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Author: Emile Gaboriau

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(etext transcriber's note)



“ I shall never be able to accept another in his place. ”

MONSIEUR LECOQ

VOL. II

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF

EMILE GABORIAU

PEARSON'S LIBRARY EDITION

"Monsieur Lecoq" Vol. 1 "Monsieur Lecoq" Vol. 2
"The Gilded Clique" "The Lerouge Case"
"In Peril of His Life"
"File 113"

Illustrated



THE PEARSON PUBLISHING CO.
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MONSIEUR LECOQ.

PART II.

THE HONOUR OF THE NAME.

IX.

THE cottage where M. Lacheneur had taken refuge stood on a hill overlooking the river. It was a small and humble dwelling, though scarcely so miserable in its aspect and appointments as most of peasant abodes round about. It comprised a single storey divided into three rooms and roofed with thatch. In front was a tiny garden, where a vine straggling over the walls of the house, a few fruit-trees, and some withered vegetables just managed to exist. Small as was this garden patch, and limited as was its production, still Lacheneur's aunt, to whom the dwelling had formerly belonged, had only succeeded in conquering the natural sterility of the soil after long years of patient perseverance. Day after day, during a lengthy period, she had regularly spread in front of the cottage three or four basketfuls of arable soil brought from a couple of miles distant; and though she had been dead for more than a twelvemonth, one could still detect a narrow pathway across the waste, worn by her patient feet in the performance of this daily task.

This was the path which M. d'Escorval, faithful to his resolution, took the following day, in the hope of obtaining from Marie-Anne's father some explanation of his singular conduct. The baron was so engrossed in his own thoughts that he failed to realise the excessive heat as he climbed the rough hillside in the full glare of the noonday sun. When he reached the summit, however, he paused to take breath; and while wiping the perspiration from his brow, turned to look back on the valley whence he had come. It was the first time he had visited the spot, and he was surprised at the extent of the landscape offered to his view. From this point, the most elevated in the surrounding country, one can survey the course of the Oiselle for many miles; and in the distance a glimpse may be obtained of the ancient citadel of Montaignac, perched on an almost inaccessible rock. A man in the baron's mood could, however, take but little interest in the picturesqueness of the scenery, though, when he turned his back to the valley and prepared to resume his walk, he was certainly struck by the aspect of Lacheneur's new abode. His imagination pictured the sufferings of this unfortunate man, who, only two days before, had relinquished the splendours of the Chateau du Sairmeuse to resume the peasant life of his early youth.

"Come in!" cried a female voice when M. d'Escorval rapped at the door of the cottage. He lifted the latch, and entered a small room with white-washed walls, having no other ceiling than the thatched roof, and no other flooring than the bare ground. A table with a wooden bench on either side stood in the middle of this humble chamber, in one corner of which was an old bedstead. On a stool near the narrow casement sat Marie-Anne, working at a piece of embroidery, and clad in a peasant-girl's usual garb.

At the sight of M. d'Escorval, she rose to her feet, and for a moment they remained standing in front of one another, she apparently calm, he visibly agitated. Lacheneur's daughter was paler than usual, she seemed even thinner, but there was a strange, touching charm about her person; the consciousness of duty nobly fulfilled, of resignation calling for accomplishment, lending, as it were, a new radiance to her beauty.

Remembering his son, M. d'Escorval was surprised at Marie-Anne's tranquillity. "You don't inquire after Maurice," he said, with a touch of reproachfulness in his voice.

"I had news of him this morning, as I have had every day," quietly replied Marie-Anne. "I know that he is getting better, and that he was able to take some food yesterday."

"You have not forgotten him, then?"

She trembled; a faint blush suffused her cheeks and forehead, but it was in a calm voice that she replied: "Maurice knows that it would be impossible for me to forget him, even if I wished to do so."

"And yet you told him that you approved your father's decision!"

"Yes, I told him so; and I shall have the courage to repeat it."

"But you have made Maurice most wretched and unhappy, my dear child; he almost died of grief."

She raised her head proudly, looked M. d'Escorval fully in the face and answered, "Do you think then that I haven't suffered myself?"

M. d'Escorval was abashed for a moment; but speedily recovering himself, he took hold of Marie-Anne's hand and, pressing it affectionately, exclaimed: "So Maurice loves you, and you love him; you are both suffering: he has nearly died of grief and still you reject him!"

"It must be so, sir."

"You say this, my dear child—you say this, and you undoubtedly believe it. But I, who have sought to discover the necessity of this immense sacrifice, have quite failed to find any plausible reason. Explain to me why it must be so, Marie-Anne. Have you no confidence in me? Am I not an old friend? It may be that your father in his despair has adopted extreme resolutions. Let me know them and we will conquer them together. Lacheneur knows how deeply I am attached to him. I will speak to him: he will listen to *me*."

"I can tell you nothing, sir."

"What! you remain inflexible when a father entreats you to assist him, when he says to you: 'Marie-Anne, you hold my son's happiness, life, and reason in your hands. Can you be so cruel——' "

"Ah! it is you who are cruel, sir," answered Marie-Anne with tears glittering in her eyes; "it is you who are without pity. Cannot you see what I suffer? No, I have nothing to tell you; there is nothing you can say to my father. Why try to unnerve me when I require all my courage to struggle against my despair? Maurice must forget me; he must never see me again. This is fate; and he must not fight against it. It would be folly. Beseech him to leave the country, and if he refuses, you, who are his father, must command him to do so. And you too, in heaven's name fly from us. We shall bring misfortune upon you. Never return here; our house is accursed. The fate that overshadows us may ruin you as well."

She spoke almost wildly, and her voice was so loud that it reached an adjoining room, the door of which suddenly opened, M. Lacheneur appearing upon the threshold. At the sight of M. d'Escorval the whilom lord of Sairmeuse could not restrain an oath; but there was more sorrow and anxiety than anger in his manner, as he said: "What, you here, baron?"

The consternation into which Marie-Anne's words had thrown M. d'Escorval was so intense that he could only just manage to stammer a reply. "You have abandoned us entirely; I was anxious about you. Have you forgotten your old friendship? I come to you——"

"Why did you not inform me of the honour that the baron had done me, Marie-Anne?" said Lacheneur sternly.

She tried to speak, but could not; and it was the baron who replied; "Why, I have but just arrived, my dear friend."

M. Lacheneur looked suspiciously, first at his daughter and then at the baron. His brow was overcast as he was evidently wondering what M. d'Escorval and Marie-Anne had said to each other whilst they were alone. Still, however great his disguise may have been, he seemed to master it; and it was with his old-time affability of manner that he invited M. d'Escorval to follow him into the adjoining room. "It is my reception room and study combined," he said smilingly.

This room, although much larger than the first, was, however, quite as scantily furnished, but piled up on the floor and table were a number of books and packages, which two men were busy sorting and arranging. One of these men was Chanlouineau, whom M. d'Escorval at once recognized, though he did not remember having ever seen the other one, a young fellow of twenty or thereabouts. With the latter's identity he was, however, soon made acquainted.

"This is my son, Jean," said Lacheneur. "He has changed since you last saw him ten years ago."

It was true. Fully ten years had elapsed since the baron last saw Lacheneur's son. How time flies! He had known Jean as a boy and he now found him a man. Young Lacheneur was just in his twenty-first year, but with his haggard features and precocious beard he looked somewhat older. He was tall and well built, and his face indicated more than average intelligence. Still he did not convey a favorable impression. His restless eyes betokened a prying curiosity of mind, and his smile betrayed an unusual degree of shrewdness, amounting almost to cunning. He made a deep bow when his father introduced him; but he was evidently out of temper.

"Having no longer the means to keep Jean in Paris," resumed M. Lacheneur, "I have made him return as you see. My ruin will, perhaps, prove a blessing to him. The air of great cities is not good for a peasant's son. Fools that we are, we send our children to Paris that they may learn to rise above their fathers. But they do nothing of the kind. They think only of degrading themselves."

"Father," interrupted the young man; "father, wait at least until we are alone!"

"M. d'Escorval is not a stranger," retorted M. Lacheneur, and then turning again to the baron, he continued; "I must have wearied you by telling you again and again; 'I am very pleased with my son. He has a commendable ambition; he is working faithfully and is bound to succeed.' Ah! I was a poor foolish father! The friend whom I commissioned to call on Jean and tell him to return here has enlightened me as to the truth. The model young man you see here only left the gaming-house to run to some public ball. He was in love with a wretched little ballet girl at some low theatre; and to please this creature, he also went on the stage with his face painted red and white."

"It's not a crime to appear on the stage," interrupted Jean with a flushed face.

"No; but it is a crime to deceive one's father and to affect virtues one doesn't possess! Have I ever refused you money? No; and yet you have got into debt on all sides. You owe at least twenty thousand francs!"

Jean hung his head; he was evidently angry, but he feared his father.

"Twenty thousand francs!" repeated M. Lacheneur. "I had them a fortnight ago; now I haven't a halfpenny. I can

only hope to obtain this sum through the generosity of the Duke or the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The baron uttered an exclamation of surprise. He only knew of the scene at the parsonage and believed that there would be no further connection between Lacheneur and the duke's family. Lacheneur perceived M. d'Escorval's amazement, and it was with every token of sincerity and good faith that he resumed: "What I say astonishes you. Ah! I understand why. My anger at first led me to indulge in all sorts of absurd threats. But I am calm now, and realize my injustice. What could I expect the duke to do? To make me a present of Sairmeuse? He was a trifle brusque, I confess, but that is his way; at heart he is the best of men."

"Have you seen him again?"

"No; but I have seen his son. I have even been with him to the chateau to select the articles which I desire to keep. Oh! he refused me nothing. Everything was placed at my disposal—everything. I selected what I wanted, furniture, clothes, linen. Everything is to be brought here; and I shall be quite a great man."

"Why not seek another house? This——"

"This pleases me. Its situation suits me perfectly."

In fact, after all, thought M. d'Escorval, why should not the Sairmeuse's have regretted their odious conduct? And if they had done so might not Lacheneur, in spite of indignation, agree to accept honourable conditions?

"To say that the marquis has been kind is saying too little," continued Lacheneur. "He has shown us the most delicate attentions. For example, having noticed how much Marie-Anne regrets the loss of her flowers, he has promised to send her plants to stock our small garden, and they will be renewed every month."

Like all passionate men, M. Lacheneur overdid his part. This last remark was too much; it awakened a terrible suspicion in M. d'Escorval's mind. "Good heavens!" he thought, "does this wretched man meditate some crime?" He glanced at Chanlouineau, and his anxiety increased, for on hearing Lacheneur speak of the marquis and Marie-Anne, the stalwart young farmer had turned livid.

"It is decided," resumed Lacheneur with an air of unbounded satisfaction, "that they will give me the ten thousand francs bequeathed to me by Mademoiselle Armande. Moreover, I am to fix upon such a sum as I consider a just recompense for my services. And that is not all: they have offered me the position of manager at Sairmeuse; and I was to be allowed to occupy the game-keeper's cottage, where I lived so long. But on reflection I refused this offer. After having enjoyed a fortune which did not belong to me during so many years, I am now anxious to amass a fortune of my own."

"Would it be indiscreet in me to inquire what you intend to do?"

"Not the least in the world. I am going to turn pedlar."

M. d'Escorval could not believe his ears. "Pedlar?" he repeated.

"Yes, M. le Baron. Look, there is my pack in that corner."

"But that's absurd," exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "People can scarcely earn their daily bread in this way!"

"You are wrong, sir. I have considered the subject carefully; the profits are thirty per cent. And besides, there will be three of us to sell the goods, for I shall confide one pack to my son, and another to Chanlouineau."

"What! Chanlouineau?"

"He has become my partner in the enterprise."

"And his farm—who will take care of that?"

"He will employ day labourers." And then, as if wishing to make M. d'Escorval understand that his visit had lasted quite long enough, Lacheneur began arranging such of the little packages as were intended for his own pack.

But the baron was not to be got rid of so easily, especially now that his suspicions had almost ripened into certainty. "I must speak with you alone," he said in a curt tone.

M. Lacheneur turned round. "I am very busy," he replied with evident reluctance of manner.

"I only ask for five minutes. But if you haven't the time to spare to-day, I can return to-morrow—the day after to-morrow—or any day when I can see you in private."

Lacheneur saw plainly that it would be impossible to escape this interview, so with a gesture of a man who resigns himself to a necessity, he bade his son and Chanlouineau withdraw.

They left the room, and as soon as the door had closed behind them, Lacheneur exclaimed: "I know very well, M. le Baron, the arguments you intend to advance; and the reason of your coming. You come to ask me again for Marie-Anne. I know that my refusal has nearly killed Maurice. Believe me, I have suffered cruelly at the thought; but my refusal is none the less irrevocable. There is no power in the world capable of changing my resolution. Don't ask my motives; I cannot reveal them; but rest assured that they are sufficiently weighty."

"Are we not your friends?" asked M. d'Escorval.

"You—!" exclaimed Lacheneur with affectionate cordiality—"ah! You know it well!—you are the best, the only friends I have here below. I should be the greatest wretch living if I did not retain the recollection of your kindness until my eyes close in death. Yes, you are my friends, yes, I am devoted to you—and it is for that very reason, that I answer your proposals with no, no, never!"

There was no longer any room for doubt. M. d'Escorval seized Lacheneur's hands, and almost crushing them in his grasp, "Unfortunate man!" he exclaimed, "What do you intend to do? Of what terrible vengeance are you dreaming!"

"I swear to you——"

"Oh! do not swear. You cannot deceive a man of my age and of my experience. I divine your intentions—you hate the Sairmeuse family more mortally than ever."

"I——"

"Yes, you; and if you pretend to forget the way they treated you, it is only that they may forget it. These people have offended you too cruelly not to fear you; you understand this, and you are doing all in your power to reassure them. You accept their advances—you kneel before them—why? Because they will be more completely in your power when you have lulled their suspicions to rest; and then you can strike them more surely——"

He paused; the door of the front room opened, and Marie-Anne appeared upon the threshold. "Father," said she,

"Here is the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The mention of this name at such a juncture was so ominously significant that M. d'Escorval could not restrain a gesture of surprise and fear. "He dares to come here!" he thought. "What, is he not afraid the very walls will fall and crush him?"

M. Lacheneur cast a withering glance at his daughter. He suspected her of a ruse which might force him to reveal his secret; and for a second his features were distorted by a fit of passionate rage. By an effort, however, he succeeded in regaining his composure. He sprang to the door, pushed Marie-Anne aside, and leaning out exclaimed: "Deign to excuse me, M. le Marquis, if I take the liberty of asking you to wait a moment; I am just finishing some business, and I will be with you in a few minutes."

Neither agitation nor anger could be detected in his voice; but rather, a respectful deference and a feeling of profound gratitude. Having spoken in this fashion he closed the door again and turned to M. d'Escorval. The baron, still standing with folded arms, had witnessed this scene with the air of a man who distrusts the evidence of his own senses; and yet he understood the meaning of the incident only too well. "So this young man comes here?" he said to Lacheneur.

"Almost every day—not at this hour usually, but a trifle later."

"And you receive him? You welcome him?"

"Certainly. How can I be insensible to the honour he confers upon me? Moreover, we have subjects of mutual interest to discuss. We are now occupied in legalising the restitution of Sairmeuse. I can also give him much useful information, and many hints regarding the management of the property."

"And do you expect to make me, your old friend, believe that a man of your superior intelligence is deceived by the excuses the marquis makes for these frequent visits? Look me in the eye, and then tell me, if you dare, that you believe these visits are addressed to you!"

Lacheneur's glance did not waver. "To whom else could they be addressed?" he inquired.

This obstinate serenity disappointed the baron's expectations. He could not have received a heavier blow. "Take care Lacheneur," he said sternly. "Think of the situation in which you place your daughter, between Chanlouineau, who wishes to make her his wife, and M. de Sairmeuse, who hopes to make her—"

"Who hopes to make her his mistress—is that what you mean? Oh, say the word. But what does that matter? I am sure of Marie-Anne."

M. d'Escorval shuddered. "In other words," said he, in bitter indignation, "you make your daughter's honour and reputation your stake in the game you are playing."

This was too much. Lacheneur could restrain his furious passion no longer. "Well, yes!" he exclaimed, with a frightful oath; "yes, you have spoken the truth. Marie-Anne must be, and will be the instrument of my plans. A man in my situation is free from the considerations by which others are guided. Fortune, friends, life, honour—I have been forced to sacrifice everything. Perish my daughter's virtue—perish my daughter herself—what do they signify if I can but succeed?"

Never had M. d'Escorval seen Lacheneur so excited. His eyes flashed, and as he spoke, shook his clenched fist wildly in the air, as though he were threatening some miserable enemy. "So you admit it," exclaimed M. d'Escorval; "you admit that you propose revenging yourself on the Sairmeuse family, and that Chanlouineau is to be your accomplice?"

"I admit nothing," Lacheneur replied. "Let me reassure you." Then raising his hand as if to take an oath, he added in a solemn voice: "Before God, who hears my word, by all that I hold sacred in this world, by the memory of the wife I loved and whom I mourn to-day, I swear to you, that I am plotting nothing against the Sairmeuse family; that I have no thought of touching a hair of their heads. I use them only because they are absolutely indispensable to me. They will aid me without injuring themselves."

For a moment the baron remained silent. He was evidently trying to reconcile Lacheneur's conflicting utterances. "How can one believe this assurance after your previous avowal?" he evidently enquired.

"Oh, you may refuse to believe me if you choose," rejoined Lacheneur, who had now regained all his self-possession. "But whether you believe me or not I must decline to speak any further on the subject. I have said too much already. I know that your visit and your questions have been solely prompted by your friendship, and I cannot help feeling both proud and grateful. Still I can tell you no more. The events of the last few days demand that we should separate. Our paths in life lie far apart, and I can only say to you what I said yesterday to the Abbe-Midon. If you are my friend never come here again under any pretext whatever. Even if you hear I am dying, do not come, and should you meet me, turn aside, shun me as you would some deadly pestilence."

Lacheneur paused, as if expecting some further observation from the baron, but the latter remained silent, reflecting that the words he had just heard were substantially a repetition of what Marie-Anne had previously told him.

"There is still a wiser course you might pursue," resumed the ex-lord of Sairmeuse, after a brief interval. "Here in the district there is but little chance of your son's sorrow soon subsiding. Turn which way he will—alas, I know myself, that even the very trees and flowers will remind him of a happier time. So leave this neighborhood, take him with you, and go far away."

"Ah! how can I do that when Fouche has virtually imprisoned me here!"

"All the more reason why you should listen to my advice. You were one of the emperor's friends, hence you are regarded with suspicion. You are surrounded by spies, and your enemies are watching for an opportunity to ruin you. They would seize on the slightest pretext to throw you into prison—a letter, a word, an act capable of misconstruction. The frontier is not far off; so I repeat, go and wait in a foreign land for happier times."

"That I will never do," said M. d'Escorval proudly. His words and accent showing plainly enough how futile further discussion would be.

"Ah! you are like the Abbe Midon," sadly rejoined Lacheneur; "you won't believe me. Who knows how much your coming here this morning may cost you? It is said that no one can escape his destiny. But if some day the executioner lays his hand on your shoulder, remember that I warned you, and don't curse me for what may happen."

Lacheneur paused once more, and seeing that even this sinister prophecy produced no impression on the baron,

he pressed his hand as if to bid him an eternal farewell, and opened the door to admit the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Martial was, perhaps, annoyed at meeting M d'Escorval; but he nevertheless bowed with studied politeness, and began a lively conversation with M. Lacheneur, telling him that the articles he had selected at the chateau were at that moment on their way.

M. d'Escorval could do no more. It was quite impossible for him to speak with Marie-Anne, over whom Chanlouineau and Jean were both jealously mounting guard. Accordingly, he reluctantly took his leave, and oppressed by cruel forebodings, slowly descended the hill which he had climbed an hour before so full of hope.

What should he say to Maurice? He was revolving this query in his mind and had just reached the little pine grove skirting the waste, when the sound of hurried footsteps behind induced him to look back. Perceiving to his great surprise that the young Marquis de Sairmeuse was approaching and motioning him to stop, the baron paused, wondering what Martial could possibly want of him.

The latter's features wore a most ingenuous air, as he hastily raised his hat and exclaimed: "I hope, sir, that you will excuse me for having followed you when you hear what I have to say. I do not belong to your party and our doctrines and preferences are very different. Still I have none of your enemies' passion and malice. For this reason I tell you that if I were in your place I would take a journey abroad. The frontier is but a few miles off; a good horse, a short gallop, and you have crossed it. A word to the wise is—salvation!"

Having thus spoken and without waiting for any reply, Martial abruptly turned and retraced his steps.

"One might suppose there was a conspiracy to drive me away!" murmured M. d'Escorval in his amazement. "But I have good reason to distrust this young man's disinterestedness." The young marquis was already far off. Had he been less preoccupied, he would have perceived two figures in the grove—Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu, followed by the inevitable Aunt Medea, had come to play the spy.

X.

THE Marquis de Courtornieu idolised his daughter. This was alike an incontestable and an uncontested fact. When people spoke to him concerning the young lady they invariably exclaimed: "You who adore your daughter—" And in a like manner whenever the marquis spoke of her himself, he always contrived to say: "I who adore Blanche." In point of fact, however, he would have given a good deal, even a third of his fortune, to get rid of this smiling, seemingly artless girl, who, despite her apparent simplicity, had proved more than a match for him with all his diplomatic experience. Her fancies were legion, and however capricious they chanced to be it was useless to resist them. At one time he had hoped to ward his daughter off by inviting Aunt Medea to come and live at the chateau, but the weak-minded spinster had proved a most fragile barrier, and soon Blanche had returned to the charge more audacious and capricious than ever. Sometimes the marquis revolted, but nine times out of ten he paid dearly for his attempts at rebellion. When Blanche turned her cold, steel-like eyes upon him with a certain peculiar expression, his courage evaporated. Her weapon was irony; and knowing his weak points she dealt her blows with wonderful precision.

Such being the position of affairs, it is easy to understand how devoutly M. de Courtornieu prayed and hoped that some eligible young aristocrat would ask for his daughter's hand, and thus free him from bondage. He had announced on every side that he intended to give her a dowry of a million francs, a declaration which had brought a host of eager suitors to Courtornieu. But, unfortunately, though many of these wooers would have suited the marquis well enough, not one had been so fortunate as to please the capricious Blanche. Her father presented a candidate; she received him graciously, lavished all her charms upon him; but as soon as his back was turned, she disappointed all her father's hopes by rejecting him. "He is too short, or too tall. His rank is not equal to ours. He is a fool—his nose is so ugly." Such were the reasons she would give for her refusal; and from these summary decisions there was no appeal. Arguments and persuasion were alike useless. The condemned man had only to take himself off and be forgotten.

Still, as this inspection of would-be husbands amused the capricious Blanche, she encouraged her father in his efforts to find a suitor. Despite all his perseverance, however, to please her, the poor marquis was beginning to despair, when fate dropped the Duke de Sairmeuse and his son at his very door. At sight of Martial he had a presentiment that the *rara avis* he was seeking was found at last; and believing best to strike the iron while it was hot, he broached the subject to the duke on the morrow of their first meeting. M. de Courtornieu's overtures were favourably received, and the matter was soon decided. Indeed, having the desire to transform Sairmeuse into a principality, the duke could not fail to be delighted with an alliance with one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the neighbourhood. "Martial, my son," he said, "Possesses in his own right, an income of at least six hundred thousand francs."

"I shall give my daughter a dowry of at least—yes, at least fifteen hundred thousand," replied M. de Courtornieu.

"His majesty is favourably disposed towards me," resumed his grace. "I can obtain any important diplomatic position for Martial."

"In case of trouble," was the retort, "I have many friends among the opposition."

The treaty was thus concluded; but M. de Courtornieu took good care not to speak of it to his daughter. If he told her how much he desired the match, she would be sure to oppose it. Non-intervention accordingly seemed advisable. The correctness of his policy was soon fully demonstrated. One morning Blanche entered her father's study and peremptorily declared, "Your capricious daughter has decided, papa, that she would like to become the Marchioness de Sairmeuse."

It cost M. de Courtornieu quite an effort to conceal his delight; but he feared that if Blanche discovered his satisfaction the game would be lost. Accordingly, he presented several objections, which were quickly disposed of; and, at last, he ventured to opine: "Then the marriage is half decided as one of the parties consents. It only remains to ascertain if—"

"The other will consent," retorted the vain heiress; who, it should be remarked, had for several days previously been assiduously engaged in the agreeable task of fascinating Martial and bringing him to her feet. With a skilful affectation of simplicity and frankness, she had allowed the young marquis to perceive that she enjoyed his society,

and without being absolutely forward she had made him evident advances. Now, however, the time had come to beat a retreat—a manœuvre so successfully practised by coquettes, and which usually suffices to enslave even a hesitating suitor. Hitherto, Blanche had been gay, spiritual, and coquettish; now she gradually grew quiet and reserved. The giddy school girl had given place to a shrinking maiden; and it was with rare perfection that she played her part in the divine comedy of “first love.” Martial could not fail to be fascinated by the modest timidity and chaste fears of a virgin heart now awaking under his influence to a consciousness of the tender passion. Whenever he made his appearance Blanche blushed and remained silent. Directly he spoke she grew confused; and he could only occasionally catch a glimpse of her beautiful eyes behind the shelter of their long lashes. Who could have taught her this refinement of coquetry? Strange as it may seem, she had acquired her acquaintance with all the artifices of love during her convent education.

One thing she had not learnt, however, that clever as one may be, one is oftentimes duped by one’s own imagination. Great actresses so enter into the spirit of their part that they frequently end by shedding real tears. This knowledge came to Blanche one evening when a bantering remark from the Duke de Sairmeuse apprised her of the fact that Martial was in the habit of going to Lacheneur’s house every day. She had previously been annoyed at the young marquis’s admiration of Marie-Anne, but now she experienced a feeling of real jealousy; and her sufferings were so intolerable that fearing she might reveal them she hurriedly left the drawing-room and hastened to her own room.

“Can it be that he does not love me?” she murmured. She shivered at the thought; and for the first time in her life this haughty heiress distrusted her own power. She reflected that Martial’s position was so exalted that he could afford to despise rank; that he was so rich that wealth had no attractions for him; and that she herself might not be so pretty and so charming as her flatterers had led her to suppose. Still Martial’s conduct during the past week—and heaven knows with what fidelity her memory recalled each incident!—was well calculated to reassure her. He had not, it is true, formally declared himself; but it was evident that he was paying his addresses to her. His manner was that of the most respectful, but the most infatuated of lovers.

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of her maid, bringing a large bouquet of roses which Martial had just sent. She took the flowers, and while arranging them in a vase, bedewed them with the first sincere tears she had shed since she was a child.

She was so pale and sad, so unlike herself when she appeared the next morning at breakfast, that Aunt Medea felt alarmed. But Blanche had prepared an excuse, which she presented in such sweet tones that the old lady was as much amazed as if she had witnessed a miracle. M. de Courtornieu was no less astonished, and wondered what new freak it was that his daughter’s doleful face betokened. He was still more alarmed when immediately after breakfast, Blanche asked to speak with him. She followed him into his study, and as soon as they were alone, before he had even had time to sit down she entreated him to tell her what had passed between the Duke de Sairmeuse and himself; she wished to know if Martial had been informed of the intended alliance, and what he had replied. Her voice was meek, her eyes tearful; and her manner indicated the most intense anxiety.

The marquis was delighted. “My wilful daughter has been playing with fire,” he thought, stroking his chin caressingly; “and upon my word she has scorched herself.” Then with a smile on his face he added aloud. “Yesterday, my child, the Duke de Sairmeuse formally asked for your hand on his son’s behalf; and your consent is all that is lacking. So rest easy, my beautiful lovelorn damsel—you will be a duchess.”

She hid her face in her hands to conceal her blushes. “You know my decision, father,” she faltered in an almost inaudible voice; “we must make haste.”

He started back thinking he had not heard her words aright. “Make haste!” he repeated.

“Yes, father. I have fears.”

“What fears, in heaven’s name?”

“I will tell you when everything is settled,” she replied, at the same time making her escape from the room.

She did not doubt the reports which had reached her concerning Martial’s frequent visits to Marie-Anne, still she wished to ascertain the truth for herself. Accordingly, on leaving her father, she told Aunt Medea to dress herself, and without vouchsafing a single word of explanation, took her with her to the Reche and stationed herself in the pine grove so as to command a view of M. Lacheneur’s cottage.

It chanced to be the very day when M. d’Escorval called on Marie-Anne’s father, in hopes of obtaining some definite explanation of his conduct. Blanche saw the baron climb the slope, and shortly afterwards Martial followed the same route. She had been rightly informed; there was no room for further doubt, and her first impulse was to return home. But on reflection she resolved to wait and ascertain how long the Marquis remained with this girl she hated. M. d’Escorval’s visit was a brief one, and scarcely had he left the cottage than she saw Martial hasten out after him, and speak to him. She breathed again.

The marquis had only made a brief call, perhaps, on some matter of business, and no doubt, like M. d’Escorval, he was now going home again. Not at all, however, after a moment’s conversation with the baron, Martial returned to the cottage.

“What are we doing here?” asked Aunt Medea.

“Let me alone! Hold your tongue!” angrily replied Blanche, whose attention had just been attracted by a number of wheels, a tramp of horse’s hoofs, a loud cracking of whips, and a brisk exchange of oaths, such as waggons in a difficulty usually resort to.

All this racket heralded the approach of the vehicles conveying M. Lacheneur’s furniture and clothes. The noise must have reached the cottage on the slope, for Martial speedily appeared on the threshold, followed by Lacheneur, Jean, Chanlouineau, and Marie-Anne. Every one was soon busy unloading the waggons, and judging from the young marquis’s gestures and manner, it seemed as if he were directing the operation. He was certainly bestirring himself immensely. Hurrying to and fro, talking to everybody, and at times not even disdaining to lend a hand.

“He, a nobleman makes himself at home in that wretched hovel!” quoth Blanche to herself. “How horrible! Ah! I see only too well that this dangerous creature can do what she likes with him.”

All this, however, was nothing compared with what was to come. A third cart drawn by a single horse, and laden with shrubs and pots of flowers soon halted in front of the cottage. At this sight Blanche was positively enraged. “Flowers!” she exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with passion. “He sends her flowers, as he does me—only he sends me a

bouquet, while for her he pillages the gardens of Sairmeuse."

"What are you saying about flowers?" inquired the impoverished relative.

Blanche curtly rejoined that she had not made the slightest allusion to flowers. She was suffocating; and yet she obstinately refused to leave the grove, and go home as Aunt Medea repeatedly suggested. No; she must see the finish, and although a couple of hours were spent in unloading the furniture, still she lingered with her eyes fixed on the cottage and its surroundings. Some time after the empty waggons had gone off, Martial re-appeared on the threshold, Marie-Anne was with him, and they remained talking in full view of the grove where Blanche and her chaperone were concealed. For a long while it seemed as if the young marquis could not promptly make up his mind to leave, and when he did so, it was with evident reluctance that he slowly walked away. Marie-Anne still standing on the door-step waved her hand after him with a friendly gesture of farewell.

The young marquis was scarcely out of sight when Blanche turned to her aunt and hurriedly exclaimed: "I must speak to that creature; come quick!" Had Marie-Anne been within speaking distance at that moment, she would certainly have learnt the cause of her former friend's anger and hatred. But fate willed it otherwise. Three hundred yards of rough ground intervened between the two; and in crossing this space Blanche had time enough to reflect.

She soon bitterly regretted having shown herself at all. But Marie-Anne, who was still standing on the threshold of the cottage had seen her approaching, and it was consequently quite impossible to retreat. She accordingly utilized the few moments still at her disposal in recovering her self-control, and composing her features; and she had her sweetest smile on her lips when she greeted the girl who she had styled "that creature," only a few minutes previously. Still she was embarrassed, scarcely knowing what excuse to give for her visit, hence with the view of gaining time she pretended to be quite out of breath. "Ah! It is not very easy to reach you, dear Marie-Anne," she said at last; "you live on the top of a perfect mountain."

Mademoiselle Lacheneur did not reply. She was greatly surprised, and did not attempt to conceal the fact.

"Aunt Medea pretended to know the road," continued Blanche; "but she led me astray. Didn't you aunt?"

As usual the impecunious relative assented, and her niece resumed: "But at last we are here. I couldn't resign myself to hearing nothing about you, my dear, especially after all your misfortunes. What have you been doing? Did my recommendation procure you the work you wanted?"

Marie-Anne was deeply touched by the kindly interest which her former friend displayed in her welfare, and with perfect frankness, she confessed that all her efforts had been fruitless. It had even seemed to her that several ladies had taken pleasure in treating her unkindly.

Blanche was not listening, however. Close by stood the flowers brought from Sairmeuse; and there perfume rekindled her anger. "At all events," she interrupted, "you have something here which will almost make you forget the gardens of Sairmeuse. Who sent you those beautiful flowers?"

Marie-Anne turned crimson. For a moment she did not speak, but at last she stammered: "They are a mark of attention from the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"So she confesses it!" thought Mademoiselle de Courtornieu, amazed at what she was pleased to consider an outrageous piece of impudence. But she succeeded in concealing her rage beneath a loud burst of laughter; and it was in a tone of raillery that she rejoined: "Take care, my dear friend, I am going to call you to account. You are accepting flowers from my *fiancee*."

"What, the Marquis de Sairmeuse!"

"Yes, he has asked for my hand; and my father has promised it to him. It is a secret as yet; but I see no danger in confiding in your friendship."

Blanche really believed that this information would crush her rival; but though she watched her closely, she failed to detect the slightest trace of emotion in her face. "What dissimulation!" thought the heiress, and then with affected gaiety, she resumed aloud: "And the country folks will see two weddings at about the same time, since you are going to be married as well, my dear."

"I married?"

"Yes, you—you little deceiver! Everybody knows that you are engaged to a young man in the neighbourhood, named—wait, I know—Chanlouineau."

Thus the report which annoyed Marie-Anne so much reached her from every side. "Everybody is for once mistaken," she replied energetically. "I shall never be that young man's wife."

"But why? People speak well of him personally, and he is very well off."

"Because," faltered Marie-Anne; "because——" Maurice d'Escorval's name trembled on her lips; but unfortunately she did not give it utterance. She was as it were abashed by a strange expression on Blanche's face. How often one's destiny depends on such an apparently trivial circumstance as this!

"What an impudent worthless creature!" thought Blanche; and then in cold sneering tones that unmistakably betrayed her hatred, she said: "You are wrong, believe me, to refuse such an offer. This young fellow Chanlouineau will at all events save you from the painful necessity of toiling with your own hands, and of going from door to door in quest of work which is refused you. But no matter; *I*—she laid great stress upon this word—*I* will be more generous than your other old acquaintances. I have a great deal of embroidery to be done. I shall send it to you by my maid, and you two may settle the price together. It's late now, and we must go. Good-bye, my dear. Come, Aunt Medea."

So saying, the haughty heiress turned away, leaving Marie-Anne petrified with surprise, sorrow, and indignation. Although less experienced than Blanche, she understood well enough that this strange visit concealed some mystery—but what? She stood motionless, gazing after her departing visitors, when she felt a hand laid gently on her shoulder. She trembled, and turning quickly found herself face to face with her father.

Lacheneur was intensely pale and agitated, and a sinister light glittered in his eyes. "I was there," said he pointing to the door, "and I heard everything."

"Father!"

"What! would you try to defend her after she came here to crush you with her insolent good fortune—after she overwhelmed you with her ironical pity and scorn! I tell you they are all like this—these girls, whose heads have been turned by flattery, and who believe that the blood in their veins is different to ours. But patience! The day of

reckoning is near at hand!"

He paused. Those whom he threatened would have trembled had they seen him at that moment, so plain it was that he harboured in his mind some terrible design of retributive vengeance.

"And you, my darling, my poor Marie-Anne," he continued, "you did not understand the insults she heaped upon you. You are wondering why she treated you with such disdain. Ah, well! I will tell you: she imagines that the Marquis de Sairmeuse is your lover."

Marie-Anne turned as pale as her father, and quivered from head to foot. "Can it be possible?" she exclaimed. "Great God! What shame! What humiliation!"

"Why should it astonish you?" said Lacheneur, coldly. "Haven't you expected this result ever since the day when, to ensure the success of my plans, you consented to receive the attentions of this marquis, whom you loathe as much as I despise?"

"But Maurice! Maurice will despise me! I can bear anything, yes, everything but that."

Lacheneur made no reply. Marie-Anne's despair was heart-rending; he felt that he could not bear to witness it, that it would shake his resolution, and accordingly he re-entered the house.

His penetration was not at fault, in surmising that Blanche's visit would lead to something new, for biding the time when she might fully revenge herself in a way worthy of her hatred, Mademoiselle de Courtornieu availed herself of a favourite weapon among the jealous—calumny, and two or three abominable stories which she concocted, and which she induced Aunt Medea to circulate in the neighbourhood virtually ruined Marie-Anne's reputation.

These scandalous reports even came to Martial's ears, but Blanche was greatly mistaken if she had imagined that they would induce him to cease his visits to Lacheneur's cottage. He went there more frequently than ever and stayed much longer than he had been in the habit of doing before. Dissatisfied with the progress of his courtship, and fearful that he was being duped, he even watched the house. And then one evening, when the young marquis was quite sure that Lacheneur, his son, and Chanlouineau were absent, it so happened that he perceived a man leave the cottage, descend the slope and hasten across the fields. He followed in pursuit, but the fugitive escaped him. He believed, however, that he had recognized Maurice d'Escorval.

XI.

WHEN Maurice narrated to his father the various incidents which had marked his interview with Marie-Anne in the pine grove near La Reche, M. d'Escorval was prudent enough to make no allusion to the hopes of final victory which he, himself, still entertained. "My poor Maurice," he thought, "is heart-broken, but resigned. It is better for him to remain without hope than to be exposed to the danger of another possible disappointment."

But passion is not always blind, and Maurice divined what the baron tried to conceal—and clung to this faint hope in his father's intervention, as tenaciously as a drowning man clings to the proverbial straw. If he refrained from speaking on the subject, it was only because he felt convinced that his parents would not tell him the truth. Still he watched all that went on in the house with that subtlety of penetration which fever so often imparts, and nothing that his father said or did escaped his vigilant eyes and ears. He heard the baron put on his boots, ask for his hat, and select a cane from among those placed in the hall stand; and a moment later he, moreover, heard the garden-gate grate upon its hinges. Plainly enough M. d'Escorval was going out. Weak as he was, Maurice succeeded in dragging himself to the window in time to ascertain the truth of his surmise. "If my father is going out," he thought, "it can only be to visit M. Lacheneur; and if he is going to La Reche he has evidently not relinquished all hope."

With this thought in his mind Maurice sank into an arm-chair close at hand, intending to watch for his father's return; by doing so, he might know his fate a few moments sooner. Three long hours elapsed before the baron returned, and by his dejected manner Maurice plainly saw that all hope was lost. Of this, he was sure, as sure as the criminal who reads the fatal verdict in the judge's solemn face. He required all his energy to regain his couch, and for a moment he felt that he should die. Soon, however, he grew ashamed of this weakness, which he judged unworthy of him, and prompted by a desire to know exactly what had happened he rang the bell, and told the servant who answered his summons that he wished to speak with his father. M. d'Escorval promptly made his appearance.

"Well!" exclaimed Maurice, as his father crossed the threshold of the room.

The baron felt that all denial would be useless. "Lacheneur is deaf to my remonstrances and entreaties," he replied, sadly. "There is no hope, my poor boy; you must submit. I will not tell you that time will assuage the sorrow that now seems insupportable—for you wouldn't believe me if I did. But I do say to you be a man, and prove your courage. I will say even more: fight against all thought of Marie-Anne, as a traveller on the brink of a precipice fights against the thought of vertigo."

"Have you seen Marie-Anne, father? Have you spoken to her?"

"I found her even more inflexible than Lacheneur."

"They reject me, and yet no doubt they receive Chanlouineau."

"Chanlouineau is living there."

"Good heavens! And Martial de Sairmeuse?"

"He is their familiar guest. I saw him there."

Evidently enough each of these replies fell upon Maurice like a thunderbolt. But M. d'Escorval had armed himself with the imperturbable courage of a surgeon, who only grasps his instrument more firmly when the patient groans and writhes beneath his touch. He felt that it was necessary to extinguish the last ray of hope in his son's heart.

"It is evident that M. Lacheneur has lost his reason!" exclaimed Maurice.

The baron shook his head despondently. "I thought so myself at first," he murmured.

"But what does he say in justification of his conduct? He must say something."

"Nothing: he refuses any explanation."

"And you, father, with all your knowledge of human nature, with all your wide experience, have not been able to

fathom his intentions?"

"I have my suspicions," M. d'Escorval replied; "but only suspicions. It is possible that Lacheneur, listening to the voice of hatred, is dreaming of some terrible revenge. He may, perhaps, think of organizing some conspiracy against the emigres. Such a supposition would explain everything. Chanlouineau would be his aider and abettor; and he pretends to be reconciled to the Marquis de Sairmeuse in order to obtain information through him—"

The blood had returned to Maurice's pale cheeks. "Such a conspiracy," said he, "would not explain M. Lacheneur's obstinate rejection of my suit."

"Alas! yes, it would, my poor boy. It is through Marie-Anne that Lacheneur exerts such great influence over Chanlouineau and the marquis. If she became your wife to-day, they would desert him to-morrow. Then, too, it is precisely because he has such sincere regard for us, that he is determined to keep us out of a hazardous, even perilous enterprise. However, of course, this is merely a conjecture."

"Still, I see that it is necessary to submit," faltered Maurice. "I must resign myself; forget, I cannot."

He said this because he wished to reassure his father; though, in reality, he thought exactly the reverse. "If Lacheneur is organizing a conspiracy," he murmured to himself, "he must need assistance. Why should I not offer mine? If I aid him in his preparations, if I share his hopes and dangers, he cannot refuse me his daughter's hand. Whatever he may wish to undertake, I can surely be of greater assistance to him than Chanlouineau."

From that moment Maurice dwelt upon this thought; and the result was that he no longer pined and fretted, but did all he could to hasten his convalescence. This passed so rapidly that the Abbe Midon, who had taken the place of the physician from Montaignac, was positively astonished. Madame d'Escorval was delighted at her son's wonderful improvement in health and spirits, and declared that she would never have believed he could be so soon and so easily consoled. The baron did not try to diminish his wife's satisfaction, though he regarded this almost miraculous recovery with considerable distrust, having, indeed, a vague perception of the truth. Skilfully, however, as he questioned his son he could draw nothing from him; for Maurice had decided to keep whatever determinations he had formed a secret even from his parents. What good would it do to trouble them? and, besides, he feared remonstrance and opposition; which he was anxious to avoid although firmly resolved to carry out his plans, even if he were compelled to leave the paternal roof.

One day in the second week of September the abbe declared that Maurice might resume his ordinary life, and that, as the weather was pleasant it would be well for him to spend much of his time in the open air. In his delight, Maurice embraced the worthy priest, at the same time remarking that he had felt afraid the shooting season would pass by without his bagging a single bird. In reality he cared but little for a day on the cover; the partiality he feigned being prompted by the idea that "shooting" would furnish him with an excuse for frequent and protracted absences from home.

He had never felt happier than he did the morning when, with his gun over his shoulder, he crossed the Oiselle and started for M. Lacheneur's cottage at La Reche. He had just reached the little pine grove, and was about to pause, when he perceived Jean Lacheneur and Chanlouineau leave the house, each laden with a pedlar's pack. This circumstance delighted him, as he might now expect to find M. Lacheneur and Marie-Anne alone in the cottage.

He hastened up the slope and lifted the door latch without pausing to rap. Marie-Anne and her father were kneeling on the hearth in front of a blazing fire. On hearing the door open, they turned; and at the sight of Maurice, they both sprang to their feet. Lacheneur with a composed look on his face, and Marie-Anne blushing to the roots of her hair. "What brings you here?" they exclaimed in the same breath.

Under other circumstances, Maurice d'Escorval would have been dismayed by such an unengaging greeting, but now he scarcely noticed it.

"You have no business to return here against my wishes, and after what I said to you, M. d'Escorval," exclaimed Lacheneur, rudely.

Maurice smiled, he was perfectly cool, and not a detail of the scene before him had escaped his notice. If he had felt any doubts before, they were now dispelled. On the fire he saw a large cauldron of molten lead, while several bullet-moulds stood on the hearth, besides the andirons.

"If, sir, I venture to present myself at your house," said young d'Escorval in a grave, impressive voice, "it is because I know everything. I have discovered your revengeful projects. You are looking for men to aid you, are you not? Very well! look me in the face, in the eyes, and tell me if I am not one of those a leader is glad to enrol among his followers?"

Lacheneur seemed terribly agitated. "I don't know what you mean," he faltered, forgetting his feigned anger; "I have no such projects as you suppose."

"Would you assert this upon oath? If so, why are you casting those bullets? You are clumsy conspirators. You should lock your door; some one else might have opened it." And adding example to precept, he turned and pushed the bolt. "This is only an imprudence," he continued: "but to reject a willing volunteer would be a mistake for which your associates would have a right to call you to account. Pray understand that I have no desire to force myself into your confidence. Whatever your cause may be, I declare it mine; whatever you wish, I wish; I adopt your plans; your enemies are my enemies; command me and I will obey you. I only ask one favour, that of fighting, conquering, or dying by your side."

"Oh! father refuse him!" exclaimed Marie-Anne, "refuse him! It would be a crime to accept his offer."

"A crime! And why, if you please?" asked Maurice.

"Because our cause is not your cause; because its success is doubtful; because dangers surround us on every side."

Maurice interrupted her with a cry of scorn. "And you think to dissuade me," said he, "by warning one of the dangers which you a girl can yet afford to brave. You cannot think me a coward! If peril threatens you, all the more reason to accept my aid. Would you desert me if I were menaced, would you hide yourself, saying, 'Let him perish, so that I be saved!' Speak! would you do this?"

Marie-Anne averted her face and made no reply. She could not force herself to utter an untruth; and on the other hand she was unwilling to answer: "I would act as you are acting." She prudently waited for her father's decision.

"If I complied with your request, Maurice," said M. Lacheneur, "in less than three days you would curse me, and ruin us by some outburst of anger. Loving Marie-Anne as you do, you could not behold her equivocal position unmoved. Remember, she must neither discourage Chanlouineau nor the marquis. I know as well as you do that the part is a shameful one; and that it must result in the loss of a girl's most precious possession—her reputation; still, to ensure our success, it must be so."

Maurice did not wince. "So be it," he said calmly. "Marie-Anne's fate will be that of all women who have devoted themselves to the political cause of the man they love, be he father, brother, or lover. She will be slandered and insulted, and still what does it matter! Let her continue her task. I consent to it, for I shall never doubt her, and I shall know how to hold my peace. If we succeed, she shall be my wife, if we fail—" The gesture with which young d'Escorval concluded his sentence expressed more strongly than any verbal protestations that come what might he was ready and resigned.

Lacheneur seemed deeply moved. "At least give me time for reflection," said he.

"There is no necessity, sir, for further reflection."

"But you are only a child, Maurice; and your father is my friend."

"What of that?"

"Rash boy! don't you understand that by compromising yourself you also compromise the Baron d'Escorval? You think you are only risking your own head, but you are also endangering your father's life—"

"Oh, there has been too much parleying already!" interrupted Maurice, "there have been too many remonstrances. Answer me in a word! Only understand this: if you refuse, I shall immediately return home and blow out my brains."

It was plain from the young man's manner that this was no idle threat. The strange fire gleaming in his eyes, and the impressive tone of his voice, convinced both his listeners that he really intended to effect his deadly purpose; and Marie-Anne, with a heart full of cruel apprehensions, clasped her hands and turned to her father with a pleading look.

"You are one of us, then," sternly exclaimed Lacheneur after a brief pause; "but do not forget that your threats alone induced me to consent; and whatever may happen to you or yours, remember that you would have it so."

These gloomy words, ominous as they were, produced, however, no impression upon Maurice, who, feverish with anxiety a moment before, was now well-nigh delirious with joy.

"At present," continued Lacheneur, "I must tell you my hopes, and acquaint you with the cause for which I am toiling—"

"What does that matter to me?" replied Maurice gaily; and springing towards Marie-Anne he seized her hand and raised it to his lips, crying, with the joyous laugh of youth: "Here is my cause—none other!"

Lacheneur turned aside. Perhaps he remembered that a sacrifice of his own obstinate pride would suffice to assure his daughter's and her lover's happiness.

Still if a feeling of remorse crept into his mind, he swiftly banished it, and with increased sternness of manner exclaimed: "It is necessary, however, that you should understand our agreement."

"Let me know your conditions, sir," said Maurice.

"First of all your visits here—after certain rumours that I have circulated—would arouse suspicion. You must only come here at night time, and then only at hours agreed upon in advance—never when you are not expected." Lacheneur paused, and then seeing that Maurice's attitude implied unreserved consent, he added: "You must also find some way to cross the river without employing the ferryman, who is a dangerous fellow."

"We have an old skiff; I will persuade my father to have it repaired."

"Very well. Will you also promise me to avoid the Marquis de Sairmeuse?"

"I will."

"Wait a moment—we must be prepared for any emergency. Perhaps in spite of our precautions you may meet him here. M. de Sairmeuse is arrogance itself; and he hates you. You detest him, and you are very hasty. Swear to me that if he provokes you, you will ignore his insults."

"But I should be considered a coward."

"Probably; but will you swear?"

Maurice was hesitating when an imploring look from Marie-Anne decided him. "I swear it!" he said gravely.

"As far as Chanlouineau is concerned it would be better not to let him know of our agreement; but I will see to that point myself." Lacheneur paused once more and reflected for a moment whether he had left anything forgotten. "All that remains, Maurice," he soon resumed, "is to give you a last and very important piece of advice. Do you know my son?"

"Certainly; we were formerly the best of friends when we met during the holidays."

"Very well. When you know my secret—for I shall confide it to you without reserve—beware of Jean."

"What, sir?"

"Beware of Jean. I repeat it." And Lacheneur's face flushed as he added: "Ah! it is a painful avowal for a father; but I have no confidence in my own son. He knows no more of my plans than I told him on the day of his arrival. I deceive him, because I fear he might betray us. Perhaps it would be wise to send him away; but in that case, what would people say? Most assuredly they would say that I wanted to save my own blood, while I was ready to risk the lives of others. Still I may be mistaken; I may misjudge him." He sighed, and again added: "Beware!"

It will be understood from the foregoing that it was really Maurice d'Escorval whom the Marquis de Sairmeuse perceived leaving Lacheneur's cottage on the night he played the spy. Martial was not positively certain of the fugitive's identity, but the very idea made his heart swell with anger. "What part am I playing here, then?" he exclaimed indignantly.

Passion had hitherto so completely blinded him that even if no pains had been taken to deceive him, he would probably have remained in blissful ignorance of the true condition of affairs. He fully believed in the sincerity of Lacheneur's formal courtesy and politeness and of Jean's studied respect; while Chanlouineau's almost servile obsequiousness did not surprise him in the least. And since Marie-Anne welcomed him cordially he had concluded

that his suit was favourably progressing. Having himself forgotten the incidents which marked the return of his family to Sairmeuse, he concluded that every one else had ceased to remember them. Moreover, he was of opinion that he had acted with great generosity, and that he was fully entitled to the gratitude of the Lacheneurs; for Marie-Anne's father had received the legacy bequeathed him by Mademoiselle Armande, with an indemnity for his past services; and in addition he had selected whatever furniture he pleased among the appointments of the chateau. In goods and coin he had been presented with quite sixty thousand francs; and the hard fisted old duke, enraged at such prodigality, although it did not cost him a penny, had discontentedly growled, "He must be hard to please indeed if he is not satisfied with what we've done for him."

Such being the position of affairs, and having for so long supposed that he was the only visitor to the cottage on La Reche, Martial was perfectly incensed when he discovered that such was not the case. Was he, after all, merely a shameless girl's foolish dupe? So great was his anger, that for more than a week he did not go to Lacheneur's house. His father concluded that his ill humour was caused by some misunderstanding with Marie-Anne; and he took advantage of this opportunity to obtain his son's consent to a marriage with Blanche de Courtornieu. Goaded to the last extremity, tortured by doubt and fear, the young marquis eventually agreed to his father's proposals; and, naturally enough, the duke did not allow such a good resolution to grow cold. In less than forty-eight hours the engagement was made public; the marriage contract was drawn up, and it was announced that the wedding would take place early in the spring. A grand banquet was given at Sairmeuse in honour of the betrothal—a banquet all the more brilliant since there were other victories to be celebrated, for the Duke de Sairmeuse had just received, with his brevet of lieutenant-general, a commission placing him in command of the military district of Montaignac; while the Marquis de Courtornieu had also been appointed provost-marshal of the same region.

Thus it was that Blanche triumphed, for, after this public betrothal, might she not consider that Martial was bound to her? For a fortnight, indeed, he scarcely left her side, finding in her society a charm which almost made him forget his love for Marie-Anne. But, unfortunately, the haughty heiress could not resist the temptation to make a slighting allusion to the lowliness of the marquis's former tastes; finding, moreover, an opportunity to inform him that she furnished Marie-Anne with work to aid her in earning a living. Martial forced himself to smile; but the disparaging remarks made by his betrothed concerning Marie-Anne aroused his sympathy and indignation; and the result was that the very next day he went to Lacheneur's house.

In the warmth of the greeting which there awaited him all his anger vanished, and all his suspicions were dispelled. He perceived that Marie-Anne's eyes beamed with joy on seeing him again, and could not help thinking he should win her yet. All the household were really delighted at his return; as the son of the commander of the military forces at Montaignac, and the prospective son-in-law of the provost-marshal, Martial was bound to prove a most valuable instrument. "Through him, we shall have an eye and an ear in the enemy's camp," said Lacheneur. "The Marquis de Sairmeuse will be our spy."

And such he soon became, for he speedily resumed his daily visits to the cottage. It was now December, and the roads were scarcely passable; but neither rain, snow, nor mud could keep Martial away. He generally made his appearance at ten o'clock in the morning, seated himself on a stool in the shadow of a tall fire-place, and then he and Marie-Anne began to talk by the hour. She always seemed greatly interested in what was going on at Montaignac, and he told her everything he knew, whether it were of a military, political, or social character.

At times they remained alone. Lacheneur, Chanlouineau, and Jean were tramping about the country with their pedlar's packs. Business was indeed prospering so well that Lacheneur had even purchased a horse in order to extend the circuit of his rounds. But, although the usual occupants of the cottage might be away, it so happened that Martial's conversation was generally interrupted by visitors. It was indeed really surprising to see how many peasants called at the cottage to speak with M. Lacheneur. They called at all hours and in rapid succession, sometimes alone, and at others in little batches of two or three. And to each of these peasants Marie-Anne had something to say in private. Then she would offer them refreshments; and at times one might have imagined oneself in an ordinary village wine shop. But what can daunt a lover's courage? Martial endured the peasants and their carouses without a murmur. He laughed and jested with them, shook them by the hand, and at times he even drained a glass in their company.

He gave many other proofs of moral courage. He offered to assist M. Lacheneur in making up his accounts; and once—it happened about the middle of February—seeing Chanlouineau worrying over the composition of a letter, he actually volunteered to act as his amanuensis. "The letter is not for me, but for an uncle of mine who is about to marry his daughter," said the stalwart young farmer.

Martial took a seat at the table, and at Chanlouineau's dictation, but not without many erasures, indited the following epistle:

"My dear friend—We are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on. We are now busy preparing for the wedding, which will take place on — We invite you to give us the pleasure of your company. We count upon you, and be assured that the more friends you bring with you the better we shall be pleased."

Had Martial seen the smile upon Chanlouineau's lips when he requested him to leave the date for the wedding a blank, he would certainly have suspected that he had been caught in a snare. But he did not see it, and, besides, he was in love.

"Ah! marquis," remarked his father one day, "Chupin tells me you are always at Lacheneur's. When will you recover from your foolish fancy for that little girl?"

Martial did not reply. He felt that he was at that "little girl's" mercy. Each glance she gave him made his heart throb wildly. He lingered by her side a willing captive; and if she had asked him to make her his wife he would certainly not have refused. But Marie-Anne had no such ambition. All her thoughts and wishes were for her father's success.

Maurice and Marie-Anne had become M. Lacheneur's most intrepid auxiliaries. They were looking forward to such a magnificent reward. Feverish, indeed, was the activity which Maurice displayed! All day long he hurried from hamlet to hamlet, and in the evening, as soon as dinner was over, he made his escape from the drawing-room, sprang into his boat, and hastened to La Reche.

M. d'Escorval could not fail to notice his son's long and frequent absences. He watched him, and soon discovered that some secret understanding existed between Maurice and Lacheneur. Recollecting his previous

suspicion that Lacheneur was harbouring some seditious design he became greatly alarmed for his son's safety, and decided to go to La Reche and try once more to learn the truth. Previous repulses had diminished his confidence in his own persuasive powers, and being anxious for an auxiliary's assistance he asked the Abbe Midon to accompany him.

It was the 4th of March, and half-past four in the evening when M. d'Escorval and the cure started from Sairmeuse bound for the cottage at La Reche. They were both anxious as to the result of the step they were taking, and scarcely exchanged a dozen words as they walked towards the banks of the Oiselle. They had crossed the river and traversed the familiar pine grove, when on reaching the outskirts of the waste they witnessed a strange sight well calculated to increase their anxiety and alarm.

Night was swiftly approaching, but yet it was still sufficiently light to distinguish objects at a short distance, and on the summit of the slope they could perceive in front of Lacheneur's cottage a group of twenty persons who, judging by their frequent gesticulations, were engaged in animated conversation. Lacheneur himself was there, and his manner plainly indicated that he was in a state of great excitement. Suddenly he waved his hand, the others clustered round him, and he began to speak. What was he saying? The baron and the priest were still too far off to distinguish his words, but when he ceased they were startled by a loud acclamation which literally rent the air. Suddenly the former lord of Sairmeuse struck a match, and setting fire to a bundle of straw lying before him he tossed it on to the roof of the cottage, shouting as he did so, "Yes, the die is cast! and this will prove to you that I shall not draw back!"

Five minutes later the house was in flames and in the distance the baron and his companion could perceive a ruddy glare illuminating the windows of the citadel at Montaignac, while on every hillside round about glowed the light of other incendiary fires. The whole district was answering Lacheneur's signal.

XII.

Ah! ambition is a fine thing! The Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were considerably past middle-age; they had weathered many storms and vicissitudes; they possessed millions in hard cash, and owned the finest estates in the province. Under these circumstances it might have been supposed that their only desire was to end their days in peace and quietness. It would have been easy for them to lead a happy and useful life by seeking to promote the welfare of the district, and they might have gone down to their graves amid a chorus of benedictions and regrets.

But no. They longed to have a hand in managing the state vessel; they were not content with remaining simple passengers. The duke, appointed to the command of the military forces, and the marquis, invested with high judicial functions at Montaignac, were both obliged to leave their beautiful chateaux and install themselves in somewhat dingy quarters in the town. And yet they did not murmur at the change, for their vanity was satisfied. Louis XVIII. was on the throne; their prejudices were triumphant; and they felt supremely happy. It is true that sedition was already rife on every side, but had they not hundreds and thousands of allies at hand to assist them in suppressing it? And when thoughtful politicians spoke of "discontent," the duke and his associates looked at them with the thorough contempt of the sceptic who does not believe in ghosts.

On the 4th of March, 1816, the duke was just sitting down to dinner at his house in Montaignac when he heard a loud noise in the hall. He rose to go and see what was the matter when the door was suddenly flung open and a man entered the room panting and breathless. This man was Chupin, once a poacher, but now enjoying the position of head gamekeeper on the Sairmeuse estates. It was evident, from his manner and appearance, that something very extraordinary had happened.

"What is the matter?" inquired the duke.

"They are coming!" cried Chupin; "they are already on the way!"

"Who are coming? who?"

Chupin made no verbal reply, but handed the duke a copy of the letter written by Martial under Chanlouineau's dictation. "My dear friend," so M. de Sairmeuse read. "We are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on. We are now busy preparing for the wedding, which will take place on the fourth of March." The date was no longer blank: but still the duke had naturally failed to understand the purport of the missive. "Well, what of it?" he asked.

Chupin tore his hair. "They are on the way," he repeated. "The peasants—all the peasants of the district, they intend to take possession of Montaignac, dethrone Louis XVIII., bring back the emperor, or at least, the emperor's son, and crown him as Napoleon II. Ah, the wretches! they have deceived me. I suspected this outbreak, but I did not think it was so near at hand."

This unexpected intelligence well-nigh stupefied the duke. "How many are there?" he asked.

"Ah! how do I know, your grace? Two thousand, perhaps—perhaps ten thousand."

"All the town's people are with us."

"No, your grace, no. The rebels have accomplices here. All the retired officers of the imperial army are waiting to assist them."

"Who are the leaders of the movement?"

"Lacheneur, the Abbe Midon, Chanlouineau, the Baron d'Escorval—"

"Enough!" cried the duke.

Now that the danger was certain, his coolness returned, and his herculean form, a trifle bowed by the weight of years, rose to its full height. He gave the bell-rope a violent pull; and directly his valet entered, he bade him bring his uniform and pistols at once. The servant was about to obey, when the duke added: "Wait! Let some one take a horse, and go and tell my son to come here without a moment's delay. Take one of the swiftest horses. The messenger ought to go to Sairmeuse and back in two hours." On hearing these words, Chupin pulled at the duke's coat tail to attract his attention.

"Well, what is it now?" asked M. de Sairmeuse impatiently.

The old poacher raised his finger to his lips, as if recommending silence, and as soon as the valet had left the room, he exclaimed: "It is useless to send for the marquis!"

"And why, you fool?"

"Because, because—excuse me—I——"

"Zounds! will you speak, or not?"

Chupin regretted that he had gone so far. "Because the marquis——"

"Well?"

"He is engaged in it."

The duke overturned the dinner-table with a terrible blow of his clenched fist. "You lie, you wretch!" he thundered with terrible oaths.

His anger was so threatening, that the old poacher sprang to the door and turned the knob, ready for flight. "May I lose my head if I do not speak the truth," he insisted. "Ah! Lacheneur's daughter is a regular sorceress. All the gallants of the neighbourhood are in the ranks; Chanlouineau, young D' Escorval, your son——"

M. de Sairmeuse was pouring forth a torrent of curses upon Marie-Anne when his valet re-entered the room. He suddenly checked himself, put on his uniform, and ordering Chupin to follow him, he hastened from the house. He was still hoping that Chupin had exaggerated the danger; but when he reached the Place d'Armes commanding an extensive view of the surrounding country, whatever illusions he may have retained immediately vanished. Signal lights gleamed on every side, and Montaignac seemed surrounded by a circle of flame.

"There are the signals," murmured Chupin. "The rebels will be here before two o'clock in the morning."

The duke made no reply, but hastened towards M. de Courtornieu's house. He was striding onward, when on turning a corner, he espied two men talking in a doorway; they also had perceived him, and at sight of his glittering epaulettes they both took flight. The duke instinctively started in pursuit, overtook one of the men, and seizing him by the collar, sternly asked: "Who are you? What is your name?"

The man was silent, and his captor shook him so roughly that two pistols concealed under his over-coat, fell to the ground. "Ah, brigand!" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse, "so you are one of the conspirators against the king!"

Then without another word, he dragged the man to the citadel, gave him in charge of the astonished soldiers, and again hastened after M. de Courtornieu. He expected to find the marquis terrified; but on the contrary he seemed perfectly delighted.

"At last," he said, "there comes an opportunity for us to display our devotion and our zeal—and without danger! We have good walls, strong gates, and three thousand soldiers at our command. These peasants are fools! But be grateful for their folly, my dear duke, and run and order out the Montaignac chasseurs——" He suddenly paused, and then with a gesture of annoyance, he resumed: "The deuce! I am expecting Blanche this evening. She was to leave Courtornieu after dinner. Heaven grant she may meet with no misfortune on the way!"

The Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had more time before them than they supposed. The rebels were advancing, but not so rapidly as Chupin had stated, for Lacheneur's plans had been disarranged by two unforeseen circumstances.

When standing beside his burning cottage, he had counted the signal fires that blazed out in answer to his own, and found their number corresponded with his expectations; he joyfully exclaimed: "See all our friends keep their word! They are ready; and are now on their way to the meeting place. Let us start at once, for we must be there first!"

His horse was brought him, and one foot was already in the stirrup when two men sprang from the neighbouring grove and darted towards him. One of them seized the horse by the bridle.

"The Abbe Midon!" exclaimed Lacheneur, in amazement; "M. d'Escorval!" And foreseeing, perhaps, what was to come, he added, in a tone of concentrated fury: "What do you two want with me?"

"We wish to prevent the accomplishment of an act of madness!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval. "Hatred has crazed you, Lacheneur!"

"You know nothing of my projects!"

"Do you think that I don't suspect them? You hope to capture Montaignac——"

"What does that matter to you?" interrupted Lacheneur, angrily.

But M. d'Escorval would not be silenced. He seized his former friend by the arm, and in a voice loud enough to be heard distinctly by every one present, he continued: "You foolish fellow! You have forgotten that Montaignac is a fortified city, surrounded by deep moats and high walls! You have forgotten that behind these fortifications there is a garrison commanded by a man whose energy and bravery are beyond all question—the Duke de Sairmeuse."

Lacheneur struggled to free himself from the baron's grasp. "Everything has been arranged," he replied, "and they are expecting us at Montaignac. You would be as sure of this as I am myself, if you had only seen the lights gleaming in the windows of the citadel. And look, you can see them yet. These lights tell me that two or three hundred of Napoleon's old officers will come and open the gates of the town as soon as we make our appearance."

"And after that! If you take Montaignac, what will you do then? Do you imagine the English will give you back your emperor? Isn't Napoleon II. an Austrian prisoner. Have you forgotten that the allied sovereigns have left a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers within a day's march of Paris?"

Sullen murmurs were heard among Lacheneur's followers.

"But all this is nothing," continued the baron. "The chief danger lies in the fact that there are generally as many traitors as dupes in an undertaking of this sort."

"Whom do you call dupes?"

"All those who mistake their illusions for realities, as you have done; all those who wishing something to happen, are convinced that it *will* happen—simply because they wish it so. And besides do you really suppose that neither the Duke de Sairmeuse nor the Marquis de Courtornieu has been warned of your attempt?"

Lacheneur shrugged his shoulders. "Who could have warned them?" he asked complacently. But his tranquility was feigned; as the glance he cast on Jean only too plainly proved. Frigid indeed was the tone in which he added: "It is probable that the duke and the marquis are at this very moment in the power of our friends."

The cure now attempted to second the baron's efforts. "You will not go, Lacheneur," he said. "You cannot remain deaf to the voice of reason. You are an honest man; think of the frightful responsibility you assume! Upon

these frail hopes you are imperilling hundreds of brave lives? I tell you that you will not succeed; you will be betrayed; I am sure you will be betrayed!"

An expression of horrible agony contracted Lacheneur's features. It was evident to every one that he was deeply moved; and, perhaps, matters might have taken a very different course, had it not been for Chanlouineau's intervention. "We are wasting too much time in foolish prattle," he exclaimed, stepping forward and brandishing his gun.

Lacheneur started as if he had been struck by a whip. He rudely freed himself from his friend's grasp, and leaped into the saddle. "Forward!" he ordered.

But the baron and the priest did not yet despair; they sprang to the horse's head. "Lacheneur," cried the priest, "beware! The blood you are about to spill will fall on your own head, and on the heads of your children!"

Arrested by these prophetic words, the little band paused, and at the same moment a figure clad in the costume of a peasant issued from the ranks.

"Marie-Anne!" exclaimed the abbe and the baron in the same breath.

"Yes it is I," replied the young girl, doffing the large hat which had partially concealed her face; "I wish to share the dangers of those who are dear to me—share in their victory or their defeat. Your advice comes too late, gentlemen. Do you see those lights on the horizon? They tell us that the people of the province are repairing to the cross-roads at the Croix d'Arcy, our general meeting place. Before two o'clock fifteen hundred men will be gathered there awaiting my father's commands. Would you have him leave these men, whom he has called from their peaceful firesides, without a leader? No, it is impossible!"

She evidently shared her lover's and her father's madness, even if she did not share all their hopes. "No, there must be no more hesitation, no more parleying," she continued. "Prudence now would be the height of folly. There is no more danger in a retreat than in an advance. Do not try to detain my father, gentlemen; each moment of delay may, perhaps, cost a man's life. And now, my friends, forward!"

A loud cheer answered her, and the little band descended the hill.

But M. d'Escorval could not allow his own son, whom he now perceived in the ranks, to depart in this fashion: "Maurice!" he cried.

The young fellow hesitated, but finally stepped forward.

"You will not follow these madmen, Maurice?" said the baron.

"I must follow them, father."

"I forbid it."

"Alas! father, I can't obey you. I have promised—I have sworn. I am second in command." If his voice had a mournful ring, plainly enough he was at all events determined.

"My son!" exclaimed M. d'Escorval; "unfortunate boy! Don't you know that you are marching to certain death?"

"Then all the more reason, father, why I shouldn't break my word."

"And your mother, Maurice, your mother whom you forget!"

A tear glistened in the young fellow's eye. "I am sure," he replied, "that my mother would rather weep for her dead son than keep him near her dishonoured, and branded as a coward and a traitor. Farewell! father."

M. d'Escorval appreciated the nobility of mind which Maurice's conduct implied. He opened his arms, and pressed his son convulsively to his heart, feeling that it might be for the last time in life. "Farewell!" he faltered, "Farewell!"

A minute later Maurice had rejoined his comrades, now on the plain below, leaving the baron standing motionless and overwhelmed with sorrow.

Suddenly M. d'Escorval started from his reverie. "A single hope remains, abbe!" he cried.

"Alas!" murmured the priest.

"Oh—I am not mistaken. Marie-Anne just told us the place of rendezvous. By running to Escorval and harnessing the cabriolet, we might be able to reach the Croix d'Arcy before this party arrives there. Your voice, which touched Lacheneur, will touch the hearts of his accomplices. We will persuade these poor, misguided men to return home. Come, abbe; come quickly!"

They tarried no longer, but swiftly descended towards the ferry.

XIII.

THE clock in the church tower of Sairmeuse was just striking eight when Lacheneur and his little band of followers left La Reche. An hour later, Blanche de Courtornieu, after dining alone with Aunt Medea at the chateau, ordered the carriage to take her to Montaignac. Since her father's duties had compelled him to reside in the town they only met on Sundays, when it either happened that Blanche went to Montaignac, or the marquis paid a visit to his estate.

Now this was Thursday evening, and the servants were consequently somewhat surprised when they heard that their young mistress was going to "the town." Her journey was prompted, however, by somewhat singular circumstances.

Six days had elapsed since Martial's last visit to Courtornieu, six days of suspense and anguish for the jealous Blanche. What Aunt Medea had to endure during this interval, only poor dependents in rich families can understand. For the first three days Blanche succeeded in preserving a semblance of self-control; but on the fourth she could endure the suspense no longer, and in spite of the breach of etiquette the step involved, she despatched a messenger to Sairmeuse to inquire if Martial were ill, or if he had been summoned away?

The messenger learnt that the young marquis was in very good health, and that he spent the entire day, from early morn to dewy eve, shooting in the neighbouring preserves; going to bed every evening as soon as dinner was over.

What a horrible insult this conduct implied for Blanche! However, it did not so much distress her as she felt certain that directly Martial heard of her enquiries he would hasten to her with a full apology. Her hope was vain; he

did not come; nor even condescend to give a sign of life.

"Ah! no doubt he is with that wretch," said Blanche to Aunt Medea. "He is on his knees before that miserable Marie-Anne—his mistress." For she had finished by believing—as is not unfrequently the case—the very calumnies which she herself had invented.

Scarcely knowing how to act she at last decided to make her father her confidant; and accordingly wrote him a note to the effect that she was coming to Montaignac for his advice. In reality, she wished her father to compel Lacheneur to leave the country. This would be an easy matter for the marquis, since he was armed with discretionary judicial authority at an epoch when lukewarm devotion furnished an ample excuse for sending a man into exile.

Fully decided upon executing this plan, Mademoiselle Courtornieu grew calmer on leaving the chateau; and her hopes overflowed in incoherent phrases, which poor Aunt Medea listened to with all her accustomed resignation. "At last," exclaimed the revengeful Blanche, "I shall be rid of this shameless creature. We will see if he has the audacity to follow her. Ah, no; he cannot dare to do that!"

She was talking in this strain, or reflecting how she should lay the matter before her father, while the carriage which she and Aunt Medea occupied rolled over the highway and through the village of Sairmeuse.

There were lights in every house, the wine-shops seemed full of tipplers, and groups of people could be seen in every direction. All this animation was no doubt most unusual, but what did it matter to Mademoiselle de Courtornieu! It was not until they were a mile or so from Sairmeuse that she was startled from her reverie.

"Listen, Aunt Medea," she suddenly exclaimed. "What is that noise?"

The poor dependent listened as she was bid, and both occupants of the carriage could distinguish a confused babel of shouts and singing, which grew nearer and more distinct as the vehicle rolled onward.

"Let us find out the meaning of all this hubbub," said Blanche. And lowering one of the carriage windows, she asked the coachman if he knew what the disturbance was about.

"I can see a great crowd of peasants on the hill," he replied; "they have torches and—"

"Blessed Jesus!" interrupted Aunt Medea in alarm.

"It must be a wedding," added the coachman, whipping up his horses.

It was not a wedding, however, but Lacheneur's little band, which had now swollen to five hundred men.

The Bonapartist ringleader should have been at the Croix d'Arcy two hours earlier. But he had shared the fate of most popular chieftains. He had given an impetus to the movement, and now it was beyond his control. The Baron d'Escorval had made him lose twenty minutes at La Reche, and he was delayed four times as long in Sairmeuse. When he reached that village, a little behind time, he found the peasants scattered through the wine-shops, drinking to the success of the enterprise; and it proved a long and difficult talk to wrest them from their merry-making. To crown everything, when the insurgents were finally induced to resume their line of march, they could not possibly be persuaded to extinguish the torches they had lighted. Prayers and threats were alike unavailing. They declared that they wished to see their way, and their leader had to submit to this foolish fancy. Poor deluded beings! They had not the slightest conception of the difficulties and the perils of the enterprise they had undertaken. They had set out to capture a fortified town, defended by a numerous garrison, just as if they had been bound on a pleasure-jault. Gay, thoughtless, and animated with childlike confidence, they marched along, arm in arm, singing some patriotic refrain. Lacheneur, who was on horseback in the center of the band, suffered the most intolerable anguish. Would not this delay ruin everything? What would the others, who were waiting at Croix d'Arcy, think of him! What were they doing at this very moment? Maurice, Chanlouineau, Jean, Marie-Anne, and some twenty old soldiers of the Empire who accompanied the party, understood and shared Lacheneur's despair. They knew the terrible danger they were incurring, and like their captain they constantly repeated: "Faster! Let us march faster!"

Vain was the exhortation! The peasantry openly declared that they preferred walking slowly. Soon, indeed they did not walk at all, but came to an abrupt halt. Still it was not hesitation that induced them to pause. The fact was that some of the band, chancing to look back, had perceived the lamps of Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's carriage gleaming in the darkness. The vehicle came rapidly onward, and soon overtook them. The peasants at once recognized the coachman's livery, and greeted the carriage with derisive shouts.

M. de Courtornieu's avarice had made him even more enemies than the Duke de Sairmeuse's pride, and all the peasants who thought they had more or less to complain of his extortions were delighted at this opportunity to frighten him; for as this was his carriage, no doubt he was inside. Hence, their disappointment was great indeed when, on opening the carriage-door, they perceived that the vehicle only contained Blanche and her elderly aunt. The latter shrieked with terror, but her niece, who was certainly a brave girl, haughtily asked: "Who are you? and what do you want?"

"You shall know to-morrow," replied Chanlouineau. "Until then, you are our prisoners."

"I see that you do not know who I am, boy."

"Excuse me. I do know who you are, and, for this very reason, I must request you to alight from your carriage. She must leave the carriage, must she not, M. d'Escorval?"

"I won't leave my carriage," retorted the infuriated heiress. "Tear me from it if you dare!"

They would certainly have dared to do so had it not been for Marie-Anne, who checked several peasants as they were springing towards the vehicle. "Let Mademoiselle de Courtornieu pass without hindrance," said she.

But this permission might produce such serious consequences that Chanlouineau found courage to resist. "That cannot be, Marie-Anne," said he. "She will warn her father. We must keep her as a hostage; her life may save the lives of our friends."

Blanche had not hitherto recognized her former friend, any more than she had suspected the intentions of the crowd. But Marie-Anne's name, coupled with that of D'Escorval enlightened her at once. She understood everything, and trembled with rage at the thought that she was at her rival's mercy. She immediately resolved to place herself under no obligation to Marie-Anne Lacheneur.

"Very well," said she, "we will alight."

But Marie-Anne checked her. "No," said she, "no! This is not proper company for a young girl."

"For an honest young girl, you should say," replied Blanche, with a sneer.

Chanlouineau was standing only a few feet off with his gun in his hand. If a man had spoken in this manner he would certainly have killed him on the spot.

"Mademoiselle will turn back," calmly rejoined Marie-Anne, disdaining to notice the insult which her former friend's words implied. "As she can reach Montaignac by the other road, two men will accompany her as far as Courtoirnieu."

The order was obeyed. The carriage turned and rolled away, though not before Blanche had found time to cry: "Beware, Marie-Anne! I will make you pay dearly for your insulting patronage!"

The hours were flying by. This incident had occupied ten minutes more—ten centuries—and the last trace of order had vanished. Lacheneur could have wept with rage. Suddenly calling Maurice and Chanlouineau to his side, he said: "I place you in command, do everything you can to hurry these idiots onward. I will ride as fast as possible to the Croix d'Arcy."

He started, but he was only a short distance in advance of his followers when he perceived two men running towards him at full speed. One was clad in the attire of the middle classes; the other wore the old uniform of captain in the emperor's guard.

"What has happened?" cried Lacheneur in alarm.

"Everything is discovered!"

"Good heavens!"

"Major Carini has been arrested."

"By whom? How?"

"Ah! there was a fatality about it! Just as we were perfecting our arrangements to seize the Duke de Sairmeuse, he himself surprised us. We fled, but the cursed noble pursued us, overtook Carini, caught him by the collar, and dragged him to the citadel."

Lacheneur was overwhelmed; the abbe's gloomy prophecy again resounded in his ears.

"So I warned my friends, and hastened to warn you," continued the officer. "The affair is an utter failure!"

He was only too correct; and Lacheneur knew it even better than he did. But, blinded by hatred and anger, he would not acknowledge that the disaster was irreparable. He affected a calmness which he was far from feeling. "You are easily discouraged, gentlemen," he said, bitterly. "There is, at least, one more chance."

"The deuce! Then you have resources of which we are ignorant?"

"Perhaps—that depends. You have just passed the Croix d'Arcy; did you tell any of those people what you have just told me?"

"Not a word."

"How many men are assembled there?"

"At least two thousand."

"And what is their mood?"

"They are all eagerness to begin the fight. They are cursing your slowness, and told me to entreat you to make haste."

"In that case our cause is not lost," said Lacheneur, with a determined gesture. "Wait here until the peasants come up, and impress upon them that you were sent to tell them to make haste. Bring them on as quickly as possible, and have confidence in me; I will be responsible for the success of the enterprise."

So speaking he put spurs to his horse and galloped away. In point of fact, he had deceived the men he had just spoken with. He had no other resources, nor even the slightest hope that the enterprise might now prove successful. He had told an abominable falsehood. But if this edifice, which he had raised with such infinite care and labour was to totter and fall, he wished to be buried beneath its ruins. They would be defeated; he felt sure of it, but what did that matter? In the conflict he would seek death and find it.

Bitter discontent pervaded the crowd at the Croix d'Arcy, the murmurs of dissatisfaction having changed to curses after the messengers despatched to warn Lacheneur of the disaster at Montaignac had passed by. These peasants, nearly two thousand in number, were indignant not to find their leader waiting for them at the rendezvous. "Where is he?" they asked each other. "Who knows, perhaps he has turned tail at the last moment? Perhaps he is concealing himself while we are here risking our lives and our children's bread."

Soon the epithets of mischief-maker and traitor flew from lip to lip, increasing the anger that swelled in every heart. Some were of opinion that it would be best to disperse; while others wished to march against Montaignac without waiting any longer for Lacheneur. The point was being deliberated when a vehicle appeared in sight. It was the Baron d'Escorval's cabriolet. He and the abbe were in advance of Lacheneur, and trusted that they had arrived in time to prevent any further prosecution of the enterprise. But although only a few minutes previously several of the insurgents had wavered, the peacemakers found all their entreaties and warnings useless. Instead of arresting the movement, their intervention only precipitated it.

"We have gone too far to draw back," exclaimed one of the neighbouring farmers, who was the recognized leader in Lacheneur's absence. "If death is before us, it is also behind us. To attack and conquer—that is our only hope of salvation. Forward, then, at once. That is the only way of disconcerting our enemies. He who hesitates is a coward! So forward!"

"Yes, forward!" re-echoed the excited crowd. They unfurled the tricolour, the banner banished by the Bourbon kings, which reminded them of so much glory and such great misfortunes; the drums beat, and with loud shouts of, "Long live Napoleon the Second!" the whole column took up its line of march.

Pale, in disordered garb, and with voices husky with emotion and fatigue, M. d'Escorval and the abbe followed in the wake of the rebels, imploring them to listen to reason. These two alone perceived the precipice towards which these misguided men were rushing, and they prayed to providence for an inspiration that might enable them to arrest this foolish enterprise while there was yet time. In fifty minutes the distance separating the Croix d'Arcy from Montaignac is covered. Soon the insurgents perceive the gate of the citadel, which was to have been opened for them by their friends within the town. It is eleven o'clock, and this gate is opened. Does not this circumstance prove

that their friends are masters of the town, and that they are awaiting them in force? Hence, the column boldly advances, so certain of success that those who carry guns do not even take the trouble to load them.

M. d'Escorval and the abbe alone foresee the catastrophe. They entreat the leader of the expedition not to neglect the commonest precautions; they implore him to send some two men on in advance to reconnoitre; they themselves offer to go, on condition that the peasants will await their return before proceeding farther.

But their prayers are unheeded. The peasants pass the outer line of fortification in safety, and the head of the advancing column reaches the drawbridge. The enthusiasm now amounts to delirium; and who will be the first to enter is the only thought.

Alas! at that very moment they hear a pistol fired. It is a signal, for instantly, and on every side, resounds a terrible fusillade. Three or four peasants fall, mortally wounded. The remainder pause, terror stricken and thinking only of escape. Still the leader encourages his men, there are a few of Napoleon's old soldiers in the ranks; and a struggle begins, all the more frightful owing to the darkness!

But it is not the cry of "Forward!" that suddenly rends the air. The voice of a coward raises the cry of panic: "We are betrayed! Let him save himself who can!"

Then comes the end of all order. A wild fear seizes the throng; and these men fly madly, despairingly, scattered like withered leaves are scattered by the force of the tempest.

XIV.

AT first Chupin's extraordinary revelations and the thought that Martial, the heir of his name and dukedom, should so degrade himself as to enter into a conspiracy with vulgar peasants, had well-nigh overcome the Duke de Sairmeuse. However, M. de Courtornieu's composure soon restored his *sang froid*. He hastened to the barracks, and in less than half-an-hour five hundred linesmen and three hundred Montaignac chasseurs were under arms. With those forces at his disposal it would have been easy enough to suppress the movement without the slightest bloodshed. It was only necessary to close the gates of the city, for it was not with clubs and fowling-pieces that these infatuated peasants could force an entrance into a fortified town.

Such moderation did not, however, suit a man of the duke's violent nature. Struggle and excitement were his elements, and ambition fanned his zeal. He ordered the gates of the citadel to be left open, and concealed numerous soldiers behind the parapets of the outer fortifications. He then stationed himself where he could command a view of the insurgents' approach, and deliberately choose his moment for giving the signal to fire. Still a strange thing happened. Out of four hundred shots fired into a dense mass of fifteen hundred men, only three hit their mark. More humane than their commander, nearly all the soldiers had fired into the air.

However, the duke had no time to investigate this strange occurrence now. He leaped into the saddle, and placing himself at the head of several hundred men, both cavalry and infantry, he started in pursuit of the fugitives. The peasants were, perhaps, some twenty minutes in advance. These simple minded fellows might easily have made their escape. They had only to disperse in twenty different directions; but unfortunately, this thought never once occurred to the majority of them. A few ran across the fields and then gained their homes in safety; while the others fled panic stricken, like a flock of frightened sheep before the pursuing soldiers. Fear lent them wings, for at each moment they could hear the shots fired at the laggards.

There was one man, however, who was still steady galloping in the direction of Montaignac; and this was Lacheneur. He had just reached the Croix d'Arcy when the firing began. He listened and waited. No discharge of musketry answered the first fusillade. What could be happening? Plainly there was no combat. Had the peasantry been butchered then? Lacheneur had a perception of the truth, and regretted that the bullets just discharged had not pierced his own heart. He put spurs to his horse and galloped past the cross-roads towards Montaignac. At last he perceived the fugitives approaching in the distance. He dashed forward to meet them, and mingling curses and insults together he vainly tried to stay their flight. "You cowards!" he vociferated, "you traitors! you fly and you are ten against one! Where are you going? To your own homes? Fools! you will only find the gendarmes there, waiting your coming to conduct you to the scaffold. Is it not better to die with your weapons in your hands? Come—right about. Follow me! We may still conquer. Re-enforcements are at hand; two thousand men are following me!"

He promised them two thousand men; had he promised them ten thousand, twenty thousand—an army and cannon, it would have made no difference. Not until they reached the wide open space of the cross-roads, where they had talked so confidently scarcely an hour before, did the more intelligent of the throng regain their senses, while the others fled in every direction.

About a hundred of the bravest and most determined of the conspirators gathered round Lacheneur. In the midst of the little crowd was the Abbe Midon with a gloomy and despondent countenance. He had been separated from the baron, of whose fate he was ignorant. Had M. d'Escorval been killed or taken prisoner? or was it possible that he had made his escape? The worthy priest dared not return home. He waited, hoping that his companion might rejoin him, and deemed himself fortunate in finding the baron's cabriolet still standing at a corner of the open space, formed by the four cross roads. He was still waiting when the remnant of the column confided to Maurice and Chanlouineau came up. Of the five hundred men that composed this troop on its departure from Sairmeuse, only fifteen remained, including the two retired officers, who had escaped from Montaignac, and brought Lacheneur intelligence that the conspiracy was discovered. Marie-Anne was in the centre of this little party.

Her father and his friends were trying to decide what course should be pursued. Should each man go his own way? or should they unite, and by an obstinate resistance, give their comrades time to reach their homes?

Chanlouineau's voice put an end to the hesitation. "I have come to fight," he exclaimed, "and I shall sell my life dearly."

"We will make a stand then!" cried the others.

But Chanlouineau did not immediately follow them to the spot they considered best adapted for a prolonged defence; he called Maurice and drew him a little aside. "You must leave us at once M. d'Escorval," he said, in a rough voice.

"I—I came here, Chanlouineau, as you did, to do my duty."

"Your duty, sir, is to serve Marie-Anne. Go at once, and take her with you."

"I shall remain," said Maurice firmly.

He was going to join his comrades when Chanlouineau stopped him. "You have no right to sacrifice your life here," he said quickly. "It belongs to the woman who has given herself to you."

"Wretch! how dare you—"

Chanlouineau sadly shook his head. "What is the use of denying it?" said he. "It was so great a temptation that only an angel could have resisted it. It was not your fault, nor was it hers. Lacheneur was a bad father. There was a day when I wanted either to kill myself or to kill you, I didn't know which. Ah! you certainly were near death that day. You were scarcely five paces from the muzzle of my gun. It was God who stayed my hand by reminding me what her despair would be. But now that I have to die, and Lacheneur as well, some one must take care of Marie-Anne. Swear that you will marry her. You may be involved in some difficulty on account of this affair; but I have the means of saving you."

He was suddenly interrupted by a fusillade. The Duke de Sairmeuse's soldiers were approaching. "Good heavens!" exclaimed Chanlouineau, "and Marie-Anne."

They rushed in pursuit of her, and Maurice was the first to find her, standing in the centre of the open space clinging to the neck of her father's horse. He took her in his arms, trying to drag her away. "Come!" said he, "come!"

But she refused. "Leave me, leave me!" she entreated.

"But all is lost!"

"Yes, I know that all is lost—even honour. Leave me here. I must remain; I must die, and thus hide my shame. It must, it shall be so!"

Just then Chanlouineau reached them. Had he divined the secret of her resistance? Perhaps so, but at all events without uttering a word, he lifted her in his strong arms as if she had been a child, and carried her to the cabriolet, beside which the Abbe Midon was standing. "Get in," he said, addressing the priest, "and quick—take Mademoiselle Lacheneur. Now, Maurice it's your turn!"

But the duke's soldiers were already masters of the field. They had perceived this little group and hastened forward. Brave Chanlouineau certainly was. He seized his gun, and brandishing it like a club managed to hold the enemy at bay, while Maurice sprang into the carriage, caught the reins and started the horse off at a gallop. All the cowardice and all the heroism displayed on that terrible night will never be really known. Two minutes after the departure of the vehicle, Chanlouineau was still battling with the foe. He had at least a dozen men to deal with. Twenty shots had been fired, and yet he was unwounded, and his enemies almost believed him to be invulnerable.

"Surrender!" cried the soldiers, amazed by his bravery; "surrender!"

"Never! never!" he shrieked in reply, at the same time warding his assailants off with well-nigh superhuman strength and agility. The struggle might have lasted some time longer, had not one of the soldiers managed to crawl behind him, without being perceived. This linesman seized Chanlouineau by the legs, and although the latter struggled furiously, he was taken at such a disadvantage that further resistance was impossible. He fell to the ground with a loud cry of "Help! friends, help!"

But no one responded to this appeal. At the other end of the open space those upon whom he called had virtually yielded, after a desperate struggle. The main body of the duke's infantry was near at hand. The rebels could hear the drums beating the charge; and see the bayonets gleaming in the moonlight.

Lacheneur, who had remained on horseback amid his partisans, utterly ignoring the bullets that whistled round him, felt that his few remaining friends were about to be exterminated. At that supreme moment a vision of the past flitted before his mind's eye, with the rapidity of a flash of lightning. He read and judged his own heart. Hatred had led him to crime. He loathed himself for the humiliation which he had imposed upon his daughter, and cursed himself for the falsehoods with which he had deceived these brave men, for whose death he would be accountable to God. Enough blood had flowed; he must save those who remained. "Cease firing, my friends," he commanded; "retreat!"

They obeyed—he could see them scatter in every direction. He too could fly, for was he not mounted on a swift steed which would bear him beyond the reach of the enemy? But he had sworn that he would not survive defeat. Maddened with remorse, despair, sorrow, and impotent rage, he saw no refuge except in death. He had only to wait for it, for it was fast approaching; and yet he preferred to rush to meet it. Gathering up the reins, and applying the spurs he charged upon the enemy.

The shock was rude, the ranks opened, and there was a moment's confusion. Then Lacheneur's horse, wounded by a dozen bayonet thrusts, reared on its hind-legs, beat the air with its forehoofs, and, falling backwards, pinned its rider underneath. And the soldiers marched onward not suspecting that the rider was struggling to free himself.

It was half-past one in the morning—the open space where the cross roads met was virtually deserted. Nothing could be heard save the moans of a few wounded men, calling on their comrades for succour. Before thinking of attending to the wounded, M. de Sairmeuse had to occupy himself with his own personal interests and glory. Now that the insurrection had, so to say, been suppressed, it was necessary to exaggerate its magnitude as much as possible, in order that his grace's reward might be in proportion with the services he would be supposed to have rendered. Some fifteen or twenty rebels had been captured; but these were not sufficient to give the victory all the *eclat* which the duke desired. He must find more culprits to drag before the provost-marshal or before a military commission. He, therefore, divided his troops into several detachments, and sent them in every direction with orders to explore the villages, search the houses, and arrest all suspected persons. Having given this order and recommended implacable severity, he turned his horse and started at a brisk trot for Montaignac.

Like his friend, M. de Courtornieu, he would have blessed these honest, artless conspirators, had not a growing fear impaired his satisfaction. Was his son, the Marquis de Sairmeuse, really implicated in this conspiracy or not? The duke could scarcely believe in Martial's connivance, and yet the recollection of Chupin's assertions troubled him. On the other hand, what could have become of Martial? Had he been met by the servant sent to warn him? Was he returning? And, in that case, by which road? Had he fallen into the hands of the peasants? So many questions which could not with certainty be answered.

His grace's relief was intense when, on reaching his residence in Montaignac, after a conference with M. de Courtornieu, he learnt that Martial had returned home about a quarter of an hour before. The servant who brought

him this news added that the marquis had gone to his own room directly he dismounted from his horse.

"All right," replied the duke. "I will go to him there." At the same time, however, despite his outward placidity of manner, he was secretly murmuring, "What abominable impertinence! What! I am on horseback at the head of my troops, my life imperilled, and my son goes quietly to bed without even assuring himself of my safety!"

He reached Martial's room, and finding the door closed and locked on the inside, rapped angrily against the panel.

"Who is there?" inquired the young marquis.

"It is I," replied the duke; "open the door."

Martial at once complied, and M. de Sairmeuse entered; but the sight that met his gaze made him tremble. On the table stood a basin full of blood, and Martial, with bare chest, was bathing a large wound near the right nipple.

"You have been fighting!" exclaimed the duke, in an agitated voice.

"Yes."

"Ah!—then you were, indeed—"

"I was where?—what?"

"Why, at the rendezvous of those miserable peasants who, in their folly, dared to dream of overthrowing the best of princes!"

"I think you must be jesting, sir," replied Martial, in a tone of deep surprise, which somewhat reassured his father, though it failed to dissipate his suspicions entirely.

"Then these vile rascals attacked you?" inquired M. de Sairmeuse.

"Not at all. I have been simply obliged to fight a duel."

"With whom? Name the scoundrel who has dared to insult you?"

A faint flush tinged Martial's cheek; but it was with his usual careless manner that he replied: "Upon my word, no; I shall not give his name. You would trouble him, perhaps; and I really owe the fellow a debt of gratitude. It happened upon the highway; he might have murdered me without ceremony had he only chosen, but he offered me open combat. Besides, he was wounded far more severely than I."

All M. de Sairmeuse's doubts had now returned. "And why, instead of summoning a physician, are you attempting to dress this wound yourself?"

"Because it is a mere trifle, and because I wish to keep it a secret."

The duke shook his head. "All this is scarcely plausible," he remarked; "especially after the statements made to me concerning your complicity in the revolt."

"Ah!" said the young marquis, "so your head spy has been at work again. However, I am certainly surprised that you can hesitate for a moment between your son's word and the stories told you by such a wretch."

"Don't speak ill of Chupin, marquis; he is a very useful man. Had it not been for him, we should have been taken unawares. It was through him that I learned of this vast conspiracy organized by Lacheneur—"

"What! is it Lacheneur—"

"Who is at the head of the movement?—yes, marquis. Ah! your usual discernment has failed you in this instance. What, you were a constant visitor at his house, and yet you suspected nothing? And you contemplate a diplomatic career! But this is not everything. Now you know what became of the money you so lavishly bestowed on these people. They used it to purchase guns, powder and ammunition."

The duke was satisfied that his earlier suspicions concerning his son's complicity were without foundation; still he could not resist the temptation to taunt Martial anent his intimacy with the ex-steward of Sairmeuse. But, despite the bitterness of the situation, it proved a fruitless effort. Martial knew very well that he had been duped, but he did not think of resentment. "If Lacheneur has been captured," he murmured to himself, "if he were condemned to death, and if I could only save him, then Marie-Anne would have nothing to refuse me."

XV.

WHEN the Baron d'Escorval divined the reason of his son's frequent absences from home, he studiously avoided speaking on the matter to his wife; and, indeed, he did not even warn her of his purpose when he went to ask the Abbe Midon to go with him to Lacheneur's. This was the first time that he had ever had a secret from the faithful partner of his life; and his silence fully explains the intensity of Madame d'Escorval's astonishment when at dinner time Maurice was sometimes late; but the baron, like all great workers, was punctuality itself. Hence his non-arrival could only be due to some extraordinary occurrence. Madame d'Escorval's surprise developed into uneasiness when she ascertained that her husband had started off in the Abbe Midon's company, that they had harnessed a horse to the cabriolet themselves, driving through the stable-yard into a lane leading to the public road, in lieu of passing through the court-yard in front of the house, as was the usual practice. This strange precaution must necessarily conceal some mystery.

Madame d'Escorval waited, oppressed by vague forebodings. The servants shared her anxiety; for the baron's affability and kindness had greatly endeared him to all his dependants. Long hours passed by, but eventually, at about ten o'clock in the evening, a peasant returning from Sairmeuse passed by the chateau, and seeing the servants clustering in front of the garden gate he stopped short, and with the loquacity of a man who has just been sacrificing at the altar of Bacchus proceeded to relate the most incredible stories. He declared that all the peasantry for ten leagues around were under arms, and that the Baron d'Escorval was the leader of a revolt organized for the restoration of the Empire. He did not doubt the final success of the movement, boldly stating that Napoleon II., Marie-Louise, and all the marshals were concealed in Montaignac. Alas! it must be confessed that Lacheneur had not hesitated to utter the grossest falsehoods in his anxiety to gain followers to his cause. Madame d'Escorval, before whom this peasant was conducted, could not be deceived by these ridiculous stories, but she could and did believe that the baron was the prime mover in the insurrection. And this belief, which would have carried consternation to many women's hearts, absolutely reassured her. She had entire, unlimited faith in her husband. She believed him superior to all other men—infallible, in short. Hence, if he had organized a movement, that movement was right. If he

had attempted it, it was because he expected to succeed; and if he looked for success, to her mind it was certain.

Impatient, however, to know the result, she despatched the gardener to Sairmeuse with orders to obtain information without awakening suspicion, if possible, and to hasten back as soon as he could learn anything of a positive nature. He returned shortly after midnight, pale, frightened, and in tears. The disaster had already become known, and had been described to him with any amount of exaggeration. He had been told that hundreds of men had been killed, and that a whole army was scouring the country, massacring the defenceless peasants and their families.

While he was telling his story, Madame d'Escorval felt as if she were going mad. She saw—yes, positively, saw her son and her husband, dead—or still worse, mortally wounded, stretched on the public highway—lying with their arms crossed upon their breasts, livid, bloody, their eyes staring wildly—begging for water—a drop of water to assuage their burning thirst. "I will find them!" she exclaimed, in frenzied accents. "I will go to the battlefield and seek for them among the dead, until I find them. Light some torches, my friends, and come with me, for you will aid me, will you not? You loved them; they were so good! You would not leave their dead bodies unburied! Oh! the wretches! The wretches who have killed them!"

The servants were hastening to obey when the furious gallop of a horse and the rapid roll of carriage-wheels were heard. "Here they come!" exclaimed the gardener, "here they come!"

Madame d'Escorval, followed by the servants, rushed to the gate just in time to see a cabriolet enter the courtyard, and the panting horse, flecked with foam, miss his footing, and fall. The Abbe Midon and Maurice had already sprung to the ground and were removing an apparently lifeless body from the vehicle. Even Marie-Anne's great energy had not been able to resist so many successive shocks. The last trial had overwhelmed her. Once in the carriage, all immediate danger having disappeared, the excitement which had sustained her fled. She became unconscious, and all efforts had hitherto failed to restore her. Madame d'Escorval, however, did not recognize Mademoiselle Lacheneur in her masculine attire. She only saw that the body Maurice and the priest were carrying was not her husband, and turning to her son exclaimed in a stifled voice. "And your father—your father where is he?"

Until that moment, Maurice and the cure had comforted themselves with the hope that M. d'Escorval would reach home before them. They were now cruelly undeceived. Maurice tottered, and almost dropped his precious burden. The abbe perceived his anguish and made a sign to two servants who gently lifted Marie-Anne, and bore her to the house. Then turning to Madame d'Escorval the cure exclaimed at hazard. "The baron will soon be here, madame, he fled first—"

"The baron d'Escorval could not have fled," she interrupted. "A general does not desert when he is face to face with the enemy. If a panic seizes his soldiers, he rushes to the front, and either leads them back to combat, or sacrifices his own life."

"Mother!" faltered Maurice; "mother!"

"Oh! do not try to deceive me. My husband was the organizer of this conspiracy—If his confederates have been beaten and dispersed they must have proved themselves cowards. Heaven have mercy upon me, my husband is dead!"

In spite of the abbe's quickness of perception, he could not understand these assertions on the part of the baroness; and feared that sorrow and terror had tampered with her mind. "Ah! madame," he exclaimed, "the baron had nothing to do with this movement: far from it—" He paused; they were standing in the court-yard, in the full glare of the torches lighted by the servants a moment previously. Any one passing along the public road could hear and see everything; and in the present situation such imprudence might have fatal results. "Come, Madame," accordingly resumed the priest, leading the baroness toward the house "and you Maurice, come as well!"

Madame d'Escorval and her son passively obeyed the summons. The former seemed crushed by unspeakable anguish, but on entering the drawing-room she instinctively glanced at the seemingly lifeless form extended on the sofa. This time she recognized Marie-Anne. "What, Mademoiselle Lacheneur!" she faltered, "here in this costume? dead?"

One might indeed believe that the poor girl was dead, to see her lying there rigid, cold, and as white as if the last drop of blood had been drained from her veins. Her beautiful face had the motionless pallor of marble; her half-open colourless lips disclosed her teeth, clenched convulsively, and a large dark blue circle surrounded her closed eyelids. Her long black hair, which she had rolled up closely, so as to slip it under her peasant's hat was now unwound, and fell confusedly over the sofa and her shoulders.

"There is no danger," declared the abbe, after he had examined her. "She has only fainted, and it will not be long before she regains consciousness." And then, rapidly but clearly, he gave the necessary directions to the servants, who were as astonished as their mistress.

"What a night!" murmured Madame d'Escorval, as staring on the scene with dilated eyes she mechanically wiped her forehead, covered with cold perspiration.

"I must remind you, madame," said the priest sympathizingly, but firmly, "that reason and duty alike forbid your yielding to despair! Wife, where is your energy? Christian, what has become of your confidence in a just and protecting providence!"

"Oh! I have courage left," faltered the wretched woman. "I am brave!"

The abbe led her to a large arm-chair and compelled her to sit down. Then in a gentler tone, he resumed: "Besides, why should you despair, madame? Your son is with you in safety. Your husband has not compromised himself; he has done nothing more than I have done myself." And briefly, but with rare precision, the priest explained the part which he and the baron had played during this unfortunate evening.

Instead of reassuring the baroness, however, his recital seemed to increase her anxiety. "I understand you," she interrupted, "and I believe you. But I also know that all the people in the country round about are convinced that my husband commanded the rebels. They believe it, and they will say it."

"And what of that?"

"If he has been arrested, as you give me to understand may be the case, he will be summoned before a court-martial. Was he not one of the emperor's friends? That alone is a crime, as you know very well yourself. He will be convicted and sentenced to death."

"No, madame, no! Am I not here? I will go to the tribunal, and say: 'I have seen and know everything.' "

"But they will arrest you as well, for you are not a priest after their cruel hearts. They will throw you into prison, and you will meet him on the scaffold."

Maurice had been listening with a pale, haggard face. "Ah, I shall have been the cause of the death of my father," he exclaimed, as he heard these last words, and then despite all the abbe's attempts to silence him, he continued. "Yes, I shall have killed him. He was ignorant even of the existence of this conspiracy desired by Lacheneur; but I knew of it, and wished to succeed, because on it the success, the happiness of my life depended. And then—wretch that I was!—at times when I wished to gain a waverer to our ranks, I mentioned the honoured name of D'Escorval. Ah! I was mad!—I was mad! And yet, even now, I have not the courage to curse my folly! Oh, mother, mother, if you knew—"

The young fellow paused, the sobs which convulsively rose in his throat, choking all further utterances. Just then a faint moan was heard. Marie-Anne was slowly regaining consciousness. She seemed intensely puzzled by the scene around her, and passed her hands before her wandering eyes as if to ascertain whether she were really awake or not. At one moment she opened her mouth as if to speak, but the Abbe Midon checked her with a hasty gesture. Maurice's confession, and his mother's remarks had fully enlightened the priest as to the danger threatening the D'Escorvals. How could it be averted? There was no time for reflection. He must decide, and act at once. Accordingly he darted to the door, and summoned the servants still clustering in the hall and on the staircase. "Listen to me attentively," said he, in that quick imperious voice which unhesitatingly impresses the hearer with the certainty of approaching peril, "and remember that your master's life depends, perhaps, upon your discretion. We can rely upon you, can we not?"

Simultaneously the little group of dependents raised their hands, as if to call upon heaven to witness their fidelity.

"In less than an hour," continued the priest, "the soldiers sent in pursuit of the fugitives will be here. Not a word must be said concerning what has happened this evening. Whoever questions you must be led to suppose that I went away with the baron, and returned alone. Not one of you must have seen Mademoiselle Lacheneur. We are going to conceal her. Remember, my friends that all is lost if the slightest suspicion of her presence here is roused. Should the soldiers question you, try and convince them that M. Maurice has not left the house this evening." The priest paused for a moment, trying to think if he had forgotten any other precaution that human prudence could suggest; then he added again. "One word more; to see you standing about at this hour of the night will awaken suspicion at once. However, we must plead in justification the alarm we feel at the baron's prolonged absence. Besides, Madame d'Escorval is ill and that will furnish another excuse. She must go to bed at once, for by this means she may escape all awkward questioning. As for you, Maurice, run and change your clothes; and above all, wash your hands, and sprinkle some scent over them."

Those who heard the abbe were so impressed with the imminence of the danger, that they were more than willing to obey his orders. As soon as Marie-Anne could be moved, she was carried to a tiny garret under the roof; while Madame d'Escorval retired to her own room, and the servants went back to the kitchen. Maurice and the abbe remained alone in the drawing-room. They were both cruelly oppressed by anxiety, and shared the opinion that the Baron d'Escorval had been made a prisoner. In that event, the abbe Midon felt that all he could usefully attempt, was to try and save Maurice from any charge of complicity. "And who knows," he muttered, "the son's freedom may save the father's life."

At that moment, his meditations were interrupted by a violent pull at the bell of the front gate. The gardener could be heard hastening to answer the summons, the gate grated on its hinges, and then the measured tread of soldiers resounded over the gravel. Half-a-minute later a loud voice commanded: "Halt!"

The priest looked at Maurice and saw that he was as pale as death. "Be calm," he entreated, "don't be alarmed. Don't lose your self-possession—and, above all, don't forget my instructions."

"Let them come," replied Maurice. "I am prepared."

Scarcely had he spoken than the drawing-room door was flung violently open, and a captain of grenadiers entered the apartment. He was a young fellow of five-and-twenty, tall, fair-haired, with blue eyes, and a little, carefully waxed moustache. No doubt on ordinary occasions this military dandy's features wore the coxcomb's usual look of self-complacency, but for the time being he had a really ferocious air. The soldiers by whom he was accompanied awaited his orders in the hall. After glancing suspiciously round the apartment, he asked in a harsh voice; "Who is the master of this house?"

"The Baron d'Escorval, my father, who is absent," replied Maurice.

"Where is he?"

The abbe, who had hitherto remained seated, now rose to his feet. "On hearing of the unfortunate outbreak of this evening," he replied, "the baron and myself went after the peasants in the hope of inducing them to relinquish their foolish undertaking. They would not listen to us. In the confusion that ensued, I became separated from the baron; I returned here very anxious, and am now waiting for his return."

The captain twisted his moustache with a sneering air. "Not a bad invention!" said he. "Only I don't believe a word of it."

A threatening light gleamed in the priest's eyes, and his lips trembled for a moment. However, he prudently held his peace.

"Who are you?" rudely asked the officer.

"I am the cure of Sairmeuse."

"Honest men ought to be in bed at this hour. And you are racing about the country after rebellious peasants. Really, I don't know what prevents me from ordering your arrest."

What did prevent him was the priestly robe, all powerful under the Restoration. With Maurice, however, the swaggering swashbuckler was more at ease. "How many are there in this family of yours?" he asked.

"Three; my father, my mother—ill at this moment—and myself."

"And how many servants?"

"Seven—four men and three women."

"You haven't housed or concealed any one here this evening?"

"No one."

"It will be necessary to prove that," rejoined the captain; and turning towards the door he called, "Corporal Bavois, step here!"

This corporal proved to be one of the old soldiers who had followed the emperor all over Europe. Two tiny, but piercing grey eyes lighted his tanned, weather-beaten face, and an immense hooked nose surmounted a heavy, bristling moustache. "Bavois," commanded the officer, "take half a dozen men and search this house from top to bottom. You are an old fox, and if there be any hiding-place here, you will be sure to discover it. If you find any one concealed here, bring the person to me. Go, and make haste!"

The corporal saluted and turned on his heels; while the captain walked towards Maurice: "And now," said he, "what have you been doing this evening?"

The young man hesitated for a moment: then, with well-feigned indifference, replied: "I have not put my head out of doors."

"Hum! that must be proved. Let me see your hands."

The soldier's tone was so offensive that Maurice felt the blood rise to his forehead. Fortunately a warning glance from the abbe made him restrain himself. He offered his hands for inspection, and the captain, after examining them carefully on either side, took the final precaution to smell them. "Ah!" quoth he, "these hands are too white and smell too sweet to have been dabbling with powder."

At the same time he was somewhat surprised that this young man should have so little courage as to remain by the fireside at home, while his father was leading the peasants on to battle. "Another thing," said he: "you must have some weapons here?"

"Yes, a few hunting rifles."

"Where are they?"

"In a small room on the ground floor."

"Take me there."

They conducted him to the room, and on finding that none of the guns had been used, at least for some days, he seemed considerably annoyed. But his disappointment reached a climax when Corporal Bavois returned and stated that he had searched everywhere, without finding anything of a suspicious character.

"Send for the servants," was the officer's next order; but all the dependents faithfully confined themselves to the story indicated by the abbe Midon, and the captain perceived that even if a mystery existed, as he suspected, he was not likely to fathom it. Swearing that all the inmates of the house should pay a heavy penalty if they were deceiving him, he again called Bavois and told him that he should resume the search himself. "You," he added, "will remain here with two men, and I shall expect you to render a strict account of all you see and hear. If M. d'Escorval returns, bring him to me at once; do not allow him to escape. Keep your eyes open and good luck to you!"

He added a few words in a low voice, and then left the room as abruptly as he had entered it. Scarcely had the sound of his footsteps died away, than the corporal gave vent to his disgust in a frightful oath. "*Hein!*" said he, to his men, "did you hear that cadet. Listen, watch, arrest, report. So he takes us for spies! Ah! if the Little Corporal only knew how his old soldiers were degraded!"

The two men responded with sullen growls.

"As for you," pursued the old trooper, addressing Maurice and the abbe, "I Bavois, corporal of the grenadiers, declare in my own name and in that of my comrades here, that you are as free as birds, and that we shall arrest no one. More than that, if we can aid you in any way, we are at your service. The little fool who commands us this evening thought we were fighting. Look at my gun—I have not fired a shot from it—and my comrades only fired blank cartridges." The statement might possibly be a sincere one, but was scarcely probable. "We have nothing to conceal," replied the cautious priest.

The old corporal gave a knowing wink. "Ah! you distrust me!" said he. "You are wrong, as I'll show you. It may be easy to gull that fool who has just left here, but it's not so easy to deceive Corporal Bavois. And if you had intended to do so, you shouldn't have left a gun in the courtyard, which was certainly never loaded for firing at swallows."

The cure and Maurice exchanged glances of consternation. Maurice now recollected, for the first time, that on alighting from the cabriolet on his return, he had hastily propped the loaded gun against the wall. The weapon had subsequently escaped the servants' notice.

"Secondly!" resumed Bavois, "there is some one concealed in the attic. I have excellent ears. Thirdly, I arranged matters so that no one should enter the sick lady's room."

Maurice needed no further proof. He held out his hand to the corporal, and, in a voice trembling with emotion, replied: "You are a noble fellow!"

A few moments later—the three grenadiers having retired to another room, where they were served with supper—Maurice, the abbe, and Madame d'Escorval were again deliberating concerning their future action, when Marie-Anne entered the apartment with a pale face, but firm step. "I must leave this house," she said, to the baroness, in a tone of quiet resolution. "Had I been conscious, I would never have accepted hospitality which is likely to bring such misfortune on your family. Your acquaintance with me has cost you too much sorrow already. Don't you understand now, why I wished you to look on us as strangers? A presentiment told me that my family would prove fatal to yours!"

"Poor child!" exclaimed Madame d'Escorval; "where will you go?"

Marie-Anne raised her beautiful eyes to heaven. "I don't know, madame," she replied, "but duty commands me to go. I must learn what has become of my father and brother, and share their fate."

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "still this thought of death. You, who no longer—" He paused; for a secret which was not his own had almost escaped his lips. But visited by a sudden inspiration, he threw himself at his mother's feet. "Oh, my mother! my dearest mother, do not allow her to go," he cried. "I may perish in my attempt to save my father. She will be your daughter then—she whom I have loved so dearly. She cannot leave us. You will encircle her with your tender and protecting love; and may be, after all these trials, happier times will come."

Touched by her son's despair, Madame d'Escorval turned to Marie-Anne, and with her winning words soon prevailed upon her to remain.

XVI.

THE baroness knew nothing of the secret which Marie-Anne had revealed at the Croix d'Arcy, when she proclaimed her desire to die by her father's side; but Maurice was scarcely uneasy on that score, for his faith in his mother was so great that he felt sure she would forgive them both when she learnt the truth. Not unfrequently does it happen, that of all women, chaste and loving wives and mothers are precisely the most indulgent towards those whom the voice of passion has led astray. Comforted by this reflection, which reassured him as to the future of the girl he loved, Maurice now turned all his thoughts towards his father.

The day was breaking, and he declared that he would disguise himself as best he could, and go to Montaignac at once. It was not without a feeling of anxiety that Madame d'Escorval heard him speak in this manner. She was trembling for her husband's life, and now her son must hurry into danger. Perhaps before the day was over neither husband nor son would be left to her. And yet she did not forbid his going; for she felt that he was only fulfilling a sacred duty. She would have loved him less had she supposed him capable of cowardly hesitation, and would have dried her tears, if necessary to bid him "go." Moreover, was not anything preferable to the agony of suspense which they had been enduring for hours?

Maurice had reached the drawing-room door when the abbe called him back. "You must certainly go to Montaignac," said he, "but it would be folly to disguise yourself. You would surely be recognized, and the saying: 'He who conceals himself is guilty,' would at once be applied to you. You must proceed openly, with head erect, and you must even exaggerate the assurance of innocence. Go straight to the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu. I will accompany you; we will go together in the carriage."

"Take this advice, Maurice," said Madame d'Escorval, seeing that her son seemed undecided, "the abbe knows what is best much better than we do."

The cure had not waited for the assent which Maurice gave to his mother's words, but had already gone to order the carriage to be got ready. On the other hand, Madame d'Escorval now left the room to write a few lines to a lady friend, whose husband had considerable influence in Montaignac; and Maurice and Marie-Anne were thus left alone. This was the first moment of freedom they had found since Marie-Anne's confession. "My darling," whispered Maurice, clasping the young girl to his heart, "I did not think it was possible to love more fondly than I loved you yesterday; but now— And you—you wish for death when another precious life depends on yours."

"I was terrified," faltered Marie-Anne. "I was terrified at the prospect of shame which I saw—which I still see before me; but now I am resigned. My frailty deserves punishment, and I must submit to the insults and disgrace awaiting me."

"Insults! Let any one dare insult you! But will you not now be my wife in the sight of men, as you are in the sight of heaven? The failure of your father's scheme sets you free!"

"No, no, Maurice, I am not free! Ah! it is you who are pitiless! I see only too well that you curse me, that you curse the day when we met for the first time! Confess it!" And so speaking Marie-Anne lifted her streaming eyes to his. "As for me," she resumed, "I could not say so. Grievous my fault is, no doubt, I am disgraced and humiliated, but still——"

She could not finish; Maurice drew her to him, and their lips and their tears met in one long embrace. "You love me," he exclaimed, "you love me in spite of everything! We shall succeed. I will save your father, and mine—I will save your brother too."

He had no time to say more. The baron's berline, to which a couple of horses had been harnessed, that they might reach Montaignac with greater speed, was waiting in the courtyard; and the abbe's voice could be heard calling on Maurice to make haste, and Madame d'Escorval, moreover, now returned, carrying a letter which she handed to her son. One long, last embrace, and then leaving the two women to their tears and prayers, Maurice and the abbe sprang into the carriage, which was soon dashing along the high road towards Montaignac.

"If, by confessing your own guilt, you could save your father," said the Abbe Midon as they rolled through the village of Sairmeuse, "I should tell you to give yourself up, and confess the whole truth. Such would be your duty. But such a sacrifice would be not only useless, but dangerous. Your confessions of guilt would only implicate your father still more. You would be arrested, but they would not release him, and you would both be tried and convicted. Let us then allow—I will not say justice, for that would be blasphemy—but these blood-thirsty men, who call themselves judges, to pursue their course, and attribute all that you yourself have done to your father. When the trial comes on you will be able to prove his innocence, and to produce *alibis* of so unimpeachable a character, that they will be forced to acquit him. And I understand the people of our province well enough to feel sure that none of them will reveal our stratagem."

"And if we should not succeed in that way," asked Maurice, gloomily, "what could I do then?"

The question was so grave a one that the priest did not even try to answer it, and tortured with anxiety and cruel forebodings, he and Maurice remained silent during the rest of the journey. When they reached the town young d'Escorval realised the abbe's wisdom in preventing him from assuming a disguise; for, armed as they were with absolute power the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu had closed all the gates of Montaignac but one, through which all those who desired to leave or enter the town were obliged to pass; two officers being moreover stationed beside it, to examine and question all comers and goers. Maurice noticed these officers' surprise when, on being asked who he was, he gave them the name of d'Escorval. "Ah! you know what has become of my father!" he exclaimed.

"The Baron d'Escorval is a prisoner," replied one of the officers.

Although Maurice had expected this reply, he turned pale with suppressed emotion. "Is he wounded?" he asked, eagerly.

"He hasn't a scratch," was the answer; "but please pass on." From the tone of this last remark, and the anxious looks the officers exchanged one might have supposed that they feared they might compromise themselves by conversing with the son of so great a criminal.

The carriage rolled under the archway, and had gone a couple of hundred yards or so along the Grande Rue when Maurice noticed a large poster affixed to one of the walls, and which an elderly man was busy perusing. Instinctively both the inmates of the vehicle felt that this notice must have some connection with the revolt; and they were not mistaken, for on springing to the ground they themselves read as follows: "We, commander of the Military Division of Montaignac, in virtue of the State of Siege, decree—Article I.—The inmates of the house in which the elder Lacheneur is found shall be handed over to a military commission for trial. Article II.—Whoever shall deliver up the body of the elder Lacheneur, dead or alive, will receive a reward of twenty thousand francs. *Signed:* DUKE DE SAIRMEUSE."

"God be praised!" exclaimed Maurice when he had finished his perusal. "Then Marie-Anne's father has escaped! He had a good horse, and in two hours—"

A glance and a nudge from the abbe checked him; and in turning he recognized that the man standing near them was none other than Father Chupin. The old scoundrel had also recognized them, for he took off his hat to the cure, and with an expression of intense covetousness remarked: "Twenty thousand francs! What a sum! A man could live comfortably all his life on the interest."

The abbe and Maurice shuddered as they re-entered the carriage. "Lacheneur is lost if that man discovers his whereabouts," murmured the priest.

"Fortunately he must have crossed the frontier before now," replied Maurice. "A hundred to one he is beyond reach."

"And if you should be mistaken. What, if wounded and faint from loss of blood, Lacheneur only had strength enough to drag himself to the nearest house and implore the hospitality of its inmates?"

"Oh! even in that case he is safe; I know our peasants. There is not one who is capable of selling the life of a proscribed man."

This youthful enthusiasm elicited a sad smile from the priest. "You forget the dangers to be incurred by those who shelter him," he said. "Many a man who would not soil his hands with the price of blood might deliver up a fugitive from fear."

They were passing through the principal street, and were struck with the mournful aspect of the little city, usually so gay and full of bustle. The shops were closed; and even the window shutters of the houses had not been opened. So lugubrious was the silence that one might have supposed there was a general mourning, and that each family had lost one or more of its members. The manner of the few persons passing along the footways testified to their deep anxiety. They hurried along, casting suspicious glances on every side; and two or three who were acquaintances of the Baron d'Escorval averted their heads directly they saw his carriage, so as to avoid the necessity of bowing.

The terror prevailing in the town was explained when Maurice and the abbe reached the Hotel de France, where they proposed taking up their quarters; and which establishment the former's father had always patronized whenever he visited Montaignac; the landlord being Laugeron--Lacheneur's friend, who had been so anxious to warn him of the Duke de Sairmeuse's return to France. On catching sight of his visitors, this worthy man hastened into the courtyard, cap in hand, to give them a fitting greeting. In such a situation politeness amounted to heroism; but it has always been supposed that Laugeron was in some way connected with the conspiracy. He at once invited Maurice and the abbe to take some refreshments, doing so in such a way as to make them understand that he was anxious to speak to them in private. Thanks to one of the Duke de Sairmeuse's valets who frequented the house, the landlord knew as much as the authorities; and, indeed, he knew even more, since he had also received information from several rebels who had escaped capture. He conducted Maurice and the abbe to a room looking on to the back of the house, where he knew they would be secure from observation, and then it was that they obtained their first positive information. In the first place, nothing had been heard either of Lacheneur or his son Jean, who had so far eluded all pursuit. Secondly, there were, at that moment, no fewer than two hundred prisoners in the citadel, including both the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau. And finally, that very morning there had been at least sixty additional arrests in Montaignac. It was generally supposed that these arrests were due to traitorous denunciations, and all the inhabitants were trembling with fear. M. Laugeron knew the real cause, however, for it had been confided to him under pledge of secrecy by his customer, the duke's valet. "It certainly seems an incredible story, gentlemen," he remarked; "but yet it is quite true. Two officers, belonging to the Montaignac militia, were returning from the expedition this morning at daybreak, when on passing the Croix d'Arcy they perceived a man, wearing the uniform of the emperor's body guard, lying dead in a ditch. Not unnaturally they examined the body, and to their great astonishment they found a slip of paper between the man's clenched teeth. It proved to be a list of Montaignac conspirators, which this old soldier, finding himself mortally wounded, had endeavored to destroy; but the agonies of death had prevented him from swallowing it—"

The abbe and Maurice had no time to listen to the general news the landlord might have to impart. They requested him to procure a messenger, who was at once despatched to Escorval, so that the baroness and Marie-Anne might be made acquainted with the information they had obtained concerning both the baron and Lacheneur. They then left the hotel and hastened to the house occupied by the Duke de Sairmeuse. There was a crowd at the door; a crowd of a hundred persons or so—men with anxious faces, women in tears—all of them begging for an audience. These were the friends and relatives of the unfortunate men who had been arrested. Two footmen, wearing gorgeous liveries, of haughty mien, stood in the doorway, their time being fully occupied in keeping back the struggling throng. Hoping that his priestly dress would win him a hearing, the Abbe Midon approached and gave his name. But he was repulsed like the others. "M. le Duc is busy, and can receive nobody," said one of the servants. "M. le Duc is preparing his report to his majesty." And in support of his assertion, he pointed to the horses, standing saddled in the courtyard, and waiting for the couriers who were to carry the despatches.

The priest sadly rejoined his companions. "We must wait!" said he. And yet, intentionally or not, the servants were deceiving these poor people; for, just then, the duke was in no wise troubling himself about his despatches. In point of fact, he happened to be engaged in a violent altercation with the Marquis de Courtornieu. Each of these noble personages was anxious to play the leading part—that which would meet with the highest reward at the hands of the supreme authorities at Paris. This quarrel had begun on some petty point, but soon they both lost their tempers and stinging words, bitter allusions, and even threats were rapidly exchanged. The marquis declared it necessary to inflict the most frightful—he said the most *salutary* punishment upon the offenders; while the duke, on

the contrary, was inclined to be indulgent. The marquis opined that since Lacheneur, the prime mover, and his son, had both eluded pursuit, it was absolutely requisite that Marie-Anne should be arrested. M. de Sairmeuse, however, would not listen to the suggestion. To his mind it would be most impolitic to arrest this young girl. Such a course would render the authorities odious, and would exasperate all the rebels who were still at large.

"These men must be put down with a strong hand!" urged M. de Courtornieu.

"I don't wish to exasperate the populace," replied the duke.

"Bah! what does public sentiment matter?"

"It matters a great deal when you cannot depend upon your soldiers. Do you know what happened last night? There was enough powder burned to win a battle, and yet there were only fifteen peasants wounded. Our men fired in the air. You forget that the Montaignac corps is for the most part composed of men who formerly fought under Bonaparte, and who are burning to turn their weapons against us."

Thus did the dispute continue, ostensibly for motives of public policy, though, in reality, both the duke and the marquis had a secret reason for their obstinacy. Blanche de Courtornieu had reached Montaignac that morning and had confided her anxiety and her sufferings to her father, with the result that she had made him swear to profit of this opportunity to rid her of Marie-Anne. On his side, the duke was convinced that Marie-Anne was his son's mistress, and wished, at any cost, to prevent her appearance at the tribunal. Finding that words had no influence whatever on his coadjutor, his grace at last finished the dispute by a skillful stratagem. "As we are of different opinions we can't possibly work together," quoth he; "we are one too many." And speaking in this fashion he glanced so meaningly at a pair of pistols that the noble marquis felt a disagreeable chilliness creep up his spine. He had never been noted for bravery, and did not in the least relish the idea of having a bullet lodged in his brains. Accordingly he waived his proposal, and eventually agreed to go to the citadel with the duke to inspect the prisoners.

The whole day passed by without M. de Sairmeuse consenting to give a single audience, and Maurice spent his time in watching the moving arms of the semaphore perched on the tall keep-tower. "What orders are travelling through space?" he said to the abbe. "Are these messages of life, or death?"

The messenger despatched from the Hotel de France had been instructed to make haste, and yet he did not reach Escorval until night-fall. Beset by a thousand fears, he had taken the longest but less frequented roads, and had made numerous circuits to avoid the people he had seen approaching in the distance. Scarcely had the baroness read the letter, written to her by Maurice, than turning to Marie-Anne, she exclaimed, "We must go to Montaignac at once!"

But this was easier said than done; for they only kept three horses at Escorval. The one which had been harnessed to the cabriolet the preceding night was lame—indeed, nearly dead: while the other two had been taken to Montaignac that morning by Maurice and the priest. What were the ladies to do? They appealed to some neighbours for assistance, but the latter, having heard of the baron's arrest, firmly refused to lend a horse, believing they should gravely compromise themselves if they in any way helped the wife of a man charged with such grievous offences as high treason and revolt. Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne were talking of making the journey on foot, when Corporal Bavois, still left on guard at the chateau, swore by the sacred name of thunder that this should not be. He hurried off with his two men, and, after a brief absence, returned leading an old plough-horse by the mane. He had, more or less forcibly, requisitioned this clumsy steed, which he harnessed to the cabriolet as best he could. This was not his only demonstration of good will. His duties at the chateau were over, now that M. d'Escorval had been arrested, and nothing remained for him but to rejoin his regiment. Accordingly he declared that he would not allow these ladies to travel unattended at night-time, along a road where they might be exposed to many disagreeable encounters, but should escort them to their journey's end with his two subordinates. "And it will go hard with soldier or civilian who ventures to molest them, will it not, comrades?" he exclaimed.

As usual, his companions assented with an oath; and as Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne journeyed onward, they could perceive the three men preceding or following the vehicle, or oftener walking beside it. Not until they reached the gates of Montaignac did the old soldier forsake his proteges, and then, not without bidding them a respectful farewell, in his own name and that of his subordinates, adding that if they had need of his services, they had only to call upon Bavois, corporal of grenadiers in company No. 1., stationed at the citadel.

The clocks were striking half-past ten when Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne alighted at the Hotel de France. They found Maurice in despair, and even the abbe disheartened, for since the morning events had progressed with fearful rapidity. The semaphore signals were now explained; orders had come from Paris; and there they could be read in black and white, affixed to the walls of the town. "Montaignac must be regarded as in a state of siege. The military authorities have been granted discretionary powers. A military commission will exercise jurisdiction in lieu of all other courts. Let peaceable citizens take courage; let the evil disposed tremble! As for the rabble, the sword of the law is about to strike!" Only six lines in all—but each word fraught with menace!

The abbe most regretted that trial before a military commission had been substituted for the customary court-martial. Indeed this upset all the plans he had devised in the hope of saving his friend. A court-martial is, of course, hasty and often unjust in its decisions; but still, it observes some of the forms of procedure practiced in judicial tribunals. It still retains some of the impartiality of legal justice, which asks to be enlightened before condemning. But the military commission now to be appointed would naturally neglect all legal forms; and the prisoners would be summarily condemned and punished after the fashion in which spies are treated in time of war.

"What!" exclaimed Maurice, "would they dare to condemn without investigating, without listening to testimony, without allowing the prisoners time to prepare their defence?" The abbe remained silent. The turn events had taken exceeded his worst apprehensions. Now, indeed, he believed that anything was possible.

Maurice had spoken of investigation. Investigation, if such it could be called, had indeed begun that very day, and was still continuing by the light of a jailor's lantern. That is to say, the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were passing the prisoners in review. They now numbered three hundred, and the duke and his companion had decided to begin by summoning before the commission thirty of the most dangerous conspirators. How were they to select them? By what method could they hope to discover the extent of each prisoner's guilt? It would have been difficult for them to explain the course they took. They simply went from one man to another, asking any question that entered their minds, and when the terrified captive had answered them they either said to the head jailor, "Keep this one until another time," or, "This one for to-morrow," their decision being guided by the

impression the man's language and demeanour had created. By daylight, they had thirty names upon their list, at the head of which figured those of the Baron d'Escorval and Chanlouineau.

Although the unhappy party at the Hotel de France were not aware of this circumstance, they passed a sleepless, anxious night; and it was relief, indeed, when the daylight peered through the windows and the *reveille* could be heard beating at the citadel; for now at least they might renew their efforts. The abbe intimated his intention of going alone to the duke's house, declaring that he would find a way to force an entrance. He had just bathed his red and swollen eyes in fresh water, and was preparing to start, when a rap was heard at the door. Directly afterwards M. Laugeron, the landlord, entered the room. His face betokened some dreadful misfortune; and indeed he had just been made acquainted with the composition of the military commission. In defiance of all equity and justice, the presidency of this tribunal of vengeance had been offered to the Duke de Sairmeuse who had unblushingly accepted it—he who was at the same time both witness and executioner. Moreover, he was to be assisted by other officers hitherto placed under his immediate orders.

"And when does the commission enter upon its functions?" inquired the abbe.

"To-day," replied the host, hesitatingly; "this morning—in an hour—perhaps sooner!"

The priest understood well enough what M. Laugeron meant, but what he dared not say: "The commission is assembling, make haste." "Come!" said the abbe Midon turning to Maurice, "I wish to be present when your father is examined."

The baroness would have given anything to accompany the priest and her son; but this could not be; she understood it, and submitted. As Maurice and his companion stepped into the street they saw a soldier a short distance off who made a friendly gesture. Recognizing Corporal Bavois, they paused instinctively. But he now passing them by with an air of the utmost indifference, and apparently without observing them, hastily exclaimed: "I have seen Chanlouineau. Be of good cheer: he promises to save the baron!"

XVII.

WITHIN the limits of the citadel of Montaignac stands an old building known as the chapel. Originally consecrated to purposes of worship, this structure had, at the time of which we write, fallen into disuse. It was so damp that it could not even be utilized for storage purposes, and yet this was the place selected by the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu for the assembling of the military commission. When Maurice and the abbe entered this gloomy building they found that the proceedings had not yet commenced. The little trouble taken to transform the old chapel into a hall of justice impressed them sadly, for it testified beyond power of mistake to the precipitation of the judges, and revealed their determination to carry out the work of vengeance without either delay or mercy. Three large tables taken from a soldier's mess-room, and covered with horse blankets instead of baize, stood on a raised platform formerly occupied by the chief altar. Behind these tables were ranged a few rush-seated chairs, waiting the president's assessors, and in their midst glittered a richly-carved and gilt arm chair which his grace had had sent from his own house for his personal accommodation. In front of the tables three or four long wooden benches had been placed in readiness for the prisoners, while several strong ropes were stretched from one wall to the other, so as to divide the chapel into two parts and allow considerable room for the public. This last precaution had proved quite superfluous, for, contrary to expectation, there were not twenty persons in the building. Prominent among these were ten or twelve men of martial mien, but clad in civilian attire. Their scarred and weather-beaten features testified to many an arduous campaign fought in imperial times; and indeed they had all served Napoleon—this one as a lieutenant, that other as a captain—but the Restoration had dismissed them with scanty pensions and given their well-earned commissions to cadets of the old nobility. Their pale faces and the sullen fire gleaming in their eyes showed plainly enough what they thought of the Duke de Sairmeuse's proceedings. In addition to these retired officers there were three men dressed in professional black who stood conversing in low tones near the chapel door; while in a corner one could perceive several peasant women with their aprons thrown over their faces; they were the mothers, wives, and daughters of some of the imprisoned rebels. Save for their constant sobs the silence would have been well-nigh undisturbed.

Nine o'clock had just struck when a rolling of drums shook the window panes; a loud voice was heard outside exclaiming, "Present arms!" and then the members of the commission entered, followed by the Marquis de Courtornieu and various civil functionaries. The Duke de Sairmeuse was in full uniform, his face rather more flushed, and his air a trifle more haughty than usual. "The sitting is open!" he announced, and adding in a rough voice, "Bring in the culprits."

They came in, one by one, to the number of thirty, and sat themselves down on the benches at the foot of the platform. Chanlouineau held his head proudly erect, and looked about him with an air of great composure. The Baron d'Escorval was calm and grave; but not more so than when, in days gone by, he had been called upon to express his opinion in the councils of the empire. Both of them perceived Maurice, who was so overcome that he had to lean upon the abbe for support. But while the baron greeted his son with a simple bend of the head, Chanlouineau made a gesture that clearly signified: "Have confidence in me—fear nothing." The attitude of the other prisoners indicated surprise rather than fear. Perhaps they were unconscious of the peril they had braved, and the extent of the danger that now threatened them.

When the prisoners had taken their places, a colonel who filled the office of commissary for the prosecution rose to his feet. His presentation of the case was violent but brief. He narrated a few leading facts, exalted the merits of the government of his majesty King Louis XVIIIth, and concluded by demanding that sentence of death should be pronounced upon the culprits. When he had ceased speaking, the duke rudely bade the first prisoner on the nearest bench to stand up and give his name, age, and profession.

"Eugene Michel Chanlouineau," was the reply, "aged twenty nine, a farmer by occupation."

"An owner of national lands, probably?"

"The owner of lands which, having been paid for with good money and made fertile by my own labour, are rightfully mine."

The duke did not wish to waste time in useless discussion. "You took part in this rebellion?" he asked; and receiving an affirmative reply, pursued, "You are right in confessing, for witnesses will be introduced who will prove

this fact conclusively."

Five grenadiers entered—the same that Chanlouineau held at bay while Maurice, the abbe, and Marie-Anne were getting into the cabriolet near the cross roads. They all of them declared upon oath that they recognized the prisoner; and one of them even went so far as to say he was a solid fellow of remarkable courage. During this evidence Chanlouineau's eyes betrayed an agony of anxiety. Would the soldiers allude to the circumstance of the cabriolet and Marie-Anne's escape? Perhaps they might have done so had not the Duke de Sairmeuse abruptly stated that as the prisoner confessed he had heard quite enough.

"What were your motives in fomenting this outbreak?" asked his grace, turning to Chanlouineau.

"We hoped to free ourselves from a government brought back by foreign bayonets; to free ourselves from the insolence of the nobility, and to retain the lands that are justly ours."

"Enough! You were one of the leaders of the revolt?"

"One of the leaders—yes."

"Who were the others?"

A faint smile flitted over the young farmer's lips as he replied: "The others were M. Lacheneur, his son Jean, and the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

The duke bounded from his carved arm-chair. "You wretch! you rascal! you vile scoundrel!" he exclaimed, catching up a heavy inkstand that stood on the table before him. Every one supposed that he was about to hurl it at the prisoner's head.

But Chanlouineau stood perfectly unmoved in the midst of the assembly, which had been excited to the highest pitch by his startling declaration. "You questioned me," he resumed, "and I replied. You may gag me if my answers don't please you. If there were witnesses *for* me as there are against me, I could prove the truth of what I say. As it is, all the prisoners here will tell you that I am speaking the truth. Is it not so, you others?"

With the exception of the Baron d'Escorval, there was not one of the other prisoners who was capable of understanding the real bearing of these audacious allegations; nevertheless, they all nodded assent.

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse was so truly our leader," exclaimed the daring peasant, "that he was wounded by a sabre-thrust while fighting by my side."

The duke's face was as purple as if he had been struck with apoplexy; and his fury almost deprived him of the power of speech. "You lie, scoundrel! you lie!" he gasped.

"Send for the marquis," said Chanlouineau, quietly, "and see whether he's wounded or not."

A refusal on the duke's part was bound to arouse suspicion. But what could he do? Martial had concealed his wound on the previous day, and it was now impossible to confess that he had been wounded. Fortunately for his grace, one of the commissioners relieved him of his embarrassment. "I hope, sir," he said, "that you will not give this arrogant rebel the satisfaction he desires. The commission opposes his demand."

"Very naturally," retorted Chanlouineau. "To-morrow my head will be off, and you think nothing will then remain to prove what I say. But, fortunately, I have other proof—material and indestructible proof—which it is beyond your power to destroy, and which will speak when my body is six feet under ground."

"What is this proof?" asked another commissioner, on whom the duke looked askance.

The prisoner shook his head. "You shall have it," he said, "when you promise me my life in exchange for it. It is now in the hands of a trusty person, who knows its value. It will go to the king if necessary. We should like to understand the part which the Marquis de Sairmeuse played in this affair—whether he was truly with us, or whether he was only an instigating agent."

A tribunal regardful of the simplest rules of justice, or even of its own honour, would have instantly required the Marquis de Sairmeuse's attendance. But the military commission considered such a course quite beneath its dignity. These men arrayed in glittering uniforms were not judges charged with the vindication of the law; but simply agents selected by the conquerors to strike the conquered in virtue of that savage saying, "Woe to the vanquished!" The president, the noble Duke de Sairmeuse, would not have consented to summon Martial on any consideration. Nor did his associate judges wish him to do so. Had Chanlouineau foreseen this result? Probably he had; and yet, why had he ventured on so hazardous a course? The tribunal, after a short deliberation, decided that it would not admit this "unjustifiable" denunciation which, while exciting the whole audience, had quite stupefied Maurice and the Abbe Midon.

The examination was continued, therefore, with increased bitterness. "Instead of designating imaginary leaders," resumed the duke, "you would do well to name the real instigator of this revolt—not Lacheneur, but an individual seated at the other end of the bench, the elder D'Escorval—"

"Monsieur le Baron d'Escorval was entirely ignorant of the conspiracy, I swear it by all that I hold most sacred—"

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted the emmissary for the prosecution. "Instead of trying the patience of the commission with such ridiculous stories, you should endeavour to merit its indulgence."

Chanlouineau's glance and gesture expressed such disdain that his interrupter was abashed. "I wish for no indulgence," said the young farmer. "I have played my game and lost it; here is my head. But if you are not wild beasts you will take pity on the poor wretches who surround me. I see at least ten among them who were not our accomplices, and who certainly did not take up arms. Even the others did not know what they were doing."

With these words he resumed his seat, proud, indifferent, and apparently oblivious of the murmur which ran through the audience, the soldiers of the guard, and even to the platform, at the sound of his ringing voice. His appeal for clemency towards his fellow prisoners had reawakened the grief of the poor peasant women, whose sobs and moans now filled the hall. The retired officers had grown paler than before, and as they nervously pulled at their long moustaches they murmured among themselves, "That's a man, and no mistake!" Just then, moreover, the abbe leant towards Maurice and whispered in his ear: "Chanlouineau evidently has some plan. He intends to save your father, though I don't at all understand how."

The judges were conversing with considerable animation, although in an undertone. A difficulty had presented itself. The prisoners, ignorant of the charges which would be brought against them, and not expecting instant trial, had not thought of procuring defenders. And this circumstance, bitter mockery! caused great annoyance to this

iniquitous tribunal, despite the complacency with which it was prepared to trample justice under foot. The commissioners had made up their minds, they had already determined on their verdict, and yet they wished to hear a voice raised in defence of those who were already doomed. It chanced that three lawyers, retained by the friends of a few prisoners, were in the hall. They were the three men whom Maurice had noticed conversing near the door when he entered the chapel. The duke was informed of their presence. He turned to them, and motioned them to approach; then, pointing to Chanlouineau, asked, "Will you undertake this culprit's defence?"

For a moment the lawyers hesitated. They were disgusted with these monstrous proceedings, and looked inquiringly at one another. "We are all disposed to undertake the prisoner's defence," at last replied the eldest of the three; "but we see him for the first time; we do not know what defence he can present. He must ask for a delay; it is indispensable, in order to confer with him."

"The court can grant you no delay," interrupted M. de Sairmeuse; "will you undertake his defence, yes or no?"

The advocate hesitated, not that he was afraid, for he was a brave man: but he was endeavouring to find some argument strong enough to turn these mock judges from the course on which they seemed bent. "I will speak on his behalf," said the advocate, at last, "but not without first protesting with all my strength against these unheard of modes of trial."

"Oh! spare us your homilies, and be brief."

After Chanlouineau's examination, it was difficult to improvise any plea for him, and especially so on the spur of the moment. Still, in his indignation, the courageous advocate managed to present a score of arguments which would have made any other tribunal reflect. But all the while he was speaking the Duke de Sairmeuse fidgeted in his arm-chair with every sign of angry impatience. "Your speech was very long," he remarked, when the lawyer had finished, "terribly long. We shall never get through with this business if each prisoner takes up as much time!"

He turned to his colleagues and proposed that they should unite all the cases, in fact try all the culprits in a body, with the exception of the elder d'Escorval. "This will shorten our task," said he, "and there will then be but two judgments to be pronounced. This will not, of course, prevent each individual from defending himself."

The lawyers protested against such a course; for a general judgment such as the duke suggested would destroy all hope of saving any one of these unfortunate men. "How can we defend them," pleaded one advocate, "when we know nothing of their precise situations; why, we do not even know their names. We shall be obliged to designate them by the cut of their coats or by the colour of their hair."

They implored the tribunal to grant a week for preparation, four days, even twenty-four hours; but all their efforts were futile, for the president's proposition was adopted by his colleagues. Consequently, each prisoner was called to the table, according to the place which he occupied on the different benches. Each man gave his name, age, dwelling place, and profession, and received an order to return to his seat. Six or seven of the prisoners were actually granted time to say that they were absolutely ignorant of the conspiracy, and that they had been arrested while conversing quietly on the public highway. They begged to be allowed to furnish proof of the truth of their assertions, and they invoked the testimony of the soldiers who had arrested them. M. d'Escorval, whose case had been separated from the others, was not summoned to the table. He would be examined last of all.

"Now the counsel for the defence will be heard," said the duke; "but make haste; lose no time for it is already twelve o'clock."

Then began a shameful and revolting scene. The duke interrupted the lawyers every other moment, bidding them be silent, questioning them, or jeering at their arguments. "It seems incredible," said he, "that any one can think of defending such wretches!" Or again: "Silence! You should blush with shame for having constituted yourself the defender of such rascals!"

However, the advocates courageously persevered, even although they realized the utter futility of their efforts. But what could they do under such circumstances? The defence of these twenty-nine prisoners lasted only one hour and a half.

Before the last word was fairly uttered, the Duke de Sairmeuse gave a sigh of relief, and in a tone which betrayed his inward delight, exclaimed: "Prisoner d'Escorval, stand up."

Thus called upon, the baron rose to his feet, calm and dignified. Terrible as his sufferings must have been, there was no trace of them on his noble face. He had even repressed the smile of disdain which the duke's paltry spite in not giving him the title he had a right to almost brought to his lips. But Chanlouineau sprang up at the same time, trembling with indignation, and his face all aglow with anger.

"Remain seated," ordered the duke, "or you shall be removed from the court-room."

Despite this order the young farmer declared that he would speak: that he had some remarks to add to the plea made by the defending counsel. At a sign from the duke, two gendarmes approached him and placed their hands on his shoulders. He allowed them to force him back into his seat, though he could easily have crushed them with one blow of his brawny arm. An observer might have supposed that he was furious; but in reality he was delighted. He had attained the end he had in view. Whilst standing he had been able to glance at the Abbe Midon, and the latter had plainly read in his eyes: "Whatever happens, watch over Maurice; restrain him. Do not allow him to defeat my plans by any outburst."

This caution was not unnecessary, for Maurice was terribly agitated; his sight failed him, his head swam, he felt that he was suffocating, that he was losing his reason. "Where is the self-control you promised me?" murmured the priest.

But no one observed the young man's condition. The attention of the audience was elsewhere, and the silence was so perfect that one could distinctly hear the measured tread of the sentinels pacing to and fro in the courtyard outside. It was plain to every one that the decisive moment for which the tribunal had reserved all its attention and efforts had now arrived. The conviction and condemnation of the poor peasants were, after all, mere trifles; otherwise, indeed, was the task of humbling a prominent statesman, who had been the emperor's faithful friend and counsellor. Seldom could circumstances offer so splendid an opportunity to satisfy the cravings of royalist prejudice and ambition; and the Duke de Sairmeuse and his colleagues had fully determined not to allow it to slip by. If they had acted informally in the case of the obscure conspirators, they had carefully prepared their suit against the baron. Thanks to the activity of the Marquis de Courtornieu, the prosecution had found no fewer than seven charges against him, the least notable of which was alone punishable with death. "Which of you," asked the president, turning to the

lawyers, "will consent to defend this great culprit?"

"I!" exclaimed the three advocates all in one breath.

"Take care," said the duke, with a malicious smile; "the task may prove a difficult one."

"Difficult, indeed!" It would have been better to have said dangerous, for the defender risked his career, his peace, his liberty, and very probably—his life.

"Our profession has its exigencies," nobly replied the oldest of the advocates. And then the two courageously took their places beside the baron, thus avenging the honour of their robe.

"Prisoner," resumed M. de Sairmeuse, "state your name and profession."

"Louis Guillaume, Baron d'Escorval, Commander of the order of the Legion of Honour, formerly Councillor of State under the Empire."

"So you avow these shameful services? You confess——"

"Excuse me; I am proud of having had the honour of serving my country, and of being useful to her in proportion to my abilities——"

"Ah ha! very good indeed!" interrupted the duke with a furious gesture. "These gentlemen, my fellow commissioners, will appreciate those words of yours. No doubt it was in the hope of regaining your former position that you entered into this shameful conspiracy against a magnanimous prince."

"You know as well as I do myself, sir, that I have had no hand in this conspiracy."

"Why, you were arrested in the ranks of the conspirators with weapons in your hands!"

"I was unarmed, as you are well aware; and if I was among the peasantry, it was only because I hoped to induce them to relinquish their senseless enterprise."

"You lie!"

The baron paled beneath the insult, but he made no response. There was, however, one man in the assemblage who could no longer endure such abominable injustice, and this was the Abbe Midon, who, only a moment before, had advised Maurice to remain calm. Abruptly leaving his place, he advanced to the foot of the platform.

"The Baron d'Escorval speaks the truth," he cried, in a ringing voice: "as each of the three hundred prisoners in the citadel will swear. Those who are here would say the same, even if they stood upon the guillotine; and I, who accompanied him, who walked beside him, I, a priest, swear before the God who one day will judge us all, Monsieur de Sairmeuse, I swear we did everything that was humanly possible to do to arrest this movement!"

The duke listened with an ironical smile. "I was not deceived, then," he answered, "when I was told that this army of rebels had a chaplain! Ah! sir, you should sink to the earth with shame. What! You, a priest, mingle with such scoundrels as these—with these enemies of our good king and of our holy religion! Do not deny it! Your haggard features, your swollen eyes, your disordered attire, plainly betray your guilt. Must I, a soldier, remind you of what is due to your sacred calling? Hold your peace, sir, and depart!"

But the prisoner's advocates were on their feet. "We demand," cried they, "we demand that this witness be heard. He must be heard! Military commissions are not above the laws that regulate ordinary tribunals."

"If I do not speak the truth," resumed the abbe, "I am a perjured witness—worse yet, an accomplice. It is your duty, in that case, to have me arrested."

The duke's face assumed a look of hypocritical compassion. "No, Monsieur le Cure," said he, "I shall not arrest you. I wish to avert the scandal which you are trying to cause. We will show your priestly garb the respect the wearer does not deserve. Again, and for the last time, retire, or I shall be obliged to employ force."

What would further resistance avail? Nothing. The abbe, with a face whiter than the plastered walls, and eyes filled with tears, returned to his place beside Maurice.

In the meanwhile, the advocates were protesting with increasing energy. But the duke, hammering on the table with both fists, at last succeeded in reducing them to silence. "Ah! you want evidence!" he exclaimed. "Very well then, you shall have it. Soldiers, bring in the first witness."

There was some little movement among the guards, and then Father Chupin made his appearance. He advanced with a deliberate step, but his restless, shrinking eyes showed plainly enough that he was ill at ease. And there was a very perceptible tremor in his voice when, with hand uplifted, he swore to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"What do you know concerning the prisoner d'Escorval?" asked the duke.

"I know that he took part in the rising the other night."

"Are you sure of this?"

"I can furnish proofs."

"Submit them to the consideration of the commission."

The old scoundrel began to grow more confident. "First of all," he replied, "directly Lacheneur had given up your grace's family estates, much against his will, he hastened to M. d'Escorval's house, where he met Chanlouineau. It was then that they plotted this insurrection between them."

"I was Lacheneur's friend," observed the baron, "and it was perfectly natural that he should come to me for consolation after a great misfortune."

M. de Sairmeuse turned to his colleagues. "Do you hear that!" said he. "This D'Escorval calls the restitution of a deposit a great misfortune! Proceed, witness."

"In the second place," resumed Chupin, "M. d'Escorval was always prowling round about Lacheneur's house."

"That's false," interrupted the baron. "I never visited the house but once, and on that occasion I implored him to renounce——" He paused, understanding only when it was too late the terrible significance of these few words. However, having begun, he would not retract, but calmly added: "I implored him to renounce all idea of provoking an insurrection."

"Ah! then you knew of his infamous intentions?"

"I suspected them."

"At all events you must be perfectly well aware that the fact of not revealing this conspiracy made you an

accomplice, which implies the guillotine."

The Baron d'Escorval had just signed his death-warrant. How strange is destiny! He was innocent, and yet he was the only one among all the prisoners, whom a regular tribunal could have legally condemned. Maurice and the abbe were overcome with grief; but Chanlouineau, who turned towards them, had still the same smile of confidence on his lips. How could he hope when all hope seemed absolutely lost?

The commissioners made no attempt to conceal their satisfaction, and M. de Sairmeuse, especially, evinced an indecent joy. "Ah, well! gentlemen, what do you say to that?" he remarked to the lawyers, in a sneering tone.

The counsel for the defence were unable to conceal their discouragement; though they still endeavoured to question the validity of their client's declaration. He had said that he *suspected* the conspiracy, not that he *knew* of it, which was a very different thing.

"Say at once that you wish for still more overwhelming testimony," interrupted the duke. "Very well! You shall have it. Continue your evidence, witness."

"The prisoner," continued Chupin, "was present at all the conferences held at Lacheneur's house; and having to cross the Oiselle each time, and fearing lest the ferryman might speak about his frequent nocturnal journeys, he had an old boat repaired, which he had not used for years."

"Ah! that's a remarkable circumstance, prisoner; do you recollect having your boat repaired?"

"Yes; but not for the purpose this man mentions."

"For what purpose, then?"

The baron made no reply. Was it not in compliance with Maurice's request, that this boat had been put in order?

"And finally," continued Chupin, "when Lacheneur set fire to his house as a signal for the insurrection, the prisoner was with him."

"That," exclaimed the duke, "is conclusive evidence."

"Yes, I was at La Reche," interrupted the baron; "but as I have already told you, it was with the firm determination of preventing this outbreak."

M. de Sairmeuse laughed disdainfully. "Ah, gentlemen!" he said, addressing his fellow commissioners, "you see that the prisoner's courage does not equal his depravity. But I will confound him. What did you do, prisoner, when the insurgents left La Reche?"

"I returned home with all possible speed, took a horse and hastened to the Croix-d'Arcy."

"Then you knew that this was to be the general meeting place?"

"Lacheneur had just informed me of it."

"Even if I believed your story," retorted the duke, "I should have to remind you, that your duty was to have hastened to Montagnac and informed the authorities. But what you say is untrue. You did not leave Lacheneur, you accompanied him."

"No, sir, no!"

"And what if I could prove that you did so, beyond all question?"

"Impossible, since such was not the case."

By the malicious satisfaction that sparkled in M. de Sairmeuse's eyes, the Abbe Midon divined that he had some terrible weapon in reserve, and that he was about to overwhelm the Baron d'Escorval with false evidence, or fatal coincidence, which would place Maurice's father beyond all possibility of being saved. At a sign from the commissary for the prosecution the Marquis de Courtornieu now left his seat and advanced to the front of the platform. "I must request you, Monsieur le Marquis," said the duke, "to be kind enough to read us the statement your daughter has prepared and signed."

This scene had evidently been prepared beforehand. M. de Courtornieu cleared his glasses, produced a paper which he slowly unfolded, and then amid a death-like silence, emphatically read as follows: "I, Blanche de Courtornieu, do declare upon oath that, on the evening of the fourth of March, between ten and eleven o'clock on the public road leading from Sairmeuse to Montagnac, I was assailed by a band of armed brigands. While they were deliberating as to whether they should take possession of my person and pillage my carriage, I overheard one of them say to another, speaking of me: 'She must get out, must she not, M. d'Escorval?' I believe that the brigand who uttered these words was a peasant named Chanlouineau, but I can not assert this, on oath."

At this moment a loud cry of anguish abruptly interrupted the marquis's perusal. The trial was too great for Maurice's reason, and if the Abbe Midon had not restrained him, he would have sprung forward, and exclaimed: "It was to me, not to my father that Chanlouineau addressed those words. I alone am guilty; my father is innocent!" But fortunately the abbe had sufficient presence of mind to hold the young fellow back, and place his hand before his mouth. One or two of the retired officers standing near, also tendered their help, and probably divining the truth, seized hold of Maurice, and despite all his attempts at resistance carried him from the room by main force. The whole incident scarcely occupied ten seconds.

"What is the cause of this disturbance!" asked the duke, looking angrily at the spectators, none of whom uttered a word. "At the least noise the hall shall be cleared," added his grace. "And you, prisoner, what have you to say in self-justification, after Mademoiselle de Courtornieu's crushing evidence?"

"Nothing," murmured the baron.

But to return to Maurice. Once outside the court-room, the Abbe Midon confided him to the care of three officers, who promised to go with him, to carry him by main force, if need be, to the Hotel de France, and keep him there. Relieved on this score, the priest re-entered the hall just in time to see the baron re-seat himself without replying to M. de Sairmeuse's final sneer, that by bearing Mademoiselle Blanche's testimony unchallenged M. d'Escorval had virtually confessed his guilt. But then in truth, how could he have challenged it? How could he defend himself without betraying his son? Until this moment every one present had believed in the baron's innocence. Could it be that he was guilty? His silence seemed to imply that such was the case; and this alone was a sufficient triumph for the Duke de Sairmeuse and his friends. His grace now turned to the lawyers, and with an air of weariness and disdain, remarked. "At present you may speak, since it is absolutely necessary; but no long phrases, mind! we ought to have finished here an hour ago."

The eldest of the three advocates rose, trembling with indignation, and prepared to dare anything for the sake of giving free utterance to his thoughts, but before a word was spoken the baron hastily checked him. "Do not try to defend me," he said calmly; "it would be labour wasted. I have only one word to say to my judges. Let them remember what noble Marshal Moncey wrote to the king: 'The scaffold does not make friends.' "

But this reminder was not of a nature to soften the judges' hearts. For that very phrase the marshal had been deprived of his office, and condemned to three months' imprisonment. As the advocates made no further attempt to argue the case, the commission retired to deliberate. This gave M. d'Escorval an opportunity to speak with his defenders. He shook them warmly by the hand, and thanked them for their courage and devotion. Then drawing the eldest among them on one side, he quickly added, in a low voice: "I have a last favour to ask of you. When sentence of death has been pronounced upon me, go at once to my son. Say to him that his dying father commands him to live—he will understand you. Tell him that it is my last wish; that he live—live for his mother!"

He said no more; the judges were returning. Of the thirty prisoners, nine were declared not guilty, and released. The remaining twenty-one including both M. d'Escorval and Chanlouineau were then formally condemned to death. But Chanlouineau's lips still retained their enigmatical smile.

XVIII.

THE three military men to whose care the Abbe Midon had entrusted Maurice had considerable difficulty in getting him to the Hotel de France, for he made continual attempts to return to the court-room, having the fallacious idea that by telling the truth he might yet save his father. In point of fact, however, the only effect of his confession would have been to provide the Duke de Sairmeuse with another welcome victim. When he and his custodians at length entered the room where Madame d'Escorval and Marie-Anne were waiting in cruel suspense, the baroness eagerly asked whether the trial was over.

"Nothing is decided yet," replied one of the retired officers. "The cure will come here as soon as the verdict is given."

Then as the three military men had promised not to lose sight of Maurice, they sat themselves down in gloomy silence. Not the slightest stir could be heard in the hotel, which seemed indeed as if it were deserted. At last, a little before four o'clock, the abbe came in, followed by the lawyer, to whom the baron had confided his last wishes.

"My husband!" exclaimed Madame d'Escorval, springing wildly from her chair. The priest bowed his head. "Death!" she faltered, fully understanding the significance of this impressive gesture. "What? they have condemned him!" And overcome with the terrible blow, she sank back, with hanging arms. But this weakness did not last long. "We must save him!" she exclaimed, abruptly springing to her feet again, her eyes bright with some sudden resolution, "we must wrest him from the scaffold. Up, Maurice! up, Marie-Anne! No more lamentations. To work! You also, gentlemen, will assist me; and I can count on your help, Monsieur le Cure. I do not quite know how to begin, but something must be done. The murder of so good, so noble a man as he would be too great a crime. God will not permit it." She paused, with clasped hands, as if seeking for inspiration. "And the king," she resumed—"can the king consent to such a crime? No. A king can refuse mercy, but he cannot refuse justice. I will go to him. I will tell him everything. Ah! why didn't this thought occur to me sooner? We must start for Paris without losing an instant. Maurice you must accompany me; and one of you gentlemen go at once and order post-horses." Then, thinking they would obey her, she hastened into the next room to make preparations for her journey.

"Poor woman!" whispered the lawyer to the abbe, "she does not know that the sentence of a military commission is executed in twenty-four hours, and that it requires four days to make the journey to Paris." He reflected a moment, and then added: "But, after all, to let her go would be an act of mercy. Did not Ney, on the morning of his execution, implore the king to order the removal of his wife who was sobbing and moaning in his cell?"

The abbe shook his head. "No," said he; "Madame d'Escorval would never forgive us if we prevented her from receiving her husband's last farewell."

At that very moment, the baroness re-entered the room, and the priest was trying to gather sufficient courage to tell her the cruel truth, when a loud knock was heard at the door. One of the retired officers went to open it, and our old friend Bavois, the corporal of grenadiers, entered, raising his right hand to his cap, as if he were in his captain's presence. "Is Mademoiselle Lacheneur here?" he asked.

Marie-Anne stepped forward. "I am she, sir," she replied; "what do you want with me?"

"I am ordered to conduct you to the citadel, mademoiselle."

"What?" exclaimed Maurice, in a tone of anger; "so they imprison women as well?"

The worthy corporal struck his forehead with his open hand. "I am an old fool!" he exclaimed, "and don't know how to express myself. I meant to say that I came to fetch mademoiselle at the request of one of the prisoners, a man named Chanlouineau, who wishes to speak with her."

"Impossible, my good fellow," said one of the officers; "they would not allow this lady to visit one of the prisoners without special permission—"

"Well, she has this permission," said the old soldier. And then persuaded he had nothing to fear from any one present, he added, in lower tones: "This Chanlouineau told me that the cure would understand his reasons."

Had the brave peasant really found some means of salvation. The abbe almost began to believe that such was the case. "You must go with this worthy fellow, Marie-Anne," said he.

The poor girl shuddered at the thought of seeing Chanlouineau again, but the idea of refusing never once occurred to her. "Let me go," she said quietly.

But the corporal did not budge. Winking in a desperate fashion, as was his wont whenever he wished to attract attention, he exclaimed: "Wait a bit. I've something else to tell you. This Chanlouineau, who seems to be a shrewd fellow, told me to say that all was going well. May I be hung if I can see how! Still such is his opinion. He also told me to tell you not to stir from this place, and not to attempt anything until mademoiselle comes back again, which will be in less than an hour. He swears that he will keep his promise, and only asks you to pledge your word that you will obey him—"

"We will wait for an hour," replied the abbe. "I can promise that—"

"Then that'll do," rejoined Bavois. "Salute company. And now, mademoiselle, on the double, quick march! The poor devil over there must be on coals of fire."

That a condemned conspirator should be allowed to receive a visit from his leader's daughter—from the daughter of that Lacheneur who had succeeded in making his escape—was indeed surprising. But Chanlouineau had been ingenious enough to discover a means of procuring this special permission; and with this aim in view, he had feigned the most abject terror on hearing the sentence of death passed upon him. He even contrived to weep in a bellowing fashion, and the guards could scarcely believe their eyes when they saw this robust young fellow, so insolent and defiant a few hours before, now utterly overcome, and even unable to walk back to his cell. They had to carry him there, and then his lamentations became still more boisterous, concluding with an urgent prayer that one of the guard should go to the Duke de Sairmeuse, or the Marquis de Courtornieu, and tell them he had revelations of the greatest importance to make.

That potent word "revelations" made M. de Courtornieu hasten to the prisoner's cell. He found Chanlouineau on his knees, his features distorted by what appeared to be an agony of fear. The crafty fellow dragged himself towards the marquis, took hold of his hands and kissed them, imploring mercy and forgiveness, and swearing that to save his own life, he was ready to do anything, yes, anything, even to deliver Lacheneur up to the authorities. Such a prospect had powerful attractions for the Marquis de Courtornieu. "Do you know, then, where this brigand is concealed?" he asked.

Chanlouineau admitted that he did not know, but declared that Marie-Anne, Lacheneur's daughter, was well acquainted with her father's hiding-place. She had, he said, perfect confidence in him, Chanlouineau; and if they would only send for her, and allow him ten minutes private conversation with her, he was positive he could ascertain where the leader of the insurrection was concealed. So the bargain was quickly concluded; and Chanlouineau's life was promised him in exchange for Lacheneur's. A soldier, who fortunately chanced to be Corporal Bavois, was then sent to summon Marie-Anne; and the young farmer awaited her coming with feelings of poignant anxiety. He loved her, remember, and the thought of seeing her once more—for the last time on earth—made his heart throb wildly with mingled passion and despair. At last, at the end of the corridor, he could hear footsteps approaching. The heavy bolts securing the entrance to his cell were drawn back, the door opened, and Marie-Anne appeared, accompanied by Corporal Bavois. "M. de Courtornieu promised me that we should be left alone!" exclaimed Chanlouineau.

"Yes, I know he did, and I am going," replied the old soldier. "But I have orders to return for mademoiselle in half-an-hour."

When the door closed behind the worthy corporal, Chanlouineau took hold of Marie-Anne's hand and drew her to the tiny grated window. "Thank you for coming," said he, "thank you. I can see you and speak to you once more. Now that my hours are numbered, I may reveal the secret of my soul and of my life. Now, I can venture to tell you how ardently I have loved you—how much I still love you."

Involuntarily Marie-Anne drew away her hand and stepped back; for this outburst of passion, at such a moment and in such a place, seemed at once unspeakably sad and shocking.

"Have I, then, offended you?" asked Chanlouineau, sadly. "Forgive me—for I am about to die! You cannot refuse to listen to the voice of one, who, to-morrow, will vanish from earth forever. I have loved you for a long time, Marie-Anne, for more than six years. Before I saw you, I only cared for my belongings, and to raise fine crops and gather money together seemed to me the greatest possible happiness here below. And when at first I did meet you—you were so high, and I so low, that in my wildest dreams I did not dare to aspire to you. I went to the church each Sunday only that I might worship you as peasant women worship the Virgin; I went home with my eyes and heart full of you—and that was all. But then came your father's misfortunes, which brought us nearer to each other; and your father made me as insane, yes, as insane as himself. After the insults he received from the Duke de Sairmeuse, M. Lacheneur resolved to revenge himself upon all these arrogant nobles, and selected me for his accomplice. He had read my heart as easily as if it had been an open book; and when we left the baron's house that Sunday evening we both have such good reason to remember, he said to me: 'You love my daughter, my boy. Very well, assist me, and I promise you, that if we succeed, she shall be your wife. Only,' he added, 'I must warn you that you risk your life.' But what was life in comparison with the hopes that dazzled me? From that night, I gave body, soul, and fortune to his cause. Others were influenced by hatred, or ambition; but I was actuated by neither of these motives. What did the quarrels of these great folks matter to me—a simple labourer? I knew that the greatest were powerless to give my crops a drop of rain in seasons of drought, or a ray of sunshine during long spells of rain. I took part in the conspiracy, it was because I loved you—"

It seemed to Marie-Anne that he was reproaching her for the deception she had been forced to practise, and for the cruel fate to which Lacheneur's wild designs had brought him. "Ah, you are cruel," she cried, "you are pitiless!"

But Chanlouineau scarcely heard her words. All the bitterness of the past was rising to his brain like fumes of alcohol; and he was scarcely conscious of what he said himself. "However, the day soon came," he continued, "when my foolish illusions were destroyed. You could not be mine since you belonged to another. I might have broken my compact! I thought of doing so, but I did not have the courage. To see you, to hear your voice, to spend my time under the same roof as you, was happiness enough. I longed to see you happy and honoured; I fought for the triumph of another, for him you had chosen—"

A sob rose in his throat and choked his utterance; he buried his face in his hands to hide his tears, and, for a moment, seemed completely overcome. But he mastered his weakness after a brief interval, and in a firm voice, exclaimed: "We must not linger any longer over the past. Time flies, and the future is ominous."

As he spoke, he went to the door and applied first his eyes and then his ear to the grating, to see that there were no spies outside. But he could perceive no one, nor could he hear a sound. He came back to Marie-Anne's side, and tearing the sleeve of his jacket open with his teeth, he drew from the lining two letters, wrapped carefully in a piece of cloth. "Here," he said, in a low voice, "is a man's life!"

Marie-Anne knew nothing of Chanlouineau's promises and hopes, and she was moreover so distressed by what the young farmer had previously said that at first she did not understand his meaning. All she could do was to repeat mechanically, "This is a man's life!"

"Hush speak lower!" interrupted Chanlouineau. "Yes, one of these letters might, perhaps, save the life of a

prisoner now under sentence of death."

"Unfortunate man! Why do you not make use of it and save yourself?"

The young farmer shook his head. "Would it ever be possible for you to love me?" he said. "No it wouldn't be possible; and so what wish can I have to live? At least I shall be able to forget everything when I am underground. Moreover, I have been justly condemned. I knew what I was doing when I left La Reche with my gun over my shoulder, and my sword by my side; I have no right to complain. But these judges of ours have condemned an innocent man——"

"The Baron d'Escorval?"

"Yes—Maurice's father!" His voice changed as he pronounced the name of his envied rival—envied, no doubt, and yet to assure this rival's happiness and Marie-Anne's he would have given ten lives had they been his to give. "I wish to save the baron," he added, "and I can do so."

"Oh! if what you said were true? But you undoubtedly deceive yourself."

"I know what I am saying," rejoined Chanlouineau; and still fearful lest some spy might be concealed outside; he now came close to Marie-Anne and in a low voice spoke rapidly as follows: "I never believed in the success of this conspiracy, and when I sought for a weapon of defence in case of failure, the Marquis de Sairmeuse furnished it. When it became necessary to send out a circular, warning our accomplices of the date decided upon for the rising, I persuaded M. Martial to write a model. He suspected nothing. I told him it was for a wedding, and he did what I asked. This letter, which is now in my possession, is the rough draft of the circular we sent; and it is in the Marquis de Sairmeuse's handwriting. It is impossible for him to deny it. There is an erasure in every line, and every one would look at the letter as the handiwork of a man seeking to convey his real meaning in ambiguous phrases."

With these words Chanlouineau opened the envelope and showed her the famous letter he had dictated, in which the space for the date of the insurrection was left blank. "My dear friend, we are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on, etc."

The light that had sparkled in Marie-Anne's eyes was suddenly bedimmed. "And you think that this letter can be of any use?" she inquired, with evident discouragement.

"I don't *think* so!"

"But——"

With a gesture, he interrupted her. "We must not lose time in discussion—listen to me. Of itself, this letter might be unimportant, but I have arranged matters in such a way that it will produce a powerful effect. I declared before the commission that the Marquis de Sairmeuse was one of the leaders of the movement. They laughed; and I read incredulity on all the judges' faces. But calumny is never without its effect. When the Duke de Sairmeuse is about to receive a reward for his services, there will be enemies in plenty to remember and repeat my words. He knew this so well that he was greatly agitated, even while his colleagues sneered at my accusation."

"It's a great crime to charge a man falsely," murmured Marie-Anne, with simple honesty. "No doubt," rejoined Chanlouineau, "but I wish to save the baron, and I cannot choose my means. As I knew that the marquis had been wounded, I declared that he was fighting against the troops by my side and asked that he should be summoned before the tribunal; swearing that I had in my possession unquestionable proofs of his complicity."

"Did you say that the Marquis de Sairmeuse had been wounded?" inquired Marie-Anne.

Chanlouineau's face wore a look of intense astonishment. "What!" he exclaimed, "don't you know——?" Then after an instant's reflection: "Fool that I am!" he resumed. "After all who could have told you what happened? However, you remember that while we were on our way to the Croix-d'Arcy, after your father had rode on in advance, Maurice placed himself at the head of one division, and you walked beside him, while your brother Jean and myself stayed behind to urge the laggards forward. We were performing our duty conscientiously enough, when suddenly we heard the gallop of a horse behind us. 'We must know who is coming,' said Jean to me. So we paused. The horse soon reached us; we caught the bridle and held him. Can you guess who the rider was? Why, Martial de Sairmeuse. It would be impossible to describe your brother's fury when he recognized the marquis. 'At last I find you, you wretched noble!' he exclaimed, 'and now we will settle our account! After reducing my father, who had just given you a fortune, to despair and penury, you tried to degrade my sister. I will have my revenge! Down, we must fight!' "

Marie-Anne could scarcely tell whether she was awake or dreaming. "What, my brother challenged the marquis!" she murmured, "Is it possible?"

"Brave as the marquis may be," pursued Chanlouineau, "he did not seem inclined to accept the invitation. He stammered out something like this: 'You are mad—you are jesting—haven't we always been friends? What does all this mean?' Jean ground his teeth in rage. 'This means that we have endured your insulting familiarity long enough,' he replied, 'and if you don't dismount and fight me fairly, I will blow your brains out!' Your brother, as he spoke, manipulated his pistol in so threatening a manner that the marquis jumped off his horse and addressing me: 'You see, Chanlouineau,' he said, 'I must fight a duel or submit to murder. If Jean kills me there is no more to be said—but if I kill him, what is to be done?' I told him he would be free to go off unmolested on condition he gave me his word not to proceed to Montaignac before two o'clock. 'Then I accept the challenge,' said he, 'give me a weapon.' I gave him my sword, your brother drew his, and they took their places in the middle of the highway."

The young farmer paused to take breath, and then more slowly he resumed: "Marie-Anne, your father and I misjudged your brother. Poor Jean's appearance is terribly against him. His face indicates a treacherous, cowardly nature, his smile is cunning, and his eyes always shun yours. We distrusted him, but we should ask his forgiveness for having done so. A man who fights as I saw him fight, deserves all our confidence. For this combat in the road, and in the darkness, was terrible. They attacked each other furiously, and at last Jean fell."

"Ah! my brother is dead!" exclaimed Marie Anne.

"No," promptly replied Chanlouineau; "at least I have reason to hope not; and I know he has been well cared for. The duel had another witness, a man named Poignot, whom you must remember as he was one of your father's tenants. He took Jean away with him, and promised me that he would conceal him and care for him. As for the marquis, he showed me that he was wounded as well, and then he remounted his horse, saying: 'What could I do? He would have it so.' "

Marie-Anne now understood everything. "Give me the letter," she said to Chanlouineau, "I will go to the duke. I will find some way of reaching him, and then God will guide me in the right course to pursue."

The noble-hearted young farmer calmly handed her the scrap of paper which might have been the means of his own salvation. "You must on no account allow the duke to suppose that you have the proof with which you threaten him about your person. He might be capable of any infamy under such circumstances. He will probably say, at first, that he can do nothing—that he sees no way to save the baron; but you must tell him that he must find a means, if he does not wish this letter sent to Paris, to one of his enemies——"

He paused, for the bolt outside was being withdrawn. A moment later Corporal Bavois re-appeared. "The half-hour expired ten minutes ago," said the old soldier sadly, "and I must obey my orders."

"Coming," replied Chanlouineau; "we have finished." And then handing Marie-Anne the second letter he had taken from his sleeve, "This is for you," he added. "You will read it when I am no more. Pray, pray, do not cry so! Be brave! You will soon be Maurice's wife. And when you are happy, think sometimes of the poor peasant who loved you so."

Marie-Anne could not utter a word, but she raised her face to his. "Ah! I dare not ask it!" he exclaimed. And for the first and only time in life he clasped her in his arms, and pressed his lips to her pallid cheek. "Now, good-bye," he said once more. "Do not lose a moment. Good-bye, for ever!"

XIX.

THE prospect of capturing Lacheneur, the chief conspirator, had so excited the Marquis de Courtornieu that he had not been able to tear himself away from the citadel to go home to dinner. Stationed near the entrance of the dark corridor leading to Chanlouineau's cell, he watched Marie-Anne hasten away; but as he saw her go out into the twilight with a quick, alert step, he felt a sudden doubt concerning Chanlouineau's sincerity. "Can it be that this miserable peasant has deceived me?" thought he; and so strong was this new-born suspicion that he hastened after the young girl, determined to question her—to ascertain the truth—to arrest her even, if need be. But he no longer possessed the agility of youth, and when he reached the gateway the sentinel told him that Mademoiselle Lacheneur had already left the citadel. He rushed out after her, looked about on every side, but could see no trace of the nimble fugitive. Accordingly, he was constrained to return again, inwardly furious with himself for his own credulity. "Still, I can visit Chanlouineau," thought he, "and to-morrow will be time enough to summon this creature and question her."

"This creature" was, even then, hastening up the long, ill-paved street leading to the Hotel de France. Regardless of the inquisitive glances of the passers-by, she ran on, thinking only of shortening the terrible suspense which her friends at the hotel must be enduring. "All is not lost!" she exclaimed, as she re-entered the room where they were assembled.

"My God, Thou hast heard my prayers!" murmured the baroness. Then, suddenly seized by a horrible dread, she added: "But do not try to deceive me. Are you not trying to comfort me with false hopes?"

"No! I am not deceiving you, madame. Chanlouineau has placed a weapon in my hands, which, I hope and believe, will place the Duke de Sairmeuse in our power. He is only omnipotent at Montaignac, and the only man who would oppose him, M. de Courtornieu, is his friend. I believe that M. d'Escorval can be saved."

"Speak!" cried Maurice; "what must we do?"

"Pray and wait, Maurice, I must act alone in this matter, but be assured that I will do everything that is humanly possible. It is my duty to do so, for am I not the cause of all your misfortune?"

Absorbed in the thought of the task before her, Marie-Anne had failed to remark a stranger who had arrived during her absence—an old white-haired peasant. The abbe now drew her attention to him. "Here is a courageous friend," said he, "who ever since morning, has been searching for you everywhere, in order to give you some news of your father."

Marie-Anne could scarcely falter her gratitude. "Oh, you need not thank me," said the old peasant. "I said to myself: 'The poor girl must be terribly anxious, and I ought to relieve her of her misery.' So I came to tell you that M. Lacheneur is safe and well, except for a wound in the leg, which causes him considerable suffering, but which will be healed in a few weeks. My son-in-law, who was hunting yesterday in the mountains, met him near the frontier in company of two of his friends. By this time he must be in Piedmont, beyond the reach of the gendarmes."

"Let us hope now," said the abbe, "that we shall soon hear what has become of Jean."

"I know already," replied Marie-Anne, "that my brother has been badly wounded, but some kind friends are caring for him."

Maurice, the abbe, and the retired officers now surrounded the brave young girl. They wished to know what she was about to attempt, and to dissuade her from incurring useless danger. But she refused to reply to their pressing questions; and when they suggested accompanying her, or, at least, following her at a distance, she declared that she must go alone. "However, I shall be here again in a couple of hours," she said, "and then I shall be able to tell you if there is anything else to be done." With these words she hastened away.

To obtain an audience of the Duke de Sairmeuse was certainly a difficult matter, as Maurice and the abbe had ascertained on the previous day. Besieged by weeping and heart-broken families, his grace had shut himself up securely, fearing, perhaps, that he might be moved by their entreaties. Marie-Anne was aware of this, but she was not at all anxious, for by employing the same word that Chanlouineau had used—that same word "revelation"—she was certain to obtain a hearing. When she reached the Duke de Sairmeuse's mansion she found three or four lacqueys talking in front of the principal entrance.

"I am the daughter of M. Lacheneur," said she, speaking to one of them. "I must see the duke at once, on matters connected with the revolt."

"The duke is absent."

"I come to make a revelation."

The servant's manner suddenly changed. "In that case follow me, mademoiselle," said he.

She did follow him up the stairs and through two or three rooms. At last he opened a door and bade her enter; but, to her surprise, it was not the Duke de Sairmeuse who was in the room, but his son, Martial, who, was stretched

upon a sofa, reading a paper by the light of a large candelabra. On perceiving Marie-Anne he sprang up, pale and agitated. "You here!" he stammered; and then, swiftly mastering his emotion, he bethought himself of the possible motive of such a visit: "Lacheneur must have been arrested," he continued, "and wishing to save him from the military commission you have thought of me. Thank you for doing so, dear Marie-Anne, thank you for your confidence in me. I will not abuse it. Be reassured. We will save your father, I promise you—I swear it. We will find a means, for he must be saved. I will have it so!" As he spoke his voice betrayed the passionate joy that was surging in his heart.

"My father has not been arrested," said Marie-Anne, coldly.

"Then," said Martial, with some hesitation—"Then it is Jean who is a prisoner."

"My brother is in safety. If he survives his wounds he will evade all attempts at capture."

The pale face of the Marquis de Sairmeuse turned a deep crimson. Marie-Anne's manner showed him that she was acquainted with the duel. It would have been useless to try and deny it; still he endeavoured to excuse himself. "It was Jean who challenged me," he said; "I tried to avoid fighting, and I only defended my life in fair combat, and with equal weapons—"

Marie-Anne interrupted him. "I do not reproach you, Monsieur le Marquis," she said, quietly.

"Ah! Marie-Anne, I am more severe than you. Jean was right to challenge me. I deserved his anger. He knew my guilty thoughts, of which you were ignorant. Oh! Marie-Anne, if I wronged you in thought it was because I did not know you. Now I know that you, above all others, are pure and chaste—"

He tried to take her hands, but she instantly repulsed him, and broke into a fit of passionate sobbing. Of all the blows she had received this last was most terrible. What shame and humiliation? Now, indeed, her cup of sorrow was filled to overflowing. "Chaste and pure!" he had said. Oh, the bitter mockery of those words!

But Martial misunderstood the meaning of her grief. "Your indignation is just," he resumed, with growing eagerness. "But if I have injured you even in thought, I now offer you reparation. I have been a fool—a miserable fool—for I love you; I love, and can love you only. I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse. I am wealthy. I entreat you, I implore you to be my wife."

Marie-Anne listened in utter bewilderment. But an hour before Chanlouineau in his cell cried aloud that he died for love of her, and now it was Martial, who avowed his willingness to sacrifice his ambition and his future for her sake. And the poor peasant condemned to death, and the son of the all-powerful Duke de Sairmeuse, had confessed their passion in almost the same words.

Martial paused, awaiting some reply—a word, a gesture. None came; and then with increased vehemence, "You are silent," he cried. "Do you question my sincerity? No, it is impossible! Then why this silence? Do you fear my father's opposition? You need not. I know how to gain his consent. Besides, what does his approbation matter to us? Have we any need of him? Am I not my own master? Am I not rich—immensely rich? I should be a miserable fool, a coward, if I hesitated between his stupid prejudices and the happiness of my life." He was evidently weighing all the possible objections, in order to answer and overrule them beforehand. "Is it on account of your family that you hesitate?" he continued. "Your father and brother are pursued, and France is closed against them. But we will leave France, and they shall come and live near you. Jean will no longer dislike me when you are my wife. We will all live in England or in Italy. Now I am grateful for the fortune that will enable me to make your life a continual enchantment. I love you—and in the happiness and tender love which shall be yours in the future, I will make you forget all the bitterness of the past!"

Marie-Anne knew the Marquis de Sairmeuse well enough to understand the intensity of the love revealed by these astounding proposals. And for that very reason she hesitated to tell him that he had triumphed over his pride in vain. She was anxiously wondering to what extremity his wounded vanity would carry him, and if a refusal might not transform him into a bitter foe.

"Why do you not answer?" asked Martial, with evident anxiety.

She felt that she must reply, that she must speak, say something; and yet it was with intense reluctance that she at last unclosed her lips. "I am only a poor girl, Monsieur le Marquis," she murmured. "If I accepted your offer, you would regret it for ever."

"Never!"

"But you are no longer free. You have already plighted your troth. Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu is your promised wife."

"Ah! say one word—only one—and this engagement which I detest shall be broken."

She was silent. It was evident that her mind was fully made up, and that she refused his offer.

"Do you hate me, then?" asked Martial, sadly.

If she had allowed herself to tell the whole truth, Marie-Anne would have answered "Yes;" for the Marquis de Sairmeuse did inspire her with almost insurmountable aversion. "I no more belong to myself than you belong to yourself," she faltered.

A gleam of hatred shone for a second in Martial's eyes. "Always Maurice!" said he.

"Always."

She expected an angry outburst, but he remained perfectly calm. "Then," said he, with a forced smile, "I must believe this and other evidence. I must believe that you forced me to play a ridiculous part. Until now I doubted it."

Marie-Anne bowed her head, blushing with shame to the roots of her hair; still she made no attempt at denial. "I was not my own mistress," she stammered; "my father commanded and threatened, and I—I obeyed him."

"That matters little," he interrupted; "a pure minded young girl should not have acted so." This was the only reproach he allowed himself to utter, and he even regretted it, perhaps because he did not wish her to know how deeply he was wounded, perhaps because—as he afterwards declared—he could not overcome his love for her. "Now," he resumed, "I understand your presence here. You come to ask mercy for M. d'Escorval."

"Not mercy, but justice. The baron is innocent."

Martial drew close to Marie-Anne, and lowering his voice: "If the father is innocent," he whispered, "then it is the son who is guilty."

She recoiled in terror. What! he knew the secret which the judges could not, or would not penetrate!

But seeing her anguish, he took pity on her. "Another reason," said he, "for attempting to save the baron! If his blood were shed upon the guillotine there would be an abyss between you and Maurice which neither of you could cross. So I will join my efforts to yours."

Blushing and embarrassed, Marie-Anne dared not thank him; for was she not about to requite his generosity by charging him with a complicity of which, as she well knew, he was innocent. Indeed, she would have by far preferred to find him angry and revengeful.

Just then a valet opened the door, and the Duke de Sairmeuse entered. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the threshold, "I must confess that Chupin is an admirable hunter. Thanks to him—" He paused abruptly; he had not perceived Marie-Anne until now. "What! Lacheneur's daughter!" said he, with an air of intense surprise. "What does she want here?"

The decisive moment had come—the baron's life depended upon Marie-Anne's courage and address. Impressed by this weighty responsibility she at once recovered all her presence of mind. "I have a revelation to sell to you, sir," she said, with a resolute air.

The duke looked at her with mingled wonder and curiosity; then, laughing heartily, he threw himself on to the sofa, exclaiming: "Sell it, my pretty one—sell it! I can't speak of that until I am alone with you."

At a sign from his father, Martial left the room. "Now tell me what it is," said the duke.

She did not lose a moment. "You must have read the circular convening the conspirators," she began.

"Certainly; I have a dozen copies of it in my pocket."

"Who do you suppose wrote it?"

"Why, the elder d'Escorval, or your father."

"You are mistaken, sir; that letter was prepared by the Marquis de Sairmeuse, your son."

The duke sprang to his feet, his face purple with anger. "Zounds! girl! I advise you to bridle your tongue!" cried he.

"There is proof of what I assert; and the lady who sends me here," interrupted Marie-Anne, quite unabashed, "has the original of this circular in safe keeping. It is in the handwriting of Monsieur le Marquis, and I am obliged to tell you—"

She did not have time to complete her sentence, for the duke sprang to the door, and, in a voice of thunder, called his son. As soon as Martial entered the room his grace turned to Marie-Anne, "Now, repeat," said he, "repeat before my son what you have just said to me."

Boldly, with head erect, and in a clear, firm voice, Marie-Anne repeated her charge. She expected an indignant denial, a stinging taunt, or, at least, an angry interruption from the marquis; but he listened with a nonchalant air, and she almost believed she could read in his eyes an encouragement to proceed, coupled with a promise of protection.

"Well! what do you say to that?" imperiously asked the duke, when Marie-Anne had finished.

"First of all," replied Martial, lightly, "I should like to see this famous circular."

The duke handed him a copy. "Here—read it," said he.

Martial glanced over the paper, laughed heartily, and exclaimed: "A clever trick."

"What do you say?"

"I say that this Chanlouineau is a sly rascal. Who the devil would have thought the fellow so cunning to see his honest face. Another lesson to teach one not to trust in appearances."

In all his life the Duke de Sairmeuse had never received so severe a shock. "So Chanlouineau was not lying, then," he ejaculated, in a choked, unnatural voice, "you *were* one of the instigators of this rebellion?"

Martial's brow bent as, in a tone of marked disdain, he slowly replied: "This is the fourth time that you have addressed that question to me, and for the fourth time I answer: 'No.' That should suffice for you. If the fancy had seized me to take part in this movement, I should frankly confess it. What possible reason could I have for concealing anything from you?"

"The facts!" interrupted the duke, in a frenzy of passion; "the facts!"

"Very well," rejoined Martial, in his usual indifferent tone; "the fact is that the original of this circular does exist, that it was written in my best hand on a very large sheet of very poor paper. I recollect that in trying to find appropriate expressions I erased and re-wrote several words. Did I date this writing? I think I did, but I could not swear to it."

"How do you reconcile this with your denials?" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse.

"I can do this easily. Did I not tell you just now that Chanlouineau had made a tool of me?"

The duke no longer knew what to believe; but what exasperated him more than everything else was his son's imperturbable coolness. "You had much better confess that you were led into this by your mistress," he retorted, pointing at Marie-Anne.

"Mademoiselle Lacheneur is not my mistress," replied Martial, in an almost threatening tone. "Though it only rests with her to become the Marchioness de Sairmeuse if she chooses to-morrow. But let us leave recriminations on one side, they cannot further the progress of our business."

It was with difficulty that the duke checked another insulting rejoinder. However, he had not quite lost all reason. Trembling with suppressed rage, he walked round the room several times, and at last paused in front of Marie-Anne, who had remained standing in the same place, as motionless as a statue. "Come, my good girl," said he, "give me the writing."

"It is not in my possession, sir."

"Where is it?"

"In the hands of a person who will only give it to you under certain conditions."

"Who is this person?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you."

There was both admiration and jealousy in the look that Martial fixed upon Marie-Anne. He was amazed by her coolness and presence of mind. Ah! indeed powerful must be the passion that imparted such a ringing clearness to her voice, such brilliancy to her eyes, and such precision to her words!

"And if I should not accept the—the conditions, what then?" asked M. de Sairmeuse.

"In that case the writing will be utilized."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that early to-morrow morning a trusty messenger will start for Paris, with the view of submitting this document to certain persons who are not exactly friends of yours. He will show it to M. Laine, for example—or to the Duke de Richelieu; and he will, of course, explain to them its significance and value. Will this writing prove the Marquis de Sairmeuse's complicity? Yes, or no? Have you, or have you not, dared to condemn to death the unfortunate men who were only your son's tools?"

"Ah, you little wretch, you hussy, you little viper!" interrupted the duke in a passionate rage. "You want to drive me mad! Yes, you know that I have enemies and rivals who would gladly give anything for this execrable letter. And if they obtain it they will demand an investigation, and then farewell to the rewards due to my services. It will be shouted from the housetops that Chanlouineau, in the presence of the tribunal, declared that you, marquis, were his leader and his accomplice. You will be obliged to submit to the scrutiny of physicians, who, finding a freshly-healed wound, will require you to state how and where you received it, and why you concealed it. And then, of course, I shall be accused! It will be said I expedited matters in order to silence the voices raised against my son. Perhaps my enemies will even say that I secretly favoured the insurrection. I shall be vilified in the newspapers. And remember that it is you, you alone, marquis, who have ruined the fortunes of our house, our brilliant prospects, in this foolish fashion. You pretend to believe in nothing, to doubt everything—you are cold, sceptical, disdainful. But only let a pretty woman make her appearance on the scene, and you grow as wild as a school-boy, and you are ready to commit any act of folly. It is you that I am speaking to, marquis. Don't you hear me? Speak! what have you to say?"

Martial had listened to this tirade with unconcealed scorn, and without even attempting to interrupt it. But now he slowly replied, "I think, sir, that if Mademoiselle Lacheneur *had* any doubts of the value of the document she possesses, she certainly can have them no longer."

This answer fell upon the duke's wrath like a bucket of iced water. He instantly realised his folly; and frightened by his own words, stood literally stupefied with astonishment.

Without deigning to speak any further to his father, the marquis turned to Marie-Anne. "Will you be kind enough to explain what is required in exchange for this letter?" he said.

"The life and liberty of M. d'Escorval."

The duke started as if he had received an electric shock. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "I knew they would ask for something that was impossible!" He sank back into an arm chair; and his despair now seemed as deep as his frenzy had been violent. He hid his face in his hands, evidently seeking for some expedient. "Why didn't you come to me before judgment was pronounced?" he murmured. "Then, I could of done anything—now, my hands are bound. The commission has spoken, and the sentence must be executed—" He rose, and added in the tone of a man who is utterly resigned: "Decidedly, I should risk more in attempting to save the baron"—in his anxiety he gave M. d'Escorval his title—"a thousand times more than I have to fear from my enemies. So, mademoiselle"—he no longer said, "my good girl"—"you can utilize your document."

Having spoken, he was about to leave the room, when Martial detained him, "Think again before you decide," said the marquis. "Our situation is not without a precedent. Don't you remember that a few months ago the Count de Lavalette was condemned to death. Now the king wished to pardon him, but the ministers had contrary views. No doubt his majesty was the master; still what did he do? He effected to remain deaf to all the supplications made on the prisoner's behalf. The scaffold was even erected, and yet Lavalette was saved! And no one was compromised—yes, a jailer lost his position; but he is living on his pension now."

Marie-Anne caught eagerly at the idea which Martial had so cleverly presented. "Yes," she exclaimed, "the Count de Lavalette was favoured by royal connivance, and succeeded in making his escape."

The simplicity of the expedient, and the authority of the example, seemed to make a vivid impression on the duke. He remained silent for a moment, but Marie-Anne fancied she could detect an expression of relief steal over his face. "Such an attempt would be very hazardous," he murmured; "yet, with care, and if one were sure that it would remain a secret—"

"Oh! the secret will be religiously kept, sir," interrupted Marie-Anne.

With a glance Martial recommended her to remain silent then turning to his father, he said: "We can always consider this expedient, and calculate the consequences—that won't bind us. When is this sentence to be carried into effect?"

"To-morrow," replied the duke. Terrible as this curt answer seemed, it did not alarm Marie-Anne. She had perceived by the duke's acute anxiety that she had good grounds for hope, and she was now aware that Martial would favour her designs.

"We have, then, only the night before us," resumed the marquis. "Fortunately, it is only half-past seven, and until ten o'clock my father can visit the citadel without exciting suspicion." He paused, and seemed embarrassed. The fact was, he had just realised the existence of a difficulty which might thwart all his plans. "Have we any intelligent men in the citadel?" he murmured. "A jailer or a soldier's assistance is indispensable." Turning to his father, he abruptly asked him: "Have you any man whom one can trust?"

"I have three or four spies—they can be bought—"

"No! the wretch who betrays his comrade for a few sous would betray you for a few louis. We must have an honest man who sympathizes with Baron d'Escorval's opinions—an old soldier who fought under Napoleon, if possible."

"I know the man you require!" exclaimed Marie-Anne with sudden inspiration, and noticing Martial's surprise. "Yes, a man at the citadel."

"Take care," observed the marquis. "Remember he will have a great deal to risk, for should this be discovered the accomplices must be sacrificed."

"The man I speak of is the one you need. I will be responsible for him. His name is Bavois, and he is a corporal in the first company of grenadiers."

"Bavois," repeated Martial, as if to fix the name in his memory; "Bavois. Very well, I will confer with him. My father will find some pretext for having him summoned here."

"It is easy to find a pretext," rejoined Marie-Anne. "He was left on guard at Escorval after the searching party left the house."

"That's capital," said Martial, walking towards his father's chair. "I suppose," he continued, addressing the duke, "that the baron has been separated from the other prisoners."

"Yes, he is alone, in a large, comfortable room, on the second floor of the corner tower."

"The corner tower!" said Martial, "is that the very tall one, built on the edge of the cliff, where the rock rises almost perpendicularly?"

"Precisely," answered M. de Sairmeuse, whose promptness plainly implied that he was ready to risk a good deal to enable the prisoner to escape.

"What kind of a window is there in the baron's room?" inquired Martial.

"Oh, a tolerably large one, with a double row of iron bars, securely riveted into the stone walls. It overlooks the precipice."

"The deuce! The bars can easily be cut through, but that precipice is a serious difficulty, and yet, in one respect, it is an advantage, for no sentinels are stationed there, are they?"

"No, never. Between the walls and the citadel and the edge of the rock there is barely standing room. The soldiers don't venture there even in the day time."

"There is one more important question. What is the distance from M. d'Escorval's window to the ground?"

"I should say it is about forty feet from the base of the tower."

"Good! And from the base of the tower to the foot of the cliff—how far is that?"

"I really scarcely know. However, I should think fully sixty feet."

"Ah, that's terribly high; but fortunately the baron is still pretty vigorous."

The duke was growing impatient. "Now," said he to his son, "will you be so kind as to explain your plan?"

"My plan is simplicity itself," replied Martial. "Sixty and forty are one hundred; so it is necessary to procure a hundred feet of strong rope. It will make a very large bundle; but no matter. I will twist it round me, wrap myself up in a large cloak, and accompany you to the citadel. You will send for Corporal Bavois, leave me alone with him in a quiet place; and I will explain our wishes to him."

The Duke de Sairmeuse shrugged his shoulders. "And how will you procure a hundred feet of rope at this hour in Montaignac? Will you go about from shop to shop? You might as well trumpet your project all over France at once."

"I shall attempt nothing of the kind. What I can't do, the friends of the D'Escorval family will do." Then seeing that the duke was about to offer some fresh objections, Martial earnestly added: "Pray don't forget the danger that threatens us, nor the little time that is left us. I have made a blunder, let me repair it." And turning to Marie-Anne: "You may consider the baron saved," he pursued; "but it is necessary for me to confer with one of his friends. Return at once to the Hotel de France and tell the cure to meet me on the Place d'Armes, where I shall go at once and wait for him."

XX.

DIRECTLY the Baron d'Escorval was arrested, although he was unarmed and although he had taken no part in the insurrection, he fully realised the fact that he was a lost man. He knew how hateful he was to the royalist party, and having made up his mind that he would have to die, he turned all his attention to the danger threatening his son. The unfortunate blunder he made in contradicting Chupin's evidence was due to his preoccupation, and he did not breathe freely until he saw Maurice led from the hall by the Abbe Midon and the friendly officers; for he feared that his son would be unable to restrain himself, that he would declare his guilt all to no purpose since the commission in its blind state would never forgive the father, but rather satisfy its rancour by ordering the execution of the son as well. When Maurice was eventually got away, the baron became more composed, and with head erect, and steadfast eye, he listened to his sentence. In the confusion that ensued in removing the prisoners from the hall M. d'Escorval found himself beside Chanlouineau, who had begun his noisy lamentations. "Courage, my boy," he said, indignant at such apparent cowardice.

"Ah! it is easy to talk," whined the young farmer, who seeing that he was momentarily unobserved, leant towards the baron, and whispered; "It is for you that I am working. Save all your strength for to-night."

Chanlouineau's words and his burning glance surprised M. d'Escorval, but he attributed both to fear. When the guards took him back to his cell, he threw himself on to his pallet, and became absorbed in that vision of the last hour, which is at once the hope and despair of those who are about to die. He knew the terrible laws that govern a military commission. The next day—in a few hours—at dawn, perhaps, he would be taken from his cell, and placed in front of a squad of soldiers, an officer would lift his sword, and then all would be over. All over! ay, but what would become of his wife and son? His agony on thinking of those he loved was terrible. He was alone; he wept. But suddenly he started up, ashamed of his weakness. He must not allow these thoughts to unnerve him. Had he not already determined to meet death without flinching? Resolved to shake off this fit of melancholy, he walked round and round his cell forcing his mind to occupy itself with material objects.

The room which had been allotted to him was very large. It had once communicated with an adjoining apartment, but the door had long since been walled up. The cement which held the stone together had crumbled away, leaving crevices through which one might look from one room into the other. M. d'Escorval mechanically applied his eye to one of these crevices. Perhaps he had a friend for a neighbour, some wretched man who was to share his fate. No. He could not see anyone. He called, first in a whisper, and then louder; but no voice replied. "If I could only tear down this thin partition," he thought. He trembled, then shrugged his shoulders. And if he did, what then? He would only find himself in another apartment similar to his own, and communicating like his with a corridor

full of guards, whose monotonous tramp he could plainly hear as they passed to and fro. What folly to think of escape! He knew that every possible precaution must have been taken to guard against it. Yes, he knew this, and yet he could not refrain from examining his window. Two rows of iron bars protected it. These were placed in such a way that it was impossible for him to protrude his head and see how far he was above the ground. The height, however, must be considerable, judging from the extent of the view. The sun was setting; and through the violet haze the baron could discern an undulating line of hills, the culminating point of which must be the waste land of La Reche. The dark mass of foliage that he saw on the right was probably the forest of Sairmeuse. On the left, he divined rather than saw, nestling between the hills, the valley of the Oiselle and Escorval. Escorval, that lovely retreat where he had known such happiness, where he had hoped to die in peace. And remembering past times, and thinking of his vanished dreams, his eyes once more filled with tears. But he quickly dried them as he heard some one draw back the bolts securing the door of his room.

Two soldiers entered, one of whom carried a torch, while the other had with him one of those long baskets divided into compartments which are used in carrying meals to officers on guard. These men were evidently deeply moved, and yet, obeying a sentiment of instinctive delicacy, they affected a semblance of gaiety. "Here is your dinner, sir," said one soldier, "it ought to be good, since it comes from the commander's kitchen."

M. d'Escorval smiled sadly. Some attentions have a sinister significance coming from your jailer. Still, when he seated himself before the little table prepared for him, he found that he was really hungry. He ate with a relish, and was soon chatting quite cheerfully with the soldiers. "Always hope for the best, sir," said one of these worthy fellows. "Who knows? Stranger things have happened!"

When the baron had finished his meal, he asked for pen, ink, and paper, which were almost immediately brought to him. He found himself again alone; but his conversation with the soldiers had been of service, for his weakness had passed away, his self-possession had returned, and he could not reflect. He was surprised that he had heard nothing from his wife or son. Had they been refused admittance to the prison? No, that could not be; he could not imagine his judges sufficiently cruel to prevent him from pressing his wife and son to his heart, in a last embrace. Yet, how was it that neither the baroness nor Maurice had made an attempt to see him! Something must have prevented them from doing so. What could it be? He imagined the worst misfortunes. He saw his wife writhing in agony, perhaps dead. He pictured Maurice, wild with grief, on his knees at his mother's bedside. Still they might come yet, for on consulting his watch, he found that it was only seven o'clock. But alas, he waited in vain. No one came. At last, he took up his pen, and was about to write, when he heard a bustle in the corridor outside. The clink of spurs resounded over the flagstones, and he heard the sharp clink of a musket as the sentinel presented arms. Trembling in spite of himself, the baron sprang up. "They have come at last!" he exclaimed.

But he was mistaken; the footsteps died away in the distance, and he reflected that this must have been some round of inspection. At the same moment, however, two objects thrown through the little grated opening in the door of his cell, fell on to the floor in the middle of the room. M. d'Escorval caught them up. Somebody had thrown him two files. His first feeling was one of distrust. He knew that there were jailers who left no means untried to dishonour their prisoners before delivering them over to the executioner. Who had sent him these instruments of deliverance, a friend or an enemy? Chanlouineau's last words and the look that accompanied them recurred to his mind, perplexing him still more. He was standing with knitted brows, turning and re-turning the files in his hands, when he suddenly noticed on the floor a scrap of paper which at first had escaped his attention. He picked it up, unfolded it, and read: "Your friends are at work. Everything is prepared for your escape. Make haste and saw the bars of your window. Maurice and his mother embrace you. Hope, courage!" Beneath these few lines was the letter M.

But the baron did not need this initial to feel assured, for he had at once recognized the Abbe Midon's handwriting. "Ah! he is a true friend," he murmured. "And this explains why neither my wife nor son came to visit me; and yet I doubted their energy—and was complaining of their neglect!" Intense joy filled his heart, he raised the letter that promised him life and liberty to his lips, and enthusiastically exclaimed: "To work! to work!"

He had chosen the finest of the two files which were both well tempered, and was about to attack the bars, when he fancied he heard some one open the door of the next room. Some one had opened it, certainly, and had closed it again, but without locking it. The baron could hear this person moving cautiously about. What did it all mean? Were they incarcerating some fresh prisoner, or were they stationing a spy there? Holding his breath and listening with the greatest attention, the baron now heard a singular sound, the cause of which it was quite impossible to explain. He stealthily advanced to the door that had been walled up, knelt down and peered through one of the crevices in the masonry. The sight that met his eyes amazed him. A man was standing in a corner of the room, and the baron could see the lower part of his body by the light of a large lantern which he had deposited on the floor at his feet. He was turning quickly round and round, thus unwinding a long rope which had been twined round his body as thread is wound about a bobbin. M. d'Escorval rubbed his eyes as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming. Evidently this rope was intended for him. It was to be attached to the broken bars. But how had this man succeeded in gaining admission to this room? Who could it be that enjoyed such liberty in the prison? He was not a soldier—or, at least, he did not wear a uniform. Unfortunately, the highest crevice was so situated that the baron could not see the upper part of the man's body; and despite all his efforts, he failed to distinguish the features of this friend—he judged him to be such—whose boldness verged on folly. Unable to resist his intense curiosity, M. d'Escorval was on the point of rapping against the wall to question him, when the door of the room where this man stood was impetuously thrown open. Another man entered, but his lineaments also were beyond the baron's range of vision. However, his voice could be heard quite plainly, and M. d'Escorval was seized with despair when this new comer ejaculated in a tone of intense astonishment: "Good heavens! what are you about?"

"All is discovered!" thought the baron, growing sick at heart; while to his increased surprise the man he believed to be his friend calmly continued unwinding the rope, and quietly replied: "As you see, I am freeing myself from this burden, which I find extremely uncomfortable. There are at least sixty yards of it, I should think—and what a bundle it makes! I feared they would discover it under my cloak."

"And what are you going to do with all this rope?" inquired the newcomer.

"I am going to hand it to the Baron d'Escorval, to whom I have already given a file. He must make his escape to-night."

The scene was so improbable that the baron could not believe his own ears. "I can't be awake; I must be

dreaming," he thought.

But the new-comer uttered a terrible oath, and, in an almost threatening tone, exclaimed: "We will see about that! If you have gone mad, thank God I still possess my reason! I will not permit——"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the other, coldly, "you will permit it. This is merely the result of your own—credulity. The time to say, 'I won't permit it,' was when Chanlouineau asked you to allow him to receive a visit from Mademoiselle Lacheneur. Do you know what that cunning fellow wanted? Simply to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur a letter of mine, so compromising in its nature, that if it ever reaches the hands of a certain person of my acquaintance, my father and I will be obliged to reside in London for the future. Then good-bye to all our projects of an alliance between our two families!" The newcomer heaved a mighty sigh, followed by a half angry, half sorrowful exclamation; but the man with the rope, without giving him any opportunity to reply, resumed: "You, yourself, marquis, would no doubt be compromised. Were you not a chamberlain during Bonaparte's reign? Ah, marquis! how could a man of your experience, so subtle, penetrating, and acute, allow himself to be duped by a low, ignorant peasant?"

Now M. d'Escorval understood everything. He was not dreaming; it was the Marquis de Courtornieu and Martial de Sairmeuse who were talking on the other side of the wall. The former had been so crushed by Martial's revelation that he made no effort to oppose him. "And this terrible letter?" he groaned.

"Marie-Anne Lacheneur gave it to the Abbe Midon, who came to me and said: 'Either the baron will escape, or this letter will be taken to the Duke de Richelieu.' I voted for the baron's escape, I assure you. The abbe procured all that was necessary; he met me at a rendezvous I appointed in a quiet place; he coiled all this rope round my body, and here I am."

"Then you think that if the baron escapes they will give you back your letter?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"You deluded man! Why, as soon as the baron is safe, they will demand the life of another prisoner, with the same threats."

"By no means."

"You will see."

"I shall see nothing of the kind, for a very simple reason. I have the letter now in my pocket. The abbe gave it to me in exchange for my word of honour."

M. de Courtornieu uttered an ejaculation which showed that he considered the abbe to be an egregious fool. "What!" he exclaimed. "You hold the proof, and—— But this is madness! Burn this wretched letter in your lantern, and let the baron go where his slumbers will be undisturbed."

Martial's silence betrayed something like stupefaction. "Ah! so that's what you would do?" he asked at last.

"Certainly—and without the slightest hesitation."

"Ah well! I can't say that I quite congratulate you."

The sneer was so apparent that M. de Courtornieu was sorely tempted to make an angry reply. But he was not a man to yield to his first impulse—this ex-Imperial chamberlain now a *grand prevot* under His Majesty King Louis XVIII. He reflected. Should he, on account of a sharp word, quarrel with Martial—with the only suitor who had ever pleased his daughter? A quarrel and he would be left without any prospect of a son-in-law! When would heaven send him such another? And how furious Blanche would be! He concluded to swallow the bitter pill; and it was in a tone of paternal indulgence that he remarked: "I see that you are very young, my dear Martial."

The baron was still kneeling beside the partition, holding his breath in an agony of suspense, and with his right ear against one of the crevices.

"You are only twenty, my dear Martial," pursued the Marquis de Courtornieu; "you are imbued with all the enthusiasm and generosity of youth. Complete your undertaking; I shall not oppose you; but remember that all may be discovered—and then——"

"Have no fear, sir, on that score," interrupted the young marquis; "I have taken every precaution. Did you see a single soldier in the corridor, just now? No. That is because my father, at my request, has just assembled all the officers and guards together under pretext of ordering exceptional precautions. He is talking to them now. This gave me an opportunity to come here unobserved. No one will see me when I go out. Who, then, will dare suspect me of having any hand in the baron's escape?"

"If the baron escapes, justice will require to know who aided him."

Martial laughed. "If justice seeks to know, she will find a culprit of my providing. Go, now; I have told you everything. I had but one person to fear—yourself. A trusty messenger requested you to join me here. You came; you know all, you have agreed to remain neutral. I am at ease, and the baron will be safe in Piedmont when the sun rises." He picked up his lantern, and added, gaily: "But let us go—my father can't harangue those soldiers forever."

"But you have not told me——" insisted M. de Courtornieu.

"I will tell you everything, but not here. Come, come!"

They went out, locking the door behind them; and then the baron rose from his knees. All sorts of contradictory ideas, doubts, and conjectures filled his mind. What could this letter have contained? Why had not Chanlouineau used it to procure his own salvation? Who would have believed that Martial would be so faithful to a promise wrested from him by threats? But this was a time for action, not for reflection. The bars were heavy, and there were two rows of them. M. d'Escorval set to work. He had supposed that the task would be difficult, but, as he almost immediately discovered, it proved a thousand times more arduous than he had expected. It was the first time that he had ever worked with a file, and he did not know how to use it. His progress was despairingly slow. Nor was that all. Though he worked as cautiously as possible, each movement of the instrument across the iron caused a harsh, grating sound which made him tremble. What if some one overheard this noise? And it seemed to him impossible for it to escape notice, since he could plainly distinguish the measured tread of the guards, who had resumed their watch in the corridor. So slight was the result of his labours, that at the end of twenty minutes he experienced a feeling of profound discouragement. At this rate, it would be impossible for him to sever the first bar before daybreak. What, then, was the use of spending his time in fruitless labour? Why mar the dignity of death by the disgrace of an unsuccessful effort to escape?

He was hesitating when footsteps approached his cell. At once he left the window and seated himself at the table. Almost directly afterwards the door opened and a soldier entered; an officer who did not cross the threshold remarking at the same moment: "You have your instructions, corporal, keep a close watch. If the prisoner needs anything, call."

M. d'Escorval's heart throbbed almost to bursting. What was coming now? Had M. de Courtornieu's advice carried the day, or had Martial sent some one to assist him? But the door was scarcely closed when the corporal whispered: "We must not be dawdling here."

M. d'Escorval sprang from his chair. This man was a friend. Here was help and life.

"I am Bavois," continued the corporal. "Some one said to me just now: 'One of the emperor's friends is in danger; are you willing to lend him a helping hand!' I replied, 'Present,' and here I am."

This certainly was a brave fellow. The baron held out his hand, and in a voice trembling with emotion: "Thanks," said he; "thanks. What, you don't even know me, and yet you expose yourself to the greatest danger for my sake."

Bavois shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "Positively my old hide is no more precious than yours. If we don't succeed they will chop off our heads with the same ax. But we *shall* succeed. Now, let's stop talking and proceed to business."

As he spoke he drew from under his long overcoat a strong iron crowbar and a small vial of brandy, both of which he laid upon the bed. He then took the candle and passed it five or six times before the window.

"What are you doing?" inquired the baron in suspense.

"I am signalling to your friends that everything is progressing favourably. They are down there waiting for us; and see they are now answering." The baron looked, and three times they both perceived a little flash of flame, such as is produced by burning a pinch of gunpowder.

"Now," said the corporal, "we are all right. Let us see what progress you have made with the bars."

"I have scarcely begun," murmured M. d'Escorval.

The corporal inspected the work. "You may indeed say that you have made no progress," said he; "but never mind, I was 'prenticed to a locksmith once, and I know how to handle a file." Then drawing the cork from the vial of brandy, he fastened it to the end of one of the files, and swathed the handle of the tool with a piece of damp linen. "That's what they call putting a *stop* on the instrument," he remarked, by way of explanation. Immediately afterwards he made an energetic attack on the bars, and it was at once evident that he had by no means exaggerated either his knowledge of the task, or the efficacy of his precautions for deadening the sound. The harsh grating which had so alarmed the baron was no longer heard, and Bavois, finding he had nothing more to dread from the keenest ears, now made preparations to shelter himself from observation. Suspicion would be at once aroused if the gratings in the door were covered over, so the corporal hit upon another expedient. Moving the little table to another part of the room, he stood the candle-stick on it in such a position that the window remained entirely in shadow. Then he ordered the baron to sit down, and handing him a paper, said: "Now read aloud, without pausing for a minute, until you see me stop work."

By this method they might reasonably hope to deceive the guards outside in the corridor; some of whom, indeed did come to the door and look in; but after a brief glance they walked away, and remarked to their companions: "We have just taken a look at the prisoner. He is very pale, and his eyes are glistening feverishly. He is reading aloud to divert his mind. Corporal Bavois is looking out of the window. It must be dull music for him."

They little suspected why the baron's eyes glistened in this feverish fashion; and had no idea that if he read aloud it was with the view of overpowering any suspicious sound which might result from Corporal Bavois' labour. The time passed on, and while the latter worked, M. d'Escorval continued reading. He had completed the perusal of the entire paper, and was about to begin it again, when the old soldier, leaving the window, motioned him to stop.

"Half the task is completed," he said in a whisper. "The lower bars are cut."

"Ah! how can I ever repay you for your devotion!" murmured the baron.

"Hush! not a word!" interrupted Bavois. "If I escape with you, I can never return here; and I shan't know where to go, for the regiment, you see, is my only family. Ah, well! if you give me a home with you I shall be very well content." Thereupon he swallowed some of the brandy, and set to work again with renewed ardour.

He had cut one of the bars of the second row, when he was interrupted by M. d'Escorval who, without pausing in his renewed perusal, was pulling him by the coat tails to attract attention. The corporal turned round at once. "What's up?" said he.

"I heard a singular noise just now in the adjoining room where the ropes are."

Honest Bavois muttered a terrible oath. "Do they intend to betray us?" he asked. "I risked my life, and they promised me fair play." He placed his ear against a crevice in the partition, and listened for a long while. Nothing, not the slightest sound could be detected. "It must have been some rat that you heard," he said at last. "Go on with your reading." And he turned to his work again.

This was the only interruption, and a little before four o'clock everything was ready. The bars were cut, and the ropes, which had been drawn through an opening in the wall, were coiled under the window. The decisive moment had come. Bavois took the counterpane from the bed, fastened it over the opening in the door, and filled up the keyhole. "Now," said he, in the same measured tone he would have used in instructing a recruit, "attention! sir, and obey the word of command."

Then he calmly explained that the escape would consist of two distinct operations; first, one would have to gain the narrow platform at the base of the tower; next one must descend to the foot of the precipitous rock. The abbe, who understood this, had brought Martial two ropes; the one to be used in the descent of the precipice being considerably longer than the other. "I will fasten the shortest rope under your arms," said Bavois to the baron, "and I will let you down to the base of the tower. When you have reached it I will pass you the longer rope and the crowbar. Don't miss them. If we find ourselves without them on that narrow ledge of rock, we shall either be compelled to deliver ourselves up, or throw ourselves down the precipice. I shan't be long in joining you. Are you ready?"

In reply M. d'Escorval lifted his arms, the rope was fastened securely about him, and he crawled through the window.

From above the height seemed immense. Below, in the barren fields surrounding the citadel, eight persons were

waiting, silent, anxious, breathless with suspense. They were Madame d'Escorval and Maurice, Marie-Anne, the Abbe Midon, and four retired officers. There was no moon, but the night was very clear, and they could see the tower plainly. Soon after four o'clock struck from the church steeples, they perceived a dark object glide slowly down the side of the tower—this was the baron. A short interval and then another form followed rapidly—this was Bavois. Half of the perilous journey was accomplished. The watchers below could see the two figures moving about on the narrow platform. The corporal and the baron were exerting all their strength to fix the crowbar securely in a crevice of the rock. Suddenly one of the figures stepped forward and glided gently down the side of the precipice. It could be none other than M. d'Escorval. Transported with happiness, his wife sprang forward with open arms to receive him. Alas! at that same moment a terrible cry rent the still night air.

M. d'Escorval was falling from a height of fifty feet; he was being hurled to the foot of the precipice. The rope had parted. Had it broken naturally? Maurice examined it; and then with a vow of vengeance exclaimed that they had been betrayed—that their enemy had arranged to deliver only a dead body into their hands—that the rope had been foully tampered with, intentionally cut with a knife beforehand!

XXI.

FATHER CHUPIN, the false witness and the crafty spy, had refrained from sleeping and almost from drinking ever since that unfortunate morning when the Duke de Sairmeuse affixed to the walls of Montaignac the decree in which he promised twenty thousand francs to the person who delivered up Lacheneur, dead or alive. "Twenty thousand francs," muttered the old rascal gloomily; "twenty sacks with a hundred golden pistoles in each! Ah! if I could only discover this Lacheneur, even if he were dead and buried a hundred feet under ground, I should gain the reward."

He cared nothing for the shame which such a feat would entail. His sole thought was the reward—the blood-money. Unfortunately for his greed he had nothing whatever to guide him in his researches; no clue, however vague. All that was known in Montaignac was that Lacheneur's horse had been killed at the Croix-d'Arcy. But no one could say whether Lacheneur himself had been wounded, or whether he had escaped from the fray uninjured. Had he gained the frontier? or had he found an asylum in some friend's house. Chupin was thus hungering for the price of blood, when, on the day of the baron's trial, as he was returning from the citadel, after giving his evidence, he chanced to enter a wine-shop. He was indulging in a strong potation when he suddenly heard a peasant near him mention Lacheneur's name in a low voice. This peasant was an old man who sat at an adjoining table, emptying a bottle of wine in a friend's company, and he was telling the latter that he had come to Montaignac on purpose to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur some news of her father. He said that his son-in-law had met the chief conspirator in the mountains which separate the arrondissement of Montaignac from Savoy, and he even mentioned the exact place of meeting, which was near Saint Pavin-des-Grottes, a tiny village of only a few houses. Certainly the worthy fellow did not think he was committing a dangerous indiscretion, for in his opinion Lacheneur had already crossed the frontier, and put himself out of danger. But in this surmise he was grievously mistaken.

The frontier bordering on Savoy was guarded by soldiers, who had received orders to prevent any of the conspirators passing into Italian territory. And even if Piedmont was gained it seemed likely that the Italian authorities would themselves arrest the fugitive rebels, and hand them over to their judges. Chupin was aware of all this, and resolved to act at once. He threw a coin on the counter, and without waiting for his change, rushed back to the citadel, and asked a sergeant at the gate for pen and paper. Writing was for him usually a most laborious task, but to-day it only took him a moment to pen these lines: "I know Lacheneur's retreat, and beg monseigneur to order some mounted soldiers to accompany me, so that we may capture him."

"CHUPIN."

This letter was given to one of the guards, with a request to take it to the Duke de Sairmeuse, who was then presiding over the military commission. Five minutes later the soldier returned with the same note, on the margin of which the duke had written an order, placing a lieutenant and eight men of the Montaignac chasseurs, who could be relied upon, at Chupin's disposal. The old spy also asked the loan of a horse for his own use, and this was granted him: and the party then started off at once in the direction of St. Pavin.

When, at the finish of the final stand made by the insurgents at the Croix-d'Arcy, Lacheneur's horse received a bayonet wound in the chest, and reared and fell, burying its rider underneath; the latter lost consciousness, and it was not till some hours later that, restored by the fresh morning air, he regained his senses and was able to look about him. All he perceived was a couple of dead bodies lying some little distance off. It was a terrible moment, and in his soul he cursed the fate which had left him still alive. Had he been armed, he would no doubt have put an end to the mental tortures he was suffering by suicide—but then he had no weapon. So he must resign himself to life. Perhaps, too, the voice of honour whispered that it was cowardice to strive to escape responsibility by self-inflicted death. At last, he endeavoured to draw himself from under his horse, which proved no easy task, as his foot was still in the stirrup, and his limbs were so cramped that he could scarcely move them. Finally, however, he succeeded in freeing himself, and, on examination, discovered that he had only one wound, inflicted by a bayonet thrust, in the left leg. It caused him considerable pain, and he was trying to bandage it with his handkerchief, when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He had no time for reflection; but at once darted into the forest that lies to the left of the Croix-d'Arcy. The troops were returning to Montaignac after pursuing the rebels for more than three miles. There were some two hundred soldiers, who were bringing back a score of peasants as prisoners. Crouching behind an oak tree scarcely fifteen paces from the road, Lacheneur recognized several of the captives in the grey light of dawn. It was only by the merest chance that he escaped discovery; and he fully realized how difficult it would be for him to gain the frontier without falling into the hands of the many detachments of soldiery, who were doubtless scouring the country in every direction.

Still he did not despair. The mountains lay only two leagues away; and he firmly believed that he would be able to successfully elude his pursuers could he only gain the shelter of the hills. He began his journey courageously, but soon he was obliged to admit that he had greatly over estimated his strength, which was well nigh quite exhausted by the excessive labour and excitement of the past few days, coupled with the loss of blood occasioned by his wound. He tore up a stake in an adjacent vineyard, and using it as a staff, slowly dragged himself along, keeping in the shelter of the woods as much as possible, and creeping beside the hedges and in the ditches whenever he was

obliged to cross an open space. Physical suffering and mental anguish, were soon supplemented by the agony of hunger. He had eaten nothing for thirty hours, and felt terribly weak from lack of nourishment. Soon the craving for food became so intolerable that he was willing to brave anything to appease it. At last he perceived the thatched roofs of a little hamlet. He was going forward, decided to enter the first house and ask for food; the outskirts of the village were reached, and a cottage stood within a few yards—when suddenly he heard the rolling of a drum. Surmising that a party of troops was near at hand, he instinctively hid himself behind a wall. But the drum proved to be that of a public crier summoning the village folk together; and soon he could hear a clear, penetrating voice reciting the following words: "This is to give notice that the authorities of Montaignac promise a reward of twenty thousand francs to whosoever delivers up the man known as Lacheneur, dead or alive. Dead or alive! Understand, that if he be dead, the compensation will be the same; twenty thousand francs! to be paid in gold. God save the king."

Then came another roll of the drum. But with a bound, Lacheneur had already risen; and though he had believed himself utterly exhausted, he now found superhuman strength to fly. A price had been set upon his head; and the circumstance awakened in his breast the frenzy that renders a hunted beast so dangerous. In all the villages around him he fancied he could hear the rolling of drums, and the voices of criers proclaiming him an outlaw. Go where he would now, he was a tempting bait offered to treason and cupidity. Whom could he dare confide in? Whom could he ask for shelter? And even if he were dead, he would still be worth a fortune. Though he might die from lack of nourishment and exhaustion under a bush by the way side, yet his emaciated body would still be worth twenty thousand francs. And the man who found his corpse would not give it burial. He would place it on his cart and convey it to Montaignac, present it to the authorities and say: "Here is Lacheneur's body—give me the reward."

How long and by what paths he pursued his flight, he could not tell. But several hours afterwards, while he was wandering through the wooded hills of Charves, he espied two men, who sprang up and fled at his approach. In a terrible voice, he called after them: "Eh! you fellows! do you each want to earn a thousand pistoles? I am Lacheneur."

They paused when they recognized him, and Lacheneur saw that they were two of his former followers, both of them well-to-do farmers, whom it had been difficult to induce to join in the revolt. They happened to have with them some bread and a little brandy, and they gave both to the famished man. They sat down beside him on the grass, and while he was eating they related their misfortunes. Their connection with the conspiracy had been discovered, and soldiers were hunting for them, but they hoped to reach Italy with the help of a guide who was waiting for them at an appointed place.

Lacheneur held out his hand. "Then I am saved," said he. "Weak and wounded as I am, I should have perished, all alone."

But the two farmers did not take the hand he offered. "We ought to leave you," said the younger man gloomily, "for you are the cause of our misfortunes. You deceived us, Monsieur Lacheneur."

The leader of the revolt dared not protest; the reproach was so well deserved. However, the other farmer gave his companion a peculiar glance and suggested that they might let Lacheneur accompany them all the same. So they walked on all three together, and that same evening, after nine hours journey through the mountains, they crossed the frontier. But, in the meanwhile, many and bitter had been the reproaches they had exchanged. On being closely questioned by his companions, Lacheneur, exhausted both in mind and body, finally admitted the insincerity of his promises, by means of which he had inflamed his followers' zeal. He acknowledged that he had spread the report that Marie-Louise and the young king of Rome were concealed in Montaignac, and that it was a gross falsehood. He confessed that he had given the signal for the revolt without any chance of success, and without any precise means of action, leaving everything to chance. In short he confessed that nothing was real except the hatred, the bitter hatred he felt against the Sairmeuse family. A dozen times, at least, during this terrible confession, the peasants who accompanied him were on the point of hurling him over the precipice by the banks of which they walked. "So it was to gratify his own spite," they thought, quivering with rage, "that he set every one fighting and killing each other—that he has ruined us and driven us into exile. We'll see if he is to escape unpunished."

After crossing the frontier the fugitives repaired to the first hostelry they could find, a lonely inn, a league or so from the little village of Saint-Jean-de-Coche, and kept by a man named Balstain. It was past midnight when they rapped, but, despite the lateness of the hour, they were admitted, and ordered supper. Lacheneur, weak from loss of blood, and exhausted by his long tramp, went off to bed, however, without eating. He threw himself on to a pallet in an adjoining room and soon fell asleep. For the first time since meeting him, the two farmers now found an opportunity to talk in private. The same idea had occurred to both of them. They believed that by delivering Lacheneur up to the authorities, they might secure pardon for themselves. Neither of them would have consented to receive a single sou of the blood-money; but they did not consider there would be any disgrace in exchanging their own lives and liberty for Lacheneur's, especially as he had so deceived them. Eventually they decided to go to Saint-Jean-de-Coche directly supper was over, and inform the Piedmontese guards.

But they reckoned without their host. They had spoken loud enough to be overheard by Balstain, the inn-keeper, who, during the day, had been told of the magnificent reward promised for Lacheneur's capture. On learning that the exhausted man, now quietly sleeping under his roof, was the famous conspirator, he was seized with a sudden thirst for gold, and whispering a word to his wife he darted through the window of a back room to run and fetch the carabinieri, as the Italian gendarmes are termed. He had been gone half-an-hour or so when the two peasants left the house; for they had drunk heavily with the view of mustering sufficient courage to carry their purpose into effect. They closed the door so violently on going out that Lacheneur woke up. He rose from his bed and came into the front room, where he found the innkeeper's wife alone. "Where are my friends?" he asked, anxiously. "And where is your husband?"

Moved by sympathy, the woman tried to falter some excuse, but finding none, she threw herself at his feet, exclaiming: "Fly, save yourself—you are betrayed!"

Lacheneur rushed back into his bedroom, trying to find a weapon with which to defend himself, or a mode of egress by which he could escape unperceived. He had thought they might abandon him, but betray him—no never! "Who has sold me?" he asked, in an agitated voice.

"Your friends—the two men who supped at that table."

"That's impossible!" he retorted: for he ignored his comrades' designs and hopes; and could not, would not

believe them capable of betraying him for lucre.

"But," pleaded the innkeeper's wife, still on her knees before him, "they have just started for Saint-Jean-de-Coche, where they mean to denounce you. I heard them say that your life would purchase theirs. They certainly mean to fetch the carabineers; and, alas, must I also say that my own husband has gone to betray you."

Lacheneur understood everything now! And this supreme misfortune, after all the misery he had endured, quite prostrated him. Tears gushed from his eyes, and sinking on to a chair, he murmured: "Let them come; I am ready for them. No, I will not stir from here! My miserable life is not worth such a struggle."

But the landlady rose, and grasping at his clothing, shook and dragged him to the door—she would have carried him had she possessed sufficient strength. "You shall not be taken here; it will bring misfortune on our house!"

Bewildered by this violent appeal, and urged on by the instinct of self-preservation, so powerful in every human heart, Lacheneur advanced to the threshold. The night was very dark, and chilly fog intensified the gloom.

"See, madame," said he, in a gentle voice, "how can I find my way through these mountains, which I do not know, where there are no roads—where the foot-paths are scarcely traced."

But Balstain's wife would not argue; pushing him forward and turning him as one does a blind man to set him on the right track. "Walk straight before you," said she, "always against the wind. God will protect you. Farewell!"

He turned to ask further directions, but she had re-entered the house and closed the door. Upheld by a feverish excitement, he walked on during long hours. Soon he lost his way, and wandered among the mountains, benumbed with cold, stumbling over the rocks, at times falling to the ground. It was a wonder that he was not precipitated over the brink of some precipice. He had lost all idea of his whereabouts, and the sun was already high in the heavens when at last he met some one of whom he could ask his way. This was a little shepherd boy, who was looking for some stray goats, but the lad frightened by the stranger's wild and haggard aspect, at first refused to approach. At last the offer of a piece of money induced him to come a little nearer. "You are just on the frontier line," said he. "Here is France; and there is Savoy."

"And which is the nearest village?"

"On the Savoy side, Saint-Jean-de-Coche; on the French side, Saint-Pavin."

So after all his terrible exertions, Lacheneur was not a league from the inn. Appalled by this discovery, he remained for a moment undecided which course to pursue. Still, after all what did it matter? Was he not doomed, and would not every road lead him to death? However, at last he remembered the carabineers, the innkeeper's wife had warned him against, and slowly crawled down the steep mountain-side leading back into France. He was near Saint-Pavin, when he espied a cottage standing alone and in front of it a young peasant-woman spinning in the sunshine. He dragged himself towards her, and in a weak voice begged her hospitality.

The woman rose, surprised and somewhat alarmed by the aspect of this stranger, whose face was ghastly pale, and whose clothes were torn and soiled with dust and blood. She looked at him more closely, and then perceived that his age, stature, and features correspond with the descriptions of Lacheneur, which had been distributed round about the frontier. "Why you are the conspirator they are hunting for, and for whom they promise a reward of twenty thousand francs," she said.

Lacheneur trembled. "Yes," he replied, after a moment's hesitation; "I am Lacheneur. Betray me if you will, but in charity's name give me a morsel of bread, and allow me to rest a little."

"We betray you, sir!" said she. "Ah! you don't know the Antoinettes! Come into our house, and lie down on the bed while I prepare some refreshment for you. When my husband comes home, we will see what can be done."

It was nearly sunset when the master of the house, a sturdy mountaineer, with a frank face, entered the cottage. On perceiving the stranger seated at his fireside he turned frightfully pale. "Unfortunate woman!" he murmured to his wife, "don't you know that anyone who shelters this fugitive will be shot, and his house levelled to the ground?"

Lacheneur overheard these words; he rose with a shudder. He knew that a price had been set upon his head, but until now he had not realised the danger to which his presence exposed these worthy people. "I will go at once," said he, gently.

But the peasant laid his broad hand kindly on the outlaw's shoulder and forced him to resume his seat. "It was not to drive you away that I said that," he remarked. "You are at home, and you shall remain here until I can find some means of ensuring your safety."

The woman flung her arms round her husband's neck, and in a loving voice, exclaimed: "Ah! you are a noble man Antoine."

He smiled, tenderly kissed her, then, pointing to the open door: "Watch!" said he, and turning to Lacheneur: "It won't be easy to save you, for the promise of that big reward has set a number of evil-minded people on the alert. They know that you are in the neighbourhood, and a rascally innkeeper has crossed the frontier for the express purpose of betraying your whereabouts to the French gendarmes."

"Balstain?"

"Yes, Balstain; and he is hunting for you now. But that's not everything, as I passed through Saint-Pavin, coming back a little while ago I saw eight mounted soldiers, with a peasant guide who was also on horseback. They declared that they knew you were concealed in the village, and were going to search each house in turn."

These soldiers were the Montaignac chasseurs, placed at Chupin's disposal by the Duke de Sairmeuse. The task was certainly not at all to their taste, but they were closely watched by the lieutenant in command, who hoped to receive some substantial reward if the expedition was crowned with success.

But to return to Lacheneur. "Wounded and exhausted as you are," continued Antoine, "you can't possibly make a long march for a fortnight hence, and till then you must conceal yourself. Fortunately, I know a safe retreat in the mountain, not far from here. I will take you there to-night, with provisions enough to last you for a week."

Just then he was interrupted by a stifled cry from his wife. He turned, and saw her fall almost fainting against the door, her face white as her linen cap, her finger pointing to the path that led from Saint-Pavin to the cottage. "The soldiers—they are coming!" she gasped.

Quicker than thought, Lacheneur and the peasant sprang to the door to see for themselves. The young woman had spoken the truth; for here came the Montaignac chasseurs, slowly climbing the steep foot-path. Chupin walked in advance, urging them on with voice, gesture, and example. An imprudent word from the little shepherd-boy, had

decided the fugitive's fate; for on returning to Saint-Pavin, and hearing that the soldiers were searching for the chief conspirator, the lad had chanced to say: "I met a man just now on the mountain who asked me where he was; and I saw him go down the foot-path leading to Antoine's cottage." And in proof of his words, he proudly displayed the piece of silver which Lacheneur had given him.

"One more bold stroke and we have our man!" exclaimed Chupin. "Come, comrades!" And now the party were not more than two hundred feet from the house in which the outlaw had found an asylum.

Antoine and his wife looked at each other with anguish in their eyes. They saw that their visitor was lost.

"We must save him! we must save him!" cried the woman.

"Yes, we must save him!" repeated the husband gloomily. "They shall kill me before I betray a man in my own house."

"If he could hide in the stable behind the bundles of straw—"

"Oh, they would find him! These soldiers are worse than tigers, and the wretch who leads them on must have a bloodhound's scent." He turned quickly to Lacheneur. "Come, sir," said he, "let us leap from the back window and fly to the mountains. They will see us, but no matter! These horsemen are always clumsy runners. If you can't run, I'll carry you. They will probably fire at us, but miss their aim."

"And your wife?" asked Lacheneur.

The honest mountaineer shuddered; still he simply said: "She will join us."

Lacheneur grasped his protector's hand. "Ah! you are a noble people," he exclaimed, "and God will reward you for your kindness to a poor fugitive. But you have done too much already. I should be the basest of men if I exposed you to useless danger. I can bear this life no longer; I have no wish to escape." Then drawing the sobbing woman to him and kissing her on the forehead. "I have a daughter, young and beautiful like yourself," he added. "Poor Marie-Anne! And I pitilessly sacrificed her to my hatred! I must not complain; come what may, I have deserved my fate."

The sound of the approaching footsteps became more and more distinct. Lacheneur straightened himself up, and seemed to be gathering all his energy for the decisive moment. "Remain inside," he said imperiously, to Antoine and his wife. "I am going out; they must not arrest me in your house." And as he spoke, he crossed the threshold with a firm tread. The soldiers were but a few paces off. "Halt!" he exclaimed, in a loud ringing voice. "Are you not seeking for Lacheneur? I am he! I surrender myself."

His manner was so dignified, his tone so impressive, that the soldiers involuntarily paused. This man before them was doomed; they knew the fate awaiting him, and seemed as awed as if they had been in the presence of death itself. One there was among the search party, whom Lacheneur's ringing words had literally terrified, and this was Chupin. Remorse filled his cowardly heart, and pale and trembling, he sought to hide himself behind the soldiers.

But Lacheneur walked straight towards him. "So it is you who have sold my life, Chupin?" he said scornfully. "You have not forgotten, I perceive, how often my daughter filled your empty larder—so now you take your revenge."

The old scoundrel seemed crushed by these words. Now that he had done this foul deed, he knew what betrayal really was. "So be it," resumed Lacheneur. "You will receive the price of my blood; but it will not bring you good fortune—traitor!"

Chupin, however, indignant with his own weakness, was already making a vigorous effort to recover a semblance of self composure. "You have conspired against the king," he stammered. "I only did my duty in denouncing you." And turning to the soldiers, he added: "As for you, comrades, you may be sure the Duke de Sairmeuse will remember your services."

Lacheneur's hands were bound, and the party was about to descend the slope, when a man, roughly clad, bare-headed, covered with perspiration, and panting for breath, suddenly made his appearance. The twilight was falling, but Lacheneur recognized Balstain. "Ah! you have him!" exclaimed the innkeeper, pointing to the prisoner, as soon as he was within speaking distance. "The reward belongs to me—I denounced him first on the other side of the frontier, as the carabineers at Saint-Jean-de-Coche will testify. He would have been captured last night in my house if he hadn't managed to run away in my absence. I've been following the bandit for sixteen hours." He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, being full of fear lest he might lose his reward, and only reap disgrace and obliquity in recompense for his treason.

"If you have any right to the money, you must prove it before the proper authorities," said the officer in command.

"If I have any right!" interrupted Balstain; "who contests my right, then?" He looked threateningly around him, and casting his eyes on Chupin, "Is it you?" he asked. "Do you dare to assert that you discovered the brigand?"

"Yes, it was I who discovered his hiding place."

"You lie, you impostor!" vociferated the innkeeper; "you lie!" The soldiers did not budge. This scene repaid them for the disgust they had experienced during the afternoon. "But," continued Balstain, "what else could one expect from such a knave as Chupin? Every one knows that he's been obliged to fly from France over and over again on account of his crimes. Where did you take refuge when you crossed the frontier, Chupin? In my house, in Balstain's inn. You were fed and protected there. How many times haven't I saved you from the gendarmes and the galleys? More times than I can count. And to reward me you steal my property; you steal this man who was mine——"

"The fellow's insane!" ejaculated the terrified Chupin, "he's mad!"

"At least you will be reasonable," exclaimed the inn keeper, suddenly changing his tactics. "Let's see, Chupin, what you'll do for an old friend? Divide, won't you? No, you say no? How much will you give me, comrade? A third? Is that too much? A quarter, then——"

Chupin felt that the soldiers were enjoying his humiliation. They were indeed, sneering at him, and only an instant before they had, with instinctive loathing, avoided coming in contact with him. The old knave's blood was boiling, and pushing Balstain aside, he cried to the chasseurs:—"Come—are we going to spend the night here?"

On hearing these words, Balstain's eyes sparkled with revengeful fury, and suddenly drawing his knife from his pocket and making the sign of the cross in the air: "Saint-Jean-de-Coche," he exclaimed, in a ringing voice, "and you, Holy Virgin, hear my vow. May my soul burn in hell if I ever use a knife at meals until I have plunged the one I now hold, into the heart of the scoundrel who has defrauded me!" With these words he hurried away into the woods, and

the soldiers took up their line of march.

But Chupin was no longer the same. His impudence had left him and he walked along with hanging head, his mind full of sinister presentiments. He felt sure that such an oath as Balstain's, and uttered by such a man, was equivalent to a death warrant, or at least to a speedy prospect of assassination. The thought tormented him so much indeed, that he would not allow the detachment to spend the night at Saint-Pavin, as had been agreed upon. He was impatient to leave the neighbourhood. So after supper he procured a cart; the prisoner was placed in it, securely bound, and the party started for Montaignac. The great bell was tolling two in the morning when Lacheneur was conducted into the citadel; and at that very moment M. d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois were making their final preparations for escape.

XXII.

ON being left alone in his cell after Marie-Anne's departure, Chanlouineau gave himself up to despair. He loved Marie-Anne most passionately, and the idea that he would never see her again on earth proved heart-rending. Some little comfort he certainly derived from the thought that he had done his duty, that he had sacrificed his own life to secure her happiness, but then this result had only been obtained by simulating the most abject cowardice, which must disgrace him for ever in the eyes of his fellow prisoners, and the guards. Had he not offered to sell Lacheneur's life for his own moreover. True it was but a ruse, and yet those who knew nothing of his secret would always brand him as a traitor and a coward. To a man of his true valiant heart such a prospect was particularly distressing, and he was still brooding over the idea when the Marquis de Courtornieu entered his cell to ascertain the result of Marie-Anne's visit. "Well, my good fellow—" began the old nobleman, in his most condescending manner; but Chanlouineau did not allow him time to finish. "Leave," he cried, in a fit of rage. "Leave or—"

Without waiting to hear the end of the sentence the marquis made his escape, greatly surprised and not a little dismayed by this sudden change in the prisoner's manner. "What a dangerous bloodthirsty rascal!" he remarked to the guard. "It would, perhaps, be advisable to put him into a strait-jacket!"

But there was no necessity for that; for scarcely had the marquis left, than the young farmer threw himself on to his pallet, oppressed with feverish anxiety. Would Marie-Anne know how to make the best use of the weapon he had placed in her hands? He hoped so, for she would have the Abbe Midon's assistance, and besides he considered that the possession of this letter would frighten the Marquis de Sairmeuse into any concessions. In this last surmise Chanlouineau was entirely mistaken. The fear which Martial seemingly evinced during the interview with Marie-Anne and his father was all affected. He pretended to be alarmed, in order to frighten the duke, for he really wished to assist the girl he so passionately loved, and besides the idea of saving an enemy's life, of wresting him from the executioner on the very steps of the scaffold, was very pleasing to his mind which at times took a decidedly chivalrous turn. Poor Chanlouineau, however, was ignorant of all this, and consequently his anxiety was perfectly natural. Throughout the afternoon he remained in anxious suspense, and when the night fell, stationed himself at the window of his cell gazing on to the plain below, and trusting that if the baron succeeded in escaping, some sign would warn him of the fact. Marie-Anne had visited him, she knew the cell he occupied and surely she would find some means of letting him know that his sacrifice had not been in vain. Shortly after two o'clock in the morning he was alarmed by a great bustle in the corridor outside. Doors were thrown open, and then slammed to; there was a loud rattle of keys; guards hurried to and fro, calling each other; the passage was lighted up, and then as Chanlouineau peered through the grating in the door of his cell he suddenly perceived Lacheneur as pale as a ghost walk by conducted by some soldiers. The young farmer almost doubted his eyesight; for he really believed his former leader had escaped. Another hour, and another hour passed by and yet did he prolong his anxious vigil. Not a sound, save the tramp of the guards in the corridor, and the faint echo of some distant challenge as sentinels were relieved outside. At last, however, there abruptly came a despairing cry. What was it? He listened; but it was not repeated. After all the occurrence was not so surprising. There were twenty men in that citadel under sentence of death, and the agony of that their last night, might well call forth a lamentation. At length the grey light of dawn stole through the window bars, the sun rose rapidly and Chanlouineau, hopeful for some sign, till then murmured in despair, that the letter must have been useless. Poor generous peasant! His heart would have leapt with joy if as he spoke those words he could only have cast a glance on the court-yard of the citadel.

An hour after the *reveille* had sounded, two country-women, carrying butter and eggs to market, presented themselves at the fortress gate, and declared that while passing through the fields below the cliff on which the citadel was built, they had perceived a rope dangling from the side of the rock. A rope! Then one of the condemned prisoners must have escaped. The guards hastened from cell to cell and soon discovered that the Baron d'Escorval's room was empty. And not merely had the baron fled, but he had taken with him the man who had been left to guard him—Corporal Bavois, of the grenadiers. Everyone's amazement was intense, but their fright was still greater. There was not a single officer who did not tremble on thinking of his responsibility; not one who did not see his hopes of advancement forever blighted. What should be said to the formidable Duke de Sairmeuse and to the Marquis de Courtornieu, who in spite of his calm polished manners, was almost as much to be feared? It was necessary to warn them, however, and so a sergeant was despatched with the news. Soon they made their appearance, accompanied by Martial; and to look at all three it would have been said that they were boiling over with anger and indignation. The Duke de Sairmeuse's rage was especially conspicuous. He swore at everybody, accused everybody, and threatened everybody. He began by consigning all the keepers and guards to prison, and even talked of demanding the dismissal of all the officers. "As for that miserable Bavois," he exclaimed—"as for that cowardly deserter, he shall be shot as soon as we capture him, and we will capture him, you may depend upon it!"

The officials had hoped to appease the duke's wrath a little, by informing him of Lacheneur's arrest; but he knew of this already, for Chupin had ventured to wake him up in the middle of the night to tell him the great news. The baron's escape afforded his grace an opportunity to exalt Chupin's merits. "The man who discovered Lacheneur will know how to find this traitor D'Escorval," he remarked.

As for M. de Courtornieu, he took what he called "measures for restoring this great culprit to the hands of justice." That is to say, he despatched couriers in every direction, with orders to make close inquiries throughout the neighbourhood. His commands were brief, but to the point; they were to watch the frontier, to submit all travellers to a rigorous examination, to search the houses and sow the description of D'Escorval's appearance broadcast

through the land. But first of all he issued instructions for the arrest of the Abbe Midon and Maurice d'Escorval.

Among the officers present there was an old lieutenant, who had felt deeply wounded by some of the imputations which the Duke de Sairmeuse had cast right and left in his affected wrath. This lieutenant heard the Marquis de Courtornieu give his orders, and then stepped forward with a gloomy air, remarking that these measures were doubtless all very well, but at the same time it was urgent that an investigation should take place at once, so as to learn for certain how the baron had escaped and who were his accomplices if he had any. At the mention of this word "investigation," both the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu shuddered. They could not ignore the fact that their reputations were at stake, and that the merest trifle might disclose the truth. A neglected precaution, any insignificant detail, an imprudent word or gesture might ruin their ambitious hopes forever. They trembled to think that this officer might be a man of unusual shrewdness, who had suspected their simplicity, and was impatient to verify his presumptions. In point of fact, they were unnecessarily alarmed, for the old lieutenant had not the slightest suspicion of the truth. He had spoken on the impulse of the moment, merely to give vent to his displeasure. He was not even keen enough to remark a rapid glance which the duke and the marquis exchanged. Martial noticed this look, however, and with studied politeness, remarked: "Yes we must institute an investigation; that suggestion is as shrewd as it is opportune."

The old lieutenant turned away with a muttered oath. "That coxcomb is poking fun at me," he thought; "and he and his father and that prig the marquis deserve a box on the ears."

In reality, however, Martial was not poking fun at him. Bold as was his remark it was made advisedly. To silence all future suspicions it was absolutely necessary that an investigation should take place immediately. But then it would, by reason of their position and functions, naturally devolve on the duke and the marquis, who would know just how much to conceal, and how much to disclose. They began their task immediately, with a haste which could not fail to dispel all doubts, if indeed any existed in the minds of their subordinates.

Martial thought he knew the details of the escape as well as the fugitives themselves, for even if they had been the actors, he was at any rate the author of the drama played that night. However, he was soon obliged to admit that he was mistaken in his opinion; for the investigation revealed several incomprehensible particulars. It had been determined beforehand that the baron and the corporal would have to make two successive descents. Hence the necessity of having two ropes. These ropes had been provided, and the prisoners must have used them. And yet only one rope could be found—the one which the peasant woman had perceived hanging from the rocky platform at the base of the citadel where it was made fast to an iron crowbar. From the window of the cell, to the platform, there was no rope, however. "This is most extraordinary!" murmured Martial, thoughtfully.

"Very strange!" approved M. de Courtornieu.

"How the devil could they have reached the base of the tower?"

"That is what I can't understand."

But Martial soon found other causes for surprise. On examining the rope that remained—the one which had been used in making the descent of the cliff—he discovered that it was not of a single piece. Two pieces had been knotted together. The longest piece had evidently been too short. How did this happen? Could the duke have made a mistake in the height of the cliff? or had the abbe measured the rope incorrectly? But Martial had also measured it with his eye, while it was wound round him, and it had then seemed to him that the rope was much longer, fully a third longer, than it now appeared.

"There must have been some accident," he remarked to his father and the marquis; "what I can't say."

"Well, what does it matter?" replied M. de Courtornieu, "you have the compromising letter, haven't you?"

But Martial's mind was one of these that never rest, until they have solved the problem before them. Accordingly, he insisted on going to inspect the rocks at the foot of the precipice. Here they discovered several stains, formed of coagulated blood. "One of the fugitives must have fallen," said Martial, quickly, "and been dangerously wounded!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the Duke de Sairmeuse, "if it is the Baron d'Escorval, who has broken his neck, I shall be delighted!"

Martial turned crimson, and looked searchingly at his father. "I suppose, sir, that you do not mean one word of what you are saying," he observed, coldly. "We pledged ourselves upon the honour of our name, to save the baron. If he has been killed it will be a great misfortune for us, a very great misfortune."

When his son addressed him in this haughty freezing tone of his, the duke never knew how to reply. He was indignant, but his son's was the stronger nature.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed M. de Courtornieu; "if the rascal had merely been wounded we should have known it."

Such also was Chupin's opinion. He had been sent for by the duke, and had just made his appearance. But the old scoundrel, usually so loquacious and officious, now replied in the briefest fashion; and, strange to say, he did not offer his services. His habitual assurance and impudence, and his customary cunning smile, had quite forsaken him; and in lieu thereof his brow was overcast, and his manners strangely perturbed. So marked was the change that even the Duke de Sairmeuse observed it. "What misfortune have you had Master Chupin?" he asked.

"Why, while I was coming here," replied the old knave in a sullen tone, "a band of ragamuffins pelted me with mud and stones, and ran after me, shouting, 'Traitor! traitor!' as loud as they could." He clenched his fists, as he spoke, as if he were meditating vengeance; then suddenly he added: "The people of Montaignac are quite pleased this morning. They know that the baron has escaped, and they are rejoicing."

Alas! the joy which Chupin spoke of, was destined to be of short duration, for the execution of the conspirators sentenced on the preceding afternoon was to take place that very day. At noon the gate of the citadel was closed, and the drums rolled loudly as a preface to the coming tragedy. Consternation spread through the town. Doors were carefully secured, shutters closed, and window-blinds pulled down. The streets became deserted, and a death-like silence prevailed. At last, just as three o'clock was striking, the gate of the fortress was re-opened, and under the lofty archway came fourteen doomed men, each with a priest by his side. One and twenty had been condemned to death, but the Baron d'Escorval had eluded the executioner, and remorse or fear had tempered the Duke de Sairmeuse's thirst for blood. He and M. de Courtornieu had granted reprieves to six of the prisoners, and at that very moment a courier was starting for Paris with six petitions for pardon, signed by the military commission.

Chanlouineau was not among those for whom royal clemency was solicited. When he left his cell, without knowing whether his plan for saving the Baron d'Escorval, had proved of any use or not, he counted and examined his thirteen comrades with keen anxiety. His eyes betrayed such an agony of anguish that the priest who accompanied him asked him in a whisper. "Who are you looking for, my son?"

"For the Baron d'Escorval."

"He escaped last night."

"Ah! now I shall die content!" exclaimed the heroic peasant. And he died as he had sworn he would—without even changing colour—calm and proud, the name of Marie-Anne upon his lips.

There was one woman, a fair young girl, who was not in the least degree affected by the tragic incidents attending the repression of the Montaignac revolt. This was Blanche de Courtornieu, who smiled as brightly as ever, and who, although her father exercised almost dictatorial power in conjunction with the Duke de Sairmeuse, did not raise as much as her little finger to save any one of the condemned prisoners from execution. These rebels had dared to stop her carriage on the public road, and this was an offence which she could neither forgive nor forget. She also knew that she had only owed her liberty to Marie-Anne's intercession, and to a woman of such jealous pride this knowledge was galling in the extreme. Hence, it was with bitter resentment that, on the morning following her arrival in Montaignac, she denounced to her father what she styled that Lacheneur girl's inconceivable arrogance, and the peasantry's frightful brutality. And when the Marquis de Courtornieu asked her if she would consent to give evidence against the Baron d'Escorval, she coldly replied that she considered it was her duty to do so. She was fully aware that her testimony would send the baron to the scaffold, and yet she did not hesitate a moment. True, she carefully concealed her personal spite, and declared she was only influenced by the interests of justice. Impartiality compels us to add, moreover, that she really believed the Baron d'Escorval to be a leader of the rebels. Chanlouineau had pronounced the name in her presence, and her error was all the more excusable as Maurice was usually known in the neighbourhood by his Christian name. Had the young farmer called to "Monsieur Maurice" for instructions, Blanche would have understood the situation, but he had exclaimed, "M. d'Escorval," and hence her mistake.

After she had delivered to her father her written statement of what occurred on the highroad on the night of the revolt, the heiress assumed an attitude of seeming indifference, and when any of her friends chanced to speak of the rising, she alluded to the plebian conspirators in tones of proud disdain. In her heart, however, she blessed this timely outbreak, which had removed her rival from her path. "For now," thought she, "the marquis will return to me, and I will make him forget the bold creature who bewitched him!" In this she was somewhat mistaken. True, Martial returned and paid his court, but he no longer loved her. He had detected the calculating ambition she had sought to hide under a mask of seeming simplicity. He had realised how vain and selfish she was, and his former admiration was now well nigh transformed into repugnance; for he could but contrast her character with the noble nature of Marie-Anne, now lost to him for ever. It was mainly the knowledge that Lacheneur's daughter could never be his which prompted him to a seeming reconciliation with Blanche. He said to himself that the duke, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu had exchanged a solemn pledge, that he, too, had given his word, and that after all Blanche was his promised wife. Was it worth while to break off the engagement? Would he not be compelled to marry some day or another? His rank and name required him to do so, and such being the case what did it matter who he married, since the only woman he had ever truly loved—the only woman he ever could love—was never to be his? To a man of Martial's education it was no very difficult task to pay proper court to the jealous Blanche, to surround her with every attention, and to affect a love he did not really feel; and, indeed, so perfectly did he play his part, that Mademoiselle de Courtornieu might well flatter herself with the thought that she reigned supreme in his affections.

While Martial seemed wholly occupied with thoughts of his approaching marriage, he was really tortured with anxiety as to the fate which had overtaken the Baron d'Escorval and the other fugitives. The three members of the D'Escorval family, the abbe, Marie-Anne, Corporal Bavois, and four half-pay officers, had all disappeared, leaving no trace behind them. This was very remarkable, as the search prescribed by MM. de Sairmeuse and Courtornieu had been conducted with feverish activity, greatly to the terror of its promoters. Still what could they do? They had imprudently excited the zeal of their subordinates, and now they were unable to allay it. Fortunately, however, all the efforts to discover the fugitives proved unsuccessful; and the only information that could be obtained came from a peasant, who declared that on the morning of the escape, just before day-break, he had met a party of a dozen persons, men and women, who seemed to be carrying a dead body. This circumstance, taken in connection with the broken rope and the stains of blood at the bottom of the cliff, made Martial tremble. He was also strongly impressed by another circumstance, which came to light when the soldiers on guard the night of the escape were questioned as to what transpired. "I was on guard in the corridor communicating with the prisoner's quarters in the tower," said one of these soldiers, "when at about half-past two o'clock, just after Lacheneur had been placed in his cell, I saw an officer approaching me. I challenged him; he gave me the countersign, and, naturally, I let him pass. He went down the passage, and entered the empty room next to M. d'Escorval's. He remained there about five minutes."

"Did you recognize this officer?" asked Martial eagerly.

"No," answered the soldier. "He wore a large cloak, the collar of which was turned up so high that it hid his face to the very eyes."

"Who could this mysterious officer have been?" thought Martial, racking his brains. "What was he doing in the room where I left the ropes?"

The Marquis de Courtornieu, present at the examination, seemed much disturbed. Turning to the witness he asked him angrily, "How could you be ignorant that there were so many sympathizers with this movement among the garrison? You might have known that this visitor, who concealed his face so carefully, was an accomplice warned by Bavois, who had come to see if he needed a helping hand."

This seemed a plausible explanation, but it did not satisfy Martial. "It is very strange," he thought, "that M. d'Escorval has not even deigned to let me know he is in safety. The service I rendered him deserves that acknowledgment, at least."

Such was the young marquis's anxiety, that despite his repugnance for Chupin the spy, he resolved to seek that archtraitor's assistance, with the view of discovering what had become of the fugitives. It was no longer easy, however, to secure the old rascal's services, for since he had received the price of Lacheneur's blood—these twenty thousand francs which had so fascinated him—he had deserted the Duke of Sairmeuse's house, and taken up his

quarters in a small inn at the outskirts of the town; where he spent his days alone in a large room on the second floor. At night-time he barricaded the door, and drank, drank, drank; and till daybreak he might be heard cursing and singing, or struggling against imaginary enemies. Still he dared not disobey the summons which a soldier brought him to hasten to the Hotel de Sairmeuse at once.

"I wish to discover what has become of the Baron d'Escorval," said Martial when the old spy arrived.

Chupin trembled, and a fleeting colour dyed his cheeks. "The Montaignac police are at your disposal," he answered sulkily. "They, perhaps, can satisfy your curiosity, Monsieur le Marquis, but I don't belong to the police."

Was he in earnest, or was he merely simulating a refusal with the view of obtaining a high price for his services? Martial inclined to the latter opinion. "You shall have no reason to complain of my generosity," said he. "I will pay you well."

That word "pay" would have made Chupin's eyes gleam with delight a week before, but on hearing it now he at once flew into a furious passion. "So it was to tempt me again that you summoned me here!" he exclaimed. "You would do much better to leave me quietly at my inn."

"What do you mean, you fool?"

But Chupin did not even hear the interruption. "People told me," quoth he, with increasing fury, "that, by betraying Lacheneur, I should be doing my duty and serving the king. I betrayed him, and now I am treated as if I had committed the worst of crimes. Formerly, when I lived by stealing and poaching, folks despised me, perhaps; but they didn't shun me as they did the pestilence. They called me rascal, robber, and the like; but they would drink with me all the same. To-day, I've twenty thousand francs in my pocket, and yet I'm treated as if I were a venomous beast. If I approach any one he draws back, and if I enter a room, those who are there hasten out of it." At the recollection of the insults heaped upon him since Lacheneur's capture, the old rascal's rage reached a climax. "Was what I did so abominable?" he pursued. "Then why did your father propose it? The shame should fall on him. He shouldn't have tempted a poor man with wealth like that. If, on the contrary, I did my duty, let them make laws to protect me."

Martial perceived the necessity of reassuring this troubled mind. "Chupin, my boy," said he, "I don't ask you to discover M. d'Escorval in order to denounce him; far from it—I only want you to ascertain if any one at Saint-Pavin, or at Saint-Jean-de-Coche, knows of his having crossed the frontier."

The mention of Saint-Jean-de-Coche made Chupin shudder. "Do you want me to be murdered?" he exclaimed, remembering Balstain's vow. "I must let you know that I value my life now that I'm rich." And seized with a sort of panic he fled precipitately.

Martial was stupefied with astonishment. "One might really suppose that the rascal was sorry for what he had done," thought he.

If that were really the case, Chupin was not the only person afflicted with qualms of conscience, for both M. de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse were secretly blaming themselves for the exaggeration of their first reports, and the manner in which they had magnified the proportions of the rebellion. They accused each other of undue haste, of neglecting the proper forms of process, and had to admit in their hearts that the sentences were most unjust. They each tried to make the other responsible for the blood which had been spilt; and were certainly doing all that they could to obtain a pardon for the six prisoners who had been reprieved. But their efforts did not succeed; for one night a courier arrived at Montaignac, bearing the following laconic despatch: "The twenty-one convicted prisoners must all be executed." That is to say, the Duke de Richelieu, and M. Decazes, with their colleagues of the council of ministers, had decided that the petitions for clemency must be refused.

This despatch was a terrible blow for the Duke de Sairmeuse and M. de Courtornieu. They knew, better than any one else, how little these poor fellows were deserving of death. They knew it would soon be publicly proved that two of these six men had taken no part whatever in the conspiracy. What was to be done? Martial wished his father to resign his authority; but the duke had not the strength of mind to do so. Besides, M. de Courtornieu encouraged him to retain his functions, remarking, that no doubt all this was very unfortunate, but, since the wine was drawn, it was necessary to drink it; indeed, his grace could not now draw back without causing a terrible scandal.

Accordingly, the next day a dismal roll of drums was heard again, and the six doomed men, two of whom were known to be innocent, were led outside the walls of the citadel and shot, on the same spot where, only a week before, fourteen of their comrades had fallen.

The prime mover in the conspiracy had not, however, yet been tried. He had fallen into a state of gloomy despondency, which lasted during his whole term of imprisonment. He was terribly broken, both in body and mind. Once only did the blood mount to his pallid cheeks, and that was on the morning when the Duke de Sairmeuse entered the cell to examine him. "It was you who drove me to do what I did," exclaimed Lacheneur. "God sees us and judges us both!"

Unhappy man! his faults had been great: his chastisement was terrible. He had sacrificed his children on the altar of his wounded pride; and did not even have the consolation of pressing them to his heart and of asking their forgiveness before he died. Alone in his cell, he could not turn his mind from his son and daughter; but such was the terrible situation in which he had placed himself that he dared not ask what had become of them. Through a compassionate keeper, however, he learned that nothing had been heard of Jean, and that it was supposed Marie-Anne had escaped to some foreign country with the D'Escorval family. When summoned before the court for trial, Lacheneur was calm and dignified in manner. He made no attempt at defence, but answered every question with perfect frankness. He took all the blame upon himself, and would not give the name of any one accomplice. Condemned to be beheaded, he was executed on the following day, walking to the scaffold and mounting to the platform with a firm step. A few seconds later the blade of the guillotine fell with a loud whirr, and the rebellion of the fourth of March counted its twenty-first victim.

That same evening the townfolk of Montaignac were busy talking of the magnificent rewards which were to be bestowed on the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu, for their services to the royal cause, and a report was flying abroad to the effect that Martial and Mademoiselle Blanche were now to be married with great pomp, and with as little delay as possible.

AFTER Lacheneur had been executed, the co-dictators, regretting, as we have already said, the precipitation with which they had sentenced many of the minor partisans of the revolt, sought to propitiate public opinion by treating the remaining prisoners with unexpected clemency. Out of a hundred peasants still confined in the citadel, only eighteen or twenty were tried, and the sentences pronounced upon them were light in the extreme; all the others were released. Major Carini, the leader of the military conspirators in Montaignac, had expected to lose his head, but to his own astonishment he was only sentenced to two years' imprisonment. This tardy indulgence did not, however, efface popular recollections of previous severity, and the townsfolk of Montaignac openly declared that if MM. de Sairmeuse and de Courtornieu were clement, it was only because they were afraid of the consequences that might await continued tyranny. So thus it came to pass that people execrated them for their past cruelty, and despised them for their subsequent cowardice. However, both the duke and the marquis were ignorant of the true current of public opinion, and hurried on with their preparations for their children's wedding. It was arranged that the ceremony should take place on the 17th of April, at the village church of Sairmeuse, and that a grand entertainment should be given to the guests in the duke's chateau, which was indeed transformed into a fairy palace for the occasion.

A new priest, who had taken the Abbe Midon's place, celebrated the nuptial mass, and then addressed the newly-wedded pair in congratulatory terms. "You will be, you *must* be happy!" he exclaimed in conclusion, fully believing for the moment that he spoke the words of prophecy. And who would not have believed as he did? Where could two young people be found more richly dowered with all the attributes of worldly happiness—youth, health, opulence, and rank. And yet although the new marchioness's eyes sparkled joyfully, the bridegroom seemed strangely preoccupied. Blanche was before him radiant with beauty, proud with success; but his mind, despite all efforts, wandered back to Marie-Anne—to the Marie-Anne he had lost, who had disappeared, whom he might never behold again. "Ah! if she had but loved him," thought Martial, "what happiness would have been his. But now he was bound for life to a woman whom he did not love."

At dinner, however, he succeeded in shaking off his sadness, thanks, perhaps, to the exhilarating influence of several glasses of champagne, and when the guests rose from table he had almost forgotten his forebodings. He was rising in his turn, when a servant approached him and whispered: "There is a young peasant in the hall who wishes to speak with Monsieur le Marquis. He would not give me his name."

"Wouldn't give his name?" ejaculated Martial. "Ah, well, on one's wedding-day one must grant an audience to everybody." And with a smile he descended the staircase. Beside the fragrant flowering plants with which the vestibule was lined, he found a young man with a pale face, whose eyes glittered with feverish brilliancy. On recognising him Martial could not restrain an exclamation of surprise. "Jean Lacheneur!" he exclaimed; "you imprudent fellow!"

Young Lacheneur stepped forward. "You thought you were rid of me," he said, bitterly. "But you see you were mistaken. However, you can order your people to arrest me if you choose."

Martial's brow lowered on hearing these insulting words. "What do you want?" he asked coldly.

"I am to give you this on behalf of Maurice d'Escorval," replied Jean, drawing a letter from his pocket.

With an eager hand, Martial broke the seal; but scarcely had he glanced at the contents than he turned as pale as death and staggered back, exclaiming, "Infamous!"

"What am I to say to Maurice," insisted Jean. "What do you intend to do?"

"Come—you shall see," replied the young marquis, seizing Jean by the arm and dragging him up the staircase. The expression of Martial's features had so changed during his brief absence that the wedding guests looked at him with astonishment when he re-entered the grand saloon holding an open letter in one hand, and leading with the other a young peasant whom no one recognised. "Where is my father?" he asked, in a husky voice; "where is the Marquis de Courtornieu?"

The duke and the marquis were with Blanche in a little drawing-room leading out of the main hall. Martial hastened there, followed by a crowd of wondering guests, who, foreseeing a stormy scene, were determined to witness it. He walked straight towards M. de Courtornieu, who was standing by the fire-place, and handing him the letter: "Read!" said he, in a threatening voice.

M. de Courtornieu mechanically obeyed the injunction; but suddenly he turned livid; the paper trembled in his hands: he averted his glance, and was obliged to lean against the mantelpiece for support. "I don't understand," he stammered: "no, I don't understand."

The duke and Blanche had both sprung forward. "What is the matter?" they both asked in one breath; "what has happened?"

Martial's reply was to tear the letter from the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands, and to turn to his father with these words: "Listen to this note I have just received."

Three hundred people were assembled in the room, or clustering round the doorway, but the silence was so perfect that Martial's voice reached the farthest extremity of the grand hall as he read: "Monsieur le Marquis—Upon the honour of your name, and in exchange for a dozen lines that threatened you with ruin, you promised us the Baron d'Escorval's life. You did, indeed, bring the ropes by which he was to make his escape, but they had been previously cut, and my father was precipitated on to the rocks below. You have forfeited your honour, sir. You have soiled your name with opprobrium, and while a drop of blood remains in my veins, I will leave no means untried to punish you for your cowardice and treason. By killing me you would, it is true, escape the chastisement I am reserving for you. I challenge you to fight with me. Shall I wait for you to-morrow on La Reche? At what hour? With what weapons? If you are the vilest of men, you can appoint a meeting, and then send your gendarmes to arrest me. That would be an act worthy of you.

"MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

On hearing these words the Duke de Sairmeuse was seized with despair. He saw the secret of the baron's flight made public, and his own political prospects ruined. "Hush!" he hurriedly exclaimed in a low voice; "hush, wretched fellow, you will ruin us!"

But Martial did not even seem to hear him. He finished his perusal, and then looking the Marquis de Courtornieu full in the face: "Now, what do you think?" he asked.

"I am still unable to comprehend," replied the old nobleman, coldly.

Martial raised his hand; and every one present believed that he was about to strike his father-in-law. "You don't comprehend," he exclaimed sarcastically. "Ah, well, if *you* don't, *I* do. I know who that officer was who entered the room where I deposited the ropes—and I know what took him there." He paused, crumpled the letter between his hands, and threw it in M. de Courtornieu's face, with these last words: "Here, take your reward, you cowardly traitor!"

Overwhelmed by this denouement the marquis sank back into an arm-chair, and Martial, still holding Jean Lacheneur by the arm, was on the point of leaving the room, when his young wife, wild with despair, tried to detain him. "You shall not go!" she exclaimed, "you cannot! Where are you going? That young fellow with you is Jean Lacheneur. I recognize him. You want to join his sister—your mistress!"

Martial indignantly pushed his wife aside. "How dare you insult the noblest and purest of women," he exclaimed. "Ah, well—yes—I am going to find Marie-Anne. Farewell!" And with these words he left the chateau.

XXIV.

THE ledge of rock on which the Baron d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois rested on descending from the tower was not more than a yard and a half across its widest part. It sloped down towards the edge of the precipice, and its surface was so rugged and uneven that it was considered very imprudent to stand there, even in the day-time. Thus it will be understood that the task of lowering a man from this ledge, at dead of night, was perilous in the extreme. Before allowing the baron to descend, Bavois took every possible precaution to save himself from being dragged over the verge of the precipice by his companion's weight. He fixed his crowbar firmly in a crevice of the rock, seated himself, braced his feet against the bar, threw his shoulders well back, and then feeling that his position was secure he bid the baron let himself down. The sudden parting of the rope hurled the corporal against the tower wall, and then he rebounded forward on his knees. For an instant he hung suspended over the abyss, his hands clutching at the empty air. A hasty movement, and he would have fallen. But he possessed a marvellous power of will, and had faced danger so often in his life that he was able to restrain himself. Prudently, but with determined energy, he screwed his feet and knees into the crevices of the rock, feeling with his hands for some point of support; then gradually sinking on to one side, he at last succeeded in dragging himself from the verge of the precipice.

The effort had been a terrible one, his limbs were quite cramped, and he was obliged to sit down and rest himself. He fully believed that the baron had been killed by his fall, but this catastrophe did not produce much effect upon the old soldier, who had seen so many comrades fall by his side on fields of battle. What did amaze him, however, was the breaking of the rope—a rope so thick that one would have supposed it capable of sustaining the weight of ten men like the baron. It was too dark to examine the fragment remaining in his possession, but on feeling it at the lower end with his finger, the corporal was surprised to find it quite smooth and even, not rough and ragged as is usual after a break. "It must have been cut—yes cut nearly through," exclaimed Bavois with an oath. And at the same time a previous incident recurred to his mind. "This," thought he, "explains the noise which the poor baron heard in the next room! And I said to him: 'Nonsense! it is a rat!'"

With the view of verifying his conjectures, Bavois passed the cord round about the crowbar and pulled at it with all his strength. It parted in three places. The discovery appalled him. A part of the rope had fallen with the baron, and it was evident that the remaining fragments even if tied together would not be long enough to reach the base of the rock. What was to be done? How could he escape? If he could not descend the precipice he must remain on the ledge from which there was no other mode of escape. "It's all up, corporal," he murmured to himself. "At daybreak they will find the baron's cell empty. They will poke their heads out of the window, and see you here perched like a stone saint on his pedestal. Of course you'll be captured, tried, and condemned, and have to take your turn in the ditches. Ready! Aim! Fire! That'll be the end of your story."

He stopped short, for a vague idea had just entered his mind, which he felt might lead to salvation. It had come to him in touching the rope which he and the baron had used in their descent from the latter's cell to the rocky ledge, and which, firmly attached to the bars above hung down the side of the tower. "If you had that rope which hangs there, corporal," said he, you could tie it to these bits, and then the cord would be long enough to take you down the precipice. But how can one obtain it? If one goes back after it, one can't bring it down and come down again ones' self at the same time. He pondered for a moment and then began talking to himself again. "Attention, corporal," said he. "You are going to knot the five pieces of rope you've got here together, and you're going to fasten them to your waist; next you're going to climb up to that window, hand over hand. Not an easy matter! A staircase would be preferable. But no matter, you mustn't be finical, corporal. So you will climb up and find yourself in the cell again. What are you going to do there? A mere nothing. You will unfasten the cord secured to the window bars, you will tie it to this one and that will give you eighty feet of good strong rope. Then you will pass the rope about one of the bars that remain intact, you will tie the two ends together, and then the rope will be doubled. Next you must let yourself down here again, and when you are here, you will only have to untie one of the knots, and the rope will be at your service. Do you understand, corporal?"

The corporal did understand so well that in less than twenty minutes he was back again upon the narrow shelf of rock, having successfully accomplished the dangerous feat which he had planned. Not without a terrible effort, however, not without torn and bleeding hands and knees. Still he had succeeded in obtaining the rope, and now he was certain that he could make his escape from his dangerous position. He was chuckling gleefully at the prospect when suddenly he bethought himself of M. d'Escorval whom he had forgotten first in his anxiety, and then in his joy. "Poor baron," murmured the corporal remorsefully. "I shall succeed in saving my miserable life, for which no one cares, but I was unable to save his. No doubt, by this time his friends have carried him away."

As he uttered these words he leant forward, and to his intense amazement perceived a faint light moving here and there in the depths below. What could have happened? Something extraordinary, that was evident; or else intelligent men like the baron's friends would never have displayed this light, which, if noticed from the citadel, would betray their presence and ruin them. However, the corporal's time was too precious to be wasted in idle conjectures. "Better go down on the double-quick," he said aloud, as if to spur on his courage. "Come, my friend, spit on your hands and be off!"

As he spoke the old soldier threw himself flat on his belly and crawled slowly backwards to the verge of the

precipice. The spirit was strong, but the flesh shuddered. To march upon a battery had been a mere pastime for him in days of imperial glory; but to face an unknown peril, to suspend one's life upon a cord, was a very different matter. Great drops of perspiration, caused by the horror of his situation, stood out upon his brow when he felt that half his body had passed over the edge of the precipice, and that the slightest movement would now launch him into space. Still he did not hesitate, but allowed himself to glide on, murmuring: "If there is a God who watches over honest people let Him open His eyes this instant!"

Providence was watching; and Bavois arrived at the end of his dangerous journey alive and safe. He fell like a mass of rock; and groaned aloud when at last, after a swift flight through space, he sank heavily on to the rugged soil below. For a minute he lay stunned and dizzy on the ground. He was rising when he felt himself seized by either arm. "No foolishness," he cried quickly. "It is I, Bavois."

But his captors did not loosen their hold. "How does it happen," asked one of them in a threatening tone, "that the Baron d'Escorval is precipitated half way down the cliff, and that you alight in safety a few moments later?"

The old soldier was too shrewd not to understand the import of this insinuation; and the indignation he felt, gave him sufficient strength to free himself with a violent jerk from his captor's hand. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he cried, "so I pass for a traitor, do I! No, it is impossible, well, just listen to me." Then rapidly, but with great clearness, he recounted all the phases of his escape, his despair, his perilous situation, and the almost insurmountable obstacles which he had overcome. His tone was so sincere, the details he gave so circumstantial, that his questioners—two of the retired officers who had been waiting for the baron—at once held out their hands, sorry that they had wounded the feelings of a man so worthy of their respect and gratitude. "Forgive us, corporal," said one of them sadly. "Misery makes men suspicious and unjust, and we are very unhappy."

"No offence," he growled. "If I had trusted poor M. d'Escorval, he would be alive now."

"The baron still breathes," observed one of the officers.

This was such astounding news that for a moment Bavois was utterly confounded. "Ah! I will give my right hand, if necessary, to save him!" he exclaimed, at last.

"If it is possible to save him, he will be saved, my friend. That worthy priest whom you see there, is an excellent physician. He is examining M. d'Escorval's wounds at this moment. It was by his order that we procured and lighted that candle, which may bring our enemies upon us at any moment; but this is not a time for hesitation."

Bavois looked with all his eyes, but from where he was standing he could only distinguish a confused group of moving figures. On stepping forward, however, he perceived that Marie-Anne was holding a candle over the baron who lay stretched upon the ground, his head reclining on his wife's knees. His face was not disfigured; but he was extremely pale, and his eyes were closed at intervals. He shuddered, and then the blood would trickle from his mouth. His clothing was hacked—literally hacked to pieces; and it was easy to see that he had been frightfully mauled and wounded. Kneeling beside the unconscious man, the Abbe Midon was dexterously staunching the blood and applying bandages, torn from the linen of those present. Maurice and one of the officers were assisting him. "Ah! if I had my hands on the scoundrel who cut the rope," cried the corporal, with passionate indignation; "but patience. I shall have him yet."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Only too well!" He said no more. The abbe had done all it was possible to do, and was now lifting the wounded man a little higher on Madame d'Escorval's knees. This change of position elicited a moan which betrayed the baron's intense sufferings. He opened his eyes and faltered a few words—the first he had uttered. "Firmin!" he murmured, "Firmin!" This was the name of his former secretary, a devoted helpmate who had been dead for several years. It was evident that the baron's mind was wandering. Still he had some vague idea of his terrible situation, for in a stifled, almost inaudible voice, he added: "Oh! how I suffer! Firmin, I will not fall into the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu alive. I would rather kill myself."

This was all; his eyes closed again, and his head fell back a dead weight. The officers clustering round believed that he had expired, and it was with poignant anxiety that they drew the abbe aside. "Is it all over?" they asked. "Is there any hope?"

The priest shook his head sadly, and pointing to heaven: "My hope is in God!" he said reverently.

The hour, the place, the catastrophe, the present danger, the threatening future, all combined to impart solemnity to the priest's few words; and so profound was the impression that, for a moment, these men, familiar with death and peril, stood in awed silence. Maurice, who approached, followed by Corporal Bavois, brought them back to the exigencies of the situation. "Ought we not to make haste and carry my father away?" he asked. "Mustn't we be in Piedmont before evening?"

"Yes!" exclaimed one of the officers, "let us start at once."

But the priest did not move, and it was in a despondent voice that he remarked: "Any attempt to carry M. d'Escorval across the frontier in his present condition would cost him his life."

This seemed so inevitably a death-warrant for them all, that they shuddered. "My God! what shall we do?" faltered Maurice. "What course shall we adopt?"

No one replied. It was clear that they hoped for salvation through the priest alone. He was lost in thought, and it was some time before he spoke. "About an hour's walk from here," he said, at last, "beyond the Croix-d'Arcy, lives a peasant on whom I can rely. His name is Poignot; and he was formerly in M. Lacheneur's employ. With the assistance of his three sons, he now tills quite a large farm. We must procure a litter and carry M. d'Escorval to this honest peasant's house."

"What," interrupted one of the officers, "you want us to procure a litter at this hour of the night, and in this neighbourhood?"

"It must be done."

"But won't it awake suspicion?"

"Most assuredly."

"The Montaignac police will follow us."

"I am certain of it."

"The baron will be recaptured?"

"No." The abbe spoke in the tone of a man who, having assumed all the responsibility, feels that he has a right to be obeyed. "When the baron had been conveyed to Poignot's house," he continued, "one of you gentlemen will take the wounded man's place on the litter; the others will carry him, and the party will remain together until you have reached Piedmontese territory. Then you must separate and pretend to conceal yourselves, but do it in such a way that you are seen everywhere."

The priest's simple plan was readily understood. The royalist emissaries must be thrown off the track; and at the very moment when it seemed to them that the baron was in the mountains, he would be safe in Poignot's house.

"One word more," added the cure. "The party which will accompany the pretended baron must look as much like the people one would expect to find with him, as possible. So Mademoiselle Lacheneur will go with you, and Maurice also. Again, people know that I would not leave the baron; and as my priestly robe would attract attention, one of you must assume it. God will forgive the deception on account of its worthy motive."

It was now necessary to procure the litter; and the officers were trying to decide where they should go to obtain it, when Corporal Bavois interrupted them. "Give yourselves no uneasiness," he remarked; "I know an inn not far from here where I can procure one."

He started off on the run, and a few minutes later returned with a small litter, a thin mattress, and a coverlid. He had thought of everything. The baron was lifted carefully from the ground and placed on the mattress—a long and difficult operation which, in spite of extreme caution, provoked many terrible groans from the wounded man. When everything was ready, each officer took an end of the litter, and the little procession, headed by the abbe, started on its way. They were obliged to proceed slowly as the least jolting increased the baron's sufferings. Still they made some progress, and by daybreak they were about half way to Poignot's house. They then chanced to meet some peasants going to their daily toil. The latter paused to look at them, and when the group had passed by stood gazing curiously after these strange folks who were apparently carrying a dead body. However, these meetings did not at all seem to worry the Abbe Midon. At all events, he made no attempt to avoid them. At last they came in sight of Poignot's cottage. There was a little grove not far from the house, and here the party halted, the priest bidding his companions conceal themselves while he went forward to reconnoitre and confer with the man upon whose decision the safety of the whole party depended.

As the priest approached the house, a short, slim peasant with grey hair and a sunburnt face emerged from the stable. This was Father Poignot himself. "What! is this you, Monsieur le Cure!" he exclaimed, delightedly. "Heavens! how pleased my wife will be. We have a great favour to ask of you—" And then, without giving the abbe an opportunity to open his lips, the farmer began to relate his perplexities. The night of the revolt he had given shelter to a poor fellow who had received an ugly swordthrust. Neither his wife nor himself knew how to dress the wound, and he did not dare to send for a doctor. "And this wounded man," he added, "is Jean Lacheneur, my old employer's son."

This recital made the priest feel very anxious. This peasant had already given an asylum to one wounded conspirator, but would he consent to receive another? He could not say, but his voice trembled as he presented his petition. The farmer turned very pale and shook his head gravely more than once, while the priest was speaking. When the abbe had finished, he coldly asked: "Do you know, sir, that I incur a great risk by converting my house into a hospital for these rebels?" The abbe dared not answer. "They told me," continued Father Poignot, "that I was a coward, because I would not join in the revolt. Such was not my opinion. Now, however, I choose to shelter these wounded men. In my opinion, it requires quite as much courage to do that as to go and fight."

"Ah! you are a brave fellow!" cried the abbe.

"Never mind about that, but bring M. d'Escorval here. There is no one but my wife and boys, and they won't betray him!"

The offer was at once accepted, and half-an-hour later the baron was lying in a small loft, where Jean Lacheneur was already installed. From the window, the Abbe Midon and Madame d'Escorval watched the little party, organized for the purpose of deceiving the Duke de Sairmeuse's spies, as it moved rapidly away. Corporal Bavois, with his head bound up with blood-stained linen, had taken the baron's place on the litter carried by the retired officers. These latter only knew the baron by name and reputation. But then he was the friend of their former ruler—the friend of that great captain whom they had made their idol, and they rejoiced with all their hearts when they saw him reposing under Father Poignot's roof in comparative security. After this, there was the task of misleading the government emissaries, and they took various skilful precautions, not knowing that they were quite unnecessary. Public sentiment had declared itself in an unmistakable manner, and the police did not ascertain a single detail of the escape. They did not even hear of the little party that travelled nearly three leagues in the full light of day, bearing a wounded man upon a litter. Among the two thousand peasants who believed that this wounded man was the Baron d'Escorval, there was not one who turned informer, or made an indiscreet remark.

The fugitives were ignorant of this willing connivance, and on approaching the frontier, which they had heard was strictly guarded, they became extremely cautious. They waited until nightfall before presenting themselves at a lonely inn, where they hoped to procure a guide to lead them through the mountain passes. Sad news awaited them there, for the inn-keeper informed them of the executions that had taken place that day at Montagnac, giving the particulars as he had heard them from an eye witness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he knew nothing of M. d'Escorval's flight or of M. Lacheneur's arrest. But he was well acquainted with Chanlouineau, and was quite inconsolable concerning the death of that "handsome young fellow, the best farmer in the country."

Finding this man's views so favourable, the officers, who had left the litter a short distance from the inn, decided to confide in him, at least in some degree. "We are carrying one of our wounded comrades," they said. "Can you guide us across the frontier to-night?"

The inn-keeper replied that he would do so willingly, that he could promise to take them safely past the military posts; but that he could not think of starting before the moon rose. At midnight the fugitives were on their way; and at daybreak they set foot on the territory of Piedmont. They had dismissed their guide some time before. They now proceeded to break the litter in pieces; and handful by handful cast the wool of the mattress to the wind.

"Our task is accomplished," said one of the officers to Maurice. "We will now return to France. May God protect you! Farewell!"

It was with tears in his eyes that Maurice parted from these brave fellows who had proved so instrumental in

saving his father's life. Now he was the sole protector of Marie-Anne, who, pale and overcome with fatigue and emotion trembled on his arm. But no—for Corporal Bavois still lingered by his side. "And you, my friend," he asked, sadly, "what are you going to do?"

"Follow you," replied the old soldier. "I have a right to a home with you; that was agreed between your father and myself! so don't hurry, for the young lady does not seem well, and I can see a village only a short distance off."

XXV.

ESSENTIALLY a woman in grace and beauty, as well as in devotion and tenderness, Marie-Anne, as we have shown, was moreover capable of truly virile bravery. Her energy and coolness during those trying days had been the admiration and astonishment of all around her. But human endurance has its limits, and after excessive efforts there invariably comes a moment when the shrinking flesh fails the firmest will. Thus, when Marie-Anne tried to resume her journey she found that her strength was exhausted; her swollen feet and limbs scarcely supported her, her head whirled, and she shivered feverishly. Maurice and the old soldier were both obliged to support her, almost to carry her; but fortunately they were not far from a village, as was evident from an old church tower just discernible through the morning mist. Soon, however, they distinguished several cottages, and with the prospect of speedy rest before them they were hastening forward, when suddenly Bavois stopped short, "A thousand thunderclaps!" he exclaimed; "why, I'm in uniform! It would excite suspicion at once if I went into the village dressed like this; before we had a chance to sit down, the Piedmontese gendarmes would arrest us." He reflected for a moment, twirling his moustache furiously; then, in a tone that would have made a passer-by tremble, he remarked, "All things are fair in love and war. The next person who passes——"

"But I have money with me," interrupted Maurice, unbuckling a belt filled with gold, which he had put on under his clothing on the night of the revolt.

"Eh! then we are fortunate!" cried Bavois. "Give me some, and I will soon find a shop where I can purchase a change of clothing."

He started; and it was not long before he re-appeared clad in peasant's garb, his thin weazened countenance well-nigh hidden by a large broad-brimmed slouching hat. "Now, steady, forward, march!" he said to Maurice and Marie-Anne, who scarcely recognized him in this disguise.

What they had taken to be a mere village proved to be almost a small town, called Saliente, as they almost immediately afterwards ascertained from a sign-post. The fourth house they met with was a hostelry, the Traveller's Rest. They went in, and at once asked the hostess to take the young lady to a room, and to assist her in undressing. While these instructions were being complied with, Maurice and the corporal proceeded to the dining-room, and ordered something to eat. Refreshments were served at once, but the glances cast upon the new arrivals were by no means friendly. They were evidently regarded with suspicion. A tall man, who was apparently the landlord, hovered round them, and at last embraced a favourable opportunity to ask their names. "My name is Dubois," replied Maurice, without the slightest hesitation. "I am travelling on business, and this man with me is a farmer of mine."

The landlord seemed somewhat reassured by this reply. "And what is your business?" he enquired.

"I have come into this land of inquisitive people to buy mules," laughed Maurice, striking his belt of money.

On hearing the jingle of the coin the landlord deferentially raised his cap. Breeding mules was the chief industry of the district. This would-be purchaser was very young, but he had a well-filled purse, and that was enough. "You will excuse me," resumed the landlord, in quite a different tone. "You see, we are obliged to be very careful. There has been some trouble at Montagnac."

The imminence of the peril and the responsibility devolving upon him, gave Maurice unusual assurance; and it was in the most careless, off-hand manner possible that he concocted quite a plausible story to explain his early arrival on foot with his wife, who had been taken poorly on the way. He congratulated himself upon his address, but the old corporal was far from satisfied. "We are too near the frontier to bivouac here," he grumbled. "As soon as the young lady is on her feet again we must hurry on."

He believed, and Maurice hoped, that twenty-four hours' rest would set Marie-Anne right again. But they were both mistaken. She could not move, but remained in a state of torpor from which it was impossible to rouse her. When she was spoken to she made no reply, and it seemed very doubtful whether she could even hear and understand. Fortunately the landlord's mother proved to be a good, kind-hearted old woman, who would not leave the so-called Madame Dubois's bed-side, but nursed her with the greatest care during three long days, while Marie-Anne remained in this strange and alarming condition. When at last she spoke, Maurice could at first scarcely understand the import of her words. "Poor girl!" she sighed; "poor, wretched girl!" In point of fact she was alluding to herself. By a phenomenon which often manifests itself after a crisis in which reason has been temporarily imperilled, it seemed to her that it was some one else who had been the victim of all these misfortunes, the recollection of which gradually returned to her like the memory of a painful dream. What strange and terrible events had taken place since that August Sunday when, on leaving church with her father, she first heard of the Duke de Sairmeuse's return to France. And that was only nine months ago. What a difference between the past—when she lived happy and envied in that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse, of which she believed herself the mistress—and the present, when she found herself lying in the comfortless room of a miserable country inn, attended by an old woman whom she did not know, and with no other protectors than her proscribed lover, and an old soldier—a deserter, whose life was in constant peril. Hope, fortune, and future happiness, had all been wrecked, and she had not even saved her honour. But was she alone responsible? Who was it that had forced her to play that odious part with Maurice, Martial, and Chanlouineau? As this last name darted through her mind, she recalled with startling clearness all the incidents of her last meeting with the young farmer. She saw him at her feet in that dingy cell of the citadel at Montagnac; she felt his first and only kiss upon her cheek, and remembered that he had given her a second letter, saying as he did so: "You will read this when I am dead."

She might read it now, for he had already cruelly expiated his share in her father's enterprise. But then what had become of it? She had not given it a thought till now; but at present, raising herself up in bed, she exclaimed in an eager, imperious voice: "My dress, give me my dress."

The old nurse obeyed her, and Marie-Anne could not restrain an exclamation of delight when, on examining the

pocket, she found the letter there. She opened it and read it slowly, then, sinking back on her pillows, she burst into tears. Maurice hastily approached her. "What is the matter?" he inquired anxiously. Her only reply was to hand him the missive.

Chanlouineau, it should be remembered, was only a poor peasant. Scarcely possessing the rudiments of education, as his letter (written on common paper and closed with a huge wafer, specially purchased from a grocer in Sairmeuse) evinced plainly enough. The heavy, laboured, distorted characters, had evidently been traced by a man who was more at home guiding a plough than a pen. There was but one straight line, and every third word, at least, was mis-spelt. And yet the thoughts expressed were noble and generous, well worthy of the true heart that had beat in the young farmer's breast. "Marie-Anne,"—So the letter began. "The outbreak is at hand, and whether it succeeds or fails, at all events, I shall die. I decided that on the day when I learned that you could marry no other man than Maurice d'Escorval. The conspiracy cannot succeed; and I understand your father well enough to know that he will not survive defeat. And if Maurice and your brother should both be killed, what would become of you? Oh, my God, would you not be reduced to beggary? The thought has haunted me continually. I have reflected, and this is my last will: I give and bequeath to you all my property, everything that I possess: My house, the Borderie, with its gardens and vineyards, the woodland and pastures of Berarde, and five lots of lands at Valrollier. An inventory of this property, and of the other possessions I leave to you is deposited with the notary at Sairmeuse. You can accept this bequest without fear; for I have no relatives, and am at liberty to dispose of my belongings as I please. If you do not wish to remain in France, the property can be sold for at least forty thousand francs. But it would, it seems to me, be better for you to remain in your own province. The house on the Borderie is comfortable and convenient, for I have had it thoroughly repaired. Upstairs you will find a room that has been fitted up by the best upholsterer in Montaignac. I intended it for you. Under the hearth-stone in this same room I have deposited a box containing three hundred and twenty-seven louis d'or and one hundred and forty-six livres. If you refuse this gift, it will be because you scorn me even after I am dead. Accept it, if not for your own sake, for the sake of—I dare not finish, but you will understand my meaning only too well. If Maurice is not killed, and I shall try my best to stand between him and danger, he will marry you. Then, perhaps, you will be obliged to ask his consent in order to accept my gift. I hope that he will not refuse his permission. One is not jealous of the dead! Besides, he knows well enough that you scarcely ever vouchsafed a glance to the poor peasant who loved you so much. Do not be offended at anything I have said, I am in such agony that I cannot weigh my words. Farewell, Marie-Anne. Farewell for ever.

CHANLOUINEAU."

Maurice read this letter carefully, at times pausing with suppressed emotion. After finishing its perusal he remained silent for a moment, and then in a husky voice exclaimed: "You cannot refuse; it would be wrong." Then, fearing lest he might betray his feelings, he hastily left the room. Chanlouineau's words had evidently made a deep impression on his mind. This noble peasant had saved their lives at the Croix d'Arcy, he had wrested the Baron d'Escorval from the hands of the executioner, and he had never allowed either a complaint or a reproach to escape his lips. His abnegation had been sublime; and yet, as if what he had done in life were not sufficient, he sought to protect the woman he loved, even after he was dead. When Maurice recalled all that he and Marie-Anne owed to Chanlouineau, he could not help reproaching himself with inferiority and unworthiness. But, good heavens! what if this same comparison should arise in Marie-Anne's mind as well? How could he compete with the memory of such nobility of soul and such self-sacrifice? Ay, Chanlouineau was mistaken; one may, perhaps, be jealous of the dead! However, Maurice took good care to conceal his anxiety, and when he returned to Marie-Anne's room his face was calm and even cheerful.

Although, as we have seen, Marie-Anne had recovered the full possession of her mental faculties, her strength had not yet returned. She was almost unable to sit up; and Maurice had to relinquish all thought of leaving Saliente for the present. The so-called Madame Dubois' persistent weakness began to astonish the old nurse, and her faith in herbs, gathered by moonlight, was considerably shaken. Fortunately, however, Bavois had succeeded in finding a medical man in the neighbourhood—a physician of great ability, who, after being at one time attached to Prince Eugene Beauharnais' vice-regal court at Milan had, for political reasons, been forced to take refuge in this secluded spot. The corporal's discovery was a happy one, for in these days the smaller towns and villages of Italy rarely possessed any other doctors than some ignorant barber, who invariably treated all complaints with a lancet and a stock of leeches. Bavois' physician was at once summoned, and he promptly made his appearance. He was a man of uncertain age, with a furrowed brow and a keen and piercing glance. After visiting the sick-room, he drew Maurice aside. "Is this young lady really your wife, Monsieur—Dubois?" he asked, hesitating so strangely over this name, Dubois, that Maurice's face crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"I do not understand your question," he retorted, angrily.

"I beg your pardon, of course, but you seem very young for a married man, and your hands are too soft for a farmer's. And when I spoke to this young lady about her husband, she turned scarlet. The man who accompanies you, moreover, has terrible moustaches for a farmer, and besides, you must remember that there have been troubles across the frontier at Montaignac."

From crimson Maurice had turned white. He felt that he was discovered—that he was in this man's power. What should he do? What was the use of denial? At times it is only prudent to confess, and extreme confidence often meets with sympathy and protection. He weighed these considerations in his mind, and then in an anxious voice replied: "You are not mistaken, monsieur. My friend and myself are both fugitives, undoubtedly condemned to death in France by this time." And then, without giving the doctor an opportunity to respond, he briefly narrated the terrible events that had recently happened at Sairmeuse. He neither concealed his own name nor Marie-Anne's, and when his recital was completed, the physician, whom his confidence had plainly touched, warmly shook his hand.

"It is just as I supposed," said the medical man. "Believe me, Monsieur Dubois, you must not tarry here. What I have discovered others will discover as well. And, above everything, don't warn the hotel-keeper of your departure. He has not been deceived by your explanation. Self-interest alone has kept his mouth shut. He has seen your money, and so long as you spend it at his house he will hold his tongue; but if he discovers that you are going away, he will probably betray you."

"Ah! sir, but how is it possible for us to leave this place?"

"In two days the young lady will be on her feet again," interrupted the physician. "And take my advice. At the

next village, stop and give your name to Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"Ah! sir," exclaimed Maurice, "have you considered the advice you offer me? How can I, a proscribed man—a man condemned to death perhaps—how can I obtain, how can I display the proofs of identity necessary for marriage."

"Excuse me," observed the physician shaking his head, "but you are no longer in France, Monsieur d'Escorval, you are in Piedmont."

"Another difficulty!"

"No, because in this country, people marry, or at least they can marry, without all the formalities that cause you so much anxiety."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Maurice.

"Yes, if you can find a consenting priest, when he has inscribed your name on his parish register and given you a certificate, you will be so undoubtedly married, Mademoiselle Lacheneur and yourself, that the court of Rome would never grant you a divorce."

"That may be," said Maurice hesitatingly, "but how could I find a priest—"

The physician was silent, and it might have been supposed he was blaming himself for meddling with matters that did not concern him. Suddenly, however, he abruptly said: "Listen to me attentively, Monsieur d'Escorval. I am about to take my leave, but before I go, I shall find occasion to recommend your wife to take as much exercise as possible—I will do this in the landlord's presence. Consequently, on the day after to-morrow, Wednesday, you must hire mules, and you, Mademoiselle Lacheneur and your old friend, the soldier, must start from the hotel as if you were going on a pleasure excursion. You will push on to Vigano, three leagues from here, where I live. Then I will take you to a priest, one of my friends; and upon my recommendation, he will perform the marriage ceremony. Now, reflect, shall I expect you on Wednesday?"

"Oh, yes, yes. How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

"By not thanking me at all. See, here is the innkeeper; you are M. Dubois, again."

Maurice was intoxicated with joy. He understood the irregularity of such a marriage, but he knew it would reassure Marie-Anne's troubled conscience. Poor girl! she was suffering an agony of remorse. It was that which was killing her. However, he did not speak to her on the matter, fearing lest something might occur to interfere with the project. But the old physician had not spoken lightly, and everything took place as he had promised. The priest at Vigano blessed the marriage of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and after inscribing their names upon the church register, he gave them a certificate, which the physician and Corporal Bavois signed as witnesses. That same evening the mules were sent back to Saliente, and the fugitives resumed their journey. The Abbe Midon had advised them to reach Turin as quickly as possible. "It is a large city," he had said, when bidding them good-bye near Father Poignot's house, "you will be lost in the crowd. I have several friends there, whose names and addresses are on this paper. Go to them, for through them I will try to send you news of M. d'Escorval."

So it was towards Turin that Maurice, Marie-Anne, and Corporal Bavois directed their steps. Their progress was slow, however, for they were obliged to avoid the more frequented roads, and renounce all ordinary modes of transport. Still the fatigue of travel, instead of exhausting Marie-Anne, seemed to revive her, and when five or six days had elapsed the colour came back to her cheeks, and her strength had fully returned. "Fate seems to have abandoned the pursuit," said Maurice one day. "Who knows but what the future may have many compensations in store for us!"

But he was mistaken. Fate far from forgetting them had merely granted them a short respite. One April morning the fugitives stopped to breakfast at an inn in the outskirts of a large town. Maurice had finished eating, and was just leaving the table to settle with the landlady, when Marie-Anne uttered a loud shriek and fell back on her chair. She held in her hand a French newspaper about a fortnight old, which she had found lying on the sideboard where some traveller had probably left it. Maurice seized the print rapidly, and read as follows, "Lacheneur, the leader of the revolt in Montaignac, was executed yesterday. The miserable mischief-maker exhibited on the scaffold the audacity for which he had always been famous."

"My father has been put to death!" cried Marie-Anne, "and I—his daughter—was not there to receive his last farewell!" She rose, and in an imperious voice: "I will go no farther," she said; "we must turn back now without losing an instant. I wish to return to France."

To return to France was to expose themselves to frightful peril. What good would it do? Was not the misfortune irreparable? So Corporal Bavois suggested, very timidly it is true, for the old soldier trembled at the thought that they might suspect him of being afraid. But Maurice would not listen. He shuddered. He did not know what had transpired since their flight, but it seemed to him that the Baron d'Escorval must have been discovered and re-arrested at the same time that Lacheneur was captured. Accordingly they at once procured a vehicle to convey them to the frontier. One important question, however, remained to be decided. Should Maurice and Marie-Anne make their marriage public? She wished to do so, but Maurice with tears in his eyes entreated her to conceal it. "Our marriage certificate will not silence those who are disposed against us," said he. "Let us keep our secret for the present. No doubt we shall only remain in France for a few days." Unfortunately, Marie-Anne yielded. "Since you wish it," said she, "I will obey you. No one shall know of it."

It was the evening of the seventeenth of April, the same day that Martial was married to Blanche, when the fugitives at last reached Father Poignot's house. Maurice and Corporal Bavois were disguised as peasants and the old soldier had made a sacrifice that drew tears from his eyes; he had shaved off his moustaches.

XXVI.

WHEN the Abbe Midon and Martial de Sairmeuse held their conference, to decide upon the arrangements for the Baron de Escorval's escape, a difficulty presented itself which threatened to break off the negotiations. "Return my letter," said Martial, "and I will save the baron."

"Save the baron," replied the abbe, "and your letter shall be returned."

The idea that any one should suppose him to be influenced by danger when in reality he was only yielding to

Marie-Anne's tears, angered Martial beyond endurance. "These are my last words, sir," he retorted, emphatically. "Give me the letter now, and I swear to you, by the honour of my name, that I will do everything that is possible for any human being to do to save the baron. If you distrust my word, good-evening."

The situation was desperate, the danger imminent, the time limited, and Martial's tone betrayed an inflexible determination. The abbe could not hesitate. He drew the letter from his pocket and handing it to Martial: "Here it is, sir," he said, solemnly, "remember that you have pledged the honour of your name."

"I will remember it, Monsieur le Cure. Go and obtain the ropes."

Thus the abbe's sorrow and amazement were intense, when, after the baron's terrible fall, Maurice declared that the cord had been cut beforehand. And yet the priest could not make up his mind that Martial was guilty of such execrable duplicity, which is rarely found in men under twenty-five years of age. However, no one suspected the abbe's secret thoughts. It was with perfect composure that he dressed the baron's wounds and made arrangements for the flight, though not until he saw M. d'Escorval installed in Poignot's house did he breathe freely. The fact that the baron had been able to endure the journey, proved that he retained a power of vitality for which the priest had scarcely dared to hope. Some way must now be discovered to procure the surgical instruments and pharmaceutical remedies which the wounded man's condition would necessitate. But where and how could they be procured. The police kept a close watch over all the medical men and druggists in Montaignac, in hopes of discovering the wounded conspirators through one or the other medium. However, the cure had for ten years acted as physician and surgeon for the poor of his parish, and he possessed an almost complete set of surgical instruments, and a well-filled medicine chest. Accordingly at nightfall he put on a long blue blouse, concealed his features under a large slouch hat, and wended his way towards Sairmeuse. There was not a single light in the parsonage; Bibiane, the old housekeeper, having gone out to gossip with some of the neighbours. The priest effected an entrance into the house, by forcing the lock of the garden door; he speedily found the things he wanted and was able to retire without having been perceived. That night the abbe hazarded a cruel but indispensable operation. His heart trembled, but although he had never before attempted so difficult a task, the hand that held the knife was firm. "It is not upon my weak powers that I rely," he murmured, "I have placed my trust in One who is on High."

His faith was rewarded. Three days later the wounded man, after a comfortable night, seemed to regain consciousness. His first glance was for his devoted wife, who was sitting by the bedside; his first word was for his son. "Maurice?" he asked.

"Is in safety," replied the abbe. "He must be on the road to Turin."

M. d'Escorval's lips moved as if he were murmuring a prayer; then, in a feeble voice: "We owe you a debt of gratitude which we can never pay," he murmured, "for I think I shall pull through."

He did "pull through," but not without terrible suffering, and not without severe relapses that made those around him tremble with anxiety. Jean Lacheneur was more fortunate, for he was on his legs by the end of the week.

On the evening of the seventeenth of April the abbe was seated in the loft reading a newspaper to the baron when suddenly the door was quietly opened, and one of the Poignot boys looked into the room. He did not speak, however, but merely gave the cure a glance, and then quickly withdrew.

The priest finished the paragraph he was perusing, laid down the paper, and went out on to the landing. "What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Ah!" answered the young fellow, "M. Maurice, Mademoiselle Lacheneur, and the old corporal have just arrived; they want to come upstairs."

Three bounds and the abbe reached the ground floor. "You imprudent children!" he exclaimed, addressing the three travellers, "what has induced you to return here?" Then turning to Maurice: "Isn't it enough that your father has nearly died for you and through you? Are you so anxious for his recapture, that you return here to set our enemies on his track? Be off at once!"

Utterly abashed, it was as much as Maurice could do to falter his excuses; uncertainty, he said, had seemed worse to him than death; he had heard of M. Lacheneur's execution; he had started off at once without reflection and only asked to see his father and embrace his mother before leaving again.

The priest was inflexible. "The slightest emotion might kill your father," he declared; "and I should cause your mother the greatest anxiety if I told her of your return, and the dangers to which you have foolishly exposed yourself. Come, go at once, and cross the frontier again this very night."

The scene had been witnessed by Jean Lacheneur, who now approached. "The time has come for me to take *my* leave," said he, "I shall go with Maurice. But I scarcely think that the highway's the right place for my sister. You would cap all your kindness, Monsieur le Cure, if you would only persuade Father Poignot to let her remain here, and if you would watch over her yourself."

The abbe deliberated for a moment, and then hurriedly replied: "So be it; but go at once; your name is not on the proscribed list. You will not be pursued."

Suddenly separated from his wife in this fashion, Maurice wished to confer with her, to give her some parting advice; but the abbe did not allow him an opportunity to do so. "Go, go at once," he insisted. "Farewell!"

The priest's intentions were excellent, no doubt, but in point of fact he was too hasty. At the very moment when Maurice stood sorely in need of wise and temperate counsel he was handed over to Jean Lacheneur's pernicious influence. Scarcely were they outside the house, than the latter remarked: "We have to thank the Sairmeuses and the Marquis de Courtornieu for all this. I don't even know where they have thrown my father's corpse. I, his son, was even debarred from embracing him before he was traitorously murdered." He spoke in a harsh, bitter voice, laughing the while in a strange discordant fashion. "And yet," he continued, "if we climbed that hill we should be able to see the Chateau de Sairmeuse brightly illuminated. They are celebrating the marriage of Martial de Sairmeuse and Blanche de Courtornieu. We are friendless outcasts, succourless and shelterless, but they are feasting and making merry."

Less than this would have sufficed to rekindle Maurice's wrath. Yes, these Sairmeuses and these Courtornieus had killed the elder Lacheneur, and they had betrayed the Baron d'Escorval, and delivered him up—a mangled corpse—to his suffering relatives. It would be a rightful vengeance to disturb their merrymaking now, and in the midst of hundreds of assembled guests denounce their cruelty and perfidy. "I will start at once," exclaimed Maurice, "I will challenge Martial in the presence of the revellers."

But Jean interrupted him. "No, don't do that! The cowards would arrest you. Write to the young marquis, and I will take your letter."

Corporal Bavois, who heard the conversation, did not make the slightest attempt to oppose this foolish enterprise. Indeed, he thought the undertaking quite natural, under the circumstances, and esteemed his young friends all the more for their rashness. They all three entered the first wine shop they came across, and Maurice wrote the challenge which was confided to Jean Lacheneur.

The only object which Jean had in view was to disturb the bridal ball at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. He merely hoped to provoke a scandal which would disgrace Martial and his relatives in the eyes of all their friends; for he did not for one moment imagine that the young marquis would accept Maurice's challenge. While waiting for Martial in the hall of the chateau, he sought to compose a fitting attitude, striving to steel himself against the sneering scorn with which he expected the young nobleman would receive him. Martial's kindly greeting was so unlooked for that Jean was at first quite disconcerted, and he did not recover his assurance until he perceived how cruelly Maurice's insulting letter made the marquis suffer. When the latter seized him by the arm and led him upstairs, he offered no resistance; and as they crossed the brightly-lighted drawing-rooms and passed through the throng of astonished guests, his surprise was so intense that he forgot both his heavy shoes and peasant's blouse. Breathless with anxiety, he wondered what was coming. Then standing on the threshold of the little saloon leading out of the grand hall he heard Martial read Maurice d'Escorval's letter aloud, and finally saw him frantic with passion, throw the missive in his father-in-law's face. It might have been supposed that these incidents did not in the least affect Jean Lacheneur, who stood by cold and unmoved, with compressed lips and downcast eyes. However, appearances were deceitful, for in reality his heart throbbled with exultation; and if he lowered his eyes, it was only to conceal the joy that sparkled in them. He had not hoped for so prompt and so terrible a revenge.

Nor was this all. After brutally pushing Blanche, his newly-wedded wife, aside when she attempted to detain him, Martial again seized Jean Lacheneur's arm. "Now," said he, "follow me!"

Jean still obeyed him without uttering a word. They again crossed the grand hall, and on passing out into an ante-room, Martial took a candle burning on a side table, and opened a little door leading to a private staircase. "Where are you taking me?" inquired Jean.

Martial, in his haste, was already a third of the way up the flight. "Are you afraid?" he asked, turning round.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "If you put it in that way, let us go on," he coldly replied.

They entered the room which Martial had occupied since taking possession of the chateau. It was the same room that had once belonged to Jean Lacheneur; and nothing in it had been changed. The whilom steward's son recognized the brightly-flowered curtains, the figures on the carpet, and even an old arm-chair ensconced wherein he had read many a novel in secret. Martial hastened to a small writing-desk, and drew therefrom a folded paper which he slipped into his pocket. "Now," said he, "let us be off. We must avoid another scene. My father and my wife will be looking for me. I will explain everything when we are outside."

They hastily descended the staircase, passed through the gardens, and soon reached the long avenue. Then Jean Lacheneur suddenly paused. "After all," said he, "it was scarcely necessary for me to wait so long for a simple yes or no. Have you decided? What answer am I to give Maurice d'Escorval?"

"None at all! You will take me to him. I must see him and speak with him in order to justify myself. Let us proceed!"

But Jean did not move. "What you ask is impossible!" he replied.

"Why so?"

"Because Maurice is pursued. If he is captured, he will be tried and undoubtedly condemned to death. He is now in a safe retreat, and I have no right to disclose it." In point of fact, Maurice's safe retreat, for the time being, was only a neighbouring wood, where, in the corporal's company, he was waiting for Jean's return. But the latter could not resist the temptation to make this insinuating remark, which by reason of its covert character, was far more insulting than if he had simply said: "We fear informers!"

Strange as it may appear, and proud and violent as was Martial's nature, he did not resent the insult. "So you distrust me!" he merely said. Jean Lacheneur was silent—another insult. "And yet," insisted Martial, "after what you've just seen and heard you can't possibly suspect me of having cut the ropes I carried to the baron."

"No! I'm convinced that *you* didn't do it."

"You saw how I punished the man who had dared to compromise my honour. And this man is the father of the girl I married to-day."

"Oh, I saw and heard everything, but as for taking you to Maurice, I must still reply: 'Impossible.' "

No doubt the younger Lacheneur's severity was unjust; however, Martial did not rebel against it. He merely drew from his pocket the paper which he had taken from his desk a few minutes previously, and handed it to Jean. "You doubt my word," he said grimly. "I shall not forget to punish those whose fault it is. However, here is a proof of my sincerity which I expect you to give to Maurice, and which must convince even you."

"What proof is it?"

"Why, the very letter in exchange for which we facilitated the baron's escape. A presentiment I can't explain prevented me from burning it, and now I'm very glad I didn't. Take it, and do what you choose with it."

Any one but Jean Lacheneur would have appreciated the young marquis's candour, and have been touched by the confidence he displayed. But Jean's hatred was implacable, and the more humble his enemy showed himself, the more determined he was to carry out the project of vengeance maturing in his brain. His only reply to Martial's last remark was a promise to give the letter to Maurice.

"It should be a bond of alliance, it seems to me," said Martial, gently.

"A bond of alliance!" rejoined Jean with a threatening gesture. "You are too fast, Monsieur le Marquis! Have you forgotten all the blood that flows between us? You didn't cut the ropes; but who condemned the Baron d'Escorval to death? Wasn't it your father, the Duke de Sairmeuse? An alliance! why, you must have forgotten that you and yours sent my father to the scaffold! How have you rewarded the man whose honesty gave you back a fortune? By murdering him and ruining his daughter's reputation."

"I offered my name and fortune to your sister."

"I would have killed her with my own hand had she accepted your offer. Take that as a proof that I don't forget; and if any great disgrace ever tarnishes the proud name of Sairmeuse, think of Jean Lacheneur. My hand will be in it." He was so frantic with passion that he forgot his usual caution. However, after a great effort he recovered his self-possession, and added in calmer tones "If you are so desirous of seeing Maurice, be at La Reche to-morrow at noon. He will be there." With these words he turned abruptly aside, sprang over the fence skirting the avenue, and vanished into the darkness.

"Jean," cried Martial, in almost supplicating tones; "Jean, come back—listen to me!" There was no reply. The young marquis stood bewildered in the middle of the road; and little short of a miracle prevented his being run over by a horseman galloping in the direction of Montaignac. The latter's shouts to get out of the way awakened him from his dream, and as the cold night breeze fanned his forehead he was able to collect his thoughts and judge his conduct. Ah, there was no denying it. He, the professed sceptic, a man who, despite his youth, boasted of his indifference and insensibility, had forgotten all self-control. He had acted generously, no doubt, but after all he had created a terrible scandal, all to no purpose. When Blanche, his wife, had accused Marie-Anne of being the cause of his frenzy, she had not been entirely wrong. For though Martial might regard all other opinions with disdain, the thought that Marie-Anne despised him, and considered him a traitor and a coward, had, in truth, made him perfectly frantic. It was for her sake, that on the impulse of the moment he had resorted to such a startling justification. And if he had begged Jean to lead him to Maurice d'Escorval, it was because he hoped to find Marie-Anne not far off, and to say to her, "Appearances were against me, but I am innocent; and have proved it by unmasking the real culprit." It was to Marie-Anne that he wished Chanlouineau's circular to be given, thinking that she, at least, would be surprised at his generosity. And yet all his expectations had been disappointed. "It will be the devil to arrange!" he thought; "but nonsense! it will be forgotten in a month. The best way is to face those gossips at once: I will return immediately." He said: "I will return," in the most deliberate manner; but his courage grew weaker at each successive step he took in the direction of the chateau. The guests must have already left, and Martial concluded that he would probably find himself alone with his young wife, his father and the Marquis de Courtornieu, whose reproaches, tears, and threats he would be obliged to encounter. "No," muttered he. "After all, let them have a night to calm themselves. I will not appear until to-morrow."

But where should he sleep? He was in evening dress and bare-headed, and the night was chilly. On reflection he recollected his father's house at Montaignac. "I shall find a bed there," he thought, "servants, a fire, and a change of clothing—and to-morrow, a horse to come back again." The walk was a long one, no doubt; however, in his present mood, this circumstance did not displease him. The servant who came to open the door when he knocked, was at first speechless with astonishment. "You, Monsieur le Marquis!" he exclaimed at last.

"Yes, it's I. Light a good fire in the drawing-room, and bring me a change of clothes." The valet obeyed, and soon Martial found himself alone, stretched on a sofa in front of the blazing logs. "It would be a good thing to sleep and forget my troubles," he thought; and accordingly he tried to do so, but it was almost dawn when at last he fell into a feverish slumber.

He woke up again at nine o'clock, gave the necessary instructions for breakfast, and was eating with a good appetite, when suddenly he remembered his rendezvous with Maurice. He ordered a horse and set out at once, reaching La Reche at half-past eleven o'clock. The others had not yet arrived; so he fastened his horse by the bridle to a tree near by, and leisurely climbed to the summit of the hill. It was here that Lacheneur's cottage had formerly stood, and the four walls still remained standing, blackened by fire. Martial was gazing at the ruins, not without a feeling of emotion, when he heard the branches crackle in the adjacent cover. He turned, and perceived that Maurice, Jean, and Corporal Bavois were approaching. The old soldier carried under his arm, in a piece of green serge, a couple of swords which Jean Lacheneur had borrowed from a retired officer at Montaignac during the night. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting," began Maurice, "but you will observe that it is not yet noon. Since we scarcely expected to see you——"

"I was too anxious to justify myself not to be here early," interrupted Martial.

Maurice shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "This is not a question of self-justification, but one of fighting," he abruptly replied.

Insulting as were the words and the gesture that accompanied them, Martial never so much as winced. "Grief has made you unjust," said he, gently, "or M. Lacheneur has not told you everything."

"Yes, Jean has told me everything."

"Well, then?"

Martial's coolness drove Maurice frantic. "Well," he replied, with extreme violence, "my hatred is unabated even if my scorn is diminished. I have waited for this occasion ever since the day we met on the square at Sairmeuse in Mademoiselle Lacheneur's presence. You said to me then, 'We shall meet again.' And now here we stand face to face. What insults must I heap upon you to decide you to fight?"

With a threatening gesture Martial seized one of the swords which Bavois offered him, and assumed an attitude of defence. "You will have it so," said he in a husky voice. "The thought of Marie-Anne can no longer save you."

But the blades had scarcely crossed before a cry from Jean arrested the combat. "The soldiers!" he exclaimed; "we are betrayed." A dozen gendarmes were indeed approaching at full speed.

"Ah! I spoke the truth!" exclaimed Maurice. "The coward came, but the guards accompanied him." He bounded back, and breaking his sword over his knee, hurled the fragments in Martial's face. "Here, miserable wretch!" he cried.

"Wretch!" repeated Jean and Corporal Bavois, "traitor! coward!" And then they fled, leaving Martial literally thunderstruck.

He struggled hard to regain his composure. The soldiers were swiftly approaching; he ran to meet them, and addressing the officer in command, imperiously enquired, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," replied the brigadier, respectfully, "you are the Duke de Sairmeuse's son."

"Very well! I forbid you to follow those men."

The brigadier hesitated at first; then, in a decided tone he replied: "I can't obey you, sir. I have my orders." And turning to his men, he added, "Forward!"

He was about to set the example, when Martial seized him by the arm: "At least you will not refuse to tell me who sent you here?"

"Who sent us? The colonel, of course, in obedience to orders from the grand provost, M. d'Courtornieu. He sent the order last night. We have been hidden near here ever since daybreak. But thunder! let go your hold, I must be off."

He galloped away, and Martial, staggering like a drunken man, descended the slope, and remounted his horse. But instead of repairing to the Chateau of Sairmeuse, he returned to Montaignac, and passed the remainder of the afternoon in the solitude of his own room. That evening he sent two letters to Sairmeuse—one to his father, and the other to his wife.

XXVII.

MARTIAL certainly imagined that he had created a terrible scandal on the evening of his marriage; but he had no conception of the reality. Had a thunderbolt burst in these gilded halls, the guests at Sairmeuse could not have been more amazed and horrified than they were by the scene presented to their view. The whole assembly shuddered when Martial, in his wrath, flung the crumpled letter full in the Marquis de Courtornieu's face. And when the latter sank back into an arm-chair, several young ladies of extreme sensibility actually fainted away. The young marquis had departed, taking Jean Lacheneur with him, and yet the guests stood as motionless as statues, pale, mute, and stupefied. It was Blanche who broke the spell. While the Marquis de Courtornieu was panting for breath—while the Duke de Sairmeuse stood trembling and speechless with suppressed anger—the young marchioness made an heroic attempt to save the situation. With her hand still aching from Martial's brutal clasp, her heart swelling with rage and hatred, and her face whiter than her bridal veil, she yet had sufficient strength to restrain her tears and force her lips to smile. "Really this is placing too much importance on a trifling misunderstanding which will be explained to-morrow," she said, almost gaily, to those nearest her. And stepping into the middle of the hall she made a sign to the musicians to play a country-dance.

But scarcely had the first note sounded, than, as if by unanimous consent, the whole company hastened towards the door. It might have been supposed that the chateau was on fire, for the guests did not withdraw, they actually fled. An hour previously, the Marquis de Courtornieu and the Duke de Sairmeuse had been overwhelmed with the most obsequious homage and adulation. But now there was not one in all the assembly daring enough to take them openly by the hand. Just when they both believed themselves all-powerful they were rudely precipitated from their lordly eminence. Indeed disgrace, and perhaps punishment, were to be their portion. Heroic to the last, however, the abandoned bride endeavoured to stay the tide of retreating guests. Standing near the door, and with her most bewitching smile upon her lips, Blanche spared neither flattering words nor entreaties in her efforts to retain the deserters. The attempt was vain; and, in point of fact, many were not sorry of this opportunity to repay the young Marchioness de Sairmeuse for all her past disdain and criticism. Soon, of all the guests, there only remained one old gentleman who, on account of his gout, had deemed it prudent not to mingle with the crowd. He bowed as he passed before Blanche, and could not even restrain a blush, for he rightly considered that this swift flight was a cruel insult for the abandoned bride. Still, what could he do alone? Under the circumstances, his presence would prove irksome, and so he departed like the others.

Blanche was now alone, and there was no longer any necessity for constraint. There were no more curious witnesses to enjoy her sufferings and comment upon them. With a furious gesture she tore her bridal veil and wreath of orange flowers from her head, and trampled them under foot. "Extinguish the lights everywhere!" she cried to a servant passing by, stamping her foot angrily, and speaking as imperiously as if she had been in her father's house, and not at Sairmeuse. The lacquey obeyed her, and then, with flashing eyes and dishevelled hair, she hastened to the little drawing-room at the end of the hall. Several servants stood round the marquis, who was lying back in his chair with a swollen, purple face, as if he had been stricken with apoplexy.

"All the blood in his body has flown to his head," remarked the duke, with a shrug of his shoulders. His grace was furious. He scarcely knew whom he was most angry with—with Martial or the Marquis de Courtornieu. The former, by his public confession, had certainly imperilled, if not ruined, their political future. But, on the other hand, the Marquis de Courtornieu had cast on the Sairmeuses the odium of an act of treason revolting to any honourable heart. The duke was watching the clustering servants with a contracted brow when his daughter-in-law entered the room. She paused before him, and angrily exclaimed: "Why did you remain here while I was left alone to endure such humiliation. Ah! if I had been a man! All our guests have fled, monsieur—all of them!"

M. de Sairmeuse sprang up. "Ah, well! what if they have. Let them go to the devil!" Among all the invited ones who had just left his house, there was not one whom his grace really regretted—not one whom he regarded as an equal. In giving a marriage feast for his son, he had invited all the petty nobility and gentry of the neighbourhood. They had come—very well! They had fled—*bon voyage!* If the duke cared at all for their desertion, it was only because it presaged with terrible eloquence the disgrace that was to come. Still he tried to deceive himself. "They will come back again, madame," said he; "you will see them return, humble and repentant! But where can Martial be?"

Blanche's eyes flashed, but she made no reply.

"Did he go away with the son of that rascal, Lacheneur?"

"I believe so."

"It won't be long before he returns——"

"Who can say?"

M. de Sairmeuse struck the mantlepiece with his clenched fist. "My God!" he exclaimed, "this is an overwhelming misfortune." The young wife believed that he was anxious and angry on her account. But she was mistaken: for his grace was only thinking of his disappointed ambition. Whatever he might pretend, the duke secretly admitted his son's intellectual superiority and genius for intrigue, and he was now extremely anxious to consult him. "He has wrought this evil," he murmured: "it is for him to repair it! And he is capable of doing so if he chooses." Then, aloud, he resumed: "Martial must be found—he must be found——"

With an angry gesture Blanche interrupted him. "You must look for Marie-Anne Lacheneur if you wish to find

my husband," said she.

The duke was of the same opinion, but he dared not admit it. "Anger leads you astray, marchioness," said he.

"I know what I say," was the curt response.

"No, believe me, Martial will soon make his appearance. If he went away, he will soon return. The servants shall go for him at once, or I will go for him myself——"

The duke left the room with a muttered oath, and Blanche approached her father, who still seemed to be unconscious. She seized his arm and shook it roughly, peremptorily exclaiming, "Father, father!" This voice, which had so often made the Marquis de Courtornieu tremble, proved more efficacious than eau de Cologne. "I wish to speak with you," added Blanche: "do you hear me?"

The marquis dared not disobey; he slowly opened his eyes and raised himself from his recumbent position. "Ah! how I suffer!" he groaned, "how I suffer!"

His daughter glanced at him scornfully, and then in a tone of bitter irony remarked: "Do you think that I'm in paradise?"

"Speak," sighed the marquis. "What do you wish to say?"

The bride turned haughtily to the servants and imperiously ordered them to leave the room. When they had done so and she had locked the door: "Let us speak of Martial," she began.

At the sound of his son-in-law's name the marquis bounded from his chair with clenched fists. "Ah, the wretch!" he exclaimed.

"Martial is my husband, father."

"And you! after what he has done—you dare to defend him?"

"I don't defend him; but I don't wish him to be murdered." At that moment the news of Martial's death would have given the Marquis de Courtornieu infinite satisfaction. "You heard, father," continued Blanche, "that young D'Escorval appointed a meeting for to-morrow, at mid-day, at La Reche. I know Martial; he has been insulted, and will go there. Will he encounter a loyal adversary? No. He will find a band of assassins. You alone can prevent him from being murdered."

"I—and how?"

"By sending some soldiers to La Reche, with orders to conceal themselves in the grove—with orders to arrest these murderers at the proper moment."

The marquis gravely shook his head. "If I do that," said he, "Martial is quite capable——"

"Of anything!—yes, I know it. But what does it matter to you, since I am willing to assume the responsibility?"

M. de Courtornieu looked at his daughter inquisitively, and if she had been less excited as she insisted on the necessity of sending instructions to Montaignac at once, she would have discerned a gleam of malice in his eye. The marquis was thinking that this would afford him an ample revenge, since he could easily bring dishonour on Martial, who had shown so little regard for the honour of others. "Very well; then, since you will have it so, it shall be done," he said, with feigned reluctance.

His daughter hastily procured ink and pens, and then with trembling hands he prepared a series of minute instructions for the commander at Montaignac. Blanche herself gave the letter to a servant, with directions to start at once; and it was not until she had seen him set off at a gallop that she went to her own apartment, that luxurious bridal chamber which Martial had so sumptuously adorned. But now its splendour only aggravated the misery of the deserted wife, for that she was deserted she did not for a moment doubt. She felt sure that her husband would not return, and had no faith whatever in the promises of the Duke de Sairmeuse, who at that moment was searching through the neighbourhood with a party of servants. Where could the truant be? With Marie-Anne most assuredly—and at the thought a wild desire to wreak vengeance on her rival took possession of Blanche's heart. She did not sleep that night, she did not even undress, but when morning came she exchanged her snowy bridal robe for a black dress, and wandered through the grounds like a restless spirit. Most of the day, however, she spent shut up in her room, refusing to allow either the duke or her father to enter.

At about eight o'clock in the evening tidings came from Martial. A servant brought two letters; one sent by the young marquis to his father, and the other to his wife. For a moment Blanche hesitated to open the one addressed to her. It would determine her destiny, and she felt afraid. At last, however, she broke the seal and read: "Madame—Between you and me all is ended; reconciliation is impossible. From this moment you are free. I esteem you enough to hope that you will respect the name of Sairmeuse, from which I cannot relieve you. You will agree with me, I am sure, in thinking a quiet separation preferable to the scandal of legal proceedings. My lawyer will pay you an allowance befitting the wife of a man whose income amounts to five hundred thousand francs. MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Blanche staggered beneath the terrible blow. She was indeed deserted—and deserted, as she supposed, for another. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "that creature! that creature! I will kill her!"

While Blanche was measuring the extent of her misfortune his grace the Duke de Sairmeuse raved and swore. After a fruitless search for his son he returned to the chateau, and began a continuous tramp to and fro in the great hall. On the morrow he scarcely ate, and was well nigh sinking from weariness when his son's letter was handed him. It was very brief. Martial did not vouchsafe any explanation; he did not even mention the conjugal separation he had determined on, but merely wrote: "I cannot return to Sairmeuse, and yet it is of the utmost importance that I should see you. You will, I trust, approve the resolution I have taken when I explain the reasons that have guided me in adopting it. Come to Montaignac, then, the sooner the better. I am waiting for you."

Had he listened to the prompting of his own impatience, his grace would have started at once. But he could not abandon the Marquis de Courtornieu and his son's wife in this abrupt fashion. He must at least see them, speak to them, and warn them of his intended departure. He attempted to do this in vain. Blanche had shut herself up in her own apartments, and remained deaf to all entreaties for admittance. Her father had been put to bed, and the physician who had been summoned to attend him, declared that the marquis was well nigh at death's door. The duke was therefore obliged to resign himself to the prospect of another night of suspense, which was almost intolerable to such a nature as his. "However," thought he, "to-morrow, after breakfast, I will find some pretext to escape, without telling them I am going to see Martial."

He was spared this trouble, for on the following morning at about nine o'clock, while he was dressing, a servant

came to inform him that M. de Courtornieu and his daughter were waiting to speak with him in the drawing-room. Much surprised, he hastened downstairs. As he entered the room, the marquis, who was seated in an arm-chair, rose to his feet leaning for support on Aunt Medea's shoulder; while Blanche, who was as pale as if every drop of blood had been drawn from her veins—stepped swiftly forward: "We are going, Monsieur le Duc," she said, coldly, "and we wish to bid you farewell."

"What! you are going? Will you not——"

The young bride interrupted him with a mournful gesture, and drew Martial's letter from her bosom. "Will you do me the favour to peruse this?" she said, handing the missive to his grace.

The duke glanced over the short epistle, and his astonishment was so intense that he could not even find an oath. "Incomprehensible!" he faltered; "incomprehensible!"

"Incomprehensible, indeed," repeated the young wife sadly, but without bitterness. "I was married yesterday; to-day I am deserted. It would have been more generous to have reflected the evening before and not the next day. Tell Martial, however, that I forgive him for having destroyed my life, for having made me the most unhappy of women. I also forgive him for the supreme insult of speaking to me of his fortune. I trust he may be happy. Farewell, Monsieur le Duc, we shall never meet again. Farewell!"

With these words she took her father's arm, and they were about to retire, when M. de Sairmeuse hastily threw himself between them and the door. "You shall not go away like this!" he exclaimed. "I will not suffer it. Wait at least until I have seen Martial. Perhaps he is not so guilty as you suppose——"

"Enough!" interrupted the marquis; "enough! This is one of those outrages which can never be repaired. May your conscience forgive you, as I myself forgive you. Farewell!"

This was said with such a conventional air of benevolence, and with such entire harmony of intonation and gesture that M. de Sairmeuse was perfectly bewildered. With a dazed air he watched the marquis and his daughter depart, and they had been gone some moments before he recovered himself sufficiently to exclaim: "The old hypocrite! does he believe me to be his dupe?" His dupe! M. de Sairmeuse was so far from being his dupe, that his next thought was: "What's going to follow this farce? If he says he forgives us, that means that he has some crushing blow in store for us." This idea soon ripening into conviction made his grace feel apprehensive, for he did not quite see how he would cope successfully with the perfidious marquis. "But Martial is a match for him!" he at last exclaimed. "Yes I must see Martial at once."

So great was his anxiety that he lent a helping hand in harnessing the horses he had ordered, and when the vehicle was ready, he announced his determination to drive himself. As he urged the horses furiously onward, he tried to reflect, but the most contradictory ideas were seething in his brain and he lost all power of looking at the situation calmly. He burst into Martial's room like a bombshell. "I certainly think you must have gone mad, marquis," he exclaimed. "That is the only valid excuse you can offer."

But Martial, who had been expecting the visit, had fully prepared himself for some such remark. "Never, on the contrary, have I felt more calm and composed in mind," he replied, "than I am now. Allow me to ask you one question. Was it you who sent the gendarmes to the meeting which Maurice d'Escorval appointed?"

"Marquis!"

"Very well! Then it was another act of infamy to be scored against the Marquis de Courtornieu."

The duke made no reply. In spite of all his faults and vices, this haughty nobleman retained those characteristics of the old French aristocracy—fidelity to his word and undoubted valour. He thought it perfectly natural, even necessary, that Martial should fight with Maurice; and he considered it a contemptible proceeding to send armed soldiers to seize an honest and confiding opponent.

"This is the second time," resumed Martial, "that this scoundrel has tried to dishonour our name; and if I am to convince people of the truth of this assertion, I must break off all connection with him and his daughter. I have done so, and I don't regret it, for I only married her out of deference to your wishes, and because it seemed necessary for me to marry, and because all women, excepting one, who can never be mine, are alike to me."

Such utterances were scarcely calculated to re-assure the duke. "This sentiment is very noble, no doubt," said he; "but it has none the less ruined the political prospects of our house."

An almost imperceptible smile curved Martial's lips. "I believe, on the contrary, I have saved them," replied he. "It is useless for us to attempt to deceive ourselves; this affair of the insurrection has been abominable, and you ought to bless the opportunity this quarrel gives you to free yourself from all responsibility in it. You must go to Paris at once, and see the Duke de Richelieu—nay, the king himself, and with a little address, you can throw all the odium on the Marquis de Courtornieu, and retain for yourself only the prestige of the valuable services you have rendered."

The duke's face brightened. "Zounds, marquis!" he exclaimed; "that is a good idea! In the future I shall be infinitely less afraid of Courtornieu."

Martial remained thoughtful. "It is not the Marquis de Courtornieu that I fear," he murmured, "but his daughter—my wife."

XXVIII.

IN the country, news flies from mouth to mouth with inconceivable rapidity, and, strange as it may seem, the scene at the Chateau de Sairmeuse was known of at Father Poignot's farm-house that same night. After Maurice, Jean Lacheneur, and Bavois left the farm, promising to recross the frontier as quickly as possible the Abbe Midon decided not to acquaint M. d'Escorval either with his son's return, or Marie-Anne's presence in the house. The baron's condition was so critical that the merest trifle might turn the scale. At about ten o'clock he fell asleep, and the abbe and Madame d'Escorval then went downstairs to talk with Marie-Anne. They were sitting together when Poignot's eldest son came home in a state of great excitement. He had gone out after supper with some of his acquaintances to admire the splendours of the Sairmeuse *fete*, and he now came rushing back to relate the strange events of the evening to his father's guests. "It is inconceivable!" murmured the abbe when the lad had finished his narrative. The worthy ecclesiastic fully understood that these strange events would probably render their situation more perilous than ever. "I cannot understand," added he, "how Maurice could commit such an act of folly after what

I had just said to him. The baron has no worse enemy than his own son."

In the course of the following day the inmates of the farm heard of the meeting at La Reche; a peasant who had witnessed the preliminaries of the duel from a distance being able to give them the fullest details. He had seen the two adversaries take their places, and had then perceived the soldiers hasten to the spot. After a brief parley with the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, they had started off in pursuit of Maurice, Jean, and Bavois, fortunately, however, without overtaking them; for this peasant had met the same troopers again five hours later, when they were harassed and furious; the officer in command declaring that their failure was due to Martial, who had detained them. That same day, moreover, Father Poignot informed the abbe that the Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were at variance. Their quarrel was the talk of the district. The marquis had returned home with his daughter, and the duke had gone to Montaignac. The abbe's anxiety on receiving this intelligence was so intense that, strive as he might, he could not conceal it from the Baron d'Escorval. "You have heard some bad news, my friend," said the latter.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Some new danger threatens us."

"None, none at all."

But the priest's protestations did not convince the wounded man. "Oh, don't deny it!" he exclaimed. "On the night before last, when you came into my room after I woke up, you were paler than death, and my wife had certainly been crying. What does all this mean?" As a rule, when the cure did not wish to reply to his patient's questions, it sufficed to tell him that conversation and excitement would retard his recovery; but this time the baron was not so docile. "It will be very easy for you to restore my peace of mind," he continued. "Confess now, you are afraid they may discover my retreat. This fear is torturing me also. Very well, swear to me that you will not let them take me alive, and then my mind will be at rest."

"I can't take such an oath as that," said the cure, turning pale.

"And why not?" insisted M. d'Escorval. "If I am recaptured, what will happen? They will nurse me, and then, as soon as I can stand on my feet, they will shoot me down again. Would it be a crime to save me from such suffering? You are my best friend; swear you will render me this supreme service. Would you have me curse you for saving my life?"

The abbe offered no verbal reply; but his eye, voluntarily or involuntarily, turned with a peculiar expression to the medicine chest standing upon the table near by. Did he wish to be understood as saying: "I will do nothing myself, but you will find a poison there?"

At all events M. d'Escorval understood him so; and it was in a tone of gratitude that he murmured: "Thanks!" He breathed more freely now that he felt he was master of his life, and from that hour his condition, so long desperate, began steadily to improve.

Day after day passed by, and yet the abbe's gloomy apprehensions were not realised. Instead of fomenting reprisals, the scandal at the Chateau de Sairmeuse, and the imprudent temerity of which Maurice and Jean Lacheneur had been guilty, seemed actually to have frightened the authorities into increased indulgence; and it might have been reasonably supposed that they quite had forgotten, and wished every one else to forget, all about Lacheneur's conspiracy, and the slaughter which had followed it. The inmates of the farm soon learnt that Maurice and his friend the corporal had succeeded in reaching Piedmont; though nothing was heard of Jean Lacheneur, who had probably remained in France. However, his safety was scarcely to be feared for, as he was not upon the proscribed list. Later on it was rumoured that the Marquis de Courtornieu was ill, and that Blanche his daughter did not leave his bedside; and then just afterwards Father Poignot returning from an excursion to Montaignac, reported that the Duke de Sairmeuse had lately passed a week in Paris, and that he was now on his way home with one more decoration—a convincing proof that he was still in the enjoyment of royal favour. What was of more importance was, that his grace had succeeded in obtaining an order for the release of all the conspirators still detained in prison. It was impossible to doubt this news which the Montaignac papers formally chronicled on the following day. The abbe attributed this sudden and happy change of prospects to the quarrel between the duke and the Marquis de Courtornieu, and such indeed was the universal opinion in the neighbourhood. Even the retired officers remarked: "The duke is decidedly better than he was supposed to be; if he was so severe, it is only because he was influenced by his colleague the odious provost marshal."

Marie-Anne alone suspected the truth. A secret presentiment told her that it was Martial de Sairmeuse who was working all these changes, by utilizing his ascendancy over his father's mind. "And it is for your sake," whispered an inward voice, "that Martial is working in this fashion. He cares nothing for the obscure peasant prisoners, whose names he does not even know! If he protects them, it is only that he may have a right to protect you, and those whom you love!" With these thoughts in her mind she could but feel her aversion for Martial diminish. Was not his conduct truly noble? She had to confess it was, and yet the thought of this ardent passion which she had inspired never once quickened the throbbing of Marie-Anne's heart. Alas! it seemed as if nothing were capable of touching her heart now. She was but the ghost of her former self. She would sit for whole days motionless in her chair, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, her lips contracted as if by a spasm, while great tears rolled silently down her cheeks. The Abbe Midon, who was very anxious on her account, often tried to question her. "You are suffering my child," he said kindly one afternoon. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Cure. I am not ill."

"Won't you confide in me? Am I not your friend? What do you fear?"

She shook her head sadly and replied: "I have nothing to confide." She said this, and yet she was dying of sorrow and anguish. Faithful to the promise she had made to Maurice, she had never spoken of her condition, or of the marriage solemnized in the little church at Vigano. And she saw with inexpressible terror the moment, when she could no longer keep her secret, slowly approaching. Her agony was frightful; but what could she do! Fly! but where could she go? And by going, would she not lose all chance of hearing from Maurice, which was the only hope that sustained her in this trying hour? Still she had almost determined on flight when circumstances—providentially, it seemed to her—came to her aid.

Money was needed at the farm. The fugitives were unable to obtain any without betraying their whereabouts, and Father Poignot's little store was almost exhausted. The Abbe Midon was wondering what they could do, when

Marie-Anne told him of the will which Chanlouineau had made in her favour, and of the money concealed under the hearth-stone in the room on the first floor. "I might go to the Borderie one night," she suggested, "enter the house, which is unoccupied, obtain the money and bring it here. I have a right to do so, haven't I?"

"You might be seen," replied the priest, "and who knows—perhaps arrested. If you were questioned, what plausible explanation could you give?"

"What shall I do, then?"

"Act openly; you yourself are not compromised. You must appear at Sairmeuse to-morrow as if you had just returned from Piedmont; go at once to the notary, take possession of your property, and install yourself at the Borderie."

Marie-Anne shuddered. "What, live in Chanlouineau's house," she faltered. "Live there alone?"

"Heaven will protect you, my dear child. I can only see an advantage in your living at the Borderie. It will be easy to communicate with you; and with ordinary precautions there can be no danger. Before you start we will decide on a meeting place, and two or three times a week you can join Father Poignot there. And in the course of two or three months you can be still more useful to us. When people have grown accustomed to your living at the Borderie, we will take the baron there. Such an arrangement would hasten his convalescence; for in the narrow loft, where we are obliged to conceal him now, he is really suffering for want of light and air."

Accordingly it was decided that Father Poignot should accompany Marie-Anne to the frontier that very night; and that she should take the diligence running between Piedmont and Montagnac, *via* Sairmeuse. Before she started, the Abbe Midon gave her minute instructions as to the story she should tell of her sojourn in foreign lands. The peasantry, possibly even the authorities, would question her, and all her answers must tend to prove that the Baron d'Escorval was concealed near Turin.

The plan was carried out as projected; and at eight o'clock on the following morning, the people of Sairmeuse were greatly astonished to see Marie-Anne alight from the passing diligence. "M. Lacheneur's daughter has come back again!" they exclaimed. The words flew from lip to lip with marvellous rapidity, and soon all the villagers stood at their doors and windows watching the poor girl as she paid the driver, and entered the local hostelry, followed by a lad carrying a small trunk. Urban curiosity has some sense of shame, and seeks to hide itself when prying into other people's affairs, but country folks are openly and outrageously inquisitive. Thus when Marie-Anne emerged from the inn, she found quite a crowd of sightseers awaiting her with gaping mouths and staring eyes. And fully a score of chattering gossips thought fit to escort her to the notary's door. This notary was a man of importance, and he welcomed Marie-Anne with all the deference due to the heiress of a house and farm worth from forty to fifty thousand francs. However, being jealous of his renown for perspicuity, he gave her clearly to understand that, as a man of experience, he fully divined that love alone had influenced Chanlouineau in drawing up this last will and testament. He was no doubt anxious to obtain some information concerning the young farmer's passion, and Marie-Anne's composure and reticence disappointed him immensely.

"You forget what brings me here," she said; "you don't tell me what I have to do!"

The notary, thus interrupted, made no further attempts at divination. "Plague on it!" he thought, "she is in a hurry to get possession of her property—the avaricious creature!" Then he added aloud, "The business can be finished at once, for the magistrate is at liberty to-day, and can go with us to break the seals this afternoon."

So, before evening, all the legal requirements complied with, and Marie-Anne was formally installed at the Borderie. She was alone in Chanlouineau's house, and as the darkness gathered round her, a great terror seized hold of her heart. She fancied that the doors were about to open, that this man who had loved her so much would suddenly appear before her, and that she should hear his voice again as she heard it for the last time in his grim prison cell. She struggled hard against these foolish fears, and at last lighting a lamp she ventured to wander through this house—now her's—but wherein everything spoke so forcibly of its former owner. She slowly examined the different rooms on the ground floor, noting the recent repairs and improvements, and at last climbed the stairs to the room above which Chanlouineau had designed to be the altar of his love. Strange as it may seem, it was really luxuriously upholstered—far more so than Chanlouineau's letter had led her to suppose. The young farmer, who for years had breakfasted off a crust and an onion, had lavished a small fortune on this apartment, which he meant to be his idol's sanctuary.

"How he loved me!" murmured Marie-Anne, moved by that emotion, the bare thought of which had awakened Maurice's jealousy. But she had neither the time nor the right to yield to her feelings. At that very moment Father Poignot was no doubt waiting for her at the appointed meeting place. Accordingly, she swiftly raised the hearth-stone, and found the money which Chanlouineau had mentioned. She handed the larger part of it to Poignot, who in his turn gave it to the abbe on reaching home.

The days that followed were peaceful ones for Marie-Anne, and this tranquillity, after so many trials, seemed to her almost happiness. Faithful to the priest's instructions, she lived alone; but, by frequent visits to Sairmeuse, she accustomed people to her presence. Yes, she would have been almost happy if she could only have had some news of Maurice. What had become of him! Why did he give no sign of life? She would have given anything in exchange for one word of love and counsel from him. Soon the time approached when she would require a confidant; and yet there was no one in whom she dared confide. In her dire need she at last remembered the old physician at Vigano, who had been one of the witnesses at her marriage. She had no time to reflect whether he would be willing or not; but wrote to him immediately, entrusting her letter to a youth in the neighbourhood. "The gentleman says you may rely upon him," said the lad on his return. And that very evening Marie-Anne was roused by a rap at her door. It was the kind-hearted old man, who had hastened to her relief. He remained at the Borderie nearly a fortnight, and when he left one morning before daybreak, he took away with him under his cloak an infant—a little boy—whom he had sworn to cherish as his own child.

XXIX.

It had cost Blanche an almost superhuman effort to leave Sairmeuse without treating the duke to a display of violence, such as would have fairly astonished even that irascible nobleman. She was tortured with inward rage at the very moment, when, with an assumption of melancholy dignity, she murmured the words of forgiveness we have

previously recorded. But vanity, after all, was more powerful than resentment. She thought of the gladiators who fall in the arena with a smile on their lips, and resolved that no one should see her weep, that no one should hear her threaten or complain. Indeed, on her return to the Chateau de Courtornieu her behaviour was truly worthy of a stoic philosopher. Her face was pale, but not a muscle of her features moved as the servants glanced at her inquisitively. "I am to be called mademoiselle as formerly," she said imperiously. "Any of you forgetting this order will be at once dismissed."

One maid did forget the injunction that very day, addressing her young mistress as "madame," and the poor girl was instantly dismissed, in spite of her tears and protestations. All the servants were indignant. "Does she hope to make us forget that she's married, and that her husband has deserted her?" they queried.

Ah! that was what she wished to forget herself. She wished to annihilate all recollection of the day that had seen her successively maiden, wife, and widow. For was she not really a widow? A widow, not by her husband's death, it is true; but, thanks to the machinations of an odious rival, an infamous, perfidious creature, lost to all sense of shame. And yet, though she had been disdained, abandoned, and repulsed, she was no longer free. She belonged to this man whose name she bore like a badge of servitude—to this man who hated her, who had fled from her. She was not yet twenty; still her youth, her hopes, her dreams were ended. Society condemned her to seclusion, while Martial was free to rove wheresoever he listed. It was now that she realised the disadvantages of isolation. She had not been without friends in her school-girl days; but after leaving the convent she had estranged them by her haughtiness, on finding them not as high in rank, or as wealthy as herself. So she was now reduced to the irritating consolations of Aunt Medea, a very worthy person, no doubt, but whose tears flowed as freely for the loss of a cat as for the death of a relative. However, Blanche firmly persevered in her determination to conceal her grief and despair in the deepest recesses of her heart. She drove about the country, wore her prettiest dresses, and forced herself to assume a gay and indifferent air. But on going to church at Sairmeuse on the following Sunday, she realised the futility of her efforts. Her fellow worshippers did not look at her haughtily, or even inquisitively, but they turned aside to smile, and she overheard remarks concerning "the maiden widow," which pierced her very soul. So she was an object of mockery and ridicule. "Oh! I will have my revenge!" she muttered to herself.

She had indeed already thought of vengeance; and had found her father quite willing to assist her. For the first time the father and the daughter shared the same views. "The Duke de Sairmeuse shall learn what it costs to favour a prisoner's escape, and to insult a man like me," said the Marquis bitterly. "Fortune, favour, position—he shall lose everything, and I will not rest content till I see him ruined and dishonoured at my feet. And mind me, that day shall surely come!"

Unfortunately, however, for M. de Courtornieu's projects, he was extremely ill for three days after the scene at Sairmeuse; and then he wasted three days more in composing a report, which was intended to crush his former ally. This delay ruined him, for it gave Martial time to perfect his plans, and to despatch the Duke de Sairmeuse to Paris with full instructions. And what did the duke say to the king, who gave him such a gracious reception? He undoubtedly pronounced the first reports to be false, reduced the rising at Montaignac to its proper proportions, represented Lacheneur as a fool, and his followers as inoffensive idiots. It was said, moreover, that he led his majesty to suppose that the Marquis de Courtornieu might have provoked the outbreak by undue severity. He had served under Napoleon, and had possibly thought it necessary to make a display of his zeal, so that his past apostacy might be forgotten. As far as the duke himself was concerned, he deeply deplored the mistakes into which he had been led by his ambitious colleague, on whom he cast most of the responsibility of so much bloodshed. To be brief, the result of the duke's journey was, that when the Marquis de Courtornieu's report reached Paris, it was answered by a decree depriving him of his office as provost-marshal of the province.

This unexpected blow quite crushed the old intriguer. What! he had been duped in this fashion, he so shrewd, so adroit, so subtle minded and quick witted; he who had successfully battled with so many storms; who, unlike most of his fellow patricians, had been enriched, not impoverished, by the Revolution, and who had served with the same obsequious countenance each master who was willing to accept his services. "It must be that old imbecile, the Duke de Sairmeuse, who has manœuvred so skilfully," he groaned. "But who advised him? I can't imagine who it could have been."

Who it was Blanche knew only too well. Like Marie-Anne, she recognized Martial's hand in all this business. "Ah! I was not deceived in him," she thought; "he is the great diplomatist I believed him to be. To think that at his age he has outwitted my father, an old politician of such experience and acknowledged skill! And he does all this to please Marie-Anne," she continued, frantic with rage. "It is the first step towards obtaining pardon for that vile creature's friends. She has unbounded influence over him, and so long as she lives there is no hope for me. But, patience, my time will come."

She had not yet decided what form the revenge she contemplated should take; but she already had her eye on a man whom she believed would be willing to do anything for money. And, strange as it may seem, this man was none other than our old acquaintance, Father Chupin. Burdened with remorse, despised and jeered at; stoned whenever he ventured in the streets, and horror-stricken whenever he thought of Balstain's vow, Chupin had left Montaignac, and sought an asylum at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. In his ignorance, he fancied that the great nobleman who had incited him to discover Lacheneur owed him, over and above the promised reward, all needful aid and protection. But the duke's servants shunned the so-called traitor. He was not even allowed a seat at the kitchen table, nor a straw pallet in the stables. The cook threw him a bone, as he would have thrown it to a dog; and he slept just where he could. However, he bore all these hardships uncomplainingly, deeming himself fortunate in being able to purchase comparative safety, even at such a price. But when the duke returned from Paris with a policy of forgetfulness and conciliation in his pocket, his grace could no longer tolerate in his establishment the presence of a man who was the object of universal execration. He accordingly gave instructions for Chupin to be dismissed. The latter resisted, however, swearing that he would not leave Sairmeuse unless he were forcibly expelled, or unless he received the order from the lips of the duke himself. This obstinate resistance was reported to the duke, and made him hesitate; but a word from Martial concerning the necessities of the situation eventually decided him. He sent for Chupin and told him that he must not visit Sairmeuse again under any pretext whatever, softening the harshness of expulsion, however, by the offer of a small sum of money. But Chupin, sullenly refusing the proffered coins, gathered his belongings together, and departed, shaking his clenched fist at the chateau, and vowing vengeance on the Sairmeuse family. He then went to his old home, where his wife and his two boys still lived. He seldom left this filthy

den, and then only to satisfy his poaching proclivities. On these occasions, instead of stealthily firing at a squirrel or a partridge from some safe post of concealment, as he had done in former times, he walked boldly into the Sairmeuse or the Courtornieu forests, shot his game, and brought it home openly, displaying it in an almost defiant manner. He spent the rest of his time in a state of semi-intoxication, for he drank constantly, and more and more immoderately. When he had taken more than usual, his wife and his sons usually attempted to obtain money from him, and if persuasion failed they often resorted to blows. For he had never so much as shown them the blood-money paid to him for betraying Lacheneur; and though he had squandered a small sum at Montaignac, no one knew what he had done with the great bulk of the 20,000 francs in gold paid to him by the Duke de Sairmeuse. His sons believed he had buried it somewhere; but they tried in vain to wrest his secret from him. All the people in the neighbourhood were aware of this state of affairs, and one day when the head gardener at Courtornieu was telling the story to two of his assistants, Blanche, seated on a bench near by, chanced to overhear him.

"Ah, he's an old scoundrel!" said the gardener indignantly. "And he ought to be at the galleys, instead of at large among respectable people."

At that same moment the voice of hatred was whispering to Blanche, "That's the man to serve your purpose." But how an opportunity was to be found to confer with him? she wondered, being too prudent to think of hazarding a visit to his house. However, she remembered that he occasionally went shooting in the Courtornieu woods, and that it might be possible for her to meet him there. "It will only require," thought she, "a little perseverance and a few long walks." But, in point of fact, it cost poor Aunt Medea, the inevitable chaperone, two long weeks of almost constant perambulation. "Another freak!" groaned the impoverished relative, overcome with fatigue; "my niece is certainly crazy!"

However, at last, one lovely afternoon in May, Blanche came across the object of her quest. She chanced to be standing in a sequestered nook nigh the mere, situated in the depths of the forest of Courtornieu, when she perceived Chupin, tramping sullenly along with his gun in his hand, and glancing suspiciously on either side. Not that he feared either game-keeper or judicial proceedings, but go wherever he would, still and ever he fancied he could see Balstain the Piedmontese innkeeper, walking in his shadow and brandishing the terrible knife, which, by St. Jean-de-Coche, he had consecrated to his vengeance. Seeing Blanche in turn, the old rascal would have fled into the cover, but before he could do so she had called to him: "Eh, Father Chupin!"

He hesitated for a moment, then paused, dropped his gun, and waited.

Aunt Medea was pale with fright. "Blessed Jesus!" she murmured, pressing her niece's arm; "what are you calling that terrible man for?"

"I want to speak to him."

"What Blanche, do you dare——"

"I must!"

"No, I can't allow it. I must not——"

"There, that's enough!" said Blanche, with one of those imperious glances that deprive a dependent of all strength and courage; "quite enough." Then, in gentler tones: "I *must* talk with this man," she added. "And you, Aunt Medea, must remain some little distance off. Keep a close watch on every side, and if you see any one approaching, call me at once."

Aunt Medea, submissive as was her wont, immediately obeyed; and Blanche walked straight towards the old poacher. "Well, my good Father Chupin, and what sort of sport have you had to-day?" she began, directly she was a few steps from him.

"What do you want with me?" growled Chupin; "for you do want something, or you wouldn't trouble yourself about a man like me."

The old ruffian's manner was so surly and aggressive that Blanche needed all her strength of mind to carry out her purpose. "Yes, it is true that I have a favour to ask you," she replied, in a resolute tone.

"Ah, ha! I supposed so."

"A mere trifle which will cost you no trouble, and for which you shall be well paid." She said this so carelessly that an ordinary person would have supposed she was really asking for some unimportant service; but cleverly as she played her part, Chupin was not deceived.

"No one asks trifling services of a man like me," he said coarsely. "Since I served the good cause, at the peril of my life, people seem to suppose they've a right to come to me with money in their hands whenever they want any dirty work done. It's true that I was well paid for that other job; but I would like to melt all the gold and pour it down the throats of those who gave it to me. Ah! I know now what it costs the poor to listen to the words of the great! Go your way; and if you have any wickedness in your head, do it yourself!"

He shouldered his gun and was moving off, when Blanche coldly observed: "It was because I knew of your wrongs that I stopped you; I thought you would be glad to serve me, because I hate the Sairmeuses like you do."

These words excited the old poacher's interest, and he paused. "I know very well that you hate the Sairmeuses now—but—"

"But what?"

"Why, in less than a month you will be reconciled. And then that old wretch, Chupin—"

"We shall never be reconciled."

"Hum!" growled the wily rascal, after deliberating awhile. "And if I did assist you, what compensation will you give me?"

"I will give you whatever you wish for—money, land, a house—"

"Many thanks. I want something quite different."

"What do you want then? Tell me."

Chupin reflected for a moment, and then replied: "This is what I want. I have a good many enemies, and I don't even feel safe in my own house. My sons abuse me when I've been drinking, and my wife is quite capable of poisoning my wine. I tremble for my life and for my money. I can't endure such an existence much longer. Promise me an asylum at the Chateau de Courtornieu and I'm yours. I shall be safe in your house. But let it be understood I

won't be ill-treated by the servants like I was at Sairmeuse."

"Oh, I can promise you all that."

"Swear it then by your hope of heaven."

"I swear it."

There was such evident sincerity in her accent that Chupin felt re-assured. He leant towards her, and in a low voice, remarked: "Now tell me your business." His small grey eyes glittered in a threatening fashion; his thin lips were drawn tightly over his sharp teeth; he evidently expected some proposition of murder, and was ready to accomplish it.

His attitude evinced his feelings so plainly that Blanche shuddered. "Really, what I want of you is almost nothing," she replied. "I only want you to watch the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"Your husband?"

"Yes; my husband. I want to know what he does, where he goes, and what persons he sees, I want to know how he spends all his time."

"What! now is that really all you want me to do?" asked Chupin eagerly.

"For the present, yes. My plans are not yet decided; but circumstances will guide me."

"You can rely upon me," replied Chupin at once; "but I must have a little time."

"Yes, I understand that. To-day is Saturday; can you give me a first report on Thursday?"

"In five days? Yes, probably."

"In that case, meet me here on Thursday, at the same hour."

The conversation might have continued a few moments longer, but at this very moment Aunt Medea was heard exclaiming. "Some one is coming!"

"Quick! we must not be seen together. Conceal yourself," ejaculated Blanche, and while the old poacher disappeared with one bound into the forest, she hastily rejoined her chaperone. A few paces off she could perceive one of her father's servants approaching.

"Ah! mademoiselle," exclaimed the lacquey, "we have been looking for you everywhere during the last three hours. Your father M. le Marquis—good heavens! what a misfortune! A physician has been sent for."

"Whatever has happened? Is my father dead?"

"No, mademoiselle, no; but—how can I tell you. When the marquis went out this morning his actions were very strange, and—and—when he returned—" As he spoke the servant tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "You understand me, mademoiselle—when he came home his reason seemed to—to have left him!"

Without waiting for the servant to finish, or for her terrified aunt to follow her, Blanche darted off in the direction of the chateau. "How is the marquis?" she inquired of the first servant she met.

"He is in bed, and is quieter than he was," answered the maid.

But Blanche had already reached her father's room. He was sitting up in bed, under the supervision of his valet and a footman. His face was livid, and a white foam had gathered on his lips. Still, he recognized his daughter. "Here you are," said he. "I was waiting for you."

She paused on the threshold, and though she was neither tender-hearted nor impressionable, the sight seemed to appal her: "My father!" she faltered. "Good heavens! what has happened?"

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed the marquis, with a discordant laugh. "I met him! what, you doubt me? I tell you that I saw the wretch. I know him well; haven't I seen his cursed face before my eyes for more than a month—for it never leaves me. I saw him. It was in the forest near the Sanguille rocks. You know the place; it is always dark there, on account of the trees. I was slowly walking home thinking of him, when suddenly he sprang up before me, holding out his arms as if to bar my passage. 'Come,' said he, 'you must join me.' He was armed with a gun; he fired—"

The marquis paused, and Blanche summoned up sufficient courage to approach him. For more than a minute she looked at him attentively, with a cold magnetic glance, such as often exercises great influence over those who have lost their reason, then shaking him roughly by the arm, she exclaimed: "Control yourself, father. You are the victim of an hallucination. It is impossible that you can have seen the man you speak of."

Blanche knew only too well who was the man that M. de Courtornieu alluded to; but she dared not, could not, utter his name.

However, the marquis had resumed his scarcely coherent narrative. "Was I dreaming?" he continued. "No, it was Lacheneur, Lacheneur and none other who stood in front of me. I am sure of it, and the proof is that he reminded me of a circumstance which occurred in my youth, and which was known only to him and me. It happened during the Reign of Terror. He was all-powerful in Montaignac; and I was accused of being in correspondence with the *emigres*. My property had been confiscated; and I was every moment expecting to feel the executioner's hand on my shoulder, when Lacheneur took me to his house. He concealed me; furnished me with a passport; saved my money, and saved my life as well; and yet—and yet I sentenced him to death. That's the reason why I've seen him again. I must join him; he told me so—I'm a dying man!" With these words the marquis fell back on his pillows, pulled the bed clothes over his face, and lied there so rigid and motionless that one might readily have supposed the counterpane covered some inanimate corpse.

Mute with horror, the servants exchanged frightened glances. Such baseness and ingratitude amazed them. They could not understand why, under such circumstances, the marquis had not pardoned Lacheneur. Blanche alone retained her presence of mind. Turning to her father's valet, she said: "Hasn't some one tried to injure my father?"

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, some one most certainly has: a little more and Monsieur le Marquis would have been killed."

"How do you know that?"

"In undressing the marquis I noticed that he had received a wound in the head. I also examined his hat, and I found three holes in it, which could only have been made by bullets."

"Then some one must have tried to murder my father," murmured Blanche, "and this attack of delirium has been brought on by fright. How can we find out who the would-be murderer was?"

The valet shook his head. "I suspect that old poacher, who is always prowling about here, a man named—Chupin."

"No, it couldn't have been him."

"Ah! I am almost sure of it. There's no one else in the neighbourhood capable of such an evil deed."

Blanche could not give her reasons for declaring Chupin innocent. Nothing in the world would have induced her to admit that she had met him, talked with him for more than half-an-hour, and only just parted from him. So she remained silent.

Soon afterwards the medical man arrived. He removed the coverlet from M. de Courtornieu's face, being almost compelled to use force in doing so—examined the patient with evident anxiety, and then ordered mustard plasters, applications of ice to the head, leeches, and a potion, for which a servant was to gallop to Montaignac at once. Immediately afterwards all was bustle and confusion in the house. When the physician left the sickroom, Blanche followed him. "Well, doctor?" she said, with a questioning look.

The physician hesitated, but at last he replied; "People sometimes recover from such attacks."

It really mattered little to Blanche whether her father recovered or died, but she felt that an opportunity to recover her lost influence was now afforded her. If she was to fight successfully against Martial's desertion, she must improvise a very different reputation to that which she at present enjoyed. Now, if she could only appear to the world in the character of a patient victim, and devoted daughter, public opinion, which, as she had recently discovered, was after all worth having, might yet turn in her favour. Such an occasion offering itself must not be neglected. Accordingly, she lavished the most touching and delicate attentions on her suffering father. It was impossible to induce her to leave his bedside for a moment, and it was only with great difficulty that she would be persuaded to sleep for a couple of hours, in an arm-chair in the sick-room. But while she was playing this self-imposed role of sister of charity with a talent worthy of a healthier mind, her chief thoughts were for Chupin. What was he doing at Montaignac? Was he watching Martial as he had promised? How slowly the time passed! Would that Thursday which had been appointed for their meeting never come?

It came at last, and momentarily entrusting her father to Aunt Medea's care, Blanche made her escape. The old poacher was waiting for her at the appointed place near the lake. "Well, what have you got to tell me?" asked Blanche.

"Next to nothing, I'm sorry to say."

"What! haven't you been watching the marquis?"

"Your husband? Excuse me, I have followed him like his own shadow. But I'm afraid the news I have of him won't interest you very much. Since the duke left for Paris, your husband has charge of everything. Ah! you wouldn't recognize him! He's always busy now. He's up at cock-crow; and goes to bed with the chickens. He writes letters all the morning. In the afternoon he receives every one who calls upon him. The retired officers are hand and glove with him. He has re-instated five or six of them, and has granted pensions to two others. He seldom goes out, and never in the evening."

He paused, and for a moment Blanche remained silent. A question rose to her lips, and yet she scarcely dared to propound it. She blushed with shame, and it was only after a supreme effort that she managed to articulate, "But he must surely have a mistress?"

Chupin burst into a noisy laugh. "Well, we have come to it at last," he said, with an air of audacious familiarity that made Blanche positively shudder. "You mean that scoundrel Lacheneur's daughter, don't you? that stuck-up minx Marie-Anne?"

Blanche felt that denial was useless. "Yes," she answered; "I do mean Marie-Anne."

"Ah, well! she's neither been seen nor heard of. She must have fled with her other lover, Maurice d'Escorval."

"You are mistaken."

"Oh, not at all! Of all the Lacheneurs, the only one remaining about here is Jean the son, who leads a vagabond life, poaching much as I do. He's always in the woods, day and night, with his gun slung over his shoulder. I caught sight of him once. He's quite frightful to look at, a perfect skeleton, with eyes that glitter like live coals. If he ever meets me and sees me, my account will be settled then and there."

Blanche turned pale. Plainly enough it was Jean Lacheneur who had fired at her father. However, concealing her agitation, she replied, "I, myself, feel sure that Marie-Anne is in the neighbourhood, concealed at Montaignac, probably. I must know. Try and find out where she is by Monday, when I will meet you here again."

"All right, I'll try," answered Chupin, and he did indeed try; exerting all his energy and cunning, but in vain. He was fettered by the precautions which he took to shield himself against Balstain and Jean Lacheneur; while, on the other hand, he had to prosecute his search personally, as no one in the neighbourhood would have consented to give him the least information. "Still no news!" he said to Blanche at each succeeding interview. But she would not admit the possibility of Marie-Anne having fled with Maurice. Jealousy will not yield even to evidence. She had declared that Marie-Anne had taken her husband from her, that Martial and Marie-Anne loved each other, and it must be so, all proofs to the contrary notwithstanding. At last, one morning, she found her spy jubilant. "Good news!" he cried, as soon as he perceived her; "we have caught the minx at last."

XXX.

THIS was three days after Marie-Anne's arrival at the Borderie, which event was the general topic of conversation throughout the neighbourhood; Chanlouineau's will especially forming the subject of countless comments. The old folks looked grave, and repeated to one another, "Ah, well, here's M. Lacheneur's daughter with an income of more than two thousand francs, without counting the house." While the unattractive maidens who had not been fortunate enough to secure husbands muttered in their turn, "An honest girl would have had no such luck as that!"

When Chupin brought this great news to Blanche she trembled with anger, and clenched her soft white hands, exclaiming: "What audacity! What impudence!"

The old poacher seemed to be of the same opinion. "If each of her lovers gives her as much she will be richer

than a queen," quothed he maliciously. "She will be able to buy up Sairmeuse, and Courtornieu as well if she chooses."

"And this is the woman who has estranged Martial from me!" ejaculated Blanche. "He abandons me for a filthy drab like that!" She was so incensed that she entirely forgot Chupin's presence, making no attempt to restrain herself, or to hide the secret of her sufferings. "Are you sure that what you tell me is true?" she asked.

"As sure as you stand there."

"Who told you all this?"

"No one—I have eyes. That is, I overheard two villagers talking about Mademoiselle Lacheneur's return; so then I went to the Borderie to see for myself, and I found all the shutters open. Marie-Anne was leaning out of a window. She doesn't even wear mourning, the heartless hussy!" Chupin spoke the truth, but then the only dress the poor girl possessed was the one that Madame d'Escorval had lent her on the night of the insurrection, when it became necessary for her to doff her masculine attire.

The old poacher was about to increase Blanche's irritation by some further malicious remarks, when she checked him with the enquiry—"Whereabouts is the Borderie?"

"Oh, about a league and a half from here, opposite the water mills on the Oiselle, and not far from the river bank."

"Ah, yes! I remember now. Were you ever in the house?"

"Oh, scores and scores of times while Chanlouineau was living."

"Then you can describe it to me?"

"I should think I could. It stands in an open space a little distance from the road. There's a small garden in front, and an orchard behind. They are both hedged in. In the rear of the orchard, on the right, are the vineyards; while on the left there's a small grove planted round about a spring." Chupin paused suddenly in his description, and with a knowing wink, inquired: "But what use do you mean to make of all this information?"

"That's no matter of yours. But tell me, what is the house like inside?"

"There are three large square rooms on the ground floor, besides the kitchen and pantry. I can't say what there is upstairs, as I've never been there."

"And what are the rooms you've seen furnished like?"

"Why, like those in any peasant's house, to be sure." Chupin, it should be observed, knew nothing of the luxurious apartment which Chanlouineau had intended for Marie-Anne. Indeed, the only stranger who was aware of its existence was the leading upholsterer of Montaignac, for the young farmer had never confided his secret to any one in the neighbourhood, and the furniture had been brought to the Borderie one night in the stealthiest fashion.

"How many doors are there to the house?" enquired Blanche.

"Three: one opening into the garden, one into the orchard, and another communicating with the stables. The staircase is in the middle room."

"And is Marie-Anne quite alone at the Borderie?"

"Quite alone at present; but I expect her brigand of a brother will join her before long."

After this reply, Blanche fell into so deep and prolonged a reverie that Chupin at last became impatient. He ventured to touch her on the arm, and, in a wily voice, enquired, "Well, what shall we decide?"

Blanche drew back shuddering. "My mind is not yet made up," she stammered. "I must reflect—I will see." And then noting the old poacher's discontented face, she added, "I will do nothing lightly. Don't lose sight of the marquis. If he goes to the Borderie, and he will go there, I must be informed of it. If he writes, and he will write, try to procure one of his letters. I must see you every other day. Don't rest! Try to deserve the good place I am reserving for you at Courtornieu. Now go!"

The old rascal trudged off without attempting a rejoinder, but his manner plainly showed that he was intensely disappointed. "It serves me deucedly well right," he growled. "I oughtn't to have listened to such a silly, affected woman. She fills the air with her ravings, wants to kill everybody, burn and destroy everything. She only asks for an opportunity. Well, the occasion presents itself, and then of course her heart fails her. She draws back, and gets afraid!"

In these remarks Chupin did Blanche great injustice. If, as he had noted, she had shrunk back shuddering when he urged her to decide, it was not because her will wavered, but rather because her flesh instinctively revolted against the deed she had in her mind. The old spy's unwelcome touch, his perfidious voice and threatening glance, may also in a minor degree have prompted this movement of repulsion. At all events, Blanche's reflections were by no means calculated to appease her rancour. Whatever Chupin and the Sairmeuse villagers might say to the contrary, she regarded the story which Marie-Anne, in obedience to the Abbe Midon's instructions, had told of her travels in Piedmont as a ridiculous fable, and nothing more. In her opinion, Marie-Anne had simply emerged from some retreat where Martial had previously deemed it prudent to conceal her. But why this sudden re-appearance? Vindictive Blanche was ready to swear that it was out of mere bravado, and intended only as an insult to herself. "Ah, I *will* have my revenge," she thought. "I would tear my heart out if it were capable of cowardly weakness under such provocation!"

The voice of conscience was unheard, unheeded, in this tumult of passion. Her sufferings, and Jean Lacheneur's attempt upon her father's life, seemed to justify the most terrible reprisals. She had plenty of time now to brood over her wrongs, and to concoct schemes of vengeance; for her father no longer required her care. He had passed from the frenzied ravings of delirium to the stupor of idiocy. And yet the physician had confidently declared his patient to be cured. Cured! The body was cured, perhaps, but reason had utterly fled. All traces of intelligence had left the marquis's once mobile face, so ready in former times to assume the precise expression which his hypocrisy and duplicity required. His eyes, which had gleamed with cunning, wore a dull, vacant stare, and his under lip hung low, as is customary with idiots. Worst of all, no hope of any improvement was to be entertained. A single passion—indulgence at table—had taken the place of all those which in former times had swayed the life of this ambitious man. The marquis, in previous years most temperate in his habits, now ate and drank with disgusting voracity, and was rapidly becoming extremely corpulent. Between his meals he would wander about the Chateau and its surrounding in a listless fashion, scarcely knowing what he did. His memory had gone, and he had lost all sense of

dignity, all knowledge of good and evil. Even the instinct of self-preservation, the last which dies within us, had departed, and he had to be watched like a child. Often, as he roamed about the grounds, his daughter would gaze at him from her window with a strange terror in her heart. But after all, this warning of providence only increased her desire for revenge. "Who would not prefer death to such a misfortune?" she murmured. "Ah! Jean Lacheneur's revenge is far more terrible than if his bullet had pierced my father's heart. It is a similar revenge that I must have, and I will have it!"

She saw Chupin every two or three days; sometimes going alone to the meeting-place, and at others in Aunt Medea's company. The old poacher came punctually enough although he was beginning to tire of his task. "I am risking a great deal," he growled. "I fancied that Jean Lacheneur would go and live at the Borderie with his sister. Then, I should have been safe. But no; the brigand continues to prowl about with his gun under his arm: and sleeps in the woods at night time. What game is he after? Why, Father Chupin, of course. On the other hand, I know that my rascally innkeeper over there has abandoned his inn and disappeared. Where is he? Hidden behind one of these trees, perhaps, in settling what part of my body he shall plunge his knife into." What irritated the old poacher most of all was, that after two months watching he had come to the conclusion that whatever might have been Martial's connection with Marie-Anne in former times, everything was now all over between them.

But Blanche would not admit this. "Own that they are more cunning than you are, Father Chupin, but don't tell me they don't see each other," she observed one day.

"Cunning—and how?" was the retort. "Since I have been watching the marquis, he hasn't once passed outside the fortifications of Montaignac, while, on the other hand, the postman at Sairmeuse, whom my wife cleverly questioned, declares that he hasn't taken a single letter to the Borderie."

After this, if it had not been for the hope of a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, Chupin would have abandoned his task altogether; as it was, he relaxed his surveillance considerably; coming to the rendezvous with Blanche, chiefly because he had fallen into the habit of claiming some money for his expenses, on each occasion. And when Blanche asked him for an account of everything that Martial had done since their previous meeting, he generally told her anything that came into his head. However, one day, early in September, she interrupted him as he began the same old story, and, looking him steadfastly in the eyes, exclaimed: "Either you are betraying me, Father Chupin, or else you are a fool. Yesterday Martial and Marie-Anne spent a quarter of an hour together at the Croix d'Arcy."

XXXI.

AFTER the old physician of Vigano had left the Borderie with his precious burden, Marie-Anne fell into a state of bitter despondency. Many in her situation would perhaps have experienced a feeling of relief, for had she not succeeded in concealing the outcome of her frailty, which none, save perhaps the Abbe Midon, so much as suspected? Hence, her despondency may at first sight seem to have been uncalled for. But then, let it be remembered that the sublime instinct of maternity had been awakened in her breast; and when she saw the physician leave her, carrying away her child she felt as if her soul and body were being rent asunder. When might she hope to set her eyes again on this poor babe who was doubly dear to her by reason of the very sorrow and anguish he had cost her? Ah, if it had not been for her promise to Maurice, she would have braved public opinion and kept her infant son at the Borderie. Had she not braved calumny already? She had been accused of having three lovers. Chanlouineau, Martial, and Maurice. The comments of the villagers had not affected her; but she had been tortured, and was still tortured by the thought that these people didn't know the truth. Maurice was her husband, and yet she dare not proclaim the fact; she was "Mademoiselle Lacheneur" to all around—a maiden—a living lie. Surely such a situation accounted only too completely for her despondency and distress. And when she thought of her brother she positively shuddered with dismal apprehensions.

Having learnt that Jean was roving about the country she sent for him; but it was not without considerable persuasion that he consented to come and see her at the Borderie. A glance at his appearance sufficed to explain all Chupin's terror. The young fellow's clothes were in tatters, and the expression of his weather-stained, unshaven, unkempt face was ferocious in the extreme. When he entered the cottage, Marie-Anne recoiled with fear. She did not recognize him until he spoke. "It is I, sister," he said gloomily.

"What, you—my poor Jean! you!"

He surveyed himself from head to foot, and with a sneering laugh retorted, "Well, really, I shouldn't like to meet myself at dusk in the forest."

Marie-Anne fancied she could detect a threat behind this ironical remark, and her apprehensions were painful in the extreme. "What a life you must be leading, my poor brother!" she said after a brief pause. "Why didn't you come here sooner? Now, I have you here, I shall not let you go. You will not desert me. I need protection and love so much. You will remain with me?"

"That's impossible, Marie-Anne."

"And why?"

Jean averted his glance; his face coloured, and it was with evident hesitation that he replied—"Because I've a right to dispose of my own life, but not of yours. We can't be anything to each other any longer. I deny you to-day, so that you may be able to deny me to-morrow. Yes, although you are now the only person on earth I love. I must and do renounce you. Your worst enemies haven't slandered you more foully than I have done, for before numerous witnesses I have openly declared that I would never set my foot inside a house given you by Chanlouineau."

"What, you said that—you, Jean—you, my brother?"

"Yes, I said it, and with a purpose; for it must be supposed that there is a deadly feud between us, so that neither you nor Maurice d'Escorval may be accused of complicity in any deed of mine."

Marie-Anne gazed at her brother wonderingly. "He is mad!" she murmured, and then with a burst of energy, she added, "What do you mean to do? Tell me; I must know."

"Nothing! leave me to myself."

"Jean!"

"Leave me to myself," he repeated roughly.

Marie-Anne felt that her apprehensions were correct. "Take care, take care," she said entreatingly. "Do not tamper with such matters. God's justice will punish those who have wronged us."

But nothing could move Jean Lacheneur, or divert him from his purpose. With a hoarse, discordant laugh, he clapped his hand on his gun and retorted, "That's my justice!"

Marie-Anne almost tottered as she heard these words. She discerned in her brother's mind the same fixed, fatal idea which had lured her father on to destruction—the idea for which he had sacrificed everything—family, friends, fortune, and even his daughter's honour, the idea which had caused so much bloodshed, which had cost the lives of so many innocent men, and had finally led him to the scaffold himself. "Jean," she murmured, "remember our father."

The young fellow's face turned livid; and instinctively he clenched his fists. But the words he uttered were the more impressive as his voice was calm and low. "It is just because I do remember my father that I am determined justice shall be done. Ah! these wretched nobles wouldn't display such audacity if all sons had my will and determination. A scoundrel like the Duke de Sairmeuse would hesitate before he attacked an honest man if he were only obliged to say to himself: 'If I wrong this man, and even should I kill him, I cannot escape retributive justice, for his children will surely call me to account. Their vengeance will fall on me and mine; they will pursue us by day and night, at all hours and in all seasons. We must ever fear their hatred for they will be implacable and merciless. I shall never leave my house without fear of a bullet; never lift food to my lips without dread of poison. And until I and mine have succumbed, these avengers will prowl round about our home threatening us at every moment with death, dishonour, ruin, infamy, and misery!' " The young fellow paused, laughed nervously, and then, in a still slower voice, he added: "That is what the Sairmeuses and the Courtornieus have to expect from me." It was impossible to mistake the import of these words. Jean Lacheneur's threats were not the wild ravings of anger. His was a cold, deep-set premeditated desire for vengeance which would last as long as he lived—and he took good care that his sister should understand him, for between his teeth he added: "Undoubtedly these people are very high, and I am very low; but when a tiny insect pierces the root of a giant oak, that tree is doomed."

Marie-Anne realized that all her entreaties would fail to turn her brother from his purpose, and yet she could not allow him to leave, without making one more effort it was with clasped hands and in a supplicating voice that she begged him to renounce his projects, but he still remained obdurate, and when changing her tactics she asked him to remain with her, at least that evening and share her frugal supper, adding in trembling tones that it might be the last time they would see each other for long years, he again repeated, "You ask me an impossibility!" And yet he was visibly moved, and if his voice was stern, a tear trembled in his eye. She was clinging to him imploringly, when, yielding for one moment to the impulse of nature, he took her in his arms and pressed her to his heart. "Poor sister—poor Marie-Anne," he said, "you will never know what it costs me to refuse your supplications. But I cannot yield to them. I have been most imprudent in coming here at all. You don't realize the danger to which you may be exposed if folks suspect that there is any connection between us. I trust that you and Maurice may lead a calm and happy life. It would be a crime for me to mix you up with my wild schemes. Think of me sometimes, but don't try to see me, or even to find out what has become of me. A man like me struggles, triumphs, or perishes alone." He kissed Marie-Anne passionately, and freed himself from her detaining hands. "Farewell!" he cried; "when you see me again, our father will be avenged!"

Then with one bound he reached the door. She sprang out after him, meaning to call him back, but he had already disappeared. "It is all over," murmured the wretched girl; "my brother is lost. Nothing will restrain him now." And a vague, inexplicable, dread invaded her heart. She felt as if she were being slowly but surely drawn into a whirlpool of passion, rancour, vengeance, and crime, and a voice whispered that she would be crushed.

Some days had elapsed after this incident, when one evening, while she was preparing her supper, she heard a rustling sound outside. She turned and looked: some one had slipped a letter under the front door. Without a moments hesitation, she raised the latch and courageously sprang out on to the threshold. No one could be seen. The gloom was well nigh impenetrable, and when she listened not a sound broke the stillness. With a trembling hand she picked up the letter, walked towards the lamp burning on her supper table, and looked at the address. "From the Marquis de Sairmeuse!" she exclaimed, in amazement, as she recognized Martial's hand-writing. So he had written to her! He had dared to write to her! Her first impulse was to burn the letter; and she was already holding it over the stove, when she suddenly thought of her friends concealed at Father Poignot's farm. "For their sake," she thought, "I must read it, and see if they are threatened with danger."

Then hastily opening the missive, she found that it was as follows: "My dear Marie-Anne—Perhaps you have suspected who it is that has given an entirely new and certainly surprising turn to events. Perhaps you have also understood the motives that guided him. In that case I am amply repaid for my efforts, for you can no longer refuse me your esteem. But my work of reparation is not yet perfect. I have prepared everything for a revision of the judgment that condemned the Baron d'Escorval to death, or for having him pardoned. You must know where the baron is concealed. Acquaint him with my plans and ascertain whether he prefers a revision of judgment, or a simple pardon. If he wishes for a new trial, I will give him a letter of licence from the king. I await your reply before acting.
MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Marie-Anne's head whirled. This was the second time that Martial had astonished her by the chivalrous spirit of his love. How noble the two men who had loved her and whom she had rejected, had proved themselves to be. One of them Chanlouineau, after dying for her sake, had sought to protect her from beyond the grave. The other, Martial de Sairmeuse had sacrificed the connections and prejudices of his caste, and hazarded with noble recklessness the political fortunes of his house, so as to insure as far as possible her own happiness and that of those she loved. And yet the man whom she had chosen, the father of her child, Maurice d'Escorval, had not given as much as a sign of life since he left her five months before. But suddenly and without reason, Marie-Anne passed from profound admiration to deep distrust. "What if Martial's offer were only a trap?" This was the suspicion that darted through her mind. "Ah!" she thought, "the Marquis de Sairmeuse would be a hero if he were sincere!" And she did not wish him to be a hero.

The result of her suspicions was that she hesitated five days before repairing to the meeting place where Father Poignot usually awaited her. When she did go, in lieu of the worthy farmer she found the Abbe Midon, who had been greatly alarmed by her prolonged absence. It was night time, but Marie-Anne, fortunately, knew Martial's letter by

heart. The abbe made her repeat it twice, the second time very slowly, and when she had concluded, he remarked: "This young man no doubt has the prejudices of his rank and his education; but his heart is noble and generous." And when Marie-Anne disclosed her suspicions: "You are wrong, my child," he added, "the marquis is certainly sincere, and it would be unwise not to take advantage of his generosity. Such, at least, is my opinion. Entrust this letter to me. I will consult the baron, and to-morrow you shall know our decision."

Four and twenty hours later the abbe and Marie-Anne met again at the same spot. "M. d'Escorval," said the priest, "agrees with me that we must trust ourselves to the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Only the baron, being innocent, cannot, will not, accept a pardon. He demands a revision of the iniquitous judgment which condemned him—in one word, a new trial."

Marie-Anne had foreseen this determination, and yet she could not help exclaiming: "What! M. d'Escorval means to give himself up to his enemies! To risk his life on the chance of acquittal?" The priest nodded assent, and then knowing that it was quite useless to attempt arguing the point Marie-Anne submissively remarked: "In this case, I must ask you for a rough draft of the letter I ought to write to the marquis."

For a moment the priest did not reply. He evidently had some misgivings. At last, summoning all his courage, he answered. "It would be better not to write."

"But——"

"It is not that I distrust the marquis, not by any means, but a letter is dangerous; it doesn't always reach the person it's addressed to. You must see M. de Sairmeuse."

Marie-Anne recoiled. "Never! never!" she exclaimed.

The abbe did not seem surprised. "I understand your repugnance, my child," he said, gently; "your reputation has suffered greatly through the marquis's attentions. But duty calls, and this is not the time to hesitate. You know that the baron is innocent, and you know, alas, that your father's mad enterprise has ruined him. You must, at least, make this atoning sacrifice." He then explained to her everything she would have to say, and did not leave her until she had promised to see the marquis in person.

It must not be supposed that Marie-Anne's aversion to this interview was due to the reason which the abbe assigned. Her reputation! Alas, she knew that it was lost for ever. A fortnight before the prospect of such a meeting would have in no wise disquieted her. Then, though she no longer hated Martial, she thought of him with indifference, whereas now—— Perhaps, in choosing the Croix d'Arcy for the rendezvous, she hoped that this spot with its cruel memories would restore aversion to her heart. As she walked along towards the meeting place, she said to herself that no doubt Martial would wound her feelings by his usual tone of careless gallantry. But in this she was mistaken. The young marquis was greatly agitated, but he did not utter a word unconnected with the purport of the meeting. It was only when the conference was over, and he had consented to all the conditions suggested by the abbe, that he sadly remarked: "We are friends, are we not?"

And in an almost inaudible voice she answered, "Yes."

And that was all. He remounted his horse, which had been held by a servant, and galloped off in the direction of Montagnac. Breathless, with cheeks on fire, Marie-Anne watched him as bending low in the saddle he urged his horse onward over the dusty highway, until at last a bend and some projecting trees finally hid him from view. Then, all of a sudden, she became as it were conscious of her thoughts. "Ah, wretched woman that I am," she exclaimed, "is it possible I could ever love any other man than Maurice, my husband, the father of my child?"

Her voice was still trembling with emotion when she related the particulars of the interview to the abbe. But he did not perceive her trouble, his thoughts being busy with the baron's interests. "I felt sure," said he, "that Martial would agree to our conditions. I was, indeed, so certain that I even made every arrangement for the baron to leave the farm. He will leave it to-morrow night and wait at your house till we receive the letters of licence from the king. The heat and bad ventilation of Poignot's loft are certainly retarding his recovery. One of Poignot's boys will bring our baggage to-morrow evening, and at eleven o'clock or so we will place M. d'Escorval in a vehicle and all sup together at the Borderie."

"Heaven comes to my aid!" murmured Marie-Anne as she walked home, reflecting that now she would no longer be alone. With Madame d'Escorval at her side to talk to her of Maurice, and the cheerful presence of her other friends, she would soon be able to chase away those thoughts of Martial, now haunting her.

When she awoke the next morning she was in better spirits than she had been for months, and once, while putting her little house in order, she was surprised to find herself singing at her work. Just as eight o'clock in the evening was striking she heard a peculiar whistle. This was a signal from the younger Poignot, who soon appeared laden with an arm-chair for the sick man, the abbe's medicine chest, and a bag of books. They were all placed in the room upstairs—the room which Chanlouineau had decorated at such cost, and which Marie-Anne now intended for the baron. Young Poignot told her that he had several other things to bring, and nearly an hour afterwards, fancying that he might be overloaded, she ventured out to meet him. The night was very dark, and as she hastened on, Marie-Anne failed to notice two figures stooping behind a clump of lilac bushes in her little garden.

XXXII.

CHUPIN was at first quite crestfallen when Blanche told him of Martial's meeting with Marie-Anne at the Croix d'Arcy. He was detected with a falsehood on his lips, and feared that the discovery of his duplicity would for ever wreck his prospects. He must say good-bye to a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, and good-bye also to frequent gifts which had enabled him to spare his hoarded treasure, and even to increase it. However, his discomfiture only lasted for a moment. It seemed best to put a bold face on the matter, and accordingly raising his head, he remarked with an affection of frankness, "I may be stupid no doubt, but I wouldn't deceive a child. I scarcely fancy your information can be correct. Some one must have told you falsely."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "I obtained my information from two persons, who were ignorant of the interest it possessed for me."

"As truly as the sun is in the heavens I swear——"

"Don't swear; simply confess that you have been very negligent."

Blanche spoke so authoritatively that Chupin considered it best to change his tactics. With an air of abject humility, he admitted that he had relaxed his surveillance on the previous day; he had been very busy in the morning; then one of his boys had injured his foot; and finally, he had met some friends who persuaded him to go with them to a wine-shop, where he had taken more than usual, so that——. He told his story in a whining tone, frequently interrupting himself to affirm his repentance and cover himself with reproaches. "Old drunkard!" he said, "this will teach you not to neglect your duties."

But far from reassuring Blanche, his protestations only made her more suspicious. "All this is very good, Father Chupin," she said, dryly, "but what are you going to do now to repair your negligence?"

"What do I intend to do?" he exclaimed, feigning the most violent anger. "Oh! you shall see. I will prove that no one can deceive me with impunity. There is a small grove near the Borderie, and I shall station myself there; and may the devil seize me if a cat enters that house without my knowing it."

Blanche drew her purse from her pocket, and handed three louis to Chupin, saying as she did so, "Take these, and be more careful in future. Another blunder of the kind, and I shall have to obtain some other person's assistance."

The old poacher went away whistling contentedly. He felt quite reassured. In this, however, he was wrong, for Blanche's generosity was only intended to prevent him fancying that she doubted his veracity. In point of fact, she did doubt it. She believed his promises to be on a par with his past conduct, which, as events had shown, had at the very best been negligent in the extreme. This miserable wretch made it his business to betray others—so why shouldn't he have betrayed her as well? What confidence could she place in his reports. She certainly paid him, but the person who paid him more would unquestionably have the preference. Still, she must know the truth, the whole truth, and how was she to ascertain it? There was but one method—a certain, though a very disagreeable one—she must play the spy herself.

With this idea in her head, she waited impatiently for evening to arrive, and then, directly dinner was over, she summoned Aunt Medea, and requested her company as she was going out for a walk. The impoverished chaperone made a feeble protest concerning the lateness of the hour. But Blanche speedily silenced her, and bade her get ready at once, adding that she did not wish any one in the chateau to know that they had gone out. Aunt Medea had no other resource than to obey, and in the twinkling of an eye she was ready. The marquis had just been put to bed, the servants were at dinner, and Blanche and her companion reached a little gate leading from the grounds into the open fields without being observed. "Good heavens! Where are we going?" groaned the astonished chaperone.

"What does that matter to you? Come along!" replied Blanche, who, as it may have been guessed, was going to the Borderie. She could have followed the banks of the Oiselle, but she preferred to cut across the fields, thinking she would be less likely to meet any one. The night was very dark, and the hedges and ditches often impeded their progress. On two occasions Blanche lost her way, while Aunt Medea stumbled again and again over the rough ground, bruising herself against the stones. She groaned; she almost wept; but her terrible niece was pitiless. "Come along!" she cried, "or else I shall leave you to find your way as best you can." And so the poor dependent struggled on.

At last, after more than an hour's tramp, Blanche ventured to breathe. She recognized Chanlouineau's house, a short distance off, and soon afterwards she paused in the little grove of which Chupin had spoken. Aunt Medea now timidly inquired if they were at their journey's end—a question which Blanche answered affirmatively. "But be quiet," she added, "and remain where you are. I wish to look about a little."

"What! you are leaving me alone?" ejaculated the frightened chaperone. "Blanche, I entreat you! What are you going to do? Good heavens! you frighten me. You do indeed, Blanche!"

But her niece had gone. She was exploring the grove, looking for Chupin, whom she did not find. This convinced her that the old poacher was deceiving her, and she angrily asked herself if Martial and Marie-Anne were not in the house hard by at that very hour, laughing at her credulity. She then rejoined Aunt Medea, whom she found half dead with fright, and they both advanced to the edge of the copse, where they could view the front of the house. A flickering, ruddy light illuminated two windows on the upper floor. There was evidently a fire in the room upstairs. "That's right," murmured Blanche, bitterly; "Martial is such a chilly personage." She was about to approach the house, when a peculiar whistle made her pause. She looked about her, and, through the darkness, she managed to distinguish a man walking towards the Borderie, and carrying a weighty burden. Almost immediately afterwards, a woman, certainly Marie-Anne, opened the door of the house, and the stranger was admitted. Ten minutes later he reappeared, this time without his burden, and walked briskly away. Blanche was wondering what all this meant, but for the time being she did not venture to approach, and nearly an hour elapsed before she decided to try and satisfy her curiosity by peering through the windows. Accompanied by Aunt Medea, she had just reached the little garden, when the door of the cottage opened so suddenly that Blanche and her relative had scarcely time to conceal themselves behind a clump of lilac-bushes. At the same moment, Marie-Anne crossed the threshold, and walked down the narrow garden path, gained the road, and disappeared. "Wait for me here," said Blanche to her aunt, in a strained, unnatural voice, "and whatever happens, whatever you hear, if you wish to finish your days at Courtornieu, not a word! Don't stir from this spot; I will come back again." Then pressing the frightened spinster's arm she left her alone and went into the cottage.

Marie-Anne, on going out, had left a candle burning on the table in the front room. Blanche seized it and boldly began an exploration of the dwelling. Owing to Chupin's description, she was tolerably familiar with the arrangements on the ground floor, and yet the aspect of the rooms surprised her. They were roughly floored with tiles, and the walls were poorly whitewashed. A massive linen press, a couple of heavy tables, and a few clumsy chairs, constituted the only furniture in the front apartment, while from the beams above hung numerous bags of grain and bunches of dried herbs. Marie-Anne evidently slept in the back room, which contained an old-fashioned country bedstead very high and broad, and the tall fluted posts of which were draped with green serge curtains, sliding on iron rings. Fastened to the wall at the head of the bed was a receptacle for holy water. Blanche dipped her finger in the bowl, and found it full to the brim. Then beside the window on a wooden shelf she espied a jug and basin of common earthenware. "It must be confessed that my husband doesn't provide his idol with a very sumptuous abode," she muttered with a sneer. And for a moment, indeed, she was almost on the point of asking herself if jealousy had not led her astray. Remembering Martial's fastidious tastes, she failed to reconcile them with these meager surroundings. The presence of the holy water, moreover, seemed incompatible with her suspicions.

But the latter revived again when she entered the kitchen. A savoury soup was bubbling in a pot over the fire, and fragrant stews were simmering in two or three saucepans. Such preparations could not be made for Marie-Anne alone. Who then were they for? At this moment Blanche remembered the ruddy glow which she had noticed through the windows on the floor above. Hastily leaving the kitchen she climbed the stairs and opened a door she found in front of her. A cry of mingled anger and surprise escaped her lips. She stood on the threshold of the room which Chanlouineau in the boldness of his passion had designed to be the sanctuary of his love. Here every thing was beautiful and luxurious: "Ah, so after all it's true," exclaimed Blanche in a paroxysm of jealousy. "And I was fancying that everything was too meager and too poor. Down stairs everything is so arranged that visitors may not suspect the truth! Ah, now I recognise Martial's astonishing talent for dissimulation, he is so infatuated with this creature that he is even anxious to shield her reputation. He keeps his visits secret and hides himself up here. Yes, here it is that they laugh at me the deluded forsaken wife whose marriage was but a mockery!"

She had wished to know the truth, and now she felt she knew it. Certainty was less cruel than everlasting suspicion, and she even took a bitter delight in examining the appointments of the apartment, which to her mind proved how deeply Martial must be infatuated. She felt the heavy curtains of brocaded silken stuff with trembling hands; she tested the thickness of the rich carpet with her feet; the embroidered coverlid on the palissandre bedstead, the mirrors, the hundred knicknacks on the tables and the mantleshef—all in turn met with her attentive scrutiny. Everything indicated that some one was expected—the bright fire—the cosy arm-chair beside it, the slippers on the rug. And who would Marie-Anne expect but Martial? No doubt the man whom Blanche had seen arriving had come to announce the marquis's approach, and Marie-Anne had gone to meet him.

Curiously enough, on the hearth stood a bowl of soup, still warm, and which Marie-Anne had evidently been about to drink when she heard the messenger's signal. Blanche was still wondering how she could profit of her discoveries, when she espied a chest of polished oak standing open on a table near a glass door leading into an adjoining dressing room. She walked towards it and perceived that it contained a number of tiny vials and boxes. It was indeed the Abbe Midon's medicine chest, which Marie-Anne had placed here in readiness, should it be needed when the baron arrived, weak from his nocturnal journey. Blanche was examining the contents when suddenly she noticed two bottles of blue glass, on which "poison" was inscribed. "Poison!"—the word seemed to fascinate her, and by a diabolical inspiration she associated these vials with the bowl of soup standing on the hearth. "And why not?" she muttered. "I could escape afterwards." Another thought made her pause, however. Martial would no doubt return with Marie-Anne, and perhaps he would drink this broth. She hesitated for a moment, and then took one of the vials in her hand, murmuring as she did so, "God will decide; it is better he should die than belong to another." She had hitherto acted like one bewildered, but this act, simple in its performance, but terrible in its import, seemed to restore all her presence of mind. "What poison is it," thought she, "ought I to administer a large or a small dose?" With some little difficulty she opened the bottle and poured a small portion of its contents into the palm of her hand. The poison was a fine, white powder, glistening like pulverized glass. "Can it really be sugar?" thought Blanche; and with the view of making sure she moistened a finger tip, and gathered on it a few atoms of the powder, which she applied to her tongue. Its taste was not unlike that of an apple. She wiped her tongue with her handkerchief, and then without hesitation or remorse, without even turning pale, she poured the entire contents of the bottle into the bowl. Her self-possession was so perfect that she even stirred the broth, so that the powder might more rapidly dissolve. She next tasted it, and found that it had a slightly bitter flavour—not sufficiently perceptible, however, to awaken distrust. All that now remained was to escape, and she was already walking towards the door when, to her horror, she heard some one coming up the stairs. What should she do? where could she conceal herself? She now felt so sure that she would be detected that she almost decided to throw the contents of the bowl into the fire, and then face the intruders. But no—a chance remained—the dressing-room! She darted into it, without daring, however, to close the door, for the least click of the lock might betray her.

Immediately afterwards Marie-Anne entered the apartment, followed by a peasant carrying a large bundle. "Ah! here is my candle!" she exclaimed, as she crossed the threshold. "Joy must be making me lose my wits! I could have sworn that I left it on the table down-stairs."

Blanche shuddered. She had not thought of this circumstance before.

"Where shall I put these clothes?" asked the peasant.

"Lay them down here. I will arrange them by and by," replied Marie-Anne.

The youth dropped his heavy burden with a sigh of relief. "That's the last," he exclaimed. "Now our gentleman can come."

"At what o'clock will he start?" inquired Marie-Anne.

"At eleven. It will be nearly midnight when he gets here."

Marie-Anne glanced at the magnificent timepiece on the mantelshelf. "I have still three hours before me," said she; "more time than I need. Supper is ready, I am going to set the table here by the fire. Tell him to bring a good appetite with him."

"I won't forget, mademoiselle; thank you for having come to meet me. The load wasn't so very heavy, but it was awkward to handle."

"Won't you take a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks. I must make haste back, Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"Good night, Poignot."

Blanche had never heard this name of Poignot before; it had no meaning for her. Ah, if she had heard M. d'Escorval or the abbe mentioned, she might perhaps have doubted the truth; her resolution might have wavered and—who knows? But unfortunately, young Poignot, in referring to the baron, had spoken of him as "our gentleman," while Marie-Anne said, "he." And to Blanche's mind they both of them referred to Martial. Yes, unquestionably it must be the Marquis de Sairmeuse, who would arrive at midnight. She was sure of it. It was he who had sent this messenger with a parcel of clothes—a proceeding which could only mean that he was going to establish himself at the Borderie. Perhaps he would cast aside all secrecy and live there openly, regardless of his rank, his dignity, and duties; forgetful even of his prejudices as well. These conjectures could only fire Blanche's jealous fury. Why should she hesitate or tremble after that? The only thing she had to fear now was that Marie-Anne might enter the dressing-room and find her there. She had but little anxiety concerning Aunt Medea, who, it is true, was still in the garden;

but after the orders she had received the poor dependent would remain as still as a stone behind the lilac bushes, and, if needs be, during the whole night. On the other hand, Marie-Anne would remain alone in the house during another two hours and a half, and Blanche reflected that this would give her ample time to watch the effects of the poison on her hated rival. When the crime was discovered she would be far away. No one knew she was not at Courtornieu; no one had seen her leave the chateau; Aunt Medea would be as silent as the grave. And, besides, who would dare to accuse the Marchioness de Sairmeuse, *nee* Blanche de Courtornieu, of murder? One thing that worried Blanche was that Marie-Anne seemed to pay no attention to the broth. She had, in fact, forgotten it. She had opened the bundle of clothes, and was now busily arranging them in a wardrobe near the bed. Who talks of presentiments! She was as gay and vivacious as in her happiest days; and while she folded the clothes hummed an air that Maurice had often sung. She felt that her troubles were nearly over, for her friends would soon be round her, and a brighter time seemed near at hand. When she had put all the clothes away, she shut the wardrobe and drew a small table up before the fire. It was not till then that she noticed the bowl standing on the hearth. "How stupid I am!" she said, with a laugh; and taking the bowl in her hands, she raised it to her lips.

Blanche heard Marie-Anne's exclamation plainly enough; she saw what she was doing; and yet she never felt the slightest remorse. However, Marie-Anne drank but one mouthful, and then, in evident disgust, she set the bowl down. A horrible dread made the watcher's heart stand still, and she wondered whether her victim had detected any peculiar taste in the soup. No, she had not; but, owing to the fire having fallen low, it had grown nearly cold, and a slight coating of grease floated on its surface. Taking a spoon Marie-Anne skimmed the broth carefully, and stirred it up. Then, being thirsty, she drank the liquid almost at one draught, laid the bowl on the mantelpiece, and resumed her work.

The crime was perpetrated. The future no longer depended on Blanche de Courtornieu's will. Come what would, she was a murderess. But though she was conscious of her crime, the excess of her jealous hatred prevented her from realizing its enormity. She said to herself that she had only accomplished an act of justice, that in reality her vengeance was scarcely cruel enough for the wrongs she had suffered, and that nothing could indeed fully atone for the tortures inflicted on her. But in a few moments grievous misgivings took possession of her mind. Her knowledge of the effects of poison was extremely limited. She had expected to see Marie-Anne fall dead before her, as if stricken down by a thunderbolt. But no, several minutes passed, and Marie-Anne continued her preparations for supper as if nothing had occurred. She spread a white cloth over the table, smoothed it with her hands, and placed a cruet-stand and salt-cellar on it. Blanche's heart was beating so violently that she could scarcely realise why its throbbings were not heard in the adjoining room. Her assurance had been great, but now the fear of punishment which usually precedes remorse crept over her mind; and the idea that her victim might enter the dressing-room made her turn pale with fear. At last she saw Marie-Anne take the light and go down-stairs. Blanche was left alone, and the thought of escaping again occurred to her; but how could she possibly leave the house without being seen? Must she wait there, hidden in that nook for ever? "That couldn't have been poison. It doesn't act," she muttered in a rage.

Alas! it did act as she herself perceived when Marie-Anne re-entered the room. The latter had changed frightfully during the brief interval she had spent on the ground floor. Her face was livid and mottled with purple spots, her distended eyes glittered with a strange brilliancy, and she let a pile of plates she carried fall on the table with a crash.

"The poison! it begins to act at last!" thought Blanche.

Marie-Anne stood on the hearth-rug, gazing wildly round her, as if seeking for the cause of her incomprehensible sufferings. She passed and repassed her hand across her forehead, which was bathed in cold sweat; she gasped for breath, and then suddenly overcome with nausea, she staggered, pressed her hands convulsively to her breast, and sank into the arm-chair, crying: "Oh, God! how I suffer!"

Kneeling by the door of the dressing-room which was only partly closed, Blanche eagerly watched the workings of the poison she had administered. She was so near her victim that she could distinguish the throbbing of her temples, and sometimes she fancied she could feel on her own cheek her rival's breath, scorching her like flame. An utter prostration followed Marie-Anne's paroxysm of agony; and if it had not been for the convulsive working of her mouth and laboured breathing, it might have been supposed that she was dead. But soon the nausea returned, and she was seized with vomiting. Each effort seemed to contract her body; and gradually a ghastly tint crept over her face, the spots on her cheeks became of a deeper tint, her eyes seemed as if they were about to burst from their sockets, and great drops of perspiration rolled down her cheeks. Her sufferings must have been intolerable. She moaned feebly at times, and at intervals gave vent to truly heart-rending shrieks. Then she faltered fragmentary sentences; she begged piteously for water, or entreated heaven to shorten her tortures. "Ah, it is horrible! I suffer too much! My God! grant me death!" She invoked all the friends she had ever known, calling for aid in a despairing voice. She called on Madame d'Escorval, the abbe, Maurice, her brother, Chanlouineau, and Martial!

Martial!—that name more than sufficed to chase all pity from Blanche's heart. "Go on! call your lover, call!" she said to herself, bitterly. "He will come too late." And as Marie-Anne repeated the name, in a tone of agonized entreaty: "Suffer!" continued Blanche, "suffer, you deserve it! You imparted to Martial the courage to forsake me, his wife, like a drunken lacquey would abandon the lowest of degraded creatures! Die, and my husband will return to me repentant." No, she had no pity. She felt a difficulty in breathing, but that merely resulted from the instinctive horror which the sufferings of others inspire—a purely physical impression, which is adorned with the fine name of sensibility, but which is, in reality, the grossest selfishness.

And yet, Marie-Anne was sinking perceptibly. She had fallen on to the floor, during one of her attacks of sickness, and now she even seemed unable to moan; her eyes closed, and after a spasm which brought a bloody foam to her lips, her head sank back, and she lay motionless on the hearth-rug.

"It is over," murmured Blanche, rising to her feet. To her surprise her own limbs trembled so acutely, that she could scarcely stand. Her will was still firm and implacable; but her flesh failed her. She had never even imagined a scene like that she had just witnessed. She knew that poison caused death; but she had not suspected the agony of such a death. She no longer thought of increasing her victim's sufferings by upbraiding her. Her only desire now was to leave the house, the very floor of which seemed to scorch her feet. A strange, inexplicable sensation was creeping over her; it was not yet fright, but rather the stupor that follows the perpetration of a terrible crime. Still, she compelled herself to wait a few moments longer; then seeing that Marie-Anne still remained motionless, with closed eyes, she ventured to open the door softly, and enter the room in which her victim was lying. But she had not taken

three steps forward before Marie-Anne, as if she had been galvanized by an electric battery, suddenly rose and extended her arms to bar her enemy's passage. This movement was so unexpected and so appalling that Blanche recoiled. "The Marchioness de Sairmeuse," faltered Marie-Anne. "You, Blanche—here!" And finding an explanation of her sufferings in the presence of this young woman, who once had been her friend, but who was now her bitterest enemy, she exclaimed: "It is you who have murdered me!"

Blanche de Courtornieu's nature was one of those that break, but never bend. Since she had been detected, nothing in the world would induce her to deny her guilt. She advanced boldly, and in a firm voice replied: "Yes, I have taken my revenge. Do you think I didn't suffer that evening when you sent your brother to take my newly-wedded husband away, so that I have never since gazed upon his face?"

"Your husband! I sent my brother to take him away! I do not understand you."

"Do you dare deny, then, that you are not Martial's mistress!"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress! why I saw him yesterday for the first time since the Baron d'Escorval's escape." The effort which Marie-Anne had made to rise and speak had exhausted her strength. She fell back in the arm-chair.

But Blanche was pitiless. "You only saw Martial then," she said. "Pray, tell me, who gave you this costly furniture, these silk hangings, all the luxury that surrounds you?"

"Chanlouineau."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "So be it," she said, with an ironical smile. "But you are not waiting for Chanlouineau this evening? Have you warmed these slippers and laid this table for Chanlouineau? Was it Chanlouineau who sent his clothes by a peasant named Poignot? You see that I know everything?" She paused for some reply; but her victim was silent. "Who are you waiting for?" insisted Blanche. "Answer me!"

"I cannot!"

"Ah, of course not, because you know that it is your lover who is coming, you wretched woman—my husband, Martial!"

Marie-Anne was considering the situation as well as her intolerable sufferings and troubled mind would permit. Could she name the persons she was expecting? Would not any mention of the Baron d'Escorval to Blanche ruin and betray him? They were hoping for a letter of licence for a revision of judgment, but he was none the less under sentence of death, and liable to be executed in twenty-four hours.

"So you refuse to tell me whom you expect here—at midnight," repeated the marchioness.

"I refuse," gasped Marie-Anne; but at the same time she was seized with a sudden impulse. Although the slightest movement caused her intolerable agony, she tore her dress open, and drew a folded paper from her bosom. "I am not the Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress," she said, in an almost inaudible voice. "I am Maurice d'Escorval's wife. Here is the proof—read."

Blanche had scarcely glanced at the paper than she turned as pale as her victim. Her sight failed her; there was a strange ringing in her ears, and a cold sweat started from every pore in her skin. This paper was the marriage certificate of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, drawn up by the cure of Vigano, witnessed by the old physician and Bavois, and sealed with the parish seal. The proof was indisputable. She had committed a useless crime; she had murdered an innocent woman. The first good impulse of her life made her heart beat more quickly. She did not stop to consider; she forgot the danger to which she exposed herself, and in a ringing voice she cried; "Help! help!"

Eleven o'clock was just striking in the country; every one was naturally abed, and, moreover, the nearest farmhouse was half a league away. Blanche's shout was apparently lost in the stillness of the night. In the garden below Aunt Medea perhaps heard it; but she would have allowed herself to be cut to pieces rather than stir from her place. And yet there was one other who heard that cry of distress. Had Blanche and her victim been less overwhelmed with despair, they would have heard a noise on the stairs, which at that very moment were creaking under the tread of a man, who was cautiously climbing them. But he was not a saviour, for he did not answer the appeal. However, even if there had been help at hand, it would now have come too late.

Marie-Anne felt that there was no longer any hope for her, and that it was the chill of death which was creeping towards her heart. She felt that her life was fast ebbing away. So, when Blanche turned as if to rush out in search of assistance, she detained her with a gesture, and gently called her by her name. The murderess paused. "Do not summon any one," murmured Marie-Anne; "It would do no good. Let me at least die in peace. It will not be long now."

"Hush! do not speak so. You must not—you shall not die! If you should die—great God! what would my life be afterwards!"

Marie-Anne made no reply. The poison was rapidly completing its work. The sufferer's breath literally whistled as it forced its way through her inflamed throat. When she moved her tongue, it scorched her palate as if it had been a piece of hot iron; her lips were parched and swollen; and her hands, inert and paralysed, would no longer obey her will.

But the horror of the situation restored Blanche's calmness. "All is not yet lost," she exclaimed. "It was in that great box there on the table that I found the white powder I poured into the bowl. You must know what it is; you must know the antidote."

Marie-Anne sadly shook her head. "Nothing can save me now," she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice; "but I don't complain. Who knows the misery from which death may preserve me? I don't crave life; I have suffered so much during the past year; I have endured such humiliation; I have wept so much! A curse was on me!" She was suddenly endowed with that clearness of mental vision so often granted to the dying. She saw how she had wrought her own undoing by consenting to play the perfidious part her father had assigned her, and how she herself had paved the way for the slander, crimes, and misfortunes of which she had been the victim.

Her voice grew fainter and fainter. Worn out with suffering, a sensation of drowsiness stole over her. She was falling asleep in the arms of death. But suddenly such a terrible thought found its way into her failing mind that she gasped with agony, "My child!" And then, regaining, by a superhuman effort as much will, energy, and strength, as the poison would allow her, she straitened herself in the arm-chair, and though her features were contracted by

mortal anguish, yet with an energy of which no one would have supposed her capable, she exclaimed, "Blanche, listen to me. It is the secret of my life which I am going to reveal to you; no one suspects it. I have a son by Maurice. Alas! many months have elapsed since my husband disappeared. If he is dead, what will become of my child? Blanche, you, who have killed me, swear to me that you will be a mother to my child!"

Blanche was utterly overcome. "I swear!" she sobbed; "I swear!"

"On that condition, but on that condition alone, I pardon you. But take care! Do not forget your oath! Blanche, heaven sometimes allows the dead to avenge themselves. You have sworn, remember. My spirit will allow you no rest if you do not fulfil your vow!"

"I will remember," sobbed Blanche; "I will remember. But the child——"

"Ah! I was afraid—cowardly creature that I was! I dreaded the shame—then Maurice insisted—I sent my child away—your jealousy and my death are the punishment of my weakness. Poor child! abandoned to strangers! Wretched woman that I am! Ah! this suffering is too horrible. Blanche, remember——"

She spoke again, but her words were indistinct, inaudible. Blanche frantically seized the dying woman's arm, and endeavoured to arouse her. "To whom have you confided your child?" she repeated; "to whom? Marie-Anne—a word more—a single word—a name, Marie-Anne!"

The unfortunate woman's lips moved, but the death-rattle already sounded in her throat; a terrible convulsion shook her frame; she slid down from the chair, and fell full length upon the floor. Marie-Anne was dead—dead, and she had not disclosed the name of the old physician at Vigano to whom she had entrusted her child. She was dead, and the terrified murderess stood in the middle of the room as rigid and motionless as a statue. It seemed to her that madness—a madness like that which had stricken her father—was working in her brain. She forgot everything; she forgot that some one was expected at midnight; that time was flying, and that she would surely be discovered if she did not fly. But the man who had entered the house when she cried for help was watching over her. As soon as he saw that Marie-Anne had breathed her last, he pushed against the door, and thrust his leering face into the room.

"Chupin!" faltered Blanche.

"In the flesh," he responded. "This was a grand chance for you. Ah, ha! The business riled your stomach a little; but nonsense! that will soon pass off. But we must not dawdle here: some one may come in. Let us make haste."

Mechanically the murderess stepped forward, but Marie-Anne's dead body lay between her and the door, barring the passage. To leave the room it was necessary to step over her victim's lifeless form. She had not courage to do so, and recoiled with a shudder. But Chupin was troubled by no such scruples. He sprang across the body, lifted Blanche as if she had been a child, and carried her out of the house. He was intoxicated with joy. He need have no fears for the future now; for Blanche was bound to him by the strongest of chains—complicity in crime. He saw himself on the threshold of a life of constant revelry. All remorse anent Lacheneur's betrayal had departed. He would be sumptuously fed, lodged, and clothed; and, above all, effectually protected by an army of servants.

While these agreeable thoughts were darting through his mind, the cool night air was reviving the terror-stricken Marchioness de Sairmeuse. She intimated that she should prefer to walk, and accordingly Chupin deposited her on her feet some twenty paces from the house. Aunt Medea was already with them after the fashion of a dog left at the door by its master while the latter goes into a house. She had instinctively followed her niece, when she perceived the old poacher carrying her out of the cottage.

"We must not stop to talk," said Chupin. "Come, I will lead the way." And taking Blanche by the arm, he hastened towards the grove. "Ah! so Marie-Anne had a child," he remarked, as they hurried on. "She pretended to be such a saint! But where the deuce has she placed it?"

"I shall find it," replied Blanche.

"Hum! that is easier said than done," quoth the old poacher, thoughtfully.

Scarcely had he spoken than a shrill laugh resounded in the darkness. In the twinkling of an eye Chupin had released his hold on Blanche's arm, and assumed an attitude of defence. The precaution was fruitless; for at the same moment a man concealed among the trees bounded upon him from behind, and, plunging a knife four times into his writhing body, exclaimed, "Holy Virgin! now is my vow fulfilled! I shall no longer have to eat with my fingers!"

"Balstain! the innkeeper!" groaned the wounded man, sinking to the ground.

Blanche seemed rooted to the spot with horror; but Aunt Medea for once in her life had some energy in her fear. "Come!" she shrieked, dragging her niece away "Come—he is dead!"

Not quite, for the old traitor had sufficient strength remaining to crawl home and knock at the door. His wife and youngest boy were sleeping soundly, and it was his eldest son, who had just returned home, who opened the door. Seeing his father prostrate on the ground, the young man thought he was intoxicated, and tried to lift him and carry him into the house, but the old poacher begged him to desist. "Don't touch me," said he. "It is all over with me! but listen: Lacheneur's daughter has just been poisoned by Madame Blanche. It was to tell you this that I dragged myself here. This knowledge is worth a fortune, my boy, if you are not a fool!" And then he died without being able to tell his family where he had concealed the price of Lacheneur's blood.

XXXIII.

It will be recollected that of all those who witnessed the Baron d'Escorval's terrible fall over the precipice below the citadel of Montaignac, the Abbe Midon was the only one who did not despair. He set about his task with more than courage, with a reverent faith in the protection of providence, remembering Ambroise Pare's sublime phrase—"I dress the wound—God heals it." That he was right to hope was conclusively shown by the fact that after six months sojourn in Father Poignot's house, the baron was able to sit up and even to limp about with the aid of crutches. On reaching this stage of recovery, however, when it was essential he should take some little exercise, he was seriously inconvenienced by the diminutive proportions of Poignot's loft, so that he welcomed with intense delight the prospect of taking up his abode at the Borderie with Marie-Anne; and when indeed the abbe fixed the day for moving, he grew as impatient for it to arrive, as a schoolboy is for the holidays. "I am suffocating here," he said to his wife, "literally suffocating. The time passes so slowly. When will the happy day come!"

It came at last. The morning was spent in packing up such things as they had managed to procure, during their stay at the farm; and soon after nightfall Poignot's elder son began carrying them away. "Everything is at the Borderie," said the honest fellow, on returning from his last trip, "and Mademoiselle Lacheneur bids the baron bring a good appetite."

"I shall have one, never fear!" responded M. d'Escorval gaily. "We shall all have one."

Father Poignot himself was busy harnessing his best horse to the cart which was to convey the baron to his new home. The worthy man felt sad as he thought that these guests, for whose sake he had incurred such danger, were now going to leave him. He felt he should acutely miss them, that the house would seem gloomy and deserted after they had left. He would allow no one else to arrange the mattress intended for M. d'Escorval comfortably in the cart; and when he had done this to his satisfaction, he murmured, with a sigh, "It's time to start!" and turned to climb the narrow staircase leading to the loft.

M. d'Escorval with a patient's natural egotism had not thought of the parting. But when he saw the honest farmer, coming to bid him good-bye, with signs of deep emotion on his face, he forgot all the comforts that awaited him at the Borderie, in the remembrance of the royal and courageous hospitality he had received in the house he was about to leave. The tears sprang to his eyes. "You have rendered me a service which nothing can repay, Father Poignot," he said, with intense feeling. "You have saved my life."

"Oh! we won't talk of that, baron. In my place, you would have done the same—neither more nor less."

"I shall not attempt to express my thanks, but I hope to live long enough to show my gratitude."

The staircase was so narrow that they had considerable difficulty in carrying the baron down; but finally they had him stretched comfortably on his mattress in the cart; a few handfuls of straw being scattered over his limbs so as to hide him from the gaze of any inquisitive passers-by. The latter was scarcely to be expected it is true, for it was now fully eleven o'clock at night. Parting greetings were exchanged, and then the cart which young Poignot drove with the utmost caution started slowly on its way.

On foot, some twenty paces in the rear came Madame d'Escorval, leaning on the abbe's arm. It was very dark, but even if they had been in the full sunshine, the former cure of Sairmeuse might have encountered any of his old parishioners without the least danger of detection. He had allowed his hair and beard to grow; his tonsure had entirely disappeared, and his sedentary life had caused him to become much stouter. He was clad like all the well-to-do peasants of the neighbourhood, his face being partially hidden by a large slouch hat. He had not felt so much at ease for months past. Obstacles which had originally seemed to him insurmountable, had now vanished, and in the near future he saw the baron's innocence proclaimed by an impartial tribunal, while he himself was re-installed in the parsonage of Sairmeuse. If it had not been for his recollection of Maurice he would have had nothing to trouble his mind. Why had young d'Escorval given no sign of life? It seemed impossible for him to have met with any misfortune without hearing of it, for there was brave old Corporal Bavois who would have risked anything to come and warn them, if Maurice had been in danger. The abbe was so absorbed in these reflections, that he did not notice Madame d'Escorval was leaning more heavily on his arm and gradually slackening her pace. "I am ashamed to confess it," she said at last, "but I can go no farther. It is so long since I was out of doors, that I have almost forgotten how to walk."

"Fortunately we are almost there," replied the priest; and indeed a moment afterwards young Poignot drew up at the corner of the foot-path leading to the Borderie. Telling the baron that the journey was ended he gave a low whistle, like that which had warned Marie-Anne of his arrival a few hours before. No one appeared or replied, so he whistled again, in a louder key, and then a third time with all his might—still there was no response. Madame d'Escorval and the abbe had now overtaken the cart, "It's very strange that Marie-Anne doesn't hear me," remarked young Poignot, turning to them. "We can't take the baron to the house until we have seen her. She knows that very well. Shall I run up and warn her?"

"She's asleep, perhaps," replied the abbe; "stay with your horse, my boy, and I'll go and wake her."

He certainly did not feel the least uneasiness. All was calm and still outside, and a bright light shone through the windows of the upper floor. Still, when he perceived the open door, a vague presentiment of evil stirred his heart. "What can this mean?" he thought. There was no light in the lower rooms, and he had to feel for the staircase with his hands. At last he found it and went up. Another open door was in front of him; he stepped forward and reached the threshold. Then, so suddenly that he almost fell backward—he paused horror-stricken at the sight before him. Poor Marie-Anne was lying on the floor. Her eyes, which were wide open, were covered with a white film; her tongue was hanging black and swollen from her mouth. "Dead!" faltered the priest; "dead!" But this could not be. The abbe conquered his weakness, and approaching the poor girl, he took her by the hand. It was icy cold; and her arm was as rigid as iron. "Poisoned!" he murmured: "poisoned with arsenic." He rose to his feet, and was casting a bewildered glance around the room, when his eyes fell on his medicine chest, standing open on a side-table. He rushed towards it, took out a vial, uncorked it, and turned it over on the palm of his hand—it was empty. "I was not mistaken!" he exclaimed.

But he had no time to lose in conjectures. The first thing to be done was to induce the baron to return to the farm-house without telling him of the terrible misfortune which had occurred. It would not be very difficult to find a pretext. Summoning all his courage the priest hastened back to the waggon, and with well-affected calmness told M. d'Escorval that it would be impossible for him to take up his abode at the Borderie at present, that several suspicious-looking characters had been seen prowling about, and that they must be more prudent than ever now, so as not to render Martial's intervention useless. At last, but not without considerable reluctance, the baron yielded. "As you desire it, cure," he sighed, "I must obey. Come, Poignot, my boy, drive me back to your father's house."

Madame d'Escorval took a seat in her cart beside her husband. The priest stood watching them as they drove off, and it was not until the sound of the wheels had died away in the distance that he ventured to return to the Borderie. He was climbing the stairs again when he heard a faint moan in the room where Marie-Anne was lying. The sound sent all his blood wildly rushing to his heart, and with one bound he had reached the upper floor. Beside the corpse a young man was kneeling, weeping bitterly. The expression of his face, his attitude, his sobs betrayed the wildest despair. He was so lost in grief that he did not observe the abbe's entrance. Who was this mourner who had found his way to the house of death? At last, however, though he did not recognize him, the priest divined who he must be. "Jean!" he cried, "Jean Lacheneur!" The young fellow sprang to his feet with a pale face and threatening look. "Who are you?" he asked vehemently. "What are you doing here? What do you want with me?"

The former cure of Sairmeuse was so effectually disguised by his peasant dress and long beard, that he had to name himself. "You, Monsieur abbe," exclaimed Jean. "It is God who has sent you here! Marie-Anne cannot be dead! You, who have saved so many others, will save her." But as the priest sadly pointed to heaven, the young fellow paused, and his face became most ghastly looking than before. He understood now that there was no hope. "Ah!" he murmured in a desponding tone, "fate shows us no mercy. I have been watching over Marie-Anne, from a distance; and this evening I was coming to warn her to be cautious, for I knew she was in great danger. An hour ago, while I was eating my supper in a wine-shop at Sairmeuse, Grollet's son came in. 'Is that you, Jean?' said he. 'I just saw Chupin hiding near your sister's house; when he observed me he slunk away.' When I heard that, I hastened here like a crazy man. I ran, but when fate is against you, what can you do? I arrived too late!"

The abbe reflected for a moment. "Then you suppose it was Chupin?" he asked.

"I don't suppose; I feel certain that it was he—the miserable traitor!—who committed this foul deed."

"Still, what motive could he have had?"

With a discordant laugh that almost seemed a yell, Jean answered: "Oh, you may be certain that the daughter's blood will yield him a richer reward than did the father's. Chupin has been the instrument; but it was not he who conceived the crime. You will have to seek higher for the culprit, much higher, in the finest chateau of the country, in the midst of an army of retainers at Sairmeuse."

"Wretched man, what do you mean?"

"What I say." And he coldly added: "Martial de Sairmeuse is the assassin."

The priest recoiled. "You are mad!" he said severely.

But Jean gravely shook his head. "If I seem so to you, sir," he replied, "it is only because you are ignorant of Martial's wild passion for Marie-Anne. He wanted to make her his mistress. She had the audacity to refuse the honour; and that was a crime for which she must be punished. When the Marquis de Sairmeuse became convinced that Lacheneur's daughter would never be his, he poisoned her that she might not belong to any one else." All efforts to convince Jean of the folly of his accusations would at that moment have been vain. No proofs would have convinced him. He would have closed his eyes to all evidence.

"To-morrow, when he is more calm, I will reason with him," thought the abbe; and then he added aloud: "We can't allow the poor girl's body to remain here on the floor. Help me, and we will place it on the bed."

Jean trembled from head to foot, and his hesitation was perceptible; but at last, after a severe struggle, he complied. No one had ever yet slept on this bed which Chanlouineau had destined for Marie-Anne, saying to himself that it should be for her, or for no one. And Marie-Anne it was who rested there the first—sleeping the sleep of death. When the sad task was accomplished, Jean threw himself into the same arm-chair in which Marie-Anne had breathed her last, and with his face buried in his hands, and his elbows resting on his knees, he sat there as silent and motionless as the statues of sorrow placed above the last resting places of the dead.

In the meanwhile, the abbe knelt by the bed-side, and began reciting the prayers for the departed, entreating God to grant peace and happiness in heaven to her who had suffered so much on earth. But he prayed only with his lips, for in spite of all his efforts, his mind would persist in wandering. He was striving to solve the mystery that enshrouded Marie-Anne's death. Had she been murdered? Was it possible that she had committed suicide? The latter idea occurred to him without his having any great faith in it; but, on the other hand, how could her death possibly be the result of crime? He had carefully examined the room, and had discovered nothing that betrayed a stranger's visit. All he could prove was that his vial of arsenic was empty, and that Marie-Anne had been poisoned by absorbing it in the broth a few drops of which were left in the bowl standing on the mantelpiece. "When morning comes," thought the abbe, "I will look outside."

Accordingly, at daybreak he went into the garden, and made a careful examination of the premises. At first he saw nothing that gave him the least clue, and he was about to abandon his investigations, when on entering the little grove, he espied a large dark stain on the grass a few paces off. He went nearer—it was blood! In a state of great excitement, he summoned Jean to inform him of the discovery.

"Some one has been murdered here," said young Lacheneur; "and only last night, for the blood has scarcely had time to dry."

"The victim must have lost a great deal of blood," remarked the priest; "it might be possible to discover who he was by following these stains."

"Yes, I will try," replied Jean with alacrity. "Go into the house, sir; I will soon be back again."

A child might have followed the trail of the wounded man, for the blood stains left along his line of route were so frequent and distinct. These tell-tale marks led to Chupin's hovel, the door of which was closed. Jean rapped, however, without the slightest hesitation, and when the old poacher's eldest son opened the door, he perceived a very singular spectacle. The dead body had been thrown on to the ground, in a corner of the hut, the bedstead was overturned and broken, all the straw had been torn from the mattress, and the dead man's wife and sons armed with spades and pick-axes were wildly overturning the beaten soil that formed the hovel's only floor. They were seeking for the hidden treasure, for the 20,000 francs in gold, paid for Lacheneur's betrayal! "What do you want?" asked the widow, roughly.

"I want to see Father Chupin."

"Can't you see that he's been murdered," replied one of the sons. And brandishing his pick close to Jean's head, he added: "And you're the murderer, perhaps. But that's for justice to determine. Now, decamp; if you don't want me to do for you."

Jean could scarcely restrain himself from punishing young Chupin for his threat, but under the circumstances a conflict was scarcely permissible. Accordingly, he turned without another word hastened back to the Borderie. Chupin's death upset all his plans, and greatly irritated him. "I swore that the wretch who betrayed my father should perish by my hand," he murmured; "and now I am deprived of my vengeance. Some one has cheated me out of it. Who could it be? Can Martial have assassinated Chupin after he murdered Marie-Anne? The best way to assure one's self of an accomplice's silence is certainly to kill him."

Jean had reached the Borderie, and was on the point of going up-stairs, when he fancied he heard some one talking in the back room. "That's strange," he said to himself. "Who can it be?" And yielding to the impulse of

curiosity, he tapped against the communicating door.

The abbe instantly made his appearance, hurriedly closing the door behind him. He was very pale and agitated.

"Who's there?" inquired Jean, eagerly.

"Why, Maurice d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois."

"My God!"

"And it's a miracle that Maurice has not been up stairs."

"But whence does he come from? Why have we had no news of him?"

"I don't know. He has only been here five minutes. Poor boy! after I told him his father was safe, his first words were: 'And Marie-Anne!' He loves her more devotedly than ever. He comes home with his heart full of her, confident and hopeful; and I tremble—I fear to tell him the truth."

"Yes, it's really too terrible!"

"Now I have warned you, be prudent—and come in." They entered the room together; and both Maurice and the old soldier greeted Jean warmly. They had not seen one another since the duel at La Reche, interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers; and when they separated that day they scarcely expected to meet again.

Now Maurice, however, was in the best of spirits, and it was with a smile on his face that he remarked: "I am glad you've come. There's nothing to fear now." Then turning to the abbe, he remarked: "But I just promised to let you know the reason of my long silence. Three days after we crossed the frontier—Corporal Bavois and I—we reached Turin. We were tired out. We went to a small inn, and they gave us a room with two beds. While we were undressing, the corporal said to me: 'I am quite capable of sleeping two whole days without waking,' while I promised myself at least a good twelve hours' rest; but we reckoned without our host, as you'll see. It was scarcely daybreak when we were suddenly woke up. There were a dozen men in our room, one or two of them in some official costume. They spoke to us in Italian, and ordered us to dress ourselves. They were so numerous that resistance was useless, so we obeyed; and an hour after we were both in prison, confined in the same cell. You may well imagine what our thoughts were. The corporal remarked to me, in that cool way of his: 'It will require four days to obtain our extradition, and three days to take us back to Montaignac—that's seven, then there'll be one day more to try us, so we've in all just eight days to live.' Bavois said that at least a hundred times during the first five or six days of our confinement, but five months passed by, and every night we went to bed expecting they'd come for us on the following morning. But they didn't come. We were kindly treated. They did not take away my money; and they willingly sold us various little luxuries. We were allowed two hours of exercise every day in the courtyard, and the keepers even lent us several books to read. In short, I shouldn't have had any particular cause for complaint, if I had only been allowed to receive or to forward letters, or if I had been able to communicate with my father or Marie-Anne. But we were in the secret cells, and were not allowed to have any intercourse with the other prisoners. At length our detention seemed so strange and became so insupportable that we resolved to obtain some explanation of it at any cost. We changed our tactics. We had hitherto been quiet and submissive: but now we became as violent and unmanageable as possible. The whole prison resounded with our cries and protestations; we were continually sending for the superintendent, and claiming the intervention of the French ambassador. These proceedings at last had the desired effect. One fine afternoon the governor of the jail released us, not without expressing his regret at being deprived of the society of such amiable and charming guests. Our first act, as you may suppose, was to hasten to the ambassador. We didn't see that dignitary, but his secretary received us. He knit his brows when I told my story, and became excessively grave. I remember each word of his reply. 'Sir,' said he, 'I can assure you most positively that any proceedings instituted against you in France have had nothing whatever to do with your detention here.' And I expressed my astonishment frankly. 'One moment,' he added, 'I will give you my opinion. One of your enemies—I leave you to discover which—must exert a powerful influence in Turin. You were in his way, perhaps, and he had you imprisoned by the Piedmontese police.'

Jean Lacheneur struck the table beside him with his clenched fist. "Ah! the secretary was right!" he exclaimed. "Maurice, it was Martial de Sairmeuse who caused your arrest——"

"Or the Marquis de Courtornieu," interrupted the abbe, with a warning glance at Jean.

In a moment Maurice's eyes gleamed brilliantly, then, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, he said, "Never mind; I don't wish to trouble myself any more about the past. My father is well again—that is the main thing. We can easily find some way of getting him safely across the frontier. And then Marie-Anne and I—we will tend him so devotedly that he will soon forget it was my rashness that almost cost him his life. He is so good, so indulgent for the faults of others. We will go and reside in Italy or Switzerland, and you shall accompany us, Monsieur the Abbe, and you as well, Jean. As for you, corporal, it's already decided that you belong to our family."

While Maurice spoke in this fashion, so hopefully, so confidently, Jean and the abbe, realising the bitter truth, sought to avert their faces; but they could not conceal their agitation from young D'Escorval's searching glance. "What is the matter?" he asked, with evident surprise.

They trembled, hung their heads, but did not say a word. Maurice's astonishment changed to a vague, inexpressible fear. He enumerated all the misfortunes which could possibly have befallen him.

"What has happened?" he asked in a husky voice. "My father is safe is he not? You said that my mother would want nothing more, if I were only by her side again. Is it Marie-Anne then——" He hesitated.

"Courage, Maurice," murmured the abbe. "Courage!"

The young fellow tottered as if he were about to fall. He had turned intensely pale. "Marie-Anne is dead!" he exclaimed.

Jean and the abbe were silent.

"Dead!" repeated Maurice; "and no secret voice warned me! Dead! When?"

"She died only last night," replied Jean.

Maurice rose. "Last night?" said he. "In that case, then, she is still here. Where?—upstairs?" And without waiting for a reply, he darted toward the staircase so quickly that neither Jean nor the abbe had time to intercept him. With three bounds he reached the room above; he walked straight to the bed, and with a firm hand turned back the sheet that hid his loved one's face. But at the same moment he recoiled with a heart-broken cry. What! was this the beautiful, the radiant Marie-Anne—she whom he had loved so fervently! He did not recognize her. He could not

recognize these distorted features—that swollen, discoloured face—these eyes, now almost hidden by the purple swelling round them. When Jean and the priest entered the room they found him standing with his head thrown back, his eyes dilated with terror, his right arm rigidly extended toward the corpse. “Maurice,” said the priest, gently, “be calm. Courage!”

The young fellow turned with an expression of complete bewilderment upon his features. “Yes,” he faltered; “that is what I need—courage!” He staggered as he spoke, and they were obliged to support him to an arm-chair.

“Be a man,” continued the priest. “Where is your energy? To live is to suffer.”

He listened, but did not seem to understand. “Live!” he murmured; “why should I live since she is dead?”

His eyes gleamed so strangely that the abbe was alarmed. “If he does not weep, he will most certainly lose his reason!” thought the priest. Then in a commanding voice he added aloud, “You have no right to despair; you owe a sacred duty to your child.”

The same remembrance which had given Marie-Anne strength to hold even death itself at bay for a moment, saved Maurice from the dangerous trance into which he was sinking. He shuddered as if he had received an electric shock, and springing from his chair, “That is true,” he cried. “Take me to my child!”

“Not just now, Maurice; wait a little.”

“Where is it? Tell me where it is.”

“I cannot; I do not know.”

An expression of unspeakable anguish stole over Maurice’s face, and in a broken voice he said: “What! you don’t know? Did she not confide in you?”

“No. I suspected her secret. I, alone——”

“You, alone! Then the child is perhaps dead. Even if it is living, who can tell where it is?”

“We shall no doubt find a clue.”

“You are right,” faltered Maurice. “When Marie-Anne knew that her life was in danger, she could not have forgotten her little one. Those who cared for her in her last moments must have received some message for me. I must see those who watched over her. Who were they?” The priest averted his face. “I asked you who was with her when she died,” repeated Maurice, in a sort of frenzy. And, as the abbe remained silent, a terrible light dawned on the young fellow’s mind. He understood the cause of Marie-Anne’s distorted features now. “She perished the victim of a crime!” he exclaimed. “Some monster killed her. If she died such a death, our child is lost for ever! And it was I who recommended, who commanded the greatest precautions! Ah! we are all of us cursed!” He sank back in his chair, overwhelmed with sorrow and remorse, and with big tears rolling slowly down his cheeks.

“He is saved!” thought the abbe, whose heart bled at the sight of such intense sorrow.

Jean Lacheneur stood by the priest’s side with gloom upon his face. Suddenly he drew the Abbe Midon towards one of the windows: “What is this about a child?” he enquired, harshly.

The priest’s face flushed. “You have heard,” he answered, laconically.

“Am I to understand that Marie-Anne was Maurice’s mistress, and that she had a child by him? Is that the case? I won’t, I can’t believe it! She whom I revered as a saint! What! you would have me believe that her eyes lied—her eyes so chaste, so pure? And he—Maurice—he whom I loved as a brother! So his friendship was only a cloak which he assumed so as to rob us of our honour!” Jean hissed these words through his set teeth in such low tones that Maurice, absorbed in his agony of grief, did not overhear him. “But how did she conceal her shame?” he continued. “No one suspected it—absolutely no one. And what has she done with her child? Did the thought of disgrace frighten her? Did she follow the example of so many ruined and forsaken women? Did she murder her own child? Ah, if it be alive I will find it, and in any case Maurice shall be punished for his perfidy as he deserves.” He paused; the window was open, and the sound of galloping horses could be plainly heard approaching along the adjacent highway. Both Jean and the abbe leant forward and looked out. Two horsemen were riding toward the Borderie—the first some ten yards in advance of the other. The former halted at the corner of the garden path, threw his reins to his follower—a groom—and then strode on foot toward the house. On recognizing this visitor, Jean bounded from the window with a yell. He clutched Maurice by the shoulders, and, shaking him violently, exclaimed, “Up! here comes Martial, Marie-Anne’s murderer! Up! he is coming! He is at our mercy!”

Maurice sprang to his feet, infuriated; but the abbe darted to the door and intercepted both young fellows as they were about to leave the room. “Not a word! not a threat!” he said, imperiously. “I forbid it. At least respect the presence of death!” He spoke with such authority, and his glance was so commanding, that both Jean and Maurice involuntarily paused. Before the priest had time to add another word, Martial was there. He did not cross the threshold. One look and he realised the situation. He turned very pale, but not a word escaped his lips. Wonderful as was his usual power of self-control he could not articulate a syllable; and it was only by pointing to the bed on which Marie-Anne’s lifeless form was reposing that he asked for an explanation.

“She was infamously poisoned last evening,” sadly replied the abbe.

Then Maurice, forgetting the priest’s demands, stepped forward. “She was alone and defenseless,” he said vehemently. “I have only been at liberty during the last two days. But I know the name of the man who had me arrested at Turin, and thrown into prison. They told me the coward’s name! Yes, it was you, you infamous wretch! Ah! you dare not deny it; you confess your guilt, you scoundrel!”

Once again the abbe interposed; He threw himself between the rivals, fearing lest they should come to blows. But the Marquis de Sairmeuse had already resumed his usual haughty and indifferent manner. He took a bulky envelope from his pocket, and threw it on the table. “This,” said he coldly, “is what I was bringing to Mademoiselle Lacheneur. It contains, first of all, royal letters of licence from his majesty for the Baron d’Escorval, who is now at liberty to return to his old home. He is, in fact, free and saved, for he is granted a new trial, and there can be no doubt of his acquittal. In the same envelope you will also find a decree of noncomplicity rendered in favour of the Abbe Midon, and an order from the bishop of the diocese, reinstating him as cure of Sairmeuse; and, finally, Corporal Bavois’ discharge from the service, drawn up in proper form, with the needful memorandum securing his right to a pension.”

He paused, and as his hearers stood motionless with wonder, he turned and approached Marie-Anne’s bedside. Then, with his hand raised to heaven over the lifeless form of her whom he had loved, and in a voice that would have

made the murderess tremble in her innermost soul, he solemnly exclaimed: "I swear to you, Marie-Anne, that I will avenge you!" For a few seconds he stood motionless, then suddenly he stooped, pressed a kiss on the dead girl's brow, and left the room.

"And you think that man can be guilty!" exclaimed the abbe. "You see, Jean, that you are mad!"

"And this last insult to my dead sister is an honour, I suppose," said Jean, with a furious gesture.

"And the wretch binds my hands by saving my father!" exclaimed Maurice.

From his place by the window, the abbe saw Martial vault into the saddle. But the marquis did not take the road to Montagnac. It was towards the Chateau de Courtornieu that he now hastened.

XXXIV.

BLANCHE'S reason had sustained a frightful shock, when Chupin was obliged to lift and carry her out of Marie-Anne's room. But she well-nigh lost consciousness altogether when she saw the old poacher struck down by her side. However, as will be remembered, Aunt Medea, at least, had some energy in her fright. She seized her bewildered niece's arm, and by dint of dragging and pushing had her back at the chateau in much less time than it had taken them to reach the Borderie. It was half-past one in the morning when they reached the little garden-gate, by which they had left the grounds. No one in the chateau had noticed their long absence. This was due to several different circumstances. First of all, to the precautions which Blanche herself had taken in giving orders, before going out, that no one should come to her room, on any pretext whatever, unless she rang. Then it also chanced to be the birthday of the marquis's valet de chambre, and the servants had dined more sumptuously than usual. They had toasts and songs over their dessert; and at the finish of the repast, they amused themselves with an improvised ball. They were still dancing when Blanche and her aunt returned. None of the doors had yet been secured for the night, and the pair succeeded in reaching Blanche's room without being observed. When the door had been securely closed, and there was no longer any fear of listeners, Aunt Medea attacked her niece.

"Now, will you explain what happened at the Borderie; and what you were doing there?" she inquired, in a tone of unusual authority.

Blanche shuddered. "Why do you wish to know?" she asked.

"Because I suffered agony during the hours I was waiting for you in the garden. What was the meaning of those dreadful cries I heard? Why did you call for help? I heard a death-rattle that made my hair stand on end with terror. Why did Chupin have to bring you out in his arms?" She paused for a moment, and then finding that Blanche did not reply. "You don't answer me!" she exclaimed.

The young marchioness was longing to annihilate her dependent relative, who might ruin her by a thoughtless word, and whom she would ever have beside her—a living memento of her crime. However, what should she say? Would it be better to reveal the truth, horrible as it was, or to invent some plausible explanation? If she confessed everything she would place herself at Aunt Medea's mercy. But, on the other hand, if she deceived her aunt, it was more than probable that the latter would betray her by some involuntary remark when she heard of the crime committed at the Borderie. Hence, under the circumstances, the wisest plan, perhaps, would be to speak out frankly, to teach her relative her lesson, and try and imbue her with some firmness. Having come to this conclusion, Blanche disdained all concealment. "Ah, well!" she said, "I was jealous of Marie-Anne. I thought she was Martial's mistress. I was half-crazed, and I poisoned her."

She expected a despairing cry, or even a fainting fit, but, to her surprise, Aunt Medea merely shed a few tears—such as she often wept for any trifle—and exclaimed: "How terrible. What if it should be discovered?" In point of fact, stupid as the neglected spinster might be, she had guessed the truth before she questioned her niece. And not merely was she prepared for some such answer, but the tyranny she had endured for years had well-nigh destroyed all the real moral sensibility she had ever possessed.

On noting her aunt's comparative composure, Blanche breathed more freely. She never imagined that her impoverished relative was already meditating some sort of revenge for all the slights heaped on her in past years; but felt quite convinced that she could count on Aunt Medea's absolute silence and submission. With this idea in her head she began to relate all the circumstances of the frightful drama enacted at the Borderie. In so doing she yielded to a desire stronger than her own will: to the wild longing that often seizes the most hardened criminal, and forces—irresistibly impels him to talk of his crimes, even when he distrusts his confidant. But when she came to speak of the proofs which had convinced her of her lamentable mistake, she suddenly paused in dismay.

What had she done with the marriage certificate signed by the cure of Vigano, and which she remembered holding in her hands? She sprang up, and felt in the pocket of her dress. Ah, she had it safe. It was there. Without again unfolding it she threw into a drawer, and turned the key.

Aunt Medea wished to retire to her own room, but Blanche entreated her to remain. She was unwilling to be left alone—she dared not—she was afraid. And as if she desired to silence the inward voice tormenting her, she talked on with extreme volubility, repeating again and again that she was ready to do anything in expiation of her crime, and vowing that she would overcome all impossibilities in her quest for Marie-Anne's child. The task was both a difficult and dangerous one, for an open search for the child would be equivalent to a confession of guilt. Hence, she must act secretly, and with great caution. "But I shall succeed," she said. "I will spare no expense." And remembering her vow, and her dying victim's threats, she added: "I must succeed. I swore to do so, and I was forgiven under those conditions."

In the meanwhile, Aunt Medea sat listening in astonishment. It was incomprehensible to her, that her niece, with her dreadful crime still fresh in her mind, could coolly reason, deliberate, and make plans for the future. "What an iron will!" thought the dependent relative; but in her bewilderment she quite overlooked one or two circumstances that would have enlightened any ordinary observer.

Blanche was seated on her bed with her hair unbound; her eyes were glistening with delirium, and her incoherent words and excited gestures betrayed the frightful anxiety that was torturing her. And she talked and talked, now narrating, and now questioning Aunt Medea, and forcing her to reply, only that she might escape from her own thoughts. Morning had already dawned, and the servants could be heard bustling about the chateau, while Blanche, oblivious of everything around her, was still explaining how, in less than a year, she could hope to restore

Marie-Anne's child to Maurice d'Escorval. She paused abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Instinct had suddenly warned her of the danger she incurred in making the slightest change in her habits. Accordingly, she sent Aunt Medea away, then, at the usual hour, rang for her maid. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and she was just completing her toilette, when the ring of the outer bell announced a visitor. Almost immediately her maid, who had just previously left her, returned, evidently in a state of great excitement.

"What is the matter?" inquired Blanche, eagerly. "Who has come?"

"Ah, madame—that is, mademoiselle, if you only knew——"

"Will you speak?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse is downstairs in the blue drawing-room; and he begs mademoiselle to grant him a few minutes' conversation."

Had a thunderbolt riven the earth at her feet, the murderess could not have been more terrified. Her first thought was that everything had been discovered; for what else could have brought Martial there? She almost decided to send word that she was not at home, or that she was extremely ill; when reason told her that she was perhaps alarming herself needlessly, and that in any case the worst was preferable to suspense. "Tell the marquis that I will be with him in a moment," she at last replied.

She desired a few minutes solitude to compose her features, to regain her self-possession, if possible, and conquer the nervous trembling that made her shake like a leaf. But in the midst of her uneasiness a sudden inspiration brought a malicious smile to her lip. "Ah!" she thought, "my agitation will seem perfectly natural. It may even be of service." And yet as she descended the grand staircase, she could not help saying to herself: "Martial's presence here is incomprehensible."

It was certainly very extraordinary; and he himself had not come to Courtornieu without considerable hesitation. But it was the only means he had of procuring several important documents which were indispensable in the revision of M. d'Escorval's case. These documents, after the baron's condemnation, had been left in the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands. Now that the latter had gone out of his mind, it was impossible to ask him for them; and Martial was obliged to apply to his wife for permission to search for them among her father's papers. He had said to himself that morning: "I will carry the baron's letters of licence to Marie-Anne, and then I will push on to Courtornieu."

He arrived at the Borderie gay and confident, his heart full of hope; and found that Marie-Anne was dead. The discovery had been a terrible blow for Martial; and his conscience told him that he was not free from blame; that he had, at least, facilitated the perpetration of the crime. For it was indeed he who, by an abuse of influence, had caused Maurice's arrest at Turin. But though he was capable of the basest perfidy when his love was at stake, he was incapable of virulent animosity. Marie-Anne was dead; he had it in his power to revoke the benefits he had conferred, but the thought of doing so never once occurred to him. And when Jean and Maurice upbraided him, his only revenge was to overwhelm them by his magnanimity. When he left the Borderie, pale as a ghost, his lips still cold from the kiss still printed on the dead girl's brow, he said to himself: "For her sake, I will go to Courtornieu. In memory of her, the baron must be saved."

By the expression of the servants' faces as he leapt from the saddle in the courtyard of the chateau and asked to see Madame Blanche, he was again reminded of the sensation which this unexpected visit would necessarily cause. However, he cared little for it. He was passing through a crisis in which the mind can conceive no further misfortune, and becomes indifferent to everything. Still he trembled slightly when they ushered him into the blue drawing-room. He remembered the room well, for it was here that Blanche had been wont to receive him in days gone by, when his fancy was wavering between her and Marie-Anne. How many pleasant hours they had passed together here! He seemed to see Blanche again, as she was then, radiant with youth, gay and smiling. Her manner was affected, perhaps, but still it had seemed charming at the time.

At this very moment, Blanche entered the room. She looked so sad and careworn that her husband scarcely knew her. His heart was touched by the look of patient sorrow seemingly stamped upon her features. "How much you must have suffered, Blanche," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said.

It cost her an effort to repress her secret joy. She at once realised that he knew nothing of her crime; and noting his emotion, she perceived the profit she might derive from it. "I can never cease to regret having displeased you," she replied, in a sad humble voice. "I shall never be consoled."

She had touched the vulnerable spot in every man's heart. For there is no man so sceptical, so cold, or so heartless but his vanity is not flattered with the thought that a woman is dying for his sake. There is no man who is not moved by such a flattering idea; and who is not ready and willing to give, at least, a tender pity in exchange for such devotion.

"Is it possible that you could forgive me?" stammered Martial. The wily enchantress averted her face as if to prevent him from reading in her eyes a weakness of which she felt ashamed. This simple gesture was the most eloquent of answers. But Martial said no more on this subject. He asked for permission to inspect M. de Courtornieu's papers with the view of finding the documents he required for M. d'Escorval's case, and Blanche readily complied with his request. He then turned to take his leave, and fearing perhaps the consequences of too formal a promise he merely added: "Since you don't forbid it, Blanche, I will return—to-morrow—another day." However, as he rode back to Montaignac, his thoughts were busy. "She really loves me," he mused; "that pallor, that weariness could not be feigned. Poor girl! she is my wife, after all. The reasons that influenced me in my quarrel with her father exist no longer, for the Marquis de Courtornieu may be considered as dead."

All the inhabitants of Sairmeuse were congregated on the market-place when Martial rode through the village. They have just heard of the murder at the Borderie, and the abbe was now closeted with the magistrate, relating as far as he could the circumstances of the crime. After a prolonged enquiry, it was eventually reported that a man known as Chupin, a notoriously bad character, had entered the house of Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and taken advantage of her absence to mingle poison with her food; and the said Chupin had been himself assassinated soon after his crime, by a certain Balstain, whose whereabouts were unknown.

However, this affair soon interested the district far less than the constant visits which Martial was paying to Madame Blanche. Shortly afterwards it was rumoured that the Marquis and the Marchioness de Sairmeuse were reconciled; and indeed a few weeks later, they left for Paris with an intention of residing there permanently. A day or

two after their departure, the eldest of the Chupins also announced his determination of taking up his abode in the same great city. Some of his friends endeavoured to dissuade him, assuring him that he would certainly die of starvation; but with singular assurance, he replied: "On the contrary, I have an idea that I shan't want for anything so long as I live there."

XXXV.

TIME gradually heals all wounds; and its effacing fingers spare but few traces of events; which in their season may have absorbed the attention of many thousand minds. What remained to attest the reality of that fierce whirlwind of passion which had swept over the peaceful valley of the Oiselle? Only a charred ruin on La Reche, and a grave in the cemetery, on which was inscribed: "Marie-Anne Lacheneur, died at the age of twenty. Pray for her!" Recent as were the events of which that ruin and that grave stone seemed as it were the prologue and the epilogue, they were already relegated to the legendary past. The peasantry of Sairmeuse had other things to think about—the harvest, the weather, their sheep and cattle, and it was only a few old men, the politicians of the village, who at times turned their attention from agricultural incidents to remember the rising of Montaignac. Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, when they were gathered together at the local hostelry of the Boeuf Couronne, they would lay down their greasy cards and gravely discuss the events of the past year. And they never failed to remark that almost all the actors in that bloody drama at Montaignac had in common parlance, "come to a bad end." The victors and the vanquished seemed to encounter the same fate. Lacheneur had been beheaded; Chanlouineau, shot; Marie-Anne, poisoned, and Chupin, the traitor, the Duke de Sairmeuse's spy, stabbed to death. It was true that the Marquis de Courtornieu lived, or rather survived, but death would have seemed a mercy in comparison with such a total annihilation of intelligence. He had fallen below the level of a brute beast, which at least is endowed with instinct. Since his daughter's departure he had been ostensibly cared for by two servants, who did not allow him to give them much trouble, for whenever they wished to go out they complacently confined him, not in his room, but in the back cellar, so as to prevent his shrieks and ravings from being heard outside. If some folks supposed for awhile that the Sairmeuses would escape the fate of the others, they were grievously mistaken, for it was not long before the curse fell upon them as well.

One fine December morning, the Duke left the chateau to take part in a wolf-hunt in the neighbourhood. At nightfall, his horse returned, panting, covered with foam, and riderless. What had become of his master? A search was instituted at once, and all night long a score of men, carrying torches, wandered through the woods, shouting and calling at the top of their voices. Five days went by, and the search for the missing man was almost abandoned, when a shepherd lad, pale with fear, came to the chateau to tell the steward that he had discovered the Duke de Sairmeuse's body—lying all bloody and mangled at the foot of a precipice. It seemed strange that so excellent a rider should have met with such a fate; and there might have been some doubt as to its being an accident, had it not been for the explanation given by several of his grace's grooms. "The duke was riding an exceedingly vicious beast," these men remarked. "She was always taking fright and shying at everything."

A few days after this occurrence Jean Lacheneur left the neighbourhood. This singular fellow's conduct had caused considerable comment. When Marie-Anne died, although he was her natural heir, he at first refused to have anything to do with her property. "I don't want to take anything that came to her through Chanlouineau," he said to every one right and left, thus slandering his sister's memory, as he had slandered her when alive. Then, after a short absence from the district, and without any apparent reason, he suddenly changed his mind. He not only accepted the property, but made all possible haste to obtain possession of it. He excused his past conduct as best he could; but if he was to be believed, instead of acting in his own interest, he was merely carrying his sister's wishes into effect, for he over and over again declared that whatever price her property might fetch not a sou of its value would go into his own pockets. This much is certain, as soon as he obtained legal possession of the estate, he sold it, troubling himself but little as to the price he received, provided the purchasers paid cash. However, he reserved the sumptuous furniture of the room on the upper floor of the Borderie and burnt it—from the bed-stead to the curtains and the carpet—one evening in the little garden in front of the house. This singular act became the talk of the neighbourhood, and the villagers universally opined that Jean had lost his head. Those who hesitated to agree with this opinion, expressed it a short time afterwards, when it became known that Jean Lacheneur had engaged himself with a company of strolling players who stopped at Montaignac for a few days. The young fellow had both good advice and kind friends. M. d'Escorval and the abbe had exerted all their eloquence to induce him to return to Paris, and complete his studies; but in vain.

The priest and the baron no longer had to conceal themselves. Thanks to Martial de Sairmeuse they were now installed, the former at the parsonage and the latter at Escorval, as in days gone by. Acquitted at his new trial, re-installed in possession of his property, reminded of his frightful fall only by a slight limp, the baron would have deemed himself a fortunate man had it not been for his great anxiety on his son's account. Poor Maurice! The nails that secured Marie-Anne's coffin ere it was lowered into the sod seemed to have pierced his heart; and his very life now seemed dependent on the hope of finding his child. Relying already on the Abbe Midon's protection and assistance, he had confessed everything to his father, and had even confided his secret to Corporal Bavois, who was now an honoured guest at Escorval; and all three had promised him their best assistance. But the task was a difficult one and such chances of success as might have existed were greatly diminished by Maurice's determination that Marie-Anne's name should not be mentioned in prosecuting the search. In this he acted very differently to Jean. The latter slandered his murdered sister right and left, while Maurice sedulously sought to prevent her memory being tarnished.

The Abbe Midon did not seek to turn Maurice from his idea. "We shall succeed all the same," he said kindly, "with time and patience any mystery can be solved." He divided the department into a certain number of districts; and one of the little band went day by day from house to house questioning the inmates, in the most cautious manner, for fear of arousing suspicion; for a peasant becomes intractable if his suspicions are but once aroused. However, weeks went by, and still the quest was fruitless. Maurice was losing all hope. "My child must have died on coming into the world," he said, again and again.

But the abbe re-assured him. "I am morally certain that such was not the case," he replied. "By Marie-Anne's absence I can tell pretty nearly the date of her child's birth. I saw her after her recovery; she was comparatively gay

and smiling. Draw your own conclusions."

"And yet there isn't a nook or corner for miles round which we haven't explored."

"True; but we must extend the circle of our investigations."

The priest was now only striving to gain time, which as he knew full well is the sovereign balm for sorrow. His confidence had been very great at first, but it had sensibly diminished since he had questioned an old woman, who had the reputation of being one of the greatest gossips of the community. On being skilfully catechised by the abbe, this worthy dame replied that she knew nothing of such a child, but that there must be one in the neighbourhood, as this was the third time she had been questioned on the subject. Intense as was his surprise, the abbe succeeded in concealing it. He set the old gossip talking, and after two hours' conversation, he arrived at the conclusion that two persons in addition to Maurice were searching for Marie-Anne's child. Who these persons were and what their aim was, were points which the abbe failed to elucidate. "Ah" thought he, "after all, rascals have their use on earth. If we only had a man like Chupin to set on the trail!"

The old poacher was dead, however, and his eldest son—the one who knew Blanche's secret—was in Paris. Only the widow and the second son remained at Sairmeuse. They had not, as yet, succeeded in discovering the twenty thousand francs, but the fever for gold was still burning in their veins, and they persisted in their search. From morn till night the mother and son toiled on, until the earth round their hut had been fully explored to the depth of six feet. However, a peasant passed by one day and made a remark which suddenly caused them to abandon their search. "Really, my boy," he said, addressing young Chupin, "I didn't think you were such a fool as to persist in bird's nesting after the chick was hatched and had flown. Your brother in Paris can no doubt tell you where the treasure was concealed."

"Holy Virgin! you're right!" cried the younger Chupin. "Wait till I get money enough to take me to Paris, and we'll see."

XXXVI.

MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE'S unexpected visit to the Chateau de Courtornieu had alarmed Aunt Medea even more than it had alarmed Blanche. In five minutes, more ideas passed through the dependent relative's mind than during the last five years. In fancy she already saw the gendarmes at the chateau; her niece arrested, confined in the Montaignac prison, and brought before the Assize Court. She might herself remain quiet if that were all there was to fear! But suppose she were compromised, suspected of complicity as well, dragged before the judges, and even accused of being the only culprit! At this thought her anxiety reached a climax, and finding the suspense intolerable, she ventured downstairs. She stole on tiptoe into the great ball room, and applying her ear to the keyhole of the door leading into the blue salon, she listened attentively to Blanche and Martial's conversation. What she heard convinced her that her fears were groundless. She drew a long breath, as if a mighty burden had been lifted from her breast. But a new idea, which was to grow, flourish, and bear fruit, had just taken root in her mind. When Martial left the room, she at once opened the door by which she had been standing, and entered the blue reception room, thus admitting as it were that she had been a listener. Twenty-four hours earlier she would not even have dreamed of committing such an audacious act. "Well," she exclaimed, "Blanche, we were frightened for nothing."

Blanche did not reply. The young marchioness was weighing in her mind the probable consequences of all these events which had succeeded each other with such marvellous rapidity. "Perhaps the hour of my revenge is nigh," she murmured, as if communing with herself.

"What do you say?" inquired Aunt Medea, with evident curiosity.

"I say, aunt, that in less than a month I shall be the Marchioness de Sairmeuse in reality as well as in name. My husband will return to me, and then—oh! then."

"God grant it!" said Aunt Medea, hypocritically. In her secret heart she had but scant faith in this prediction, and cared very little whether it was realized or not. However, in that low tone which accomplices habitually employ, she ventured to add: "If what you say proves true, it will only be another proof that your jealousy led you astray; and that—that what you did at the Borderie was a perfectly unnecessary act."

Such had indeed been Blanche's opinion; but now she shook her head, and gloomily replied: "You are wrong; what took place at the Borderie has brought my husband back to me again. I understand everything now. It is true that Marie-Anne was not his mistress; but he loved her. He loved her, and her repulses only increased his passion. It was for her sake that he abandoned me; and while she lived he would never have thought of me. His emotion on seeing me was the remnant of an emotion which she had awakened. His tenderness was only the expression of his grief. Whatever happens, I shall only have her leavings—the leavings of what she disdained!" The young marchioness spoke bitterly, her eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot as she added: "So I shan't regret what I have done! no, never—never!" As she spoke she felt herself again brave and determined.

But horrible fears assailed her when the enquiry into the circumstances of the murder commenced. Officials had been sent from Montaignac to investigate the affair. They examined a host of witnesses, and there was even some talk of sending to Paris for one of those detectives skilled in unravelling all the mysteries of crime. This prospect quite terrified Aunt Medea; and her fear was so apparent that it caused Blanche great anxiety. "You will end by betraying us," she remarked, one evening.

"Ah! I can't control my fears."

"If that is the case, don't leave your room."

"It would be more prudent, certainly."

"You can say you are not well; your meals shall be served you upstairs."

Aunt Medea's face brightened. In her heart, she was delighted. It had long been her dream and ambition to have her meals served in her own room, in bed in the morning and on a little table by the fire in the evening; but as yet she had never been able to realise this fancy. On two or three occasions, feeling slightly indisposed, she had asked to have her breakfast brought to her room, but her request had each time been harshly refused. "If Aunt Medea is hungry, she will come downstairs, and take her place at the table as usual," had been Blanche's imperious reply.

It was hard, indeed, to be treated in this way in a chateau where there were always a dozen servants idling

about. But now, in obedience to the young marchioness's formal orders, the head cook himself came up every morning into Aunt Medea's room, to receive her instructions; and she was at perfect liberty to dictate each day's bill of fare, and to order the particular dishes she preferred. This change in the dependent relative's situation awakened many strange thoughts in her mind, and stifled such regret as she had felt for the crime at Borderie. Still both she and her niece followed the enquiry which had been set on foot with a keen interest. They obtained all the latest information concerning the investigation through the butler of the chateau, who seemed much interested in the case, and who had won the goodwill of the Montaignac police agents, by making them familiar with the contents of his wine cellar. It was from this major-domo that Blanche and her aunt learned that all suspicions pointed to the deceased Chupin, who had been seen prowling round about the Borderie on the very night the crime was committed. This testimony was given by the same young peasant who had warned Jean Lacheneur of the old poacher's doings. As regards the motive of the crime, fully a score of persons had heard Chupin declare that he should never enjoy any piece of mind as long as a single Lacheneur was left on earth. So thus it happened that the very incidents which might have ruined Blanche, saved her; and she really came to consider the old poacher's death as a providential occurrence, for she at least had no reason to suspect that he had revealed her secret before expiring. When the butler told her that the magistrate and the police agents had returned to Montaignac, she could scarcely conceal her joy; and drawing a long breath of relief, she turned towards Aunt Medea with the remark: "Ah, now there's nothing more to be feared."

She had, indeed, escaped the justice of man; but the justice of God remained. A few weeks previously the thought of divine retribution would perhaps have made Blanche smile, for she then considered the punishment of providence as an imaginary evil, invented to hold timorous minds in check. On the morning that followed her crime, and after her long random talk with Aunt Medea, she almost shrugged her shoulders at the thought of Marie-Anne's dying threats. She remembered her promise; and yet, despite all she had said, she did not intend to fulfil it. After careful consideration, she had come to the conclusion that in trying to find the missing child she would expose herself to terrible risks; and on the other hand, she felt certain that the child's father would discover it. So she dismissed the matter from her mind, and chiefly busied herself with what Martial had said during his visit, and the prospect that presented itself of a reconciliation.

But she was destined to realize the power of her victim's threats that same night. Worn out with fatigue, she retired to her room at an early hour, and jumped into bed, exclaiming; "I must sleep!" But sleep had fled. Her crime was over in her thoughts; and rose before her in all its horror and atrocity. She knew that she was lying on her bed, at Courtornieu; and yet it seemed as if she were still in Chanlouineau's house, first pouring out the poison, and then watching its effects, while concealed in the dressing-room. She was struggling against the idea; exerting all her strength of will to drive away these terrible memories, when she imagined she heard the key turn in the lock. Raising her head from the pillow with a start, she fancied she could perceive the door open noiselessly, and then Marie-Anne glided into the room like a phantom. She seated herself in an arm-chair near the bed, and while the tears rolled down her cheeks, she looked sadly, yet threateningly around her. The murderess hid her face under the counterpane. She shivered with terror, and a cold sweat escaped from every pore in her skin. For this seemed no mere apparition, but the frightful reality itself. Blanche did not submit to these tortures without resisting. Making a vigorous effort, she tried to reason with herself aloud, as if the sound of her voice would re-assure her. "I am dreaming!" she said. "The dead don't return to life? To think that I'm childish enough to be frightened at phantoms which only exist in my own imagination."

She said this, but the vision did not fade. When she shut her eyes the phantom still faced her—even through her closed eyelids, and through the coverlids drawn up over her face. Say what she would, she did not succeed in sleeping till daybreak. And, worst of all, night after night, the same vision haunted her, reviving the terror which she forgot during the day-time in the broad sunlight. For she would regain her courage and become sceptical again as soon as the morning broke. "How foolish it is to be afraid of something that does not exist!" she would remark, railing at herself. "To-night I will conquer this absurd weakness." But when evening came all her resolution vanished, and scarcely had she retired to her room than the same fears seized hold of her, and the same phantom rose before her eyes. She fancied that her nocturnal agonies would cease when the investigation anent the murder was over—that she would forget both her crime and promise; but the enquiry finished, and yet the same vision haunted her, and she did not forget. Darwin has remarked that it is when their safety is assured that great criminals really feel remorse, and Blanche might have vouched for the truth of this assertion, made by the deepest thinker and closest observer of the age.

And yet her sufferings, atrocious as they were, did not induce her for one moment to abandon the plan she had formed on the occasion of Martial's visit. She played her part so well that, moved with pity, if not with love, he returned to see her frequently, and at last, one day, besought her to allow him to remain. But even this triumph did not restore her peace of mind. For between her and her husband rose the dreadful vision of Marie-Anne's distorted features. She knew only too well that Martial had no love to give her, and that she would never have the slightest influence over him. And to crown her already intolerable sufferings came an incident which filled her with dismay. Alluding one evening to Marie-Anne's death, Martial forgot himself, and spoke of his oath of vengeance. He deeply regretted that Chupin was dead, he said, for he should have experienced an intense delight in making the wretch who murdered her die a lingering death in the midst of the most frightful tortures. As he spoke his voice vibrated with still powerful passion, and Blanche, in terror asked herself what would be her fate if her husband ever discovered that she was the culprit—and he might discover it. Now it was that she began to regret she had not kept her promise; and she resolved to commence the search for Marie-Anne's child. But to do this effectually it was essential she should be in a large city—in Paris, for instance—where she could procure discreet and skilful agents. Thus it was necessary to persuade Martial to remove to the capital. But with the Duke de Sairmeuse's assistance she did not find this a very difficult task; and one morning, with a radiant face, she informed Aunt Medea that she and her husband would leave Courtornieu at the end of the coming week.

In the midst of her anxiety, Blanche had failed to notice that Aunt Medea was no longer the same. The change in the dependent relative's tone and manner had, it is true, been a gradual one; it had not struck the servants, but it was now the less positive and real, and now it showed itself continually. For instance, the offtime tyrannized-over chaperone no longer trembled when any one spoke to her, as formerly had been her wont, and there was occasionally a decided ring of independence in her voice. If visitors were present, she had been used to remain modestly in the background, but now she drew her chair forward, and unhesitatingly took part in the conversation.

At table, she gave free expression to her preferences and dislikes; and on two or three occasions she had ventured to differ from her niece in opinion, and had even been so bold as to question the propriety of some of her orders. One day, moreover, when Blanche was going out, she asked Aunt Medea to accompany her; but the latter declared she had a cold, and remained at home. And, on the following Sunday, although Blanche did not wish to attend vespers, Aunt Medea declared her intentions of going; and as it rained she requested the coachman to harness the horses to the carriage, which was done. All these little incidents could have been nothing separately, but taken together they plainly showed that the once humble chaperone's character had changed. When her niece announced that she and Martial were about to leave the neighbourhood, Aunt Medea was greatly surprised, for the project had never been discussed in her presence. "What! you are going away," she repeated; "you are leaving Courtornieu?"

"And without regret."

"And where are you going to, pray?"

"To Paris. We shall reside there permanently; that's decided. The capital's the proper place for my husband, and, with his name, fortune, talents and the king's favour, he will secure a high position there. He will re-purchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and furnish it magnificently, so that we shall have a princely establishment."

Aunt Medea's expression plainly indicated that she was suffering all the torments of envy. "And what is to become of me?" she asked, in plaintive tones.

"You—aunt! You will remain here; you will be mistress of the chateau. A trustworthy person must remain to watch over my poor father. You will be happy and contented here, I hope."

But no; Aunt Medea did not seem satisfied. "I shall never have courage to stay all alone in this great chateau," she whined.

"You foolish woman! won't you have the servants, the gardeners, and the concierge to protect you?"

"That makes no difference. I am afraid of insane people. When the marquis began to rave and howl this evening, I felt as if I should go mad myself."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "What *do* you wish, then?" she asked, sarcastically.

"I thought—I wondered—if you wouldn't take me with you."

"To Paris! You are crazy, I do believe. What would you do there?"

"Blanche, I entreat you, I beseech you, to do so!"

"Impossible, aunt, impossible!"

Aunt Medea seemed to be in despair. "And what if I told you that I can't remain here—that I dare not—that I should die!"

Blanche flushed with impatience. "You weary me beyond endurance," she said, roughly. And with a gesture that increased the harshness of her words, she added: "If Courtornieu displeases you so much, there is nothing to prevent you from seeking a home more to your taste. You are free and of age."

Aunt Medea turned very pale, and bit her lips. "That is to say," she said at last, "that you allow me to take my choice between dying of fear at Courtornieu and ending my days in a hospital. Thanks, my niece, thanks. That is like you. I expected nothing less from you. Thanks!" She raised her head, and her once humble eyes gleamed in a threatening fashion. "Very well! this decides me," she continued. "I entreated you, and you brutally refused my request, so now I command you and I say: 'I will go!' Yes, I intend to go with you to Paris—and I shall go. Ah! so it surprises you to hear poor, meek, much-abused Aunt Medea speak like this; but I've endured a great deal in silence for a long time, and now I rebel. My life in this house has been like life in hell. It is true you've given me shelter—fed and lodged me, but you've taken my entire life in exchange. What servant ever endured what I've had to endure? Have you ever treated one of your maids as you have treated me—your own flesh and blood? And I have had no wages, on the contrary, I was expected to be grateful since I lived by your tolerance. Ah, you have made me pay dearly for the crime of being poor. How you have insulted me—humiliated me—trampled me under foot!"

The rebellious chaperone paused again. The bitter rancour which had been accumulating in her heart for years fairly choked her; but after a moment, she resumed in a tone of irony: "You ask me what I should do in Paris? I should enjoy myself, like you. You will go to court, to the play—into society, won't you? Very well, I will accompany you. I will attend these fetes. I will have handsome toilettes too. I have rarely seen myself in anything but shabby black woollen dresses. Have you ever thought of giving me the pleasure of possessing a handsome dress? Twice a-year, perhaps, you have given me a black silk, recommending me to take good care of it. But it was not for my sake that you went to this expense. It was for your own sake, and in order that your poor relation should do honour to your generosity. You dressed me in it, like you put your lacqueys in livery, through vanity. And I endured all this; I made myself insignificant and humble; and when I was buffeted on one cheek, I offered the other. For after all I must live—I must have food. And you, Blanche, how often haven't you said to me so that I might do your bidding, 'You must obey me, if you wish to remain at Courtornieu!' And I obeyed you—I was forced to obey, as I didn't know where else to go. Ah! you have abused my poverty in every way; but now my turn has come!"

Blanche was so amazed that she could scarcely articulate a syllable, and it was in a scarcely audible voice that at last she faltered: "I don't understand you, aunt, I don't understand you."

The poor dependent shrugged her shoulders, as her niece had done a few moments before. "In that case," said she, slowly, "I may as well tell you that since you have made me your accomplice against my will, we must share everything in common. I share the danger; so I will share the pleasure. Suppose everything should be discovered? Do you ever think of that? Yes, I've no doubt you do, and that's why you are seeking diversion. Very well! I desire diversion also, so I shall go to Paris with you."

With a desperate effort, Blanche managed to regain some degree of self-possession. "And if I still said no?" she coldly queried.

"But you won't say no."

"And why not, if you please?"

"Because—"

"Will you go to the authorities and denounce me?"

Aunt Medea shook her head. "I am not such a fool," she retorted. "I should only compromise myself. No. I

shouldn't do that; but I might, perhaps, tell your husband what happened at the Borderie."

Blanche shuddered. No other threat could have had such influence over her. "You shall accompany us, aunt," said she: "I promise it." And then in a gentle voice, she added: "But it's quite unnecessary to threaten me. You have been cruel, aunt, and at the same time unjust. If you have been unhappy in our house, you have only yourself to blame. Why haven't you ever said anything? I attributed your complaisance to your affection for me. How was I to know that a woman so quiet and modest as yourself longed for fine dresses. Confess that it was impossible. Had I known—But rest easy, aunt, I will atone for my neglect." And as Aunt Medea, having obtained all she desired, stammered an excuse. "Nonsense!" rejoined Blanche; "let us forget this foolish quarrel. You forgive me, don't you?" And the two ladies embraced each other with the greatest effusion, like two friends, united after a misunderstanding.

Neither of them, however, was in the least degree deceived by this mock reconciliation. "It will be best for me to keep on the alert," thought the dependent relative. "God only knows with what joy my dear niece would send me to join Marie-Anne."

Perhaps a similar thought flitted through Blanche's mind. "I'm bound to this dangerous, perfidious creature for ever now," she reflected. "I'm no longer my own mistress; I belong to her. When she commands me, I must obey, no matter what may be her fancy—and she has forty years' humiliation and servitude to avenge." The prospect of such a life made the young marchioness tremble; and she racked her brain to discover some way of freeing herself from such intolerable thralldom. Would it be possible to induce Aunt Medea to live independently in her own house, served by her own servants? Might she succeed in persuading this silly old woman, who still longed for finery, to marry? A handsome marriage portion will always attract a husband. However, in either case, Blanche would require money—a large sum of money, which no one must be in a position to claim an account of. With this idea she took possession of over two hundred and fifty thousand francs, in bank notes and coin, belonging to her father, and put away in one of his private drawers. This sum represented the Marquis de Courtornieu's savings during the past three years. No one knew he had laid it aside, except his daughter; and now that he had lost his reason, Blanche could take it for her own use, without the slightest danger. "With this," thought she, "I can enrich Aunt Medea whenever I please without having recourse to Martial."

After these incidents there was a constant exchange of delicate attentions and fulsome affection between the two ladies. It was "my dearest little aunt," and "my dearly beloved niece," from morning until night; and the gossips of the neighbourhood, who had often commented on the haughty disdain with which Blanche treated her relative, would have found abundant food for comment had they known that during the journey to Paris, Aunt Medea was protected from the possibility of cold by a mantle lined with costly fur, exactly like the marchioness's own, and that instead of travelling in the cumbersome berline with the servants, she had a seat in the postchaise with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and his wife.

Before their departure Martial had noticed the great change which had come over Aunt Medea and the many attentions which his wife lavished on her, and one day when he was alone with Blanche, he exclaimed in a tone of good-natured raillery: "What's the meaning of all this attachment? We shall finish by encasing this precious aunt in cotton, shan't we?"

Blanche trembled, and flushed. "I love good Aunt Medea so much!" said she. "I never can forget all the affection and devotion she lavished on me when I was so unhappy."

It was such a plausible explanation that Martial took no further notice of the matter; and, indeed, just then his mind was fully occupied. The agent he had despatched to Paris in advance, to purchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, if it were possible, had written asking the marquis to hasten his journey, as there was some difficulty about concluding the bargain. "Plague take the fellow!" angrily said Martial, on receiving this news. "He is quite stupid enough to let this opportunity, which we've been waiting for during the last ten years, slip through his fingers. I shan't find any pleasure in Paris, if I can't own our old residence."

He was so impatient to reach the capital that, on the second day of their journey, he declared that if he were alone he would travel all night. "Do so now," said Blanche, graciously; "I don't feel the least tired, and a night of travel does not frighten me." So they journeyed on without stopping, and the next morning at about nine o'clock they alighted at the Hotel Meurice.

Martial scarcely took time to eat his breakfast. "I must go and see my agent at once," he said, as he hurried off. "I will soon be back." Two hours afterwards he re-appeared with a radiant face. "My agent was a simpleton," he exclaimed. "He was afraid to write me word that a man, on whom the conclusion of the sale depends, requires a bonus of fifty thousand francs. He shall have it and welcome." Then, in a tone of gallantry, habitual to him whenever he addressed his wife, he added: "It only remains for me to sign the papers, but I won't do so unless the house suits you. If you are not too tired, I would like you to visit it at once. Time presses, and we have many competitors."

This visit was, of course, one of pure form; but Blanche would have been hard to please if she had not been satisfied with this mansion, then one of the most magnificent in Paris, with a monumental entrance facing the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain and large umbrageous gardens, extending to the Rue de Varennes. Unfortunately, this superb dwelling had not been occupied for several years, and required considerable repair. "It will take at least six months to restore everything," said Martial, "perhaps more; though in three months, possibly, a portion of it might be arranged very comfortably."

"It would be living in one's own house, at least," observed Blanche, divining her husband's wishes.

"Ah! then you agree with me! In that case, you may rest assured that I will expedite matters as swiftly as possible."

In spite, or rather by reason of his immense fortune, the Marquis de Sairmeuse knew that one is never so well, nor so quickly served, as when one serves one's self, and so he resolved to take the matter into his own hands. He conferred with the architect, interviewed the contractors, and hurried on the workmen. As soon as he was up in the morning he started out without waiting for breakfast, and seldom returned before dinner. Although Blanche was compelled to pass most of her time in doors, on account of the bad weather, she was not inclined to complain. Her journey, the unaccustomed sights and sounds of Paris, the novelty of life in a hotel, all combined to divert her thoughts from herself. She forgot her fears, a sort of haze enveloped the terrible scene at the Borderie, and the clamours of conscience were sinking into faint whispers. Indeed, the past seemed fading away, and she was beginning to entertain hopes of a new and better life, when one day a servant knocked at the door, and said: "There

is a man downstairs who wishes to speak with madame."

XXXVII.

BLANCHE was reclining on a sofa listening to a new book which Aunt Medea was reading aloud, and she did not even raise her head as the servant delivered his message. "A man?" she said, carelessly; "what man?" She was expecting no one; it must be one of the assistants or overseers employed by Martial.

"I can't inform madame who he is," replied the servant. "He is quite young; he is dressed like a peasant, and is, perhaps, seeking a place."

"It is probably the marquis he wishes to see."

"Madame will excuse me, but he particularly said that he wished to speak with her."

"Ask his name and business, then. Go on, aunt," she added: "we have been interrupted in the most interesting part."

But Aunt Medea had not time to finish the page before the servant returned. "The man says madame will understand his business when she hears his name."

"And his name?"

"Chupin."

It seemed as if a bomb-shell had burst into the room. Aunt Medea dropped her book with a shriek, and sank back, half fainting in her chair. Blanche sprang up with a face as colourless as her white cashmere morning dress, her eyes dazed, and her lips trembling. "Chupin," she repeated, as if she almost hoped the servant would tell her she had not understood him correctly; "Chupin!" Then angrily, she added: "Tell this man I won't see him, I won't see him, do you hear?" But before the servant had time to bow and retire, the young marchioness changed her mind. "One moment," said she; "on reflection I think I will see him. Bring him up."

The servant then withdrew, and the two ladies looked at each other in silent consternation. "It must be one of Chupin's sons," faltered Blanche at last.

"No doubt; but what does he desire?"

"Money, probably."

Aunt Medea raised her eyes to heaven. "God grant that he knows nothing of your meetings with his father!" said she.

"You are not going to despair in advance, are you, aunt? We shall know everything in a few minutes. Pray remain calm. Turn your back to us; look out of the window into the street and don't let him see your face."

Blanche was not deceived. This unexpected visitor was indeed Chupin's eldest son; the one to whom the dying poacher had confided his secret. Since his arrival in Paris, the young fellow had been running in every direction, inquiring everywhere and of everybody for the Marquis de Sairmeuse's address. At last he obtained it; and he lost no time in presenting himself at the Hotel Meurice. He was now awaiting the result of his application at the entrance down-stairs where he stood whistling, with his hands in his pockets, when the servant returned, and bade him follow. Chupin obeyed; but the servant, who was on fire with curiosity, loitered by the way in hope of obtaining from this country youth some explanation of the surprise, not to say fright with which Madame de Sairmeuse had greeted the mention of his name. "I don't say it to flatter you, my boy," he remarked, "but your name produced a great effect on madame." The prudent peasant carefully concealed the joy he felt on receiving this information. "How does she happen to know you?" continued the servant. "Are you both from the same place?"

"I am her foster-brother."

The servant did not believe this reply for a moment, and as they had now reached the marchioness's apartment, he opened the door and ushered Chupin into the room. The latter had prepared a little story beforehand, but he was so dazzled by the magnificence around him that for a moment he stood motionless with staring eyes and gaping mouth. His wonder was increased by a large mirror opposite the door, in which he could survey himself from head to foot, and by the beautiful flowers on the carpet, which he feared to crush with his heavy shoes.

After a moment, Blanche decided to break the silence. "What do you want of me," she asked.

In a rambling fashion young Chupin then explained that he had been obliged to leave Sairmeuse on account of the numerous enemies he had there, that he had been unable to find his father's hidden treasure, and that he was consequently without resources.

"That'll do," interrupted Blanche, and then in far from a friendly manner, she remarked: "I don't at all understand why you should apply to me. You and all the rest of your family have anything but an enviable reputation at Sairmeuse; still, as you are from that part of the country, I am willing to aid you a little on condition you don't apply to me again."

Chupin listened to this homily with a half cringing, half impudent air; but when Blanche had finished he raised his head, and proudly said: "I don't ask for alms."

"What do you ask for, then?"

"My dues."

Blanche's heart sank, and yet she had courage enough to glance disdainfully at Chupin, and reply: "What! do I owe you anything?"

"You don't owe me anything personally, madame; but you owe a heavy debt to my deceased father. Whose service did he perish in? Poor old man! he loved you devotedly. His last words were about you. 'A terrible thing has just happened at the Borderie, my boy,' said he. 'The young marchioness hated Marie-Anne, and she has poisoned her. If it hadn't been for me she would have been lost. I am about to die, so let the whole blame rest on me; for it won't hurt me when I'm under the sod, and it will save the young lady. And by-and-by she will reward you; so that as long as you keep the secret you will want for nothing.' " Great as was young Chupin's impudence he paused abruptly, amazed by the air of perfect composure with which Blanche listened to him. In face of such wonderful dissimulation he almost doubted the truth of his father's story.

The marchioness's self possession was indeed surprising. She felt that if she once yielded she would always be

at this wretch's mercy, as she already was at Aunt Medea's. "In other words," said she, calmly, "you accuse me of having murdered Mademoiselle Lacheneur; and you threaten to denounce me if I don't yield to your demands." Chupin nodded his head in acquiescence. "Very well!" added Blanche; "since that's the case you may go."

It seemed, indeed, that by audacity she might win this dangerous game on which her future peace depended. Chupin, greatly abashed, was standing before her undecided what course to pursue, when Aunt Medea, who was listening by the window, turned in affright, exclaiming, "Blanche! your husband—Martial! He is coming!"

The game was lost. Blanche fancied her husband entering and finding Chupin there, conversing with him, and so discovering everything! Her brain whirled; she yielded. Hastily thrusting her purse into Chupin's hand, she dragged him through an inner door to the servants' staircase. "Take this," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "I will see you again. And not a word—not a word to my husband, remember!"

She had been wise to yield in time. When she returned to the drawing-room, she found Martial there. He was gazing on the ground, and held an open letter in his hand. But he raised his head when his wife entered the room, and she could detect signs of great emotion in his features. "What has happened?" she faltered.

Martial did not remark her troubled manner. "My father is dead, Blanche," he replied.

"The Duke de Sairmeuse! Good heavens! how did it happen?"

"He was thrown from his horse in the forest near the Sanguille rocks."

"Ah! it was there where my poor father was nearly murdered."

"Yes, the very place."

There was a moment's silence. Martial's affection for his father had not been very deep, and he was well aware that the duke had but little love for him. Hence he was astonished at the bitter grief he felt on hearing of his death. "From this letter, which was forwarded by a messenger from Sairmeuse," he continued, "I gather that everybody believes it to have been an accident; but I—I—"

"Well?"

"I believe he was murdered."

An exclamation of horror escaped Aunt Medea, and Blanche turned pale. "Murder!" she whispered.

"Yes, Blanche; and I could name the murderer. Oh! I am not deceived. My father's murderer is the same man who tried to kill the Marquis de Courtornieu—"

"Jean Lacheneur!"

Martial gravely bowed his head. It was his only reply.

"And will you not denounce him? Will you not demand justice?"

Martial's face grew gloomy. "What good would it do?" he replied. "I have no material proofs to furnish, and justice requires unimpeachable evidence." Then, as if communing with his own thoughts, rather than addressing his wife, he added, despondingly, "The Duke de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu have reaped what they sowed. The blood of murdered innocence always calls for vengeance. Sooner or later, the guilty must expiate their crimes."

Blanche shuddered. Each word found an echo in her own soul. Had her husband intended his words for her, he would scarcely have expressed himself differently. "Martial," said she, trying to arouse him from his gloomy reverie; "Martial!"

But he did not seem to hear her, and it was in the same tone that he continued; "These Lacheneurs were happy and honoured before our arrival at Sairmeuse. Their conduct was above all praise; their probity amounted to heroism. We might have made them our faithful and devoted friends. It was our duty, as well as in our interests, to have done so. But we did not understand it; we humiliated, ruined, exasperated them. It was a fault for which we must atone. Who knows but what in Jean Lacheneur's place I should have done exactly what he has done?" He was again silent for a moment; then, with one of those sudden inspirations that sometimes enable one almost to read the future, he resumed: "I know Jean Lacheneur. I can fathom his hatred, and I know that he lives only in the hope of vengeance. It is true that we are very high and he is very low, but that matters little. We have everything to fear. Our millions form a rampart around us, but he will know how to open a breach. And no precautions will save us. At the very moment when we feel ourselves secure, he will be ready to strike. What he will attempt, I don't know; but his will be a terrible revenge. Remember my words, Blanche, if ruin ever overtakes our house, it will be Jean Lacheneur's work."

Aunt Medea and her niece were too horror-stricken to articulate a word, and for five minutes no sound broke the stillness save Martial's monotonous tread, as he paced up and down the room. At last he paused before his wife. "I have just ordered post-horses," he said. "You will excuse me for leaving you here alone. I must go to Sairmeuse at once, but I shall not be absent more than a week."

He left Paris a few hours later, and Blanche became a prey to the most intolerable anxiety. She suffered more than she had done during the days that immediately followed her crime. It was not against phantoms that she had to shield herself now; Chupin existed, and his voice, even if it were not as terrible as the voice of conscience, might make itself heard at any moment. If she had known where to find him, she would have gone to him, and endeavoured, by the payment of a large sum of money, to persuade him to leave France. But he had left the hotel without giving her his address. Then again Martial's gloomy apprehensions combined to increase her fears, and the mere thought of Jean Lacheneur made her shrink with terror. She could not rid herself of the idea that Jean suspected her guilt, and was watching her, waiting for revenge. Her wish to find Marie-Anne's child now became stronger than ever; it seemed to her that the abandoned infant might be a protection to her some day. However, where could she find an agent in whom she could confide? At last she remembered that she had heard her father speak of a detective named Chefteux as an exceedingly shrewd fellow, capable of anything, even of honesty if he were well paid. This man was really a perfect scoundrel, one of Fouche's vilest instruments, who had served and betrayed all parties, and who, at last, after the most barefaced perjury, had been dismissed from the police force. He had then established a private enquiry office, and after some little search Blanche ascertained that he lived in the Place Dauphine. One morning, taking advantage of her husband's absence, she donned her simplest dress, and, accompanied by Aunt Medea, repaired to Chefteux's residence. He proved to be a middle-aged man of medium height and inoffensive mien, and he cleverly affected an air of good humour. He ushered his client into a neatly

furnished drawing-room, and Blanche at once told him that she was a married woman; that she lived with her husband in the Rue St. Denis; and that one of her sisters who had lately died had been led astray by a man who had disappeared. A child was living, however, whom she was very anxious to find. In short, she narrated an elaborate story which she had prepared in advance, and which, after all, sounded very plausible. Chefteux, however, did not believe a word of it; for as soon as it was finished he tapped Blanche familiarly on the shoulder, and remarked: "In short, my dear, we had our little escapades before our marriage."

Blanche shrank back as if some venomous reptile had touched her. To be treated in this fashion! she—a Courtornieu, now Duchess de Sairmeuse! "I think you are labouring under a wrong impression," she haughtily replied.

He made haste to apologize; but while listening to the further details he asked for, he could not help remarking to himself; "What eyes! what a voice!—they can't belong to a denizen of the Rue Saint-Denis!" His suspicions were confirmed by the reward of twenty thousand francs, which Blanche imprudently promised him in case of success, and by the five hundred francs which she paid in advance. "And where shall I have the honour of writing to you, madame?" he inquired.

"Nowhere," replied Blanche. "I shall be passing by here from time to time, and I will call."

When the two women left the house, Chefteux followed them. "For once," thought he, "I believe that fortune smiles on me." To discover his new client's name and rank was but child's play for Fouche's former pupil; and indeed his task was all the easier since they had no suspicion whatever of his designs.

Blanche, who had heard his powers of discernment so highly praised, was confident of success, and all the way back to the hotel she was congratulating herself on the step she had taken. "In less than a month," she said to Aunt Medea, "we shall have the child; and it will be a protection to us."

But the following week she realised the extent of her imprudence. On visiting Chefteux again, she was received with such marks of respect that she at once saw she was known. Still, she would have made another attempt to deceive the detective, but he checked her. "First of all," he said, with a good-humoured smile, "I ascertain the identity of the persons who honour me with their confidence. It is a proof of my ability, which I give gratis. But madame need have no fears. I am discreet by nature and by profession. Many ladies of the highest rank are in the position of Madame Duchesse."

So Chefteux still believed that the Duchess de Sairmeuse was searching for her own child. She did not try to convince him to the contrary, for it was better he should believe this than suspect the truth.

Blanche's position was now truly pitiable. She found herself entangled in a net, and each movement, far from freeing her, tightened the meshes round her. Three persons were acquainted with the secret which threatened her life and honour; and under these circumstances, how could she hope to prevent it from becoming more widely known? She was, moreover, at the mercy of three unscrupulous masters; and at a word, a gesture, or a look from them, her haughty spirit must bow in meek subservience. And her time, moreover, was no longer at her own disposal, for Martial had returned, and they had taken up their abode at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, where the young duchess was compelled to live under the scrutiny of fifty servants, more or less interested in watching her, in criticising her acts, and discovering her thoughts. Aunt Medea, it is true, was of great assistance. Blanche purchased a new dress for her whenever she bought one for herself, took her about with her on all occasions, and the dependent relative expressed her satisfaction in the most enthusiastic terms, declaring her willingness to do anything for her benefactress. Nor did Chefteux give Blanche much more annoyance. Every three months he presented a memorandum of investigation expenses, which usually amounted to some ten thousand francs; and so long as she paid him it was plain he would be silent. He had given her to understand, however, that he should expect an annuity of twenty-four thousand francs; and once, when Blanche remarked that he must abandon the search if nothing had been discovered at the end of two years. "Never," replied he; "I shall continue the search as long as I live."

In addition to these two there was Chupin, who proved a constant terror. Blanche had been compelled to give him twenty thousand francs, to begin with. He declared that his younger brother had come to Paris in pursuit of him, accusing him of having stolen their father's hoard, and demanding his share with his knife in his hand. There had been a battle, and it was with his head bound up in blood-stained linen, that Chupin made his appearance before Blanche. "Give me the sum that the old man buried," said he, "and I will allow my brother to think I stole it. It is not very pleasant to be regarded as a thief, when one's an honest man, but I will bear it for your sake. If you refuse, however, I shall be compelled to tell him where I've obtained my money, and how." Naturally enough Blanche complied with this demand, for how could she do otherwise?

If her tormentor possessed all his father's vices, depravity, and cold-blooded perversity, he had certainly not inherited the parental intelligence or tact. Instead of taking the precautions which his interests required, he seemed to find a brutal pleasure in compromising the duchess. He was a constant visitor at the Hotel de Sairmeuse. He called at all hours, morning, noon, and night, without in the least troubling himself about Martial. And the servants were amazed to see their haughty mistress unhesitatingly leave everything to receive this suspicious-looking character, who smelt so strongly of tobacco and alcohol. One evening, while a grand entertainment was progressing at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, he made his appearance, half drunk, and imperiously ordered the servants to go and tell Madame Blanche that he was there, waiting for her. She hastened to him in her magnificent evening dress, her face white with rage and shame beneath her tiara of diamonds. And when, in her exasperation, she refused to give the wretch what he demanded: "So that's to say I'm to starve while you are revelling here!" he exclaimed. "I am not such a fool. Give me some money at once, or I will tell everything I know on the spot!" What could she do? She was obliged to yield, as she had always done before. And yet he grew more and more insatiable every day. Money filtered through his fingers as fast as water filters through a sieve. But he did not think of raising his vices to the height of the fortune which he squandered. He did not even provide himself with decent clothing, and from his appearance he might have been supposed to be a penniless beggar. One night he was arrested for fomenting a row in a low drinking den, and the police, surprised at finding so much gold in such a beggarly-looking rascal's possession, accused him of being a thief. But he mentioned the name of the Duchess de Sairmeuse, and on the following morning—Martial fortunately was in Vienna at the time—an inspector of police presented himself at the mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, and Blanche had to undergo the humiliation of confessing that she had given a large sum of money to this man, whose family she had known, and who, she added, had once rendered her an important service.

Sometimes her pertinacious tormentor changed his tactics. For instance, he declared that he disliked coming to the Hotel de Sairmeuse, as the servants treated him as if he were a mendicant; so whenever he required money he would write. And effectively, every week or so, there came a letter bidding Blanche bring such a sum, to such a place, and at such an hour. And the proud duchess was always punctual at the rendezvous. Soon afterwards the rascal met, heaven knows where! a certain Aspasia Clapard, to whom he took a violent fancy, and although she was much older than himself, he wished to marry her. It was Blanche who paid for the wedding feast. Then Chupin again announced his desire of establishing himself in business, having resolved, he said, to live by his own exertions. So he purchased a wine merchant's stock, which the duchess paid for, and which he drank in no time. Next, his wife gave birth to a child, and Madame de Sairmeuse must pay for the baptism as she had paid for the wedding, only too happy that Chupin did not require her to stand as god-mother to little Polyte, which idea he had at first entertained. On two occasions Blanche accompanied her husband to Vienna and to London, where he went on important diplomatic missions. She remained abroad during three years, and during all that time she received at least one letter every week from Chupin. Ah! many a time she envied her victim's lot! What was Marie-Anne's death compared with the life she led! Her sufferings were measured by years, Marie-Anne's by minutes; and she said to herself, again and again, that the tortures of poison could not be so intolerable as was her agony.

XXXVIII.

It may be asked how it was that Martial had failed to discover or to suspect this singular state of affairs; but a moment's reflection will explain his ignorance. The head of a family, whether he dwells in an attic or in a palace, is always the last to know what is going on in his own home. He does not even suspect circumstances, with which every one else is fully acquainted; and, in Martial's case, the life he led was scarcely likely to lead him to the truth; for after all, he and his wife were virtually strangers to one another. His manner towards her was perfect, full of deference and chivalrous courtesy; but they had nothing in common except a name and certain interests. Each lived his own life. They met only at dinner, or at the entertainments they gave—which were considered the most brilliant of Parisian society. The duchess had her own apartments, her private servants, carriages, horses, and table. At five-and-twenty, Martial, the last descendant of the great house of Sairmeuse—a man on whom destiny had apparently lavished every blessing—who was young, who possessed unbounded wealth, and a brilliant intellect, found himself literally overburdened with *ennui*. Marie-Anne's death had destroyed all his hopes of happiness; and realizing the emptiness of his life, he sought to fill the void with bustle and excitement. He threw himself headlong into politics, striving to find some relief from his despondency in the pleasures of power and satisfied ambition.

It is only just to say that Blanche had remained superior to circumstances; and that she had played the part of a happy, contented woman with consummate skill. Her frightful sufferings and anxiety never marred the haughty serenity of her features. She soon won a place as one of the queens of Parisian society; and plunged into dissipation with a sort of frenzy. Was she endeavouring to divert her mind? Did she hope to overpower thought by excessive fatigue? To Aunt Medea alone did Blanche reveal her secret heart. "I am like a culprit who has been bound to the scaffold, and abandoned there by the executioner to live, as it were, till the axe falls of its own accord." And the axe might fall at any moment. A word, a trifle, an unlucky chance—she dared not say "a decree of providence," and Martial would know everything. Such, in all its unspeakable horror, was the position of the beautiful and envied Duchess de Sairmeuse. "She must be perfectly happy," said the world; but she felt herself sliding down the precipice to the awful depths below. Like a shipwrecked mariner clinging to a floating spar, she scanned the horizon with a despairing eye, and could only see the threatening clouds that betokened the coming tempest. Once it happened that six weeks went by without any news coming from Chupin. A month and a half! What had become of him? To Madame Blanche this silence was as ominous as the calm that precedes the storm. A line in a newspaper solved the mystery, however. Chupin was in prison. After drinking more heavily than usual one evening, he had quarrelled with his brother, and killed him by a blow on the head with an iron bar. Lacheneur's blood was being visited on his betrayer's children. Chupin was tried, condemned to twenty year's hard labour, and sent to Brest. But this sentence afforded the duchess no relief. The culprit had written to her from his Paris prison; and he found the means to write to her from Brest. He confided his letters to comrades, whose terms of imprisonment had expired, and who came to the Hotel de Sairmeuse demanding an interview with the duchess. And she received them. They told her all the miseries they had endured "out there;" and usually ended by requesting some slight assistance.

One morning, a man whose desperate manner quite frightened her, brought the duchess this laconic note. "I am tired of starving here; I wish to make my escape. Come to Brest; you can visit the prison, and we will decide on some plan. If you refuse to do this, I shall apply to the duke, who will obtain my pardon in exchange for what I will tell him." Blanche was dumb with horror. It was impossible, she thought, to sink lower than this.

"Well!" said the returned convict, harshly. "What answer shall I take to my comrade?"

"I will go—tell him I will go!" she said, driven to desperation. And in fact she made the journey, and visited the prison, but without finding Chupin. There had been a revolt the previous week, the troops had fired on the prisoners, and Chupin had been killed. Still the duchess dared not rejoice, for she feared that her tormentor had told his wife the secret of his power.

Indeed the widow—the Aspasia Clapard already mentioned, promptly made her appearance at the house in the Rue de Grenelle; but her manner was humble and supplicating. She had often heard her dear dead husband say that madame was his benefactress, and now she came to beg a little aid to enable her to open a small wine-shop. Her son Polyte—ah! such a good son! just eighteen years old, and such a help to his poor mother—had found a little house in a good situation for business, and if they only had three or four hundred francs— Blanche cut the story short by handing her supplicant a five hundred franc note. "Either that woman's humility is a mask," thought the duchess, "or her husband has told her nothing."

Five days later Polyte Chupin presented himself. They needed three hundred francs more before they could commence business, he said, and he came on behalf of his mother to entreat the kind lady to advance them that amount. But being determined to discover exactly how she was situated, with regard to the widow, the duchess curtly refused, and the young fellow went off without a word. Evidently the mother and son were ignorant of the facts. Chupin's secret had died with him.

This happened early in January. Towards the close of February, Aunt Medea contracted inflammation of the

lungs on leaving a fancy ball, which she attended in an absurd costume, in spite of all the attempts which her niece made to dissuade her. Her passion for dress killed her. Her illness lasted only three days; but her sufferings, physical and mental, were terrible. Constrained by fear of death to examine her own conscience, she saw plainly enough that profiting by her niece's crime had been as culpable as if she had actually aided her in committing it. Aunt Medea had been very devout in former years, and now her superstitious fears were reawakened and intensified. Her faith returned, followed by a train of terrors. "I am lost, I am lost!" she cried, tossing to and fro on her bed; writhing and shrieking as if she already saw hell opening to engulf her. She called on the Holy Virgin and all the saints to protect her. She entreated heaven to grant her time for repentance and expiation; and she even begged to see a priest, swearing she would make a full confession.

Paler than the dying woman, but still implacable, Blanche watched over her, aided by one of her maids in whom she had most confidence. "If this lasts long, I shall be ruined," she thought. "I shall be obliged to call for assistance, and she will betray me."

But it did not last long. The patient's delirium was followed by such utter prostration that it seemed as if each moment would be her last. But towards midnight she revived a little, and in a voice of intense feeling, she faltered, "You have had no pity on me, Blanche. You have deprived me of all hope in the life to come. Heaven will punish you. You will die like a dog yourself, and alone without a word of Christian counsel or encouragement. I curse you!" And she expired, just as the clock was striking two.

The time when Blanche would have given almost anything to know that Aunt Medea was under the ground had long since passed away. Now the poor old woman's death deeply affected her. She had lost an accomplice who had often consoled her, and she had gained nothing in return. Every one who was intimately acquainted with the Duchesse de Sairmeuse noticed her dejection, and was astonished by it. "Is it not strange," remarked her friends, "that the duchess—such a very superior woman—should grieve so much for that absurd relative of hers." But Blanche's dejection was due in great measure to the sinister prophecies faltered by her dying aunt, to whom for self-protection she had denied the last consolations of religion. And as her mind reviewed the past she shuddered as the Sairmeuse peasants had done, when thinking of the fatality which pursued those who had shed, or helped to shed so much innocent blood. What misfortunes had overtaken them all—from Chupin's sons to her father, the Marquis de Courtornieu, in whose mind not one spark of reason had gleamed for ten long years before his death. The Baron and the Baroness d'Escorval, and old Corporal Bavois had departed this life within a month of each other the previous year, mourned by every one, so that of all the people of diverse condition who had been connected with the troubles of Montaignac, Blanche knew of only four who were still alive. Maurice d'Escorval, who having studied the law was now an investigating magistrate attached to the tribunal of the Seine; the Abbe Midon, who had come to Paris with Maurice, and Martial and herself.

There was another person at the recollection of whom she trembled, and whose name she dared not utter. This was Jean Lacheneur, Marie-Anne's brother. He had disappeared, and so completely that it might have been fancied he was dead, but an inward voice, more powerful than reason, told Blanche that this enemy was still alive, watching for his hour of vengeance. More troubled by her presentiments now, than she had been by Chupin's persecutions in days gone by, Madame de Sairmeuse decided to apply to Chefteux in order to ascertain, if possible, what she had to expect. Fouche's former agent had not wavered in his devotion to the duchess. Every three months he presented his bill, which was paid without discussion; and to ease his conscience, he sent one of his men two or three times a year to prowl round Sairmeuse for awhile. Animated by the hope of a magnificent reward, the spy promised his client, and—what was more to the purpose—promised himself, that he would discover this dreaded enemy. He started in quest of him, and had already begun to collect proofs of Jean's existence, when his investigations abruptly came to a close. One morning a man's body, literally hacked to pieces, was found in an old well not far from Sairmeuse. It was Chefteux who had been murdered by some one who remained unknown. When Blanche read this news in a local journal she felt as a culprit might feel on hearing his death-warrant read. "The end is near," she murmured. "Lacheneur is coming."

The duchess was not mistaken. Jean had told the truth when he declared that he was not disposing of his sister's estate for his own benefit. In his opinion, Marie-Anne's fortune must be consecrated to one sacred purpose; and he would not divert the slightest portion of it to his personal requirements. He was absolutely penniless when the manager of a travelling theatrical company sojourning at Montaignac engaged him for a consideration of forty-five francs a month. From that day he lived the precarious life of a strolling player. He was poorly paid, and often reduced to abject poverty by lack of engagements, or the impecuniosity of managers. His hatred had lost none of its virulence; but to wreak the vengeance he wished to wreak, he must have time and money at his disposal. But how could he accumulate money when he was often too poor even to appease his hunger. Still he did not renounce his hopes. His was a rancour which was only intensified by years. He was biding his time while he watched from the depths of his misery the brilliant fortunes of the house of Sairmeuse. He had waited sixteen years, when one of his friends procured him an engagement in Russia. The engagement was nothing; but during his stay at St. Petersburg the poor comedian was fortunate enough to obtain an interest in a theatrical enterprise, from which he realized a clear profit of a hundred thousand francs in less than six years. "Now," said he, "I can give up this life, for I have money enough to begin the struggle." And six weeks later he arrived at his native village.

Before carrying any of his designs into execution, he went to Sairmeuse to visit Marie-Anne's grave, the sight of which he felt would fan his smouldering animosity, and give him all the determination he needed as the cold stern avenger of crime. This was his only motive in going, but, on the very evening of his arrival, he learnt through a garrulous old peasant woman that ever since his departure—that is to say, for a period of twenty years—two parties had been making persistent inquiries for a child which had been placed somewhere in the neighbourhood. Jean knew that it was Marie-Anne's child they were seeking, and why they had not succeeded in finding it. But why were there two persons prosecuting these investigations? One was Maurice d'Escorval, of course, but who was the other? This information induced Jean to prolong his stay at Sairmeuse, where he tarried a whole month. By the expiration of that time he had traced the inquiries, which he could not at first comprehend, to one of Chefteux's agents. Through the latter, he reached Fouche's former spy himself; and finally succeeded in discovering that the second search had been instituted by no less a person than the Duchesse de Sairmeuse. This discovery bewildered him. How could Blanche have known that Marie-Anne had given birth to a child; and, knowing it, what possible interest could she have had in finding this abandoned babe, now grown to manhood. These two questions puzzled Jean considerably, and he could give them no satisfactory answer. "Chupin's son could tell me perhaps," he thought, "but to obtain information from

that quarter, I must pretend to be reconciled to the sons of the wretch who betrayed my father."

However, the traitor's children had been dead for several years, and after a long search, Jean only found the Widow Chupin, *nee* Aspasie Clapard, and her son Polyte. They were keeping a drinking-den not far from the Rue des Chateau-des-Rentiers; and their establishment, known as the Poivriere, enjoyed anything but an enviable reputation. Lacheneur cautiously questioned the widow and her son. He asked them if they knew of the crime at the Borderie—if they had heard that grandfather Chupin had committed murder and had been assassinated in his turn—if they had ever been told of an abandoned child, and of searches prosecuted to find it. But neither of these two had ever been at Sairmeuse in their lives, and when Lacheneur mentioned his name in hopes it might recall some recollection, they declared they had never heard it before. Jean was about to take his departure, despondently enough, when Mother Chupin, probably in the hope of pocketing a few pence, began to deplore her present misery, which was, she declared, all the harder to bear as she had wanted for nothing during her poor husband's lifetime, for he had always obtained as much money as he wanted from a lady of high degree, called the Duchess de Sairmeuse.

Lacheneur uttered such a frightful oath that the old woman and her son started back in astonishment. He saw at once the close connection between Blanche's search for the child and her generosity to Chupin. "It was she who poisoned Marie-Anne," he said to himself. "It must have been through my sister herself that she became aware of the child's existence. She loaded the younger Chupin with favours because he knew the crime she had committed—that crime in which his father had been only an accomplice."

He remembered Martial's oath at the murdered girl's bedside, and his heart overflowed with savage exultation. For he could already see his two enemies, the last of the Sairmeuses and the last of the Courtornieus consummating his work of vengeance themselves. However, after all, this was mere conjecture: he must at any price ascertain whether his suppositions were correct. Drawing from his pocket several pieces of gold, and, throwing them on the table, he said: "I am rich; if you will obey me and keep my secret, your fortune is made."

A shrill cry of delight from mother and son outweighed any protestations of obedience. The Widow Chupin knew how to write, and Lacheneur then dictated this letter to her: "Madame la Duchesse—I shall expect you at my establishment to-morrow between twelve and four o'clock. It is on business connected with the Borderie. If at five o'clock I have not seen you, I shall carry to the post a letter for the duke."

"And if she comes, what am I to say to her?" asked the astonished widow.

"Nothing; you will merely ask her for money."

"If she comes, it is as I have guessed," he reflected.

She came. Hidden in the loft of the Poivriere, Jean, through an opening in the floor, saw the duchess hand Mother Chupin a bank note. "Now, she is in my power!" he thought exultantly. "And I will drag her through sloughs of degradation before I deliver her up to her husband's vengeance!"

XXXIX.

A FEW lines of the article consecrated to Martial in the "General Biography of Men of the Time," fittingly epitomize the history of his public life. "Martial de Sairmeuse," says the writer, "placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at the time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most unpopular measures. But the hostility he encountered, the danger in which he placed the throne, compelled him to retire from office, leaving behind him animosities which will only be extinguished with his life." In thus summing up Martial's public career, his biographer omits to say that if the Duke de Sairmeuse was wrong in his policy—and that depends entirely on the point of view from which his conduct is regarded—he was doubly wrong, since he was not possessed of that ardent conviction verging on fanaticism which makes men, fools, heroes, and martyrs. He was not even truly ambitious. When those associated with him witnessed his passionate struggles and unceasing activity, they thought him actuated by an insatiable thirst for power. But, in reality, he cared little or nothing for it. He considered its burdens heavy; its compensations slight. His pride was too lofty to feel any satisfaction in applause; and flattery disgusted him. Often, during some brilliant fete, his acquaintances and subordinates, finding him thoughtful and pre-occupied, respectfully refrained from disturbing him. "His mind is occupied with momentous questions," they fancied. "Who can tell what important decisions may result from his reverie." But in this surmise they were mistaken. And, indeed, at the very moment when royal favour filled his rivals' hearts with envy, when occupying the highest position a subject can aspire to, and it seemed he could have nothing left to wish for in this world, Martial was saying to himself, "What an empty life! What weariness and vexation of spirit! To live for others—what a mockery!"

He looked at his wife, radiant in her beauty, worshipped like a queen, and sighed. He thought of her who was dead—Marie-Anne—the only woman he had ever loved. She was never absent from his mind, and after all these years he saw her yet, stretched cold, rigid, lifeless, on the canopied bedstead, in that luxurious room at the Borderie. Time, far from effacing from his heart the image of the fair girl whose beauty unwittingly had wrought such woe—had only intensified youthful impressions, endowing the lost idol with almost superhuman grace of person and character. Ah! if fate had but given him Marie-Anne for his wife! Thus said Martial, again and again, picturing the happiness which then would have been his. They would have remained at Sairmeuse. They would have had children playing round them! And he would not be condemned to this continual warfare—to this hollow, unsatisfying restless life. The truly happy are not those who parade their dignities and opulence before the eyes of the multitude. They rather hide themselves from the curious gaze, and they are right; for here on earth happiness is almost a crime. So thought Martial; and he, the envied statesman, often said to himself, with a feeling of vexation: "To love, and to be loved—that is everything! All else is vanity."

He had really tried to love his wife; he had done his best to resuscitate the feeling of admiration with which she had inspired him at their first meeting; but he had not succeeded. It seemed as if there was between them a wall of ice which nothing could melt, and which only grew and expanded as time went on. "Why is it?" he wondered, again and again. "It is incomprehensible. There are days when I could swear she loves me. Her character, formerly so irritable, is entirely changed; she is gentleness itself." But still he could not conquer his aversion; it was stronger than his own will.

These unavailing regrets, the disappointment and sorrow that preyed upon his mind undoubtedly aggravated the bitterness and severity of Martial's policy. At least he knew how to fall nobly. He passed, even without a change of countenance, from all but omnipotence to a position so compromising that his very life was endangered. On perceiving his ante-chambers, formerly thronged with flatterers and place-hunters, now empty and deserted, he laughed—naturally, sincerely, without the least affectation. "The ship is sinking," said he: "the rats have deserted it." He did not even turn pale when the mob gathered outside his house, hurling stones at his windows, and hooting and cursing the fallen statesman; and when Otto, his faithful valet de chambre, entreated him to assume a disguise, and make his escape through the gardens, he quietly replied, "By no means! I am simply odious; I don't wish to become ridiculous!" They could not even dissuade him from going to a window and looking down on the rabble in the street below. A singular idea had just occurred to him. "If Jean Lacheneur is still alive," he thought, "how much he would enjoy this! And if he is alive, no doubt he is there in the foremost rank, urging on the crowd." And he wished to see. But Jean Lacheneur was in Russia at that epoch.

The excitement eventually subsided; and the Hotel de Sairmeuse was not seriously threatened. However, Martial realized that it would be better for him to go away for awhile, and allow people to forget him. He did not ask the duchess to accompany him. "The fault has been mine entirely," he said to her, "and it would be most unjust to make you suffer for it by condemning you to exile. Remain here; I think it will be much better for you to remain." She did not offer to go with him, although she longed to do so, but then she dared not leave Paris. She knew that she must remain in order to secure her persecutor's silence. On the two occasions when she had left Paris before, everything was near being discovered, and yet then she had had Aunt Medea to take her place. Martial went away, accompanied only by his servant, Otto. In intelligence, this man was decidedly superior to his position; he was indeed decently off, and he had a hundred reasons—one, by the way, was a very pretty one—for desiring to remain in Paris; but his master was in trouble, and so he did not hesitate. During four years the Duke de Sairmeuse wandered through Europe, always chafing beneath the burden of a life no longer animated by interest or sustained by hope. He remained for a time in London, then he went to Vienna, and afterwards to Venice. One day he was seized by an irresistible desire to see Paris again, and he returned. It was not a very prudent step, perhaps, for his bitterest enemies—personal enemies, whom he had mortally offended and persecuted—were in power; but still he did not hesitate. Besides, how could they injure him, since he had no favours to ask, no cravings of ambition to satisfy?

The exile which had weighed so heavily on him, the loneliness he had endured had softened his nature and inclined his heart to tenderness: and he returned firmly resolved to overcome his aversion to his wife, and seek a reconciliation. "Old age is coming," he thought. "If I have not the love of youth by my fireside, I may at least have a friend." Blanche was astonished by his manner towards her when he returned. She almost believed she had found again the Martial of the old days at Courtoineu, but the realisation of the dream, so fondly cherished and so long deferred, now proved only another torture added to all the others. Still, Martial was striving to carry his plan into execution, when one day the following brief note came to him through the post: "Monsieur le Duc—If I were in your place, I would watch my wife."

It was only an anonymous letter, and yet on perusing it Martial's blood mounted to his forehead. "Can she have a lover?" he thought. Then reflecting on his own conduct towards his wife since their marriage, he said to himself: "And if she has, what right have I to complain? Did I not tacitly give her back her liberty?" However, he was greatly troubled; and yet he did not once think of playing the spy.

A few mornings afterwards, at about eleven o'clock, he was returning from a ride on horseback, and was not thirty paces from the Hotel de Sairmeuse when he suddenly perceived a lady hurriedly emerge from the house. She was very plainly dressed—entirely in black—but her whole appearance recalled that of the duchess in a striking fashion. "That's certainly my wife," thought Martial, "but why is she dressed in that fashion?" Then, yielding to a sudden impulse, he walked his horse up the Rue de Grenelle behind the woman in black. Blanche it was. She was tripping swiftly over the pavement, keeping her face shrouded by a thick veil and she never once turned her head. On reaching the Rue Taranne, she spoke hurriedly to a cab-driver on the stand, and then sprang into his vehicle. The Jehu was already on his box and he at once gave his bony horse such a vigorous cut of the whip that it was evident he had just been promised a princely gratuity. The cab had already turned into the Rue du Dragon, and Martial, ashamed of what he had already done and irresolute as to what he should do now was still tarrying at the corner of the Rue des Saints-Peres, where he had originally stopped his horse. Scarcely daring to entertain the suspicions that flitted across his mind, he tried to deceive himself. "After all," he muttered, "it is of no use advancing. The cab's a long way off by now, and I couldn't overtake it." Still he mechanically gave his horse the rein and when he reached the Croix Rouge he espied Blanche's vehicle among a crowd of others. He recognized it by its green body and wheels striped with white. This decided him. The cab-driver had just managed to extricate himself from the block which traffic so frequently causes hereabouts, and whipping up his horse once more turned literally at a gallop up the Rue du Vieux Colombier—leading into the Place St. Sulpice. Thence he took the shortest cut to gain the outer boulevards.

Martial's thoughts were busy as he trotted along a hundred yards or so behind the vehicle. "She's in a terrible hurry," he said to himself. "But this is scarcely the quarter for a lover's rendezvous." The cab had indeed now reached the squalid region extending beyond the Place d'Italie. It turned into the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers and soon drew up before a tract of waste ground. The Duchess de Sairmeuse then hastily alighted, and, without stopping to look to the right or to the left, hurried across the open space. Martial had prudently paused in the rear. Not far from him he espied a man sitting on a block of stone and apparently immersed in the task of colouring a clay-pipe. "Will you hold my horse a moment?" inquired Martial.

"Certainly," answered the man, rising to his feet. He wore a workman's blouse and a long beard, and his aspect altogether was scarcely prepossessing. Had Martial been less pre-occupied, his suspicions might have been aroused by the malicious smile that curved the fellow's lips; and had he scrutinized him closely, he would perhaps have recognized him. For the seeming vagrant was Jean Lacheneur. Since forwarding that anonymous letter to the Duke de Sairmeuse, he had compelled the Duchess to multiply her visits to the Widow Chupin's den, and on each occasion he had watched for her arrival. "So, if her husband decides to follow her I shall know it," he thought. It was indispensable for the success of his plans that Blanche should be watched by her husband. For from among a thousand schemes of revenge, Jean had chosen the most frightful his fevered brain could conceive. He longed to see the haughty Duchess de Sairmeuse subjected to the vilest ignominy, and Martial in the hands of the lowest of the low. He pictured a bloody struggle in this miserable den; the sudden arrival of the police, summoned by himself, and the indiscriminate arrest of all the parties present. He gloated over the thought of a trial in which the crime

committed at the Borderie would be brought to light; he saw the duke and the duchess in prison, and the great names of Sairmeuse and Courtornieu shrouded in eternal disgrace. And he believed that nothing was wanting to ensure the success of his plans. He had two miserable wretches who were capable of any crime at his disposal; and an unfortunate youth named Gustave, whom poverty and cowardice had made his willing slave, was intended to play the part of Marie-Anne's son. These three accomplices had no suspicions of Lacheneur's real intentions, while, as for the Widow Chupin and her son, if they suspected some infamous plot all they really knew in regard to it was the duchess's name. Moreover, Jean held Polyte and his mother completely under his control by the wealth he had promised them if they served them faithfully. If Martial decided to follow his wife into the Poivriere the first time he watched her, Jean had, moreover, so arranged matters that the duke would at first suppose that Blanche had been led there by charity. "But he will not go in," thought the seeming vagrant, as, holding Martial's horse some little distance off, he looked in the direction of the hovel. "Monsieur le Duc is too cunning for that."

And Martial did not go in. Though he was horrified when he saw his wife enter so vile a den, as if she were at home there, he said to himself that he should learn nothing by following her. He, therefore, contented himself by making a thorough examination of the hovel from outside, and then remounting his horse and throwing Lacheneur a silver coin he started back home at a gallop. He was completely mystified: he did not know what to think, what to imagine, what to believe. But, at the same time, he was fully resolved to fathom the mystery; and as soon as he returned home he sent Otto out in search of information. He could confide everything to this devoted servant from whom he had no secrets. At four o'clock in the afternoon, the faithful valet de chambre returned with an expression of consternation on his face. "What is it?" asked Martial, divining some great misfortune.

"Ah, sir, the mistress of that wretched den is the widow of Chupin's son—"

Martial's face turned ghastly pale. He knew life well enough to understand that since the duchess had been compelled to submit to these peoples' power, they must be masters of some secret which she was anxious at any price to keep unrevealed. But what secret could it be? The years which had furrowed Martial's brow, had not cooled the ardour of his blood. He was, as he had always been, a man of impulse, and so, without pausing he rushed to his wife's apartments.

"Madame has just gone downstairs to receive the Countess de Mussidan and the Marchioness d'Arlange," said the maid whom he met on the landing.

"Very well; I will wait for her here. You may retire."

So saying, Martial entered Blanche's dressing-room. It was in disorder for, after returning from the Poivriere, the duchess was still engaged at her toilette when visitors were announced. The wardrobe-doors stood open, two or three chairs were encumbered with wearing apparel, and Blanche's watch, her purse, and several bunches of keys were lying on the dressing-table and the mantel-piece. Martial did not sit down. His self-possession was returning. "I will commit no act of folly," he thought, "if I question her, I shall learn nothing. I must be silent and watchful."

He was about to retire, when, on glancing round the room, he noticed a large casket, inlaid with silver, which had belonged to his wife ever since she was a girl, and which accompanied her everywhere. "That, no doubt, contains the solution of the mystery," he said to himself. This was one of those moments when a man obeys the dictates of passion without pausing to reflect. Seeing the keys on the mantelpiece, he seized them, and endeavoured to find one that would fit the lock of the casket. The fourth key opened it. It was full of papers. With feverish haste, Martial examined their contents. He had thrown aside several unimportant letters, when he came to a bill that read as follows: "Search made for Madame de Sairmeuse's child. Expenses for the third quarter of the year 18—." Martial's brain reeled. A child! His wife had a child! But he read on: "For the services of two agents at Sairmeuse, ——. For expenses attending my own journey, ——. Divers gratuities, ——. Etc., etc." The total amounted to six thousand francs; and it was receipted "Chefteux." With a sort of cold rage, Martial continued his examination of the casket's contents, and found a miserably-written note, which said; "Two thousand francs this evening, or I will tell the duke the history of the affair at the Borderie." Then there were several more of Chefteux's bills; next, a letter from Aunt Medea, in which she spoke of prison and remorse; and, finally, at the bottom of the casket, he found the marriage certificate of Marie-Anne Lacheneur and Maurice d'Escorval, drawn up by the cure of Vigano and signed by the old physician and Corporal Bavois.

The truth was as clear as daylight. Stunned, frozen with horror, Martial scarcely had strength enough to place the letters in the casket again, and restore it to its place. Then he tottered back to his own room, clinging to the walls for support. "It was she who murdered Marie-Anne," he murmured. He was confounded, terror-stricken, by the perfidy of this woman who was his wife—by her criminal audacity, cool calculation and assurance, and her marvellous powers of dissimulation.

Still he swore he would discover everything, either through the duchess or through the Widow Chupin; and he ordered Otto to procure him a costume such as was generally worn by the frequenters of the Poivriere. He did not know how soon he might have need of it. This happened early in February, and from that moment Blanche did not take a single step without being watched. Not a letter reached her that her husband had not previously read. And she had not the slightest suspicion of the constant supervision to which she was subjected. Martial did not leave his room; he pretended to be ill. He felt he could not meet his wife and remain silent. He remembered the oath of vengeance which he had sworn over Marie-Anne's lifeless form only too well. However, the watch which Otto kept over the duchess, and the perusal of the letters addressed to her, did not yield any fresh information, and for this reason: Polyte Chupin had been arrested on a charge of theft, and this accident caused a delay in the execution of Lacheneur's plans.

But at last the latter prepared everything for Shrove Sunday, the 20th of February. On the previous day, in accordance with her instructions, the Widow Chupin wrote to the duchess that she must come to the Poivriere on Sunday night at eleven o'clock. On that same evening, Jean was to meet his accomplices at a ball at the Rainbow—a wine-shop bearing a very unenviable reputation—and give them their final instructions. These accomplices were to open the scene; he was only to appear at the *denouement*. "All is well arranged; the mechanism will work of its own accord," he said to himself. But, as is already known, the "mechanism," as he styled it, failed to act.

On receiving the Widow Chupin's summons, Blanche revolted for a moment. The lateness of the hour, the distance, the isolation of the appointed meeting place, frightened her. Still, she was obliged to submit, and on Sunday evening she furtively left the house, accompanied by Camille, the same maid who had been present when Aunt Medea died. The duchess and Camille were attired like women of the lowest order, and felt no fear of being

recognized. And yet a man was watching who quickly followed them. This was Martial. He had perused the note appointing this rendezvous even before his wife, and had disguised himself in the costume Otto had procured for him—that of a labourer about the quays. Then, in hope of making himself absolutely unrecognizable, he had soiled and matted his hair and beard; his hands were grimed with dirt; and he really seemed to belong to the class of which he wore the attire. Otto had begged to be allowed to accompany his master; but the duke refused, remarking that his revolver would prove quite sufficient protection. He knew Otto well enough, however, to feel certain he would disobey him.

Ten o'clock was striking when Blanche and Camille left the house, and it did not take them five minutes to reach the Rue Taranne. There was only one cab on the stand, which they at once hired. This circumstance drew from Martial an oath worthy of his costume. But he reflected that, since he knew where to find his wife, a slight delay in obtaining a vehicle would not matter. He soon found one, and, thanks to a gratuity of ten francs, the driver started off to the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers as fast as his horse could go. However, the duke had scarcely alighted before he heard the rumbling of another vehicle which pulled up abruptly a little distance behind. "Otto is evidently following me," he thought. And he then started across the open space in the direction of the Poivriere. The prevailing silence and absence of life were rendered still more oppressive by a chill fog which heralded an approaching thaw. Martial stumbled and slipped at almost every step he took over the rough, snow-covered ground; but at last through the mist he distinguished a building in the distance. This was the Poivriere. The light burning inside, filtered through the heart-shaped apertures cut in the upper part of the shutters, and it almost seemed as if a pair of lurid eyes were striving to peer through the fog.

Could it really be possible that the Duchess de Sairmeuse was there! Martial cautiously approached the window, and clinging to the hinges of the shutters, raised himself up so that he could glance through one of the apertures. Yes, there was no mistake. His wife and Camille were seated at a table before a large punch-bowl, in the company of two ragged, leering scoundrels, and a soldier of youthful appearance. In the centre of the room stood the Widow Chupin, with a small glass in her hand. She was talking with great volubility, and punctuating her sentences with occasional sips of brandy. The impression this scene produced on Martial was so acute that his hold relaxed and he dropped to the ground. A ray of pity stole into his soul, for he vaguely realized the frightful suffering which had been the murderess's chastisement. But he wished for another glance, and so once more he lifted himself up to the opening and looked in. The old woman had disappeared; the young soldier had risen from the table, and was talking and gesticulating earnestly. Blanche and Camille were listening to him with the closest attention. The two men who were sitting face to face, with their elbows on the table, were looking at each other; and Martial saw them exchange a significant glance. He was not wrong. The scoundrels were plotting "a rich haul." Blanche, who had dressed herself with much care, and to render her disguise perfect had encased her feet in large coarse shoes, that were causing her well nigh intolerable agony—Blanche had neglected to remove her superb diamond ear-rings. She had forgotten them, but Lacheneur's accomplices had noticed them, and were now glancing at them with eyes that glittered more brilliantly than the diamonds themselves. While awaiting Lacheneur's coming, these wretches as had been agreed upon, were playing the part which he had imposed upon them. For this, and their assistance afterwards, they were to receive a certain sum of money. But they were thinking that this sum did not represent a quarter of the value of these jewels, and their looks only too plainly said: "What if we could secure them and go off before Lacheneur comes!" The temptation was too strong to be resisted. One of the scoundrels suddenly rose, and, seizing the duchess by the back of the neck, forced her head down on the table. The diamonds would have been at once torn from her ears if it had not been for Camille, who bravely came to her mistress's assistance. Martial could endure no more. He sprang to the door of the hovel, opened it, and entered, bolting it behind him.

"Martial!" "Monsieur le Duc!" cried Blanche and Camille in the same breath, for, despite his disguise, they had both recognised him. Their exclamations turned the momentary stupor of their assailants into fury; and both ruffians precipitated themselves on Martial, determined to kill him. But, springing on one side, the duke avoided them. He had his revolver in his hand; he fired twice, and both the scoundrels fell. However, he was not yet safe, for the young soldier rushed forward and attempted to disarm him. Then began a furious struggle, in the midst of which Martial did not leave off crying, in a panting voice, "Fly! Blanche, fly! Otto is not far off. The name—save the honour of the name!"

The two women obeyed him, making their escape through the back door, which opened into the garden; and they had scarcely done so, before a violent knocking was heard at the front entry. The police were coming! This increased Martial's frenzy; and in a supreme effort to free himself from his assailant, he hurled him backwards so violently, that, striking his head against a corner of the table, the young soldier fell on to the floor, and lay there to all appearance dead. In the meanwhile, the Widow Chupin, who had hastened from the room above on hearing the uproar, was shrieking on the staircase, while at the front door a voice was crying: "Open in the name of the law!" Martial might have fled; but if he fled, the duchess might be captured, for he would certainly be pursued. He saw the peril at a glance, and determined to remain. Shaking the Widow Chupin by the arm, he said to her, in an imperious voice: "If you know how to hold your tongue you shall have a hundred thousand francs." Then, drawing a table before the door opening into the back room, he intrenched himself behind it as behind a rampart, and awaited the enemy's approach.

The next moment the door was forced open, and a squad of police agents, headed by Inspector Gevrol, entered the room. "Surrender!" cried the inspector.

Martial did not move; his revolver was turned towards the intruders. "If I can parley with them and hold them in check only two minutes, all may yet be saved," he thought. He obtained the required delay; then throwing his weapon to the ground, he was about to bound through the back door, when a police agent, who had gone round to the rear of the house, seized him about the body, and threw him to the floor. From this side he expected only assistance, hence he exclaimed: "Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

In the twinkling of an eye he was bound; and two hours later he was an inmate of the station-house at the Place d'Italie. He had played his part so perfectly, that he had deceived even Gevrol. His assailants were dead, and he could rely upon the Widow Chupin. But he knew that the trap had been set for him by Jean Lacheneur; and he read a whole volume of suspicion in the eyes of the young officer who had cut off his retreat, and who was called Lecoq by his companions.

THE Duke de Sairmeuse was one of those men who remain superior to circumstances. He was possessed of vast experience, and great natural shrewdness. His mind was quick to act, and fertile in resources. But when he found himself immured in the damp and loathsome station-house at the Place d'Italie, after the terrible scene we have just recalled, he felt inclined to relinquish all hope. He knew that justice does not trust to appearances, and that when an investigating magistrate finds himself in presence of a mystery, he does not rest until he has fathomed it. He knew only too well, moreover, that if his identity was established, the authorities would endeavour to discover the reason that had led him to the Poivriere; now he could scarcely doubt but what this reason would soon be discovered, and, in that case, the crime at the Borderie, and the duchess's guilt, would undoubtedly be made public. This meant the Assize Court for the woman who bore his name—imprisonment, perhaps execution, at all events, a frightful scandal, dishonour, eternal disgrace! And the power he had wielded in former days was a positive disadvantage to him now, when his past position was filled by his political adversaries. Among them were two personal enemies, whose vanity he once had wounded, and who had never forgiven him. They would certainly not neglect the present opportunity for revenge. At the thought of such an ineffaceable stain on the great name of Sairmeuse, which was his pride and glory, reason almost forsook him. "My God, inspire me," he murmured. "How shall I save the honour of the name?"

He saw but one chance of salvation—death. They now believed him to be one of the miserable loafers who haunt the suburbs of Paris; if he were dead they would not trouble themselves about his identity. "It is the only way!" he thought, and he was indeed endeavouring to find some means of committing suicide, when suddenly he heard a bustle outside his cell. A few moments afterwards the door was opened and a man was thrust in—a man who staggered a few steps, fell heavily on to the floor, and then began to snore. The new arrival was apparently only some vulgar drunkard.

A minute or so elapsed, and then a vague, strange hope touched Martial's heart—no, he must be mistaken—and yet—yes, certainly this drunkard was Otto—Otto in disguise, and almost unrecognizable! It was a bold ruse and no time must be lost in profiting by it. Martial stretched himself on a bench, as if to sleep, and in such a way that his head was close to Otto's. "The duchess is out of danger," murmured the faithful servant.

"For to-day, perhaps. But to-morrow, through me everything will be discovered."

"Have you told them who you are?"

"No; all the police agents but one took me for a vagabond."

"You must continue to personate that character."

"What good will it do? Jean Lacheneur will betray me." But Martial, though he little knew it, had no need to fear Lacheneur for the present, at least. A few hours previously, on his way in the dark from the Rainbow to to the Poivriere, Jean had fallen to the bottom of a stone quarry, and fractured his skull. The labourers, on returning to their work early in the morning, found him lying there senseless; and that very moment they were carrying him to the hospital.

Although Otto also was ignorant of this circumstances, he did not seem discouraged. "There will be some way of getting rid of Lacheneur," said he, "if you will only sustain your present character. An escape is an easy matter when a man has millions at his command."

"They will ask me who I am, where I've come from, and how I've lived."

"You speak English and German, don't you; tell them that you have just returned from foreign parts; that you were a foundling, and that you have always lived a roving life."

"How can I prove that?"

Otto drew a little nearer his master, and said, impressively: "We must agree on our plans, for success depends on a perfect understanding between us. I have a sweetheart in Paris—and no one knows of our connection. She is as sharp as steel. Her name is Milner, and she keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg, in the Rue Saint-Quentin. You can say that you arrived here from Leipsic on Sunday; that you went to that hotel, that you left your trunk there, and that it has a card nailed to the top with your name—say May, foreign artist."

"Capital!" said Martial, approvingly. And then, with extraordinary quickness and precision, they agreed, point by point, on their plan of defense. When everything had been arranged, Otto pretended to awake from the heavy sleep of intoxication; he clamoured to be released, and the keeper finally opened the door and set him at liberty. Before leaving the station-house, however, he succeeded in throwing a note to the Widow Chupin, who was imprisoned in the opposite cell. So, when Lecoq, after his skilful investigations at the Poivriere, rushed to the Place d'Italie, panting with hope and ambition, he found himself outwitted by these men, who were inferior to him in penetration, but whose tact was superior to his own.

Martial's plans being fully formed, he intended to carry them out with absolute perfection of detail, and, after his removal to the Depot, he was preparing himself for the investigating magistrate's visit, when Maurice d'Escorval entered his cell. They recognized each other. They were both terribly agitated, and the examination was an examination only in name. After Maurice's departure Martial attempted to destroy himself; for he had no faith in his former enemy's generosity. But when he found M. Segmuller occupying Maurice's place the next morning, he really believed that he was saved.

Then began that struggle between the magistrate and Lecoq on one side, and the prisoner on the other—a struggle in which neither conquered. Martial knew that Lecoq was the only person he had to fear, still he bore him no ill-will. Faithful to his nature, which compelled him to be just even to his enemies, he could not help admiring the astonishing penetration and perseverance of this young police agent, who, undismayed by the obstacles surrounding him, struggled on, unassisted, to reach the truth. But Lecoq was always outwitted by Otto, the mysterious accomplice, who seemed to know his every movement in advance. At the Morgue, at the Hotel de Mariembourg, with Toinon, the wife of Polyte Chupin, as well as with Polyte himself Lecoq was always just a little too late. He detected the secret correspondence between the prisoner and his accomplice, and he was even ingenious enough to discover the key to it, but this served no purpose. A man, who had seen a rival, or rather a future master in Lecoq—in short, Gevrol—had betrayed him. If his efforts to arrive at the truth through the jeweller and the Marchioness d'Arlange had failed, it was only because Blanche had not purchased the diamond ear-rings she wore at the Poivriere at any shop, but from one of her friends, the Baroness de Watchau. And finally, if no one in Paris had missed the Duke de

Sairmeuse, it was because—thanks to an understanding between the duchess, Otto, and Camille—no other inmates of the Hotel de Sairmeuse suspected his absence. All the servants supposed that the duke was confined to his room by illness. His breakfast and dinner were taken up to his private apartments every day; and soups and tisanes were prepared ostensibly for his benefit.

So the weeks went by, and Martial was expecting to be summoned before the Assize Court and condemned under the name of May, when he was afforded an opportunity to escape. Too shrewd not to discern the trap that had been set for him, it was only after horrible hesitation that he decided to alight from the prison-van, determined to run the risk, and commending himself for protection to his lucky star. And he decided wisely, for that same night he leaped over his own garden wall, leaving an escaped convict, Joseph Couturier by name, whom he had picked up in a low eating-house, as a hostage in Lecoq's hands. Warned by Madame Milner, thanks to a blunder which Lecoq committed, Otto was waiting for his master. In the twinkling of an eye Martial's beard fell under the razor; he plunged into the bath which was already prepared, and his clothes were burned. And he it was who, during the search a few minutes later, had the hardihood to call out: "Otto, by all means allow these men to do their duty." But he did not breathe freely until the police-agents had departed. "At last," he exclaimed, "honour is saved! We have outwitted Lecoq!"

He had just left his bath, and assumed a dressing-gown, when Otto handed him a letter from the duchess. He hastily opened the envelope and read: "You are safe. You know everything. I am dying. Farewell. I loved you."

With two bounds he reached his wife's apartments. The outer door was locked: he burst it open; but he came to late. Blanche was dead—poisoned, like Marie-Anne; but she had procured a drug having an instantaneous effect, and extended on her couch, clad in her wonted apparel, her hands folded over her breast, she seemed only asleep. A tear glistened in Martial's eye. "Poor, unhappy woman!" he murmured; "may God forgive you as I forgive you—you whose crime has been so frightfully expiated here below!"

EPILOGUE.

SAFE, in his own princely mansion, and surrounded by an army of retainers, the Duke de Sairmeuse had triumphantly exclaimed: "We have outwitted Lecoq!"

In this he was right; for the young detective was certainly nonplussed for the time being; but when his grace fancied himself for ever beyond this wily, keen-witted, aspiring agent's reach, he was most decidedly wrong. Lecoq was not the man to sit down with folded hands and brood over the humiliation of defeat. Before he went to old Tabaret, he was beginning to recover from his despondency; and when he left that experienced detective's presence, he had regained his courage, energy, and command over his faculties. "Well, my worthy friend," he remarked to Father Absinthe, who was trotting along by his side, "you heard what the great Monsieur Tabaret said, didn't you? So you see I was right."

But his companion evinced no enthusiasm. "Yes, you were right," he responded, in woe-begone tones.

"Do you think we are ruined by two or three mistakes? Nonsense! I will soon turn to-day's defeat into a glorious victory."

"Ah! you might do so perhaps, if—they don't dismiss us from the force."

This doleful remark recalled Lecoq to a sense of his present position. He and Absinthe had allowed a prisoner to slip through their fingers. That was vexatious, it is true; but, on the other hand, they had captured a most notorious criminal—Joseph Couturier. Surely there was some comfort in that. Still, of course, they both might be dismissed—and yet Lecoq could have borne the prospect, dismal as it was, if it had not been for the thought that dismissal would for ever prevent him from following up the Poivriere affair. What would his superiors say when he told them that May and the Duke de Sairmeuse were one and the same person. They would, no doubt, shrug their shoulders and turn up their noses. "Still, M. Segmuller will believe me," he thought. "But will he dare to take any action in the matter without patent evidence before him?"

This was very unlikely, as Lecoq fully realized, and for a moment he asked himself if he and his fellows could not make a descent on the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and, on some pretext or other, compel the duke to show himself. It would then be easy to identify him as the prisoner May. However, after a little thought he dismissed the idea. "It would be a stupid expedient!" he exclaimed. "Two such men as the duke and his accomplice are not likely to be caught napping. They are prepared for such a visit, and we should only have our labour for our pains."

He made these reflections in a low tone of voice; and Father Absinthe's curiosity was aroused. "Excuse me," said the old veteran, "I don't quite understand you."

"I say that we must find some tangible proof before asking permission to proceed further—" Lecoq paused with knitted brows. An idea had occurred to him. He fancied he could prove complicity between at least one of the witnesses summoned to give evidence, and some member of the duke's household. He was indeed thinking of Madame Milner, the landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg, and of his first meeting with her. He saw her again, in his mind's eye, standing on a chair, her face on a level with a cage, covered with a large piece of black silk, while she persistently repeated three or four German words to a starling, who with equal persistency retorted: "Camille! Where is Camille?" "One thing is certain," exclaimed Lecoq aloud, "if Madame Milner—who is a German, and who speaks French with the strongest possible German accent—had reared this bird, it would either have spoken in German or else in French, and in the latter case with the same accent as its mistress. So it can't have been in her possession long; but then who can have given it to her?"

Father Absinthe was beginning to grow impatient "In sober earnest, what are you talking about?" he asked, petulantly.

"I say that if there is any one at the Hotel de Sairmeuse named Camille, I have the proof I wish for. Come, Papa Absinthe, let us hurry on." And without another word of explanation, he dragged his companion rapidly towards the Seine.

When they reached the Rue de Grenelle, Lecoq perceived a commissioner leaning against the door of a wine-shop. He walked straight towards him. "Come, my good fellow," said he. "I want you to go to the Hotel de Sairmeuse and ask for Camille. Tell her that her uncle is waiting for her here."

"But, sir—"

"What, you haven't gone yet?"

The messenger started off, and the two police agents entered the wine-shop, Father Absinthe scarcely having time to swallow a glass of brandy before the envoy returned. "I was unable to see Mademoiselle Camille," said he. "The house is closed from top to bottom. The duchess died very suddenly this morning."

"Ah! the wretch!" exclaimed the young police agent. Then controlling himself, he mentally added: "He must have killed his wife on returning home, but his fate is sealed. Now, I shall be allowed to continue my investigations."

In less than twenty minutes they arrived at the Palais de Justice. M. Segmuller did not seem to be immoderately surprised by Lecoq's revelations, though he listened with evident doubt to the young police agent's ingenious deductions; it was the circumstance of the starling which at last decided him. "Perhaps you are right, my dear Lecoq," he said, "and to tell the truth, I quite agree with you. But I can take no further action in the matter until you can furnish proof so convincing in its nature that the Duke de Sairmeuse will be unable to think of denying it."

"Ah! sir, my superiors won't allow me—"

"On the contrary," interrupted the magistrate, "they will allow you the fullest liberty after I have spoken to them." Such action on M. Segmuller's part, required no little courage; for in official circles there had been considerable merriment over the magistrate's mysterious man with the iron mask, disguised as a mountebank; and the former by his persistent support of the young detective's theories, had almost become an object of ridicule.

"And when will you speak to them?" timidly inquired Lecoq.

"At once."

The magistrate had already turned towards the door when the young police agent stopped him. "I have one more favour to ask you, sir," he said, entreatingly. "You are so kind, you are the first person who has given me any encouragement—who has had any faith in me."

"Speak, my good fellow."

"Ah! sir, will you give me a message for M. d'Escorval? Any insignificant message—inform him of the prisoner's escape. I will take it myself, and then—Oh! fear nothing, sir; I will be very prudent."

"Very well!" replied the magistrate, "I will write him a note."

When he finally left the office, Lecoq was fully authorized to proceed with his investigations, and he carried in his pocket M. Segmuller's letter to M. d'Escorval. His satisfaction was so intense that he did not deign to notice the sneers bestowed upon him as he passed along the corridors; but on the threshold downstairs he encountered Gevrol the general, who was evidently watching for him. "Ah ha!" laughed the inspector, as Lecoq passed out, "here's one of those simpletons who fish for whales and don't even catch a gudgeon."

For an instant Lecoq felt angry. He turned round abruptly and looked Gevrol full in the face. "At all events," retorted he in the tone of a man *who* knows what he's saying. "That's better than assisting prisoners to carry on a surreptitious correspondence with people outside."

In his surprise, Gevrol almost lost countenance, and his blush was equivalent to a confession. But Lecoq did not add another word. What did it matter to him now if Gevrol had betrayed him! Was he not about to win a glorious revenge!

He spent the remainder of the day in preparing his plan of action, and in thinking what he should say when he took M. Segmuller's note to Maurice d'Escorval. The next morning at about eleven o'clock he presented himself at the latter's house. "M. d'Escorval is in his study with a young man," replied the servant to the young detective's inquiry, "but, as he gave me no orders to the contrary, you may go in."

Lecoq entered, but found the study unoccupied. From the adjoining room, however, only separated from the study by velvet hangings, came a sound of stifled exclamations, of sobs mingled with kisses. Not knowing whether to remain or to retire, the young police-agent stood for a moment undecided; when suddenly he perceived an open letter lying on the carpet. Impelled by an impulse stronger than his will, Lecoq picked the letter up, and his eyes meeting the signature, he started back in surprise. He could not now refrain from reading this missive which ran as follows:

"The bearer of this letter is Marie-Anne's son—your son, Maurice. I have given him all the proofs necessary to establish his identity. It was to his education that I consecrated poor Marie-Anne's inheritance. Those to whose care I confided him have made a noble man of him. If I restore him to you, it is only because the life I lead is not a fitting life for him. Yesterday, the miserable woman who murdered my sister died from poison administered by her own hand. Poor Marie-Anne! she would have been far more terribly avenged had not an accident which happened to me saved the Duke and the Duchess de Sairmeuse from the snare into which I had drawn them.

"JEAN LACHENEUR."

Lecoq stood as if petrified. Now he understood the terrible drama enacted in the Widow Chupin's cabin. "I must go to Sairmeuse at once," he said to himself; "there I can discover everything." He left the room without seeing M. d'Escorval, and even successfully resisted the temptation to take Lacheneur's letter with him.

Exactly a month had transpired since Blanche's death. His grace the Duke de Sairmeuse was reclining on a divan in his library, reading one of his favourite authors, when Otto his valet de chambre came in to inform him that a messenger was below, charged with delivering into his grace's own hands a letter from M. d'Escorval.

Martial sprang to his feet. "It is impossible," he exclaimed; and then he quickly added: "Let the messenger come up."

A tall man, with florid complexion, and red hair and beard, timidly handed the duke a letter. Martial instantly broke the seal, and read:

"I saved you, monsieur, by not recognizing the prisoner.

"He began writing without noticing that the messenger was looking over his shoulder."

May. In your turn assist me. By noon on the day after to-morrow, I must have two hundred and sixty thousand

francs. I have sufficient confidence in your honour to apply to you.

“MAURICE D’ESCORVAL.”

For a moment Martial stood bewildered, then springing to a table he began writing, without noticing that the messenger was looking over his shoulder: “Monsieur—Not the day after to-morrow, but this evening, what you ask will be at your service. My fortune and my life are at your disposal. It is but a slight return for the generosity shown by you in withdrawing, when, under the rags of May, you recognized your former enemy, but now your devoted friend.

“MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE.”

The duke folded this letter with a feverish hand, and giving it to the messenger with a louis, he said: “Here is the answer, make haste!”

But the messenger did not stir. He slipped the letter into his pocket, and then hastily cast his red beard and wig on the floor.

“Lecoq!” exclaimed Martial, paler than death.

“Lecoq, yes, sir,” replied the young detective. “I was obliged to take my revenge; my future depended on it, and so I ventured to imitate M. d’Escorval’s writing.” And as Martial offered no remark: “I must also say to Monsieur le Duc,” he continued, “that if your grace will transmit a confession of your presence at the Poivriere in your own handwriting to the investigating magistrate I can and will at the same time furnish proofs of your grace’s innocence—that you were dragged into a snare, and that you only acted in self-defense.”

Martial looked up in fair astonishment, but to show that he was acquainted with everything, Lecoq slowly added: “As madame is dead, there will be nothing said concerning what took place at the Borderie.”

A week later a private report setting forth that there were no grounds to proceed against the Duke de Sairmeuse was forwarded by M. Segmuller to the public prosecutor.

Appointed to the position of inspector, which he coveted. Lecoq had the good taste, or perhaps, the shrewdness, to wear his honours modestly. But on the day of his promotion, he ordered a seal, on which was engraved the exultant rooster, his chosen armorial design, with a motto to which he ever remained faithful: “*Semper Vigilans.*”

FINIS.

Typographical errors corrected by the etext transcriber:

acticles=> acticles {pg 6}

he broached the subject fo the duke=> he broached the subject to the duke {pg 14}

The Marquise de Sairmeuse will be our spy=> The Marquis de Sairmeuse will be our spy {pg 31}

exclaimed Lacheneur, in amazment;=> exclaimed Lacheneur, in amazement; {pg 38}

The last trial had overwhelmd her=> The last trial had overwhelmed her {pg 58}

Marquis de Courtoruieu had closed=> Marquis de Courtornieu had closed {pg 69}

Blanche de Courtorneiu had reached Montaignac=> Blanche de Courtornieu had reached Montaignac {pg 73}

knew of his infamous intentions=> knew of his infamous intentions {pg 88}

his frequent nocturnal jonrneys=> his frequent nocturnal journeys {pg 89}

looking angrily at the sqectators=> looking angrily at the spectators {pg 90}

since it it absolutely necessary=> since it is absolutely necessary {pg 91}

as motionless as a statute=> as motionless as a statue {pg 109}

a soldier’s assistence is indispensable=> a soldier’s assistance is indispensable {pg 112}

The frontior bordering on Savoy=> The frontier bordering on Savoy {pg 127}

the military commision=> the military commission {pg 127}

he could scarely move them=> he could scarcely move them {pg 128}

It wont be easy to save you=> It won’t be easy to save you {pg 134}

Martial turned crimson, and look searchingly=> Martial turned crimson, and looked searchingly {pg 143}

Peoble told me=> People told me {pg 148}

there was the ask of misleading=> there was the task of misleading {pg 163}

did he breathe freely=> did he breathe freely {pg 174}

that is not yet noon=> that it is not yet noon {pg 182}

the guards accompained him=> the guards accompanied him {pg 182}

Oh the morrow he scarcely ate=> On the morrow he scarcely ate {pg 188}

The abbe atributed this sudden=> The abbe attributed this sudden {pg 194}

She had commited=> She had committed {pg 234}

assumed and attitude=> assumed an attitude {pg 238}

the Baron d’Escoval’s terrible=> the Baron d’Escorval’s terrible {pg 238}

they found him standing=> they found him standing {pg 249}

Am I to undersatand that Marie-Anne=> Am I to understand that Marie-Anne {pg 250}

in the pocket of of her dress=> in the pocket of her dress {pg 254}

after this occurance=> after this occurrence {pg 260}

He has so impatient to reach=> He was so impatient to reach {pg 273}

the clamours of conscience was sinking=> the clamours of conscience were sinking {pg 274}

The patients delirium => The patient’s delirium {pg 287}

Ducnesse de Sairmeuse=> Duchesse de Sairmeuse {pg 288}

the crime she had commited=> the crime she had committed {pg 291}

the happiness which when would have been his=> the happiness which then would have been his {pg 293}

formerly so irritably=> formerly so irritably {pg 293}
urging no the crowd=> urging on the crowd {pg 294}
the duke's household=> the duke's household {pg 309}

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MONSIEUR LECOQ, V. 2 ***

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