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Title: Ramuntcho

Author: Pierre Loti

Release date: January 1, 2006 [EBook #9616]

Most recently updated: January 26, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Dagny; and David Widger

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RAMUNTCHO ***

RAMUNTCHO

By Pierre Loti

Translated by Henri Pene du Bois

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PART I.

CHAPTER I.

The sad curlews, annunciators of the autumn, had just appeared in a mass in a gray squall, fleeing from the high sea under the threat of approaching tempests. At the mouth of the southern rivers, of the Adour, of the Nivelle, of the Bidassoa which runs by Spain, they wandered above the waters already cold, flying low, skimming, with their wings over the mirror-like surfaces. And their cries, at the fall of the October night, seemed to ring the annual half-death of the exhausted plants.

On the Pyrenean lands, all bushes and vast woods, the melancholy of the rainy nights of declining seasons fell slowly, enveloping like a shroud, while Ramuntcho walked on the moss-covered path, without noise, shod with rope soles, supple and silent in his mountaineer's tread.

Ramuntcho was coming on foot from a very long distance, ascending the regions neighboring the Bay of Biscay, toward his isolated house which stood above, in a great deal of shade, near the Spanish frontier.

Around the solitary passer-by, who went up so quickly without trouble and whose march in sandals was not heard, distances more and more profound deepened on all sides, blended in twilight and mist.

The autumn, the autumn marked itself everywhere. The corn, herb of the lowlands, so magnificently green in the Spring, displayed shades of dead straw in the depths of the valleys, and, on all the summits, beeches and oaks shed their leaves. The air was almost cold; an odorous humidity came out of the mossy earth and, at times, there came from above a light shower. One felt it near and anguishing, that season of clouds and of long rains, which returns every time with the same air of bringing the definitive exhaustion of saps and irremediable death,—but which passes like all things and which one forgets at the following spring.

Everywhere, in the wet of the leaves strewing the earth, in the wet of the herbs long and bent, there was a sadness of death, a dumb resignation to fecund decomposition.

But the autumn, when it comes to put an end to the plants, brings only a sort of far-off warning to man, a little more durable, who resists several winters and lets himself be lured several times by the charm of spring. Man, in the rainy nights of October and of November, feels especially the instinctive desire to seek shelter at home, to warm himself at the hearth, under the roof which so many thousand years amassed have taught him progressively to build.—And Ramuntcho felt awakening in the depths of his being the old ancestral aspirations for the Basque home of the country, the isolated home, unattached to the neighboring homes. He hastened his steps the more toward the primitive dwelling where his mother was waiting for him.

Here and there, one perceived them in the distance, indistinct in the twilight, the Basque houses, very distant from one another, dots white or grayish, now in the depth of some gorge steeped in darkness, then on some ledge of the mountains with summits lost in the obscure sky. Almost inconsequential are these human habitations, in the immense and confused entirety of things; inconsequential and even annihilated quite, at this hour, before the majesty of the solitude and of the eternal forest nature.

Ramuntcho ascended rapidly, lithe, bold and young, still a child, likely to play on his road as little mountaineers play, with a rock, a reed, or a twig that one whittles while walking. The air was growing sharper, the environment harsher, and already he ceased to hear the cries of the curlews, their rusty-pulley cries, on the rivers beneath. But Ramuntcho was singing one of those plaintive songs of the olden time, which are still transmitted in the depths of the distant lands, and his naive voice went through the mist or the rain, among the wet branches of the oaks, under the grand shroud, more and more sombre, of isolation, of autumn and of night.

He stopped for an instant, pensive, to see a cart drawn by oxen pass at a great distance above him. The cowboy who drove the slow team sang also; through a bad and rocky path, they descended into a ravine bathed in shadows already nocturnal.

And soon they disappeared in a turn of the path, masked suddenly by trees, as if they had vanished in an abyss. Then Ramuntcho felt the grasp of an unexpected melancholy, unexplained like most of his complex impressions, and, with an habitual gesture, while he resumed his less alert march, he brought down like a visor on his gray eyes, very sharp and very soft, the crown of his woolen Basque cap.

Why?—What had to do with him this cart, this singing cowboy whom he did not even know? Evidently nothing—and yet, for having seen them disappear into a lodging, as they did doubtless every night, into some farm isolated in a lowland, a more exact realization had come to him of the humble life of the peasant, attached to the soil and to the native field, of those human lives as destitute of joy as beasts of burden, but with declines more prolonged and more lamentable. And, at the same time, through his mind had passed the intuitive anxiety for other places, for the thousand other things that one may see or do in this world and which one may enjoy; a chaos of troubling half thoughts, of atavic reminiscences and of phantoms had furtively marked themselves in the depths of his savage child's mind—

For Ramuntcho was a mixture of two races very different and of two beings separated, if one may say it, by an abyss of several generations. Created by the sad fantasy of one of the refined personages of our dazzled epoch, he had been inscribed at his birth as the “son of an unknown father” and he bore no other name than that of his mother. So, he did not feel that he was quite similar to his companions in games and healthy fatigues.

Silent for a moment, he walked less quickly toward his house, on the deserted paths winding on the heights. In him, the chaos of other things, of the luminous “other places”, of the splendors or of the terrors foreign to his own life, agitated itself confusedly, trying to disentangle itself—But no, all this, being indistinct and incomprehensible, remained formless in the darkness.

At last, thinking no more of it, he began to sing his song again. The song told, in monotonous couplets, the complaint of a linen weaver whose lover in a distant war prolonged his absence. It was written in that mysterious Euskarian language, the age of which seems incalculable and the origin of which remains unknown. And little by little, under the influence of the ancient melody, of the wind and of the solitude, Ramuntcho found himself as he was at the beginning of his walk, a simple Basque mountaineer, sixteen or seventeen years old, formed like a man, but retaining the ignorance and the candor of a little boy.

Soon he perceived Etchezar, his parish, its belfry massive as the dungeon of a fortress; near the church, some houses were grouped; others, more numerous, had preferred to be disseminated in the surroundings, among trees, in ravines or on bluffs. The night fell entirely, hastily that evening, because of the sombre veils hooked to the great summits.

Around this village, above or in the valleys, the Basque country appeared, at that moment, like a confusion of gigantic, obscure masses. Long mists disarranged the perspectives; all the distances, all the depths had become inappreciable, the changing mountains seemed to have grown taller in the nebulous phantasmagoria of night. The hour, one knew not why, became strangely solemn, as if the shade of past centuries was to come out of the soil. On the vast lifting-up which is called the Pyrenees, one felt something soaring which was, perhaps, the finishing mind of that race, the fragments of which have been preserved and to which Ramuntcho belonged by his mother—

And the child, composed of two essences so diverse, who was walking alone toward his dwelling, through the night and the rain, began again in the depth of his double being to feel the anxiety of inexplicable reminiscences.

At last he arrived in front of his house,—which was very elevated, in the Basque fashion, with old wooden

balconies under narrow windows, the glass of which threw into the night the light of a lamp. As he came near the entrance, the light noise of his walk became feebler in the thickness of the dead leaves: the leaves of those plane-trees shaped like vaults which, according to the usage of the land, form a sort of atrium before each dwelling.

She recognized from afar the steps of her son, the serious Franchita, pale and straight in her black clothes,—the one who formerly had loved and followed the stranger; then, who, feeling her desertion approaching, had returned courageously to the village in order to inhabit alone the dilapidated house of her deceased parents. Rather than to live in the vast city, and to be troublesome and a solicitor there, she had quickly resolved to depart, to renounce everything, to make a simple Basque peasant of that little Ramuntcho, who, at his entrance in life, had worn gowns embroidered in white silk.

It was fifteen years ago, fifteen years, when she returned, clandestinely, at a fall of night similar to this one. In the first days of this return, dumb and haughty to her former companions from fear of their disdain, she would go out only to go to church, her black cloth mantilla lowered on her eyes. Then, at length, when curiosity was appeased, she had returned to her habits, so valiantly and so irreproachably that all had forgiven her.

To greet and embrace her son she smiled with joy and tenderness, but, silent by nature and reserved as both were, they said to each other only what it was useful to say.

He sat at his accustomed place to eat the soup and the smoking dish which she served to him without speaking. The room, carefully kalsomined, was made gay by the sudden light of a flame of branches in the tall and wide chimney ornamented with a festoon of white calico. In frames, hooked in good order, there were images of Ramuntcho's first communion and different figures of saints with Basque legends; then the Virgin of Pilar, the Virgin of Anguish, and rosaries, and blessed palms. The kitchen utensils shone, in a line on shelves sealed to the walls; every shelf ornamented with one of those pink paper frills, cut in designs, which are manufactured in Spain and on which are printed, invariably, series of personages dancing with castanets, or scenes in the lives of the toreadors. In this white interior, before this joyful and clear chimney, one felt an impression of home, a tranquil welfare, which was augmented by the notion of the vast, wet, surrounding night, of the grand darkness of the valleys, of the mountains and of the woods.

Franchita, as every evening, looked long at her son, looked at him embellishing and growing, taking more and more an air of decision and of force, as his brown mustache was more and more marked above his fresh lips.

When he had supped, eaten with his young mountaineer's appetite several slices of bread and drunk two glasses of cider, he rose, saying:

"I am going to sleep, for we have to work tonight."

"Ah!" exclaimed the mother, "and when are you to get up?"

"At one o'clock, as soon as the moon sets. They will whistle under the window."

"What is it?"

"Bundles of silk and bundles of velvet."

"With whom are you going?"

"The same as usual: Arrochkoa, Florentino and the Iragola brothers. It is, as it was the other night, for Itchoua, with whom I have just made an engagement. Good-night, mother—Oh, we shall not be out late and, sure, I will be back before mass."

Then, Franchita leaned her head on the solid shoulder of her son, in a coaxing humor almost infantile, different suddenly from her habitual manner, and, her cheek against his, she remained tenderly leaning, as if to say in a confident abandonment of her will: "I am still troubled a little by those night undertakings; but, when I reflect, what you wish is always well; I am dependent on you, and you are everything—"

On the shoulder of the stranger, formerly, it was her custom to lean and to abandon herself thus, in the time when she loved him.

When Ramuntcho had gone to his little room, she stayed thinking for a longer time than usual before resuming her needlework. So, it became decidedly his trade, this night work in which one risks receiving the bullets of Spain's carbineers!—He had begun for amusement, in bravado, like most of them, and as his friend Arrochkoa was beginning, in the same band as he; then, little by little, he had made a necessity of this continual adventure in dark nights; he deserted more and more, for this rude trade, the open air workshop of the carpenter where she had placed him as an apprentice to carve beams out of oak trunks.

And that was what he would be in life, her little Ramuntcho, so coddled formerly in his white gown and for whom she had formed naively so many dreams: a smuggler! Smuggler and pelota player,—two things which go well together and which are essentially Basque.

She hesitated still, however, to let him follow that unexpected vocation. Not in disdain for smugglers, oh, no, for her father had been a smuggler; her two brothers also; the elder killed by a Spanish bullet in the forehead, one night that he was swimming across the Bidassoa, the second a refugee in America to escape the Bayonne prison; both respected for their audacity and their strength. No, but he, Ramuntcho, the son of the stranger, he, doubtless, might have had pretensions to lead a less harsh life than these men if, in a hasty and savage moment, she had not separated him from his father and brought him back to the Basque mountains. In truth, he was not heartless, Ramuntcho's father; when, fatally, he had wearied of her, he had made some efforts not to let her see it and never would he have abandoned her with her child if, in her pride, she had not quitted him. Perhaps it would be her duty to-day to write to him, to ask him to think of his son—

And now the image of Gracieuse presented itself naturally to her mind, as it did every time she thought of Ramuntcho's future. She was the little betrothed whom she had been wishing for him for ten years. (In the sections of country unacquainted with modern fashions, it is usual to marry when very young and often to know and select one another for husband and wife in the first years of life.) A little girl with hair fluffed in a gold mist, daughter of a friend of her childhood, of a certain Dolores Detcharry, who had been always conceited—and who had remained contemptuous since the epoch of the great fault.

Certainly, the father's intervention in the future of Ramuntcho would have a decisive influence in obtaining the hand of that girl—and would permit even of asking it of Dolores with haughtiness, after the ancient quarrel. But Franchita felt a great uneasiness in her, increasing as the thought of addressing herself to that man became more precise. And then, she recalled the look, so often sombre, of the stranger, she recalled his vague words of infinite lassitude, of incomprehensible despair; he had the air of seeing always, beyond her horizon, distant abysses and darkness, and, although he was not an insulter of sacred things, never would he pray, thus giving to her this excess of remorse, of having allied herself to some pagan to whom heaven would be closed forever. His friends were similar to him, refined also, faithless, prayerless, exchanging among themselves in frivolous words abysmal thoughts.—Oh, if Ramuntcho by contact with them were to become similar to them all!—desert the churches, fly from the sacraments and the mass!—Then, she remembered the letters of her old father,—now decomposed in the profound earth, under a slab of granite, near the foundations of his parish church—those letters in Euskarian tongue which he wrote to her, after the first months of indignation and of silence, in the city where she had dragged her fault. “At least, my poor Franchita, my daughter, are you in a country where the men are pious and go to church regularly?”—Oh! no, they were hardly pious, the men of the great city, not more the fashionable ones who were in the society of Ramuntcho's father than the humblest laborers in the suburban district where she lived hidden; all carried away by the same current far from the hereditary dogmas, far from the antique symbols.—And Ramuntcho, in such surroundings, how would he resist?—

Other reasons, less important perhaps, retained her also. Her haughty dignity, which in that city had maintained her honest and solitary, revolted truly at the idea that she would have to reappear as a solicitor before her former lover. Then, her superior commonsense, which nothing had ever been able to lead astray or to dazzle, told her that it was too late now to change anything; that Ramuntcho, until now ignorant and free, would not know how to attain the dangerous regions where the intelligence of his father had elevated itself, but that he would languish at the bottom, like one outclassed. And, in fine, a sentiment which she hardly confessed to herself, lingered powerfully in the depths of her heart: the fear of losing her son, of guiding him no longer, of holding him no longer, of having him no longer.—And so, in that instant of decisive reflection, after having hesitated for years, she inclined more and more to remain stubborn in her silence with regard to the stranger and to let pass humbly near her the life of her Ramuntcho, under the protecting looks of the Virgin and the saints.—There remained unsolved the question of Gracieuse Detcharry.—Well, she would marry, in spite of everything, her son, smuggler and poor though he be! With her instinct of a mother somewhat savagely loving, she divined that the little girl was enamoured enough not to fall out of love ever; she had seen this in her fifteen year old black eyes, obstinate and grave under the golden nimbus of her hair. Gracieuse marrying Ramuntcho for his charm alone, in spite of and against maternal will!—The rancor and vindictiveness that lurked in the mind of Franchita rejoiced suddenly at that great triumph over the pride of Dolores.

Around the isolated house where, under the grand silence of midnight, she decided alone her son's future, the spirit of the Basque ancestors passed, sombre and jealous also, disdainful of the stranger, fearful of impiety, of changes, of evolutions of races;—the spirit of the Basque ancestors, the old immutable spirit which still maintains that people with eyes turned toward the anterior ages; the mysterious antique spirit by which the children are led to act as before them their fathers had acted, at the side of the same mountains, in the same villages, around the same belfries.—

The noise of steps now, in the dark, outside!—Someone walking softly in sandals on the thickness of the plane-tree leaves strewn the soil.—Then, a whistled appeal.—

What, already!—Already one o'clock in the morning—!

Quite resolved now, she opened the door to the chief smuggler with a smile of greeting that the latter had never seen in her:

“Come in, Itchoua,” she said, “warm yourself—while I go wake up my son.”

A tall and large man, that Itchoua, thin, with a thick chest, clean shaven like a priest, in accordance with the fashion of the old time Basque; under the cap which he never took off, a colorless face, inexpressive, cut as with a pruning hook, and recalling the beardless personages archaically drawn on the missals of the fifteenth century. Above his hollow cheeks, the breadth of the jaws, the jutting out of the muscles of the neck gave the idea of his extreme force. He was of the Basque type, excessively accentuated; eyes caved-in too much under the frontal arcade; eyebrows of rare length, the points of which, lowered as on the figures of tearful madonnas, almost touched the hair at the temples. Between thirty and fifty years, it was impossible to assign an age to him. His name was Jose-Maria Gorosteguy; but, according to the custom he was known in the country by the surname of Itchoua (the Blind) given to him in jest formerly, because of his piercing sight which plunged in the night like that of cats. He was a practising Christian, a church warden of his parish and a chorister with a thundering voice. He was famous also for his power of resistance to fatigue, being capable of climbing the Pyrenean slopes for hours at racing speed with heavy loads on his back.

Ramuntcho came down soon, rubbing his eyelids, still heavy from a youthful sleep, and, at his aspect, the gloomy visage of Itchoua was illuminated by a smile. A continual seeker for energetic and strong boys that he might enroll in his band, and knowing how to keep them in spite of small wages, by a sort of special point of honor, he was an expert in legs and in shoulders as well as in temperaments, and he thought a great deal of his new recruit.

Franchita, before she would let them go, leaned her head again on her son's neck; then she escorted the two men to the threshold of her door, opened on the immense darkness,—and recited piously the Pater for them, while they went into the dark night, into the rain, into the chaos of the mountains, toward the obscure frontier.

CHAPTER II.

Several hours later, at the first uncertain flush of dawn, at the instant when shepherds and fisherman awake, they were returning joyously, the smugglers, having finished their undertaking.

Having started on foot and gone, with infinite precautions to be silent, through ravines, through woods, through fords of rivers, they were returning, as if they were people who had never anything to conceal from anybody, in a bark of Fontarabia, hired under the eyes of Spain's custom house officers, through the Bidassoa river.

All the mass of mountains and of clouds, all the sombre chaos of the preceding night had disentangled itself almost suddenly, as under the touch of a magic wand. The Pyrenees, returned to their real proportions, were only average mountains, with slopes bathed in a shadow still nocturnal, but with peaks neatly cut in a sky which was already clearing. The air had become lukewarm, suave, exquisite, as if the climate or the season had suddenly changed,—and it was the southern wind which was beginning to blow, the delicious southern wind special to the Basque country, which chases before it, the cold, the clouds and the mists, which enlivens the shades of all things, makes the sky blue, prolongs the horizons infinitely and gives, even in winter, summer illusions.

The boatman who was bringing the smugglers back to France pushed the bottom of the river with his long pole, and the bark dragged, half stranded. At this moment, that Bidassoa by which the two countries are separated, seemed drained, and its antique bed, excessively large, had the flat extent of a small desert.

The day was decidedly breaking, tranquil and slightly pink. It was the first of the month of November; on the Spanish shore, very distant, in a monastery, an early morning bell rang clear, announcing the religious solemnity of every autumn. And Ramuntcho, comfortably seated in the bark, softly cradled and rested after the fatigues of the night, breathed the new breeze with well-being in all his senses. With a childish joy, he saw the assurance of a radiant weather for that All-Saints' Day which was to bring to him all that he knew of this world's festivals: the chanted high mass, the game of pelota before the assembled village, then, at last, the dance of the evening with Gracieuse, the fandango in the moon-light on the church square.

He lost, little by little, the consciousness of his physical life, Ramuntcho, after his sleepless night; a sort of torpor, benevolent under the breath of the virgin morning, benumbed his youthful body, leaving his mind in a dream. He knew well such impressions and sensations, for the return at the break of dawn, in the security of a bark where one sleeps, is the habitual sequel of a smuggler's expedition.

And all the details of the Bidassoa's estuary were familiar to him, all its aspects, which changed with the hour, with the monotonous and regular tide.—Twice every day the sea wave comes to this flat bed; then, between France and Spain there is a lake, a charming little sea with diminutive blue waves—and the barks float, the barks go quickly; the boatmen sing their old time songs, which the grinding and the shocks of the cadenced oars accompany. But when the waters have withdrawn, as at this moment, there remains between the two countries only a sort of lowland, uncertain and of changing color, where walk men with bare legs, where barks drag themselves, creeping.

They were now in the middle of this lowland, Ramuntcho and his band, half dozing under the dawning light. The colors of things began to appear, out of the gray of night. They glided, they advanced by slight jerks, now through yellow velvet which was sand, then through a brown thing, striped regularly and dangerous to walkers, which was slime. And thousands of little puddles, left by the tide of the day before, reflected the dawn, shone on the soft extent like mother-of-pearl shells. On the little yellow and brown desert, their boatman followed the course of a thin, silver stream, which represented the Bidassoa at low tide. From time to time, some fisherman crossed their path, passed near them in silence, without singing as the custom is in rowing, too busy poling, standing in his bark and working his pole with beautiful plastic gestures.

While they were day-dreaming, they approached the French shore, the smugglers. On the other side of the strange zone which they were traversing as in a sled, that silhouette of an old city, which fled from them slowly, was Fontarabia; those highlands which rose to the sky with figures so harsh, were the Spanish Pyrenees. All this was Spain, mountainous Spain, eternally standing there in the face of them and incessantly preoccupying their minds: a country which one must reach in silence, in dark nights, in nights without moonlight, under the rain of winter; a country which is the perpetual aim of dangerous expeditions; a country which, for the men of Ramuntcho's village, seems always to close the southwestern horizon, while it changes in appearance according to the clouds and the hours; a country which is the first to be lighted by the pale sun of mornings and which masks afterward, like a sombre screen the red sun of evenings.—

He adored his Basque land, Ramuntcho,—and this morning was one of the times when this adoration penetrated him more profoundly. In his after life, during his exile, the reminiscence of these delightful returns at dawn, after the nights of smuggling, caused in him an indescribable and very anguishing nostalgia. But his love for the hereditary soil was not as simple as that of his companions. As in all his sentiments, as in all his sensations, there were mingled in it diverse elements. At first the instinctive and unanalyzed attachment of his maternal ancestors to the native soil, then something more refined coming from his father, an unconscious reflection of the artistic admiration which had retained the stranger here for several seasons and had given to him the caprice of allying himself with a girl of these mountains in order to obtain a Basque descendance.—

CHAPTER III.

It is eleven o'clock now, and the bells of France and Spain mingle above the frontier their religious festival vibrations.

Bathed, rested, and in Sunday dress, Ramuntcho was going with his mother to the high mass of All-Saints' Day. On the path, strewn with reddish leaves, they descended toward their parish, under a warm sun which gave to them the illusion of summer.

He, dressed in a manner almost elegant and like a city denizen, save for the traditional Basque cap, which he wore on the side and pulled down like a visor over his childish eyes. She, straight and proud, her head high, her demeanor distinguished, in a gown of new form; having the air of a society woman, except for the mantilla; made of black cloth, which covered her hair and her shoulders. In the great city formerly she had learned how to dress—and anyway, in the Basque country, where so many ancient traditions have been preserved, the women and the girls of the least important villages have all taken the habit of dressing in the fashion of the day, with an elegance unknown to the peasants of the other French provinces.

They separated, as etiquette ordains, in the yard of the church, where the immense cypress trees smelled of the south and the Orient. It resembled a mosque from the exterior, their parish, with its tall, old, ferocious walls, pierced at the top only by diminutive windows, with its warm color of antiquity, of dust and of sun.

While Franchita entered by one of the lower doors, Ramuntcho went up a venerable stone stairway which led one from the exterior wall to the high tribunes reserved for men.

The extremity of the sombre church was of dazzling old gold, with a profusion of twisted columns, of complicated entablatures, of statues with excessive convolutions and with draperies in the style of the Spanish Renaissance. And this magnificence of the tabernacle was in contrast with the simplicity of the lateral walls, simply kalsomined. But an air of extreme old age harmonized these things, which one felt were accustomed for centuries to endure in the face of one another.

It was early still, and people were hardly arriving for this high mass. Leaning on the railing of his tribune, Ramuntcho looked at the women entering, all like black phantoms, their heads and dress concealed under the mourning cashmere which it is usual to wear at church. Silent and collected, they glided on the funereal pavement of mortuary slabs, where one could read still, in spite of the effacing of ages, inscriptions in Euskarian tongue, names of extinguished families and dates of past centuries.

Gracieuse, whose coming preoccupied Ramuntcho, was late. But, to distract his mind for a moment, a "convoy" advanced slowly; a convoy, that is a parade of parents and nearest neighbors of one who had died during the week, the men still draped in the long cape which is worn at funerals, the women under the mantle and the traditional hood of full mourning.

Above, in the two immense tribunes superposed along the sides of the nave, the men came one by one to take their places, grave and with rosaries in their hands: farmers, laborers, cowboys, poachers or smugglers, all pious and ready to kneel when the sacred bell rang. Each one of them, before taking his seat, hooked behind him, to a nail on the wall, his woolen cap, and little by little, on the white background of the kalsomine, came into line rows of innumerable Basque headgear.

Below, the little girls of the school entered at last, in good order, escorted by the Sisters of Saint Mary of the Rosary. And, among these nuns, wrapped in black, Ramuntcho recognized Gracieuse. She, too, had her head enveloped with black; her blonde hair, which to-night would be flurried in the breeze of the fandango, was hidden for the moment under the austere mantilla of the ceremony. Gracieuse had not been a scholar for two years, but was none the less the intimate friend of the sisters, her teachers, ever in their company for songs, novenas, or decorations of white flowers around the statues of the Holy Virgin.—Then, the priests, in their most sumptuous costumes, appeared in front of the magnificent gold of the tabernacle, on a platform elevated and theatrical, and the mass began, celebrated, in this distant village, with excessive pomp as in a great city. There were choirs of small boys chanting in infantile voices with a savage ardor. Then choruses of little girls, whom a sister accompanied at the harmonium and which the clear and fresh voice of Gracieuse guided. From time to time a clamor came, like a storm, from the tribunes above where the men were, a formidable response animated the old vaults, the old sonorous wainscoting, which for centuries have vibrated with the same song.—

To do the same things which for numberless ages the ancestors have done and to tell blindly the same words of faith, are indications of supreme wisdom, are a supreme force. For all the faithful who sang there came from this immutable ceremony of the mass a sort of peace, a confused but soft resignation to coming destruction. Living of the present hour, they lost a little of their ephemeral personality to attach themselves better to the dead lying under the slabs and to continue them more exactly, to form with them and their future descendants only one of these resisting entireties, of almost infinite duration, which is called a race.

CHAPTER IV.

"*Te missa est!*" The high mass is finished and the antique church is emptying. Outside, in the yard, among the tombs, the assistants scatter. And all the joy of a sunny noon greets them, as they come out of the sombre nave where each, according to his naive faculties, had caught more or less a glimpse of the great mystery and of the inevitable death.

Wearing all the uniform national cap, the men come down the exterior stairway; the women, slower to be captivated by the lure of the blue sky, retaining still under the mourning veil a little of the dream of the church, come out of the lower porticoes in black troops; around a grave freshly closed, some stop and weep.

The southern wind, which is the great magician of the Basque country, blows softly. The autumn of yesterday has gone and it is forgotten. Lukewarm breaths pass through the air, vivifying, healthier than those of May, having the odor of hay and the odor of flowers. Two singers of the highway are there, leaning on the

graveyard wall, and they intone, with a tambourine and a guitar, an old seguidilla of Spain, bringing here the warm and somewhat Arabic gaieties of the lands beyond the frontiers.

And in the midst of all this intoxication of the southern November, more delicious in this country than the intoxication of the spring, Ramuntcho, having come down one of the first, watches the coming out of the sisters in order to greet Gracieuse.

The sandal peddler has come also to this closing of the mass, and displays among the roses of the tombs his linen foot coverings ornamented with woolen flowers. Young men, attracted by the dazzling embroideries, gather around him to select colors.

The bees and the flies buzz as in June; the country has become again, for a few hours, for a few days, for as long as this wind will blow, luminous and warm. In front of the mountains, which have assumed violent brown or sombre green tints, and which seem to have advanced to-day until they overhang the church, houses of the village appear in relief, very neat, very white under their coat of kalsomine,—old Pyrenean houses with their wooden balconies and on their walls intercrossings of beams in the fashion of the olden time. In the southwest, the visible portion of Spain, the denuded and red peak familiar to smugglers, stands straight and near in the beautiful clear sky.

Gracieuse does not appear yet, retarded doubtless by the nuns in some altar service. As for Franchita, who never mingles in the Sunday festivals, she takes the path to her house, silent and haughty, after a smile to her son, whom she will not see again until to-night after the dances have come to an end.

A group of young men, among whom is the vicar who has just taken off his golden ornaments, forms itself at the threshold of the church, in the sun, and seems to be plotting grave projects.—They are the great players of the country, the fine flower of the lithe and the strong; it is for the pelota game of the afternoon that they are consulting, and they make a sign to Ramuntcho who pensively comes to them. Several old men come also and surround them, caps crushed on white hair and faces clean shaven like those of monks: champions of the olden time, still proud of their former successes, and sure that their counsel shall be respected in the national game, which the men here attend with pride as on a field of honor.—After a courteous discussion, the game is arranged; it will be immediately after vespers; they will play the “blaid” with the wicker glove, and the six selected champions, divided into two camps, shall be the vicar, Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa, Gracieuse's brother, against three famous men of the neighboring villages: Joachim of Mendiapzi; Florentino of Espelette, and Irrubeta of Hasparren—

Now comes the “convoy”, which comes out of the church and passes by them, so black in this feast of light, and so archaic, with the envelope of its capes, of its caps and of its veils. They are expressive of the Middle Age, these people, while they pass in a file, the Middle Age whose shadow the Basque country retains. And they express, above all, death, as the large funereal slabs, with which the nave is paved, express it, as the cypress trees and the tombs express it, and all the things in this place, where the men come to pray, express it: death, always death.—But a death very softly neighboring life, under the shield of the old consoling symbols—for life is there marked also, almost equally sovereign, in the warm rays which light up the cemetery, in the eyes of the children who play among the roses of autumn, in the smile of those beautiful brown girls who, the mass being finished, return with steps indolently supple toward the village; in the muscles of all this youthfulness of men, alert and vigorous, who shall soon exercise at the ball-game their iron legs and arms.—And of this group of old men and of boys at the threshold of a church, of this mingling, so peacefully harmonious, of death and of life, comes the benevolent lesson, the teaching that one must enjoy in time strength and love; then, without obstinacy in enduring, submit to the universal law of passing and dying, repeating with confidence, like these simple-minded and wise men, the same prayers by which the agonies of the ancestors were cradled.—

It is improbably radiant, the sun of noon in this yard of the dead. The air is exquisite and one becomes intoxicated by breathing it. The Pyrenean horizons have been swept of their clouds, their least vapors, and it seems as if the wind of the south had brought here the limpities of Andalusia or of Africa.

The Basque guitar and tambourine accompany the sung seguilla, which the beggars of Spain throw, like a slight irony into this lukewarm breeze, above the dead. And boys and girls think of the fandango of to-night, feel ascending in them the desire and the intoxication of dancing.—

At last here come the sisters, so long expected by Ramuntcho; with them advance Gracieuse and her mother, Dolores, who is still in widow's weeds, her face invisible under a black cape closed by a crape veil.

What can this Dolores be plotting with the Mother Superior?—Ramuntcho, knowing that these two women are enemies, is astonished and disquiet to-day to see them walk side by side. Now they even stop to talk aside, so important and secret doubtless is what they are saying; their similar black caps, overhanging like wagon-hoods, touch each other and they talk sheltered under them; a whispering of phantoms, one would say, under a sort of little black vault.—And Ramuntcho has the sentiment of something hostile plotted against him under these two wicked caps.

When the colloquy comes to an end, he advances, touches his cap for a salute, awkward and timid suddenly in presence of this Dolores, whose harsh look under the veil he divines. This woman is the only person in the world who has the power to chill him, and, never elsewhere than in her presence, he feels weighing upon him the blemish of being the child of an unknown father, of wearing no other name than that of his mother.

To-day, however, to his great surprise, she is more cordial than usual, and she says with a voice almost amiable: “Good-morning, my boy!” Then he goes to Gracieuse, to ask her with a brusque anxiety: “To-night, at eight o'clock, say if you will be on the square to dance with me?”

For some time, every Sunday had brought to him the same fear of being deprived of dancing with her in the evening. In the week he hardly ever saw her. Now that he was becoming a man, the only occasion for him to have her company was this ball on the green of the square, in the light of the stars or of the moon.

They had fallen in love with each other five years ago, Ramuntcho and Gracieuse, when they were still children. And such loves, when by chance the awakening of the senses confirms instead of destroying them, become in young heads something sovereign and exclusive.

They had never thought of saying this to each other, they knew it so well; never had they talked together of the future which did not appear possible to one without the other. And the isolation of this mountain village where they lived, perhaps also the hostility of Dolores to their naive, unexpressed projects, brought them more closely together—

“To-night, at eight o'clock, say if you will be on the square to dance with me?”

“Yes—” replies the little girl, fixing on her friend eyes of sadness, a little frightened, as well as of ardent tenderness.

“Sure?” asked Ramuntcho again, whom these eyes make anxious.

“Yes, sure!”

So, he is quieted again this time, knowing that if Gracieuse has said and decided something one may count on it. And at once the weather seems to him more beautiful, the Sunday more amusing, life more charming—

The dinner hour calls the Basques now to the houses or to the inns, and, under the light, somewhat gloomy, of the noon sun, the village seems deserted.

Ramuntcho goes to the cider mill which the smugglers and pelota players frequent. There, he sits at a table, his cap still drawn over his eyes, with his friends: Arrochkoa, two or three others of the mountains and the somber Itchoua, their chief.

A festive meal is prepared for them, with fish of the Nivelle, ham and hares. In the foreground of the hall, vast and dilapidated, near the windows, are the tables, the oak benches on which they are seated; in the background, in a penumbra, are the enormous casks filled with new cider.

In this band of Ramuntcho, which is there entire, under the piercing eye of its chief, reigns an emulation of audacity and a reciprocal, fraternal devotion; during their night expeditions especially, they are all one to live or to die.

Leaning heavily, benumbed in the pleasure of resting after the fatigues of the night and concentrated in the expectation of satiating their robust hunger, they are silent at first, hardly raising their heads to look through the window-panes at the passing girls. Two are very young, almost children like Ramuntcho: Arrochkoa and Florentino. The others have, like Itchoua, hardened faces, eyes in ambush under the frontal arcade, expressing no certain age; their aspect reveals a past of fatigues, in the unreasonable obstinacy to pursue this trade of smuggling, which hardly gives bread to the less skillful.

Then, awakened little by little by the smoking dishes, by the sweet cider, they talk; soon their words interlace, light, rapid and sonorous, with an excessive rolling of the *r*. They talk in their mysterious language, the origin of which is unknown and which seems to the men of the other countries in Europe more distant than Mongolian or Sanskrit. They tell stories of the night and of the frontier, stratagems newly invented and astonishing deceptions of Spanish carbineers. Itchoua, the chief, listens more than he talks; one hears only at long intervals his profound voice of a church singer vibrate. Arrochkoa, the most elegant of all, is in striking contrast with his comrades of the mountain. (His name was Jean Detcharry, but he was known only by his surname, which the elders of his family transmitted from father to son for centuries.) A smuggler for his pleasure, he, without any necessity, and possessing beautiful lands in the sunlight; the face fresh and pretty, the blonde mustache turned up in the fashion of cats, the eye feline also, the eye caressing and fleeting; attracted by all that succeeds, by all that amuses, by all that shines; liking Ramuntcho for his triumphs in the ball-game, and quite disposed to give to him the hand of his sister, Gracieuse, even if it were only to oppose his mother, Dolores. And Florentino, the other great friend of Ramuntcho is, on the contrary, the humblest of the band; an athletic, reddish fellow, with wide and low forehead, with good eyes of resignation, soft as those of beasts of burden; without father or mother, possessing nothing in the world except a threadbare costume and three pink cotton shirts; unique lover of a little fifteen year old orphan, as poor as he and as primitive.

At last Itchoua deigns to talk in his turn. He relates, in a tone of mystery and of confidence, a certain tale of the time of his youth, in a black night, on the Spanish territory, in the gorges of Andarlaza. Seized by two carbineers at the turn in a dark path, he had disengaged himself by drawing his knife to stab a chest with it: half a second, a resisting flesh, then, crack! the blade entering brusquely, a jet of warm blood on his hand, the man fallen, and he, fleeing in the obscure rocks—

And the voice which says these things with implacable tranquility, is the same which for years sings piously every Sunday the liturgy in the old sonorous church,—so much so that it seems to retain a religious and almost sacred character—!

“When you are caught”—adds the speaker, scrutinizing them all with his eyes, become piercing again—“When you are caught—What is the life of a man worth in such a case? You would not hesitate, either, I suppose, if you were caught—?”

“Sure not,” replied Arrochkoa, in a tone of infantile bravado, “Sure not! In such a case to take the life of a carabinero no one would hesitate!—”

The debonair Florentino, turned from Itchoua his disapproving eyes. Florentino would hesitate; he would not kill. This is divined in the expression of his face.

“You would not hesitate,” repeated Itchoua, scrutinizing Ramuntcho this time in a special manner; “you would not hesitate, either, I suppose, if you were caught, would you?”

“Surely,” replied Ramuntcho, submissively. “Oh, no, surely—”

But his look, like that of Florentino, has turned from Itchoua. A terror comes to him of this man, of this imperious and cold influence, so completely felt already; an entire soft and refined side of his nature is awakened, made disquiet and in revolt.

Silence has followed the tale, and Itchoua, discontented with the effect of it, proposes a song in order to change the course of ideas.

The purely material well-being which comes after dinner, the cider which has been drunk, the cigarettes which are lighted and the songs that begin, bring back quickly confident joy in these children's heads. And then, there are in the band the two brothers Iragola, Marcos and Joachim, young men of the mountain above

Mendiapzi, who are renowned extemporary speakers in the surrounding country and it is a pleasure to hear them, on any subject, compose and sing verses which are so pretty.

"Let us see," says Itchoua, "you, Marcos, are a sailor who wishes to pass his life on the ocean and seek fortune in America; you, Joachim, are a farm hand who prefers not to quit his village and his soil here. Each of you will discuss alternately, in couplets of equal length, the pleasures of his trade to the tune—to the tune of the 'Iru Damacho'. Go on."

They looked at each other, the two brothers, half turned toward each other on the oak bench where they sit; an instant of reflection, during which an imperceptible agitation of the eyelids alone betrays the working of their minds; then, brusquely Marcos, the elder, begins, and they will never stop. With their shaven cheeks, their handsome profiles, their chins which advance somewhat imperiously above the powerful muscles of the neck, they recall, in their grave immobility, the figures engraved on the Roman medals. They sing with a certain effort of the throat, like the muezzins in the mosques, in high tones. When one has finished his couplet, without a second of hesitation or silence, the other begins; more and more their minds are animated and inflamed. Around the smugglers' table many other caps have gathered and all listen with admiration to the witty or sensible things which the two brothers know how to say, ever with the needed cadence and rhyme.

At the twentieth stanza, at last, Itchoua interrupts them to make them rest and he orders more cider.

"How have you learned?" asked Ramuntcho of the Iragola brothers. "How did the knack come to you?"

"Oh!" replies Marcos, "it is a family trait, as you must know. Our father, our grandfather were extemporary composers who were heard with pleasure in all the festivals of the Basque country, and our mother also was the daughter of a grand improvisator of the village of Lesaca. And then, every evening in taking back the oxen or in milking the cows, we practice, or at the fireside on winter nights. Yes, every evening, we make compositions in this way on subjects which one of us imagines, and it is our greatest pleasure—"

But when Florentino's turn to sing comes he, knowing only the old refrains of the mountain, intones in an Arabic falsetto voice the complaint of the linen weaver; and then Ramuntcho, who had sung it the day before in the autumn twilight, sees again the darkened sky of yesterday, the clouds full of rain, the cart drawn by oxen going down into a sad and closed valley, toward a solitary farm—and suddenly the unexplained anguish returns to him, the one which he had before; the fear of living and of passing thus always in these same villages, under the oppression of these same mountains; the notion and the confused desire for other places; the anxiety for unknown distances—His eyes, become lifeless and fixed, look inwardly; for several strange minutes he feels that he is an exile, from what country he does not know, disinherited, of what he does not know, sad in the depths of his soul; between him and the men who surround him have come suddenly irreducible, hereditary barriers—

Three o'clock. It is the hour when vespers, the last office of the day, comes to an end; the hour when leave the church, in a meditation grave as that of the morning, all the mantillas of black cloth concealing the beautiful hair of the girls and the form of their waists, all the woolen caps similarly lowered on the shaven faces of men, on their eyes piercing or somber, still plunged in the old time dreams.

It is the hour when the games are to begin, the dances, the pelota and the fandango. All this is traditional and immutable.

The light of the day becomes more golden, one feels the approach of night. The church, suddenly empty, forgotten, where persists the odor of incense, becomes full of silence, and the old gold of the background shines mysteriously in the midst of more shade; silence also is scattered around on the tranquil enclosure of the dead, where the folks this time passed without stopping, in their haste to go elsewhere.

On the square of the ball-game, people are beginning to arrive from everywhere, from the village itself and from the neighboring hamlets, from the huts of the shepherds or of the smugglers who perch above, on the harsh mountains. Hundreds of Basque caps, all similar, are now reunited, ready to judge the players, to applaud or to murmur; they discuss the chances, comment upon the relative strength of the players and make big bets of money. And young girls, young women gather also, having nothing of the awkwardness of the peasants in other provinces of France, elegant, refined, graceful in costumes of the new fashions; some wearing on their hair the silk kerchief, rolled and arranged like a small cap; others bareheaded, their hair dressed in the most modern manner; most of them pretty, with admirable eyes and very long eyebrows—This square, always solemn and ordinarily somewhat sad, is filled to-day, Sunday, with a lively and gay crowd.

The most insignificant hamlet in the Basque country has a square for the ball-game, large, carefully kept, in general near the church, under oaks.

But here, this is a central point and something like the Conservatory of French ball-players, of those who become celebrated, in South America as well as in the Pyrenees, and who, in the great international games, oppose the champions of Spain. So the place is particularly beautiful and pompous, surprising in so distant a village. It is paved with large stones, between which grass grows expressing its antiquity and giving to it an air of being abandoned. On the two sides are extended, for the spectators, long benches—made of the red granite of the neighboring mountain and, at this moment, all overgrown with autumn scabwort.

And in the back, the old monumental wall rises, against which the balls will strike. It has a rounded front which seems to be the silhouette of a dome and bears this inscription, half effaced by time: "Blaidka haritzea debakatua." (The blaid game is forbidden.)

Still, the day's game is to be the blaid; but the venerable inscription dates from the time of the splendor of the national game, degenerated at present, as all things degenerate. It had been placed there to preserve the tradition of the "rebot", a more difficult game, exacting more agility and strength, and which has been perpetuated only in the Spanish province of Guipuzcoa.

While the graded benches are filling up, the paved square, which the grass makes green, and which has seen the lithe and the vigorous men of the country run since the days of old, remains empty. The beautiful autumn sun, at its decline, warms and lights it. Here and there some tall oaks shed their leaves above the seated spectators. Beyond are the high church and the cypress trees, the entire sacred corner, from which

the saints and the dead seem to be looking at a distance, protecting the players, interested in this game which is the passion still of an entire race and characterises it—

At last they enter the arena, the Pelotarís, the six champions among whom is one in a cassock: the vicar of the parish. With him are some other personages: the crier, who, in an instant, will sing the points; the five judges, selected among the experts of different villages to intervene in cases of litigation, and some others carrying extra balls and sandals. At the right wrist the players attach with thongs a strange wicker thing resembling a large, curved fingernail which lengthens the forearm by half. It is with this glove (manufactured in France by a unique basket-maker of the village of Ascain) that they will have to catch, throw and hurl the pelota,—a small ball of tightened cord covered with sheepskin, which is as hard as a wooden ball.

Now they try the balls, selecting the best, limbering, with a few points that do not count, their athletic arms. Then, they take off their waistcoats and carry them to preferred spectators; Ramuntcho gives his to Gracieuse, seated in the first row on the lower bench. And all, except the priest, who will play in his black gown, are in battle array, their chests at liberty in pink cotton shirts or light thread fleshings.

The assistants know them well, these players; in a moment, they shall be excited for or against them and will shout at them, frantically, as it happens with the toreadors.

At this moment the village is entirely animated by the spirit of the olden time; in its expectation of the pleasure, in its liveliness, in its ardor, it is intensely Basque and very old,—under the great shade of the Gizune, the overhanging mountain, which throws over it a twilight charm.

And the game begins in the melancholy evening. The ball, thrown with much strength, flies, strikes the wall in great, quick blows, then rebounds, and traverses the air with the rapidity of a bullet.

This wall in the background, rounded like a dome's festoon on the sky, has become little by little crowned with heads of children,—little Basques, little cats, ball-players of the future, who soon will precipitate themselves like a flight of birds, to pick up the ball every time when, thrown too high, it will go beyond the square and fall in the fields.

The game becomes gradually warmer as arms and legs are limbered, in an intoxication of movement and swiftness. Already Ramuntcho is acclaimed. And the vicar also shall be one of the fine players of the day, strange to look upon with his leaps similar to those of a cat, and his athletic gestures, imprisoned in his priest's gown.

This is the rule of the game: when one of the champions of the two camps lets the ball fall, it is a point earned by the adverse camp,—and ordinarily the limit is sixty points. After each point, the titled crier chants with a full voice in his old time tongue: "The but has so much, the refile has so much, gentlemen!" (The but is the camp which played first, the refile is the camp opposed to the but.) And the crier's long clamor drags itself above the noise of the crowd, which approves or murmurs.

On the square, the zone gilt and reddened by the sun diminishes, goes, devoured by the shade; more and more the great screen of the Gizune predominates over everything, seems to enclose in this little corner of the world at its feet, the very special life and the ardor of these mountaineers—who are the fragments of a people very mysteriously unique, without analogy among nations—The shade of night marches forward and invades in silence, soon it will be sovereign; in the distance only a few summits still lighted above so many darkened valleys, are of a violet luminous and pink.

Ramuntcho plays as, in his life, he had never played before; he is in one of those instants when one feels tempered by strength, light, weighing nothing, and when it is a pure joy to move, to extend one's arms, to leap. But Arrochkoa weakens, the vicar is fettered two or three times by his black cassock, and the adverse camp, at first distanced, little by little catches up, then, in presence of this game so valiantly disputed, clamor redoubles and caps fly in the air, thrown by enthusiastic hands.

Now the points are equal on both sides; the crier announces thirty for each one of the rival camps and he sings the old refrain which is of tradition immemorial in such cases: "Let bets come forward! Give drink to the judges and to the players." It is the signal for an instant of rest, while wine shall be brought into the arena at the cost of the village. The players sit down, and Ramuntcho takes a place beside Gracieuse, who throws on his shoulders, wet with perspiration, the waistcoat which she was keeping for him, Then he asks of his little friend to undo the thongs which hold the glove of wood, wicker and leather on his reddened arm. And he rests in the pride of his success, seeing only smiles of greeting on the faces of the girls at whom he looks. But he sees also, on the side opposed to the players' wall, on the side of the approaching darkness, the archaic assemblage of Basque houses, the little square of the village with its kalsomined porches and its old plane-trees, then the old, massive belfry of the church, and, higher than everything, dominating everything, crushing everything, the abrupt mass of the Gizune from which comes so much shade, from which descends on this distant village so hasty an impression of night—Truly it encloses too much, that mountain, it imprisons, it impresses—And Ramuntcho, in his juvenile triumph, is troubled by the sentiment of this, by this furtive and vague attraction of other places so often mingled with his troubles and with his joys—

The game continues and his thoughts are lost in the physical intoxication of beginning the struggle again. From instant to instant, clack! the snap of the pelotas, their sharp noise against the glove which throws them or the wall which receives them, their same noise giving the notion of all the strength displayed—Clack! it will snap till the hour of twilight, the pelota, animated furiously by arms powerful and young. At times the players, with a terrible shock, stop it in its flight, with a shock that would break other muscles than theirs. Most often, sure of themselves, they let it quietly touch the soil, almost die: it seems as if they would never catch it: and clack! it goes off, however, caught just in time, thanks to a marvellous precision of the eye, and strikes the wall, ever with the rapidity of a bullet—When it wanders on the benches, on the mass of woollen caps and of pretty hair ornamented with silk kerchiefs, all the heads then, all the bodies, are lowered as if moved by the wind of its passage: for it must not be touched, it must not be stopped, as long as it is living and may still be caught; then, when it is really lost, dead, some one of the assistants does himself the honor to pick it up and throw it back to the players.

The night falls, falls, the last golden colors scatter with serene melancholy over the highest summits of the Basque country. In the deserted church, profound silence is established and antique images regard one

another alone through the invasion of night—Oh! the sadness of ends of festivals, in very isolated villages, as soon as the sun sets—!

Meanwhile Ramuntcho is more and more the great conqueror. And the plaudits, the cries, redouble his happy boldness; each time he makes a point the men, standing now on the old, graded, granite benches, acclaim him with southern fury.

The last point, the sixtieth—It is Ramuntcho's and he has won the game!

Then there is a sudden crumbling into the arena of all the Basque caps which ornamented the stone amphitheatre; they press around the players who have made themselves immovable, suddenly, in tired attitudes. And Ramuntcho unfastens the thongs of his glove in the middle of a crowd of expansive admirers; from all sides, brave and rude hands are stretched to grasp his or to strike his shoulder amicably.

“Have you asked Gracieuse to dance with you this evening?” asks Arrochkoa, who in this instant would do anything for him.

“Yes, when she came out of the high mass I spoke to her—She has promised.”

“Good! I feared that mother—Oh! I would have arranged it, in any case; you may believe me.”

A robust old man with square shoulders, with square jaws, with a beardless, monkish face, before whom all bowed with respect, comes also: it is Haramburu, a player of the olden time who was celebrated half a century ago in America for the game of rebot, and who earned a small fortune. Ramuntcho blushes with pleasure at the compliment of this old man, who is hard to please. And beyond, standing on the reddish benches, among the long grasses and the November scabwort, his little friend, whom a group of young girls follows, turns back to smile at him, to send to him with her hand a gentle adios in the Spanish fashion. He is a young god in this moment, Ramuntcho; people are proud to know him, to be among his friends, to get his waistcoat for him, to talk to him, to touch him.

Now, with the other pelotaris, he goes to the neighboring inn, to a room where are placed the clean clothes of all and where careful friends accompany them to rub their bodies, wet with perspiration.

And, a moment afterward, elegant in a white shirt, his cap on the side, he comes out of the door, under the plane-trees shaped like vaults, to enjoy again his success, see the people pass, continue to gather compliments and smiles.

The autumnal day has declined, it is evening at present. In the lukewarm air, bats glide. The mountaineers of the surrounding villages depart one by one; a dozen carriages are harnessed, their lanterns are lighted, their bells ring and they disappear in the little shady paths of the valleys. In the middle of the limpid penumbra may be distinguished the women, the pretty girls seated on benches in front of the houses, under the vaults of the plane-trees; they are only clear forms, their Sunday costumes make white spots in the twilight, pink spots—and the pale blue spot which Ramuntcho looks at is the new gown of Gracieuse.—Above all, filling the sky, the gigantic Gizune, confused and sombre, is as if it were the centre and the source of the darkness, little by little scattered over all things. And at the church, suddenly the pious bells ring, recalling to distracted minds the enclosure where the graves are, the cypress trees around the belfry, and the entire grand mystery of the sky, of prayer, of inevitable death.

Oh! the sadness of ends of festivals in very isolated villages, when the sun ceases to illuminate, and when it is autumn—

They know very well, these men who were so ardent a moment ago in the humble pleasures of the day, that in the cities there are other festivals more brilliant, more beautiful and less quickly ended; but this is something separate; it is the festival of the country, of their own country, and nothing can replace for them these furtive instants whereof they have thought for so many days in advance—Lovers who will depart toward the scattered houses flanking the Pyrenees, couples who to-morrow will begin over their monotonous and rude life, look at one another before separating, look at one another under the falling night, with regretful eyes that say: “Then, it is finished already? Then, that is all?—”

CHAPTER V.

Eight o'clock in the evening. They have dined at the cider mill, all the players except the vicar, under the patronage of Itchoua; they have lounged for a long time afterward, languid in the smoke of smuggled cigarettes and listening to the marvellous improvisations of the two Iragola brothers, of the Mendiazpi mountain—while outside, on the street, the girls in small groups holding one another's arms, looked at the windows, found pleasure in observing on the smoky panes the round shadows of the heads of the men covered with similar caps—

Now, on the square, the brass band plays the first measures of the fandango, and the young men, the young girls, all those of the village and several also of the mountain who have remained to dance, arrive in impatient groups. There are some dancing already on the road, not to lose anything.

And soon the fandango turns, turns, in the light of the new moon the horns of which seem to pose, lithe and light, on the enormous and heavy mountain. In the couples that dance without ever touching each other, there is never a separation; before one another always and at an equal distance, the boy and the girl make evolutions with a rhythmic grace, as if they were tied together by some invisible magnet.

It has gone into hiding, the crescent of the moon, fallen, one would think, in the black mountain; then lanterns are brought and hooked to the trunks of the plane-trees and the young men can see better their partners who, opposite them swing with an air of fleeing continually, but without increasing their distance ever: almost all pretty, their hair elegantly dressed, a kerchief on the neck, and wearing with ease gowns in the fashion of to-day. The men, somewhat grave always, accompany the music with snaps of their fingers in

the air: shaven and sunburnt faces to which labor in the fields, in smuggling or at sea, has given a special thinness, almost ascetic; still, by the ampleness of their brown necks, by the width of their shoulders, one divines their great strength, the strength of that old, sober and religious race.

The fandango turns and oscillates, to the tune of an ancient waltz. All the arms, extended and raised, agitate themselves in the air, rise or fall with pretty, cadenced motions following the oscillations of bodies. The rope soled sandals make this dance silent and infinitely light; one hears only the frou-frou of gowns, and ever the snap of fingers imitating the noise of castanets. With a Spanish grace, the girls, whose wide sleeves expand like wings, swing their tightened waists above their vigorous and supple hips—

Facing one another, Ramuntcho and Gracieuse said nothing at first, captivated by the childish joy of moving quickly in cadence, to the sound of music. It is very chaste, that manner of dancing without the slightest touch of bodies.

But there were also, in the course of the evening, waltzes and quadrilles, and even walks arm-in-arm during which the lovers could touch each other and talk.

"Then, my Ramuntcho," said Gracieuse, "it is of that game that you expect to make your future, is it not?"

They were walking now arm-in-arm, under the plane-trees shedding their leaves in the night of November, lukewarm as a night of May, during an interval of silence when the musicians were resting.

"Yes," replied Ramuntcho, "in our country it is a trade, like any other, where one may earn a living, as long as strength lasts—and one may go from time to time to South America, you know, as Irun and Gorosteguy have done, and bring back twenty, thirty thousand francs for a season, earned honestly at Buenos Ayres."

"Oh, the Americas—" exclaimed Gracieuse in a joyful enthusiasm—"the Americas, what happiness! It was always my wish to go across the sea to those countries!—And we would look for your uncle Ignacio, then go to my cousin, Bidegaina, who has a farm on the Uruguay, in the prairies—"

She ceased talking, the little girl who had never gone out of that village which the mountains enclose; she stopped to think of these far-off lands which haunted her young head because she had, like most Basques, nomadic ancestors—folks who are called here Americans or Indians, who pass their adventurous lives on the other side of the ocean and return to the cherished village only very late, to die. And, while she dreamed, her nose in the air, her eyes in the black of the clouds and of the summits, Ramuntcho felt his blood running faster, his heart beating quicker in the intense joy of what she had just said so spontaneously. And, inclining his head toward her, he asked, as if to jest, in a voice infinitely soft and childish:

"We would go? Is that what you said: we would go, you with me? This signifies therefore that you would consent, a little later, when we become of age, to marry me?"

He perceived through the darkness the gentle black light of Gracieuse's eyes, which rose toward him with an expression of astonishment and of reproach.

"Then—you did not know?"

"I wanted to make you say it, you see—You had never said it to me, do you know?—"

He held tighter the arm of his little betrothed and their walk became slower. It is true that they had never said it, not only because it seemed to them that it was not necessary to say, but especially because they were stopped at the moment of speaking by a sort of terror—the terror of being mistaken about each other's sentiment—and now they knew, they were sure. Then they had the consciousness of having passed together the grave and solemn threshold of life. And, leaning on one another, they faltered, almost, in their slackened promenade, like two children intoxicated by youthfulness, joy and hope.

"But do you think your mother will consent?" said Ramuntcho timidly, after the long, delightful silence—

"Ah, that is the trouble," replied the little girl with a sigh of anxiety—"Arrochkoa, my brother, will be for us, it is probable. But mother?—Will mother consent?—But, it will not happen soon, in any case—You have to serve in the army."

"No, if you do not want me to! No, I need not serve! I am a Guipuzcoan, like my mother; I shall be enrolled only if I wish to be—Whatever you say, I'll do—"

"My Ramuntcho, I would like better to wait for you longer and that you become naturalized, and that you become a soldier like the others. I tell you this, since you ask—"

"Truly, is it what you wish? Well, so much the better. Oh, to be a Frenchman or a Spaniard is indifferent to me. I shall do as you wish. I like as well one as the other: I am a Basque like you, like all of us; I care not for the rest! But as for being a soldier somewhere, on this side of the frontier or on the other, yes, I prefer it. In the first place, one who goes away looks as if he were running away; and then, it would please me to be a soldier, frankly."

"Well, my Ramuntcho, since it is all the same to you, serve as a soldier in France, to please me."

"It is understood, Gatchutchta!—You will see me wearing red trousers. I shall call on you in the dress of a soldier, like Bidegarray, like Joachim. As soon as I have served my three years, we will marry, if your mother consents!"

After a moment of silence Gracieuse said, in a low, solemn voice:

"Listen, my Ramuntcho—I am like you: I am afraid of her—of my mother—But listen—if she refuses, we shall do together anything, anything that you wish, for this is the only thing in the world in which I shall not obey her—"

Then, silence returned between them, now that they were engaged, the incomparable silence of young joys, of joys new and not yet tried, which need to hush, which need to meditate in order to understand themselves better in their profoundness. They walked in short steps and at random toward the church, in the soft

obscurity which the lanterns troubled no longer, intoxicated by their innocent contact and by feeling that they were walking together in the path where no one had followed them—

But the noise of the brass instruments suddenly arose anew, in a sort of slow waltz, oddly rhythmic. And the two children, at the fandango's appeal, without having consulted each other, and as if it was a compulsory thing which may not be disputed, ran, not to lose a moment, toward the place where the couples were dancing. Quickly, quickly placing themselves opposite each other, they began again to swing in measure, without talking to each other, with the same pretty gestures of their arms, the same supple motions of their hips. From time to time, without loss of step or distance, both ran, in a direct line like arrows. But this was only an habitual variation of the dance,—and, ever in measure, quickly, as if they were gliding, they returned to their starting point.

Gracieuse had in dancing the same passionate ardor as in praying at the white chapels,—the same ardor which later doubtless, she would have in embracing Ramuntcho when caresses between them would not be forbidden. And at moments, at every fifth or sixth measure, at the same time as her light and strong partner, she turned round completely, the bust bent with Spanish grace, the head thrown backward, the lips half open on the whiteness of the teeth, a distinguished and proud grace disengaging itself from her little personality, still so mysterious, which to Ramuntcho only revealed itself a little.

During all this beautiful evening of November, they danced before each other, mute and charming, with intervals of promenade in which they hardly talked—intoxicated in silence by the delicious thought with which their minds were filled.

And, until the curfew rang in the church, this dance under the branches of autumn, these little lanterns, this little festival in this corner closed to the world, threw a little light and joyful noise into the vast night which the mountains, standing everywhere like giants of shadow, made more dumb and more black.

CHAPTER VI.

There is to be a grand ball-game next Sunday, for the feast of Saint Damasus, in the borough of Hasparitz.

Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, companions in continual expeditions through the surrounding country, travelled for the entire day, in the little wagon of the Detcharry family, in order to organize that ball-game, which to them is a considerable event.

In the first place, they had to consult Marcos, one of the Iragola brothers. Near a wood, in front of his house in the shade, they found him seated on a stump of a chestnut tree, always grave and statuesque, his eyes inspired and his gesture noble, in the act of making his little brother, still in swaddling clothes, eat soup.

“Is he the eleventh?” they have asked, laughing.

“Oh! Go on!” the big eldest brother has replied, “the eleventh is running already like a hare in the heather. This is number twelve!—little John the Baptist, you know, the latest, who, I think, will not be the last.”

And then, lowering their heads not to strike the branches, they had traversed the woods, the forests of oaks under which extends infinitely the reddish lace of ferns.

And they have traversed several villages also,—Basque villages, all grouped around these two things which are the heart of them and which symbolize their life: the church and the ball-game. Here and there, they have knocked at the doors of isolated houses, tall and large houses, carefully whitewashed, with green shades, and wooden balconies where are drying in the sun strings of red peppers. At length they have talked, in their language so closed to strangers of France, with the famous players, the titled champions, the ones whose odd names have been seen in all the journals of the southwest, on all the posters of Biarritz or of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and who, in ordinary life, are honest country inn-keepers, blacksmiths, smugglers, with waistcoat thrown over the shoulder and shirt sleeves rolled on bronze arms.

Now that all is settled and that the last words have been exchanged, it is too late to return that night to Etchezar; then, following their errant habits, they select for the night a village which they like, Zitzarry, for example, where they have gone often for their smuggling business. At the fall of night, then, they turn toward this place, which is near Spain. They go by the same little Pyrenean routes, shady and solitary under the old oaks that are shedding their leaves, among slopes richly carpeted with moss and rusty ferns. And now there are ravines where torrents roar, and then heights from which appear on all sides the tall, sombre peaks.

At first it was cold, a real cold, lashing the face and the chest. But now gusts begin to pass astonishingly warm and perfumed with the scent of plants: the southern wind, rising again, bringing back suddenly the illusion of summer. And then, it becomes for them a delicious sensation to go through the air, so brusquely changed, to go quickly under the lukewarm breaths, in the noise of their horse's bells galloping playfully in the mountains.

Zitzarry, a smugglers' village, a distant village skirting the frontier. A dilapidated inn where, according to custom, the rooms for the men are directly above the stables, the black stalls. They are well-known travelers there, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, and while men are lighting the fire for them they sit near an antique, mullioned window, which overlooks the square of the ball-game and the church; they see the tranquil, little life of the day ending in this place so separated from the world.

On this solemn square, the children practice the national game; grave and ardent, already strong, they throw their pelota against the wall, while, in a singing voice and with the needful intonation, one of them counts and announces the points, in the mysterious tongue of the ancestors. Around them, the tall houses, old and white, with warped walls, with projecting rafters, contemplate through their green or red windows those little players, so lithe, who run in the twilight like young cats. And the carts drawn by oxen return from the fields, with the noise of bells, bringing loads of wood, loads of gorse or of dead ferns—The night falls, falls

with its peace and its sad cold. Then, the angelus rings—and there is, in the entire village, a tranquil, prayerful meditation—

Then Ramuntcho, silent, worries about his destiny, feels as if he were a prisoner here, with his same aspirations always, toward something unknown, he knows not what, which troubles him at the approach of night. And his heart also fills up, because he is alone and without support in the world, because Gracieuse is in a situation different from his and may never be given to him.

But Arrochkoa, very brotherly this time, in one of his good moments, slaps him on the shoulder as if he had understood his reverie, and says to him in a tone of light gaiety:

“Well! it seems that you talked together, last night, sister and you—she told me about it—and that you are both prettily agreed!—”

Ramuntcho lifts toward him a long look of anxious and grave interrogation, which is in contrast with the beginning of their conversation:

“And what do you think,” he asks, “of what we have said?”

“Oh, my friend,” replied Arrochkoa, become more serious also, “on my word of honor, it suits me very well—And even, as I fear that there shall be trouble with mother, I promise to help you if you need help—”

And Ramuntcho's sadness is dispelled as a little dust on which one has blown. He finds the supper delicious, the inn gay. He feels himself much more engaged to Gracieuse, now, when somebody is in the secret, and somebody in the family who does not repulse him. He had a presentiment that Arrochkoa would not be hostile to him, but his co-operation, so clearly offered, far surpasses Ramuntcho's hope—Poor little abandoned fellow, so conscious of the humbleness of his situation, that the support of another child, a little better established in life, suffices to return to him courage and confidence!

CHAPTER VII.

At the uncertain and somewhat icy dawn, he awoke in his little room in the inn, with a persistent impression of his joy on the day before, instead of the confused anguish which accompanied so often in him the progressive return of his thoughts. Outside, were sounds of bells of cattle starting for the pastures, of cows lowing to the rising sun, of church bells,—and already, against the wall of the large square, the sharp snap of the Basque pelota: all the noises of a Pyrenean village beginning again its customary life for another day. And all this seemed to Ramuntcho the early music of a day's festival.

At an early hour, they returned, Arrochkoa and he, to their little wagon, and, crushing their caps against the wind, started their horse at a gallop on the roads, powdered with white frost.

At Etchezar, where they arrived at noon, one would have thought it was summer,—so beautiful was the sun.

In the little garden in front of her house, Gracieuse sat on a stone bench:

“I have spoken to Arrochkoa!” said Ramuntcho to her, with a happy smile, as soon as they were alone—“And he is entirely with us, you know!”

“Oh! that,” replied the little girl, without losing the sadly pensive air which she had that morning, “oh, that!—my brother Arrochkoa, I suspected it, it was sure! A pelota player like you, you should know, was made to please him, in his mind there is nothing superior to that—”

“But your mother, Gatchutchta, for several days has acted much better to me, I think—For example, Sunday, you remember, when I asked you to dance—”

“Oh! don't trust to that, my Ramuntcho! you mean day before yesterday, after the high mass?—It was because she had just talked with the Mother Superior, have you not noticed?—And the Mother Superior had insisted that I should not dance with you on the square; then, only to be contrary, you understand—But, don't rely on that, no—”

“Oh!” replied Ramuntcho, whose joy had already gone, “it is true that they are not very friendly—”

“Friendly, mama and the Mother Superior?—Like a dog and a cat, yes!—Since there was talk of my going into the convent, do you not remember that story?”

He remembered very well, on the contrary, and it frightened him still. The smiling and mysterious black nuns had tried once to attract to the peace of their houses that little blonde head, exalted and willful, possessed by an immense necessity to love and to be loved—

“Gatchutchta! you are always at the sisters', or with them; why so often? explain this to me: they are very agreeable to you?”

“The sisters? no, my Ramuntcho, especially those of the present time, who are new in the country and whom I hardly know—for they change them often, you know—The sisters, no—I will even tell you that I am like mama about the Mother Superior. I cannot endure her—”

“Well, then, what?—”

“No, but what will you? I like their songs, their chapels, their houses, everything—I cannot explain that to you—Anyway, boys do not understand anything—”

The little smile with which she said this was at once extinguished, changed into a contemplative expression or an absent expression, which Ramuntcho had often seen in her. She looked attentively in front of her, although there were on the road only the leafless trees, the brown mass of the crushing mountain; but it seemed as if Gracieuse was enraptured in melancholy ecstasy by things perceived beyond them, by things which the eyes of Ramuntcho could not distinguish—And during their silence the angelus of noon began to ring, throwing more peace on the tranquil village which was warming itself in the winter sun; then, bending their heads, they made naively together their sign of the cross—

Then, when ceased to vibrate the holy bell, which in the Basque villages interrupts life as in the Orient the song of the muezzins, Ramuntcho decided to say:

"It frightens me, Gatchutcha, to see you in their company always—I cannot but ask myself what ideas are in your head—"

Fixing on him the profound blackness of her eyes, she replied, in a tone of soft reproach:

"It is you talking to me in that way, after what we have said to each other Sunday night!—If I were to lose you, yes then, perhaps—surely, even!—But until then, oh! no—oh! you may rest in peace, my Ramuntcho—"

He bore for a long time her look, which little by little brought back to him entire delicious confidence, and at last he smiled with a childish smile:

"Forgive me," he asked—"I say silly things often, you know!—"

"That, at least, is the truth!"

Then, one heard the sound of their laughter, which in two different intonations had the same freshness and the same youthfulness. Ramuntcho, with an habitual brusque and graceful gesture, changed his waistcoat from one shoulder to the other, pulled his cap on the side, and, with no other farewell than a sign of the head, they separated, for Dolores was coming from the end of the road.

CHAPTER VIII.

Midnight, a winter night, black as Hades, with great wind and whipping rain. By the side of the Bidassoa, in the midst of a confused extent of ground with treacherous soil that evokes ideas of chaos, in slime that their feet penetrate, men are carrying boxes on their shoulders and, walking in the water to their knees, come to throw them into a long thing, blacker than night, which must be a bark—a suspicious bark without a light, tied near the bank.

It is again Itchoua's band, which this time will work by the river. They have slept for a few moments, all dressed, in the house of a receiver who lives near the water, and, at the needed hour, Itchoua, who never closes but one eye, has shaken his men; then, they have gone out with hushed tread, into the darkness, under the cold shower propitious to smuggling.

On the road now, with the oars, to Spain whose fires may be seen at a distance, confused by the rain. The weather is let loose; the shirts of the men are already wet, and, under the caps pulled over their eyes, the wind slashes the ears. Nevertheless, thanks to the vigor of their arms, they were going quickly and well, when suddenly appeared in the obscurity something like a monster gliding on the waters. Bad business! It is the patrol boat which promenades every night. Spain's customs officers. In haste, they must change their direction, use artifice, lose precious time, and they are so belated already.

At last they have arrived without obstacle near the Spanish shore, among the large fishermen's barks which, on stormy nights, sleep there on their chains, in front of the "Marine" of Fontarabia. This is the perilous instant. Happily, the rain is faithful to them and falls still in torrents. Lowered in their skiff to be less visible, having ceased to talk, pushing the bottom with their oars in order to make less noise, they approach softly, softly, with pauses as soon as something has seemed to budge, in the midst of so much diffuse black, of shadows without outlines.

Now they are crouched against one of these large, empty barks and almost touching the earth. And this is the place agreed upon, it is there that the comrades of the other country should be to receive them and to carry their boxes to the receiving house—There is nobody there, however!—Where are they?—The first moments are passed in a sort of paroxysm of expectation and of watching, which doubles the power of hearing and of seeing. With eyes dilated, and ears extended, they watch, under the monotonous dripping of the rain—But where are the Spanish comrades? Doubtless the hour has passed, because of this accursed custom house patrol which has disarranged the voyage, and, believing that the undertaking has failed this time, they have gone back—

Several minutes flow, in the same immobility and the same silence. They distinguish, around them, the large, inert barks, similar to floating bodies of beasts, and then, above the waters, a mass of obscurities denser than the obscurities of the sky and which are the houses, the mountains of the shore—They wait, without a movement, without a word. They seem to be ghosts of boatmen near a dead city.

Little by little the tension of their senses weakens, a lassitude comes to them with the need of sleep—and they would sleep there, under this winter rain, if the place were not so dangerous.

Itchoua then consults in a low voice, in Basque language, the two eldest, and they decide to do a bold thing. Since the others are not coming, well! so much the worse, they will go alone, carry to the house over there, the smuggled boxes. It is risking terribly, but the idea is in their heads and nothing can stop them.

"You," says Itchoua to Ramuntcho, in his manner which admits of no discussion, "you shall be the one to watch the bark, since you have never been in the path that we are taking; you shall tie it to the bottom, but not too solidly, do you hear? We must be ready to run if the carbineers arrive."

So they go, all the others, their shoulders bent under the heavy loads, the rustling, hardly perceptible, of their march is lost at once on the quay which is so deserted and so black, in the midst of the monotonous dripping of the rain. And Ramuntcho, who has remained alone, crouches at the bottom of the skiff to be less visible becomes immovable again, under the incessant sprinkling of the rain, which falls now regular and tranquil.

They are late, the comrades—and by degrees, in this inactivity and this silence, an irresistible numbness comes to him, almost a sleep.

But now a long form, more sombre than all that is sombre, passes by him, passes very quickly,—always in

this same absolute silence which is the characteristic of these nocturnal undertakings: one of the large Spanish barks!—Yet, thinks he, since all are at anchor, since this one has no sails nor oars—then, what?—It is I, myself, who am passing!—and he has understood: his skiff was too lightly tied, and the current, which is very rapid here, is dragging him:—and he is very far away, going toward the mouth of the Bidassoa, toward the breakers, toward the sea—

An anxiety has taken hold of him, almost an anguish—What will he do?—What complicates everything is that he must act without a cry of appeal, without a word, for, all along this coast, which seems to be the land of emptiness and of darkness, there are carbineers, placed in an interminable cordon and watching Spain every night as if it were a forbidden land—He tries with one of the long oars to push the bottom in order to return backward;—but there is no more bottom; he feels only the inconsistency of the fleeting and black water, he is already in the profound pass—Then, let him row, in spite of everything, and so much for the worse—!

With great trouble, his forehead perspiring, he brings back alone against the current the heavy bark, worried, at every stroke of the oar, by the small, disclosing grating that a fine ear over there might so well perceive. And then, one can see nothing more, through the rain grown thicker and which confuses the eyes; it is dark, dark as in the bowels of the earth where the devil lives. He recognizes no longer the point of departure where the others must be waiting for him, whose ruin he has perhaps caused; he hesitates, he waits, the ear extended, the arteries beating, and he hooks himself, for a moment's reflection, to one of the large barks of Spain—Something approaches then, gliding with infinite precaution on the surface of the water, hardly stirred: a human shadow, one would think, a silhouette standing:—a smuggler, surely, since he makes so little noise! They divine each other, and, thank God! it is Arrochkoa; Arrochkoa, who has untied a frail, Spanish skiff to meet him—So, their junction is accomplished and they are probably saved all, once more!

But Arrochkoa, in meeting him, utters in a wicked voice, in a voice tightened by his young, feline teeth, one of those series of insults which call for immediate answer and sound like an invitation to fight. It is so unexpected that Ramuntcho's stupor at first immobilizes him, retards the rush of blood to his head. Is this really what his friend has just said and in such a tone of undeniable insult?—

“You said?”

“Well!” replies Arrochkoa, somewhat softened and on his guard, observing in the darkness Ramuntcho's attitudes. “Well! you had us almost caught, awkward fellow that you are!—”

The silhouettes of the others appear in another bark.

“They are there,” he continues. “Let us go near them!”

And Ramuntcho takes his oarsman's seat with temples heated by anger, with trembling hands—no—he is Gracieuse's brother; all would be lost if Ramuntcho fought with him; because of her he will bend the head and say nothing.

Now their bark runs away by force of oars, carrying them all; the trick has been played. It was time; two Spanish voices vibrate on the black shore: two carbineers, who were sleeping in their cloaks and whom the noise has awakened!—And they begin to hail this flying, beaconless bark, not perceived so much as suspected, lost at once in the universal, nocturnal confusion.

“Too late, friends,” laughs Itchoua, while rowing to the uttermost. “Hail at your ease now and let the devil answer you!”

The current also helps them; they go into the thick obscurity with the rapidity of fishes.

There! Now they are in French waters, in safety, not far, doubtless, from the slime of the banks.

“Let us stop to breathe a little,” proposes Itchoua.

And they raise their oars, halting, wet with perspiration and with rain. They are immovable again under the cold shower, which they do not seem to feel. There is heard in the vast silence only the breathing of chests, little by little quieted, the little music of drops of water falling and their light rippling. But suddenly, from this bark which was so quiet, and which had no other importance than that of a shadow hardly real in the midst of so much night, a cry rises, superacute, terrifying: it fills the emptiness and rents the far-off distances—It has come from those elevated notes which belong ordinarily to women only, but with something hoarse and powerful that indicates rather the savage male; it has the bite of the voice of jackals and it preserves, nevertheless, something human which makes one shiver the more; one waits with a sort of anguish for its end, and it is long, long, it is oppressive by its inexplicable length—It had begun like a stag's bell of agony and now it is achieved and it dies in a sort of laughter, sinister and burlesque, like the laughter of lunatics—

However, around the man who has just cried thus in the front of the bark, none of the others is astonished, none budes. And, after a few seconds of silent peace, a new cry, similar to the first, starts from the rear, replying to it and passing through the same phases,—which are of a tradition infinitely ancient.

And it is simply the “irrintzina”, the great Basque cry which has been transmitted with fidelity from the depth of the abyss of ages to the men of our day, and which constitutes one of the strange characteristics of that race whose origins are enveloped in mystery. It resembles the cry of a being of certain tribes of redskins in the forests of America; at night, it gives the notion and the unfathomable fright of primitive ages, when, in the midst of the solitudes of the old world, men with monkey throats howled.

This cry is given at festivals, or for calls of persons at night in the mountains, and especially to celebrate some joy, some unexpected good fortune, a miraculous hunt or a happy catch of fish in the rivers.

And they are amused, the smugglers, at this game of the ancestors; they give their voices to glorify the success of their undertaking, they yell, from the physical necessity to be compensated for their silence of a moment ago.

But Ramuntcho remains mute and without a smile. This sudden savagery chills him, although he has known it for a long time; it plunges him into dreams that worry and do not explain themselves.

And then, he has felt to-night once more how uncertain and changing is his only support in the world, the

support of that Arrochkoa on whom he should be able to count as on a brother; audacity and success at the ball-game will return that support to him, doubtless, but a moment of weakness, nothing, may at any moment make him lose it. Then it seems to him that the hope of his life has no longer a basis, that all vanishes like an unstable chimera.

CHAPTER IX.

It was New Year's eve.

All the day had endured that sombre sky which is so often the sky of the Basque country—and which harmonizes well with the harsh mountains, with the roar of the sea, wicked, in the depths of the Bay of Biscay.

In the twilight of this last day of the year, at the hour when the fires retain the men around the hearths scattered in the country, at the hour when home is desirable and delicious, Ramuntcho and his mother were preparing to sit at the supper table, when there was a discreet knock at the door.

The man who was coming to them from the night of the exterior, at the first aspect seemed unknown to them; only when he told his name (Jose Bidegarray, of Hasparitz) they recalled the sailor who had gone several years ago to America.

"Here," he said, after accepting a chair, "here is the message which I have been asked to bring to you. Once, at Rosario in Uruguay, as I was talking on the docks with several other Basque immigrants there, a man, who might have been fifty years old, having heard me speak of Etchezar, came to me.

"'Do you come from Etchezar?' he asked.

"'No,' I replied, 'but I come from Hasparitz, which is not far from Etchezar.'

"Then he put questions to me about all your family. I said:

"'The old people are dead, the elder brother was killed in smuggling, the second has disappeared in America; there remain only Franchita and her son, Ramuntcho, a handsome young fellow who must be about eighteen years old today.'

"He was thinking deeply while he was listening to me.

"'Well,' he said at last, 'since you are going back there, you will say good-day to them for Ignacio.'

"And after offering a drink to me he went away—"

Franchita had risen, trembling and paler than ever. Ignacio, the most adventurous in the family, her brother who had disappeared for ten years without sending any news—!

How was he? What face? Dressed how?—Did he seem happy, at least, or was he poorly dressed?

"Oh!" replied the sailor, "he looked well, in spite of his gray hair; as for his costume, he appeared to be a man of means, with a beautiful gold chain on his belt."

And that was all he could say, with this naive and rude good-day of which he was the bearer; on the subject of the exile he knew no more and perhaps, until she died, Franchita would learn nothing more of that brother, almost non-existing, like a phantom.

Then, when he had emptied a glass of cider, he went on his road, the strange messenger, who was going to his village. Then, they sat at table without speaking, the mother and the son: she, the silent Franchita, absent minded, with tears shining in her eyes; he, worried also, but in a different manner, by the thought of that uncle living in adventures over there.

When he ceased to be a child, when Ramuntcho began to desert from school, to wish to follow the smugglers in the mountain, Franchita would say to him:

"Anyway, you take after your uncle Ignacio, we shall never make anything of you!—"

And it was true that he took after his uncle Ignacio, that he was fascinated by all the things that are dangerous, unknown and far-off—

To-night, therefore, if she did not talk to her son of the message which had just been transmitted to them, the reason was she divined his meditation on America and was afraid of his answers. Besides, among country people, the little profound and intimate dramas are played without words, with misunderstandings that are never cleared up, with phrases only guessed at and with obstinate silence.

But, as they were finishing their meal, they heard a chorus of young and gay voices, coming near, accompanied by a drum, the boys of Etchezar, coming for Ramuntcho to bring him with them in their parade with music around the village, following the custom of New Year's eve, to go into every house, drink in it a glass of cider and give a joyous serenade to an old time tune.

And Ramuntcho, forgetting Uruguay and the mysterious uncle, became a child again, in the pleasure of following them and of singing with them along the obscure roads, enraptured especially by the thought that they would go to the house of the Detcharry family and that he would see again, for an instant, Gracieuse.

CHAPTER X.

The changeable month of March had arrived, and with it the intoxication of spring, joyful for the young, sad

for those who are declining.

And Gracieuse had commenced again to sit, in the twilight of the lengthened days, on the stone bench in front of her door.

Oh! the old stone benches, around the houses, made, in the past ages, for the reveries of the soft evenings and for the eternally similar conversations of lovers—!

Gracieuse's house was very ancient, like most houses in that Basque country, where, less than elsewhere, the years change the things.—It had two stories; a large projecting roof in a steep slope; walls like a fortress which were whitewashed every summer; very small windows, with settings of cut granite and green blinds. Above the front door, a granite lintel bore an inscription in relief; words complicated and long which, to French eyes resembled nothing known. It said: "May the Holy Virgin bless this home, built in the year 1630 by Peter Detcharry, beadle, and his wife Damasa Irribarne, of the village of Istaritz." A small garden two yards wide, surrounded by a low wall so that one could see the passers-by, separated the house from the road; there was a beautiful rose-laurel, extending its southern foliage above the evening bench, and there were yuccas, a palm tree, and enormous bunches of those hortensias which are giants here, in this land of shade, in this lukewarm climate, so often enveloped by clouds. In the rear was a badly closed orchard which rolled down to an abandoned path, favorable to escalades of lovers.

What mornings radiant with light there were in that spring, and what tranquil, pink evenings!

After a week of full moon which kept the fields till day-light blue with rays, and when the band of Itchoua ceased to work,—so clear was their habitual domain, so illuminated were the grand, vaporous backgrounds of the Pyrenees and of Spain—the frontier fraud was resumed more ardently, as soon as the thinned crescent had become discreet and early setting. Then, in these beautiful times, smuggling by night was exquisite; a trade of solitude and of meditation when the mind of the naive and very pardonable defrauders was elevated unconsciously in the contemplation of the sky and of the darkness animated by stars—as it happens to the mind of the sea folk watching, on the nocturnal march of vessels, and as it happened formerly to the mind of the shepherds in antique Chaldea.

It was favorable also and tempting for lovers, that tepid period which followed the full moon of March, for it was dark everywhere around the houses, dark in all the paths domed with trees,—and very dark, behind the Detcharry orchard, on the abandoned path where nobody ever passed.

Gracieuse lived more and more on her bench in front of her door.

It was here that she was seated, as every year, to receive and look at the carnival dancers: those groups of young boys and of young girls of Spain or of France, who, every spring, organize themselves for several days in a wandering band, and, all dressed in the same pink or white colors, traverse the frontier village, dancing the fandango in front of houses, with castanets—

She stayed later and later in this place which she liked, under the shelter of the rose-laurel coming into bloom, and sometimes even, she came out noiselessly through the window, like a little, sly fox, to breathe there at length, after her mother had gone to bed. Ramuntcho knew this and, every night, the thought of that bench troubled his sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

One clear April morning, they were walking to the church, Gracieuse and Ramuntcho. She, with an air half grave, half mocking, with a particular and very odd air, leading him there to make him do a penance which she had ordered.

In the holy enclosure, the flowerbeds of the tombs were coming into bloom again, as also the rose bushes on the walls. Once more the new saps were awakening above the long sleep of the dead. They went in together, through the lower door, into the empty church, where the old "benoite" in a black mantilla was alone, dusting the altars.

When Gracieuse had given to Ramuntcho the holy water and they had made their signs of the cross, she led him through the sonorous nave, paved with funereal stones, to a strange image on the wall, in a shady corner, under the men's tribunes.

It was a painting, impregnated with ancient mysticism, representing the figure of Jesus with eyes closed, forehead bloody, expression lamentable and dead; the head seemed to be cut off, separated from the body, and placed there on a gray linen cloth. Above, were written the long Litanies of the Holy Face, which have been composed, as everybody knows, to be recited in penance by repentant blasphemers. The day before, Ramuntcho, in anger, had sworn in an ugly manner: a quite unimaginable string of words, wherein the sacraments and the most saintly things were mingled with the horns of the devil and other villainous things still more frightful. That is why the necessity for a penance had impressed itself on the mind of Gracieuse.

"Come, my Ramuntcho," she recommended, as she walked away, "omit nothing of what you must say."

She left him then in front of the Holy Face, beginning to murmur his litanies in a low voice, and went to the good woman and helped her to change the water of the white Easter daisies in front of the altar of the Virgin.

But when the languorous evening returned, and Gracieuse was seated in the darkness meditating on her stone bench, a young human form started up suddenly near her; someone who had come in sandals, without making more noise than the silk owls make in the air, from the rear of the garden doubtless, after some scaling, and who stood there, straight, his waistcoat thrown over one shoulder: the one to whom were addressed all her tender emotions on earth, the one who incarnated the ardent dream of her heart and of her senses—

"Ramuntcho!" she said. "Oh! how you frightened me. Where did you come from at such an hour? What do

you want? Why did you come?"

"Why did I come? In my turn, to order you to do penance," he replied, laughing.

"No, tell the truth, what is the matter, what are you coming to do?"

"To see you, only! That is what I come to do—What will you have! We never see each other!—Your mother keeps me at a distance more and more every day. I cannot live in that way.—We are not doing any harm, after all, since we are to be married! And you know, I could come every night, if you like, without anybody suspecting it—"

"Oh! no!—Oh! do not do that ever, I beg of you—"

They talked for an instant, and so low, so low, with more silence than words, as if they were afraid to wake up the birds in their nests. They recognized no longer the sound of their voices, so changed and so trembling they were, as if they had committed some delicious and damnable crime, by doing nothing but staying near each other, in the grand, caressing mystery of that night of April, which was hatching around them so many ascents of saps, so many germinations and so many loves—

He had not even dared to sit at her side; he remained standing, ready to run under the branches at the least alarm, like a nocturnal prowler.

However, when he prepared to go, it was she who asked, hesitating, and in a manner to be hardly heard:

"And—you will come back to-morrow?"

Then, under his growing mustache, he smiled at this sudden change of mind and he replied:

"Yes, surely.—To-morrow and every night.—Every night when we shall not have to work in Spain.—I will come—"

CHAPTER XII.

Ramuntcho's lodging place was, in the house of his mother and above the stable, a room neatly whitewashed; he had there his bed, always clean and white, but where smuggling gave him few hours for sleep. Books of travel or cosmography, which the cure of the parish lent to him, posed on his table—unexpected in this house. The portraits, framed, of different saints, ornamented the walls, and several pelota-players' gloves were hanging from the beams of the ceiling, long gloves of wicker and of leather which seemed rather implements of hunting or fishing.

Franchita, at her return to her country, had bought back this house, which was that of her deceased parents, with a part of the sum given to her by the stranger at the birth of her son. She had invested the rest; then she worked at making gowns or at ironing linen for the people of Etchezar, and rented, to farmers of land near by, two lower rooms, with the stable where they placed their cows and their sheep.

Different familiar, musical sounds rocked Ramuntcho in his bed. First, the constant roar of a near-by torrent; then, at times, songs of nightingales, salutes to the dawn of divers birds. And, in this spring especially, the cows, his neighbors, excited doubtless by the smell of new-mown hay, moved all night, were agitated in dreams, making their bells tintillate continually.

Often, after the long expeditions at night, he regained his sleep in the afternoon, extended in the shade in some corner of moss and grass. Like the other smugglers, he was not an early riser for a village boy, and he woke up sometimes long after daybreak, when already, between the disjointed planks of his flooring, rays of a vivid and gay light came from the stable below, the door of which remained open always to the rising sun after the departure of the cattle to their pastures. Then, he went to his window, pushed open the little, old blinds made of massive chestnut wood painted in olive, and leaned on his elbows, placed on the sill of the thick wall, to look at the clouds or at the sun of the new morning.

What he saw, around his house, was green, green, magnificently green, as are in the spring all the corners of that land of shade and of rain. The ferns which, in the autumn, have so warm a rusty color, were now, in this April, in the glory of their greenest freshness and covered the slopes of the mountains as with an immense carpet of curly wool, where foxglove flowers made pink spots. In a ravine, the torrent roared under branches. Above, groups of oaks and of beeches clung to the slopes, alternating with prairies; then, above this tranquil Eden, toward the sky, ascended the grand, denuded peak of the Gizune, sovereign hill of the region of the clouds. And one perceived also, in the background, the church and the houses—that village of Etchezar, solitary and perched high on one of the Pyrenean cliffs, far from everything, far from the lines of communication which have revolutionized and spoiled the lowlands of the shores; sheltered from curiosity, from the profanation of strangers, and living still its Basque life of other days.

Ramuntcho's awakenings were impregnated, at this window, with peace and humble serenity. They were full of joy, his awakenings of a man engaged, since he had the assurance of meeting Gracieuse at night at the promised place. The vague anxieties, the undefined sadness, which accompanied in him formerly the daily return of his thoughts, had fled for a time, dispelled by the reminiscence and the expectation of these meetings; his life was all changed; as soon as his eyes were opened he had the impression of a mystery and of an immense enchantment, enveloping him in the midst of this verdure and of these April flowers. And this peace of spring, thus seen every morning, seemed to him every time a new thing, very different from what it had been in the previous years, infinitely sweet to his heart and voluptuous to his flesh, having unfathomable and ravishing depths.

CHAPTER XIII.

It is Easter night, after the village bells have ceased to mingle in the air so many holy vibrations that came from Spain and from France.

Seated on the bank of the Bidassoa, Ramuntcho and Florentino watch the arrival of a bark. A great silence now, and the bells sleep. The tepid twilight has been prolonged and, in breathing, one feels the approach of summer.

As soon as the night falls, it must appear from the coast of Spain, the smuggling bark, bringing the very prohibited phosphorus. And, without its touching the shore, they must go to get that merchandise, by advancing on foot in the bed of the river, with long, pointed sticks in their hands, in order to assume, if perchance they were caught, airs of people fishing innocently for "platuches."

The water of the Bidassoa is to-night an immovable and clear mirror, a little more luminous than the sky, and in this mirror, are reproduced, upside down, all the constellations, the entire Spanish mountain, carved in so sombre a silhouette in the tranquil atmosphere. Summer, summer, one has more and more the consciousness of its approach, so limpid and soft are the first signs of night, so much lukewarm languor is scattered over this corner of the world, where the smugglers silently manoeuvre.

But this estuary, which separates the two countries, seems in this moment to Ramuntcho more melancholy than usual, more closed and more walled-in in front of him by these black mountains, at the feet of which hardly shine, here and there, two or three uncertain lights. Then, he is seized again by his desire to know what there is beyond, and further still.—Oh! to go elsewhere!—To escape, at least for a time, from the oppressiveness of that land—so loved, however!—Before death, to escape the oppressiveness of this existence, ever similar and without egress. To try something else, to get out of here, to travel, to know things —!

Then, while watching the far-off, terrestrial distances where the bark will appear, he raises his eyes from time to time toward what happens above, in the infinite, looks at the new moon, the crescent of which, as thin as a line, lowers and will disappear soon; looks at the stars, the slow and regulated march of which he has observed, as have all the people of his trade, during so many nocturnal hours; is troubled in the depth of his mind by the proportions and the inconceivable distances of these things.—

In his village of Etchezar, the old priest who had taught him the catechism, interested by his young, lively intelligence, has lent books to him, has continued with him conversations on a thousand subjects, and, on the subject of the planets, has given to him the notion of movements and of immensities, has half opened before his eyes the grand abyss of space and duration. Then, in his mind, innate doubts, frights and despairs that slumbered, all that his father had bequeathed to him as a sombre inheritance, all these things have taken a black form which stands before him. Under the great sky of night, his Basque faith has commenced to weaken. His mind is no longer simple enough to accept blindly dogmas and observances, and, as all becomes incoherence and disorder in his young head, so strangely prepared, the course of which nobody is leading, he does not know that it is wise to submit, with confidence in spite of everything, to the venerable and consecrated formulas, behind which is hidden perhaps all that we may ever see of the unknowable truths.

Therefore, these bells of Easter which the year before had filled him with a religious and soft sentiment, this time had seemed to him to be a music sad and almost vain. And now that they have just hushed, he listens with undefined sadness to the powerful noise, almost incessant since the creation, that the breakers of the Bay of Biscay make and which, in the peaceful nights, may be heard in the distance behind the mountains.

But his floating dream changes again.—Now the estuary, which has become quite dark and where one may no longer see the mass of human habitations, seems to him, little by little, to become different; then, strange suddenly, as if some mystery were to be accomplished in it; he perceives only the great, abrupt lines of it, which are almost eternal, and he is surprised to think confusedly of times more ancient, of an unprecise and obscure antiquity.—The Spirit of the old ages, which comes out of the soil at times in the calm nights, in the hours when sleep the beings that trouble us in the day-time, the Spirit of the old ages is beginning, doubtless, to soar in the air around him; Ramuntcho does not define this well, for his sense of an artist and of a seer, that no education has refined, has remained rudimentary; but he has the notion and the worry of it.—In his head, there is still and always a chaos, which seeks perpetually to disentangle itself and never succeeds.—However, when the two enlarged and reddened horns of the moon fall slowly behind the mountain, always black, the aspect of things takes, for an inappreciable instant, one knows not what ferocious and primitive airs; then, a dying impression of original epochs which had remained, one knows not where in space, takes for Ramuntcho a precise form in a sudden manner, and troubles him until he shivers. He dreams, even without wishing it, of those men of the forests who lived here in the ages, in the uncalculated and dark ages, because, suddenly, from a point distant from the shore, a long Basque cry rises from the darkness in a lugubrious falsetto, an "irrintzina," the only thing in this country with which he never could become entirely familiar. But a great mocking noise occurs in the distance, the crash of iron, whistles: a train from Paris to Madrid, which is passing over there, behind them, in the black of the French shore. And the Spirit of the old ages folds its wings made of shade and vanishes. Silence returns: but after the passage of this stupid and rapid thing, the Spirit which has fled reappears no more—

At last, the bark which Ramuntcho awaited with Florentino appears, hardly perceptible for other eyes than theirs, a little, gray form which leaves behind it slight ripples on this mirror which is of the color of the sky at night and wherein stars are reflected upside down. It is the well-selected hour, the hour when the customs officers watch badly; the hour also when the view is dimmer, when the last reflections of the sun and those of the crescent of the moon have gone out, and the eyes of men are not yet accustomed to darkness.

Then to get the prohibited phosphorus, they take their long fishing sticks, and go into the water silently.

CHAPTER XIV.

There was a grand ball-game arranged for the following Sunday at Erribiague, a far-distant village, near the tall mountains. Ramuntcho, Arrochkoa and Florentino were to play against three celebrated ones of Spain; they were to practice that evening, limber their arms on the square of Etchezar, and Gracieuse, with other little girls of her age, had taken seats on the granite benches to look at them. The girls, all pretty; with elegant airs in their pale colored waists cut in accordance with the most recent vagary of the season. And they were laughing, these little girls, they were laughing! They were laughing because they had begun laughing, without knowing why. Nothing, a word of their old Basque tongue, without any appropriateness, by one of them, and there they were all in spasms of laughter.—This country is truly one of the corners of the world where the laughter of girls breaks out most easily, ringing like clear crystal, ringing youthfulness and fresh throats.

Arrochkoa had been there for a long time, with the wicker glove at his arm, throwing alone the pelota which, from time to time, children picked up for him. But Ramuntcho, Florentino, what were they thinking of? How late they were! They came at last, their foreheads wet with perspiration, their walk heavy and embarrassed. And, while the little, laughing girls questioned them, in that mocking tone which girls, when they are in a troupe, assume ordinarily to interpellate boys, these smiled, and each one struck his chest which gave a metallic sound.—Through paths of the Gizune, they had returned on foot from Spain, heavy with copper coin bearing the effigy of the gentle, little King Alfonso XIII. A new trick of the smugglers: for Itchoua's account, they had exchanged over there with profit, a big sum of money for this debased coin, destined to be circulated at par at the coming fairs, in different villages of the Landes where Spanish cents are current. They were bringing, in their pockets, in their shirts, some forty kilos of copper. They made all this fall like rain on the antique granite of the benches, at the feet of the amused girls, asking them to keep and count it for them; then, after wiping their foreheads and puffing a little, they began to play and to jump, being light now and lighter than ordinarily, their overload being disposed of.

Except three or four children of the school who ran like young cats after the lost pelotas, there were only the girls, seated in a group on the lowest one of these deserted steps, the old, reddish stones of which bore at this moment their herbs and their flowers of April. Calico gowns, clear white or pink waists, they were all the gaiety of this solemnly sad place. Beside Gracieuse was Pantchika Dargaigaratz, another fifteen year old blonde, who was engaged to Arrochkoa and would soon marry him, for he, being the son of a widow, had not to serve in the army. And, criticizing the players, placing in lines on the granite rows of piled-up copper cents, they laughed, they whispered, in their chanted accent, with ends of syllables in "rra" or in "rrik," making the "r's" roll so sharply that one would have thought every instant sparrows were beating their wings in their mouths.

They also, the boys, were laughing, and they came frequently, under the pretext of resting, to sit among the girls. These troubled and intimidated them three times more than the public, because they mocked so!

Ramuntcho learned from his little betrothed something which he would not have dared to hope for: she had obtained her mother's permission to go to that festival of Erribiague, see the ball-game and visit that country, which she did not know. It was agreed that she should go in a carriage, with Pantchika and Madame Dargaigaratz; and they would meet over there; perhaps it would be possible to return all together.

During the two weeks since their evening meetings had begun, this was the first time when he had had the opportunity to talk to her thus in the day-time and before the others—and their manner was different, more ceremonious apparently, with, beneath it, a very suave mystery. It was a long time, also, since he had seen her so well and so near in the daylight: she was growing more beautiful that spring; she was pretty, pretty!—Her bust had become rounder and her waist thinner; her manner gained, day by day, an elegant suppleness. She resembled her brother still, she had the same regular features, the same perfect oval of the face; but the difference in their eyes went on increasing: while those of Arrochkoa, of a blue green shade which seemed fleeting, avoided the glances of others, hers, on the contrary, black pupils and lashes, dilated themselves to look at you fixedly. Ramuntcho had seen eyes like these in no other person; he adored the frank tenderness of them and also their anxious and profound questioning. Long before he had become a man and accessible to the trickery of the senses, those eyes had caught, of his little, childish mind, all that was best and purest in it.—And now around such eyes, the grand Transformer, enigmatic and sovereign, had placed a beauty of flesh which irresistibly called his flesh to a supreme communion.—

They were made very inattentive to their game, the players, by the group of little girls, of white and pink waists, and they laughed themselves at not playing so well as usual. Above them, occupying only a small corner of the old, granite amphitheatre, ascended rows of empty benches in ruins; then, the houses of Etchezar, so peacefully isolated from the rest of the world; then, in fine, the obscure, encumbering mass of the Gizune, filling up the sky and mingling with thick clouds asleep on its sides. Clouds immovable, inoffensive and without a threat of rain; clouds of spring, which were of a turtle-dove color and which seemed tepid, like the air of that evening. And, in a rent, much less elevated than the summit predominating over this entire site, a round moon began to silver as the day declined.

They played, in the beautiful twilight, until the hour when the first bats appeared, until the hour when the flying pelota could hardly be seen in the air. Perhaps they felt, unconsciously, that the moment was rare and might not be regained: then, as much as possible, they should prolong it—

And at last, they went together to take to Itchoua his Spanish coins. In two lots, they had been placed in two thick, reddish towels which a boy and a girl held at each end, and they walked in cadence, singing the tune of "The Linen Weaver."

How long, clear and soft was that twilight of April!—There were roses and all sorts of flowers in front of the walls of the venerable, white houses with brown or green blinds. Jessamine, honeysuckle and linden filled the air with fragrance. For Gracieuse and Ramuntcho, it was one of those exquisite hours which later, in the

anguishing sadness of awakenings, one recalls with a regret at once heart-breaking and charming.

Oh! who shall say why there are on earth evenings of spring, and eyes so pretty to look at, and smiles of young girls, and breaths of perfumes which gardens exhale when the nights of April fall, and all this delicious cajoling of life, since it is all to end ironically in separation, in decrepitude and in death—

CHAPTER XV.

The next day, Friday, was organized the departure for this village where the festival was to take place on the following Sunday. It is situated very far, in a shady region, at the turn of a deep gorge, at the foot of very high summits. Arrochkoa was born there and he had spent there the first months of his life, in the time when his father lived there as a brigadier of the French customs; but he had left too early to have retained the least memory of it.

In the little Detcharry carriage, Gracieuse, Pantchita and, with a long whip in her hand, Madame Dargaingaratz, her mother, who is to drive, leave together at the noon angelus to go over there directly by the mountain route.

Ramuntcho, Arrochkoa and Florentino, who have to settle smuggling affairs at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, go by a roundabout way which will bring them to Erribiague at night, on the train which goes from Bayonne to Burguetta. To-day, all three are heedless and happy; Basque caps never appeared above more joyful faces.

The night is falling when they penetrate, by this little train of Burguetta, into the quiet, interior country. The carriages are full of a gay crowd, a spring evening crowd, returning from some festival, young girls with silk kerchiefs around their necks, young men wearing woolen caps; all are singing, laughing and kissing. In spite of the invading obscurity one may still distinguish the hedges, white with hawthorn, the woods white with acacia flowers; into the open carriages penetrates a fragrance at once violent and suave, which the country exhales. And on all this white bloom of April, which the night little by little effaces, the train throws in passing a furrow of joy, the refrain of some old song of Navarre, sung and resung infinitely by these girls and these boys, in the noise of the wheels and of the steam—

Erribiague! At the doors, this name, which makes all three start, is cried. The singing band had already stepped out, leaving them almost alone in the train, which had become silent. High mountains had made the night very thick—and the three were almost sleeping.

Astounded, they jump down, in the midst of an obscurity which even their smugglers' eyes cannot pierce. Stars above hardly shine, so encumbered is the sky by the overhanging summits.

"Where is the village?" they ask of a man who is there alone to receive them.

"Three miles from here on the right."

They begin to distinguish the gray trail of a road, suddenly lost in the heart of the shade. And in the grand silence, in the humid coolness of these valleys full of darkness, they walk without talking, their gaiety somewhat darkened by the black majesty of the peaks that guard the frontier here.

They come, at last, to an old, curved bridge over a torrent; then, to the sleeping village which no light indicates. And the inn, where shines a lamp, is near by, leaning on the mountain, its base in the roaring water.

The young men are led into their little rooms which have an air of cleanliness in spite of their extreme oldness: very low, crushed by their enormous beams, and bearing on their whitewashed walls images of the Christ, the Virgin and the saints.

Then, they go down to the supper tables, where are seated two or three old men in old time costume: white belt, black blouse, very short, with a thousand pleats. And Arrochkoa, vain of his parentage, hastens to ask them if they have not known Detcharry, who was here a brigadier of the customs eighteen years ago.

One of the old men scans his face:

"Ah! you are his son, I would bet! You look like him! Detcharry, do I remember Detcharry!—He took from me two hundred lots of merchandise!—That does not matter, here is my hand, even if you are his son!"

And the old defrauder, who was the chief of a great band, without rancor, with effusion, presses Arrochkoa's two hands.

Detcharry has remained famous at Erribiague for his stratagems, his ambuscades, his captures of contraband goods, out of which came, later, his income that Dolores and her children enjoy.

And Arrochkoa assumes a proud air, while Ramuntcho lowers his head, feeling that he is of a lower condition, having no father.

"Are you not in the customhouse, as your deceased father was?" continued the old man in a bantering tone.

"Oh, no, not exactly.—Quite the reverse, even—"

"Oh, well! I understand!—Then, shake once more—and it's a sort of revenge on Detcharry for me, to know that his son has gone into smuggling like us!—"

They send for cider and they drink together, while the old men tell again the exploits and the tricks of former times, all the ancient tales of nights in the mountains; they speak a variety of Basque different from that of Etchezar, the village where the language is preserved more clearly articulated, more incisive, more pure, perhaps. Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa are surprised by this accent of the high land, which softens the words and which chants them; those white-haired story tellers seem to them almost strangers, whose talk is a series of monotonous stanzas, repeated infinitely as in the antique songs expressive of sorrow. And, as soon as they cease talking, the slight sounds in the sleep of the country come from peaceful and fresh darkness. The crickets chirp; one hears the torrent bubbling at the base of the inn; one hears the dripping of springs

from the terrible, overhanging summits, carpeted with thick foliage.—It sleeps, the very small village, crouched and hidden in the hollow of a ravine, and one has the impression that the night here is a night blacker than elsewhere and more mysterious.

“In truth,” concludes the old chief, “the customhouse and smuggling, at bottom, resemble each other; it is a game where the smartest wins, is it not? I will even say that, in my own opinion, an officer of customs, clever and bold, a customs officer like your father, for example, is as worthy as any of us!”

After this, the hostess having come to say that it was time to put out the lamp—the last lamp still lit in the village—they go away, the old defrauders. Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa go up to their rooms, lie down and sleep, always in the chirp of the crickets, always in the sound of fresh waters that run or that fall. And Ramuntcho, as in his house at Etchezar, hears vaguely during his sleep the tinkling of bells, attached to the necks of cows moving in a dream, under him, in the stable.

CHAPTER XVI.

Now they open, to the beautiful April morning, the shutters of their narrow windows, pierced like portholes in the thickness of the very old wall.

And suddenly, it is a flood of light that dazzles their eyes. Outside, the spring is resplendent. Never had they seen, before this, summits so high and so near. But along the slopes full of leaves, along the mountains decked with trees, the sun descends to radiate in this valley on the whiteness of the village, on the kalsomine of the ancient houses with green shutters.

Both awakened with veins full of youth and hearts full of joy. They have formed the project this morning to go into the country, to the house of Madame Dargaignaratz's cousins, and see the two little girls, who must have arrived the night before in the carriage, Gracieuse and Pantchika.—After a glance at the ball-game square, where they shall return to practice in the afternoon, they go on their way through small paths, magnificently green, hidden in the depths of the valleys, skirting the cool torrents. The foxglove flowers start everywhere like long, pink rockets above the light and infinite mass of ferns.

It is at a long distance, it seems, that house of the Olhagarray cousins, and they stop from time to time to ask the way from shepherds, or they knock at the doors of solitary houses, here and there, under the cover of branches. They had never seen Basque houses so old nor so primitive, under the shade of chestnut trees so tall.

The ravines through which they advance are strangely enclosed. Higher than all these woods of oaks and of beeches, which seem as if suspended above, appear ferocious, denuded summits, a zone abrupt and bald, sombre brown, making points in the violent blue of the sky. But here, underneath, is the sheltered and mossy region, green and deep, which the sun never burns and where April has hidden its luxury, freshly superb.

And they also, the two who are passing through these paths of foxglove and of fern, participate in this splendor of spring.

Little by little, in their enjoyment at being there, and under the influence of this ageless place, the old instincts to hunt and to destroy are lighted in the depths of their minds. Arrochkoa, excited, leaps from right to left, from left to right, breaks, uproots grasses and flowers; troubles about everything that moves in the green foliage, about the lizards that might be caught, about the birds that might be taken out of their nests, and about the beautiful trout swimming in the water; he jumps, he leaps; he wishes he had fishing lines, sticks, guns; truly he reveals his savagery in the bloom of his robust eighteen years.—Ramuntcho calms himself quickly; after breaking a few branches, plucking a few flowers, he begins to meditate; and he thinks—

Here they are stopped now at a cross-road where no human habitation is visible. Around them are gorges full of shade wherein grand oaks grow thickly, and above, everywhere, a piling up of mountains, of a reddish color burned by the sun. There is nowhere an indication of the new times; there is an absolute silence, something like the peace of the primitive epochs. Lifting their heads toward the brown peaks, they perceive at a long distance persons walking on invisible paths, pushing before them donkeys of smugglers: as small as insects at such a distance, are these silent passers-by on the flank of the gigantic mountain; Basques of other times, almost confused, as one looks at them from this place, with this reddish earth from which they came—and where they are to return, after having lived like their ancestors without a suspicion of the things of our times, of the events of other places—

They take off their caps, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, to wipe their foreheads; it is so warm in these gorges and they have run so much, jumped so much, that their entire bodies are in a perspiration. They are enjoying themselves, but they would like to come, nevertheless, near the two little, blonde girls who are waiting for them. But of whom shall they ask their way now, since there is no one?

“Ave Maria,” cries at them from the thickness of the branches an old, rough voice.

And the salutation is prolonged by a string of words spoken in a rapid decrescendo, quick; quick; a Basque prayer rattled breathlessly, begun very loudly, then dying at the finish. And an old beggar comes out of the fern, all earthy, all hairy, all gray, bent on his stick like a man of the woods.

“Yes,” says Arrochkoa, putting his hand in his pocket, “but you must take us to the Olhagarray house.”

“The Olhagarray house,” replies the old man. “I have come from it, my children, and you are near it.”

In truth, how had they failed to see, at a hundred steps further, that black gable among branches of chestnut trees?

At a point where sluices rustle, it is bathed by a torrent, that Olhagarray house, antique and large, among antique chestnut trees. Around, the red soil is denuded and furrowed by the waters of the mountain; enormous roots are interlaced in it like monstrous gray serpents; and the entire place, overhung on all sides

by the Pyrenean masses, is rude and tragic.

But two young girls are there, seated in the shade; with blonde hair and elegant little pink waists; astonishing little fairies, very modern in the midst of the ferocious and old scenes.—They rise, with cries of joy, to meet the visitors.

It would have been better, evidently, to enter the house and salute the old people. But the boys say to themselves that they have not been seen coming, and they prefer to sit near their sweethearts, by the side of the brook, on the gigantic roots. And, as if by chance, the two couples manage not to bother one another, to remain hidden from one another by rocks, by branches.

There then, they talk at length in a low voice, Arrochkoa with Pantchika, Ramuntcho with Gracieuse. What can they be saying, talking so much and so quickly?

Although their accent is less chanted than that of the highland, which astonished them yesterday, one would think they were speaking scanned stanzas, in a sort of music, infinitely soft, where the voices of the boys seem voices of children.

What are they saying to one another, talking so much and so quickly, beside this torrent, in this harsh ravine, under the heavy sun of noon? What they are saying has not much sense; it is a sort of murmur special to lovers, something like the special song of the swallows at nesting time. It is childish, a tissue of incoherences and repetitions. No, what they are saying has not much sense—unless it be what is most sublime in the world, the most profound and truest things which may be expressed by terrestrial words.—It means nothing, unless it be the eternal and marvellous hymn for which alone has been created the language of men and beasts, and in comparison with which all is empty, miserable and vain.

The heat is stifling in the depth of that gorge, so shut in from all sides; in spite of the shade of the chestnut trees, the rays, that the leaves sift, burn still. And this bare earth, of a reddish color, the extreme oldness of this nearby house, the antiquity of these trees, give to the surroundings, while the lovers talk, aspects somewhat harsh and hostile.

Ramuntcho has never seen his little friend made so pink by the sun: on her cheeks, there is the beautiful, red blood which flushes the skin, the fine and transparent skin; she is pink as the foxglove flowers.

Flies, mosquitoes buzz in their ears. Now Gracieuse has been bitten on the chin, almost on the mouth, and she tries to touch it with the end of her tongue, to bite the place with the upper teeth. And Ramuntcho, who looks at this too closely, feels suddenly a langour, to divert himself from which he stretches himself like one trying to awake.

She begins again, the little girl, her lip still itching—and he again stretches his arms, throwing his chest backward.

“What is the matter, Ramuntcho, and why do you stretch yourself like a cat?”

But when, for the third time, Gracieuse bites the same place, and shows again the little tip of her tongue, he bends over, vanquished by the irresistible giddiness, and bites also, takes in his mouth, like a beautiful red fruit which one fears to crush, the fresh lip which the mosquito has bitten—

A silence of fright and of delight, during which both shiver, she as much as he; she trembling also, in all her limbs, for having felt the contact of the growing black mustache.

“You are not angry, tell me?”

“No, my Ramuntcho.—Oh, I am not angry, no—”

Then he begins again, quite frantic, and in this languid and warm air, they exchange for the first time in their lives, the long kisses of lovers—

CHAPTER XVII.

The next day, Sunday, they went together religiously to hear one of the masses of the clear morning, in order to return to Etchezar the same day, immediately after the grand ball-game. It was this return, much more than the game, that interested Gracieuse and Ramuntcho, for it was their hope that Pantchika and her mother would remain at Erribiague while they would go, pressed against each other, in the very small carriage of the Detcharry family, under the indulgent and slight watchfulness of Arrochkoa, five or six hours of travel, all three alone, on the spring roads, under the new foliage, with amusing halts in unknown villages

At eleven o'clock in the morning, on that beautiful Sunday, the square was encumbered by mountaineers come from all the summits, from all the savage, surrounding hamlets. It was an international match, three players of France against three of Spain, and, in the crowd of lookers-on, the Spanish Basques were more numerous; there were large sombreros, waistcoats and gaiters of the olden time.

The judges of the two nations, designated by chance, saluted each other with a superannuated politeness, and the match began, in profound silence, under an oppressive sun which annoyed the players, in spite of their caps, pulled down over their eyes.

Ramuntcho soon, and after him Arrochkoa, were acclaimed as victors. And people looked at the two little strangers, so attentive, in the first row, so pretty also with their elegant pink waists, and people said: “They are the sweethearts of the two good players.” Then Gracieuse, who heard everything, felt proud of Ramuntcho.

Noon. They had been playing for almost an hour. The old wall, with its summit curved like a cupola, was cracking from dryness and from heat, under its paint of yellow ochre. The grand Pyrenean masses, nearer

here than at Etchezar, more crushing and more high, dominated from everywhere these little, human groups, moving in a deep fold of their sides. And the sun fell straight on the heavy caps of the men, on the bare heads of the women, heating the brains, increasing enthusiasm. The passionate crowd yelled, and the pelotas were flying, when, softly, the angelus began to ring. Then an old man, all wrinkled, all burned, who was waiting for this signal, put his mouth to the clarion—his old clarion of a Zouave in Africa—and rang the call to rest. And all, the women who were seated rose; all the caps fell, uncovering hair black, blonde or white, and the entire people made the sign of the cross, while the players, with chests and foreheads streaming with perspiration, stopped in the heat of the game and stood in meditation with heads bent—

At two o'clock, the game having come to an end gloriously for the French, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho went in their little wagon, accompanied and acclaimed by all the young men of Erribiague; then Gracieuse sat between the two, and they started for their long, charming trip, their pockets full of the gold which they had earned, intoxicated by their joy, by the noise and by the sunlight.

And Ramuntcho, who retained the taste of yesterday's kiss, felt like shouting to them: "This little girl who is so pretty, as you see, is mine! Her lips are mine, I had them yesterday and will take them again to-night!"

They started and at once found silence again, in the shaded valleys bordered by foxglove and ferns—

To roll for hours on the small Pyrenean roads, to change places almost every day, to traverse the Basque country, to go from one village to another, called here by a festival, there by an adventure on the frontier—this was now Ramuntcho's life, the errant life which the ball-game made for him in the day-time and smuggling in the night-time.

Ascents, descents, in the midst of a monotonous display of verdure. Woods of oaks and of beeches, almost inviolate, and remaining as they were in the quiet centuries.—When he passed by some antique house, hidden in these solitudes of trees, he stopped to enjoy reading, above the door, the traditional legend inscribed in the granite: "Ave Maria! in the year 1600, or in the year 1500, such a one, from such a village, has built this house, to live in it with such a one, his wife."

Very far from all human habitation, in a corner of a ravine, where it was warmer than elsewhere, sheltered from all breezes, they met a peddler of holy images, who was wiping his forehead. He had set down his basket, full of those colored prints with gilt frames that represent saints with Euskarian legends, and with which the Basques like to adorn their old rooms with white walls. And he was there, exhausted from fatigue and heat, as if wrecked in the ferns, at a turn of those little, mountain routes which run solitary under oaks.

Gracieuse came down and bought a Holy Virgin.

"Later," she said to Ramuntcho, "we shall put it in our house as a souvenir—"

And the image, dazzling in its gold frame, went with them under the long, green vaults—

They went out of their path, for they wished to pass by a certain valley of the Cherry-trees, not in the hope of finding cherries in it, in April, but to show to Gracieuse the place, which is renowned in the entire Basque country.

It was almost five o'clock, the sun was already low, when they reached there. It was a shaded and calm region, where the spring twilight descended like a caress on the magnificence of the April foliage. The air was cool and suave, fragrant with hay, with acacia. Mountains—very high, especially toward the north, to make the climate there softer, surrounded it on all sides, investing it with a melancholy mystery of closed Edens.

And, when the cherry-trees appeared, they were a gay surprise, they were already red.

There was nobody on these paths, above which the grand cherry-trees extended like a roof, their branches dripping with coral.

Here and there were some summer houses, still uninhabited, some deserted gardens, invaded by the tall grass and the rose bushes.

Then, they made their horse walk; then, each one in his turn, transferring the reins and standing in the wagon, amused himself by eating these cherries from the trees while passing by them and without stopping. Afterward, they placed bouquets of them in their buttonholes, they culled branches of them to deck the horse's head, the harness and the lantern. The equipage seemed ornamented for some festival of youth and of joy—

"Now let us hurry," said Gracieuse. "If only it be light enough, at least, when we reach Etchezar, for people to see us pass, ornamented as we are!"

As for Ramuntcho, he thought of the meeting place in the evening, of the kiss which he would dare to repeat, similar to that of yesterday, taking Gracieuse's lip between his lips like a cherry—

CHAPTER XVIII.

May! The grass ascends, ascends from everywhere like a sumptuous carpet, like silky velvet, emanating spontaneously from the earth.

In order to sprinkle this region of the Basques, which remains humid and green all summer like a sort of warmer Brittany, the errant vapors on the Bay of Biscay assemble all in this depth of gulf, stop at the Pyrenean summits and melt into rain. Long showers fall, which are somewhat deceptive, but after which the soil smells of new flowers and hay.

In the fields, along the roads, the grasses quickly thicken; all the ledges of the paths are as if padded by the magnificent thickness of the bent grass; everywhere is a profusion of gigantic Easter daisies, of buttercups with tall stems, and of very large, pink mallows like those of Algeria.

And, in the long, tepid twilights, pale iris or blue ashes in color, every night the bells of the month of Mary resound for a long time in the air, under the mass of the clouds hooked to the flanks of the mountains.

During the month of May, with the little group of black nuns, with discreet babble, with puerile and lifeless laughter, Gracieuse, at all hours, went to church. Hastening their steps under the frequent showers, they went together through the graveyard, full of roses; together, always together, the little clandestine betrothed, in light colored gowns, and the nuns, with long, mourning veils; during the day they brought bouquets of white flowers, daisies and sheafs of tall lilies; at night they came to sing, in the nave still more sonorous than in the day-time, the softly joyful canticles of the Virgin Mary:

“Ave, Queen of the Angels! Star of the Sea, ave!—”

Oh, the whiteness of the lilies lighted by the tapers, their white petals and their yellow pollen in gold dust! Oh, their fragrance in the gardens or in the church, during the twilights of spring!

And as soon as Gracieuse entered there, at night, in the dying ring of the bells—leaving the pale half-light of the graveyard full of roses for the starry night of the wax tapers which reigned already in the church, quitting the odor of hay and of roses for that of incense and of the tall, cut lilies, passing from the lukewarm and living air outside to that heavy and sepulchral cold that centuries amass in old sanctuaries—a particular calm came at once to her mind, a pacifying of all her desires, a renunciation of all her terrestrial joys. Then, when she had knelt, when the first canticles had taken their flight under the vault, infinitely sonorous, little by little she fell into an ecstasy, a state of dreaming, a visionary state which confused, white apparitions traversed: whiteness, whiteness everywhere; lilies, thousands of sheafs of lilies, and white wings, shivers of white wings of angels—

Oh! to remain for a long time in that state, to forget all things, and to feel herself pure, sanctified and immaculate, under that glance, ineffably fascinating and soft, under that glance, irresistibly appealing, which the Holy Virgin, in long white vestments, let fall from the height of the tabernacle—!

But, when she went outside, when the night of spring re-enveloped her with tepid breezes of life, the memory of the meeting which she had promised the day before, the day before as well as every day, chased like the wind of a storm the visions of the church. In the expectation of Ramuntcho, in the expectation of the odor of his hair, of the touch of his mustache, of the taste of his lips, she felt near faltering, like one wounded, among the strange companions who accompanied her, among the peaceful and spectral black nuns.

And when the hour had come, in spite of all her resolutions she was there, anxious and ardent, listening to the least noise, her heart beating if a branch of the garden moved in the night—tortured by the least tardiness of the beloved one.

He came always with his same silent step of a rover at night, his waistcoat on his shoulder, with as much precaution and artifice as for the most dangerous act of smuggling.

In the rainy nights, so frequent in the Basque spring-time, she remained in her room on the first floor, and he sat on the sill of the open window, not trying to go in, not having the permission to do so. And they stayed there, she inside, he outside, their arms laced, their heads touching each other, the cheek of one resting on the cheek of the other.

When the weather was beautiful, she jumped over this low window-sill to wait for him outside, and their long meetings, almost without words, occurred on the garden bench. Between them there were not even those continual whisperings familiar to lovers; no, there were rather silences. At first they did not dare to talk, for fear of being discovered, for the least murmurs of voices at night are heard. And then, as nothing new threatened their lives, what need had they to talk? What could they have said which would have been better than the long contact of their joined hands and of their heads resting against each other?

The possibility of being surprised kept them often on the alert, in an anxiety which made more delicious afterward the moments when they forgot themselves more, their confidence having returned.—Nobody frightened them as much as Arrochkoa, a smart, nocturnal prowler himself, and always so well-informed about the goings and comings of Ramuntcho—In spite of his indulgence, what would he do, if he discovered them?—

Oh, the old stone benches, under branches, in front of the doors of isolated houses, when fall the lukewarm nights of spring!—Theirs was a real lovers' hiding place, and there was for them, every night, a music, for, in all the stones of the neighbors' wall lived those singing tree-toads, beasts of the south, which, as soon as night fell, gave from moment to moment a little, brief note, discreet, odd, having the tone of a crystal bell and of a child's throat. Something similar might be produced by touching here and there, without ever resting on them, the scales of an organ with a celestial voice. There were tree-toads everywhere, responding to one another in different tones; even those which were under their bench, close by them, reassured by their immobility, sang also from time to time; then that little sound, brusque and soft, so near, made them start and smile. All the exquisite, surrounding obscurity was animated by that music, which continued in the distance, in the mystery of the leaves and of the stones, in the depths of all the small, black holes of rocks or walls; it seemed like chivies in miniature, or rather, a sort of frail concert somewhat mocking—oh! not very mocking, and without any maliciousness—led timidly by inoffensive gnomes. And this made the night more living and more loving—

After the intoxicated audacities of the first nights, fright took a stronger hold of them, and, when one of them had something special to say, one led the other by the hand without talking; this meant that they had to walk softly, softly, like marauding cats, to an alley behind the house where they could talk without fear.

“Where shall we live, Gracieuse?” asked Ramuntcho one night.

“At your house, I had thought.”

“Ah! yes, so thought I—only I thought it would make you sad to be so far from the parish, from the church and the square—”

“Oh—with you, I could find anything sad?—”

“Then, we would send away those who live on the first floor and take the large room which opens on the road to Hasparitz—”

It was an increased joy for him to know that Gracieuse would accept his house, to be sure that she would bring the radiance of her presence into that old, beloved home, and that they would make their nest there for life—

CHAPTER XIX.

Here come the long, pale twilights of June, somewhat veiled like those of May, less uncertain, however, and more tepid still. In the gardens, the rose-laurel which is beginning to bloom in profusion is becoming already magnificently pink. At the end of each work day, the good folks sit outside, in front of their doors, to look at the night falling—the night which soon confuses, under the vaults of the plane-trees, their groups assembled for benevolent rest. And a tranquil melancholy descends over villages, in those interminable evenings—

For Ramuntcho, this is the epoch when smuggling becomes a trade almost without trouble, with charming hours, marching toward summits through spring clouds; crossing ravines, wandering in lands of springs and of wild fig-trees; sleeping, waiting for the agreed hour, with carbineers who are accomplices, on carpets of mint and pinks.—The good odor of plants impregnated his clothes, his waistcoat which he never wore, but used as a pillow or a blanket—and Gracieuse would say to him at night: “I know where you went last night, for you smell of mint of the mountain above Mendizpi”—or: “You smell of absinthe of the Suberno morass.”

Gracieuse regretted the month of Mary, the offices of the Virgin in the nave, decked with white flowers. In the twilights without rain, with the sisters and some older pupils of their class, she sat under the porch of the church, against the low wall of the graveyard from which the view plunges into the valleys beneath. There they talked, or played the childish games in which nuns indulge.

There were also long and strange meditations, meditations to which the fall of day, the proximity of the church, of the tombs and of their flowers, gave soon a serenity detached from material things and as if free from all alliance with the senses. In her first mystic dreams as a little girl,—inspired especially by the pompous rites of the cult, by the voice of the organ, the white bouquets, the thousand flames of the wax tapers—only images appeared to her—very radiant images, it is true: altars resting on mists, golden tabernacles where music vibrated and where fell grand flights of angels. But those visions gave place now to ideas: she caught a glimpse of that peace and that supreme renunciation which the certainty of an endless celestial life gives; she conceived, in a manner more elevated than formerly, the melancholy joy of abandoning everything in order to become an impersonal part of that entirety of nuns, white, or blue, or black, who, from the innumerable convents of earth, make ascend toward heaven an immense and perpetual intercession for the sins of the world—

However, as soon as night had fallen quite, the course of her thoughts came down every evening fatally toward intoxicating and mortal things. Her wait, her feverish wait, began, more impatient from moment to moment. She felt anxious that her cold companions with black veils should return into the sepulchre of their convent and that she should be alone in her room, free at last, in the house fallen asleep, ready to open her window and listen to the slight noise of Ramuntcho's footsteps.

The kiss of lovers, the kiss on the lips, was now a thing possessed and of which they had not the strength to deprive themselves. And they prolonged it a great deal, not wishing, through charming scruples, to accord more to each other.

Anyway, if the intoxication which they gave to each other thus was a little too carnal, there was between them that absolute tenderness, infinite, unique, by which all things are elevated and purified.

CHAPTER XX.

Ramuntcho, that evening, had come to the meeting place earlier than usual—with more hesitation also in his walk, for one risks, on these June evenings, to find girls belated along the paths, or boys behind the hedges on love expeditions.

And by chance she was already alone, looking outside, without waiting for him, however.

At once she noticed his agitated demeanor and guessed that something new had happened. Not daring to come too near, he made a sign to her to come quickly, jump over the window-sill, and meet him in the obscure alley where they talked without fear. Then, as soon as she was near him, in the nocturnal shade of the trees, he put his arm around her waist and announced to her, brusquely, the great piece of news which, since the morning, troubled his young head and that of Franchita, his mother.

“Uncle Ignacio has written.”

“True? Uncle Ignacio!”

She knew that that adventurous uncle, that American uncle, who had disappeared for so many years, had never thought until now of sending more than a strange good-day by a passing sailor.

“Yes! And he says that he has property there, which requires attention, large prairies, herds of horses; that he has no children, that if I wish to go and live near him with a gentle Basque girl married to me here, he would be glad to adopt both of us.—Oh! I think mother will come also.—So, if you wish.—We could marry now.—You know they marry people as young as we, it is allowed.—Now that I am to be adopted by my uncle and I shall have a real situation in life, your mother will consent, I think.—And as for military service, we shall not care for that, shall we?—”

They sat on the mossy rocks, their heads somewhat dizzy, troubled by the approach and the unforeseen temptation of happiness. So, it would not be in an uncertain future, after his term as a soldier, it would be almost at once; in two months, in one month, perhaps, that communion of their minds and of their flesh, so ardently desired and now so forbidden, might be accomplished without sin, honestly in the eyes of all, permitted and blessed.—Oh! they had never looked at this so closely.—And they pressed against each other their foreheads, made heavy by too many thoughts, fatigued suddenly by a sort of too delicious delirium.—Around them, the odor of the flowers of June ascended from the earth, filling the night with an immense suavity. And, as if there were not enough scattered fragrance, the jessamine, the honeysuckle on the walls exhaled from moment to moment, in intermittent puffs, the excess of their perfume; one would have thought that hands swung in silence censers in the darkness, for some hidden festival, for some enchantment magnificent and secret.

There are often and everywhere very mysterious enchantments like this, emanating from nature itself, commanded by one knows not what sovereign will with unfathomable designs, to deceive us all, on the road to death—

“You do not reply, Gracieuse, you say nothing to me—”

He could see that she was intoxicated also, like him, and yet he divined by her manner of remaining mute so long, that shadows were amassing over his charming and beautiful dream.

“But,” she asked at last, “your naturalization papers. You have received them, have you not?”

“Yes, they arrived last week, you know very well, and it was you who said that I should apply for them—”

“Then you are a Frenchman to-day.—Then, if you do not do your military service you are a deserter.”

“Yes.—A deserter, no; but refractory, I think it is called.—It isn't better, since one cannot come back.—I was not thinking of that—”

How she was tortured now to have caused this thought, to have impelled him herself to this act which made soar over his hardly seen joy a threat so black! Oh, a deserter, he, her Ramuntcho! That is, banished forever from the dear, Basque country!—And this departure for America becomes suddenly frightfully grave, solemn, similar to a death, since he could not possibly return!—Then, what was there to be done?—

Now they were anxious and mute, each one preferring to submit to the will of the other, and waiting, with equal fright, for the decision which should be taken, to go or to remain. From the depths of their two young hearts ascended, little by little, a similar distress, poisoning the happiness offered over there, in that America from which they would never return.—And the little, nocturnal censers of jessamine, of honeysuckle, of linden, continued to throw into the air exquisite puffs to intoxicate them; the darkness that enveloped them seemed more and more caressing and soft; in the silence of the village and of the country, the tree-toads gave, from moment to moment, their little flute-note, which seemed a very discreet love call, under the velvet of the moss; and, through the black lace of the foliage, in the serenity of a June sky which one thought forever unalterable, they saw scintillate, like a simple and gentle dust of phosphorus, the terrifying multitude of the worlds.

The curfew began to ring, however, at the church. The sound of that bell, at night especially, was for them something unique on earth. At this moment, it was something like a voice bringing, in their indecision, its advice, its counsel, decisive and tender. Mute still, they listened to it with an increasing emotion, of an intensity till then unknown, the brown head of the one leaning on the brown head of the other. It said, the advising voice, the dear, protecting voice: “No, do not go forever; the far-off lands are made for the time of youth; but you must be able to return to Etchezar: it is here that you must grow old and die; nowhere in the world could you sleep as in this graveyard around the church, where one may, even when lying under the earth, hear me ring again—” They yielded more and more to the voice of the bell, the two children whose minds were religious and primitive. And Ramuntcho felt on his cheek a tear of Gracieuse:

“No,” he said at last, “I will not desert; I think that I would not have the courage to do it—”

“I thought the same thing as you, my Ramuntcho,” she said. “No, let us not do that. I was waiting for you to say it—”

Then he realized that he also was crying, like her—

The die was cast, they would permit to pass by happiness which was within their reach, almost under their hands; they would postpone everything to a future uncertain and so far off—!

And now, in the sadness, in the meditation of the great decision which they had taken, they communicated to each other what seemed best for them to do:

“We might,” she said, “write a pretty letter to your uncle Ignacio; write to him that you accept, that you will come with a great deal of pleasure immediately after your military service; you might even add, if you wish, that the one who is engaged to you thanks him and will be ready to follow you; but that decidedly you cannot desert.”

“And why should you not talk to your mother now, Gatchutchta, only to know what she would think?—Because now, you understand, I am not as I was, an abandoned child—” Slight steps behind them, in the path—and above the wall, the silhouette of a young man who had come on the tips of his sandals, as if to spy upon them!

“Go, escape, my Ramuntcho, we will meet to-morrow evening!—”

In half a second, there was nobody: he was hidden in a bush, she had fled into her room.

Ended was their grave interview! Ended until when? Until to-morrow or until always?—On their farewells, abrupt or prolonged, frightened or peaceful, every time, every night, weighed the same uncertainty of their meeting again—

CHAPTER XXI.

The bell of Etchezar, the same dear, old bell, that of the tranquil curfew, that of the festivals and that of the agonies, rang joyously in the beautiful sun of June. The village was decorated with white cloths, white embroideries, and the procession of the Fete-Dieu passed slowly, on a green strewing of fennel seed and of reeds cut from the marshes.

The mountains seemed near and sombre, somewhat ferocious in their brown tones, above this white parade of little girls marching on a carpet of cut leaves and grass.

All the old banners of the church were there, illuminated by that sun which they had known for centuries but which they see only once or twice a year, on the consecrated days.

The large one, that of the Virgin, in white silk embroidered with pale gold, was borne by Gracieuse, who walked in white dress, her eyes lost in a mystic dream. Behind the young girls, came the women, all the women of the village, wearing black veils, including Dolores and Franchita, the two enemies. Men, numerous enough, closed this cortege, tapers in their hands, heads uncovered—but there were especially gray hairs, faces with expressions vanquished and resigned, heads of old men.

Gracieuse, holding high the banner of the Virgin, became at this hour one of the Illuminati; she felt as if she were marching, as after death, toward the celestial tabernacles. And when, at instants, the reminiscence of Ramuntcho's lips traversed her dream, she had the impression, in the midst of all this white, of a sharp stain, delicious still. Truly, as her thoughts became more elevated from day to day, what brought her back to him was less her senses, capable in her of being tamed, than true, profound tenderness, the one which resists time and deceptions of the flesh. And this tenderness was augmented by the fact that Ramuntcho was less fortunate than she and more abandoned in life, having had no father—

CHAPTER XXII.

"Well, Gatchutchá, you have at last spoken to your mother of Uncle Ignacio?" asked Ramuntcho, very late, the same night, in the alley of the garden, under rays of the moon.

"Not yet, I have not dared.—How could I explain that I know all these things, since I am supposed not to talk with you ever, and she has forbidden me to do so?—Think, if I were to make her suspicious!—There would be an end to everything, we could not see each other again! I would like better to wait until you left the country, then all would be indifferent to me—"

"It is true!—let us wait, since I am to go."

He was going away, and already they could count the evenings which would be left to them.

Now that they had permitted their immediate happiness to escape, the happiness offered to them in the prairies of America, it seemed preferable to them to hasten the departure of Ramuntcho for the army, in order that he might return sooner. So they had decided that he would enlist in the naval infantry, the only part of the service where one may elect to serve for a period as short as three years. And as they needed, in order to be certain not to be lacking in courage, a precise epoch, considered for a long time in advance, they had fixed the end of September, after the grand series of ball-games.

They contemplated this separation of three years duration with an absolute confidence in the future, so sure they thought they were of each other, and of themselves, and of their imperishable love. But it was, however, an expectation which already filled their hearts strangely; it threw an unforeseen melancholy over things which were ordinarily the most indifferent, on the flight of days, on the least indications of the next season, on the coming into life of certain plants, on the coming into bloom of certain species of flowers, on all that presaged the arrival and the rapid march of their last summer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Already the fires of St. John have flamed, joyful and red in a clear, blue night, and the Spanish mountain seemed to burn, that night, like a sheaf of straw, so many were the bonfires lighted on its sides. It has begun, the season of light, of heat and of storms, at the end of which Ramuntcho must depart.

And the saps, which in the spring went up so quickly, become languid already in the complete development of the verdure, in the wide bloom of the flowers. And the sun, more and more burning, overheats all the heads covered with Basque caps, excites ardor and passion, causes to rise everywhere, in those Basque villages, ferments of noisy agitation and of pleasure. While, in Spain, begin the grand bull-fights, this is here the epoch of so many ball-games, of so many fandangoes danced in the evening, of so much pining of lovers in the tepid voluptuousness of nights—!

Soon will come the warm splendor of the southern July. The Bay of Biscay has become very blue and the Cantabric coast has for a time put on its fallow colors of Morocco or of Algeria.

With the heavy rains alternates the marvellously beautiful weather which gives to the air absolute limpitudes. And there are days also when somewhat distant things are as if eaten by light, powdered with sun dust; then, above the woods and the village of Etchezar, the Gizune, very pointed, becomes more vaporous and more high, and, on the sky, float, to make it appear bluer, very small clouds of a gilded white with a little

mother-of-pearl gray in their shades.

And the springs run thinner and rarer under the thickness of the ferns, and, along the routes, go more slowly, driven by half nude men, the ox-carts which a swarm of flies surrounds.

At this season, Ramuntcho, in the day-time, lived his agitated life of a pelotari, running with Arrochkoa from village to village, to organize ball-games and play them.

But, in his eyes, evenings alone existed.

Evenings!—In the odorous and warm darkness of the garden, to be seated very near Gracieuse; to put his arm around her, little by little to draw her to him and hold her against his breast, and remain thus for a long time without saying anything, his chin resting on her hair, breathing the young and healthy scent of her body.

He enervated himself dangerously, Ramuntcho, in these prolonged contacts which she did not prohibit. Anyway, he divined her surrendered enough to him now, and confident enough, to permit everything; but he did not wish to attempt supreme communion, through childish reserve, through respect for his betrothed, through excess and profoundness of love. And it happened to him at times to rise abruptly, to stretch himself—in the manner of a cat, she said, as formerly at Erribiague—when he felt a dangerous thrill and a more imperious temptation to leave life with her in a moment of ineffable death—

CHAPTER XXIV.

Franchita, however, was astonished by the unexplained attitude of her son, who, apparently, never saw Gracieuse and yet never talked of her. Then, while was amassing in her the sadness of his coming departure for military service, she observed him, with her peasant's patience and muteness.

One evening, one of the last evenings, as he was going away, mysterious and in haste, long before the hour of the nocturnal contraband, she straightened before him, her eyes fixed on his:

“Where are you going, my son?”

And seeing him turn his head, blushing and embarrassed, she acquired a sudden certainty:

“It is well, now I know.—Oh! I know!—”

She was moved even more than he, at her discovery of this great secret.—The idea had not even come to her that it was not Gracieuse, that it might be another girl. She was too far-seeing. And her scruples as a Christian were awakened, her conscience was frightened at the evil that they might have done, as rose from the depth of her heart a sentiment of which she was ashamed as if it were a crime, a sort of savage joy.—For, in fine—if their carnal union was accomplished, the future of her son was assured.—She knew her Ramuntcho well enough to know that he would not change his mind and that Gracieuse would never be abandoned by him.

The silence between them was prolonged, she standing before him, barring the way:

“And what have you done together?” she decided to ask. “Tell me the truth, Ramuntcho, what wrong have you done?—”

“What wrong?—Oh! nothing, mother, nothing wrong, I swear to you—”

He replied this without irritation at being questioned, and bearing the look of his mother with eyes of frankness. It was true, and she believed him.

But, as she stayed in front of him, her hand on the door-latch, he said, with dumb violence:

“You are not going to prevent me from going to her, since I shall leave in three days!”

Then, in presence of this young will in revolt, the mother, enclosing in herself the tumult of her contradictory thoughts, lowered her head and, without a word, stood aside to let him pass.

CHAPTER XXV.

It was their last evening, for, the day before yesterday, at the Mayor's office of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, he had, with a hand trembling a little, signed his engagement for three years in the Second naval infantry, whose garrison was a military port of the North.

It was their last evening,—and they had said that they would make it longer than usual,—it would last till midnight, Gracieuse had decided: midnight, which in the villages is an unseasonable and black hour, an hour after which, she did not know why, all seemed to the little betrothed graver and guiltier.

In spite of the ardent desire of their senses, the idea had not come to one nor to the other that, during this last meeting, under the oppression of parting, something more might be attempted.

On the contrary, at the instant so full of concentration of their farewell, they felt more chaste still, so eternal was their love.

Less prudent, however, since they had not to care for the morrow, they dared to talk there, on their lovers' bench, as they had never done before. They talked of the future, of a future which was for them very distant, because, at their age, three years seem infinite.

In three years, at his return, she would be twenty; then, if her mother persisted to refuse in an absolute manner, at the end of a year she would use her right of majority, it was between them an agreed and a sworn thing.

The means of correspondence, during the long absence of Ramuntcho, preoccupied them a great deal: between them, everything was so complicated by obstacles and secrets!—Arrochkoa, their only possible intermediary, had promised his help; but he was so changeable, so uncertain!—Oh, if he were to fail!—And then, would he consent to send sealed letters?—If he did not consent there would be no pleasure in writing.—In our time, when communications are easy and constant, there are no more of these complete separations similar to the one which theirs would be; they were to say to each other a very solemn farewell, like the one which the lovers of other days said, the lovers of the days when there were lands without post-offices, and distances that frightened one. The fortunate time when they should see each other again appeared to them situated far off, far off, in the depths of duration; yet, because of the faith which they had in each other, they expected this with a tranquil assurance, as the faithful expect celestial life.

But the least things of their last evening acquired in their minds a singular importance; as this farewell came near, all grew and was exaggerated for them, as happens in the expectation of death. The slight sounds and the aspects of the night seemed to them particular and, in spite of them, were engraving themselves forever in their memory. The song of the crickets had a characteristic which it seemed to them they had never heard before. In the nocturnal sonority, the barking of a watch-dog, coming from some distant farm, made them shiver with a melancholy fright. And Ramuntcho was to carry with him in his exile, to preserve later with a desolate attachment, a certain stem of grass plucked from the garden negligently and with which he had played unconsciously the whole evening.

A phase of their life finished with that day: a lapse of time had occurred, their childhood had passed—

Of recommendations, they had none very long to exchange, so intensely was each one sure of what the other might do during the separation. They had less to say to each other than other engaged people have, because they knew mutually their most intimate thoughts. After the first hour of conversation, they remained hand in hand in grave silence, while were consumed the inexorable minutes of the end.

At midnight, she wished him to go, as she had decided in advance, in her little thoughtful and obstinate head. Therefore, after having embraced each other for a long time, they quitted each other, as if the separation were, at this precise minute, an ineluctable thing which it was impossible to retard. And while she returned to her room with sobs that he heard, he scaled over the wall and, in coming out of the darkness of the foliage, found himself on the deserted road, white with lunar rays. At this first separation, he suffered less than she, because he was going, because it was he that the morrow, full of uncertainty, awaited. While he walked on the road, powdered and clear, the powerful charm of change, of travel, dulled his sensitiveness; almost without any precise thought, he looked at his shadow, which the moon made clear and harsh, marching in front of him. And the great Gizune dominated impassibly everything, with its cold and spectral air, in all this white radiance of midnight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The parting day, good-byes to friends here and there; joyful wishes of former soldiers returned from the regiment. Since the morning, a sort of intoxication or of fever, and, in front of him, everything unthought-of in life.

Arrochkoa, very amiable on that last day, had offered to drive him in a wagon to Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and had arranged to go at sunset, in order to arrive there just in time for the night train.

The night having come, inexorably, Franchita wished to accompany her son to the square, where the Detcharry wagon was waiting for him, and here her face, despite her will, was drawn by sorrow, while he straightened himself, in order to preserve the swagger which becomes recruits going to their regiment:

“Make a little place for me, Arrochkoa,” she said abruptly. “I will sit between you to the chapel of Saint-Bitchentcho; I will return on foot—”

And they started at the setting sun, which, on them as on all things, scattered the magnificence of its gold and of its red copper.

After a wood of oaks, the chapel of Saint-Bitchentcho passed, and the mother wished to remain. From one turn to another, postponing every time the great separation, she asked to be driven still farther.

“Mother, when we reach the top of the Issaritz slope you must go down!” he said tenderly. “You hear, Arrochkoa, you will stop where I say; I do not want mother to go further—”

At this Issaritz slope the horse had himself slackened his pace. The mother and the son, their eyes burned with suppressed tears, held each other's hands, and they were going slowly, slowly, in absolute silence, as if it were a solemn ascent toward some Calvary.

At last, at the top of the slope, Arrochkoa, who seemed mute also, pulled the reins slightly, with a simple little: “Ho!—” discreet as a lugubrious signal which one hesitates to give—and the carriage was stopped.

Then, without a word, Ramuntcho jumped to the road, helped his mother to descend, gave a long kiss to her, then remounted briskly to his seat:

“Go, Arrochkoa, quickly, race, let us go!”

And in two seconds, in the rapid descent, he lost sight of the one whose face at last was covered with tears.

Now they were going away from one another, Franchita and her son. In different directions, they were walking on that Etchezar road,—in the splendor of the setting sun, in a region of pink heather and of yellow fern. She was going up slowly toward her home, meeting isolated groups of farmers, flocks led through the golden evening by little shepherds in Basque caps. And he was going down quickly, through valleys soon darkened, toward the lowland where the railway train passes—

CHAPTER XXVII.

At twilight, Franchita was returning from escorting her son and was trying to regain her habitual face, her air of haughty indifference, to pass through the village.

But, when she arrived in front of the Detcharry house, she saw Dolores who, instead of going in, as she intended, turned round and stood at the door to see her pass. Something new, some sudden revelation must have impelled her to take this attitude of aggressive defiance, this expression of provoking irony,—and Franchita then stopped, she also, while this phrase, almost involuntary, came through her set teeth:

“What is the matter with that woman? Why does she look at me so—”

“He will not come to-night, the lover, will he?” responded the enemy.

“Then you knew that he came here to see your daughter?”

In truth, Dolores knew this since the morning: Gracieuse had told her, since no care needed to be taken of the morrow; Gracieuse had told it wearily, after talking uselessly of Uncle Ignacio, of Ramuntcho's future, of all that would serve their cause—

“Then you knew that he came here to see your daughter?”

By a reminiscence of other times, they regained instinctively their theeing and thouing of the sisters' school, those two women who for nearly twenty years had not addressed a word to each other. Why they detested each other, they hardly knew; so many times, it begins thus, with nothings, with jealousies, with childish rivalries, and then, at length, by dint of seeing each other every day without talking to each other, by dint of casting at each other evil looks, it ferments till it becomes implacable hatred.—Here they were, facing each other, and their two voices trembled with rancor, with evil emotion:

“Well,” replied the other, “you knew it before I did, I suppose, you who are without shame and sent him to our house!—Anyway, one can understand your easiness about means, after what you have done in the past—”

And, while Franchita, naturally much more dignified, remained mute, terrified now by this unexpected dispute on the street, Dolores continued:

“No. My daughter marrying that penniless bastard, think of it!—”

“Well, I have the idea that she will marry him, in spite of everything!—Try to propose to her a man of your choice and see—”

Then, as if she disdained to continue, she went on her way, hearing behind her the voice and the insults of the other pursuing her. All her limbs trembled and she faltered at every step on her weakened legs.

At the house, now empty, what sadness she found!

The reality of this separation, which would last for three years, appeared to her under an aspect frightfully new, as if she had hardly been prepared for it—even as, on one's return from a graveyard, one feels for the first time, in its frightful integrity, the absence of the cherished dead—

And then, those words of insult in the street, those words the more crushing because she was cruelly conscious of her sin with the stranger! Instead of passing by, as she should have done, how had she found the courage to stop before her enemy and, by a phrase murmured between her teeth, provoke this odious dispute? How could she have descended to such a thing, forgotten herself thus, she who, for fifteen years, had imposed herself, little by little, on the respect of all by her demeanor, so perfectly dignified. Oh, to have attracted and to have suffered the insult of that Dolores,—whose past was irreproachable and who had, in effect, the right to treat her with contempt! When she reflected, she became frightened more and more by that sort of defiance of the future which she had had the imprudence to hurl; it seemed to her that she had compromised the cherished hope of her son in exasperating thus the hatred of that woman.

Her son!—her Ramuntcho, whom a wagon was carrying away from her at this hour in the summer night, was carrying away from her to a long distance, to danger, to war!—She had assumed very heavy responsibilities in directing his life with ideas of her own, with stubbornness, with pride, with selfishness.—And now, this evening, she had, perhaps, attracted misfortune to him, while he was going away so confident in the joy of his return!—This would be doubtless for her the supreme chastisement; she seemed to hear, in the air of the empty house, something like a threat of this expiation, she felt its slow and sure approach.

Then, she said for him her prayers, from a heart harshly revolted, because religion, as she understood it, remained without sweetness, without consolation, without anything confidential and tender. Her distress and her remorse were, at this moment, of so sombre a nature that tears, benevolent tears, came no longer to her

—

And he, at this same instant of the night, continued to descend, through darker valleys, toward the lowland where the trains pass—carrying away men to a long distance, changing and upsetting all things. For about an hour he would continue to be on Basque soil; then, it would end. Along his route, he met some oxcarts, of indolent demeanor, recalling the tranquillities of the olden time; or vague human silhouettes, hailing him with the traditional goodnight, the antique “Gaou-one,” which to-morrow he would cease to hear. And beyond, at his left, in the depth of a sort of black abyss, was the profile of Spain, Spain which, for a very long time doubtless, would trouble his nights no longer—

CHAPTER I.

Three years have passed, rapidly.

Franchita is alone at home, ill and in bed, at the end of a November day.—And it is the third autumn since her son's departure.

In her hands, burning with fever, she holds a letter from him, a letter which should have brought only joy without a cloud, since it announces his return, but which causes in her, on the contrary, tormented sentiments, for the happiness of seeing him again is poisoned now by sadness, by worry especially, by frightful worry—

Oh, she had an exact presentiment of the sombre future, that night when, returning from escorting him on the road to departure, she returned to her house with so much anguish, after that sort of defiance hurled at Dolores on the street: it was cruelly true that she had broken then forever her son's life—!

Months of waiting and of apparent calm had followed that scene, while Ramuntcho, far from his native land, was beginning his military service. Then, one day, a wealthy suitor had presented himself for Gracieuse and she, to the entire village's knowledge, had rejected him obstinately in spite of Dolores's will. Then, they had suddenly gone away, the mother and the daughter, pretexting a visit to relatives in the highland; but the voyage had been prolonged; a mystery more and more singular had enveloped this absence,—and suddenly the rumor had come that Gracieuse was a novice among the sisters of Saint Mary of the Rosary, in a convent of Gascony where the former Mother Superior of Etchezar was the abbess—!

Dolores had reappeared alone in her home, mute, with a desolate and evil air. None knew what influence had been exercised over the little girl with the golden hair, nor how the luminous doors of life had been closed before her, how she had permitted herself to be walled in that tomb; but, as soon as the period of novitiate had been accomplished, without seeing even her brother, she had taken her vows there, while Ramuntcho, in a far-off colonial war, ever distant from the post-offices of France, among the forests of a Southern island, won the stripes of a sergeant and a military medal.

Franchita had been almost afraid that he would never return, her son.—But at last, he was coming back. Between her fingers, thin and warm, she held the letter which said: "I start day after to-morrow and I will be with you Saturday night." But what would he do, at his return, what would he make of his life, so sadly changed? In his letters, he had obstinately refrained from writing of this.

Anyway, everything had turned against her. The farmers, her tenants, had left Etchezar, leaving the barn empty, the house more lonely, and naturally her modest income was much diminished. Moreover, in an imprudent investment, she had lost a part of the money which the stranger had given for her son. Truly, she was too unskilful a mother, compromising in every way the happiness of her beloved Ramuntcho,—or rather, she was a mother upon whom justice from above fell heavily to-day, because of her past error.—And all this had vanquished her, all this had hastened and aggravated the malady which the physician, called too late, did not succeed in checking.

Now, therefore, waiting for the return of her son, she was stretched on her bed, burning with fever.

CHAPTER II.

He was returning, Ramuntcho, after his three years of absence, discharged from the army in that city of the North where his regiment was in garrison. He was returning with his heart in disarray, with his heart in a tumult and in distress.

His twenty-two year old face had darkened under the ardent sun; his mustache, now very long, gave him an air of proud nobility. And, on the lapel of the civilian coat which he had just bought, appeared the glorious ribbon of his medal.

At Bordeaux, where he had arrived after a night of travel, he had taken a place, with some emotion, in that train of Irun which descends in a direct line toward the South, through the monotony of the interminable moors. Near the right door he had installed himself in order to see sooner the Bay of Biscay open and the highlands of Spain sketch themselves.

Then, near Bayonne, he had been startled at the sight of the first Basque caps, at the tall gates, the first Basque houses among the pines and the oaks.

And at Saint-Jean-de-Luz at last, when he set foot on the soil, he had felt like one drunk—After the mist and the cold already begun in Northern France, he felt the sudden and voluptuous impression of a warmer climate, the sensation of going into a hothouse. There was a festival of sunlight that day; the southern wind, the exquisite southern wind, blew, and the Pyrenees had magnificent tints on the grand, free sky. Moreover, girls passed, whose laughter rang of the South and of Spain, who had the elegance and the grace of the Basques—and who, after the heavy blondes of the North, troubled him more than all these illusions of summer.—But promptly he returned to himself: what was he thinking of, since that regained land was to him an empty land forever? How could his infinite despair be changed by that tempting gracefulness of the girls, by that ironical gaiety of the sky, the human beings and the things?—No! He would go home, embrace his mother—!

As he had expected, the stage-coach to Etchezar had left two hours ago. But, without trouble, he would traverse on foot this long road so familiar to him and arrive in the evening, before night.

So he went to buy sandals, the foot-gear of his former runs. And, with the mountaineer's quick step, in long, nervous strides, he plunged at once into the heart of the silent country, through paths which were for him full of memories.

November was coming to an end in the tepid radiance of that sun which lingers always here for a long time, on the Pyrenean slopes. For days, in the Basque land, had lasted this same luminous and pure sky, above woods half despoiled of their leaves, above mountains reddened by the ardent tint of the ferns. From the borders of the paths ascended tall grasses, as in the month of May, and large, umbellated flowers, mistaken about the season; in the hedges, privets and briars had come into bloom again, in the buzz of the last bees; and one could see flying persistent butterflies, to whom death had given several weeks of grace.

The Basque houses appeared here and there among the trees,—very elevated, the roof protruding, white in their extreme oldness, with their shutters brown or green, of a green ancient and faded. And everywhere, on their wooden balconies were drying the yellow gold pumpkins, the sheafs of pink peas; everywhere, on their walls, like beautiful beads of coral, were garlands of red peppers: all the things of the soil still fecund, all the things of the old, nursing soil, amassed thus in accordance with old time usage, in provision for the darkened months when the heat departs.

And, after the mists of the Northern autumn, that limpidity of the air, that southern sunlight, every detail of the land, awakened in the complex mind of Ramuntcho infinite vibrations, painfully sweet.

It was the tardy season when are cut the ferns that form the fleece of the reddish hills. And, large ox-carts filled with them rolled tranquilly, in the beautiful, melancholy sun, toward the isolated farms, leaving on their passage the trail of their fragrance. Very slowly, through the mountain paths, went these enormous loads of ferns; very slowly, with sounds of cow-bells. The harnessed oxen, indolent and strong,—all wearing the traditional head-gear of sheepskin, fallow colored, which gives to them the air of bisons or of aurochs, pulled those heavy carts, the wheels of which are solid disks, like those of antique chariots. The cowboys, holding the long stick in their hands, marched in front, always noiselessly, in sandals, the pink cotton shirt revealing the chest, the waistcoat thrown over the left shoulder—and the woolen cap drawn over a face shaven, thin, grave, to which the width of the jaws and of the muscles of the neck gives an expression of massive solidity.

Then, there were intervals of solitude when one heard, in these paths, only the buzz of flies, in the yellowed and finishing shade of the trees.

Ramuntcho looked at them, at these rare passers-by who crossed his road, surprised at not meeting somebody he knew who would stop before him. But there were no familiar faces. And the friends whom he met were not effusive, there were only vague good-days exchanged with folks who turned round a little, with an impression of having seen him sometime, but not recalling when, and fell back into the humble dream of the fields.—And he felt more emphasized than ever the primary differences between him and those farm laborers.

Over there, however, comes one of those carts whose sheaf is so big that branches of oaks in its passage catch it. In front, walks the driver, with a look of soft resignation, a big, peaceful boy, red as the ferns, red as the autumn, with a reddish fur in a bush on his bare chest; he walks with a supple and nonchalant manner, his arms extended like those of a cross on his goad, placed across his shoulders. Thus, doubtless, on these same mountains, marched his ancestors, farm laborers and cowboys like him since numberless centuries.

And this one, at Ramuntcho's aspect, touches the forehead of his oxen, stops them with a gesture and a cry of command, then comes to the traveller, extending to him his brave hands.—Florentino! A Florentino much changed, having squarer shoulders, quite a man now, with an assured and fixed demeanor.

The two friends embrace each other. Then, they scan each other's faces in silence, troubled suddenly by the wave of reminiscences which come from the depth of their minds and which neither the one nor the other knows how to express; Ramuntcho, not better than Florentino, for, if his language be infinitely better formed, the profoundness and the mystery of his thoughts are also much more unfathomable.

And it oppresses them to conceive things which they are powerless to tell; then their embarrassed looks return absent-mindedly to the two beautiful, big oxen:

"They are mine, you know," says Florentino. "I was married two years ago.—My wife works. And, by working—we are beginning to get along.—Oh!" he adds, with naive pride, "I have another pair of oxen like these at the house."

Then he ceases to talk, flushing suddenly under his sunburn, for he has the tact which comes from the heart, which the humblest possess often by nature, but which education never gives, even to the most refined people in the world: considering the desolate return of Ramuntcho, his broken destiny, his betrothed buried over there among the black nuns, his mother dying, Florentino is afraid to have been already too cruel in displaying too much his own happiness.

Then the silence returned; they looked at each other for an instant with kind smiles, finding no words. Besides, between them, the abyss of different conceptions has grown deeper in these three years. And Florentino, touching anew the foreheads of his oxen, makes them march again with a call of his tongue, and presses tighter the hand of his friend:

"We shall see each other again, shall we not?"

And the noise of the cow-bells is soon lost in the calm of the road more shady, where begins to diminish the heat of the day—

"Well, he has succeeded in life, that one!" thinks Ramuntcho lugubriously, continuing his walk under the autumn branches—

The road which he follows ascends, hollowed here and there by springs and sometimes crossed by big roots of oaks.

Soon Etchezar will appear to him and, before seeing it, the image of it becomes more and more precise in him, recalled and enlivened in his memory by the aspect of the surroundings.

Empty now, all this land, where Gracieuse is no more, empty and sad as a beloved home where the great Reaper has passed!—And yet Ramuntcho, in the depths of his being, dares to think that, in some small convent over there, under the veil of a nun, the cherished black eyes still exist and that he will be able at least to see them; that taking the veil is not quite like dying, and that perhaps the last word of his destiny has not been said irrevocably.—For, when he reflects, what can have changed thus the soul of Gracieuse, formerly so uniquely devoted to him?—Oh, terrible, foreign pressure, surely—And then, when they come face to face again, who knows?—When they talk, with his eyes in her eyes?—But what can he expect that is reasonable and possible?—In his native land has a nun ever broken her eternal vows to follow one to whom she was engaged? And besides, where would they go to live together afterward, when folks would get out of their way, would fly from them as renegades?—To America perhaps, and even there!—And how could he take her from these white houses of the dead where the sisters live, eternally watched?—Oh, no, all this is a chimera which may not be realized—All is at an end, all is finished hopelessly—!

Then, the sadness which comes to him from Gracieuse is forgotten for a moment, and he feels nothing except an outburst of his heart toward his mother, toward his mother who remains to him, who is there, very near, a little upset, doubtless, by the joyful trouble of waiting for him.

And now, on the left of his route, is a humble hamlet, half hidden in the beeches and the oaks, with its ancient chapel,—and with its wall for the pelota game, under very old trees, at the crossing of two paths. At once, in Ramuntcho's youthful head, the course of thoughts changes again: that little wall with rounded top, covered with wash of kalsomine and ochre, awakens tumultuously in him thoughts of life, of force and of joy; with a childish ardor he says to himself that to-morrow he will be able to return to that game of the Basques, which is an intoxication of movement and of rapid skill; he thinks of the grand matches on Sundays after vespers, of the glory of the fine struggles with the champions of Spain, of all this deprivation of his years of exile. But it is a very short instant, and mortal despair comes back to him: his triumphs on the squares, Gracieuse shall not see them; then, what is the use!—Without her, all things, even these, fall back discolored, useless and vain, do not even exist—

Etchezar!—Etchezar, is revealed suddenly at a turn of the road!—It is in a red light, something like a fantasmagoria image, illuminated purposely in a special manner in the midst of grand backgrounds of shade and of night. It is the hour of the setting sun. Around the isolated village, which the old, heavy belfry, surmounts, a last sheaf of rays traces a halo of the color of copper and gold, while clouds—and a gigantic obscurity emanating from the Gizune—darken the lands piled up above and under, the mass of brown hills, colored by the death of the ferns—

Oh! the melancholy apparition of the native land, to the soldier who returns and will not find his sweetheart—!

Three years have passed since he left here.—Well, three years, at his age, are an abyss of time, a period which changes all things. And, after that lone exile, how this village, which he adores, appears to him diminished, small, walled in the mountains, sad and hidden!—In the depth of his mind of a tall, uncultured boy, commences again, to make him suffer more, the struggle of those two sentiments of a too refined man, which are an inheritance of his unknown father: an attachment almost maladive to the home, to the land of childhood, and a fear of returning to be enclosed in it, when there exist in the world other places so vast and so free. —After the warm afternoon, the autumn is indicated now by the hasty fall of the day, with a coolness ascending suddenly from the valleys underneath, a scent of dying leaves and of moss. And then the thousand details of preceding autumns in the Basque country, of the former Novembers, come to him very precisely; the cold fall of night succeeding the beautiful, sunlit day; the sad clouds appearing with the night; the Pyrenees confounded in vapors inky gray, or, in places, cut in black silhouettes on a pale, golden sky; around the houses, the belated flowers of the gardens, which the frost spares for a long time here, and, in front of all the doors, the strewn leaves of the plane-trees, the yellow strewn leaves cracking under the steps of the man returning in sandals to his home for supper.—Oh, the heedless joy of these returns to the home, in the nights of other times, after days of marching on the rude mountain! Oh, the gaiety, in that time, of the first winter fires—in the tall, smoky hearth ornamented with a drapery of white calico and with a strip of pink paper. No, in the city, with its rows of houses one does not have the real impression of returning home, of earthing up like plants at night in the primitive manner, as one has it here, under those Basque roofs, solitary in the midst of the country, with the grand, surrounding black, the grand, shivering black of the foliage, the grand, changing black of the clouds and the summits.—But to-day, his travels, his new conceptions, have diminished and spoiled his mountaineer's home; he will doubtless find it almost desolate, especially in the thought that his mother shall not be there always—and that Gracieuse shall never be there again.

His pace quickens in his haste to embrace his mother; he turns around his village instead of going into it, in order to reach his house through a path which overlooks the square and church; passing quickly, he looks at everything with inexpressible pain. Peace, silence soar over this little parish of Etchezar, heart of the French Basque land and country of all the famous pelotaris of the past who have become heavy grandfathers, or are dead now. The immutable church, where have remained buried his dreams of faith, is surrounded by the same dark cypresses, like a mosque. The ball-game square, while he walks quickly above it, is still lighted by the sun with a finishing ray, oblique, toward the background, toward the wall which the ancient inscription surmounts,—as on the evening of his first great success, four years ago, when, in the joyous crowd, Gracieuse stood in a blue gown, she who has become a black nun to-day.—On the deserted benches, on the granite steps where the grass grows, three or four old men are seated, who were formerly the heroes of the place and whom their reminiscences bring back here incessantly, to talk at the end of the days, when the twilight descends from the summits, invades the earth, seems to emanate and to fall from the brown Pyrenees.—Oh, the folks who live here, whose lives run here; oh, the little cider inns, the little, simple shops and the old, little things—brought from the cities, from the other places—sold to the mountaineers of the surrounding country!—How all this seems to him now strange, separated from him, or set far in the background of the primitive past!—Is he truly not a man of Etchezar to-day, is he no longer the Ramuntcho of former times?—What particular thing resides in his mind to prevent him from feeling comfortable here, as the others feel? Why is it prohibited to him, to him alone, to accomplish here the tranquil destiny of his dreams, since all his friends

have accomplished theirs?—

At last here is his house, there, before his eyes. It is as he expected to find it. As he expected, he recognizes along the wall all the persistent flowers cultivated by his mother, the same flowers which the frost has destroyed weeks ago in the North from which he comes: heliotropes, geraniums, tall dahlias and roses with climbing branches. And the cherished, strewn leaves, which fall every autumn from the vault-shaped plane-trees, are there also, and are crushed with a noise so familiar under his steps—!

In the lower hall, when he enters, there is already grayish indecision, already night. The high chimney, where his glance rests at first by an instinctive reminiscence of the fires of ancient evenings, stands the same with its white drapery; but cold, filled with shade, smelling of absence or death.

He runs up to his mother's room. She, from her bed having recognized her son's step, has straightened up, all stiff, all white in the twilight:

"Ramuntcho," she says, in a veiled and aged voice.

She extends her arms to him and as soon as she holds him, enlaces and embraces him:

"Ramuntcho!—"

Then, having uttered this name without adding anything, she leans her head against his cheek, in the habitual movement of surrender, in the movement of the grand, tender feelings of other times.—He, then, perceives that his mother's face is burning against his. Through her shirt he feels the arms that surround him thin, feverish and hot. And for the first time, he is frightened; the notion that she is doubtless very ill comes to his mind, the possibility and the sudden terror that she might die—

"Oh, you are alone, mother! But who takes care of you? Who watches over you?"

"Who watches over me?—" she replies with her abrupt brusqueness, her ideas of a peasant suddenly returned. "Spending money to nurse me, why should I do it?—The church woman or the old Doyamburu comes in the day-time to give me the things that I need, the things that the physician orders.—But—medicine! —Well! Light a lamp, my Ramuntcho!—I want to see you—and I cannot see you—"

And, when the clearness has come from a Spanish, smuggled match, she says in a tone of caress infinitely sweet, as one talks to a very little child whom one adores:

"Oh, your mustache! The long mustache which has come to you, my son!—I do not recognize my Ramuntcho!—Bring your lamp here, bring it here so that I can look at you!—"

He also sees her better now, under the new light of that lamp, while she admires him lovingly. And he is more frightened still, because the cheeks of his mother are so hollow, her hair is so whitened; even the expression of her eyes is changed and almost extinguished; on her face appears the sinister and irremediable labor of time, of suffering and of death—

And, now, two tears, rapid and heavy, fall from the eyes of Franchita, which widen, become living again, made young by desperate revolt and hatred.

"Oh, that woman," she says suddenly. "Oh, that Dolores!"

And her cry expresses and summarizes all her jealousy of thirty years' standing, all her merciless rancor against that enemy of her childhood who has succeeded at last in breaking the life of her son.

A silence between them. He is seated, with head bent, near the bed, holding the poor, feverish hand which his mother has extended to him. She, breathing more quickly, seems for a long while under the oppression of something which she hesitates to express:

"Tell me, my Ramuntcho!—I would like to ask you.—What do you intend to do, my son? What are your projects for the future?—"

"I do not know, mother.—I will think, I will see.—You ask—all at once.—We have time to talk of this, have we not?—To America, perhaps—"

"Oh, yes," she says slowly, with the fear that was in her for days, "to America—I suspected it. Oh, that is what you will do.—I knew it, I knew it—"

Her phrase ends in a groan and she joins her hands to try to pray—

CHAPTER III.

Ramuntcho, the next morning, was wandering in the village, under a sun which had pierced the clouds of the night, a sun as radiant as that of yesterday. Careful in his dress, the ends of his mustache turned up, proud in his demeanor, elegant, grave and handsome, he went at random, to see and to be seen, a little childishness mingling with his seriousness, a little pleasure with his distress. His mother had said to him:

"I am better, I assure you. To-day is Sunday; go, walk about I pray you—"

And passers-by turned their heads to look at him, whispered the news: "Franchita's son has returned home; he looks very well!"

A summer illusion persisted everywhere, with, however, the unfathomable melancholy of things tranquilly finishing. Under that impassible radiance of sunlight, the Pyrenean fields seemed dull, all their plants, all their grasses were as if collected in one knows not what resignation weary of living, what expectation of death.

The turns of the path, the houses, the least trees, all recalled hours of other times to Ramuntcho, hours wherein Gracieuse was mingled. And then, at each reminiscence, at each step, engraved itself and hammered itself in his mind, under a new form, this verdict without recourse: "It is finished, you are alone forever, Gracieuse has been taken away from you and is in prison—" The rents in his heart, every accident in the path

renewed and changed them. And, in the depth of his being, as a constant basis for his reflections, this other anxiety endured: his mother, his mother very ill, in mortal danger, perhaps—!

He met people who stopped him, with a kind and welcoming air, who talked to him in the dear Basque tongue—ever alert and sonorous despite its incalculable antiquity; old Basque caps, old white heads, liked to talk of the ball-game to this fine player returned to his cradle. And then, at once, after the first words of greeting, smiles went out, in spite of this clear sun in this blue sky, and all were disturbed by the thought of Gracieuse in a veil and of Franchita dying.

A violent flush of blood went up to his face when he caught sight of Dolores, at a distance, going into her home. Very decrepit, that one, and wearing a prostrate air! She had recognized him, for she turned quickly her obstinate and hard head, covered by a mourning mantilla. With a sentiment of pity at seeing her so undone, he reflected that she had struck herself with the same blow, and that she would be alone now in her old age and at her death—

On the square, he met Marcos Iragola who informed him that he was married, like Florentino—and with the little friend of his childhood, he also.

"I did not have to serve in the army," Iragola explained, "because we are Guipuzcoans, immigrants in France; so I could marry her earlier!"

He, twenty-one years old; she eighteen; without lands and without a penny, Marcos and Pilar, but joyfully associated all the same, like two sparrows building their nest. And the very young husband added laughingly:

"What would you? Father said: 'As long as you do not marry I warn you that I shall give you a little brother every year.' And he would have done it! There are already fourteen of us, all living—"

Oh, how simple and natural they are! How wise and humbly happy!—Ramuntcho quitted him with some haste, with a heart more bruised for having spoken to him, but wishing very sincerely that he should be happy in his improvident, birdlike, little home.

Here and there, folks were seated in front of their doors, in that sort of atrium of branches which precedes all the houses of this country. And their vaults of plane-trees, cut in the Basque fashion, which in the summer are so impenetrable all open worked in this season, let fall on them sheafs of light. The sun flamed, somewhat destructive and sad, above those yellow leaves which were drying up—

And Ramuntcho, in his slow promenade, felt more and more what intimate ties, singularly persistent, would attach him always to this region of the earth, harsh and enclosed, even if he were there alone, abandoned, without friends, without a wife and without a mother—

Now, the high mass rings! And the vibrations of that bell impress him with a strange emotion that he did not expect. Formerly, its familiar appeal was an appeal to joy and to pleasure—

He stops, he hesitates, in spite of his actual religious unbelief and in spite of his grudge against that church which has taken his betrothed away from him. The bell seems to invite him to-day in so special a manner, with so peaceful and caressing a voice: "Come, come; let yourself be rocked as your ancestors were; come, poor, desolate being, let yourself be caught by the lure which will make your tears fall without bitterness, and will help you to die—"

Undecided, resisting still, he walks, however, toward the church—when Arrochkoa appears!

Arrochkoa, whose catlike mustache has lengthened a great deal and whose feline expression is accentuated, runs to him with extended hands, with an effusion that he did not expect, in an enthusiasm, perhaps sincere, for that ex-sergeant who has such a grand air, who wears the ribbon of a medal and whose adventures have made a stir in the land:

"Ah, my Ramuntcho, when did you arrive?—Oh, if I could have prevented—What do you think of my old, hardened mother and of all those church bigots?—Oh, I did not tell you: I have a son, since two months; a fine little fellow! We have so many things to say, my poor friend, so many things!—"

The bell rings, rings, fills the air more and more with its soft appeal, very grave and somewhat imposing also.

"You are not going there, I suppose?" asks Arrochkoa, pointing to the church.

"No, oh, no," replies Ramuntcho, sombrely decided.

"Well come then, let us go in here and taste the new cider of your country!—"

To the smugglers' cider mill, he brings him; both, near the open window, sit as formerly, looking outside;—and this place also, these old benches, these casks in a line in the back, these same images on the wall, are there to recall to Ramuntcho the delicious times of the past, the times that are finished.

The weather is adorably beautiful; the sky retains a rare limpidity; through the air passes that special scent of falling seasons, scent of woods despoiled, of dead leaves that the sun overheats on the soil. Now, after the absolute calm of the morning, rises a wind of autumn, a chill of November, announcing clearly, but with a melancholy almost charming, that the winter is near—a southern winter, it is true, a softened winter, hardly interrupting the life of the country. The gardens and all the old walls are still ornamented with roses—!

At first they talk of indifferent things while drinking their cider, of Ramuntcho's travels, of what happened in the country during his absence, of the marriages which occurred or were broken. And, to those two rebels who have fled from the church, all the sounds of the mass come during their talk, the sounds of the small bells and the sounds of the organ, the ancient songs that fill the high, sonorous nave—

At last, Arrochkoa returns to the burning subject:

"Oh, if you had been here it would not have occurred!—And even now, if she saw you—"

Ramuntcho looks at him then, trembling at what he imagines he understands:

"Even now?—What do you mean?"

"Oh, women—with them, does one ever know?—She cared a great deal for you and it was hard for her.—In these days there is no law to keep her there!—How little would I care if she broke her vows—"

Ramuntcho turns his head, lowers his eyes, says nothing, strikes the soil with his foot. And, in the silence,

the impious thing which he had hardly dared to formulate to himself, seems to him little by little less chimerical, attainable, almost easy.—No, it is not impossible to regain her. And, if need be, doubtless, Arrochkoa, her own brother, would lend a hand. Oh, what a temptation and what a new disturbance in his mind—!

Drily he asks, "Where is she?—Far from here?"

"Far enough, yes. Over there, toward Navarre, five or six hours of a carriage drive. They have changed her convent twice. She lives at Amezqueta now, beyond the oak forests of Oyzanzabal; the road is through Mendichoco; you know, we must have gone through it together one night with Itchoua."

The high mass is ended.—Groups pass: women, pretty girls, elegant in demeanor, among whom Gracieuse is no more: many Basque caps lowered on sunburnt foreheads. And all these faces turn to look at the two cider drinkers at their window. The wind, that blows stronger, makes dance around their glasses large, dead, plane-tree leaves.

A woman, already old, casts at them, from under her black cloth mantilla, a sad and evil glance:

"Ah," says Arrochkoa, "here is mother! And she looks at us crosswise.—She may flatter herself for her work!—She punished herself for she will end in solitude now.—Catherine—who is at Elsagarray's, you know—works by the day for her; otherwise, she would have nobody to talk to in the evening—"

A bass voice, behind them, interrupts them, with a Basque greeting, hollow like a sound in a cavern, while a large and heavy hand rests on Ramuntcho's shoulder as if to take possession of him: Itchoua, Itchoua who has just finished chanting his liturgy!—Not changed at all, this one; he has always his same ageless face, always his colorless mask which is at once that of a monk and that of a highwayman, and his same eyes, set in, hidden, absent. His mind also must have remained similar, his mind capable of impassible murder at the same time as devout fetichism.

"Ah," he says, in a tone which wishes to be that of a good fellow, "you have returned to us, my Ramuntcho! Then we are going to work together, eh? Business is brisk with Spain now, you know, and arms are needed at the frontier. You are one of us, are you not?"

"Perhaps," replies Ramuntcho. "We may talk of it—"

For several moments his departure for America has become a faint idea in his mind.—No!—He would rather stay in his native land, begin again his former life, reflect and wait obstinately. Anyway, now that he knows where she is, that village of Amezqueta, at a distance of five or six hours from here, haunts him in a dangerous way, and he hugs all sorts of sacrilegious projects which, until to-day, he would never have dared hardly to conceive.

CHAPTER IV.

At noon, he returned to his isolated house to see his mother.

The febrile and somewhat artificial improvement of the morning had continued. Nursed by the old Doyanburu, Franchita said that she felt better, and, in the fear that Ramuntcho might become dreamy, she made him return to the square to attend the Sunday ball-game.

The breath of the wind became warm again, blew from the south; none of the shivers of a moment ago remained; on the contrary, a summer sun and atmosphere, on the reddened woods, on the rusty ferns, on the roads where continued to fall the sad leaves. But the sky was gathering thick clouds, which suddenly came out from the rear of the mountains as if they had stayed there in ambush to appear all at the same signal.

The ball-game had not yet been arranged and groups were disputing violently when he reached the square. Quickly, he was surrounded, he was welcomed, designated by acclamation to go into the game and sustain the honor of his county. He did not dare, not having played for three years and distrusting his unaccustomed arm. At last, he yielded and began to undress—but to whom would he trust his waistcoat now?—The image reappeared to him, suddenly, of Gracieuse, seated on the nearest steps and extending her hands to receive it. To whom would he throw his waistcoat to-day? It is intrusted ordinarily to some friend, as the toreadors do with their gilt silk mantles.—He threw it at random, this time, anywhere, on the granite of the old benches flowered with belated scabwort—

The match began. Out of practice at first, uncertain, he missed several times the little bounding thing which is to be caught in the air.

Then, he went to his work with a rage, regained his former ease and became himself again superbly. His muscles had gained in strength what they had perhaps lost in skill; again he was applauded, he knew the physical intoxication of moving, of leaping, of feeling his muscles play like supple and violent springs, of hearing around him the ardent murmur of the crowd.

But then came the instant of rest which interrupts ordinarily the long disputed games; the moment when one sits halting, the blood in ebullition, the hands reddened, trembling,—and when one regains the course of ideas which the game suppresses.

Then, he realized the distress of being alone.

Above the assembled heads, above the woolen caps and the hair ornamented with kerchiefs, was accentuated that stormy sky which the southern winds, when they are about to finish, bring always. The air had assumed an absolute limpidity, as if it had become rarified, rarified unto emptiness. The mountains seemed to have advanced extraordinarily; the Pyrenees were crushing the village; the Spanish summits or the French summits were there, all equally near, as if pasted on one another, exaggerating their burned, brown

colors, their intense and sombre, violet tints. Large clouds, which seemed as solid as terrestrial things, were displayed in the form of bows, veiling the sun, casting an obscurity which was like an eclipse. And here and there, through some rent, bordered with dazzling silver, one could see the profound blue green of a sky almost African. All this country, the unstable climate of which changes between a morning and an evening, became for several hours strangely southern in aspect, in temperature and in light.

Ramuntcho breathed that dry and suave air, come from the South in order to vivify the lungs. It was the true weather of his native land. It was even the characteristic weather of that land of the Bay of Biscay, the weather which he liked best formerly, and which to-day filled him with physical comfort—as much as with disturbance of mind, for all that was preparing, all that was amassing above, with airs of ferocious menace, impressed him with the sentiment of a heaven deaf to prayers, without thoughts as without master, a simple focus of storms, of blind forces creating, recreating and destroying. And, during these minutes of halting meditation, where men in Basque caps of a temperament other than his, surrounded him to congratulate him, he made no reply, he did not listen, he felt only the ephemeral plenitude of his own vigor, of his youth, of his will, and he said to himself that he wished to use harshly and desperately all things, to try anything, without the obstacle of vain fears, of vain church scruples, in order to take back the young girl whom his soul and his flesh desired, who was the unique one and the betrothed—

When the game had ended gloriously for him, he returned alone, sad and resolute,—proud of having won, of having known how to preserve his agile skilfulness, and realizing that it was a means in life, a source of money and of strength, to have remained one of the chief ball-players of the Basque country.

Under the black sky, there were still the same tints exaggerated by everything, the same sombre horizon. And still the same breaths from the south, dry and warm, agitators of muscles and of thought.

However, the clouds had descended, descended, and soon this weather, these appearances would change and finish. He knew it, as do all the countrymen accustomed to look at the sky: it was only the announcement of an autumn squall to close the series of lukewarm winds,—of a decisive shake-up to finish despoiling the woods of their leaves. Immediately after would come the long showers, chilling everything, the mists making the mountains confused and distant. And it would be the dull rain of winter, stopping the saps, making temporary projects languid, extinguishing ardor and revolt—

Now the first drops of water were beginning to fall on the road, separate and heavy on the strewn leaves.

As the day before, when he returned home, at twilight, his mother was alone.

He found her asleep, in a bad sleep, agitated, burning.

Rambling in his house he tried, in order to make it less sinister, to light in the large, lower chimney a fire of branches, but it went out smoking. Outside, torrents of rain fell. Through the windows, as through gray shrouds, the village hardly appeared, effaced under a winter squall. The wind and the rain whipped the walls of the isolated house, around which, once more, would thicken the grand blackness of the country in rainy nights—that grand blackness, that grand silence, to which he had long been unaccustomed. And in his childish heart, came little by little, a cold of solitude and of abandonment; he lost even his energy, the consciousness of his love, of his strength and of his youth; he felt vanishing, before the misty evening, all his projects of struggle and of resistance. The future which he had formed a moment ago became miserable or chimerical in his eyes, that future of a pelota player, of a poor amuser of the crowds, at the mercy of a malady or of a moment of weakness—His hopes of the day-time were going out, based, doubtless, on unstable things, fleeing now in the night—

Then he felt transported, as in his childhood, toward that soft refuge which was his mother; he went up, on tiptoe, to see her, even asleep, and to remain there, near her bed, while she slept.

And, when he had lighted in the room, far from her, a discreet lamp, she appeared to him more changed than she had been by the fever of yesterday; the possibility presented itself, more frightful to his mind, of losing her, of being alone, of never feeling again on his cheek the caress of her head.—Moreover, for the first time, she seemed old to him, and, in the memory of all the deceptions which she had suffered because of him, he felt a pity for her, a tender and infinite pity, at sight of her wrinkles which he had not before observed, of her hair recently whitened at the temples. Oh, a desolate pity and hopeless, with the conviction that it was too late now to arrange life better.—And something painful, against which there was no possible resistance, shook his chest, contracted his young face; objects became confused to his view, and, in the need of imploring, of asking for mercy, he let himself fall on his knees, his forehead on his mother's bed, weeping at last, weeping hot tears—

CHAPTER V.

“And whom did you see in the village, my son?” she asked, the next morning during the improvement which returned every time, in the first hours of the day, after the fever had subsided.

“And whom did you see in the village, my son?—” In talking, she tried to retain an air of gaiety, of saying indifferent things, in the fear of attacking grave subjects and of provoking disquieting replies.

“I saw Arrochkoa, mother,” he replied, in a tone which brought back suddenly the burning questions.

“Arrochkoa!—And how did he behave with you?”

“Oh, he talked to me as if I had been his brother.”

“Yes, I know, I know.—Oh, it was not he who made her do it—”

“He said even—”

He did not dare to continue now, and he lowered his head.

“He said what, my son?”

"Well, that—that it was hard to put her in prison there—that perhaps—that, even now, if she saw me, he was not far from thinking—"

She straightened under the shock of what she had just suspected; with her thin hands she parted her hair, newly whitened, and her eyes became again young and sharp, in an expression almost wicked from joy, from avenged pride:

"He said that, he!—"

"Would you forgive me, mother—if I tried?"

She took his two hands and they remained silent, not daring, with their scruples as Catholics, to utter the sacrilegious thing which was fomenting in their heads. In the depth of her eyes, the evil spark went out.

"Forgive you?" she said in a low voice, "Oh, I—you know very well that I would.—But do not do this, my son, I pray you, do not do it; it would bring misfortune to both of you!—Do not think of it, my Ramuntcho, never think of it—"

Then, they hushed, hearing the steps of the physician who was coming up for his daily visit. And it was the only time, the supreme time when they were to talk of it in life.

But Ramuntcho knew now that, even after death, she would not condemn him for having attempted, or for having committed it: and this pardon was sufficient for him, and, now that he felt sure of obtaining it, the greatest barrier, between his sweetheart and him, had now suddenly fallen.

CHAPTER VI.

In the evening, when the fever returned, she seemed already much more dangerously affected.

On her robust body, the malady had violently taken hold,—the malady recognized too late, and insufficiently nursed because of her stubbornness as a peasant, because of her incredulous disdain for physicians and medicine.

And little by little, in Ramuntcho, the frightful thought of losing her installed itself in a dominant place; during the hours of watchfulness spent near her bed, silent and alone, he was beginning to face the reality of that separation, the horror of that death and of that burial,—even all the lugubrious morrows, all the aspects of his future life: the house which he would have to sell before quitting the country; then, perhaps, the desperate attempt at the convent of Amezqueta; then the departure, probably solitary and without desire to return, for unknown America—

The idea also of the great secret which she would carry with her forever,—of the secret of his birth,—tormented him more from hour to hour.

Then, bending over her, and, trembling, as if he were about to commit an impious thing in a church, he dared to say:

"Mother!—Mother, tell me now who my father is!"

She shuddered at first under the supreme question, realizing well, that if he dared to question her thus, it was because she was lost. Then, she hesitated for a moment: in her head, boiling from fever, there was a battle; her duty, she discerned well no longer; her obstinacy which had lasted for so many years faltered almost at this hour, in presence of the sudden apparition of death—

But, resolved at last forever, she replied at once, in the brusque tone of her bad days:

"Your father!—And what is the use, my son?—What do you want of your father who for twenty years has never thought of you?—"

No, it was decided, ended, she would not tell. Anyway, it was too late now; at the moment when she would disappear, enter into the inert powerlessness of the dead, how could she risk changing so completely the life of that son over whom she would no longer watch, how could she surrender him to his father, who perhaps would make of him a disbeliever and a disenchanting man like himself! What a responsibility and what an immense terror—!

Her decision having been taken irrevocably, she thought of herself, feeling for the first time that life was closing behind her, and joined her hands for a sombre prayer.

As for Ramuntcho, after this attempt to learn, after this great effort which had almost seemed a profanation to him, he bent his head before his mother's will and questioned no longer.

CHAPTER VII.

It went very quickly now, with the drying fevers that made her cheeks red, her nostrils pinched, or with the exhaustion of baths of perspiration, her pulse hardly beating.

And Ramuntcho had no other thought than his mother; the image of Gracieuse ceased to visit him during these funereal days.

She was going, Franchita; she was going, mute and as if indifferent, asking for nothing, never complaining

—
Once, however, as he was watching, she called him suddenly with a poor voice of anguish, to throw her arms around him, to draw him to her, lean her head on his cheek. And, in that minute, Ramuntcho saw pass in

her eyes the great Terror—that of the flesh which feels that it is finishing, that of the men and that of the beasts, the horrible and the same for all.—A believer, she was that a little; practising rather, like so many other women around her; timid in the face of dogmas, of observances, of services, but without a clear conception of the world beyond, without a luminous hope.—Heaven, all the beautiful things promised after life.—Yes, perhaps.—But still, the black hole was there, near and certain, where she would have to turn into dust.—What was sure, what was inexorable, was the fact that never, never more would her destroyed visage lean in a real manner on that of Ramuntcho; then, in the doubt of having a mind which would fly, in the horror and the misery of annihilation, of becoming powder and nothing, she wanted again kisses from that son, and she clutched at him as clutch the wrecked who fall into the black and deep waters—

He understood all this, which the poor, fading eyes said so well. And the pity so tender, which he had already felt at seeing the wrinkles and the white hairs of his mother, overflowed like a flood from his very young heart; he responded to this appeal with all that one may give of desolate clasps and embraces.

But it did not last long. She had never been one of those who are enervated for long, or at least, let it appear. Her arms unclasped, her head fallen back, she closed her eyes again, unconscious now,—or stoical—

And Ramuntcho, standing, not daring to touch her, wept heavy tears, without noise, turning his head,—while, in the distance, the parish bell began to ring the curfew, sang the tranquil peace of the village, filled the air with vibrations soft, protective, advising sound sleep to those who have morrows—

The following morning, after having confessed, she passed out of life, silent and haughty, having felt a sort of shame for her suffering,—while the same bell rang slowly her agony.

And at night, Ramuntcho found himself alone, beside that thing in bed and cold, which is preserved and looked at for several hours, but which one must make haste to bury in the earth—

CHAPTER VIII.

Eight days after.

At the fall of night, while a bad mountain squall twisted the branches of the trees, Ramuntcho entered his deserted house where the gray of death seemed scattered everywhere. A little of winter had passed over the Basque land, a little frost, burning the annual flowers, ending the illusory summer of December. In front of Franchita's door, the geraniums, the dahlias had just died, and the path which led to the house, which no one cared for, disappeared under the mass of yellow leaves.

For Ramuntcho, this first week of mourning had been occupied by the thousand details that rock sorrow. Proud also, he had desired that all should be done in a luxurious manner, according to the old usages of the parish. His mother had been buried in a coffin of black velvet ornamented with silver nails. Then, there had been mortuary masses, attended by the neighbors in long capes, the women enveloped and hooded with black. And all this represented a great deal of expense for him, who was poor.

Of the sum given formerly, at the time of his birth, by his unknown father, little remained, the greater part having been lost through unfaithful bankers. And now, he would have to quit the house, sell the dear familiar furniture, realize the most money possible for the flight to America—

This time, he returned home peculiarly disturbed, because he was to do a thing, postponed from day to day, about which his conscience was not at rest. He had already examined, picked out, all that belonged to his mother; but the box containing her papers and her letters was still intact—and to-night he would open it, perhaps.

He was not sure that death, as many persons think, gives the right to those who remain to read letters, to penetrate the secrets of those who have just gone. To burn without looking seemed to him more respectful, more honest. But it was also to destroy forever the means of discovering the one whose abandoned son he was.—Then what should he do?—And from whom could he take advice, since he had no one in the world?

In the large chimney he lit the evening fire: then he got from an upper room the disquieting box, placed it on a table near the fire, beside his lamp, and sat down to reflect again. In the face of these papers, almost sacred, almost prohibited, which he would touch and which death alone could have placed in his hands, he had in this moment the consciousness, in a more heartbreaking manner, of the irrevocable departure of his mother; tears returned to him and he wept there, alone, in the silence—

At last he opened the box—

His arteries beat heavily. Under the surrounding trees, in the obscure solitude, he felt that forms were moving, to look at him through the window-panes. He felt breaths strange to his own chest, as if some one was breathing behind him. Shades assembled, interested in what he was about to do.—The house was crowded with phantoms—

They were letters, preserved there for more than twenty years, all in the same handwriting,—one of those handwritings, at once negligent and easy, which men of the world have and which, in the eyes of the simple minded, are an indication of great social difference. And at first, a vague dream of protection, of elevation and of wealth diverted the course of his thoughts.—He had no doubt about the hand which had written them, those letters, and he held them tremblingly, not daring to read them, nor even to look at the name with which they were signed.

One only had retained its envelope; then he read the address: "To Madame Franchita Duval."—Oh! yes, he remembered having heard that his mother, at the time of her disappearance from the Basque country, had taken that name for a while.—Following this, was an indication of street and number, which it pained him to read without his being able to understand why, which made the blood come to his cheeks; then the name of

that large city, wherein he was born.—With fixed eyes, he stayed there, looking no longer.—And suddenly, he had the horrible vision of that clandestine establishment: in a suburban apartment, his mother, young, elegant, mistress of some rich idler, or of some officer perhaps!—In the regiment he had known some of these establishments, which doubtless are all alike, and he had found in them for himself unexpected adventures.—A dizziness seized him, to catch a glimpse thus under a new aspect of the one whom he had venerated so much; the dear past faltered behind him, as if to fall into a desolating abyss. And his despair turned into a sudden execration for the one who had given life to him through a caprice—

Oh! to burn them, to burn them as quickly as possible, these letters of misfortune!—And he began to throw them one by one into the fire, where they were consumed by sudden flames.

A photograph, however, came out of them, fell on the floor; then he could not refrain from taking it to the lamp to see it.

And his impression was heart-rending, during the few seconds when his eyes met the half effaced ones of the yellowed image!—It resembled him!—He found, with profound fear, something of himself in the unknown. And instinctively he turned round, asking himself if the spectres in the obscure corners had not come near behind him to look also.

It had hardly an appreciable duration, that silent interview, unique and supreme, with his father. To the fire also, the image! He threw it, with a gesture of anger and of terror, among the ashes of the last letters, and all left soon only a little mass of black dust, extinguishing the clear flames of the branches.

Finished! The box was empty. He threw on the floor his cap which gave him a headache, and straightened himself, with perspiration on his forehead and a buzzing at the temples.

Finished! Annihilated, all these memories of sin and of shame. And now the things of life appeared to him to regain their former balance; he regained his soft veneration for his mother, whose memory it seemed to him he had purified, avenged also a little, by this disdainful execution.

Therefore, his destiny had been fixed to-night forever. He would remain the Ramuntcho of other times, the "son of Franchita," player of pelota and smuggler, free, freed from everything, owing nothing to and asking nothing from anybody. And he felt serene, without remorse, without fright, either, in this mortuary house, from which the shades had just disappeared, peaceful now and friendly—

CHAPTER IX.

At the frontier, in a mountain hamlet. A black night, about one o'clock in the morning; a winter night inundated by cold and heavy rain. At the front of a sinister house which casts no light outside, Ramuntcho loads his shoulders with a heavy smuggled box, under the rippling rain, in the midst of a tomb-like obscurity. Itchoua's voice commands secretly,—as if one hardly touched with a bow the last strings of a bass viol,—and around him, in the absolute darkness, one divines the presence of other smugglers similarly loaded, ready to start on an adventure.

It is now more than ever Ramuntcho's life, to run almost every night, especially on the cloudless and moonless nights when one sees nothing, when the Pyrenees are an immense chaos of shade. Amassing as much money as he can for his flight, he is in all the smuggling expeditions, as well in those that bring a suitable remuneration as in those where one risks death for a hundred cents. And ordinarily, Arrochkoa accompanies him, without necessity, in sport and for a whim.

They have become inseparable, Arrochkoa, Ramuntcho,—and they talk freely of their projects about Gracieuse, Arrochkoa seduced especially by the attraction of some fine prowess, by the joy of taking a nun away from the church, of undoing the plans of his old, hardened mother,—and Ramuntcho, in spite of his Christian scruples which affect him still, making of this dangerous project his only hope, his only reason for being and for acting. For a month, almost, the attempt has been decided upon in theory and, in their long talks in the December nights, on the roads where they walk, or in the corners of the village cider mills where they sit apart, the means of execution are discussed by them, as if the question was a simple frontier undertaking. They must act very quickly, concludes Arrochkoa always, they must act in the surprise of a first interview which shall be for Gracieuse a very disturbing thing; they must act without giving her time to think or to recant, they must try something like kidnapping—

"If you knew," he says, "what is that little convent of Amezqueta where they have placed her: four old, good sisters with her, in an isolated house!—I have my horse, you know, who gallops so quickly; once the nun is in a carriage with you, who can catch her?"—

And to-night they have resolved to take into their confidence Itchoua himself, a man accustomed to suspicious adventures, valuable in assaults at night, and who, for money, is capable of everything.

The place from which they start this time for the habitual smuggling expedition is named Landachkoa, and it is situated in France at ten minutes' distance from Spain. The inn, solitary and old, assumes as soon as the night falls, the air of a den of thieves; at this moment while the smugglers come out of one door, it is full of Spanish carbineers who have familiarly crossed the frontier to divert themselves here and who drink while singing. And the hostess, accustomed to these nocturnal affairs, has said joyfully, a moment ago, in Basque tongue to Itchoua's folks:

"It is all right! They are all drunk, you can go out!"

Go out! It is easier to advise than to do! You are drenched at the first steps and your feet slip on the mud, despite the aid of your sticks, on the stiff slopes of the paths. They do not see one another; they see nothing, neither the walls of the hamlet along which they pass nor the trees afterward, nor the rocks; they are like blind men, groping and slipping under a deluge, with the music of rain in their ears which makes them deaf.

And Ramuntcho, who makes this trip for the first time, has no idea of the passages which they are to go through, strikes here and there his load against black things which are branches of beeches, or slips with his two feet, falters, straightens up, catches himself by planting at random his iron-pointed stick in the soil. They are the last on the march, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, following the band by ear;—and those who precede them make no more noise with their sandals than wolves in a forest.

In all, fifteen smugglers on a distance of fifty metres, in the thick black of the mountain, under the incessant sprinkling of the shower; they carry boxes full of jewels, of watches, of chains, of rosaries, or bundles of Lyons silk, wrapped in oilcloth; in front, loaded with merchandise less valuable, walk two men who are the skirmishers, those who will attract, if necessary, the guns of the Spaniards and will then take flight, throwing away everything. All talk in a low voice, despite the drumming of the rain which already stifles sounds—

The one who precedes Ramuntcho turns round to warn him:

“Here is a torrent in front of us—” (Its presence would have been guessed by its noise louder than that of the rain—) “We must cross it!”

“Ah!—Cross it how? Wade in the water?—”

“No, the water is too deep. Follow us. There is a tree trunk over it.”

Groping, Ramuntcho finds that tree trunk, wet, slippery and round. He stands, advancing on this monkey's bridge in a forest, carrying his heavy load, while under him the invisible torrent roars. And he crosses, none knows how, in the midst of this intensity of black and of this noise of water.

On the other shore they have to increase precaution and silence. There are no more mountain paths, frightful descents, under the night, more oppressing, of the woods. They have reached a sort of plain wherein the feet penetrate; the sandals attached to nervous legs cause a noise of beaten water. The eyes of the smugglers, their cat-like eyes, more and more dilated by the obscurity, perceive confusedly that there is free space around, that there is no longer the closing in of branches. They breathe better also and walk with a more regular pace that rests them—

But the bark of dogs immobilizes them all in a sudden manner, as if petrified under the shower. For a quarter of an hour they wait, without talking or moving; on their chests, the perspiration runs, mingled with the rain that enters by their shirt collars and falls to their belts.

By dint of listening, they hear the buzz of their ears, the beat of their own arteries.

And this tension of their senses is, in their trade, what they all like; it gives to them a sort of joy almost animal, it doubles the life of the muscles in them, who are beings of the past; it is a recall of the most primitive human impressions in the forests or the jungles of original epochs.—Centuries of civilization will be necessary to abolish this taste for dangerous surprises which impels certain children to play hide and seek, certain men to lie in ambush, to skirmish in wars, or to smuggle—

They have hushed, the watch-dogs, quieted or distracted, their attentive scent preoccupied by something else. The vast silence has returned, less reassuring, ready to break, perhaps, because beasts are watching. And, at a low command from Itchoua, the men begin again their march, slower and more hesitating, in the night of the plain, a little bent, a little lowered on their legs, like wild animals on the alert.

Before them is the Nivelle; they do not see it, since they see nothing, but they hear it run, and now long, flexible things are in the way of their steps, are crushed by their bodies: the reeds on the shores. The Nivelle is the frontier; they will have to cross it on a series of slippery rocks, leaping from stone to stone, despite the loads that make the legs heavy.

But before doing this they halt on the shore to collect themselves and rest a little. And first, they call the roll in a low voice: all are there. The boxes have been placed in the grass; they seem clearer spots, almost perceptible to trained eyes, while, on the darkness in the background, the men, standing, make long, straight marks, blacker than the emptiness of the plain. Passing by Ramuntcho, Itchoua has whispered in his ear:

“When will you tell me about your plan?”

“In a moment, at our return!—Oh, do not fear, Itchoua, I will tell you!”

At this moment when his chest is heaving and his muscles are in action, all his faculties doubled and exasperated by his trade, he does not hesitate, Ramuntcho; in the present exaltation of his strength and of his combativeness he knows no moral obstacles nor scruples. The idea which came to his accomplice to associate himself with Itchoua frightens him no longer. So much the worse! He will surrender to the advice of that man of stratagem and of violence, even if he must go to the extreme of kidnapping and housebreaking. He is, tonight, the rebel from whom has been taken the companion of his life, the adored one, the one who may not be replaced; he wants her, at the risk of everything.—And while he thinks of her, in the progressive languor of that halt, he desires her suddenly with his senses, in a young, savage outbreak, in a manner unexpected and sovereign—

The immobility is prolonged, the respirations are calmer. And, while the men shake their dripping caps, pass their hands on their foreheads to wipe out drops of rain and perspiration that veil the eyes, the first sensation of cold comes to them, of a damp and profound cold; their wet clothes chill them, their thoughts weaken; little by little a sort of torpor benumbs them in the thick darkness, under the incessant winter rain.

They are accustomed to this, trained to cold and to dampness, they are hardened prowlers who go to places where, and at hours when, other men never appear, they are inaccessible to vague frights of the darkness, they are capable of sleeping without shelter anywhere in the blackest of rainy nights, in dangerous marshes or hidden ravines—

Now the rest has lasted long enough. This is the decisive instant when the frontier is to be crossed. All muscles stiffen, ears stretch, eyes dilate.

First, the skirmishers; then, one after another, the bundle carriers, the box carriers, each one loaded with a weight of forty kilos, on the shoulders or on the head. Slipping here and there among the round rocks, stumbling in the water, everybody crosses, lands on the other shore. Here they are on the soil of Spain! They

have to cross, without gunshots or bad meetings, a distance of two hundred metres to reach an isolated farm which is the receiving shop of the chief of the Spanish smugglers, and once more the game will have been played!

Naturally, it is without light, obscure and sinister, that farm. Noiselessly and groping they enter in a file; then, on the last who enter, enormous locks of the door are drawn. At last! Barricaded and rescued, all! And the treasury of the Queen Regent has been frustrated, again tonight, of a thousand francs—!

Then, fagots are lighted in the chimney, a candle on the table; they see one another, they recognize one another, smiling at the success. The security, the truce of rain over their heads, the flame that dances and warms, the cider and the whiskey that fill the glasses, bring back to these men noisy joy after compelled silence. They talk gaily, and the tall, white-haired, old chief who receives them all at this undue hour, announces that he will give to his village a beautiful square for the pelota game, the plans of which have been drawn and the cost of which will be ten thousand francs.

“Now, tell me your affair,” insists Itchoua, in Ramuntcho's ear. “Oh, I suspect what it is! Gracieuse, eh?—That is it, is it not?—It is hard you know.—I do not like to do things against my religion, you know.—Then, I have my place as a chorister, which I might lose in such a game.—Let us see, how much money will you give me if I succeed?—”

He had foreseen, Ramuntcho, that this sombre aid would cost him a great deal, Itchoua being, in truth, a churchman, whose conscience would have to be bought; and, much disturbed, with a flush on his cheeks, Ramuntcho grants, after a discussion, a thousand francs. Anyway, if he is piling up money, it is only to get Gracieuse, and if enough remains for him to go to America with her, what matters it?—

And now that his secret is known to Itchoua, now that his cherished project is being elaborated in that obstinate and sharp brain, it seems to Ramuntcho that he has made a decisive step toward the execution of his plan, that all has suddenly become real and approaching. Then, in the midst of the lugubrious decay of the place, among these men who are less than ever similar to him, he isolates himself in an immense hope of love.

They drink for a last time together, all around, clinking their glasses loudly; then they start again, in the thick night and under the incessant rain, but this time on the highway, in a band and singing. Nothing in the hands, nothing in the pockets: they are now ordinary people, returning from a natural promenade.

In the rear guard, at a distance from the singers, Itchoua on his long legs walks with his hands resting on Ramuntcho's shoulder. Interested and ardent for success, since the sum has been agreed upon, Itchoua whispers in Ramuntcho's ear imperious advices. Like Arrochkoa, he wishes to act with stunning abruptness, in the surprise of a first interview which will occur in the evening, as late as the rule of a convent will permit, at an uncertain and twilight hour, when the village shall have begun to sleep.

“Above all,” he says, “do not show yourself beforehand. She must not have seen you, she must not even know that you have returned home! You must not lose the advantage of surprise—”

While Ramuntcho listens and meditates in silence, the others, who lead the march, sing always the same old song that times their steps. And thus they re-enter Landachkoa, village of France, crossing the bridge of the Nivelle, under the beards of the Spanish carbineers.

They have no sort of illusion, the watching carbineers, about what these men, so wet, have been doing at an hour so black.

CHAPTER X.

The winter, the real winter, extended itself by degrees over the Basque land, after the few days of frost that had come to annihilate the annual plants, to change the deceptive aspect of the fields, to prepare the following spring.

And Ramuntcho acquired slowly his habits of one left alone; in his house, wherein he lived still, without anybody to serve him, he took care of himself, as in the colonies or in the barracks, knowing the thousand little details of housekeeping which careful soldiers practice. He preserved the pride of dress, dressed himself well, wore the ribbon of the brave at his buttonhole and a wide crape around his sleeve.

At first he was not assiduous at the village cider mill, where the men assembled in the cold evenings. In his three years of travel, of reading, of talking with different people, too many new ideas had penetrated his already open mind; among his former companions he felt more outcast than before, more detached from the thousand little things which composed their life.

Little by little, however, by dint of being alone, by dint of passing by the halls where the men drank,—on the window-panes of which a lamp always sketches the shadows of Basque caps,—he had made it a custom to go in and to sit at a table.

It was the season when the Pyrenean villages, freed from the visitors which the summers bring, imprisoned by the clouds, the mist, or the snow, are more intensely as they were in ancient times. In these cider mills—sole, little, illuminated points, living, in the midst of the immense, empty darkness of the fields—something of the spirit of former times is reanimated in winter evenings. In front of the large casks of cider arranged in lines in the background where it is dark, the lamp, hanging from the beams, throws its light on the images of saints that decorate the walls, on the groups of mountaineers who talk and who smoke. At times someone sings a plaintive song which came from the night of centuries; the beating of a tambourine recalls to life old, forgotten rhythms; a guitar reawakens a sadness of the epoch of the Moors.—Or, in the face of each other, two men, with castanets in their hands, suddenly dance the fandango, swinging themselves with an antique grace.

And, from these innocent, little inns, they retire early—especially in these bad, rainy nights—the darkness

of which is so peculiarly propitious to smuggling, every one here having to do some clandestine thing on the Spanish side.

In such places, in the company of Arrochkoa, Ramuntcho talked over and commented upon his cherished, sacrilegious project; or,—during the beautiful moon-light nights which do not permit of undertakings on the frontier—they talked on the roads for a long time.

Persistent religious scruples made him hesitate a great deal, although he hardly realized it. They were inexplicable scruples, since he had ceased to be a believer. But all his will, all his audacity, all his life, were concentrated and directed, more and more, toward this unique end.

And the prohibition, ordered by Itchoua, from seeing Gracieuse before the great attempt, exasperated his impatient dream.

The winter, capricious as it is always in this country, pursued its unequal march, with, from time to time, surprises of sunlight and of heat. There were rains of a deluge, grand, healthy squalls which went up from the Bay of Biscay, plunged into the valleys, bending the trees furiously. And then, repetitions of the wind of the south, breaths as warm as in summer, breezes smelling of Africa, under a sky at once high and sombre, among mountains of an intense brown color. And also, glacial mornings, wherein one saw, at awakening, summits become snowy and white.

The desire often seized him to finish everything.—But he had the frightful idea that he might not succeed and might fall again, alone forever, without a hope in life.

Anyway, reasonable pretexts to wait were not lacking. He had to settle with men of affairs, he had to sell the house and realize, for his flight, all the money that he could obtain. He had also to wait for the answer of Uncle Ignacio, to whom he had announced his emigration and at whose house he expected to find an asylum.

Thus the days went by, and soon the hasty spring was to ferment. Already the yellow primrose and the blue gentian, in advance here by several weeks, were in bloom in the woods and along the paths, in the last suns of January—

CHAPTER XI.

They are this time in the cider mill of the hamlet of Gastelugain, near the frontier, waiting for the moment to go out with boxes of jewelry and weapons.

And it is Itchoua who is talking:

“If she hesitates—and she will not hesitate, be sure of it—but if she hesitates, well! we will kidnap her.—Let me arrange this, my plan is all made. It will be in the evening, you understand?—We will bring her anywhere and imprison her in a room with you.—If it turns out badly—if I am forced to quit the country after having done this thing to please you; then, you will have to give me more money than the amount agreed upon, you understand?—Enough, at least, to let me seek for my bread in Spain—”

“In Spain!—What? What are you going to do, Itchoua? I hope you have not in your head the idea to do things that are too grave.”

“Oh, do not be afraid, my friend. I have no desire to assassinate anybody.”

“Well! You talk of running away—”

“I said this as I would have said anything else, you know. For some time, business has been bad. And then, suppose the thing turns out badly and the police make an inquiry. Well, I would prefer to go, that is sure.—For whenever these men of justice put their noses into anything, they seek for things that happened long ago, and the inquiry never ends—”

In his eyes, suddenly expressive, appeared crime and fear. And Ramuntcho looked with an increase of anxiety at this man, who was believed to be solidly established in the country with lands in the sunlight, and who accepted so easily the idea of running away. What sort of a bandit is he then, to be so much afraid of justice?—And what could be these things that happened long ago?—After a silence between them, Ramuntcho said in a lower voice, with extreme distrust:

“Imprison her—you say this seriously, Itchoua?—And where imprison her, if you please? I have no castle to hide her in—”

Then Itchoua, with the smile of a faun which no one had seen before, tapped his shoulder:

“Oh, imprison her—for one night only, my son!—It will be enough, you may believe me.—They are all alike, you see: the first step costs; but the second one, they make it all alone, and quicker than you may think. Do you imagine that she would wish to return to the good sisters, afterward?—”

The desire to slap that dull face passed like an electric shock through the arm and the hand of Ramuntcho. He constrained himself, however, through a long habit of respectfulness for the old singer of the liturgies, and remained silent, with a flush on his cheeks, and his look turned aside. It revolted him to hear one talk thus of her—and surprised him that the one who spoke thus was that Itchoua whom he had always known as the quiet husband of an ugly and old woman. But the blow struck by the impertinent phrase followed nevertheless, in his imagination, a dangerous and unforeseen path.—Gracieuse, “imprisoned a room with him!” The immediate possibility of such a thing, so clearly presented with a rough and coarse word, made his head swim like a very violent liquor.

He loved her with too elevated a tenderness, his betrothed, to find pleasure in brutal hopes. Ordinarily, he expelled from his mind those images; but now that man had just placed them under his eye, with a diabolical crudity, and he felt shivers in his flesh, he trembled as if the weather were cold—

Oh, whether the adventure fell or not under the blow of justice, well, so much the worse, after all! He had

nothing to lose, all was indifferent to him! And from that evening, in the fever of a new desire, he felt more boldly decided to brave the rules, the laws, the obstacles of this world. Saps ascended everywhere around him, on the sides of the brown Pyrenees; there were longer and more tepid nights; the paths were bordered with violets and periwinkles.—But religious scruples held him still. They remained, inexplicably in the depth of his disordered mind: instinctive horror of profanation; belief, in spite of everything, in something supernatural enveloping, to defend them, churches and cloisters—

CHAPTER XII.

The winter had just come to an end.

Ramuntcho,—who had slept for a few hours, in a bad, tired sleep, in a small room of the new house of his friend Florentino, at Ururbil,—awakened as the day dawned.

The night,—a night of tempest everywhere, a black and troubled night,—had been disastrous for the smugglers. Near Cape Figuiet, in the rocks where they had just landed from the sea with silk bundles, they had been pursued with gunshots, compelled to throw away their loads, losing everything, some fleeing to the mountain, others escaping by swimming among the breakers, in order to reach the French shore, in terror of the prisons of San Sebastian.

At two o'clock in the morning, exhausted, drenched and half drowned, he had knocked at the door of that isolated house, to ask from the good Florentino his aid and an asylum.

And on awakening, after all the nocturnal noise of the equinoctial storm, of the rain, of the groaning branches, twisted and broken, he perceived that a grand silence had come. Straining his ear, he could hear no longer the immense breath of the western wind, no longer the motion of all those things tormented in the darkness. No, nothing except a far-off noise, regular, powerful, continued and formidable; the roll of the waters in the depth of that Bay of Biscay—which, since the beginning, is without truce and troubled; a rhythmic groan, as might be the monstrous respiration of the sea in its sleep; a series of profound blows which seemed the blows of a battering ram on a wall, continued every time by a music of surf on the beaches.—But the air, the trees and the surrounding things were immovable; the tempest had finished, without reasonable cause, as it had begun, and the sea alone prolonged the complaint of it.

To look at that land, that Spanish coast which he would perhaps never see again, since his departure was so near, he opened his window on the emptiness, still pale, on the virginity of the desolate dawn.

A gray light emanating from a gray sky; everywhere the same immobility, tired and frozen, with uncertainties of aspect derived from the night and from dreams. An opaque sky, which had a solid air and was made of accumulated, small, horizontal layers, as if one had painted it by superposing pastes of dead colors.

And underneath, mountains black brown; then Fontarabia in a morose silhouette, its old belfry appearing blacker and more worn by the years. At that hour, so early and so freshly mysterious, when the ears of most men are not yet open, it seemed as if one surprised things in their heartbreaking colloquy of lassitude and of death, relating to one another, at the first flush of dawn, all that they do not say when the day has risen.—What was the use of resisting the storm of last night? said the old belfry, sad and weary, standing in the background in the distance; what was the use, since other storms will come, eternally others, other storms and other tempests, and since I will pass away, I whom men have elevated as a signal of prayer to remain here for incalculable years?—I am already only a spectre, come from some other time; I continue to ring ceremonies and illusory festivals; but men will soon cease to be lured by them; I ring also knells, I have rung so many knells for thousands of dead persons whom nobody remembers! And I remain here, useless, under the effort, almost eternal, of all those western winds which blow from the sea—

At the foot of the belfry, the church, drawn in gray tints, with an air of age and abandonment, confessed also that it was empty, that it was vain, peopled only by poor images made of wood or of stone, by myths without comprehension, without power and without pity. And all the houses, piously grouped for centuries around it, avowed that its protection was not efficacious against death, that it was deceptive and untruthful—

And especially the clouds, the clouds and the mountains, covered with their immense, mute attestation what the old city murmured beneath them; they confirmed in silence the sombre truths: heaven empty as the churches are, serving for accidental phantasmagoria, and uninterrupted times rolling their flood, wherein thousands of lives, like insignificant nothings, are, one after another, dragged and drowned.—A knell began to ring in that distance which Ramuntcho saw whitening; very slowly, the old belfry gave its voice, once more, for the end of a life; someone was in the throes of death on the other side of the frontier, some Spanish soul over there was going out, in the pale morning, under the thickness of those imprisoning clouds—and he had almost the precise notion that this soul would very simply follow its body in the earth which decomposes—

And Ramuntcho contemplated and listened. At the little window of that Basque house, which before him had sheltered only generations of simple-minded and confident people, leaning on the wide sill which the rubbing of elbows had worn, pushing the old shutter painted green, he rested his eyes on the dull display of that corner of the world which had been his and which he was to quit forever. Those revelations which things made, his uncultured mind heard them for the first time and he lent to them a frightened attention. An entire new labor of unbelief was going on suddenly in his mind, prepared by heredity to doubts and to worry. An entire vision came to him, sudden and seemingly definitive, of the nothingness of religions, of the nonexistence of the divinities whom men supplicate.

And then—since there was nothing, how simple it was to tremble still before the white Virgin, chimerical protector of those convents where girls are imprisoned—!

The poor agony bell, which exhausted itself in ringing over there so puerilely to call for useless prayers,

stopped at last, and, under the closed sky, the respiration of the grand waters alone was heard in the distance, in the universal silence. But the things continued, in the uncertain dawn, their dialogue without words: nothing anywhere; nothing in the old churches venerated for so long a time; nothing in the sky where clouds and mists amass; but always, in the flight of times, the eternal and exhausting renewal of beings; and always and at once, old age, death, ashes—

That is what they were saying, in the pale half light, the things so dull and so tired. And Ramuntcho, who had heard, pitied himself for having hesitated so long for imaginary reasons. To himself he swore, with a harsher despair, that this morning he was decided; that he would do it, at the risk of everything; that nothing would make him hesitate longer.

CHAPTER XIII.

Weeks have elapsed, in preparations, in anxious uncertainties on the manner of acting, in abrupt changes of plans and ideas.

Between times, the reply of Uncle Ignacio has reached Etchezar. If his nephew had spoken sooner, Ignacio has written, he would have been glad to receive him at his house; but, seeing how he hesitated, Ignacio had decided to take a wife, although he is already an old man, and now he has a child two months old. Therefore, there is no protection to be expected from that side; the exile, when he arrives there, may not find even a home—

The family house has been sold, at the notary's money questions have been settled; all the goods of Ramuntcho have been transformed into gold pieces which are in his hand—

And now is the day of the supreme attempt, the great day,—and already the thick foliage has returned to the trees, the clothing of the tall grass covers anew the prairies; it is May.

In the little wagon, which the famous fast horse drags, they roll on the shady mountain paths, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, toward that village of Amezqueta. They roll quickly; they plunge into the heart of an infinite region of trees. And, as the hour goes by, all becomes more peaceful around them, and more savage; more primitive, the hamlets; more solitary, the Basque land.

In the shade of the branches, on the borders of the paths, there are pink foxgloves, silences, ferns, almost the same flora as in Brittany; these two countries, the Basque and the Breton, resemble each other by the granite which is everywhere and by the habitual rain; by the immobility also, and by the continuity of the same religious dream.

Above the two young men who have started for the adventure, thicken the big, customary clouds, the sombre and low sky. The route which they follow, in these mountains ever and ever higher, is deliciously green, dug in the shade, between walls of ferns.

Immobility of several centuries, immobility in beings and in things,—one has more and more the consciousness of it as one penetrates farther into this country of forests and of silence. Under this obscure veil of the sky, where are lost the summits of the grand Pyrenees, appear and run by, isolated houses, centenary farms, hamlets more and more rare,—and they go always under the same vault of oaks, of ageless chestnut trees, which twist even at the side of the path their roots like mossy serpents. They resemble one another, those hamlets separated from one another by so much forest, by so many branches, and inhabited by an antique race, disdainful of all that disturbs, of all that changes: the humble church, most often without a belfry, with a simple campanila on its gray facade, and the square, with its wall painted for that traditional ball-game wherein, from father to son, the men exercise their hard muscles. Everywhere reigned the healthy peace of rustic life, the traditions of which in the Basque land are more immutable than elsewhere.

The few woolen caps which the two bold young men meet on their rapid passage, incline all in a bow, from general politeness first, and from acquaintance above all, for they are, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, the two celebrated pelota players of the country;—Ramuntcho, it is true, had been forgotten by many people, but Arrochkoa, everybody, from Bayonne to San Sebastian, knows his face with healthy colors and the turned up ends of his catlike mustache.

Dividing the journey into two stages, they have slept last night at Mendichoco. And at present they are rolling quickly, the two young men, so preoccupied doubtless that they hardly care to regulate the pace of their vigorous beast.

Itchoua, however, is not with them. At the last moment, a fear has come to Ramuntcho of this accomplice, whom he felt to be capable of everything, even of murder; in a sudden terror, he has refused the aid of that man, who clutched the bridle of the horse to prevent it from starting; and feverishly, Ramuntcho has thrown gold into his hands, to pay for his advice, to buy the liberty to act alone, the assurance, at least, of not committing a crime: piece by piece, to break his engagement, he has given to Itchoua a half of the agreed price. Then, when the horse is driven at a gallop, when the implacable figure has vanished behind a group of trees, Ramuntcho has felt his conscience lighter—

"You will leave my carriage at Aranotz, at Burugoity, the inn-keeper's, who understands," said Arrochkoa, "for, you understand, as soon as you have accomplished your end I will leave you.—We have business with the people of Buruzabal, horses to lead into Spain to-night, not far from Amezqueta, and I promised to be there before ten o'clock—"

What will they do? They do not know, the two allied friends; this will depend on the turn that things take;

they have different projects, all bold and skilful, according to the cases which might present themselves. Two places have been reserved, one for Ramuntcho and the other for her, on board a big emigrant vessel on which the baggage is embarked and which will start tomorrow night from Bordeaux carrying hundreds of Basques to America. At this small station of Aranotz, where the carriage will leave both of them, Ramuntcho and Gracieuse, they will take the train for Bayonne, at three o'clock in the morning, and, at Bayonne afterward, the Irun express to Bordeaux. It will be a hasty flight, which will not give to the little fugitive the time to think, to regain her senses in her terror,—doubtless also in her intoxication deliciously mortal—

A gown, a mantilla of Gracieuse are all ready, at the bottom of the carriage, to replace the veil and the black uniform: things which she wore formerly, before her vows, and which Arrochkoa found in his mother's closets. And Ramuntcho thinks that it will be perhaps real, in a moment, that she will be perhaps there, at his side, very near, on that narrow seat, enveloped with him in the same travelling blanket, flying in the midst of night, to belong to him, at once and forever;—and in thinking of this too much, he feels again a shudder and a dizziness—

"I tell you that she will follow you," repeats his friend, striking him rudely on the leg in protective encouragement, as soon as he sees Ramuntcho sombre and lost in a dream. "I tell you that she will follow you, I am sure! If she hesitates, well, leave the rest to me!"

If she hesitates, then they will be violent, they are resolved, oh, not very violent, only enough to unlace the hands of the old nuns retaining her.—And then, they will carry her into the small wagon, where infallibly the enlacing contact and the tenderness of her former friend will soon turn her young head.

How will it all happen? They do not yet know, relying a great deal on their spirit of decision which has already dragged them out of dangerous passes. But what they know is that they will not weaken. And they go ahead, exciting each other; one would say that they are united now unto death, firm and decided like two bandits at the hour when the capital game is to be played.

The land of thick branches which they traverse, under the oppression of very high mountains which they do not see, is all in ravines, profound and torn up, in precipices, where torrents roar under the green night of the foliage. The oaks, the beeches, the chestnut trees become more and more enormous, living through centuries off a sap ever fresh and magnificent. A powerful verdure is strewn over that disturbed geology; for ages it covers and classifies it under the freshness of its immovable mantle. And this nebulous sky, almost obscure, which is familiar to the Basque country, adds to the impression which they have of a sort of universal meditation wherein the things are plunged; a strange penumbra descends from everywhere, descends from the trees at first, descends from the thick, gray veils above the branches, descends from the great Pyrenees hidden behind the clouds.

And, in the midst of this immense peace and of this green night, they pass, Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa, like two young disturbers going to break charms in the depths of forests. At all cross roads old, granite crosses rise, like alarm signals to warn them; old crosses with this inscription, sublimely simple, which is here something like the device of an entire race: "O crux, ave, spes unica!"

Soon the night will come. Now they are silent, because the hour is going, because the moment approaches, because all these crosses on the road are beginning to intimidate them—

And the day falls, under that sad veil which covers the sky. The valleys become more savage, the country more deserted. And, at the corners of roads, the old crosses appear, ever with their similar inscriptions: "O crux, ave, spes unica!"

Amezqueta, at the last twilight. They stop their carriage at an outskirts of the village, before the cider mill. Arrochkoa is impatient to go into the house of the sisters, vexed at arriving so late; he fears that the door may not be opened to them. Ramuntcho, silent, lets him act.

It is above, on the hill; it is that isolated house which a cross surmounts and which one sees in relief in white on the darker mass of the mountain. They recommend that as soon as the horse is rested the wagon be brought to them, at a turn, to wait for them. Then, both go into the avenue of trees which leads to that convent and where the thickness of the May foliage makes the obscurity almost nocturnal. Without saying anything to each other, without making a noise with their sandals, they ascend in a supple and easy manner; around them the profound fields are impregnated by the immense melancholy of the night.

Arrochkoa knocks with his finger on the door of the peaceful house:

"I would like to see my sister, if you please," he says to an old nun who opens the door, astonished—

Before he has finished talking, a cry of joy comes from the dark corridor, and a nun, whom one divines is young in spite of the envelopment of her dissembling costume, comes and takes his hand. She has recognized him by his voice,—but has she divined the other who stays behind and does not talk?—

The Mother Superior has come also, and, in the darkness of the stairway, she makes them go up to the parlor of the little country convent; then she brings the cane-seat chairs and everyone sits down, Arrochkoa near his sister, Ramuntcho opposite,—and they face each other at last, the two lovers, and a silence, full of the beating of arteries, full of leaps of hearts, full of fever, descends upon them—

Truly, in this place, one knows not what peace almost sweet, and a little sepulchral also, envelopes the terrible interview; in the depth of the chests, the hearts beat with great blows, but the words of love or of violence, the words die before passing the lips.—And this peace, more and more establishes itself; it seems as if a white shroud little by little is covering everything, in order to calm and to extinguish.

There is nothing very peculiar, however, in this humble parlor: four walls absolutely bare under a coat of whitewash; a wooden ceiling; a floor where one slips, so carefully waxed it is; on a table, a plaster Virgin, already indistinct, among all the similar white things of the background where the twilight of May is dying. And a window without curtains, open on the grand Pyrenean horizons invaded by night.—But, from this voluntary poverty, from this white simplicity, is exhaled a notion of definitive impersonality, of renunciation forever; and the irremediability of accomplished things begins to manifest itself to the mind of Ramuntcho, while bringing to him a sort of peace, of sudden and involuntary resignation.

The two smugglers, immovable on their chairs, appear as silhouettes, of wide shoulders on all this white of

the walls, and of their lost features one hardly sees the black more intense of the mustache and the eyes. The two nuns, whose outlines are unified by the veil, seem already to be two spectres all black—

“Wait, Sister Mary Angelique,” says the Mother Superior to the transformed young girl who was formerly named Gracieuse, “wait sister till I light the lamp in order that you may at least see your brother's face!”

She goes out, leaving them together, and, again, silence falls on this rare instant, perhaps unique, impossible to regain, when they are alone—

She comes back with a little lamp which makes the eyes of the smugglers shine,—and with a gay voice, a kind air, asks, looking at Ramuntcho:

“And this one? A second brother, I suppose?—”

“Oh, no,” says Arrochkoa in a singular tone. “He is only my friend.”

In truth, he is not their brother, that Ramuntcho who stays there, ferocious and mute.—And how he would frighten the quiet nuns if they knew what storm brings him here—!

The same silence returns, heavy and disquieting, on these beings who, it seems, should talk simply of simple things; and the old Mother Superior remarks it, is astonished by it.—But the quick eyes of Ramuntcho become immovable, veil themselves as if they are fascinated by some invisible tamer. Under the harsh envelope, still beating, of his chest, the calmness, the imposed calmness continues to penetrate and to extend. On him, doubtless, are acting the mysterious, white powers which are here in the air; religious heredities which were asleep in the depths of his being fill him now with unexpected respect and submissiveness; the antique symbols dominate him: the crosses met in the evening along the road and that plaster Virgin of the color of snow, immaculate on the spotless white of the wall—

“Well, my children, talk of the things of Etchezar,” says the Mother Superior to Gracieuse and to her brother. “We shall leave you alone, if you wish,” she adds with a sign to Ramuntcho to follow her.

“Oh, no,” protests Arrochkoa, “Let him stay.—No, he is not the one—who prevents us—”

And the little nun, veiled in the fashion of the Middle Age, lowers her head, to maintain her eyes hidden in the shade of her austere headdress.

The door remains open, the window remains open; the house, the things retain their air of absolute confidence, of absolute security, against violations and sacrilege. Now two other sisters, who are very old, set a small table, put two covers, bring to Arrochkoa and to his friend a little supper, a loaf of bread, cheese, cake, grapes from the arbor. In arranging these things they have a youthful gaiety, a babble almost childish—and all this is strangely opposed to the ardent violence which is here, hushed, thrown back into the depth of minds, as under the blows of some mace covered with white—

And, in spite of themselves, they are seated at the table, the two smugglers, opposite each other, yielding to insistence and eating absent-mindedly the frugal things, on a cloth as white as the walls. Their broad shoulders, accustomed to loads, lean on the backs of the little chairs and make their frail wood crack. Around them come and go the Sisters, ever with their discreet talk and their puerile laugh, which escape, somewhat softened, from under their veils. Alone, she remains mute and motionless, Sister Mary Angelique: standing near her brother who is seated, she places her hand on his powerful shoulder; so lithe beside him that she looks like a saint of a primitive church picture. Ramuntcho, sombre, observes them both; he had not been able to see yet the face of Gracieuse, so severely her headdress framed it. They resemble each other still, the brother and the sister; in their very long eyes, which have acquired expressions more than ever different remains something inexplicably similar, persists the same flame, that flame which impelled one toward adventures and the life of the muscles, the other toward mystic dreams, toward mortification and annihilation of flesh. But she has become as frail as he is robust; her breast doubtless is no more, nor her hips; the black vestment wherein her body remains hidden falls straight like a furrow enclosing nothing carnal.

And now, for the first time, they are face to face, Gracieuse and Ramuntcho; their eyes have met and gazed on one another. She does not lower her head before him; but it is as from an infinite distance that she looks at him, it is as from behind white mists that none may scale, as from the other side of an abyss, as from the other side of death; very soft, nevertheless, her glance indicates that she is as if she were absent, gone to tranquil and inaccessible other places.—And it is Ramuntcho at last who, still more tamed, lowers his ardent eyes before her virgin eyes.

They continue to babble, the Sisters; they would like to retain them both at Amezqueta for the night: the weather, they say, is so black, and a storm threatens.—M. the Cure, who went out to take communion to a patient in the mountain, will come back; he has known Arrochkoa at Etchezar when a vicar there; he would be glad to give him a room in the parish house—and one to his friend also, of course—

But no, Arrochkoa refuses, after a questioning glance at Ramuntcho. It is impossible to stay in the village; they will even go at once, or after a few moments of conversation, for they are expected on the Spanish frontier.—Gracieuse who, at first, in her mortal disturbance of mind, had not dared to talk, begins to question her brother. Now in Basque, then in French, she asks for news of those whom she has forever abandoned:

“And mother? All alone now in the house, even at night?”

“Oh, no,” says Arrochkoa, “Catherine watches over her and sleeps at the house.”

“And how is your child, Arrochkoa, has he been christened? What is his name? Lawrence, doubtless, like his grandfather.”

Etchezar, their village, is separated from Amezqueta by some sixty kilometres, in a land without more means of communication than in the past centuries:

“Oh, in spite of the distance,” says the little nun, “I get news of you sometimes. Last month, people here had met on the market place of Hasparren, women of our village; that is how I learned—many things.—At Easter I had hoped to see you; I was told that there would be a ball-game at Erricalde and that you would come to play there; then I said to myself that perhaps you would come here—and, while the festival lasted, I looked often at the road through this window, to see if you were coming—”

And she shows the window, open on the blackness of the savage country—from which ascends an immense

silence, with, from time to time, the noise of spring, intermittent musical notes of crickets and tree-toads.

Hearing her talk so quietly, Ramuntcho feels confounded by this renunciation of all things; she appears to him still more irrevocably changed, far-off—poor little nun!—Her name was Gracieuse; now her name is Sister Mary Angelique, and she has no relatives; impersonal here, in this little house with white walls, without terrestrial hope and without desire, perhaps—one might as well say that she has departed for the regions of the grand oblivion of death. And yet, she smiles, quite serene now and apparently not even suffering.

Arrochkoa looks at Ramuntcho, questions him with a piercing eye accustomed to fathom the black depths—and, tamed himself by all this unexpected peace, he understands very well that his bold comrade dares no longer, that all the projects have fallen, that all is useless and inert in presence of the invisible wall with which his sister is surrounded. At moments, pressed to end all in one way or in another, in a haste to break this charm or to submit to it and to fly before it, he pulls his watch, says that it is time to go, because of the friends who are waiting for them.—The Sisters know well who these friends are and why they are waiting but they are not affected by this: Basques themselves, daughters and granddaughters of Basques, they have the blood of smugglers in their veins and consider such things indulgently—

At last, for the first time, Gracieuse titters the name of Ramuntcho; not daring, however, to address him directly, she asks her brother, with a calm smile:

“Then he is with you, Ramuntcho, now? You work together?”

A silence follows, and Arrochkoa looks at Ramuntcho.

“No,” says the latter, in a slow and sombre voice, “no—I, I go to-morrow to America—”

Every word of this reply, harshly scanned, is like a sound of trouble and of defiance in the midst of that strange serenity. She leans more heavily on her brother's shoulder, the little nun, and Ramuntcho, conscious of the profound blow which he has struck, looks at her and envelopes her with his tempting eyes, having regained his audacity, attractive and dangerous in the last effort of his heart full of love, of his entire being of youth and of flame made for tenderness.—Then, for an uncertain minute, it seems as if the little convent had trembled; it seems as if the white powers of the air recoiled, went out like sad, unreal mists before this young dominator, come here to hurl the triumphant appeal of life. And the silence which follows is the heaviest of all the silent moments which have interrupted already that species of drama played almost without words—

At last, Sister Mary Angelique talks, and talks to Ramuntcho himself. Really it does not seem as if her heart had just been torn supremely by the announcement of that departure, nor as if she had just shuddered under that lover's look.—With a voice which little by little becomes firmer in softness, she says very simple things, as to any friend.

“Oh, yes—Uncle Ignacio?—I had always thought that you would go to rejoin him there.—We shall all pray the Holy Virgin to accompany you in your voyage—”

And it is the smuggler who lowers the head, realizing that all is ended, that she is lost forever, the little companion of his childhood; that she has been buried in an inviolable shroud.—The words of love and of temptation which he had thought of saying, the projects which he had revolved in his mind for months, all these seemed insensate, sacrilegious, impossible things, childish bravadoes.—Arrochkoa, who looks at him attentively, is under the same irresistible and light charm; they understand each other and, to one another, without words, they confess that there is nothing to do, that they will never dare—

Nevertheless an anguish still human appears in the eyes of Sister Mary Angelique when Arrochkoa rises for the definite departure: she prays, in a changed voice, for them to stay a moment longer. And Ramuntcho suddenly feels like throwing himself on his knees in front of her; his head on the hem of her veil, sobbing all the tears that stifle him; like begging for mercy, like begging for mercy also of that Mother Superior who has so soft an air; like telling both of them that this sweetheart of his childhood was his hope, his courage, his life, and that people must have a little pity, people must give her back to him, because, without her, there is no longer anything.—All that his heart contains that is infinitely good is exalted at present into an immense necessity to implore, into an outbreak of supplicating prayer and also into a confidence in the kindness, in the pity of others—

And who knows, if he had dared formulate that great prayer of pure tenderness, who knows what he might have awakened of kindness also, and of tenderness and of humanity in the poor, black-veiled girl?—Perhaps this old Mother Superior herself, this old, dried-up girl with childish smile and grave, pure eyes, would have opened her arms to him, as to a son, understanding everything, forgiving everything, despite the rules and despite the vows? And perhaps Gracieuse might have been returned to him, without kidnapping, without deception, almost excused by her companions of the cloister. Or at last, if that was impossible, she would have bade him a long farewell, consoling, softened by a kiss of immaterial love—

But no, he stays there mute on his chair. Even that prayer he cannot make. And it is the hour to go, decidedly. Arrochkoa is up, agitated, calling him with an imperious sign of the head. Then he straightens up also his proud bust and takes his cap to follow Arrochkoa. They express their thanks for the little supper which was given to them and they say good-night, timidly. During their entire visit they were very respectful, almost timid, the two superb smugglers. And, as if hope had not just been undone, as if one of them was not leaving behind him his life, they descend quietly the neat stairway, between the white walls, while the good Sisters light the way with their little lamp.

“Come, Sister Mary Angelique,” gaily proposes the Mother Superior, in her frail, infantile voice, “we shall escort them to the end of our avenue, you know, near the village.”

Is she an old fairy, sure of her power, or a simple and unconscious woman, playing without knowing it, with a great, devouring fire?—It was all finished; the parting had been accomplished; the farewell accepted; the struggle stifled under white wadding,—and now the two who adored each other are walking side by side, outside, in the tepid night of spring!—in the amorous, enveloping night, under the cover of the new leaves and on the tall grass, among all the saps that ascend in the midst of the sovereign growth of universal life.

They walk with short steps, through this exquisite obscurity, as in silent accord, to make the shaded path last longer, both mute, in the ardent desire and the intense fear of contact of their clothes, of a touch of their

hands. Arrochkoa and the Mother Superior follow them closely, on their heels; without talking, nuns with their sandals, smugglers with their rope soles, they go through these soft, dark spots without making more noise than phantoms, and their little cortege, slow and strange, descends toward the wagon in a funereal silence. Silence also around them, everywhere in the grand, ambient black, in the depth of the mountains and the woods. And, in the sky without stars, sleep the big clouds, heavy with all the water that the soil awaits and which will fall to-morrow to make the woods still more leafy, the grass still higher; the big clouds above their heads cover all the splendor of the southern summer which so often, in their childhood, charmed them together, disturbed them together, but which Ramuntcho will doubtless never see again and which in the future Gracieuse will have to look at with eyes of one dead, without understanding nor recognizing it—

There is no one around them, in the little obscure alley, and the village seems asleep already. The night has fallen quite; its grand mystery is scattered everywhere, on the mountains and the savage valleys.—And, how easy it would be to execute what these two young men have resolved, in that solitude, with that wagon which is ready and that fast horse—!

However, without having talked, without having touched each other, they come, the lovers, to that turn of the path where they must bid each other an eternal farewell. The wagon is there, held by a boy; the lantern is lighted and the horse impatient. The Mother Superior stops: it is, apparently, the last point of the last walk which they will take together in this world,—and she feels the power, that old nun, to decide that it will be thus, without appeal. With the same little, thin voice, almost gay, she says:

“Come, Sister, say good-bye.”

And she says that with the assurance of a Fate whose decrees of death are not disputable.

In truth, nobody attempts to resist her order, impassably given. He is vanquished, the rebellious Ramuntcho, oh, quite vanquished by the tranquil, white powers; trembling still from the battle which has just come to an end in him, he lowers his head, without will now, and almost without thought, as under the influence of some sleeping potion—

“Come, Sister, say good-bye,” the old, tranquil Fate has said. Then, seeing that Gracieuse has only taken Arrochkoa's hand, she adds:

“Well, you do not kiss your brother?—”

Doubtless, the little Sister Mary Angelique asks for nothing better, to kiss him with all her heart, with all her soul; to clasp him, her brother, to lean on his shoulder and to seek his protection, at that hour of superhuman sacrifice when she must let the cherished one leave her without even a word of love.—And still, her kiss has in it something frightened, at once drawn back; the kiss of a nun, somewhat similar to the kiss of one dead.—When will she ever see him again, that brother, who is not to leave the Basque country, however? When will she have news of her mother, of the house, of the village, from some passer-by who will stop here, coming from Etchezar?—

“We will pray,” she says again, “to the Holy Virgin to protect you in your long voyage—” And how they go; slowly they turn back, like silent shades, toward the humble convent which the cross protects, and the two tamed smugglers, immovable on the road, look at their veils, darker than the night of the trees, disappearing in the obscure avenue.

Oh! she is wrecked also, the one who will disappear in the darkness of the little, shady hill.—But she is nevertheless soothed by white, peaceful vapors, and all that she suffers will soon be quieted under a sort of sleep. To-morrow she will take again, until death, the course of her strangely simple existence; impersonal, devoted to a series of daily duties which never change, absorbed in a reunion of creatures almost neutral, who have abdicated everything, she will be able to walk with eyes lifted ever toward the soft, celestial mirage—

O crux, ave, spes unica—!

To live, without variety or truce to the end, between the white walls of a cell always the same, now here, then elsewhere, at the pleasure of a strange will, in one of those humble village convents to which one has not even the leisure to become attached. On this earth, to possess nothing and to desire nothing, to wait for nothing, to hope for nothing. To accept as empty and transitory the fugitive hours of this world, and to feel freed from everything, even from love, as much as by death.—The mystery of such lives remains forever unintelligible to those young men who are there, made for the daily battle, beautiful beings of instinct and of strength, a prey to all the desires; created to enjoy life and to suffer from it, to love it and to continue it—

O crux, ave, spes unica!—One sees them no longer, they have re-entered their little, solitary convent.

The two men have not exchanged even a word on their abandoned undertaking, on the ill-defined cause which for the first time has undone their courage; they feel, toward one another, almost a sense of shame of their sudden and insurmountable timidity.

For an instant their proud heads were turned toward the nuns slowly fleeing; now they look at each other through the night.

They are going to part, and probably forever: Arrochkoa puts into his friends hands the reins of the little wagon which, according to his promise, he lends to him:

“Well, my poor Ramuntcho!” he says, in a tone of commiseration hardly affectionate.

And the unexpressed end of the phrase signifies clearly:

“Go, since you have failed; and I have to go and meet my friends—”

Ramuntcho would have kissed him with all his heart for the last farewell,—and in this embrace of the brother of the beloved one, he would have shed doubtless good, hot tears which, for a moment at least, would have cured him a little.

But no, Arrochkoa has become again the Arrochkoa of the bad days, the gambler without soul, that only bold things interest. Absentmindedly, he touches Ramuntcho's hand:

“Well, good-bye!—Good luck—”

And, with silent steps, he goes toward the smugglers, toward the frontier, toward the propitious darkness.

Then Ramuntcho, alone in the world now, whips the little, mountain horse who gallops with his light tinkling of bells.—That train which will pass by Aranotz, that vessel which will start from Bordeaux—an instinct impels Ramuntcho not to miss them. Mechanically he hastens, no longer knowing why, like a body without a mind which continues to obey an ancient impulsion, and, very quickly, he who has no aim and no hope in the world, plunges into the savage country, into the thickness of the woods, in all that profound blackness of the night of May, which the nuns, from their elevated window, see around them—

For him the native land is closed, closed forever; finished are the delicious dreams of his first years. He is a plant uprooted from the dear, Basque soil and which a breath of adventure blows elsewhere.

At the horse's neck, gaily the bells tinkle, in the silence of the sleeping woods; the light of the lantern, which runs hastily, shows to the sad fugitive the under side of branches, fresh verdure of oaks; by the wayside, flowers of France; from distance to distance, the walls of a familiar hamlet, of an old church,—all the things which he will never see again, unless it be, perhaps, in a doubtful and very distant old age—

In front of his route, there is America, exile without probable return, an immense new world, full of surprises and approached now without courage: an entire life, very long, doubtless, during which his mind plucked from here will have to suffer and to harden over there; his vigor spend and exhaust itself none knows where, in unknown labors and struggles—

Above, in their little convent, in their sepulchre with walls so white, the tranquil nuns recite their evening prayers—

O crux, ave, spes unica—!

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RAMUNTCHO ***

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