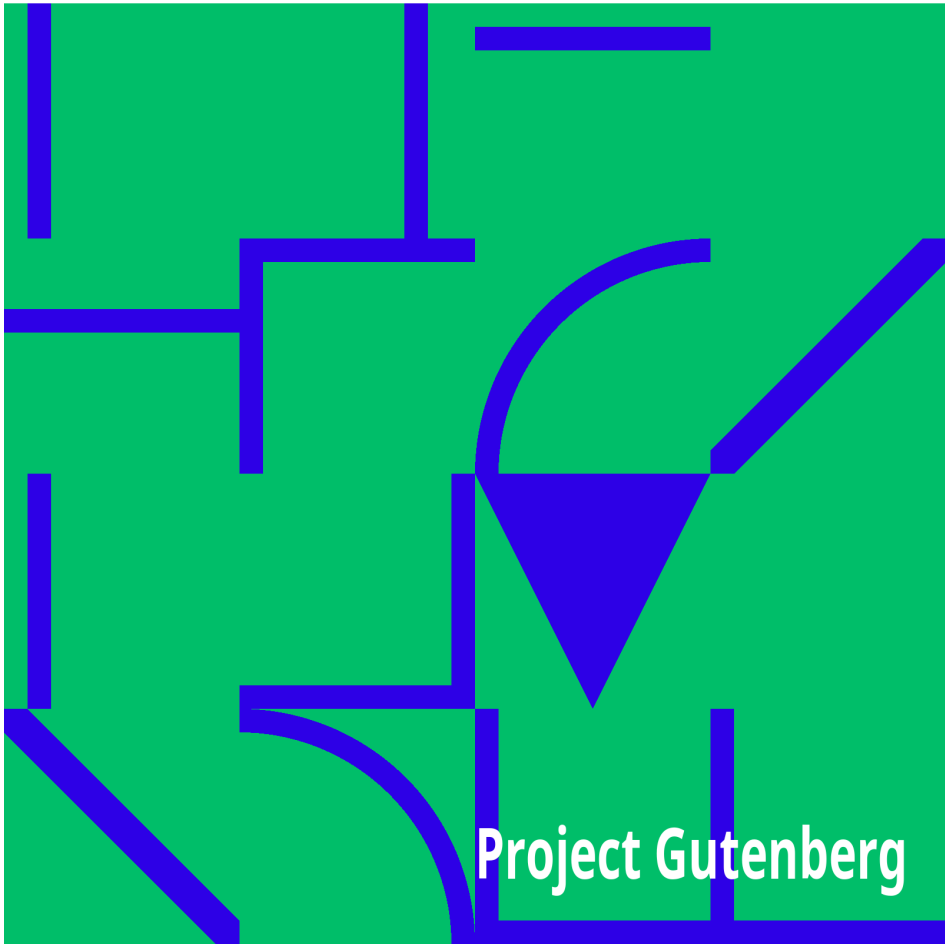
The Count's Millions

Emile Gaboriau



The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Count's Millions

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: The Count's Millions

Author: Emile Gaboriau

Release date: July 2, 2008 [eBook #305]
Most recently updated: January 28, 2021

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/305

Credits: Produced by John Hamm and David Widger

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COUNT'S MILLIONS ***

THE COUNT'S MILLIONS

By Emile Gaboriau

A novel in two parts. Part Two of this novel is found in the volume: "Baron Trigault's Vengeance"

CONTENTS

PASCAL AND MARGUERITE

I.

II.

III.

IV.

V.

VI.

VII.

VIII.

IX.

X.

XI.

XII.

XIII.

XIV.

XV.

XVI.

XVII.

XVIII.

XIX.

XX.

XXI.

PASCAL AND MARGUERITE.

I.

It was a Thursday evening, the fifteenth of October; and although only half-past six o'clock, it had been dark for some time already. The weather was cold, and the sky was as black as ink, while the wind blew tempestuously, and the rain fell in torrents.

The servants at the Hotel de Chalusse, one of the most magnificent mansions in the Rue de Courcelles in Paris, were assembled in the porter's lodge, a little building comprising a couple of rooms standing on the right hand side of the great gateway. Here, as in all large mansions, the "concierge" or porter, M. Bourigeau, was a person of immense importance, always able and disposed to make any one who was inclined to doubt his authority, feel it in cruel fashion. As could be easily seen, he held all the other servants in his power. He could let them absent themselves without leave, if he chose, and conceal all returns late at night after the closing of public balls and wine-shops. Thus, it is needless to say that M. Bourigeau and his wife were treated by their fellow-servants with the most servile adulation.

The owner of the house was not at home that evening, so that M. Casimir, the count's head valet, was serving coffee for the benefit of all the retainers. And while the company sipped the fragrant beverage which had been generously tinctured with cognac, provided by the butler, they all united in abusing their common enemy, the master of the house. For the time being, a pert little waiting-maid, with an odious turn-up nose, had the floor. She was addressing her remarks to a big, burly, and rather insolent-looking fellow, who had been added only the evening before to the corps of footmen. "The place is really intolerable," she was saying. "The wages are high, the food of the very best, the livery just such as would show off a good-looking man to the best advantage, and Madame Leon, the housekeeper, who has entire charge of everything, is not too lynx-eyed."

“And the work?”

“A mere nothing. Think, there are eighteen of us to serve only two persons, the count and Mademoiselle Marguerite. But then there is never any pleasure, never any amusement here.”

“What! is one bored then?”

“Bored to death. This grand house is worse than a tomb. No receptions, no dinners—nothing. Would you believe it, I have never seen the reception-rooms! They are always closed; and the furniture is dropping to pieces under its coverings. There are not three visitors in the course of a month.”

She was evidently incensed, and the new footman seemed to share her indignation. “Why, how is it?” he exclaimed. “Is the count an owl? A man who’s not yet fifty years old, and who’s said to be worth several millions.”

“Yes, millions; you may safely say it—and perhaps ten, perhaps twenty millions too.”

“Then all the more reason why there should be something going on here. What does he do with himself alone, all the blessed day?”

“Nothing. He reads in the library, or wanders about the garden. Sometimes, in the evening, he drives with Mademoiselle Marguerite to the Bois de Boulogne in a closed carriage; but that seldom happens. Besides, there is no such thing as teasing the poor man. I’ve been in the house for six months, and I’ve never heard him say anything but: ‘yes’; ‘no’; ‘do this’; ‘very well’; ‘retire.’ You would think these are the only words he knows. Ask M. Casimir if I’m not right.”

“Our guv’nor isn’t very gay, that’s a fact,” responded the valet.

The footman was listening with a serious air, as if greatly interested in the character of the people whom he was to serve. “And mademoiselle,” he asked, “what does she say to such an existence?”

“Bless me! during the six months she has been here, she has never once complained.”

“If she is bored,” added M. Casimir, “she conceals it bravely.”

“Naturally enough,” sneered the waiting-maid, with an ironical gesture; “each month that mademoiselle remains here, brings her too much money for her to complain.”

By the laugh that greeted this reply, and by the looks the older servants exchanged, the new-comer must have realized that he had discovered the secret skeleton hidden in every house. “What! what!” he exclaimed, on fire with curiosity; “is there really anything in that? To tell the truth, I was inclined to doubt it.”

His companions were evidently about to tell him all they knew, or rather all they thought they knew, when the front-door bell rang vigorously.

“There he comes!” exclaimed the concierge; “but he’s in too much of a hurry; hell have to wait awhile.”

He sullenly pulled the cord, however; the heavy door swayed on its hinges, and a cab-driver, breathless and hatless, burst into the room, crying, “Help! help!”

The servants sprang to their feet.

“Make haste!” continued the driver. “I was bringing a gentleman here —you must know him. He’s outside, in my vehicle——”

Without pausing to listen any longer, the servants rushed out, and the driver’s incoherent explanation at once became intelligible. At the bottom of the cab, a roomy four-wheeler, a man was lying all of a heap, speechless and motionless. He must have fallen forward, face downward, and owing to the jolting of the vehicle his head had slipped under the front seat.

“Poor devil!” muttered M. Casimir, “he must have had a stroke of apoplexy.” The valet was peering into the vehicle as he spoke, and his comrades were approaching, when suddenly he drew back, uttering a cry of horror. “Ah, my God! it is the count!”

Whenever there is an accident in Paris, a throng of inquisitive spectators seems to spring up from the very pavement, and indeed more than fifty persons had already congregated round about the vehicle. This

circumstance restored M. Casimir's composure; or, at least, some portion of it. "You must drive into the courtyard," he said, addressing the cabman. "M. Bourigeau, open the gate, if you please." And then, turning to another servant, he added:

"And you must make haste and fetch a physician—no matter who. Run to the nearest doctor, and don't return until you bring one with you."

The concierge had opened the gate, but the driver had disappeared; they called him, and on receiving no reply the valet seized the reins and skilfully guided the cab through the gateway.

Having escaped the scrutiny of the crowd, it now remained to remove the count from the vehicle, and this was a difficult task, on account of the singular position of his body; still, they succeeded at last, by opening both doors of the cab, the three strongest men uniting in their efforts. Then they placed him in a large arm-chair, carried him to his own room, and speedily had him undressed and in bed.

He had so far given no sign of life; and as he lay there with his head weighing heavily on the pillow, you might have thought that all was over. His most intimate friend would scarcely have recognized him. His features were swollen and discolored; his eyes were closed, and a dark purple circle, looking almost like a terrible bruise, extended round them. A spasm had twisted his lips, and his distorted mouth, which was drawn on one side and hung half open imparted a most sinister expression to his face. In spite of every precaution, he had been wounded as he was removed from the cab. His forehead had been grazed by a piece of iron, and a tiny stream of blood was trickling down upon his face. However, he still breathed; and by listening attentively, one could distinguish a faint rattling in his throat.

The servants, who had been so garrulous a few moments before, were silent now. They lingered in the room, exchanging glances of mute consternation. Their faces were pale and sad, and there were tears in the eyes of some of them. What was passing in their minds? Perhaps they were overcome by that unconquerable fear which sudden and unexpected death always provokes. Perhaps they unconsciously loved

this master, whose bread they ate. Perhaps their grief was only selfishness, and they were merely wondering what would become of them, where they should find another situation, and if it would prove a good one. Not knowing what to do, they talked together in subdued voices, each suggesting some remedy he had heard spoken of for such cases. The more sensible among them were proposing to go and inform mademoiselle or Madame Leon, whose rooms were on the floor above, when the rustling of a skirt against the door suddenly made them turn. The person whom they called "mademoiselle" was standing on the threshold.

Mademoiselle Marguerite was a beautiful young girl, about twenty years of age. She was a brunette of medium height, with big gloomy eyes shaded by thick eyebrows. Heavy masses of jet-black hair wreathed her lofty but rather sad and thoughtful forehead. There was something peculiar in her face—an expression of concentrated suffering, and a sort of proud resignation, mingled with timidity.

"What has happened?" she asked, gently. "What is the cause of all the noise I have heard? I have rung three times and the bell was not answered."

No one ventured to reply, and in her surprise she cast a hasty glance around. From where she stood, she could not see the bed stationed in an alcove; but she instantly noted the dejected attitude of the servants, the clothing scattered about the floor, and the disorder that pervaded this magnificent but severely furnished chamber, which was only lighted by the lamp which M. Bourigeau, the concierge, carried. A sudden dread seized her; she shuddered, and in a faltering voice she added: "Why are you all here? Speak, tell me what has happened."

M. Casimir stepped forward. "A great misfortune, mademoiselle, a terrible misfortune. The count——"

And he paused, frightened by what he was about to say.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite had understood him. She clasped both hands to her heart, as if she had received a fatal wound, and uttered the single word: "Lost!"

The next moment she turned as pale as death, her head drooped, her eyes closed, and she staggered as if about to fall. Two maids sprang forward to support her, but she gently repulsed them, murmuring, “Thanks! thanks! I am strong now.”

She was, in fact, sufficiently strong to conquer her weakness. She summoned all her resolution, and, paler than a statue, with set teeth and dry, glittering eyes, she approached the alcove. She stood there for a moment perfectly motionless, murmuring a few unintelligible words; but at last, crushed by her sorrow, she sank upon her knees beside the bed, buried her face in the counterpane and wept.

Deeply moved by the sight of this despair, the servants held their breath, wondering how it would all end. It ended suddenly. The girl sprang from her knees, as if a gleam of hope had darted through her heart. “A physician!” she said, eagerly.

“I have sent for one, mademoiselle,” replied M. Casimir. And hearing a voice and a sound of footsteps on the staircase, he added: “And fortunately, here he comes.”

The doctor entered. He was a young man, although his head was almost quite bald. He was short, very thin, clean-shaven, and clad in black from head to foot. Without a word, without a bow, he walked straight to the bedside, lifted the unconscious man’s eyelids, felt his pulse, and uncovered his chest, applying his ear to it. “This is a serious case,” he said at the close of his examination.

Mademoiselle Marguerite, who had followed his movements with the most poignant anxiety, could not repress a sob. “But all hope is not lost, is it, monsieur?” she asked in a beseeching voice, with hands clasped in passionate entreaty. “You will save him, will you not—you will save him?”

“One may always hope for the best.”

This was the doctor’s only answer. He had drawn his case of instruments from his pocket, and was testing the points of his lancets on the tip of his finger. When he had found one to his liking: “I must ask

you, mademoiselle," said he, "to order these women to retire, and to retire yourself. The men will remain to assist me, if I require help."

She obeyed submissively, but instead of returning to her own room, she remained in the hall, seating herself upon the lower step of the staircase near the door, counting the seconds, and drawing a thousand conjectures from the slightest sound.

Meanwhile, inside the room, the physician was proceeding slowly, not from temperament however, but from principle. Dr. Jodon—for such was his name—was an ambitious man who played a part. Educated by a "prince of science," more celebrated for the money he gained than for the cures he effected, he copied his master's method, his gestures, and even the inflections of his voice. By casting in people's eyes the same powder as his teacher had employed, he hoped to obtain the same results: a large practice and an immense fortune. In his secret heart he was by no means disconcerted by his patient's condition; on the contrary, he did not consider the count's state nearly as precarious as it really was.

But bleeding and cupping alike failed to bring the sick man to consciousness. He remained speechless and motionless; the only result obtained, was that his breathing became a trifle easier. Finding his endeavors fruitless, the doctor at last declared that all immediate remedies were exhausted, that "the women" might be allowed to return, and that nothing now remained but to wait for the effect of the remedies he was about to prescribe, and which they must procure from the nearest chemist.

Any other man would have been touched by the agony of entreaty contained in the glance that Mademoiselle Marguerite cast upon the physician as she returned into the room; but it did not affect him in the least. He calmly said, "I cannot give my decision as yet."

"My God!" murmured the unhappy girl; "oh, my God, have mercy upon me!"

But the doctor, copying his model, had stationed himself near the fireplace, with his elbow leaning on the mantel-shelf, in a graceful, though rather pompous attitude. “Now,” he said, addressing his remarks to M. Casimir, “I desire to make a few inquiries. Is this the first time the Count de Chalusse has had such an attack?”

“Yes, sir—at least since I have been in attendance upon him.”

“Very good. That is a chance in our favor. Tell me—have you ever heard him complain of vertigo, or of a buzzing in his ears?”

“Never.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed inclined to volunteer some remark, but the doctor imposed silence upon her by a gesture, and continued his examination. “Is the count a great eater?” he inquired. “Does he drink heavily?”

“The count is moderation itself, monsieur, and he always takes a great deal of water with his wine.”

The doctor listened with an air of intent thoughtfulness, his head slightly inclined forward, his brow contracted, and his under lip puffed out, while from time to time he stroked his beardless chin. He was copying his master. “The devil!” he said, sotto voce. “There must be some cause for such an attack, however. Nothing in the count’s constitution predisposes him to such an accident——” Then, suddenly turning toward Mademoiselle Marguerite: “Do you know, mademoiselle, whether the count has experienced any very violent emotion during the past few days?”

“Something occurred this very morning, which seemed to annoy him very much.”

“Ah! now we have it,” said the doctor, with the air of an oracle. “Why did you not tell me all this at first? It will be necessary for you to give me the particulars, mademoiselle.”

The young girl hesitated. The servants were dazed by the doctor’s manner; but Mademoiselle Marguerite was far from sharing their awe and admiration. She would have given anything to have had the regular

physician of the household there instead of him! As for this coarse examination in the presence of all these servants, and by the bedside of a man who, in spite of his apparent unconsciousness, was, perhaps, able to hear and to comprehend, she looked upon it as a breach of delicacy, even of propriety.

"It is of the most urgent importance that I should be fully informed of these particulars," repeated the physician peremptorily.

After such an assertion, further hesitation was out of the question. Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed to collect her thoughts, and then she sadly said: "Just as we sat down to breakfast this morning, a letter was handed to the count. No sooner had his eyes fallen upon it, than he turned as white as his napkin. He rose from his seat and began to walk hastily up and down the dining-room, uttering exclamations of anger and sorrow. I spoke to him, but he did not seem to hear me. However, after a few moments, he resumed his seat at the table, and began to eat ——"

"As usual?"

"He ate more than usual, monsieur. Only I must tell you that it seemed to me he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing. Four or five times he left the table, and then came back again. At last, after quite a struggle, he seemed to come to some decision. He tore the letter to pieces, and threw the pieces out of the window that opens upon the garden."

Mademoiselle Marguerite expressed herself with the utmost simplicity, and there was certainly nothing particularly extraordinary in her story. Still, those around her listened with breathless curiosity, as though they were expecting some startling revelation, so much does the human mind abhor that which is natural and incline to that which is mysterious.

Without seeming to notice the effect she had produced, and addressing herself to the physician alone, the girl continued: "After the letter was destroyed, M. de Chalusse seemed himself again. Coffee was served, and he afterward lighted a cigar as usual. However, he soon let it go out. I dared not disturb him by any remarks; but suddenly he said to

me: ‘It’s strange, but I feel very uncomfortable.’ A moment passed, without either of us speaking, and then he added: ‘I am certainly not well. Will you do me the favor to go to my room for me? Here is the key of my escritoire; open it, and on the upper shelf you will find a small bottle which please bring to me.’ I noticed with some surprise that M. de Chalusse, who usually speaks very distinctly, stammered and hesitated considerably in making this request, but, unfortunately, I did not think much about it at the time. I did as he requested, and he poured eight or ten drops of the contents of the vial into a glass of water, and swallowed it.”

So intense was Dr. Jodon’s interest that he became himself again. He forgot to attitudinize. “And after that?” he asked, eagerly.

“After that, M. de Chalusse seemed to feel much better, and retired to his study as usual. I fancied that any annoyance the letter had caused him was forgotten; but I was wrong, for in the afternoon he sent a message, through Madame Leon, requesting me to join him in the garden. I hastened there, very much surprised, for the weather was extremely disagreeable. ‘Dear Marguerite,’ he said, on seeing me, ‘help me to find the fragments of that letter which I flung from the window this morning. I would give half my fortune for an address which it must certainly have contained, but which I quite overlooked in my anger.’ I helped him as he asked. He might have reasonably hoped to succeed, for it was raining when the scraps of paper were thrown out, and instead of flying through the air, they fell directly on to the ground. We succeeded in finding a large number of the scraps, but what M. de Chalusse so particularly wanted was not to be read on any one of them. Several times he spoke of his regret, and cursed his precipitation.”

M. Bourigeau, the concierge, and M. Casimir exchanged a significant smile. They had seen the count searching for the remnants of this letter, and had thought him little better than an idiot. But now everything was explained.

“I was much grieved at the count’s disappointment,” continued Mademoiselle Marguerite, “but suddenly he exclaimed, joyfully: ‘That address—why, such a person will give it to me—what a fool I am!’”

The physician evinced such absorbing interest in this narrative that he forgot to retain his usual impassive attitude. “Such a person! Who—who was this person?” he inquired eagerly, without apparently realizing the impropriety of his question.

But the girl felt indignant. She silenced her indiscreet questioner with a haughty glance, and in the driest possible tone, replied: “I have forgotten the name.”

Cut to the quick, the doctor suddenly resumed his master’s pose; but all the same his imperturbable sang-froid was sensibly impaired. “Believe me, mademoiselle, that interest alone—a most respectful interest—”

She did not even seem to hear his excuse, but resumed: “I know, however, monsieur, that M. de Chalusse intended applying to the police if he failed to obtain this address from the person in question. After this he appeared to be entirely at ease. At three o’clock he rang for his valet, and ordered dinner two hours earlier than usual. We sat down to table at about half-past four. At five he rose, kissed me gayly, and left the house on foot, telling me that he was confident of success, and that he did not expect to return before midnight.” The poor child’s firmness now gave way; her eyes filled with tears, and it was in a voice choked with sobs that she added, pointing to M. de Chalusse: “But at half-past six they brought him back as you see him now——”

An interval of silence ensued, so deep that one could hear the faint breathing of the unconscious man still lying motionless on his bed. However, the particulars of the attack were yet to be learned; and it was M. Casimir whom the physician next addressed. “What did the driver who brought your master home say to you?”

“Oh! almost nothing, sir; not ten words.”

“You must find this man and bring him to me.”

Two servants rushed out in search of him. He could not be far away, for his vehicle was still standing in the courtyard. They found him in a wine-shop near by. Some of the inquisitive spectators who had been disappointed in their curiosity by Casimir's thoughtfulness had treated him to some liquor, and in exchange he had told them all he knew about the affair. He had quite recovered from his fright, and was cheerful, even gay.

"Come make haste, you are wanted," said the servants.

He emptied his glass and followed them with very bad grace, muttering and swearing between his set teeth. The doctor, strange to say, was considerate enough to go out into the hall to question him; but no information of value was gained by the man's answers. He declared that the gentleman had hired him at twelve o'clock, hoping by this means to extort pay for five hours' driving, which, joined to the liberal gratuity he could not fail to obtain, would remunerate him handsomely for his day's work. Living is dear, it should be remembered, and a fellow makes as much as he can.

When the cabby had gone off, still growling, although a couple of louis had been placed in his hand, the doctor returned to his patient. He involuntarily assumed his accustomed attitude, with crossed arms, a gloomy expression of countenance, and his forehead furrowed as if with thought and anxiety. But this time he was not acting a part. In spite, or rather by reason of, the full explanation that had been given him, he found something suspicious and mysterious in the whole affair. A thousand vague and undefinable suspicions crossed his mind. Was he in presence of a crime? Certainly, evidently not. But what was the cause then of the mystery and reticence he detected? Was he upon the track of some lamentable family secret—one of those terrible scandals, concealed for a long time, but which at last burst forth with startling effect? The prospect of being mixed up in such an affair caused him infinite pleasure. It would bring him into notice; he would be mentioned in the papers; and his increased practice would fill his hands with gold.

But what could he do to ingratiate himself with these people, impose himself upon them if needs be? He reflected for some time, and finally what he thought an excellent plan occurred to him. He approached Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was weeping in an arm-chair, and touched her gently on the shoulder. She sprang to her feet at once. “One more question, mademoiselle,” said he, imparting as much solemnity to his tone as he could. “Do you know what liquid it was that M. de Chalusse took this morning?”

“Alas! no, monsieur.”

“It is very important that I should know. The accuracy of my diagnosis is dependent upon it. What has become of the vial?”

“I think M. de Chalusse replaced it in his escritoire.”

The physician pointed to an article of furniture to the left of the fireplace: “There?” he asked.

“Yes, monsieur.”

He deliberated, but at last conquering his hesitation, he said: “Could we not obtain this vial?”

Mademoiselle Marguerite blushed. “I haven’t the key,” she faltered, in evident embarrassment.

M. Casimir approached: “It must be in the count’s pocket, and if mademoiselle will allow me——”

But she stepped back with outstretched arms as if to protect the escritoire. “No,” she exclaimed, “no—the escritoire shall not be touched. I will not permit it——”

“But, mademoiselle,” insisted the doctor, “your father——”

“The Count de Chalusse is not my father!”

Dr. Jodon was greatly disconcerted by Mademoiselle Marguerite’s vehemence. “Ah!” said he, in three different tones, “ah! ah!”

In less than a second, a thousand strange and contradictory suppositions darted through his brain. Who, then, could this girl be, if she were not Mademoiselle de Chalusse? What right had she in that

house? How was it that she reigned as a sovereign there? Above all, why this angry outburst for no other apparent cause than a very natural and exceedingly insignificant request on his part?

However, she had regained her self-possession, and it was easy to see by her manner that she was seeking some means of escape from threatened danger. At last she found it. “Casimir,” she said, authoritatively, “search M. de Chalusse’s pocket for the key of his escritoire.”

Astonished by what he regarded as a new caprice, the valet obeyed. He gathered up the garments strewn over the floor, and eventually drew a key from one of the waistcoat pockets. Mademoiselle Marguerite took it from him, and then in a determined tone, exclaimed: “A hammer.”

It was brought; whereupon, to the profound amazement of the physician, she knelt down beside the fireplace, laid the key upon one of the andirons, and with a heavy blow of the hammer, broke it into fragments. “Now,” said she, quietly, “my mind will be at rest. I am certain,” she added, turning toward the servants, “that M. de Chalusse would approve what I have done. When he recovers, he will have another key made.”

The explanation was superfluous. All the servants understood the motive that had influenced her, and were saying to themselves, “Mademoiselle is right. It would not do to touch the escritoire of a dying man. Who knows but what there are millions in it? If anything were missed, why any of us might be accused. But if the key is destroyed, it will be impossible to suspect any one.”

However, the physician’s conjectures were of an entirely different nature. “What can there be in that escritoire which she desires to conceal?” he thought.

But there was no excuse for prolonging his visit. Once more he examined the sick man, whose condition remained unchanged; and then, after explaining what was to be done in his absence, he declared that he must leave at once, as he had a number of important visits to make; he added, however, that he would return about midnight.

“Madame Leon and I will watch over M. de Chalusse,” replied Mademoiselle Marguerite; “that is sufficient assurance, monsieur, that your orders will be obeyed to the letter. Only—you will not take offence, I trust, if I ask the count’s regular physician to meet you in consultation.”

Such a proposal was anything but pleasing to M. Jodon, who had met with the same misfortune in this aristocratic neighborhood several times before. When an accident happened, he was summoned because he chanced to be close at hand, but just as he was flattering himself that he had gained a desirable patient, he found himself in presence of some celebrated physician, who had come from a distance in his carriage. Accustomed to such disappointments, he knew how to conceal his dissatisfaction.

“Were I in your place, mademoiselle, I should do precisely what you suggest,” he answered, “and should you think it unnecessary for me to call, I——”

“Oh! monsieur, on the contrary, I shall certainly expect you.”

“In that case, very well.” Thereupon he bowed and left the room.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite followed him on to the landing. “You know, monsieur,” she said, speaking rapidly in an undertone, “that I am not M. de Chalusse’s daughter. You may, therefore, tell me the truth. Is his condition hopeless?”

“Alarming—yes; hopeless—no.”

“But, monsieur, this terrible unconsciousness——”

“It usually follows such an attack as he has been the victim of. Still we may hope that the paralysis will gradually disappear, and the power of motion return after a time.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite was listening, pale, agitated, and embarrassed. It was evident that she had a question on her lips which she scarcely dared to ask. At last, however, summoning all her courage, she exclaimed: “And if M. de Chalusse should not recover, will he die without regaining consciousness—without being able to speak?”

“I am unable to say, mademoiselle—the count’s malady is one of those which set at naught all the hypotheses of science.”

She thanked him sadly, sent a servant to summon Madame Leon, and returned to the count’s room.

As for the doctor, he said to himself as he went downstairs, “What a strange girl! Is she afraid that the count will regain consciousness? or, on the contrary, does she wish him to speak? Is there any question of a will under all this? What else can it be? What is at stake?” His preoccupation was so intense that he almost forgot where he was going, and he paused on every step. It was not until the fresh air of the courtyard blew upon his face, reminding him of the realities of life, that the charlatanesque element in his nature regained the ascendency. “My friend,” he said, addressing M. Casimir, who was lighting him out, “you must at once have some straw spread over the street so as to deaden the sound of the vehicles. And to-morrow, you must inform the commissary of police.”

Ten minutes later a thick bed of straw had been strewed across the thoroughfare, and the drivers of passing vehicles involuntarily slackened their speed, for every one in Paris knows what this signifies. M. Casimir personally superintended the work which was intrusted to the grooms, and he was about to return indoors again, when a young man, who had been walking up and down in front of the mansion for more than an hour, hastily approached him. He was a beardless fellow with a strangely wrinkled face, as leaden-tinted as that of a confirmed absinthe-drinker. His general expression was shrewd, and at the same time impudent, and surprising audacity gleamed in his eyes. “What do you want?” asked M. Casimir.

The young fellow bowed humbly, and replied, “Ah, don’t you recognize me, monsieur? I’m Toto—excuse me—Victor Chupin, employed by M. Isidore Fortunat.”

“Oh, yes. I recollect.”

“I came, in obedience to my employer’s orders, to inquire if you had obtained the information you promised him; but seeing that something had happened at your house, I didn’t dare go in, but decided to watch for

you——”

“And you did quite right, my lad. I have no information to give you—ah, yes! stop! The Marquis de Valorsay was closeted with the count for two hours yesterday. But what good will that do? The count has been taken suddenly ill, and he will scarcely live through the night.”

Victor Chupin was thunderstruck. “Impossible!” he cried. “Is it for him that the straw has been strewed in the street?”

“It’s for him.”

“What a lucky fellow! No one would go to such expense for me! But I have an idea that my guv’nor will hardly laugh when I tell him this. Still, thank you all the same, m’sieur, and au revoir.” He was darting off when a sudden thought detained him. “Excuse me,” said he, with conjuror like volubility; “I was so horrified that I forgot business. Tell me, m’sieur, if the count dies, you’ll take charge of the funeral arrangements, won’t you? Very well; a word of advice then. Don’t go to the regular undertakers, but come to me: here’s my address”—proffering a card—“I will treat with the undertakers for you, and take charge of everything. It will be much better and far cheaper for you, on account of certain arrangements I’ve made with these parties. Everything, to the very last plume, is warranted to give perfect satisfaction. Each item will be specified in the bill, and can be verified during the ceremony, no payment exacted until after delivery. Well, is it understood?”

The valet shrugged his shoulders. “Nonsense!” said he, carelessly; “what is all that to me?”

“Ah! I forgot to mention that there would be a commission of two hundred francs to divide between us.”

“That’s consideration. Give me your card, and rely on me. My compliments to M. Fortunat, please.” And so saying, he re-entered the house.

Victor Chupin drew a huge silver watch from his pocket and consulted it. “Five minutes to eight,” he growled, “and the guv’nor expects me at eight precisely. I shall have to stretch out my legs.”

II.

M. Isidore Fortunat resided at No. 27 Place de la Bourse, on the third floor. He had a handsome suite of apartments: a drawing-room, a dining-room, a bed-room, a large outer office where his clerks worked, and a private one, which was the sanctuary of his thoughts and meditations. The whole cost him only six thousand francs a year, a mere trifle as rents go nowadays. His lease entitled him, moreover, to the use of a room ten feet square, up under the eaves, where he lodged his servant, Madame Dodelin, a woman of forty-six or thereabouts, who had met with reverses of fortune, and who now took such good charge of his establishment, that his table—for he ate at home—was truly fit for a sybarite.

Having been established here for five years or more, M. Fortunat was very well known in the neighborhood, and, as he paid his rent promptly, and met all his obligations without demur, he was generally respected. Besides, people knew very well from what source M. Fortunat derived his income. He gave his attention to contested claims, liquidations, the recovery of legacies, and so on, as was shown by the inscription in large letters which figured on the elegant brass plate adorning his door. He must have had a prosperous business, for he employed six collectors in addition to the clerks who wrote all day long in his office; and his clients were so numerous that the concierge was often heard to complain of the way they ran up and down the stairs, declaring that it was worse than a procession.

To be just, we must add that M. Fortunat's appearance, manners and conduct were of a nature to quiet all suspicions. He was some thirty-eight years of age, extremely methodical in his habits, gentle and refined in his manner, intelligent, very good-looking, and always dressed in perfect taste. He was accused of being, in business matters, as cold, as polished, and as hard as one of the marble slabs of the Morgue; but then,

no one was obliged to employ him unless they chose to do so. This much is certain: he did not frequent cafes or places of amusement. If he went out at all after dinner, it was only to pass the evening at the house of some rich client in the neighborhood. He detested the smell of tobacco, and was inclined to be devout—never failing to attend eight o'clock mass on Sunday mornings. His housekeeper suspected him of matrimonial designs, and perhaps she was right.

On the evening that the Count de Chalusse was struck with apoplexy M. Isidore Fortunat had been dining alone and was sipping a cup of tea when the door-bell rang, announcing the arrival of a visitor. Madame Dodelin hastened to open the door, and in walked Victor Chupin, breathless from his hurried walk. It had not taken him twenty-five minutes to cover the distance which separates the Rue de Courcelles from the Place de la Bourse.

"You are late, Victor," said M. Fortunat, quietly.

"That's true, monsieur, but it isn't my fault. Everything was in confusion down there, and I was obliged to wait."

"How is that? Why?"

"The Count de Chalusse was stricken with apoplexy this evening, and he is probably dead by this time."

M. Fortunat sprang from his chair with a livid face and trembling lips. "Stricken with apoplexy!" he exclaimed in a husky voice. "I am ruined!"

Then, fearing Madame Dodelin's curiosity, he seized the lamp and rushed into his office, crying to Chupin: "Follow me."

Chupin obeyed without a word, for he was a shrewd fellow, and knew how to make the best of a trying situation. He was not usually allowed to enter this private room, the floor of which was covered with a magnificent carpet; and so, after carefully closing the door, he remained standing, hat in hand, and looking somewhat intimidated. But M. Fortunat seemed to have forgotten his presence. After depositing the lamp on the mantel-shelf, he walked several times round and round the room like a hunted beast seeking for some means of egress.

“If the count is dead,” he muttered, “the Marquis de Valorsay is lost! Farewell to the millions!”

The blow was so cruel, and so entirely unexpected, that he could not, would not believe in its reality. He walked straight to Chupin, and caught him by the collar, as if the young fellow had been the cause of this misfortune. “It isn’t possible,” said he; “the count CANNOT be dead. You are deceiving me, or they deceived you. You must have misunderstood—you only wished to give some excuse for your delay perhaps. Speak, say something!”

As a rule, Chupin was not easily impressed, but he felt almost frightened by his employer’s agitation. “I only repeated what M. Casimir told me, monsieur,” was his reply.

He then wished to furnish some particulars, but M. Fortunat had already resumed his furious tramp to and fro, giving vent to his wrath and despair in incoherent exclamations. “Forty thousand francs lost!” he exclaimed. “Forty thousand francs, counted out there on my desk! I see them yet, counted and placed in the hand of the Marquis de Valorsay in exchange for his signature. My savings for a number of years, and I have only a worthless scrap of paper to show for them. That cursed marquis! And he was to come here this evening, and I was to give him ten thousand francs more. They are lying there in that drawer. Let him come, the wretch, let him come!”

Anger had positively brought foam to M. Fortunat’s lips, and any one seeing him then would subsequently have had but little confidence in his customary good-natured air and unctuous politeness. “And yet the marquis is as much to be pitied as I am,” he continued. “He loses as much, even more! And such a sure thing it seemed, too! What speculation can a fellow engage in after this? And a man must put his money somewhere; he can’t bury it in the ground!”

Chupin listened with an air of profound commiseration; but it was only assumed. He was inwardly jubilant, for his interest in the affair was in direct opposition to that of his employer. Indeed, if M. Fortunat lost

forty thousand francs by the Count de Chalusse's death, Chupin expected to make a hundred francs commission on the funeral.

"Still, he may have made a will!" pursued M. Fortunat. "But no, I'm sure he hasn't. A poor devil who has only a few sous to leave behind him always takes this precaution. He thinks he may be run over by an omnibus and suddenly killed, and he always writes and signs his last wishes. But millionaires don't think of such things; they believe themselves immortal!" He paused to reflect for a moment, for power of reflection had returned to him. His excitement had quickly spent itself by reason of its very violence. "This much is certain," he resumed, slowly, and in a more composed voice, "whether the count has made a will or not, Valorsay will lose the millions he expected from Chalusse. If there is no will, Mademoiselle Marguerite won't have a sou, and then, good evening! If there is one, this devil of a girl, suddenly becoming her own mistress, and wealthy into the bargain, will send Monsieur de Valorsay about his business, especially if she loves another, as he himself admits—and in that case, again good evening!"

M. Fortunat drew out his handkerchief, and, pausing in front of the looking-glass, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and arranged his disordered hair. He was one of those men who may be stunned, but never crushed, by a catastrophe. "In conclusion," he muttered, "I must enter my forty thousand francs as an item in the profit and loss account. It only remains to be seen if it would not be possible to regain them in the same affair." He was again master of himself, and never had his mind been more clear. He seated himself at his desk, leant his elbows upon it, rested his head on his hands, and remained for some time perfectly motionless; but there was triumph in his gesture when he at last looked up again.

"I am safe," he muttered, so low that Chupin could not hear him. "What a fool I was! If there is no will a fourth of the millions shall be mine! Ah, when a man knows his ground, he never need lose the battle!

But I must act quickly," he added, "very quickly." And so speaking, he rose and glanced at the clock. "Nine o'clock," said he. "I must open the campaign this very evening."

Motionless in his dark corner, Chupin still retained his commiserating attitude; but he was so oppressed with curiosity that he could scarcely breathe. He opened his eyes and ears to the utmost, and watched his employer's slightest movements with intense interest.

Prompt to act when he had once decided upon his course, M. Fortunat now drew from his desk a large portfolio, crammed full of letters, receipts, bills, deeds of property, and old parchments. "I can certainly discover the necessary pretext here," he murmured, rummaging through the mass of papers. But he did not at once find what he sought, and he was growing impatient, as could be seen by his feverish haste, when all at once he paused with a sigh of relief. "At last!"

He held in his hand a soiled and crumpled note of hand, affixed by a pin to a huissier's protest, thus proving conclusively that it had been dishonored. M. Fortunat waved these strips of paper triumphantly, and with a satisfied air exclaimed: "It is here that I must strike; it is here—if Casimir hasn't deceived me—that I shall find the indispensable information I need."

He was in such haste that he did not wait to put his portfolio in order. He threw it with the papers it had contained into the drawer of his desk again, and, approaching Chupin, he asked, "It was you, was it not, Victor, who obtained that information respecting the solvency of the Vantrassons, husband and wife, who let out furnished rooms?"

"Yes, monsieur, and I gave you the answer: nothing to hope for——"

"I know; but that doesn't matter. Do you remember their address?"

"Perfectly. They are now living on the Asnieres Road, beyond the fortifications, on the right hand side."

"What is the number?"

Chupin hesitated, reflected for a moment, and then began to scratch his head furiously, as he was in the habit of doing whenever his memory failed him and he wished to recall it to duty. “I’m not sure whether the number is eighteen or forty-six,” he said, at last; “that is——”

“Never mind,” interrupted M. Fortunat. “If I sent you to the house could you find it?”

“Oh—yes, m’sieur—at once—with my eyes shut. I can see the place perfectly—a rickety old barrack. There is a tract of unoccupied land on one side, and a kitchen-garden in the rear.”

“Very well; you shall accompany me there.”

Chupin seemed astonished by this strange proposal. “What, m’sieur,” said he, “do you think of going there at this time of night?”

“Why not? Shall we find the establishment closed?”

“No; certainly not. Vantrasson doesn’t merely keep furnished rooms; he’s a grocer, and sells liquor too. His place is open until eleven o’clock at least. But if you are going there to present a bill, it’s perhaps a little late. If I were in your place, m’sieur, I should wait till to-morrow. It’s raining, and the streets are deserted. It’s an out-of-the-way place too; and in such cases, a man has been known to settle his account with whatever came handiest—with a cudgel, or a bullet, for instance.”

“Are you afraid?”

This question seemed so utterly absurd to Chupin that he was not in the least offended by it; his only answer was a disdainful shrug of the shoulders.

“Then we will go,” remarked M. Fortunat. “While I’m getting ready, go and hire a cab, and see that you get a good horse.”

Chupin was off in an instant, tearing down the staircase like a tempest. There was a cab-stand only a few steps from the house, but he preferred to run to the jobmaster’s stables in the Rue Feydeau.

“Cab, sir!” shouted several men, as they saw him approaching.

He made no reply, but began to examine the horses with the air of a connoisseur, until at last he found an animal that suited him. Thereupon he beckoned to the driver, and going to the little office where a woman sat reading: “My five sous, if you please,” he said, authoritatively.

The woman looked at him. Most jobmasters are in the habit of giving five sous to any servant who comes in search of a cab for his master; and this was the custom here. But the keeper of the office, who felt sure that Chupin was not a servant, hesitated; and this made the young fellow angry. “Make haste,” he cried, imperiously. “If you don’t, I shall run to the nearest stand.”

The woman at once threw him five sous, which he pocketed with a satisfied grin. They were his—rightfully his—since he had taken the trouble to gain them. He then hastily returned to the office to inform his employer that the cab was waiting at the door, and found himself face to face with a sight which made him open his eyes to their widest extent.

M. Fortunat had profited by his clerk’s absence, not to disguise himself—that would be saying too much—but to make some changes in his appearance. He had arrayed himself in a long overcoat, shiny with grease and wear, and falling below his knees; in place of his elegant satin cravat he had knotted a gaudy silk neckerchief about his throat; his boots were worn, and out of shape; and his hat would have been treated with contempt even by a dealer in old clothes. Of the prosperous Fortunat, so favorably known round about the Place de la Bourse, naught remained save his face and his hands. Another Fortunat had taken his place, more than needy in aspect—wretched, famished, gaunt with hunger, ready for any desperate deed. And, yet, he seemed at ease in this garb; it yielded to his every movement, as if he had worn it for a long time. The butterfly had become a chrysalis again. Chupin’s admiring smile must have repaid him for his trouble. Since the young clerk evinced approval, M. Fortunat felt sure that Vantrasson would take him for what he wished to appear—a poor devil of an agent, who was acting on some other person’s behalf. “Let us start at once,” said he.

But just as he was leaving the ante-room, he remembered an order of great importance which he wished to give. He called Madame Dodelin, and without paying the slightest heed to her astonishment at seeing him thus attired: “If the Marquis de Valorsay comes, in my absence,” said he —“and he WILL come—ask him to wait for me. I shall return before midnight. Don’t take him into my office—he can wait in the drawing-room.”

This last order was certainly unnecessary, since M. Fortunat had closed and double-locked his office door and placed the key carefully in his own pocket. But perhaps he had forgotten this circumstance. There were now no traces of his recent anger and disappointment. He was in excellent humor; and you might have supposed that he was starting on an enterprise from which he expected to derive both pleasure and profit.

Chupin was climbing to a place on the box beside the driver when his employer bade him take a seat inside the vehicle. They were not long in reaching their destination, for the horse was really a good one, and the driver had been stimulated by the promise of a magnificent gratuity. In fact, M. Fortunat and his companion reached the Asnieres Road in less than forty minutes.

In obedience to the orders he had received before starting, the cabman drew up on the right hand side of the road, at about a hundred paces from the city gate, beyond the fortifications. “Well, sir, here you are! Are you satisfied?” he inquired, as he opened the door.

“Perfectly satisfied,” replied M. Fortunat. “Here is your promised gratuity. Now, you have only to wait for us. Don’t stir from this place. Do you understand?”

But the driver shook his head. “Excuse me,” he said, “but if it’s all the same to you, I will station myself over there near the gate. Here, you see, I should be afraid to go to sleep, while over there——”

“Very well; suit yourself,” M. Fortunat replied.

This precaution on the driver’s part convinced him that Chupin had not exaggerated the evil reputation of this quarter of the Parisian suburbs. And, indeed, there was little of a reassuring character in the

aspect of this broad road, quite deserted at this hour, and shrouded in the darkness of a tempestuous night. The rain had ceased falling, but the wind blew with increased violence, twisting the branches off the trees, tearing slates from the roofs, and shaking the street-lamps so furiously as to extinguish the gas. They could not see a step before them; the mud was ankle-deep, and not a person, not a solitary soul was visible.

"Are we almost there?" M. Fortunat asked every ten paces.

"Almost there, m'sieur."

Chupin said this; but to tell the truth, he knew nothing about it. He tried to discover where he was, but did not succeed. Houses were becoming scanty, and vacant plots of building ground more numerous; it was only with the greatest difficulty that one could occasionally discern a light. At last, however, after a quarter of an hour's hard struggling, Chupin uttered a joyful cry. "Here we are, m'sieur—look!" said he.

A large building, five stories high, sinister of aspect, and standing quite alone, could just be distinguished in the darkness. It was already falling to pieces, and yet it was not entirely completed. Plainly enough, the speculator who had undertaken the enterprise had not been rich enough to complete it. On seeing the many closely pierced windows of the facade, a passer-by could not fail to divine for what purpose the building had been erected; and in order that no one should remain in ignorance of it, this inscription: "Furnished Rooms," figured in letters three feet high, between the third and fourth floors. The inside arrangements could be easily divined: innumerable rooms, all small and inconvenient, and let out at exorbitant rentals.

However, Victor Chupin's memory had misled him. This establishment was not on the right, but on the left-hand side of the road, a perfect mire through which M. Fortunat and his companion were obliged to cross. Their eyes having become accustomed to the darkness, they could discern sundry details as they approached the building. The ground floor comprised two shops, one of which was closed, but the other was still open, and a faint light gleamed through the soiled red curtains. Over the frontage appeared the shop-keeper's name,

Vantrasson, while on either side, in smaller letters, were the words: “Groceries and Provisions—Foreign and French Wines.” Everything about this den denoted abject poverty and low debauchery.

M. Fortunat certainly did not recoil, but before entering the shop he was not sorry to have an opportunity to reconnoitre. He approached cautiously, and peered through the window at a place where a rent in the curtain allowed him some view of the interior. Behind the counter a woman who looked some fifty years of age was seated, mending a soiled dress by the light of a smoking lamp. She was short and very stout. She seemed literally weighed down, and puffed out by an unwholesome and unnatural mass of superfluous flesh; and she was as white as if her veins had been filled with water, instead of blood. Her hanging cheeks, her receding forehead, and her thin lips, imparted an alarming expression of wickedness and cunning to her countenance. At the farther end of the store Fortunat could vaguely discern the figure of a man seated on a stool. He seemed to be asleep, for his crossed arms rested on a table, with his head leaning on them.

“Good luck!” whispered Chupin in his employer’s ear; “there is not a customer in the place. Vantrasson and his wife are alone.” This circumstance was by no means displeasing to M. Fortunat, as could be seen by his expression of face. “So, m’sieur,” continued Chupin, “you need have no fears. I’ll remain here and watch, while you go in.”

M. Fortunat did so. On hearing the door open and shut, the woman laid down her work. “What can I do for monsieur?” she asked, in a wheedling voice.

M. Fortunat did not reply at once; but he drew the note with which he had provided himself from his pocket, and displayed it. “I am a huissier’s clerk,” he then exclaimed; “and I called in reference to this little matter—a note of hand for five hundred and eighty-three francs, value received in goods, signed Vantrasson, and made payable to the order of a person named Barutin.”

“An execution!” said the woman, whose voice suddenly soured. “Vantrasson, wake up, and come and see about this.”

This summons was unnecessary. On hearing the words “note of hand,” the man had lifted his head; and at the name of Barutin, he rose and approached with a heavy, uncertain step, as if he had not yet slept off his intoxication. He was younger than his wife, tall, with a well-proportioned and athletic form. His features were regular, but the abuse of alcohol and all sorts of excesses had greatly marred them, and their present expression was one of ferocious brutishness. “What’s that you are talking about?” he asked in a harsh, grating voice. “Is it to mock people that you come and ask for money on the 15th of October—rent day? Where have you seen any money left after the landlord has made his round? Besides, what is this bill? Give it me to look at.”

M. Fortunat was not guilty of such folly; he did not intrust the paper to Vantrasson’s hand, but held it a little distance from him, and then read it aloud.

When he had finished: “That note fell due eighteen months ago,” declared Vantrasson. “It is worth nothing now.”

“You are mistaken—a note of this kind is of value any time within five years after the day it goes to protest.”

“Possibly; but as Barutin has failed, and gone no one knows where, I am released——”

“Another mistake on your part. You owe these five hundred and eighty-three francs to the person who bought this note at Barutin’s sale, and who has given my employer orders to prosecute——”

The blood had risen to Vantrasson’s face. “And what of that? Do you suppose I’ve never been sued for debts before? Even the king can’t take anything from a person who possesses nothing; and I own nothing. My furniture is all pawned or mortgaged, and my stock is not worth a hundred francs. When your employer finds it useless to waste money in worrying me, he’ll let me alone. You can’t injure a man like me.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“Unfortunately you are again mistaken, for although the holder of the note doesn’t care so very much about obtaining his dues, he’ll spend his own money like water to make trouble for you.” And thereupon M. Fortunat began to draw a vivid and frightful picture of a poor debtor pursued by a rich creditor who harassed him, and tortured him, and hounded him everywhere, until not even a change of clothing was left him.

Vantrasson rolled his eyes and brandished his formidable fist in the most defiant manner; but his wife was evidently much alarmed. At last she could bear it no longer, and rising hastily she led her husband to the rear of the shop, saying: “Come, I must speak with you.”

He followed her, and they remained for some little time conversing together in a low tone, but with excited gestures. When they returned, the woman opened the conversation. “Alas! sir,” she said to M. Fortunat, “we have no money just now; business is so very bad, and if you prosecute us, we are lost. What can be done? You look like an honest man; give us your advice.”

M. Fortunat did not reply at once; he was apparently absorbed in thought, but suddenly he exclaimed: “One owes a duty to unfortunate folks, and I’m going to tell you the exact truth. My employer, who isn’t a bad man at heart, hasn’t the slightest desire for revenge. He said to me: ‘Go and see these Vantrassons, and if they seem to be worthy people, propose a compromise. If they choose to accept it, I shall be quite satisfied.’”

“And what is this compromise?”

“It is this: you must write an acknowledgment of the debt on a sheet of stamped paper, together with a promise to pay a little on account each month. In exchange I will give you this note of hand.”

The husband and wife exchanged glances, and it was the woman who said: “We accept.”

But to carry out this arrangement it was necessary to have a sheet of stamped paper, and the spurious clerk had neglected to provide himself with some. This circumstance seemed to annoy him greatly, and you

might almost have sworn that he regretted the concession he had promised. Did he think of going? Madame Vantrasson feared so, and turning eagerly to her husband, she exclaimed: “Run to the tobacco shop in the Rue de Levis; you will find some paper there!”

He started off at once, and M. Fortunat breathed freely again. He had certainly retained his composure admirably during the interview, but more than once he had fancied that Vantrasson was about to spring on him, crush him with his brawny hands, tear the note from him, burn it, and then throw him, Fortunat, out into the street, helpless and nearly dead. But now that danger had passed and Madame Vantrasson, fearing he might tire of waiting, was prodigal in her attentions. She brought him the only unbroken chair in the establishment, and insisted that he should partake of some refreshment—a glass of wine at the very least. While rummaging among the bottles, she alternately thanked him and complained, declaring she had a right to repine, since she had known better days—but fate had been against her ever since her marriage, though she had little thought she would end her days in such misery, after having been so happy in the Count de Chalusse’s household many years before.

To all appearance, M. Fortunat listened with the mere superficial interest which ordinary politeness requires one to show, but in reality his heart was filled with intense delight. Coming here without any clearly-defined plan, circumstances had served him a thousand times better than he could reasonably have hoped. He had preserved his power over the Vantrassons, had won their confidence, had succeeded in obtaining a tete-a-tete with the wife, and to crown all, this woman alluded, of her own accord, to the very subject upon which he was longing to question her.

“Ah! if I were only back in the Count’s household again,” she exclaimed. “Six hundred francs a year, and gifts worth double that amount. Those were good times for me. But you know how it is—one is never content with one’s lot, and then the heart is weak——”

She had not succeeded in finding the sweet wine which she proposed to her guest; so in its place she substituted a mixture of ratafia and brandy in two large glasses which she placed upon the counter. “One evening, to my sorrow,” she resumed, “I met Vantrasson at a ball. It was the 13th day of the month. I might have known no good would come of it. Ah, you should have seen him at that time, in full uniform. He belonged to the Paris Guards then. All the women were crazy about soldiers, and my head was turned, too——” Her tone, her gestures, and the compression of her thin lips, revealed the bitterness of her disappointment and her unavailing regret. “Ah, these handsome men!” she continued; “don’t talk to me about them! This one had heard of my savings. I had nineteen thousand francs, so he begged me to marry him, and I was fool enough to consent. Yes, fool—for I was forty, and he was only thirty. I might have known it was my money that he wanted, and not me. However, I gave up my situation, and even purchased a substitute for him, in order that I might have him all to myself.”

She had gradually warmed with her theme, as she described her confidence and blind credulity, and then, with a tragic gesture, as if she desired to drive away these cruel memories, she suddenly seized her glass and emptied it at a draught.

Chupin, who was still at his post outside, experienced a thrill of envy, and involuntarily licked his lips. “A mixed ratafia,” he said, longingly. “I shouldn’t object to one myself.”

However, this choice compound seemed to inspire Madame Vantrasson with renewed energy, for, with still greater earnestness, she resumed: “At first, all went well. We employed my savings in purchasing the Hotel des Espagnes, in the Rue Notre Dame des Victoires, and business prospered; there was never a vacant room. But any person who has drank, sir, will drink again. Vantrasson kept sober for a few months, but gradually he fell into his old habits. He was in such a condition most of the time that he was scarcely able to ask for food. And if that had been all! But, unfortunately, he was too handsome a man to be a good husband. One night he didn’t come home, and the next day, when I

ventured to reproach him—very gently, I assure you—he answered me with an oath and a blow. All our happiness was over! Monsieur declared that he was master, and would do as he liked. He drank and carried away all the wine from the cellar—he took all the money—he remained away for weeks together; and if I complained—more blows!"

Her voice trembled, and a tear gathered in her eye; but, wiping it away with the back of her hand, she resumed: "Vantrasson was always drunk, and I spent my time in crying my very eyes out. Business became very bad, and soon everybody left the house. We were obliged to sell it. We did so, and bought a small cafe. But by the end of the year we lost that. Fortunately, I still had a little money left, and so I bought a stock of groceries in my own name; but in less than six months the stock was eaten up, and we were cast into the street. What was to be done? Vantrasson drank worse than ever; he demanded money when he knew that I had none to give him, and he treated me even more cruelly than before. I lost courage—and yet one must live! Oh, you wouldn't believe it if I told you how we have lived for the past four years." She did not tell him, but contented herself with adding, "When you begin to go down hill, there is no such thing as stopping; you roll lower and lower, until you reach the bottom, as we have done. Here we live, no one knows how; we have to pay our rent each week, and if we are driven from this place, I see no refuge but the river."

"If I had been in your position, I should have left my husband," M. Fortunat ventured to remark.

"Yes—it would have been better, no doubt. People advised me to do so, and I tried. Three or four times I went away, and yet I always returned—it was stronger than myself. Besides, I'm his wife; I've paid dearly for him; he's mine—I won't yield him to any one else. He beats me, no doubt; I despise him, I hate him, and yet I——" She poured out part of a glass of brandy, and swallowed it; then, with a gesture of rage, she added: "I can't give him up! It's fate! As it is now, it will be until the end, until he starves, or I——"

M. Fortunat's countenance wore an expression of profound commiseration. A looker-on would have supposed him interested and sympathetic to the last degree; but in reality, he was furious. Time was passing, and the conversation was wandering farther and farther from the object of his visit. "I am surprised, madame," said he, "that you never applied to your former employer, the Count de Chalusse."

"Alas! I did apply to him for assistance several times——"

"With what result?"

"The first time I went to him he received me; I told him my troubles, and he gave me bank-notes to the amount of five thousand francs."

M. Fortunat raised his hands to the ceiling. "Five thousand francs!" he repeated, in a tone of astonishment; "this count must be very rich——"

"So rich, monsieur, that he doesn't know how much he's worth. He owns, nobody knows how many houses in Paris, chateaux in every part of the country, entire villages, forests—his gold comes in by the shovelful."

The spurious clerk closed his eyes, as if he were dazzled by this vision of wealth.

"The second time I went to the count's house," resumed Madame Vantrasson, "I didn't see him, but he sent me a thousand francs. The third and last time they gave me twenty francs at the door, and told me that the count had gone on a journey. I understood that I could hope for no further help from him. Besides, all the servants had been changed. One morning, without any apparent reason, M. de Chalusse dismissed all the old servants, so they told me. He even sent away the concierge and the housekeeper."

"Why didn't you apply to his wife?"

"M. de Chalusse isn't married. He never has been married."

From the expression of solicitude upon her guest's features, Madame Vantrasson supposed he was racking his brain to discover some mode of escape from her present difficulties. "If I were in your place," he said, "I should try to interest his relatives and family in my case——"

“The count has no relatives.”

“Impossible!”

“He hasn’t, indeed. During the ten years I was in his service, I heard him say more than a dozen times that he alone was left of all his family—that all the others were dead. People pretend that this is the reason why he is so immensely rich.”

M. Fortunat’s interest was no longer assumed; he was rapidly approaching the real object of his visit. “No relatives!” he muttered. “Who, then, will inherit his millions when he dies?”

Madame Vantrasson jerked her head. “Who can say?” she replied. “Everything will go to the government, probably, unless—— But no, that’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible?”

“Nothing. I was thinking of the count’s sister, Mademoiselle Hermine.”

“His sister! Why, you said just now that he had no relatives.”

“It’s the same as if he hadn’t; no one knows what has become of her, poor creature! Some say that she married; others declare that she died. It’s quite a romance.”

M. Isidore Fortunat was literally upon the rack; and to make his sufferings still more horrible, he dared not ask any direct question, nor allow his curiosity to become manifest, for fear of alarming the woman. “Let me see,” said he; “I think—I am sure that I have heard—or that I have read—I cannot say which—some story about a Mademoiselle de Chalusse. It was something terrible, wasn’t it?”

“Terrible, indeed. But what I was speaking of happened a long time ago—twenty-five or twenty-six years ago, at the very least. I was still in my own part of the country—at Besancon. No one knows the exact truth about the affair.”

“What! not even you?”

“Oh! I—that’s an entirely different thing. When I entered the count’s service, six years later, there was still an old gardener who knew the whole story, and who told it to me, making me swear that I would never betray his confidence.”

Lavish of details as she had been in telling her own story, it was evident that she was determined to exercise a prudent reserve in everything connected with the De Chalusse family; and M. Fortunat inwardly cursed this, to him, most unseasonable discretion. But he was experienced in these examinations, and he had at his command little tricks for loosening tongues, which even an investigating magistrate might have envied. Without seeming to attach the slightest importance to Madame Vantrasson’s narrative, he rose with a startled air, like a man who suddenly realizes that he has forgotten himself. “Zounds!” he exclaimed, “we sit here gossiping, and it’s growing late. I really can’t wait for your husband. If I remain here any longer, I shall miss the last omnibus; and I live on the other side of the river, near the Luxembourg.”

“But our agreement, monsieur?”

“We will draw that up at some future time. I shall be passing again, or I will send one of my colleagues to see you.”

It was Madame Vantrasson’s turn to tremble now. She feared, if she allowed this supposed clerk to go without signing the agreement, that the person who came in his stead might not prove so accommodating; and even if he called again himself, he might not be so kindly disposed. “Wait just a moment longer, monsieur,” she pleaded; “my husband will soon be back, and the last omnibus doesn’t leave the Rue de Levis until midnight.”

“I wouldn’t refuse, but this part of the suburbs is so lonely.”

“Vantrasson will see you on your way.” And, resolved to detain him at any cost, she poured out a fresh glass of liquor for him, and said: “Where were we? Oh, yes! I was about to tell you Mademoiselle Hermine’s story.”

Concealing his delight with an assumed air of resignation, M. Fortunat reseated himself, to the intense disgust of Chupin, who was thoroughly tired of waiting outside in the cold.

"I must tell you," began Madame Vantrasson, "that when this happened—at least twenty-five years ago—the De Chalusse family lived in the Rue Saint-Dominique. They occupied a superb mansion, with extensive grounds, full of splendid trees like those in the Tuileries gardens. Mademoiselle Hermine, who was then about eighteen or nineteen years old, was, according to all accounts, the prettiest young creature ever seen. Her skin was as white as milk, she had a profusion of golden hair, and her eyes were as blue as forget-me-nots. She was very kind and generous, they say, only, like all the rest of the family, she was very haughty and obstinate—oh, obstinate enough to allow herself to be roasted alive over a slow fire rather than yield an inch. That's the count's nature exactly. Having served him, I know something about it, to be sure, and——"

"Excuse me," interrupted M. Fortunat, who was determined to prevent these digressions, "and Mademoiselle Hermine?"

"I was coming to her. Although she was very beautiful and immensely rich, she had no suitors—for it was generally understood that she was to marry a marquis, whose father was a particular friend of the family. The parents had arranged the matter between them years before, and nothing was wanting but the young lady's consent; but Mademoiselle Hermine absolutely refused to hear the marquis's name mentioned.

"They did everything to persuade her to consent to this marriage; they employed prayers and threats alike, but they might as well have talked to a stone. When they asked her why she refused to marry the marquis, she replied, 'Because'—and that was all. In fact, at last she declared she would leave home and take refuge in a convent, if they didn't cease to torment her. Her relatives were certain there must be some reason for her refusal. It isn't natural for a girl to reject a suitor who is young,

handsome, rich, and a marquis besides. Her friends suspected there was something she wouldn't confess; and M. Raymond swore that he would watch his sister, and discover her secret."

"M. Raymond is the present Count de Chalusse, I suppose?" inquired M. Fortunat.

"Yes, monsieur. Such was the state of matters when, one night, the gardener thought he heard a noise in the pavilion, at the end of the garden. This pavilion was very large. I have seen it. It contained a sitting-room, a billiard-room, and a large fencing-hall. Naturally enough, the gardener got up to go and see what was the matter. As he left the house, he fancied he saw two persons moving about among the trees. He ran after them, but could find nothing. They had made their escape through a small gate leading from the garden into the street. When the gardener was telling me this story, he declared again and again that he had fancied the noise he had heard was made by some of the servants trying to leave the house secretly, and for this reason he didn't give the alarm. However, he hurried to the pavilion, but on seeing no light there, he went back to bed with an easy mind."

"And it was Mademoiselle Hermine eloping with a lover?" asked M. Fortunat.

Madame Vantrasson seemed as disappointed as an actor who has been deprived of an opportunity of producing a grand effect. "Wait a moment," she replied, "and you'll see. The night passed, morning came, and then the breakfast hour. But Mademoiselle Hermine did not make her appearance. Some one was sent to rap at her door—there was no answer. The door was opened—the young lady was not in her room, and the bed had not even been disturbed. In a few moments the whole household was in the wildest commotion; the mother weeping, and the father half wild with rage and sorrow. Of course, the next thought was of Mademoiselle Hermine's brother, and he was sent for. But, he, too, was not in his room, and his bed had not been touched. The excitement was becoming frenzy, when it occurred to the gardener to mention what he had heard and seen on the previous night. They hastened to the pavilion,

and discovered what? Why, M. Raymond stretched upon the ground, stiff, cold, and motionless, weltering in his own blood. One of his rigid hands still grasped a sword. They lifted him up, carried him to the house, laid him upon his bed, and sent for a physician. He had received two dangerous wounds; one in the throat, the other in the breast. For more than a month he hung between life and death, and six weeks elapsed before he had strength to relate what had happened. He was lighting a cigar at his window when he thought he saw a woman's form flit through the garden. A suspicion that it might be his sister flashed through his mind; so he hastened down, stole noiselessly into the pavilion, and there he found his sister and a young man who was absolutely unknown to him. He might have killed the intruder, but instead of doing so, he told him they would fight then and there. Weapons were within reach, and they fought, with the result that Raymond was wounded twice, in quick succession, and fell. His adversary, supposing him dead, thereupon fled from the spot, taking Mademoiselle Hermine with him."

At this point in her narrative Madame Vantrasson evinced a desire to pause and draw a breath, and perhaps partake of some slight refreshment; but M. Fortunat was impatient. The woman's husband might return at any moment. "And, after that?" he inquired.

"After that—well—M. Raymond recovered, and in about three months' time he was out again; but the parents, who were old folks, had received their death-blow. They never rallied from the shock. Perhaps they felt that it was their own hard-heartedness and obstinacy that had caused their daughter's ruin—and remorse is hard to bear. They waned perceptibly from day to day, and during the following year they were borne to the cemetery within two months of each other."

From the spurious clerk's demeanor it was easy to see that he had ceased thinking about his omnibus, and his hostess felt both reassured and flattered. "And Mademoiselle Hermine?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Alas! monsieur, no one ever knew where she went, or what became of her."

"Didn't they try to find her?"

“They searched for her everywhere, for I don’t know how long; all the ablest detectives in France and in foreign countries tried to find her, but not one of them succeeded in discovering the slightest trace of her whereabouts. M. Raymond promised an enormous sum to the man who would find his sister’s betrayer. He wished to kill him, and he sought for him for years; but all in vain.”

“And did they never receive any tidings of this unfortunate girl?”

“I was told that they heard from her twice. On the morning following her flight her parents received a letter, in which she implored their forgiveness. Five or six months later, she wrote again to say that she knew her brother was not dead. She confessed that she was a wicked, ungrateful girl—that she had been mad; but she said that her punishment had come, and it was terrible. She added that every link was severed between herself and her friends, and she hoped they would forget her as completely as if she had never existed. She went so far as to say that her children should never know who their mother was, and that never in her life again would she utter the name which she had so disgraced.”

It was the old, sad story of a ruined girl paying for a moment’s madness with her happiness and all her after life. A terrible drama, no doubt; but one that is of such frequent occurrence that it seems as commonplace as life itself. Thus any one who was acquainted with M. Isidore Fortunat would have been surprised to see how greatly he was moved by such a trifle. “Poor girl!” said he, in view of saying something. And then, in a tone of assumed carelessness, he inquired: “Did they never discover what scoundrel carried Mademoiselle de Chalusse away?”

“Never. Who he was, whence he came, whether he was young or old, how he became acquainted with Mademoiselle Hermine—these questions were never answered. It was rumored at one time that he was an American, a captain in the navy; but that was only a rumor. To tell the truth, they never even discovered his name.”

“What, not even his name?”

“Not even his name.”

Unable to master his emotion, M. Fortunat had at least the presence of mind to rise and step back into the darker part of the shop. But his gesture of disappointment and the muttered oath that fell from his lips did not escape Madame Vantrasson. She was startled, and from that moment she looked upon the supposed clerk with evident distrust. It was not long before he again resumed his seat nearer the counter, still a trifle pale, perhaps, but apparently calm. Two questions more seemed indispensable to him, and yet either one of them would be sure to arouse suspicion. Nevertheless, he resolved to incur the risk of betraying himself. And, after all, what would it matter now? Did he not possess the information he had wished for, at least as much of it as it was in this woman's power to impart? "I can scarcely tell you, my dear madame, how much your narrative has interested me," he began. "I can confess now that I am slightly acquainted with the Count de Chalusse, and that I have frequently visited the house in the Rue de Courcelles, where he now resides."

"You!" exclaimed the woman, taking a hasty inventory of M. Fortunat's toilette.

"Yes, I—on the part of my employer, understand. Each time I've been to visit M. de Chalusse's I've seen a young lady whom I took for his daughter there. I was wrong, no doubt, since he isn't a married man—"

He paused. Astonishment and anger seemed to be almost suffocating his hostess. Without understanding how or why, she felt convinced that she had been duped; and if she had obeyed her first impulse she would have attacked M. Isidore then and there. If she restrained this impulse, if she made an effort to control herself, it was only because she thought she held a better revenge in reserve.

"A young lady in the count's house!" she said, thoughtfully. "That's scarcely possible. I've never seen her; I've never heard her spoken of. How long has she been there?"

"For six or seven months?"

"In that case, I can't absolutely deny it. It's two years since I set foot in the count's house."

“I fancied this young lady might be the count’s niece Mademoiselle Hermine’s daughter.”

Madame Vantrasson shook her head. “Put that fancy out of your head,” she remarked. “The count said that his sister was dead to him from the evening of her flight.”

“Who CAN this young girl be, then?”

“Bless me! I don’t know. What sort of a looking person is she?”

“Very tall; a brunette.”

“How old is she?”

“Eighteen or nineteen.”

The woman made a rapid calculation on her fingers. “Nine and four are thirteen,” she muttered, “and five are eighteen. Ah, ha!—why not? I must look into this.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing; a little reflection I was making to myself. Do you know this young lady’s name?”

“It’s Marguerite.”

The woman’s face clouded. “No; it can’t be then,” she muttered, in a scarcely audible voice.

M. Fortunat was on coals of fire. It was evident that this frightful creature, even if she knew nothing definite, had some idea, some vague suspicion of the truth. How could he compel her to speak now that she was on her guard? He had not time to ascertain, for the door suddenly opened, and Vantrasson appeared on the threshold. He was scarcely sober when he left the shop, but now he was fairly drunk; his heavy shamble had become a stagger. “Oh, you wretch, you brigand!” howled his wife; “you’ve been drinking again!”

He succeeded in maintaining his equilibrium, and, gazing at her with the phlegmatic stare peculiar to intoxicated men, he replied: “Well, what of that! Can’t I have a little pleasure with my friends? I came across a couple of men who were just taking their fifteenth glass; why should I refuse a compliment?”

“You can’t hold yourself up.”

“That’s true.” And to prove it he tumbled on to a chair.

A torrent of abuse now flowed from Madame Vantrasson’s lips! M. Fortunat only imperfectly distinguished the words “thief,” “spy,” and “detective;” but he could not mistake the meaning of the looks which she alternately gave her husband and himself. “It’s a fortunate thing for you that my husband is in this condition,” her glances plainly implied, “otherwise there would be an explanation, and then we should see—”

“I’ve had a lucky escape,” thought the spurious clerk. But as matters stood there was nothing to fear. It was a case where one could show a brave front to the enemy without incurring the slightest danger. “Let your husband alone,” said he. “If he has only brought the paper that he was sent to fetch, I sha’n’t have lost my evening to oblige you.”

Vantrasson had brought not one sheet of stamped paper, but two. A bad pen and some muddy ink were produced, and M. Fortunat began to draw up an acknowledgment according to the established formula. However, it was necessary to mention the name of the creditor of whom he had spoken, and not wishing to state his own, he used that of poor Victor Chupin, who was at that very moment shivering at the door, little suspecting what liberty was being taken with his cognomen.

“Chupin!” repeated the vixen, as if to engrave the name on her memory; “Victor Chupin! I should just like to see him,” she added, viciously.

When the document was finished, it became necessary to wake Vantrasson, so that he might sign it. He did so with very good grace, and his wife appended her signature beside her husband’s. Thereupon M. Fortunat gave them in exchange the note which had served as a pretext for his visit. “And above all,” he remarked, as he opened the door to go, “don’t forget that you are to pay something on account each month.”

“Go to the devil, and your account with you!” growled Madame Vantrasson.

But Fortunat did not hear this. He was already walking down the road by the side of Chupin, who was saying: “Well, here you are, at last, m’sieur! I thought you had taken a lease of that old barrack. If ever I come here again, I’ll bring a foot-warmer with me.”

But one of those fits of profound abstraction to which determined seekers after truth are subject had taken possession of M. Fortunat, and made him oblivious of all surrounding circumstances. His heart had been full of hope when he reached the Asnieres Road, but he went away gloomy and despondent; and quite unconscious of the darkness, the mud, and the rain, which was again falling, he silently plodded along in the middle of the highway. Chupin was obliged to stop him at the city gate, and remind him that the cab was waiting.

“That’s true,” was M. Fortunat’s only answer. He entered the vehicle, certainly without knowing it; and as they rolled homeward, the thoughts that filled his brain to overflowing found vent in a sort of monologue, of which Chupin now and then caught a few words. “What a piece of business!” he muttered—“what a piece of business! I’ve had seven years’ experience in such matters, and yet I’ve never met with an affair so shrouded in mystery. My forty thousand francs are in a precarious condition. Certainly I’ve lost money before through heirs whose existence I hadn’t even suspected; but by reinstating these same heirs in their rights, I’ve regained my lost money, and received a handsome reward in addition; but in this case all is darkness; there isn’t a single gleam of light—not the slightest clew. If I could only find them! But how can I search for people whose names I don’t even know—for people who have escaped all the inquiries of the police? And where shall I look for them—in Europe, in America? It would be sheer madness! To whom, then, will the count’s millions go?”

It was only the sudden stoppage of the cab in front of his own door that recalled M. Fortunat to the realities of life. “Here are twenty francs, Victor,” he said to Chupin. “Pay the driver, and keep the rest yourself.”

As he spoke, he sprang nimbly to the ground. A handsome brougham, drawn by two horses, was standing before the house. “The Marquis de Valorsay’s carriage,” muttered M. Fortunat. “He has been very patient; he has waited for me—or, rather, he has waited for my ten thousand francs. Well, we shall see.”

III.

M. Fortunat had scarcely started off on his visit to the Vantrassons when the Marquis de Valorsay reached the Place de la Bourse.

“Monsieur has gone out,” said Madame Dodelin, as she opened the door.

“You must be mistaken, my good woman.”

“No, no; my master said you would, perhaps, wait for him.”

“Very well; I will do so.”

Faithful to the orders she had received, the servant conducted the visitor to the drawing-room, lit the tapers in the candelabra, and retired. “This is very strange!” growled the marquis. “Monsieur Fortunat makes an appointment, Monsieur Fortunat expects me to wait for him! What will happen next?” However, he drew a newspaper from his pocket, threw himself into an arm-chair, and waited.

By his habits and tastes, the Marquis de Valorsay belonged to that section of the aristocracy which has coined the term “high life” in view of describing its own manners and customs. The matters that engrossed the marquis’s frivolous mind were club-life and first performances at the opera and the leading theatres, social duties and visits to the fashionable watering-places, racing and the shooting and hunting seasons, together with his mistress and his tailor.

He considered that to ride in a steeple-chase was an act of prowess worthy of his ancestors; and when he galloped past the stand, clad as a jockey, in top-boots and a violet silk jacket, he believed he read admiration in every eye. This was his every-day life, which had been enlivened by a few salient episodes: two duels, an elopement with a married woman, a twenty-six hours’ seance at the gaming table, and a fall from his horse, while hunting, which nearly cost him his life. These acts of valor had raised him considerably in the estimation of his friends,

and procured him a celebrity of which he was not a little proud. The newspaper reporters were constantly mentioning his name, and the sporting journals never failed to chronicle his departure from Paris or his arrival in the city.

Unfortunately, such a life of busy idleness has its trials and its vicissitudes, and M. de Valorsay was a living proof of this. He was only thirty-three, but in spite of the care he expended upon his toilette, he looked at least forty. Wrinkles were beginning to show themselves; it required all the skill of his valet to conceal the bald spots on his cranium; and since his fall from his horse, he had been troubled by a slight stiffness in his right leg, which stiffness became perfect lameness in threatening weather. Premature lassitude pervaded his entire person, and when he relaxed in vigilance even his eyes betrayed a distaste for everything—weariness, satiety as it were. All the same, however, he bore himself with an undeniable air of distinction, albeit the haughtiness of his manner indicated an exaggerated idea of his own importance. He was indeed in the habit of treating all those whom he considered his inferiors with supercilious sufficiency.

The clock on M. Fortunat's mantel-shelf struck eleven at last and the marquis rose to his feet with a muttered oath. "This is too much!" he growled, angrily.

He looked about for a bell, and seeing none, he was reduced to the dire necessity of opening the door himself, and calling some one. Madame Dodelin answered the summons. "Monsieur said he would return before midnight," she replied; "so he will certainly be here. There is no one like him for punctuality. Won't monsieur have patience a little longer?"

"Well, I will wait a few moments; but, my good woman, light the fire; my feet are frozen!"

M. Fortunat's drawing-room being used but seldom, was really as frigid as an iceberg; and to make matters still worse, M. de Valorsay was in evening dress, with only a light overcoat. The servant hesitated for an instant, thinking this visitor difficult to please, and inclined to make himself very much at home, still she obeyed.

“I think I ought to go,” muttered the marquis. “I really think I ought to go.” And yet he remained. Necessity, it should be remembered, effectually quiets the revolts of pride.

Left an orphan in his early childhood, placed in possession of an immense fortune at the age of twenty-three, M. de Valorsay had entered life like a famished man enters a dining-room. His name entitled him to a high position in the social world; and he installed himself at table without asking how much the banquet might cost him. It cost him dear, as he discovered at the end of the first year, on noting that his disbursements had considerably exceeded his large income. It was very evident that if he went on in this way, each twelvemonth would deepen an abyss where in the one hundred and sixty thousand francs a year, left him by his father, would finally be swallowed up. But he had plenty of time to reflect upon this unpleasant possibility ere it could come to pass! And, besides, he found his present life so delightful, and he obtained so much gratification for his money, that he was unwilling to make any change. He possessed several fine estates, and he found plenty of men who were only too glad to lend him money on such excellent security. He borrowed timidly at first, but more boldly when he discovered what a mere trifle a mortgage is. Moreover, his wants increased in proportion to his vanity. Occupying a certain position in the opinion of his acquaintances, he did not wish to descend from the heights to which they had exalted him; and the very fact that he had been foolishly extravagant one year made it necessary for him to be guilty of similar folly during the succeeding twelvemonth. He failed to pay his creditors the interest that was due on his loans. They did not ask him for it; and perhaps he forgot that it was slowly but surely accumulating, and that at the end of a certain number of years the amount of his indebtedness would be doubled. He never thought what the end would be. He became absolutely ignorant of the condition of his affairs, and really arrived at the conclusion that his resources were inexhaustible. He believed this until one day when on going to his lawyer for some money, that gentleman coldly said: “You requested me to obtain one hundred thousand francs for you, Monsieur le Marquis—but I have only been able

to procure fifty thousand—here they are. And do not hope for more. All your real estate is encumbered beyond its value. Your creditors will probably leave you in undisturbed possession for another year—it will be to their interest—but when it has elapsed they will take possession of their own, as they have a perfect right to do." Then, with a meaning smile, the smile of a wily prime minister, he added: "If I were in your place, Monsieur le Marquis, I would profit by this year of grace. You undoubtedly understand what I mean. I have the honor to wish you good-morning."

What an awakening—after a glorious dream that had lasted for ten years. M. de Valorsay was stunned—crushed. For three days he remained immured in his own room, obstinately refusing to receive any one. "The marquis is ill," was his valet's answer to every visitor.

M. de Valorsay felt that he must have time to regain his mental equilibrium—to look his situation calmly in the face. It was a frightful one, for his ruin was complete, absolute. He could save nothing from the wreck. What was to become of him? What could he do? He set his wits to work; but he found that he was incapable of plying any kind of avocation. All the energy he had been endowed with by nature had been squandered—exhausted in pandering to his self-conceit. If he had been younger he might have turned soldier; but at his age he had not even this resource. Then it was that his notary's smile recurred to his mind. "His advice was decidedly good," he muttered. "All is not yet lost; one way of escape still remains—marriage."

And why, indeed, shouldn't he marry, and marry a rich wife too? No one knew anything about his misfortune; for a year at least, he would retain all the advantages that wealth bestows upon its possessor. His name alone was a great advantage. It would be very strange if he could not find some manufacturer's or banker's daughter who would be only too delighted to have a marquisial coronet emblazoned on her carriage panels.

Having arrived at this conclusion, M. de Valorsay began his search, and it was not long before he thought he had found what he was seeking. But something was still necessary. The bestowers of large dowers are inclined to be suspicious; they like to have a clear understanding as to the financial position of the suitors who present themselves, and they not unfrequently ask for information. Accordingly, before committing himself, M. de Valorsay understood that it was necessary he should provide himself with an intelligent and devoted adviser. There must be some one to hold his creditors in check, to silence them, and obtain sundry concessions from them—in a word, some one to interest them in his success. With this object in view, M. de Valorsay applied to his notary; but the latter utterly refused to mix himself up in any such affair, and declared that the marquis's suggestion was almost an insult. Then touched, perhaps, by his client's apparent despair, he said, "But I can mention a person who might be of service to you. Go to M. Isidore Fortunat, No. 27 Place de la Bourse. If you succeed in interesting him in your marriage, it is an accomplished fact."

It was under these circumstances that the marquis became acquainted with M. Fortunat. M. de Valorsay was a man of no little penetration, and on his first visit he carefully weighed his new acquaintance. He found him to be the very counsellor he desired—prudent, and at the same time courageous; fertile in expedients; a thorough master of the art of evading the law, and not at all troubled by scruples. With such an adviser, it would be mere child's play to conceal his financial embarrassments and deceive the most suspicious father-in-law. So M. de Valorsay did not hesitate a moment. He frankly disclosed his pecuniary condition and his matrimonial hopes, and concluded by promising M. Fortunat a certain percentage on the bride's dowry, to be paid on the day following the marriage.

After a prolonged conference, the agreement was drawn up and signed, and that very day M. Fortunat took the nobleman's interests in hand. How heartily, and with what confidence in his success, is shown by the fact that he had advanced forty thousand francs for his client's

use, out of his own private purse. After such a proof of confidence the marquis could hardly have been dissatisfied with his adviser; in point of fact, he was delighted with him, and all the more so, as this invaluable man always treated him with extreme deference, verging on servility. And in M. de Valorsay's eyes this was a great consideration; for he was becoming more arrogant and more irascible in proportion as his right to be so diminished. Secretly disgusted with himself, and deeply humiliated by the shameful intrigue to which he had stooped, he took a secret satisfaction in crushing his accomplice with his imaginary superiority and lordly disdain. According as his humor was good or bad, he called him "my dear extortioner," "Mons. Fortunat," or "Master Twenty-per-cent." But though these sneers and insults drove the obsequious smile from M. Fortunat's lips, he was quite capable of including them in the bill under the head of sundries.

The unvarying deference and submission which M. de Valorsay's adviser displayed made his failure to keep the present appointment all the more remarkable. Such neglect of the commonest rules of courtesy was inconceivable on the part of so polite a man; and the marquis's anger gradually changed to anxiety. "What can have happened?" he thought.

He was trying to decide whether he should leave or stay, when he heard a key grate in the lock of the outer door, and then some quick steps along the ante-room. "At last—here he is!" he muttered, with a sigh of relief.

He expected to see M. Fortunat enter the room at once, but he was disappointed. The agent had no desire to show himself in the garb which he had assumed for his excursion with Chupin; and so he had hastened to his room to don his wonted habiliments. He also desired a few moments for deliberation.

If—as was most probably the case—M. de Valorsay were ignorant of the Count de Chalusse's critical condition, was it advisable to tell him of it? M. Fortunat thought not, judging with reason that this would lead to

a discussion and very possibly to a rupture, and he wished to avoid anything of the kind until he was quite certain of the count's death.

Meanwhile the marquis was thinking—he was a trifle late about it—that he had done wrong to wait in that drawing-room for three mortal hours. Was such conduct worthy of him? Had he shown himself proper respect? Would not M. Fortunat construe this as an acknowledgment of the importance of his services and his client's urgent need? Would he not become more exacting, more exorbitant in his demands? If the marquis could have made his escape unheard, he would, no doubt, have done so; but this was out of the question. So he resorted to a stratagem which seemed to him likely to save his compromised dignity. He stretched himself out in his arm-chair, closed his eyes, and pretended to doze. Then, when M. Fortunat at last entered the drawing-room he sprang up as if he were suddenly aroused from slumber, rubbed his eyes, and exclaimed: "Eh! what's that? Upon my word I must have been asleep!"

But M. Fortunat was not deceived. He noticed, on the floor, a torn and crumpled newspaper, which betrayed the impatience and anger his client had experienced during his long waiting. "Well," resumed the marquis, "what time is it? Half-past twelve? This is a pretty time to keep an appointment fixed for ten o'clock. This is presuming on my good-nature, M. Fortunat! Do you know that my carriage has been waiting below ever since half-past nine, and that my horses have, perhaps, taken cold? A pair of horses worth six hundred louis!"

M. Fortunat listened to these reproaches with the deepest humility. "You must excuse me, Monsieur le Marquis," said he. "If I remained out so much later than usual, it was only because your business interests detained me."

"Zounds! that is about the same as if it had been your own business that detained you!" And well pleased with this joke, he added, "Ah well! How are affairs progressing?"

"On my side as well as could be desired."

The marquis had resumed his seat in the chimney-corner, and was poking the fire with a haughty, but poorly assumed air of indifference. “I am listening,” he said carelessly.

“In that case, Monsieur le Marquis, I will state the facts in a few words, without going into particulars. Thanks to an expedient devised by me, we shall obtain for twenty hours a release from all the mortgages that now encumber your estates. On that very day we will request a certificate from the recorder. This certificate will declare that your estates are free from all encumbrances; you will show this statement to M. de Chalusse, and all his doubts—that is, if he has any—will vanish. The plan was very simple; the only difficulty was about raising the money, but I have succeeded in doing so. All your creditors but two lent themselves very readily to the arrangement. I have now won the consent of the two who at first refused, but we shall have to pay dearly for it. It will cost you about twenty-six thousand francs.”

M. de Valorsay was so delighted that he could not refrain from clapping his hands. “Then the affair is virtually concluded,” he exclaimed. “In less than a month Mademoiselle Marguerite will be the Marquise de Valorsay, and I shall have a hundred thousand francs a year again.” Then, noting how gravely M. Fortunat shook his head: “Ah! so you doubt it!” he cried. “Very well; now it is your turn to listen. Yesterday I had a long conference with the Count de Chalusse, and everything has been settled. We exchanged our word of honor, Master Twenty-per-cent. The count does things in a princely fashion; he gives Mademoiselle Marguerite two millions.”

“Two millions!” the other repeated like an echo.

“Yes, my dear miser, neither more nor less. Only for private reasons, which he did not explain, the count stipulates that only two hundred thousand francs shall appear in the marriage contract. The remaining eighteen hundred thousand francs, he gives to me unreservedly and unconditionally. Upon my word, I think this very charming. How does it strike you?”

M. Fortunat made no reply. M. de Valorsay's gayety, instead of cheering, saddened him. "Ah! my fine fellow," he thought, "you would sing a different song if you knew that by this time M. de Chalusse is probably dead, and that most likely Mademoiselle Marguerite has only her beautiful eyes left her, and will dim them in weeping for her vanished millions."

But this brilliant scion of the aristocracy had no suspicion of the real state of affairs, for he continued: "You will say, perhaps, it is strange, that I, Ange-Marie Robert Dalbou, Marquis de Valorsay, should marry a girl whose father and mother no one knows, and whose only name is Marguerite. In this respect it is true that the match is not exactly a brilliant one. Still, as it will appear that she merely has a fortune of two hundred thousand francs, no one will accuse me of marrying for money on the strength of my name. On the contrary, it will seem to be a love-match, and people will suppose that I have grown young again." He paused, incensed by M. Fortunat's lack of enthusiasm. "Judging from your long face, Master Twenty-per-cent, one would fancy you doubted my success," he said.

"It is always best to doubt," replied his adviser, philosophically.

The marquis shrugged his shoulders. "Even when one has triumphed over all obstacles?" he asked sneeringly.

"Yes."

"Then, tell me, if you please, what prevents this marriage from being a foregone conclusion?"

"Mademoiselle Marguerite's consent, Monsieur le Marquis."

It was as if a glass of ice-water had been thrown in M. de Valorsay's face. He started, turned as pale as death, and then exclaimed: "I shall have that; I am sure of it."

You could not say that M. Fortunat was angry. Such a man, as cold and as smooth as a hundred franc piece, has no useless passions. But he was intensely irritated to hear his client foolishly chanting the paeons of victory, while he was compelled to conceal his grief at the loss of his forty

thousand francs, deep in the recesses of his heart. So, far from being touched by the marquis's evident alarm, it pleased him to be able to turn the dagger in the wound he had just inflicted. "You must excuse my incredulity," said he. "It comes entirely from something you, yourself, told me about a week ago."

"What did I tell you?"

"That you suspected Mademoiselle Marguerite of a—how shall I express it?—of a secret preference for some other person."

The gloomiest despondency had now followed the marquis's enthusiasm and exultation. He was evidently in torture. "I more than suspected it," said he.

"Ah!"

"I was certain of it, thanks to the count's house-keeper, Madame Leon, a miserable old woman whom I have hired to look after my interests. She has been watching Mademoiselle Marguerite, and saw a letter written by her——"

"Oh!"

"Certainly nothing has passed that Mademoiselle Marguerite has any cause to blush for. The letter, which is now in my possession, contains unmistakable proofs of that. She might proudly avow the love she has inspired, and which she undoubtedly returns. Yet——"

M. Fortunat's gaze was so intent that it became unbearable. "You see, then," he began, "that I had good cause to fear."

Exasperated beyond endurance, M. de Valorsay sprang up so violently that he overturned his chair. "No!" he exclaimed, "no, a thousand times no! You are wrong—for the man who loves Mademoiselle Marguerite is now ruined. Yes, such is really the case. While we are sitting here, at this very moment, he is lost—irredeemably lost. Between him and the woman whom I wish to marry—whom I SHALL marry—I have dug so broad and deep an abyss that the strongest love cannot overleap it. It is better and worse than if I had killed him. Dead, he would have been

mourned, perhaps; while now, the lowest and most degraded woman would turn from him in disgust, or, even if she loved him, she would not dare to confess it."

M. Fortunat seemed greatly disturbed. "Have you then put into execution the project—the plan you spoke of?" he faltered. "I thought you were only jesting."

The marquis lowered his head. "Yes," he answered.

His companion stood for a moment as if petrified, and then suddenly exclaimed: "What! You have done that—you—a gentleman?"

M. de Valorsay paced the floor in a state of intense agitation. Had he caught a glimpse of his own face in the looking-glass, it would have frightened him. "A gentleman!" he repeated, in a tone of suppressed rage; "a gentleman! That word is in everybody's mouth, nowadays. Pray, what do you understand by a gentleman, Mons. Fortunat? No doubt, you mean a heroic idiot who passed through life with a lofty mien, clad in all the virtues, as stoical as Job, and as resigned as a martyr—a sort of moral Don Quixote, preaching the austerest virtue, and practising it? But, unfortunately, nobility of soul and of purpose are expensive luxuries, and I am a ruined man. I am no saint! I love life and all that makes life beautiful and desirable—and to procure its pleasures I must fight with the weapons of the age. No doubt, it is grand to be honest; but in my case it is so impossible, that I prefer to be dishonest—to commit an act of shameful infamy which will yield a hundred thousand francs a year. This man is in my way—I suppress him—so much the worse for him—he has no business to be in my way. If I could have met him openly, I would have dispatched him according to the accepted code of honor; but, then, I should have had to renounce all idea of marrying Mademoiselle Marguerite, so I was obliged to find some other way. I could not choose my means. The drowning man does not reject the plank, which is his only chance of salvation, because it chances to be dirty."

His gestures were even more forcible than his words; and when he concluded, he threw himself on to the sofa, holding his head tightly between his hands, as if he felt that it was bursting. Anger choked his utterance—not anger so much as something he would not confess, the quickening of his own conscience and the revolt of every honorable instinct; for, in spite of his sins of omission, and of commission, never, until this day, had he actually violated any clause of the code acknowledged by men of honor.

"You have been guilty of a most infamous act, Monsieur le Marquis," said M. Fortunat, coldly.

"Oh! no moralizing, if you please."

"Only evil will come of it."

The marquis shrugged his shoulders, and in a tone of bitter scorn, retorted: "Come, Mons. Fortunat, if you wish to lose the forty thousand francs you advanced to me, it's easy enough to do so. Run to Madame d'Argeles's house, ask for M. de Coralth, and tell him I countermand my order. My rival will be saved, and will marry Mademoiselle Marguerite and her millions."

M. Fortunat remained silent. He could not tell the marquis: "My forty thousand francs are lost already. I know that only too well. Mademoiselle Marguerite is no longer the possessor of millions, and you have committed a useless crime." However, it was this conviction which imparted such an accent of eagerness to his words as he continued to plead the cause of virtue and of honesty. Would he have said as much if he had entertained any great hope of the success of the marquis's matrimonial enterprise? It is doubtful, still we must do M. Fortunat the justice to admit that he was really and sincerely horrified by what he had unhesitatingly styled an "infamous act."

The marquis listened to his agent for a few moments in silence, and then rose to his feet again. "All this is very true," he interrupted; "but I am, nevertheless, anxious to learn the result of my little plot. For this reason, Monsieur Fortunat, give me at once the five hundred louis you promised me, and I will then bid you good-evening."

The agent had been preparing himself for this moment, and yet he trembled. “I am deeply grieved, monsieur,” he replied, with a doleful smile; “it was this matter that kept me out so much later than usual this evening. I hoped to have obtained the money from a banker, who has always accommodated me before—M. Prosper Bertomy, you know him: he married M. Andre Fauvel’s niece—–”

“Yes, I know; proceed, if you please.”

“Ah, well! it was impossible for me to procure the money.”

The marquis had hitherto been pale, but now his face flushed crimson. “This is a jest, I suppose,” said he.

“Alas!—unfortunately—no.”

There was a moment’s silence, which the marquis probably spent in reflecting upon the probable consequences of this disappointment, for it was in an almost threatening tone that he eventually exclaimed: “You know that I must have this money at once—that I must have it.”

M. Fortunat would certainly have preferred to lose a good pound of flesh rather than the sum of money mentioned; but, on the other hand, he felt that it would not do for him to sever his connection with his client until the death of the Count de Chalusse was certain; and being anxious to save his money and to keep his client, his embarrassment was extreme. “It was the most unfortunate thing in the world,” he stammered; “I apprehended no difficulty whatever—” Then, suddenly clapping his hand to his forehead, he exclaimed: “But, Monsieur le Marquis, couldn’t you borrow this amount from one of your friends, the Duke de Champdoce or the Count de Commarin?—that would be a good idea.”

M. de Valorsay was anything but unsophisticated, and his natural shrewdness had been rendered much more acute by the difficulties with which he had recently been obliged to contend. M. Fortunat’s confusion had not escaped his keen glance; and this last suggestion aroused his suspicions at once. “What!” he said, slowly, and with an air of evident

distrust. “YOU give me this advice, Master Twenty-per-cent. This is wonderful! How long is it since your opinions have undergone such a change?”

“My opinions?”

“Yes. Didn’t you say to me during our first interview; ‘The thing that will save you, is that you have never in your whole life borrowed a louis from a friend. An ordinary creditor only thinks of a large interest; and if that is paid him he holds his peace. A friend is never satisfied until everybody knows that he has generously obliged you. It is far better to apply to a usurer.’ I thought all that very sensible, and I quite agreed with you when you added: ‘So, Monsieur le Marquis, no borrowing of this kind until after your marriage—not on any pretext whatever. Go without eating rather than do it. Your credit is still good; but it is being slowly undermined—and the indiscretion of a friend who chanced to say: “I think Valorsay is hard up,” might fire the train, and then you’d explode.’”

M. Fortunat’s embarrassment was really painful to witness. He was not usually wanting in courage, but the events of the evening had shaken his confidence and his composure. The hope of gain and the fear of loss had deprived him of his wonted clearness of mind. Feeling that he had just committed a terrible blunder, he racked his brain to find some way of repairing it, and finding none, his confusion increased.

“Did you, or didn’t you, use that language?” insisted M. de Valorsay. “What have you to say in reply?”

“Circumstances——”

“What circumstances?”

“Urgent need—necessity. There is no rule without its exceptions. I did not imagine you would be so rash. I have advanced you forty thousand francs in less than five months—it is outrageous. If I were in your place, I would be more reasonable—I would economize——”

He paused! in fact, he was compelled to pause by the piercing glance which M. de Valorsay turned upon him. He was furious with himself. “I am losing my wits,” he thought.

“Still more wise counsel,” remarked the ruined nobleman ironically. “While you are about it, why don’t you advise me to sell my horses and carriages, and establish myself in a garret in the Rue Amelot? Such a course would seem very natural, wouldn’t it? and, of course, it would inspire M. de Chalusse with boundless confidence!”

“But without going to such extremes——”

“Hold your tongue!” interrupted the marquis, violently. “Better than any one else you know that I cannot retrench, although the reality no longer exists. I am condemned, cost what it may, to keep up appearances. That is my only hope of salvation. I have gambled, given expensive suppers, indulged in dissipation of every kind, and I must continue to do so. I have come to hate Ninette Simplon, for whom I have committed so many acts of folly, and yet I still keep her—to show that I am rolling in wealth. I have thrown thousand-franc notes out of the window, and I mustn’t stop throwing them. Indeed, what would people say if I stopped! Why, ‘Valorsay is a ruined man!’ Then, farewell to my hopes of marrying an heiress. And so I am always gay and smiling; that is part of my role. What would my servants—the twenty spies that I pay—what would they think if they saw me thoughtful or disturbed? You would scarcely believe it, M. Fortunat, but I have positively been reduced to dining on credit at my club, because I had paid, that morning, for a month’s provender for my horses! It is true I have many valuable articles in my house, but I cannot dispose of them. People would recognize them at once; besides, they form a part of my stock-in-trade. An actor doesn’t sell his costumes because he’s hungry—he goes without food—and when it’s time for the curtain to rise, he dons his satin and velvet garments, and, despite his empty stomach, he chants the praises of a bountiful table and rare old wine. That is what I am doing—I, Robert Dalbou, Marquis de Valorsay! At the races at Vincennes, about a fortnight ago, I was bowling along the boulevard behind my four-in-hand, when I heard

a laborer say, 'How happy those rich people must be!' Happy, indeed! Why, I envied him his lot. He was sure that the morrow would be like the day that preceded it. On that occasion my entire fortune consisted of a single louis, which I had won at baccarat the evening before. As I entered the enclosure, Isabelle, the flower-girl, handed me a rose for my button-hole. I gave her my louis—but I longed to strangle her!"

He paused for a moment, and then, in a frenzy of passion, he advanced toward M. Fortunat, who instinctively retreated into the protecting embrasure of a window. "And for eight months I have lived this horrible life!" he resumed. "For eight months each moment has been so much torture. Ah! better poverty, prison, and shame! And now, when the prize is almost won, actuated either by treason or caprice, you try to make all my toil and all my suffering unavailing. You try to thwart me on the very threshold of success! No! I swear, by God's sacred name, it shall not be! I will rather crush you, you miserable scoundrel—crush you like a venomous reptile!"

There was such a ring of fury in his voice that the crystals of the candelabra vibrated; and Madame Dodelin, in her kitchen, heard it, and shuddered. "Some one will certainly do M. Fortunat an injury one of these days," she thought.

It was not by any means the first time that M. Fortunat had found himself at variance with clients of a sanguine temperament; but he had always escaped safe and sound, so that, after all, he was not particularly alarmed in the present instance, as was proved by the fact that he was still calm enough to reflect and plan. "In forty-eight hours I shall be certain of the count's fate," he thought; "he will be dead, or he will be in a fair way to recovery—so by promising to give this frenzied man what he desires on the day after to-morrow, I shall incur no risk."

Taking advantage of an opportunity which M. de Valorsay furnished, on pausing to draw breath, he hastily exclaimed, "Really, Monsieur le Marquis, I cannot understand your anger."

"What! scoundrel!"

"Excuse me. Before insulting me, permit me to explain——"

“No explanation—five hundred louis!”

“Have the kindness to allow me to finish. Yes, I know that you are in urgent need of money—not by-and-by, but now. To-day I was unable to procure it, nor can I promise it to-morrow; but on the day after to-morrow, Saturday, I shall certainly have it ready for you.”

The marquis seemed to be trying to read his agent’s very soul. “Are you in earnest?” he asked. “Show your hand. If you don’t intend to help me out of my embarrassment, say so.”

“Ah, Monsieur le Marquis, am I not as much interested in your success as you yourself can be? Have you not received abundant proofs of my devotion?”

“Then I can rely upon you.”

“Absolutely.” And seeing a lingering doubt in his client’s eyes, M. Fortunat added, “You have my word of honor!”

The clock struck three. The marquis took his hat and started toward the door. But M. Fortunat, in whose heart the word scoundrel was still rankling, stopped him. “Are you going to that lady’s house now? What is she called? I’ve forgotten her name. Ah, yes, I remember now. Madame d’Argeles, isn’t she called? It’s at her place, I believe, that the reputation of Mademoiselle Marguerite’s favored lover is to be ruined.”

The marquis turned angrily. “What do you take me for, Master Twenty-per-cent?” he rudely asked. “That is one of those things no well-bred gentleman will do himself. But in Paris people can be found to do any kind of dirty work, if you are willing to pay them for it.”

“Then how will you know the result?”

“Why, twenty minutes after the affair is over, M. de Coralth will be at my house. He is there even now, perhaps.” And as this subject was anything but pleasant, he hastened away, exclaiming, “Get to bed, my dear extortioner. Au revoir. And, above all, remember your promise.”

“My respects, Monsieur le Marquis.”

But when the door closed, M. Fortunat's expression immediately changed. "Ah! you insult me!" he muttered sullenly. "You rob me, and you call me a scoundrel into the bargain. You shall pay dearly for it, my fine fellow, no matter what may happen!"

IV.

It is in vain that the law has endeavored to shield private life from prying eyes. The scribes who pander to Parisian curiosity surmount all obstacles and brave every danger. Thanks to the "High Life" reporters, every newspaper reader is aware that twice a week—Mondays and Thursdays—Madame Lia d'Argeles holds a reception at her charming mansion in the Rue de Berry. Her guests find plenty of amusement there. They seldom dance; but card-playing begins at midnight, and a dainty supper is served before the departure of the guests.

It was on leaving one of these little entertainments that that unfortunate young man, Jules Chazel, a cashier in a large banking-house, committed suicide by blowing out his brains. The brilliant frequenters of Madame d'Argeles's entertainments considered this act proof of exceeding bad taste and deplorable weakness on his part. "The fellow was a coward," they declared. "Why, he had lost hardly a thousand louis!"

He had lost only that, it is true—a mere trifle as times go. Only the money was not his; he had taken it from the safe which was confided to his keeping, expecting, probably, to double the amount in a single night. In the morning, when he found himself alone, without a penny, and the deficit staring him in the face, the voice of conscience cried, "You are a thief!" and he lost his reason.

The event created a great sensation at the time, and the Petit Journal published a curious story concerning this unfortunate young man's mother. The poor woman—she was a widow—sold all she possessed, even the bed on which she slept, and when she had succeeded in gathering together twenty thousand francs—the ransom of her son's honor—she carried them to the banker by whom her boy had been employed. He took them, without even asking the mother if she had enough left to purchase her dinner that evening; and the fine gentleman,

who had won and pocketed Jules Chazel's stolen gold, thought the banker's conduct perfectly natural and just. It is true that Madame d'Argeles was in despair during forty-eight hours or so; for the police had begun a sort of investigation, and she feared this might frighten her visitors and empty her drawing-rooms. Not at all, however; on the contrary, she had good cause to congratulate herself upon the notoriety she gained through this suicide. For five days she was the talk of Paris, and Alfred d'Aunay even published her portrait in the Illustrated Chronicle.

Still, no one was able to say exactly who Madame Lia d'Argeles was. Who was she, and whence did she come? How had she lived until she sprang up, full grown, in the sunshine of the fashionable world? Did the splendid mansion in the Rue de Berry really belong to her? Was she as rich as she was supposed to be? Where had she acquired such manners, the manners of a thorough woman of the world, with her many accomplishments, as well as her remarkable skill as a musician? Everything connected with her was a subject of conjecture, even to the name inscribed upon her visiting cards—"Lia d'Argeles."

But no matter. Her house was always filled to over-flowing; and at the very moment when the Marquis de Valorsay and M. Fortunat were speaking of her, a dozen coroneted carriages stood before her door, and her rooms were thronged with guests. It was a little past midnight, and the bi-weekly card party had just been made up, when a footman announced, "Monsieur le Vicomte de Coralth! Monsieur Pascal Ferailleur!"

Few of the players deigned to raise their heads. But one man growled, "Good—two more players!" And four or five young men exclaimed, "Ah! here's Ferdinand! Good evening, my dear fellow!"

M. de Coralth was very young and remarkably good-looking, almost too good-looking, indeed; for his handsomeness was somewhat startling and unnatural. He had an exceedingly fair complexion, and large, melting black eyes, while a woman might have envied him his wavy brown hair and the exquisite delicacy of his skin. He dressed with great

care and taste, and even coquettishly; his turn-down collar left his firm white throat uncovered, and his rose-tinted gloves fitted as perfectly as the skin upon his soft, delicate hands. He bowed familiarly on entering, and with a rather complacent smile on his lips, he approached Madame d'Argeles, who, half reclining in an easy chair near the fire-place, was conversing with two elderly gentlemen of grave and distinguished bearing. "How late you are, viscount," she remarked carelessly. "What have you been doing to-day? I fancied I saw you in the Bois, in the Marquis de Valorsay's dog-cart."

A slight flush suffused M. de Coralth's cheeks, and to hide it, perhaps, he turned toward the visitor who had entered with him, and drew him toward Madame d'Argeles, saying, "Allow me, madame, to present to you one of my great friends, M. Pascal Ferailleur, an advocate whose name will be known to fame some day."

"Your friends are always welcome at my house, my dear viscount," replied Madame d'Argeles. And before Pascal had concluded his bow, she averted her head, and resumed her interrupted conversation.

The new-comer, however, was worthy of more than that cursory notice. He was a young man of five or six-and-twenty, dark-complexioned and tall; each movement of his person was imbued with that natural grace which is the result of perfect harmony of the muscles, and of more than common vigor. His features were irregular, but they gave evidence of energy, kindness of heart, and honesty of purpose. A man possessing such a proud, intelligent, and open brow, such a clear, straightforward gaze, and such finely-cut lips, could be no ordinary one. Deserted by his sponsor, who was shaking hands right and left, he seated himself on a sofa a little in the background; not because he was embarrassed, but because he felt that instinctive distrust of self which frequently seizes hold of a person on entering a crowd of strangers. He did his best to conceal his curiosity, but nevertheless he looked and listened with all his might.

The salon, was an immense apartment, divided into two rooms by sliding doors and hangings. When Madame d'Argeles gave a ball, the rooms were thrown into one; but, as a general rule, one room was occupied by the card-players, and the other served as a refuge for those who wished to chat. The card-room, into which Pascal had been ushered, was an apartment of noble proportions, furnished in a style of tasteful magnificence. The tints of the carpet were subdued; there was not too much gilding on the cornices; the clock upon the mantel-shelf was chaste and elegant in design. The only thing at all peculiar about the room and its appointments was a reflector, ingeniously arranged above the chandelier in such a way as to throw the full glare of the candles upon the card-table which stood directly beneath it. The table itself was adorned with a rich tapestry cover, but this was visible only at the corners, for it was covered, in turn, with a green baize cloth considerably the worse for wear. Madame d'Argeles's guests were probably not over fifty in number, but they all seemed to belong to the very best society. The majority of them were men of forty or thereabouts; several wore decorations, and two or three of the eldest were treated with marked deference. Certain well-known names which Pascal overheard surprised him greatly. "What! these men here?" he said to himself; "and I—I regarded my visit as a sort of clandestine frolic."

There were only seven or eight ladies present, none of them being especially attractive. Their toilettes were very costly, but in rather doubtful taste, and they wore a profusion of diamonds. Pascal noticed that these ladies were treated with perfect indifference, and that, whenever the gentlemen spoke to them, they assumed an air of politeness which was too exaggerated not to be ironical.

A score of persons were seated at the card-table, and the guests who had retired into the adjoining salon were silently watching the progress of the game, or quietly chatting in the corners of the room. It surprised him to note that every one spoke in very low tones; there was something very like respect, even awe, in this subdued murmur. One might have supposed that those present were celebrating the rites of some

mysterious worship. And is not gaming a species of idolatry, symbolized by cards, and which has its images, its fetishes, its miracles, its fanatics, and its martyrs?

Occasionally, above the accompaniment of whispers, rose the strange and incoherent exclamations of the players: “Here are twenty louis! I take it—I pass! The play is made! Banco!”

“What a strange gathering!” thought Pascal Ferailleur. “What singular people!” And he turned his attention to the mistress of the house, as if he hoped to decipher the solution of the enigma on her face.

But Madame Lia d’Argeles defied all analysis. She was one of those women whose uncertain age varies according to their mood, between the thirties and the fifties; one who did not look over thirty in the evening, but who would have been charged with being more than fifty the next morning. In her youth she must have been very beautiful, and she was still good-looking, though she had grown somewhat stout, and her face had become a trifle heavy, thus marring the symmetry of her very delicate features. A perfect blonde, she had eyes of so clear a blue that they seemed almost faded. The whiteness of her skin was so unnatural that it almost startled one. It was the dull, lifeless white which suggests an excessive use of cosmetics and rice powder, and long baths, late hours, and sleep at day-time, in a darkened room. Her face was utterly devoid of expression. One might have fancied that its muscles had become relaxed after terrible efforts to feign or to conceal some violent emotions; and there was something melancholy, almost terrifying in the eternal, and perhaps involuntary smile, which curved her lips. She wore a dress of black velvet, with slashed sleeves and bodice, a new design of the famous man-milliner, Van Klopen.

Pascal was engaged in these observations when M. de Coralth, having made his round, came and sat down on the sofa beside him. “Well, what do you think of it?” he inquired.

“Upon my word!” replied the young advocate, “I am infinitely obliged to you for inviting me to accompany you here. I am intensely amused.”

“Good! My philosopher is captivated.”

“Not captivated, but interested, I confess.” Then, in the tone of good-humor which was habitual to him, he added: “As for being the sage you call me, that’s all nonsense. And to prove it, I’m going to risk my louis with the rest.”

M. de Coralth seemed amazed, but a close observer might have detected a gleam of triumph in his eyes. “You are going to play—you?”

“Yes. Why not?”

“Take care!”

“Of what, pray? The worst I can do is to lose what I have in my pocket—something over two hundred francs.”

The viscount shook his head thoughtfully. “It isn’t that which one has cause to fear. The devil always has a hand in this business, and the first time a man plays he’s sure to win.”

“And is that a misfortune?”

“Yes, because the recollection of these first winnings is sure to lure you back to the gaming-table again. You go back, you lose, you try to recover your money, and that’s the end of it—you become a gambler.”

Pascal Ferailleur’s smile was the smile of a man who has full confidence in himself. “My brain is not so easily turned, I hope,” said he. “I have the thought of my name, and the fortune I must make, as ballast for it.”

“I beseech you not to play,” insisted the viscount. “Listen to me; you don’t know what this passion for play is; the strongest and the coldest natures succumb—don’t play.”

He had raised his voice, as if he intended to be overheard by two guests who had just approached the sofa. They did indeed hear him. “Can I believe my own eyes and ears!” exclaimed one of them, an elderly man. “Can this really be Ferdinand who is trying to shake the allegiance of the votaries of our noble lady—the Queen of Spades?”

M. de Coralth turned quickly round: “Yes, it is indeed I,” he answered. “I have purchased with my patrimony the right of saying: ‘Distrust yourself, and don’t do as I’ve done,’ to an inexperienced friend.”

The wisest counsels, given in a certain fashion, never fail to produce an effect diametrically opposed to that which they seemingly aim at. M. de Coralth's persistence, and the importance he attached to a mere trifle, could not fail to annoy the most patient man in the world, and in fact his patronizing tone really irritated Pascal. "You are free, my friend, to do as you please," said he; "but I——"

"Are you resolved?" interrupted the viscount.

"Absolutely."

"So be it, then. You are no longer a child, and I have warned you. Let us play, then." Thereupon they approached the table; room was made for them, and they seated themselves, Pascal being on M. Ferdinand de Coralth's right-hand side.

The guests were playing "Baccarat tournant," a game of terrible and infantile simplicity. There are no such things as skill or combination possible in it; science and calculation are useless. Chance alone decides, and decides with the rapidity of lightning. Amateurs certainly assert that, with great coolness and long practice, one can, in a measure at least, avert prolonged ill-luck. Maybe they are right, but it is not conclusively proved. Each person takes the cards in his turn, risks what he chooses, and when his stakes are covered, deals. If he wins, he is free to follow up his vein of good-luck, or to pass the deal. When he loses, the deal passes at once to the next player on the right.

A moment sufficed for Pascal Ferailleur to learn the rules of the game. It was already Ferdinand's deal. M. de Coralth staked a hundred francs; the bet was taken; he dealt, lost, and handed the cards to Pascal.

The play, which had been rather timid at first—since it was necessary, as they say, to try the luck—had now become bolder. Several players had large piles of gold before them, and the heavy artillery—that is to say, bank-notes—were beginning to put in appearance. But Pascal had no false pride. "I stake a louis!" said he

The smallness of the sum attracted instant attention, and two or three voices replied: "Taken!"

He dealt, and won. “Two louis!” he said again. This wager was also taken; he won, and his run of luck was so remarkable that, in a wonderfully short space of time, he won six hundred francs.

“Pass the deal,” whispered Ferdinand, and Pascal followed this advice. “Not because I desire to keep my winnings,” he whispered in M. de Coralth’s ear, “but because I wish to have enough to play until the end of the evening without risking anything.”

But such prudence was unnecessary so far as he was concerned. When the deal came to him again, fortune favored him even more than before. He started with a hundred francs, and doubling them each time in six successive deals, he won more than three thousand francs.

“The devil! Monsieur is in luck.”—“Zounds! And he is playing for the first time.”—“That accounts for it. The inexperienced always win.”

Pascal could not fail to hear these comments. The blood mantled over his cheeks, and, conscious that he was flushing, he, as usually happens, flushed still more. His good fortune embarrassed him, as was evident, and he played most recklessly. Still his good luck did not desert him; and do what he would he won—won continually. In fact, by four o’clock in the morning he had thirty-five thousand francs before him.

For some time he had been the object of close attention. “Do you know this gentleman?” inquired one of the guests.

“No. He came with Coralth.”

“He is an advocate, I understand.”

And all these whispered doubts and suspicions, these questions fraught with an evil significance, these uncharitable replies, grew into a malevolent murmur, which resounded in Pascal’s ears and bewildered him. He was really becoming most uncomfortable, when Madame d’Argeles approached the card-table and exclaimed: “This is the third time, gentlemen, that you have been told that supper is ready. What gentleman will offer me his arm?”

There was an evident unwillingness to leave the table, but an old gentleman who had been losing heavily rose to his feet. “Yes, let us go to supper!” he exclaimed; “perhaps that will change the luck.”

This was a decisive consideration. The room emptied as if by magic; and no one was left at the table but Pascal, who scarcely knew what to do with all the gold piled up before him. He succeeded, however, in distributing it in his pockets, and was about to join the other guests in the dining-room, when Madame d’Argeles abruptly barred his passage.

“I desire a word with you, monsieur,” she said. Her face still retained its strange immobility, and the same stereotyped smile played about her lips. And yet her agitation was so evident that Pascal, in spite of his own uneasiness, noticed it, and was astonished by it.

“I am at your service, madame,” he stammered, bowing.

She at once took his arm, and led him to the embrasure of a window. “I am a stranger to you, monsieur,” she said, very hurriedly, and in very low tones, “and yet I must ask, and you must grant me, a great favor.”

“Speak, madame.”

She hesitated, as if at a loss for words, and then all of a sudden she said, eagerly: “You will leave this house at once, without warning any one, and while the other guests are at supper.”

Pascal’s astonishment changed into stupor.

“Why am I to go?” he asked.

“Because—but, no; I cannot tell you. Consider it only a caprice on my part—it is so; but I entreat you, don’t refuse me. Do me this favor, and I shall be eternally grateful.”

There was such an agony of supplication in her voice and her attitude, that Pascal was touched. A vague presentiment of some terrible, irreparable misfortune disturbed his own heart. Nevertheless, he sadly shook his head, and bitterly exclaimed: “You are, perhaps, not aware that I have just won over thirty thousand francs.”

“Yes, I am aware of it. And this is only another, and still stronger reason why you should protect yourself against possible loss. It is well to pattern after Charlemagne [1] in this house. The other night, the Count d’Antas quietly made his escape bareheaded. He took a thousand louis away with him, and left his hat in exchange. The count is a brave man; and far from indulging in blame, every one applauded him the next day. Come, you have decided, I see—you will go; and to be still more safe, I will show you out through the servants’ hall, then no one can possibly see you.”

Pascal had almost decided to yield to her entreaties; but this proposed retreat through the back-door was too revolting to his pride to be thought of for a moment. “I will never consent to such a thing,” he declared. “What would they think of me? Besides I owe them their revenge and I shall give it to them.”

Neither Madame d’Argeles nor Pascal had noticed M. de Coralth, who in the meantime had stolen into the room on tiptoe, and had been listening to their conversation, concealed behind the folds of a heavy curtain. He now suddenly revealed his presence. “Ah! my dear friend,” he exclaimed, in a winning tone. “While I honor your scruples, I must say that I think madame is a hundred times right. If I were in your place, if I had won what you have won, I shouldn’t hesitate. Others might think what they pleased; you have the money, that is the main thing.”

For the second time, the viscount’s intervention decided Pascal. “I shall remain,” he said, resolutely.

But Madame d’Argeles laid her hand imploringly on his arm. “I entreat you, monsieur,” said she. “Go now, there is still time.”

“Yes, go,” said the viscount, approvingly, “it would be a most excellent move. Retreat and save the cash.”

These words were like the drop which makes the cup overflow. Crimson with anger and assailed by the strangest suspicions, Pascal turned from Madame d’Argeles and hastened into the dining-room. The conversation ceased entirely on his arrival there. He could not fail to understand that he had been the subject of it. A secret instinct warned

him that all the men around him were his enemies—though he knew not why—and that they were plotting against him. He also perceived that his slightest movements were watched and commented upon. However he was a brave man; his conscience did not reproach him in the least, and he was one of those persons who, rather than wait for danger, provoke it.

So, with an almost defiant air, he seated himself beside a young lady dressed in pink tulle, and began to laugh and chat with her. He possessed a ready wit, and what is even better, tact; and for a quarter of an hour astonished those around him by his brilliant sallies. Champagne was flowing freely; and he drank four or five glasses in quick succession. Was he really conscious of what he was doing and saying? He subsequently declared that he was not, that he acted under the influence of a sort of hallucination similar to that produced by the inhalation of carbonic gas.

However, the guests did not linger long at the supper-table. “Let us go back!” cried the old gentleman, who had insisted upon the suspension of the game; “we are wasting a deal of precious time here!”

Pascal rose with the others, and in his haste to enter the adjoining room he jostled two men who were talking together near the door. “So it is understood,” said one of them.

“Yes, yes, leave it to me; I will act as executioner.”

This word sent all Pascal’s blood bounding to his heart. “Who is to be executed?” he thought? “I am evidently to be the victim. But what does it all mean?”

Meanwhile the players at the green table had changed places, and Pascal found himself seated not on Ferdinand’s right, but directly opposite him, and between two men about his own age—one of them being the person who had announced his intention of acting as executioner. All eyes were fixed upon the unfortunate advocate when it came his turn to deal. He staked two hundred louis, and lost them. There was a slight commotion round the table; and one of the players who had lost most heavily, remarked in an undertone: “Don’t look so hard at the gentleman—he won’t have any more luck.”

As Pascal heard this ironical remark, uttered in a tone which made it as insulting as a blow, a gleam of light darted through his puzzled brain. He suspected at last, what any person less honest than himself would have long before understood. He thought of rising and demanding an apology; but he was stunned, almost overcome by the horrors of his situation. His ears tingled, and it seemed to him as if the beating of his heart were suspended.

However the game proceeded; but no one paid any attention to it. The stakes were insignificant, and loss or gain drew no exclamation from any one. The attention of the entire party was concentrated on Pascal; and he, with despair in his heart, followed the movements of the cards, which were passing from hand to hand, and fast approaching him again. When they reached him the silence became breathless, menacing, even sinister. The ladies, and the guests who were not playing, approached and leaned over the table in evident anxiety. “My God!” thought Pascal, “my God, if I can only lose!”

He was as pale as death; the perspiration trickled down from his hair upon his temples, and his hands trembled so much that he could scarcely hold the cards. “I will stake four thousand francs,” he faltered.

“I take your bet,” answered a voice.

Alas! the unfortunate fellow’s wish was not gratified; he won. Then in the midst of the wildest confusion, he exclaimed: “Here are eight thousand francs!”

“Taken!”

But as he began to deal the cards, his neighbor sprang up, seized him roughly by the hands and cried: “This time I’m sure of it—you are a thief!”

With a bound, Pascal was on his feet. While his peril had been vague and undetermined, his energy had been paralyzed. But it was restored to him intact when his danger declared itself in all its horror. He pushed away the man who had caught his hands, with such violence that he sent him reeling under a sofa; then he stepped back and surveyed the excited

throng with an air of menace and defiance. Useless! Seven or eight players sprang upon him and overpowered him, as if he had been the vilest criminal.

Meanwhile, the executioner, as he had styled himself, had risen to his feet with his cravat untied, and his clothes in wild disorder. “Yes,” he said, addressing Pascal, “you are a thief! I saw you slip other cards among those which were handed to you.”

“Wretch!” gasped Pascal.

“I saw you—and I am going to prove it.” So saying he turned to the mistress of the house, who had dropped into an arm-chair, and imperiously asked, “How many packs have we used?”

“Five.”

“Then there ought to be two hundred and sixty cards upon the table.”

Thereupon he counted them slowly and with particular care, and he found no fewer than three hundred and seven. “Well, scoundrel!” he cried; “are you still bold enough to deny it?”

Pascal had no desire to deny it. He knew that words would weigh as nothing against this material, tangible, incontrovertible proof. Forty-seven cards had been fraudulently inserted among the others. Certainly not by him! But by whom? Still he, alone, had been the gainer through the deception.

“You see that the coward will not even defend himself!” exclaimed one of the women.

He did not deign to turn his head. What did the insult matter to him? He knew himself to be innocent, and yet he felt that he was sinking to the lowest depths of infamy—he beheld himself disgraced, branded, ruined. And realizing that he must meet facts with facts, he besought God to grant him an idea, an inspiration, that would unmask the real culprit.

But another person came to his aid. With a boldness which no one would have expected on his part, M. de Coralth placed himself in front of Pascal, and in a voice which betokened more indignation than sorrow,

he exclaimed: “This is a terrible mistake, gentlemen. Pascal Ferailleur is my friend; and his past vouches for his present. Go to the Palais de Justice, and make inquiries respecting his character there. They will tell you how utterly impossible it is that this man can be guilty of the ignoble act he is accused of.”

No one made any reply. In the opinion of all his listeners, Ferdinand was simply fulfilling a duty which it would have been difficult for him to escape. The old gentleman who had decided the suspension and the resumption of the game, gave audible expression to the prevailing sentiment of the party. He was a portly man, who puffed like a porpoise when he talked, and whom his companions called the baron. “Your words do you honor—really do you honor,” he said, addressing Ferdinand—“and no possible blame can attach to you. That your friend is not an honest man is no fault of yours. There is no outward sign to distinguish scoundrels.”

Pascal had so far not opened his lips. After struggling for a moment in the hands of his captors, he now stood perfectly motionless, glancing furiously around him as if hoping to discover the coward who had prepared the trap into which he had fallen. For he felt certain that he was the victim of some atrocious conspiracy, though it was impossible for him to divine what motive had actuated his enemies. Suddenly those who were holding him felt him tremble. He raised his head; he fancied he could detect a ray of hope. “Shall I be allowed to speak in my own defence?” he asked.

“Speak!”

He tried to free himself; but those beside him would not relax their hold, so he desisted, and then, in a voice husky with emotion, he exclaimed: “I am innocent! I am the victim of an infamous plot. Who the author of it is I do not know. But there is some one here who must know.” Angry exclamations and sneering laughs interrupted him. “Would you condemn me unheard?” he resumed, raising his voice.

“Listen to me. About an hour ago, while you were at supper, Madame d’Argeles almost threw herself at my feet as she entreated me to leave this house. Her agitation astonished me. Now I understand it.”

The gentleman known as the baron turned toward Madame d’Argeles: “Is what this man says true?”

She was greatly agitated, but she answered: “Yes.”

“Why were you so anxious for him to go?”

“I don’t know—a presentiment—it seemed to me that something was going to happen.”

The least observant of the party could not fail to notice Madame d’Argeles’s hesitation and confusion; but even the shrewdest were deceived. They supposed that she had seen the act committed, and had tried to induce the culprit to make his escape, in order to avoid a scandal.

Pascal saw he could expect no assistance from this source. “M. de Coralth could assure you,” he began.

“Oh, enough of that,” interrupted a player. “I myself heard M. de Coralth do his best to persuade you not to play.”

So the unfortunate fellow’s last and only hope had vanished. Still he made a supreme effort, and addressing Madame d’Argeles: “Madame,” he said, in a voice trembling with anguish? “I entreat you, tell what you know. Will you allow an honorable man to be ruined before your very eyes? Will you abandon an innocent man whom you could save by a single word?” But she remained silent; and Pascal staggered as if some one had dealt him a terrible blow. “It is all over!” he muttered.

No one heard him; everybody was listening to the baron, who seemed to be very much put out. “We are wasting precious time with all this,” said he. “We should have made at least five rounds while this absurd scene has been going on. We must put an end to it. What are you going to do with this fellow? I am in favor of sending for a commissary of police.”

Such was not at all the opinion of the majority of the guests. Four or five of the ladies took flight at the bare suggestion and several men—the most aristocratic of the company—became angry at once. “Are you mad?” said one of them. “Do you want to see us all summoned as witnesses? You have probably forgotten that Garcia affair, and that rumpus at Jenny Fancy’s house. A fine thing it would be to see, no one knows how many great names mixed up with those of sharpers and notorious women!”

Naturally of a florid complexion, the baron’s face now became scarlet. “So it’s fear of scandal that deters you! Zounds, sir! a man’s courage should equal his vices. Look at me.”

Celebrated for his income of eight hundred thousand francs a year, for his estates in Burgundy, for his passion for gaming, his horses, and his cook, the baron wielded a mighty influence. Still, on this occasion he did not carry the day, for it was decided that the “sharper” should be allowed to depart unmolested. “Make him at least return the money,” growled a loser; “compel him to disgorge.”

“His winnings are there upon the table.”

“Don’t believe it,” cried the baron. “All these scoundrels have secret pockets in which they stow away their plunder. Search him by all means.”

“That’s it—search him!”

Crushed by this unexpected, undeserved and incomprehensible misfortune, Pascal had almost yielded to his fate. But the shameful cry: “Search him!” kindled terrible wrath in his brain. He shook off his assailants as a lion shakes off the hounds that have attacked him, and, reaching the fireplace with a single bound, he snatched up a heavy bronze candelabrum and brandished it in the air, crying: “The first who approaches is a dead man!”

He was ready to strike, there was no doubt about it; and such a weapon in the hands of a determined man, becomes positively terrible. The danger seemed so great and so certain that his enemies paused—each encouraging his neighbor with his glance; but no one was inclined

to engage in this struggle, by which the victor would merely gain a few bank-notes. “Stand back, and allow me to retire?” said Pascal, imperiously. They still hesitated; but finally made way. And, formidable in his indignation and audacity, he reached the door of the room unmolested, and disappeared.

This superb outburst of outraged honor, this marvellous energy—succeeding, as it did, the most complete mental prostration—and these terrible threats, had proved so prompt and awe-inspiring that no one had thought of cutting off Pascal’s retreat. The guests had not recovered from their stupor, but were still standing silent and intimidated when they heard the outer door close after him.

It was a woman who at last broke the spell. “Ah, well!” she exclaimed, in a tone of intense admiration, “that handsome fellow is level-headed!”

“He naturally desired to save his plunder!”

It was the same expression that M. de Coralth had employed; and which had, perhaps, prevented Pascal from yielding to Madame d’Argeles’s entreaties. Everybody applauded the sentiment—everybody, the baron excepted. This rich man, whose passions had dragged him into the vilest dens of Europe, was thoroughly acquainted with sharpers and scoundrels of every type, from those who ride in their carriages down to the bare-footed vagabond. He knew the thief who grovels at his victim’s feet, humbly confessing his crime, the desperate knave who swallows the notes he has stolen, the abject wretch who bares his back to receive the blows he deserves, and the rascal who boldly confronts his accusers and protests his innocence with the indignation of an honest man. But never, in any of these scoundrels, had the baron seen the proud, steadfast glance with which this man had awed his accusers.

With this thought uppermost in his mind he drew the person who had seized Pascal’s hands at the card-table a little aside. “Tell me,” said he, “did you actually see that young man slip the cards into the pack?”

“No, not exactly. But you know what we agreed at supper? We were sure that he was cheating; and it was necessary to find some pretext for counting the cards.”

“What if he shouldn’t be guilty, after all?”

“Who else could be guilty then? He was the only winner.”

To this terrible argument—the same which had silenced Pascal—the baron made no reply. Indeed his intervention became necessary elsewhere, for the other guests were beginning to talk loudly and excitedly around the pile of gold and bank-notes which Pascal had left on the table. They had counted it, and found it to amount to the sum of thirty-six thousand three hundred and twenty francs; and it was the question of dividing it properly among the losers which was causing all this uproar. Among these guests, who belonged to the highest society—among these judges who had so summarily convicted an innocent man, and suggested the searching of a supposed sharper only a moment before—there were several who unblushingly misrepresented their losses. This was undeniable; for on adding the various amounts that were claimed together a grand total of ninety-one thousand francs was reached. Had this man who had just fled taken the difference between the two sums away with him? A difference amounting almost to fifty-five thousand francs? No, this was impossible; the supposition could not be entertained for a moment. However, the discussion might have taken an unfortunate turn, had it not been for the baron. In all matters relating to cards, his word was law. He quietly said, “It is all right;” and they submitted.

Nevertheless, he absolutely refused to take his share of the money; and after the division, rubbing his hands as if he were delighted to see this disagreeable affair concluded, he exclaimed: “It is only six o’clock; we have still time for a few rounds.”

But the other guests, pale, disturbed, and secretly ashamed of themselves, were eager to depart, and in fact they were already hastening to the cloak-room. “At least play a game of ecarte,” cried the baron, “a simple game of ecarte, at twenty louis a point.”

But no one listened, and he reluctantly prepared to follow his departing friends, who bowed to Madame d’Argeles on the landing, as they filed by, M. de Coralth, who was among the last to retire, had

already reached the staircase, and descended two or three steps, when Madame d'Argeles called to him. "Remain," said she; "I want to speak with you."

"You will excuse me," he began; "I——"

But she again bade him "remain" in such an imperious tone that he dared not resist. He reascended the stairs, very much after the manner of a man who is being dragged into a dentist's office, and followed Madame d'Argeles into a small boudoir at the end of the gambling-room. As soon as the door was closed and locked, the mistress of the house turned to her prisoner. "Now you will explain," said she. "It was you who brought M. Pascal Ferailleur here."

"Alas! I know only too well that I ought to beg your forgiveness. However, this affair will cost me dear myself. It has already embroiled me in a difficulty with that fool of a Rochecote, with whom I shall have to fight in less than a couple of hours."

"Where did you make his acquaintance?"

"Whose—Rochecote's?"

Madame d'Argeles's sempiternal smile had altogether disappeared. "I am speaking seriously," said she, with a threatening ring in her voice. "How did you happen to become acquainted with M. Ferailleur?"

"That can be very easily explained. Seven or eight months ago I had need of an advocate's services, and he was recommended to me. He managed my case very cleverly, and we kept up the acquaintance."

"What is his position?"

M. de Coralth's features wore an expression of exceeding weariness as if he greatly longed to go to sleep. He had indeed installed himself in a large arm-chair, in a semi-recumbent position. "Upon my word, I don't know," he replied. "Pascal had always seemed to be the most irreproachable man in the world—a man you might call a philosopher! He lives in a retired part of the city, near the Pantheon, with his mother, who is a widow, a very respectable woman, always dressed in black. When she opened the door for me, on the occasion of my first visit, I

thought some old family portrait had stepped down from its frame to receive me. I judge them to be in comfortable circumstances. Pascal has the reputation of being a remarkable man, and people supposed he would rise very high in his profession."

"But now he is ruined; his career is finished."

"Certainly! You can be quite sure that by this evening all Paris will know what occurred here last night."

He paused, meeting Madame Argeles's look of withering scorn with a cleverly assumed air of astonishment. "You are a villain! Monsieur de Coralth," she said, indignantly.

"I—and why?"

"Because it was you who slipped those cards, which made M. Ferailleur win, into the pack; I saw you do it! And yielding to my entreaties, the young fellow was about to leave the house when you, intentionally, prevented him from saving himself. Oh! don't deny it."

M. de Coralth rose in the coolest possible manner. "I deny nothing, my dear lady," he replied, "absolutely nothing. You and I understand each other."

Confounded by his unblushing impudence, Madame d'Argeles remained speechless for a moment. "You confess it!" she cried, at last. "You dare to confess it! Were you not afraid that I might speak and state what I had seen?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "No one would have believed you," he exclaimed.

"Yes, I should have been believed, Monsieur de Coralth, for I could have given proofs. You must have forgotten that I know you, that your past life is no secret to me, that I know who you are, and what dishonored name you hide beneath your borrowed title! I could have told my guests that you are married—that you have abandoned your wife and child, leaving them to perish in want and misery—I could have told

them where you obtain the thirty or forty thousand francs you spend each year. You must have forgotten that Rose told me everything, Monsieur—Paul!"

She had struck the right place this time, and with such precision that M. de Coralth turned livid, and made a furious gesture, as if he were about to fell her to the ground. "Ah, take care!" he exclaimed; "take care!"

But his rage speedily subsided, and with his usual indifferent manner, and in a bantering tone, he said: "Well, what of that? Do you fancy that the world doesn't already suspect what you could reveal? People have suspected me of being even worse than I am. When you proclaim on the housetops that I am an adventurer, folks will only laugh at you, and I shall be none the worse for it. A matter that would crush a dozen men like Pascal Ferailleur would not injure me in the least. I am accustomed to it. I must have luxury and enjoyment, everything that is pleasant and beautiful—and to procure all this, I do my very best. It is true that I don't derive my income from my estate in Brie; but I have plenty of money, and that is the essential thing. Besides, it is so difficult to earn a livelihood nowadays, and the love of luxury is so intense that no one knows at night what he may do—or, rather, what he won't do—the next day. And last, but not least, the people who ought to be despised are so numerous that contempt is an impossibility. A Parisian who happened to be so absurdly pretentious as to refuse to shake hands with such of his acquaintances as were not irreproachable characters, might walk for hours on the Boulevards without finding an occasion to take his hands out of his pockets."

M. de Coralth talked well enough, and yet, in point of fact, all this was sheer bravado on his part. He knew better than any one else, on what a frail and uncertain basis his brilliant existence was established. Certainly, society does show great indulgence to people of doubtful reputation. It shuts its eyes and refuses to look or listen. But this is all the more reason why it should be pitiless when a person's guilt is positively established. Thus, although he assumed an air of insolent

security, the “viscount” anxiously watched the effect of his words upon Madame d’Argeles. Fortunately for himself, he saw that she was abashed by his cynicism; and so he resumed: “Besides, as our friend, the baron, would say, we are wasting precious time in discussing improbable, and even impossible, suppositions. I was sufficiently well acquainted with your heart and your intelligence, my dear madame, to be sure that you would not speak a word to my disparagement.”

“Indeed! What prevented me from doing so?”

“I did; or perhaps I ought rather to say, your own good sense, which closed your mouth when Monsieur Pascal entreated you to speak in his defence. I am entitled to considerable indulgence, madame, and a great deal ought to be forgiven me. My mother, unfortunately, was an honest woman, who did not furnish me with the means of gratifying every whim.”

Madame d’Argeles recoiled as if a serpent had suddenly crossed her path.

“What do you mean?” she faltered.

“You know as well as I do.”

“I don’t understand you—explain yourself.”

With the impatient gesture of a man who finds himself compelled to answer an idle question, and assuming an air of hypocritical commiseration, he replied: “Well, since you insist upon it, I know, in Paris—in the Rue de Helder, to be more exact—a nice young fellow, whose lot I have often envied. He has wanted for nothing since the day he came into the world. At school, he had three times as much money as his richest playfellow. When his studies were finished, a tutor was provided—with his pockets full of gold—to conduct this favored youth to Italy, Egypt, and Greece. He is now studying law; and four times a year, with unvarying punctuality, he receives a letter from London containing five thousand francs. This is all the more remarkable, as this young man has neither a father nor a mother. He is alone in the world with his income of twenty thousand francs. I have heard him say, jestingly, that some good fairy must be watching over him; but I know that he believes

himself to be the illegitimate son of some great English nobleman. Sometimes, when he has drunk a little too much, he talks of going in search of my lord, his father."

The effect M. de Coralth had created by these words must have been extremely gratifying to him, for Madame d'Argeles had fallen back in her chair, almost fainting. "So, my dear madame," he continued, "if I ever had any reason to fancy that you intended causing me any trouble, I should go to this charming youth and say: 'My good fellow, you are strangely deceived. Your money doesn't come from the treasure-box of an English peer, but from a small gambling den with which I am very well acquainted, having often had occasion to swell its revenues with my franc-pieces.' And if he mourned his vanished dreams, I should tell him: 'You are wrong; for, if the great nobleman is lost, the good fairy remains. She is none other than your mother, a very worthy person, whose only object in life is your comfort and advancement.' And if he doubted my word, I should bring him to his mother's house some baccarat night; and there would be a scene of recognition worthy of Fargueil's genius."

Any man but M. de Coralth would have had some compassion, for Madame d'Argeles was evidently suffering agony. "It is as I feared!" she moaned, in a scarcely audible voice.

However, he heard her. "What!" he exclaimed in a tone of intense astonishment; "did you really doubt it? No; I can't believe it; it would be doing injustice to your intelligence and experience. Are people like ourselves obliged to talk in order to understand each other? Should I ever have ventured to do what I have done, in your house, if I had not known the secret of your maternal tenderness, delicacy of feeling, and devotion?"

She was weeping; big tears were rolling down her face, tracing a broad furrow through the powder on her cheeks. "He knows everything!" she murmured; "he knows everything!"

"By the merest chance, I assure you. As I don't like folks to meddle with my affairs, I never meddle with theirs. As I have just said, it was entirely the work of chance. One April afternoon I came to invite you to a

drive in the Bois. I was ushered into this very room where we are sitting now, and found you writing. I said I would wait until you finished your letter; but some one called you, and you hastily left the room. How it was that I happened to approach your writing-table I cannot explain; but I did approach it, and read your unfinished letter. Upon my word it touched me deeply. I can give no better proof of the truth of my assertion than the fact that I can repeat it, almost word for word, even now. 'DEAR SIR,'—you wrote to your London correspondent—'I send you three thousand francs, in addition to the five thousand for the regular quarterly payment. Forward the money without delay. I fear the poor boy is greatly annoyed by his creditors. Yesterday I had the happiness of seeing him in the Rue de Helder, and I found him looking pale and careworn. When you send him this money, forward at the same time a letter of fatherly advice. It is true, he ought to work and win an honorable position for himself; but think of the dangers and temptation that beset him, alone and friendless, in this corrupt city.' There, my dear lady, your letter ended; but the name and address were given, and it was easy enough to understand it. You remember, perhaps, a little incident that occurred after your return. On perceiving that you had forgotten your letter, you turned pale and glanced at me. 'Have you read it, and do you understand it?' your eyes asked; while mine replied: 'Yes, but I shall be silent.'"

"And I shall be silent too," said Madame d'Argeles.

M. de Coralth took her hand and raised it to his lips. "I knew we should understand each other," he remarked, gravely. "I am not bad at heart, believe me; and if I had possessed money of my own, or a mother like you——"

She averted her face, fearing perhaps that M. de Coralth might read her opinion of him in her eyes; but after a short pause she exclaimed beseechingly: "Now that I am your accomplice, let me entreat you to do all you possibly can to prevent last night's affair from being noised abroad."

"Impossible."

“If not for M. Ferailleur’s sake, for the sake of his poor widowed mother.”

“Pascal must be put out of the way!”

“Why do you say that? Do you hate him so much then? What has he done to you?”

“To me, personally? Nothing—I even feel actual sympathy for him.”

Madame d’Argeles was confounded. “What!” she stammered; “it wasn’t on your own account that you did this?”

“Why, no.”

She sprang to her feet, and quivering with scorn and indignation, cried: “Ah! then the deed is even more infamous—even more cowardly!” But alarmed by the threatening gleam in M. de Coralth’s eyes, she went no further.

“A truce to these disagreeable truths,” said he, coldly. “If we expressed our opinions of each other without reserve, in this world, we should soon come to hard words. Do you think I acted for my own pleasure? Suppose some one had seen me when I slipped the cards into the pack. If that had happened, I should have been ruined.”

“And you think that no one suspects you?”

“No one. I lost more than a hundred louis myself. If Pascal belonged to our set, people might investigate the matter, perhaps; but to-morrow it will be forgotten.”

“And will he have no suspicions?”

“He will have no proofs to offer, in any case.”

Madame d’Argeles seemed to resign herself to the inevitable. “I hope you will, at least, tell me on whose behalf you acted,” she remarked.

“Impossible,” replied M. de Coralth. And, consulting his watch, he added, “But I am forgetting myself; I am forgetting that that idiot of a Rochecote is waiting for a sword-thrust. So go to sleep, my dear lady, and—till we meet again.”

She accompanied him so far as the landing. “It is quite certain that he is hastening to the house of M. Ferailleur’s enemy,” she thought. And, calling her confidential servant, “Quick, Job,” she said; “follow M. de Coralth. I want to know where he is going. And, above all, take care that he doesn’t see you.”

V.

If through the length and breadth of Paris there is a really quiet, peaceful street, a refuge for the thoughtfully inclined, it is surely the broad Rue d'Ulm, which starts from the Place du Pantheon, and finishes abruptly at the Rue des Feuillantines. The shops are unassuming, and so few that one can easily count them. There is a wine-shop on the left-hand side, at the corner of the Rue de la Vieille-Estrapade; then a little toy-shop, then a washerwoman's and then a book-binder's establishment; while on the right-hand you will find the office of the Bulletin, with a locksmith's, a fruiterer's, and a baker's—that is all. Along the rest of the street run several spacious buildings, somewhat austere in appearance, though some of them are surrounded by large gardens. Here stands the Convent of the Sisters of the Cross, with the House of Our Lady of Adoration; while further on, near the Rue des Feuillantines, you find the Normal School, with the office of the General Omnibus Company hard by. At day-time you mostly meet grave and thoughtful faces in the street: priests, savants, professors, and clerks employed in the adjacent public libraries. The only stir is round about the omnibus office; and if occasional bursts of laughter are heard they are sure to come from the Normal School. After nightfall, a person might suppose himself to be at least a hundred leagues from the Boulevard Montmartre and the Opera-House, in some quiet old provincial town, at Poitiers, for instance. And it is only on listening attentively that you can catch even a faint echo of the tumult of Paris.

It was in this street—"out of the world," as M. de Coralth expressed it—that Pascal Ferailleur resided with his mother. They occupied a second floor, a pretty suite of five rooms, looking out upon a garden. Their rent was high. Indeed, they paid fourteen hundred francs a year. But this was a burden which Pascal's profession imposed upon him; for he, of course, required a private office and a little waiting-room for his clients. With

this exception, the mother and son led a straightened, simple life. Their only servant was a woman who came at seven o'clock to do the heavy work, went home again at twelve, and did not return again until the evening, to serve dinner. Madame Ferailleur attended to everything, not blushing in the least when she was compelled to open the door for some client. Besides, she could do this without the least risk of encountering disrespect, so imposing and dignified were her manners and her person.

M. de Coralth had shown excellent judgment when he compared her to a family portrait. She was, in fact, exactly the person a painter would select to represent some old burgher's wife—a chaste and loving spouse, a devoted mother, an incomparable housewife—in one phrase, the faithful guardian of her husband's domestic happiness. She had just passed her fiftieth birthday, and looked fully her age. She had suffered. A close observer would have detected traces of weeping about her wrinkled eyelids; and the twinge of her lips was expressive of cruel anguish, heroically endured. Still, she was not severe, nor even too sedate; and the few friends who visited her were often really astonished at her wit. Besides, she was one of those women who have no history, and who find happiness in what others would call duty. Her life could be summed up in a single sentence: she had loved; she had mourned.

The daughter of a petty clerk in one of the government departments, and merely dowered with a modest portion of three thousand francs, she had married a young man as poor as herself, but intelligent and industrious, whom she loved, and who adored her. This young man on marrying had sworn that he would make a fortune; not that he cared for money for himself, but he wished to provide his idol with every luxury. His love, enhancing his energy, no doubt hastened his success. Attached as a chemist to a large manufacturing establishment, his services soon became so invaluable to his employers that they gave him a considerable interest in the business. His name even obtained an honorable place among modern inventors; and we are indebted to him for the discovery

of one of those brilliant colors that are extracted from common coal. At the end of ten years he had become a man of means. He loved his wife as fondly as on the day of their marriage, and he had a son—Pascal.

Unfortunate fellow! One day, in the full sunshine of happiness and success, while he was engaged in a series of experiments for the purpose of obtaining a durable, and at the same time perfectly harmless, green, the chemicals exploded, smashing the mortar which he held, and wounding him horribly about the head and chest. A fortnight later he died, apparently calm, but in reality a prey to bitter regrets. It was a terrible blow for his poor wife, and the thought of her son alone reconciled her to life. Pascal was now everything to her—her present and her future; and she solemnly vowed that she would make a noble man of him. But alas! misfortunes never come singly. One of her husband's friends, who acted as administrator to the estate, took a contemptible advantage of her inexperience. She went to sleep one night possessing an income of fifteen thousand francs, but she awoke to find herself ruined—so completely ruined that she did not know where to obtain her dinner for that same evening. Had she been alone in the world, she would not have grieved much over the catastrophe, but she was sadly affected by the thought that her son's future was, perhaps, irrevocably blighted, and that, in any case, this disaster would condemn him to enter life through the cramped and gloomy portals of poverty.

However, Madame Ferailleur was of too courageous and too proud a nature not to meet this danger with virile energy. She wasted no time in useless lamentations. She determined to repair the harm as far as it was in her power to repair it, resolving that her son's studies at the college of Louis-the-Great should not be interrupted, even if she had to labor with her own hands. And when she spoke of manual toil, it was no wild, unmeaning exaggeration born of sorrow and a passing flash of courage. She found employment as a day-servant and in sewing for large shops, until she at last obtained a situation as clerk in the establishment where her husband had been a partner. To obtain this she was obliged to acquire a knowledge of bookkeeping, but she was amply repaid for her

trouble; for the situation was worth eighteen hundred francs a year, besides food and lodging. Then only did her efforts momentarily abate; she felt that her arduous task was drawing to a happy close. Pascal's expenses at school amounted to about nine hundred francs a year; she did not spend more than one hundred on herself; and thus she was able to save nearly eight hundred francs a year.

It must be admitted that she was admirably seconded in her efforts by her son. Pascal was only twelve years old when his mother said to him: "I have ruined you, my son. Nothing remains of the fortune which your father accumulated by dint of toil and self-sacrifice. You will be obliged to rely upon yourself, my boy. God grant that in years to come you will not reproach me for my imprudence."

The child did not throw himself into her arms, but holding his head proudly erect, he answered: "I shall love you even more, dear mother, if that be possible. As for the fortune which my father left you, I will restore it to you again. I am no longer a school-boy, I am a man—as you shall see."

One could not fail to perceive that he had taken a solemn vow. Although he possessed a remarkable mind, and the power of acquiring knowledge rapidly, he had, so far, worked indifferently, and then only by fits and starts, whenever examination time drew near. But from that day forward he did not lose a moment. His remarks, which were at once comical and touching, were those of the head of a family, deeply impressed by a sense of his own responsibility. "You see," he said to his companions, who were astonished at his sudden thirst for knowledge, "I can't afford to wear out my breeches on the college forms, now that my poor mother has to pay for them with her work."

His good-humor was not in the least impaired by his resolve not to spend a single penny of his pocket money. With a tact unusual at his age, or indeed at any other, he bore his misfortunes simply and proudly, without any of the servile humility or sullen envy which so often accompanies poverty. For three years in succession the highest prizes at the competitions rewarded him for his efforts; but these successes, far

from elating him unduly, seemed to afford him but little satisfaction. “This is only glory,” he thought; and his great ambition was to support himself.

He was soon able to do so, thanks to the kindness of the head-master, who offered him his tuition gratis if he would assist in superintending some of the lower classes. Thus one day when Madame Ferailleur presented herself as usual to make her quarterly payment, the steward replied: “You owe us nothing, madame; everything has been paid by your son.”

She almost fainted; after bearing adversity so bravely, this happiness proved too much for her. She could scarcely believe it. A long explanation was necessary to convince her of the truth, and then big tears, tears of joy this time, gushed from her eyes.

In this way, Pascal Ferailleur paid all the expenses of his education until he had won his degree, arming himself so as to resist the trials that awaited him, and giving abundant proof of energy and ability. He wished to be a lawyer; and the law, he was forced to admit, is a profession which is almost beyond the reach of penniless young men. But there are no insurmountable obstacles for those whose hearts are really set on an object. On the very day that Pascal inscribed his name as a student at the law school, he entered an advocate’s office as a clerk. His duties, which were extremely tiresome at first, had the two-fold advantage of familiarizing him with the forms of legal procedure, and of furnishing him with the means of prosecuting his studies. After he had been in the office six months, his employer agreed to pay him eight hundred francs a year, which were increased to fifteen hundred at the end of the second twelvemonth. In three years, when he had passed his final examination qualifying him to practise, his patron raised him to the position of head-clerk, with a salary of three thousand francs, which Pascal was moreover able to increase considerably by drawing up documents for busy attorneys, and assisting them in the preparation of their least important cases.

It was certainly something wonderful to have achieved such a result in so short a time; but the most difficult part of his task had still to be accomplished. It was a perilous undertaking to abandon an assured position, to cast a certainty aside for the chances of life at the bar. It was a grave step—so grave, indeed, that Pascal hesitated for a long time. He was threatened with the danger that always threatens subordinates who are useful to their superiors. He felt that his employer, who was in the habit of relieving himself of his heaviest duties by intrusting them to him, would not be likely to forgive him for leaving. And on starting on his own account, he could ill afford to dispense with this lawyer's good-will. The patronage that could scarcely fail to follow him from an office where he had served for four years was the most substantial basis of his calculations for the future. Eventually he succeeded to his satisfaction, though not without some difficulty, and only by employing that supreme finesse which consists in absolute frankness.

Before his office had been open a fortnight, he had seven or eight briefs waiting their turn upon his desk, and his first efforts were such as win the approving smile of old judges, and draw from them the prediction: "That young man will rise in his profession." He had not desired to make any display of his knowledge or talent, but merely to win the cases confided to him; and, unlike many beginners, he evinced no inclination to shine at his clients' expense. Rare modesty, and it served him well. His first ten months of practice brought him about eight thousand francs, absorbed in part by the expense attaching to a suitable office. The second year his fees increased by about one-half, and, feeling that his position was now assured, he insisted that his mother should resign her clerkship. He proved to her what was indeed the truth—that by superintending his establishment, she would save more than she made in her present position.

From that time the mother and the son had good reason to believe that their heroic energy had conquered fate. Clients became so numerous that Pascal found it necessary to draw nearer the business centre, and his rent was consequently doubled; but the income he

derived from his profession increased so rapidly that he soon had twelve thousand francs safely invested as a resource against any emergency. Madame Ferailleur now laid aside the mourning she had worn since her husband's death. She felt that she owed it to Pascal; and, besides, after believing there was no more happiness left for her on earth, her heart rejoiced at her son's success.

Pascal was thus on the high-road to fame, when a complication in M. Ferdinand de Coralth's affair, brought that young nobleman to his office. The trouble arose from a little stock exchange operation which M. Ferdinand had engaged in—an affair which savored a trifle of knavery. It was strange, but Pascal rather took a liking to M. de Coralth. The honest worker felt interested in this dashing adventurer; he was almost dazzled by his brilliant vices, his wit, his hardihood, conceit, marvellous assurance, and careless impudence; and he studied this specimen of the Parisian flora with no little curiosity. M. de Coralth certainly did not confide the secret of his life and his resources to Pascal but the latter's intelligence should have told him to distrust a man who treated the requirements of morality even more than cavalierly, and who had infinitely more wants than scruples. However, the young advocate seemed to have no suspicions; they exchanged visits occasionally, and it was Pascal himself who one day requested the viscount to take him to one of those "Reunions in High Life" which the newspapers describe in such glowing terms.

Madame Ferailleur was playing a game of whist with a party of old friends, according to her custom every Thursday evening, when M. de Coralth called to invite the young advocate to accompany him to Madame d'Argeles's reception. Pascal considered his friend's invitation exceedingly well timed. He dressed himself with more than ordinary care, and, as usual before going out, he approached his mother to kiss her and wish her good-bye. "How fine you are!" she said, smiling.

"I am going to a soiree, my dear mother," he replied; "and it is probable that I shall not return until very late. So don't wait for me, I beg of you; promise me to go to bed at your usual hour."

"Have you the night-key?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then; I will not wait for you. When you come in you will find your candle and some matches on the buffet in the ante-room. And wrap yourself up well, for it is very cold." Then raising her forehead to her son's lips, she gayly added: "A pleasant evening to you, my boy!"

Faithful to her promise, Madame Ferailleur retired at the usual hour; but she could not sleep. She certainly had no cause for anxiety, and yet the thought that her son was not at home filled her heart with vague misgivings such as she had never previously felt under similar circumstances. Possibly it was because she did not know where Pascal was going. Possibly M. de Coralth was the cause of her strange disquietude, for she utterly disliked the viscount. Her woman's instinct warned her that there was something unwholesome about this young man's peculiar handsomeness, and that it was not safe to trust to his professions of friendship. At all events, she lay awake and heard the clock of the neighboring Normal School strike each successive hour—two, three, and four. "How late Pascal stays," she said to herself.

And suddenly a fear more poignant even than her presentiments darted through her mind. She sprang out of bed and rushed to the window. She fancied she had heard a terrible cry of distress in the deserted street. At that very moment, the insulting word "thief" was being hurled in her son's face. But the street was silent, and deciding that she had been mistaken, she went back to bed laughing at herself for her fears; and at last she fell asleep. But judge of her terror in the morning when, on rising to let the servant in, she saw Pascal's candle still standing on the buffet. Was it possible that he had not returned? She hastened to his room—he was not there. And it was nearly eight o'clock.

This was the first time that Pascal had spent a night from home without warning his mother in advance; and such an act on the part of a man of his character was sufficient proof that something extraordinary had occurred. In an instant all the dangers that lurk in Paris after

nightfall flashed through her mind. She remembered all the stories she had read of men decoyed into dark corners, of men stabbed at the turn of some deserted street, or thrown into the Seine while crossing one of the bridges. What should she do? Her first impulse was to run to the Commissary of Police's office or to the house of Pascal's friend; but on the other hand, she dared not go out, for fear he might return in her absence. Thus, in an agony of suspense, she waited—counting the seconds by the quick throbbings of her temples, and straining her ears to catch the slightest sound.

At last, about half-past eight o'clock, she heard a heavy, uncertain footfall on the stairs. She flew to the door and beheld her son. His clothes were torn and disordered; his cravat was missing, he wore no overcoat, and he was bareheaded. He looked very pale, and his teeth were chattering. His eyes stared vacantly, and his features had an almost idiotic expression. "Pascal, what has happened to you?" she asked.

He trembled from head to foot as the sound of her voice suddenly roused him from his stupor. "Nothing," he stammered; "nothing at all." And as his mother pressed him with questions, he pushed her gently aside and went on to his room.

"Poor child!" murmured Madame Ferailleur, at once grieved and reassured; "and he is always so temperate. Some one must have forced him to drink."

She was entirely wrong in her surmise, and yet Pascal's sensations were exactly like those of an intoxicated man. How he had returned home, by what road, and what had happened on the way, he could not tell. He had found his way back mechanically, merely by force of habit—physical memory, as it might be called. He had a vague impression, however, that he had sat down for some time on a bench in the Champs-Elysees, that he had felt extremely cold, and that he had been accosted by a policeman, who threatened him with arrest if he did not move on. The last thing he could clearly recollect was rushing from Madame d'Argeles's house in the Rue de Berry. He knew that he had descended the staircase slowly and deliberately; that the servants in the vestibule

had stood aside to allow him to pass; and that, while crossing the courtyard, he had thrown away the candelabrum with which he had defended himself. After that, he remembered nothing distinctly. On reaching the street he had been overcome by the fresh air, just as a carouser is overcome on emerging from a heated dining-room. Perhaps the champagne which he had drank had contributed to this cerebral disorder. At all events, even now, in his own room, seated in his own arm-chair, and surrounded by familiar objects, he did not succeed in regaining the possession of his faculties.

He had barely strength enough to throw himself on to the bed, and in a moment he was sleeping with that heavy slumber which so often seizes hold of one on the occasion of a great crisis, and which has so frequently been observed among persons condemned to death, on the night preceding their execution. Four or five times his mother came to listen at the door. Once she entered, and seeing her son sleeping soundly, she could not repress a smile of satisfaction. “Poor Pascal!” she thought; “he can bear no excess but excess of work. Heavens! how surprised and mortified he will be when he awakes!”

Alas! it was not a trifling mortification, but despair, which awaited the sleeper on his wakening; for the past, the present, and the future were presented simultaneously and visionlike to his imagination. Although he had scarcely regained the full use of his faculties, he was, to some extent, at least capable of reflection and deliberation, and he tried to look the situation bravely in the face. First, as to the past, he had not the shadow of a doubt. He realized that he had fallen into a vile trap, and the person who had laid it for him was undoubtedly M. de Coralth, who, seated at his right, had prepared the “hands” with which he had won. This was evident. It seemed equally proven that Madame d’Argeles knew the real culprit—possibly she had detected him in the act, possibly he had taken her into his confidence. But what he could not fathom was M. de Coralth’s motive. What could have prompted the viscount to commit such an atrocious act? The incentive must have been very powerful, since he had naturally incurred the danger of detection and of being

considered an accomplice at the least. And then what influence had closed Madame d'Argeles's lips? But after all, what was the use of these conjectures? It was an actual, unanswerable, and terrible fact that this infamous plot had been successful, and that Pascal was dishonored. He was honesty itself, and yet he was accused—more than that, CONVICTED—of cheating at cards! He was innocent, and yet he could furnish no proofs of his innocence. He knew the real culprit, and yet he could see no way of unmasking him or even of accusing him. Do what he would, this atrocious, incomprehensive calumny would crush him. The bar was closed against him; his career was ended. And the terrible conviction that there was no escape from the abyss into which he had fallen made his reason totter—he felt that he was incapable of deciding on the best course, and that he must have a friend's advice.

Full of this idea, he hastily changed his clothes, and hurried from his room. His mother was watching for him—inclined to laugh at him a little; but a single glance warned her that her son was in terrible trouble, and that some dire misfortune had certainly befallen him. "Pascal, in heaven's name, what has happened?" she cried.

"A slight difficulty—a mere trifle," he replied.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Palais de Justice." And such was really the case, for he hoped to meet his most intimate friend there.

Contrary to his usual custom, he took the little staircase on the right, leading to the grand vestibule, where several lawyers were assembled, earnestly engaged in conversation. They were evidently astonished to see Pascal, and their conversation abruptly ceased on his approach. They assumed a grave look and turned away their heads in disgust. The unfortunate man at once realized the truth, and pressed his hand to his forehead, with a despairing gesture, as he murmured: "Already!—already!"

However, he passed on, and not seeing his friend, he hurried to the little conference hall, where he found five of his fellow-advocates. On Pascal's entrance, two of them at once left the hall, while two of the

others pretended to be very busily engaged in examining a brief which lay open on the table. The fifth, who did not move, was not the friend Pascal sought, but an old college comrade named Dartelle. Pascal walked straight toward him. “Well?” he asked.

Dartelle handed him a Figaro, still damp from the printing-press, but crumpled and worn, as if it had already passed through more than a hundred hands. “Read!” said he.

Pascal read as follows: “There was great sensation and a terrible scandal last night at the residence of Madame d’A——, a well-known star of the first magnitude. A score of gentlemen of high rank and immense wealth were enjoying a quiet game of baccarat, when it was observed that M. F—— was winning in a most extraordinary manner. He was watched and detected in the very act of dexterously slipping some cards into the pack he held. Crushed by the overpowering evidence against him, he allowed himself to be searched, and without much demur consented to refund the fruit of his knavery, to the amount of two thousand louis. The strangest thing connected with this scandal is, that M. F——, who is an advocate by profession, has always enjoyed an enviable reputation for integrity; and, unfortunately, this prank cannot be attributed to a momentary fit of madness, for the fact that he had provided himself with these cards in advance proves the act to have been premeditated. One of the persons present was especially displeased. This was the Viscount de C——, who had introduced M. F—— to Madame d’A ——. Extremely annoyed by this contretemps, he took umbrage at an offensive remark made by M. de R——, and it was rumored that these gentlemen would cross swords at daybreak this morning.

“LATER INTELLIGENCE.—We learn at the moment of going to press that an encounter has just taken place between M. de R—— and M. de C ——. M. de R—— received a slight wound in the side, but his condition is sufficiently satisfactory not to alarm his friends.”

The paper slipped from Pascal’s hand. His features were almost unrecognizable in his passion and despair. “It is an infamous lie!” he said, hoarsely. “I am innocent; I swear it upon my honor!” Dartelle

averted his face, but not quickly enough to prevent Pascal from noticing the look of withering scorn in his eyes. Then, feeling that he was condemned, that his sentence was irrevocable, and that there was no longer any hope: “I know the only thing that remains for me to do!” he murmured.

Dartelle turned, his eyes glistening with tears. He seized Pascal’s hands and pressed them with sorrowful tenderness, as if taking leave of a friend who is about to die. “Courage!” he whispered.

Pascal fled like a madman. “Yes,” he repeated, as he rushed along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, “that is the only thing left me to do.”

When he reached home he entered his office, double-locked the door, and wrote two letters—one to his mother, the other to the president of the order of Advocates. After a moment’s thought he began a third, but tore it into pieces before he had completed it. Then, without an instant’s hesitation, and like a man who had fully decided upon his course, he took a revolver and a box of cartridges from a drawer in his desk. “Poor mother!” he murmured; “it will kill her—but my disgrace would kill her too. Better shorten the agony.”

He little fancied at that supreme moment that each of his gestures, each contraction of his features, were viewed by the mother whose name he faltered. Since her son had left her to go to the Palais de Justice, the poor woman had remained almost crazy with anxiety; and when she heard him return and lock himself in his office—a thing he had never done before—a fearful presentiment was aroused in her mind. Gliding into her son’s bedroom, she at once approached the door communicating with his office. The upper part of this portal was of glass; it was possible to see what was occurring in the adjoining room. When Madame Ferailleur perceived Pascal seat himself at his desk and begin to write, she felt a trifle reassured, and almost thought of going away. But a vague dread, stronger than reason or will, riveted her to the spot. A few moments later, when she saw the revolver in her son’s hand, she understood everything. Her blood froze in her veins; and yet she had sufficient self-control to repress the cry of terror which sprang to her

lips. She realized that the danger was terrible, imminent, extreme. Her heart, rather than her bewildered reason, told her that her son's life hung on a single thread. The slightest sound, a word, a rap on the door might hasten the unfortunate man's deed.

An inspiration from heaven came to the poor mother. Pascal had contented himself with locking the door leading to the ante-room. He had forgotten this one, or neglected it, not thinking that anybody would approach his office through his bedroom. But his mother perceived that this door opened toward her. So, turning the knob with the utmost caution, she flung it suddenly open, and reaching her son's side with a single bound, she clasped him closely in her arms. "Pascal, wretched boy! what would you do?"

He was so surprised that his weapon fell from his hand, and he sank back almost fainting in his arm-chair. The idea of denying his intention never once occurred to him; besides, he was unable to articulate a word. But on his desk there lay a letter addressed to his mother which would speak for him.

Madame Ferailleur took it, tore the envelope open, and read: "Forgive me—I'm about to die. It must be so. I cannot survive dishonor; and I am dishonored."

"Dishonored!—you!" exclaimed the heartbroken mother. "My God! what does this mean? Speak. I implore you: tell me all—you must. I command you to do so. I command you!"

He complied with this at once supplicating and imperious behest, and related in a despairing voice the events which had wrought his woe. He did not omit a single particular, but tried rather to exaggerate than palliate the horrors of his situation. Perhaps he found a strange satisfaction in proving to himself that there was no hope left; possibly he believed his mother would say: "Yes, you are right; and death is your only refuge!"

As Madame Ferailleur listened, however, her eyes dilated with fear and horror, and she scarcely realized whether she were awake or in the midst of some frightful dream. For this was one of those unexpected

catastrophes which are beyond the range of human foresight or even imagination, and which her mind could scarcely conceive or admit. But SHE did not doubt him, even though his friends had doubted him. Indeed, if he had himself told her that he was guilty of cheating at cards, she would have refused to believe him. When his story was ended, she exclaimed: “And you wished to kill yourself? Did you not think, senseless boy, that your death would give an appearance of truth to this vile calumny?”

With a mother’s wonderful, sublime instinct, she had found the most powerful reason that could be urged to induce Pascal to live. “Did you not feel, my son, that it showed a lack of courage on your part to brand yourself and your name with eternal infamy, in order to escape your present sufferings? This thought ought to have stayed your hand. An honest name is a sacred trust which no one has a right to abuse. Your father bequeathed it to you, pure and untarnished, and so you must preserve it. If others try to cover it with opprobrium, you must live to defend it.”

He lowered his head despondently, and in a tone of profound discouragement, he replied: “But what can I do? How can I escape from the web which has been woven around me with such fiendish cunning? If I had possessed my usual presence of mind at the moment of the accusation, I might have defended and justified myself, perhaps. But now the misfortune is irreparable. How can I unmask the traitor, and what proofs of his guilt can I cast in his face?”

“All the same, you ought not to yield without a struggle,” interrupted Madame Ferailleur, sternly. “It is wrong to abandon a task because it is difficult; it must be accepted, and, even if one perish in the struggle, there is, at least, the satisfaction of feeling that one has not failed in duty.”

“But, mother——”

“I must not keep the truth from you, Pascal! What! are you lacking in energy? Come, my son, rise and raise your head. I shall not let you fight alone. I will fight with you.”

Without speaking a word, Pascal caught hold of his mother's hands and pressed them to his lips. His face was wet with tears. His overstrained nerves relaxed under the soothing influence of maternal tenderness and devotion. Reason, too, had regained her ascendency. His mother's noble words found an echo in his own heart, and he now looked upon suicide as an act of madness and cowardice. Madame Ferailleur felt that the victory was assured, but this did not suffice; she wished to enlist Pascal in her plans. "It is evident," she resumed, "that M. de Coralth is the author of this abominable plot. But what could have been his object? Has he any reason to fear you, Pascal? Has he confided to you, or have you discovered, any secret that might ruin him if it were divulged?"

"No, mother."

"Then he must be the vile instrument of some even more despicable being. Reflect, my son. Have you wounded any of your friends? Are you sure that you are in nobody's way? Consider carefully. Your profession has its dangers; and those who adopt it must expect to make bitter enemies."

Pascal trembled. It seemed to him as if a ray of light at last illumined the darkness—a dim and uncertain ray, it is true, but still a gleam of light.

"Who knows!" he muttered; "who knows!"

Madame Ferailleur reflected a few moments, and the nature of her reflections brought a flush to her brow. "This is one of those cases in which a mother should overstep reserve," said she. "If you had a mistress, my son——"

"I have none," he answered, promptly. Then his own face flushed, and after an instant's hesitation, he added: "But I entertain the most profound and reverent love for a young girl, the most beautiful and chaste being on earth—a girl who, in intelligence and heart, is worthy of you, my own mother."

Madame Ferailleur nodded her head gravely, as much as to say that she had expected to find a woman at the bottom of the mystery. “And who is this young girl?” she inquired. “What is her name?”

“Marguerite.”

“Marguerite who?”

Pascal’s embarrassment increased. “She has no other name,” he replied, hurriedly, “and she does not know her parents. She formerly lived in our street with her companion, Madame Leon, and an old female servant. It was there that I saw her for the first time. She now lives in the house of the Count de Chalusse, in the Rue de Courcelles.”

“In what capacity?”

“The count has always taken care of her—she owes her education to him. He acts as her guardian; and although she has never spoken to me on the subject, I fancy that the Count de Chalusse is her father.”

“And does this girl love you, Pascal?”

“I believe so, mother. She has promised me that she will have no other husband than myself.”

“And the count?”

“He doesn’t know—he doesn’t even suspect anything about it. Day after day I have been trying to gather courage to tell you everything, and to ask you to go to the Count de Chalusse. But my position is so modest as yet. The count is immensely rich, and he intends to give Marguerite an enormous fortune—two millions, I believe——”

Madame Ferailleur interrupted him with a gesture. “Look no further,” she said; “you have found the explanation.”

Pascal sprang to his feet with crimson cheeks, flaming eyes, and quivering lips. “It may be so,” he exclaimed; “it may be so! The count’s immense fortune may have tempted some miserable scoundrel. Who knows but some one may have been watching Marguerite, and have discovered that I am an obstacle?”

“Something told me that my suspicions were correct,” said Madame Ferailleur. “I had no proofs, and yet I felt sure of it.”

Pascal was absorbed in thought. “And what a strange coincidence,” he eventually remarked. “Do you know, the last time I saw Marguerite, a week ago, she seemed so sad and anxious that I felt alarmed. I questioned her, but at first she would not answer. After a little while, however, as I insisted, she said: ‘Ah, well, I fear the count is planning a marriage for me. M. de Chalusse has not said a word to me on the subject, but he has recently had several long conferences in private with a young man whose father rendered him a great service in former years. And this young man, whenever I meet him, looks at me in such a peculiar manner.’”

“What is his name?” asked Madame Ferailleur.

“I don’t know—she didn’t mention it; and her words so disturbed me that I did not think of asking. But she will tell me. This evening, if I don’t succeed in obtaining an interview, I will write to her. If your suspicions are correct, mother, our secret is in the hands of three persons, and so it is a secret no longer——”

He paused suddenly to listen. The noise of a spirited altercation between the servant and some visitor, came from the ante-room. “I tell you that he IS at home,” said some one in a panting voice, “and I must see him and speak with him at once. It is such an urgent matter that I left a card-party just at the most critical moment to come here.”

“I assure you, monsieur, that M. Ferailleur has gone out.”

“Very well; I will wait for him, then. Take me to a room where I can sit down.”

Pascal turned pale, for he recognized the voice of the individual who had suggested searching him at Madame d’Argeles’s house. Nevertheless, he opened the door; and a man, with a face like a full moon, and who was puffing and panting like a locomotive, came forward with the assurance of a person who thinks he may do anything he chooses by reason of his wealth. “Zounds!” he exclaimed. “I knew perfectly well that you were here. You don’t recognize me, perhaps, my dear sir. I am Baron Trigault—I came to——”

The words died away on his lips, and he became as embarrassed as if he had not possessed an income of eight hundred thousand francs a year. The fact is he had just perceived Madame Ferailleur. He bowed to her, and then, with a significant glance at Pascal he said: “I should like to speak to you in private, monsieur, in reference to a matter—”

Great as was Pascal’s astonishment, he showed none of it on his face. “You can speak in my mother’s presence,” he replied, coldly; “she knows everything.”

The baron’s surprise found vent in a positive distortion of his features. “Ah!” said he, in three different tones; “ah! ah!” And as no one had offered him a seat, he approached an arm-chair and took possession of it, exclaiming, “You will allow me, I trust? Those stairs have put me in such a state!”

In spite of his unwieldy appearance, this wealthy man was endowed with great natural shrewdness and an unusually active mind. And while he pretended to be engaged in recovering his breath he studied the room and its occupants. A revolver was lying on the floor beside a torn and crumpled letter, and tears were still glittering in the eyes of Madame Ferailleur and her son. A keen observer needed no further explanation of the scene.

“I will not conceal from you, monsieur,” began the baron, “that I have been led here by certain compunctions of conscience.” And, misinterpreting a gesture which Pascal made, “I mean what I say,” he continued; “compunctions of conscience. I have them occasionally. Your departure this morning, after that deplorable scene, caused certain doubts and suspicions to arise in my mind; and I said to myself, ‘We have been too hasty; perhaps this young man may not be guilty.’”

“Monsieur!” interrupted Pascal, in a threatening tone.

“Excuse me, allow me to finish, if you please. Reflection, I must confess, only confirmed this impression, and increased my doubts. ‘The devil!’ I said to myself again; ‘if this young man is innocent, the culprit must be one of the habitues of Madame d’Argeles’s house—that is to say, a man with whom I play twice a week, and whom I shall play with again

next Monday.' And then I became uneasy, and here I am!" Was the absurd reason which the baron gave for his visit the true one? It was difficult to decide. "I came," he continued, "thinking that a look at your home would teach me something; and now I have seen it, I am ready to take my oath that you are the victim of a vile conspiracy."

So saying he noisily blew his nose, but this did not prevent him from observing the quiet joy of Pascal and his mother. They were amazed. But although these words were calculated to make them feel intensely happy, they still looked at their visitor with distrust. It is not natural for a person to interest himself in other people's misfortunes, unless he has some special motive for doing so; and what could this singular man's object be?

However, he did not seem in the slightest degree disconcerted by the glacial reserve with which his advances were received. "It is clear that you are in some one's way," he resumed, "and that this some one has invented this method of ruining you. There can be no question about it. The intention became manifest to my mind the moment I read the paragraph concerning you in the Figaro. Have you seen it? Yes? Well, what do you think of it? I would be willing to swear that it was written from notes furnished by your enemy. Moreover, the particulars are incorrect, and I am going to write a line of correction which I shall take to the office myself." So saying he transported his unwieldy person to Pascal's desk, and hastily wrote as follows:

"MR. EDITOR,

"As a witness of the scene that took place at Madame d'A——s's house last night, allow me to make an important correction. It is only too true that extra cards were introduced into the pack, but that they were introduced by M. F—— is not proven, since he was NOT SEEN to do it. I know that appearances are against him, but

he nevertheless possesses my entire confidence and esteem.

"BARON TRIGAULT."

Meanwhile Madame Ferailleur and her son had exchanged significant glances. Their impressions were the same. This man could not be an enemy. When the baron had finished his letter, and had read it aloud, Pascal, who was deeply moved, exclaimed: "I do not know how to express my gratitude to you, monsieur; but if you really wish to serve me, pray don't send that note. It would cause you a great deal of trouble and annoyance, and I should none the less be obliged to relinquish the practice of my profession—besides, I am especially anxious to be forgotten for a time."

"So be it—I understand you; you hope to discover the traitor, and you do not wish to put him on his guard. I approve of your prudence. But remember my words: if you ever need a helping hand, rap at my door; and when you hold the necessary proofs, I will furnish you with the means of rendering your justification even more startling than the affront." He prepared to go, but before crossing the threshold, he turned and said: "In future I shall watch the fingers of the player who sits on my left hand. And if I were in your place, I would obtain the notes from which that newspaper article was written. One never knows the benefit that may be derived, at a certain moment, from a page of writing."

As he started off, Madame Ferailleur sprang from her chair. "Pascal," she exclaimed, "that man knows something, and your enemies are his; I read it in his eyes. He, too, distrusts M. de Coralth."

"I understood him, mother, and my mind is made up. I must disappear. From this moment Pascal Ferailleur no longer exists."

That same evening two large vans were standing outside Madame Ferailleur's house. She had sold her furniture without reserve, and was starting to join her son, who had already left for Le Havre, she said, in view of sailing to America.

VI.

"There are a number of patients waiting for me. I will drop in again about midnight. I still have several urgent visits to make." Thus had Dr. Jodon spoken to Mademoiselle Marguerite; and yet, when he left the Hotel de Chalusse, after assuring himself that Casimir would have some straw spread over the street, the doctor quietly walked home. The visits he had spoken of merely existed in his imagination; but it was a part of his role to appear to be overrun with patients. To tell the truth, the only patient he had had to attend to that week was a superannuated porter, living in the Rue de la Pepiniere, and whom he visited twice a day, for want of something better to do. The remainder of his time was spent in waiting for patients who never came, and in cursing the profession of medicine, which was ruined, he declared, by excessive competition, combined with certain rules of decorum which hampered young practitioners beyond endurance.

However, if Dr. Jodon had devoted one-half of the time he spent in cursing and building castles in the air to study, he might have, perhaps, raised his little skill to the height of his immense ambition. But neither work nor patience formed any part of his system. He was a man of the present age, and wished to rise speedily with as little trouble as possible. A certain amount of display and assurance, a little luck, and a good deal of advertising would, in his opinion, suffice to bring about this result. It was with this conviction, indeed, that he had taken up his abode in the Rue de Courcelles, situated in one of the most aristocratic quarters of Paris. But so far, events had shown his theory to be incorrect. In spite of the greatest economy, very cleverly concealed, he had seen the little capital which constituted his entire fortune dwindle away. He had originally possessed but twenty thousand francs, a sum which in no wise corresponded with his lofty pretensions. He had paid his rent that very morning; and he could not close his eyes to the fact that the time was

near at hand when he would be unable to pay it. What should he do then? When he thought of this contingency, and it was a subject that filled his mind to the exclusion of all other matters, he felt the fires of wrath and hatred kindle in his soul. He utterly refused to regard himself as the cause of his own misfortunes; on the contrary, following the example of many other disappointed individuals, he railed at mankind and everything in general—at circumstances, envious acquaintances, and enemies, whom he certainly did not possess.

At times he was capable of doing almost anything to gratify his lust for gold, for the privations which he had endured so long were like oil cast upon the flame of covetousness which was ever burning in his breast. In calmer moments he asked himself at what other door he could knock, in view of hastening the arrival of Fortune. Sometimes he thought of turning dentist, or of trying to find some capitalist who would join him in manufacturing one of those patent medicines which are warranted to yield their promoters a hundred thousand francs a year. On other occasions he dreamed of establishing a monster pharmacy, or of opening a private hospital. But money was needed to carry out any one of these plans, and he had no money. There was the rub. However the time was fast approaching when he must decide upon his course; he could not possibly hold out much longer.

His third year of practice in the Rue de Courcelles had not yielded him enough to pay his servant's wages. For he had a servant, of course. He had a valet for the same reason as he had a suite of rooms of a superficially sumptuous aspect. Faithful to his system, or, rather, to his master's system, he had sacrificed everything to show. The display of gilding in his apartments was such as to make a man of taste shut his eyes to escape the sight of it. There were gorgeous carpets and hangings, frescoed ceilings, spurious objects of virtu, and pier-tables loaded with ornaments. An unsophisticated youth from the country would certainly have been dazzled; but it would not do to examine these things too closely. There was more cotton than silk in the velvet covering of the furniture; and if various statuettes placed on brackets at a certain height

had been closely inspected, it would have been found that they were of mere plaster, hidden beneath a coating of green paint, sprinkled with copper filings. This plaster, playing the part of bronze, was in perfect keeping with the man, his system, and the present age.

When the doctor reached home, his first question to his servant was as usual: “Has any one called?”

“No one.”

The doctor sighed, and passing through his superb waiting-room, he entered his consulting sanctum, and seated himself in the chimney corner beside an infinitesimal fire. He was even more thoughtful than usual. The scene which he had just witnessed at the Count de Chalusse’s house recurred to his mind, and he turned it over and over again in his brain, striving to find some way by which he might derive an advantage from the mystery. For he was more than ever convinced that there was a mystery. He had been engrossed in these thoughts for some time, when his meditations were disturbed by a ring at the bell. Who could be calling at this hour?

The question was answered by his servant, who appeared and informed him that a lady, who was in a great hurry, was waiting in the reception-room. “Very well,” was his reply; “but it is best to let her wait a few moments.” For he had at least this merit: he never deviated from his system. Under no circumstances whatever would he have admitted a patient immediately; he wished him to wait so that he might have an opportunity of reflecting on the advantages of consulting a physician whose time was constantly occupied.

However, when ten minutes or so had elapsed, he opened the door, and a tall lady came quickly forward, throwing back the veil which had concealed her face. She must have been over forty-five; and if she had ever been handsome, there was nothing to indicate it now. She had brown hair, thickly sprinkled with gray, but very coarse and abundant, and growing low over her forehead; her nose was broad and flat; her lips were thick, and her eyes were dull and expressionless. However, her manners were gentle and rather melancholy; and one would have judged

her to be somewhat of a devotee. Still for the time being she seemed greatly agitated. She seated herself at the doctor's invitation; and without waiting for him to ask any questions: "I ought to tell you at once, monsieur," she began, "that I am the Count de Chalusse's house-keeper."

In spite of his self-control, the doctor bounded from his chair. "Madame Leon?" he asked, in a tone of intense surprise.

She bowed, compressing her thick lips. "I am known by that name—yes, monsieur. But it is only my Christian name. The one I have a right to bear would not accord with my present position. Reverses of fortune are not rare in these days; and were it not for the consoling influences of religion, one would not have strength to endure them."

The physician was greatly puzzled. "What can she want of me?" he thought.

Meanwhile, she had resumed speaking: "I was much reduced in circumstances—at the end of my resources, indeed—when M. de Chalusse—a family friend—requested me to act as companion to a young girl in whom he was interested—Mademoiselle Marguerite. I accepted the position; and I thank God every day that I did so, for I feel a mother's affection for this young girl, and she loves me as fondly as if she were my own daughter." In support of her assertion, she drew a handkerchief from her pocket, and succeeded in forcing a few tears to her eyes. "Under these circumstances, doctor," she continued, "you cannot fail to understand that the interests of my dearly beloved Marguerite bring me to you. I was shut up in my own room when M. de Chalusse was brought home, and I did not hear of his illness until after your departure. Perhaps you might say that I ought to have waited until your next visit; but I had not sufficient patience to do so. One cannot submit without a struggle to the torture of suspense, when the future of a beloved daughter is at stake. So here I am." She paused to take breath, and then added, "I have come, monsieur, to ask you to tell me the exact truth respecting the count's condition."

The doctor was expecting something very different, but nevertheless he replied with all due gravity and self-possession. “It is my painful duty to tell you, madame, that there is scarcely any hope, and that I expect a fatal termination within twenty-four hours, unless the patient should regain consciousness.”

The housekeeper turned pale. “Then all is lost,” she faltered, “all is lost!” And unable to articulate another word she rose to her feet, bowed, and abruptly left the room.

Before the grate, with his mouth half open, and his right arm extended in an interrupted gesture, the doctor stood speechless and disconcerted. It was only when the outer door closed with a bang that he seemed restored to consciousness. And as he heard the noise he sprang forward as if to recall his visitor. “Ah!” he exclaimed, with an oath, “the miserable old woman was mocking me!” And urged on by a wild, irrational impulse, he caught up his hat and darted out in pursuit. Madame Leon was considerably in advance of him, and was walking very quickly; still, by quickening his pace, he might have overtaken her. However, he did not join her, for he scarcely knew what excuse to offer for such a strange proceeding; he contented himself by cautiously following her at a little distance. Suddenly she stopped short. It was in front of a tobacconist’s shop, where there was a post-office letter-box. The shop was closed, but the box was there with its little slit for letters to be dropped into it. Madame Leon evidently hesitated. She paused, as one always does before venturing upon a decisive act, from which there will be no return, whatever may be the consequences. An observer never remains twenty minutes before a letter-box without witnessing this pantomime so expressive of irresolution. At last, however, she shrugged her shoulders with a gesture which eloquently expressed the result of her deliberations; and drawing a letter from her bosom, she dropped it into the box, and then hastened on more quickly than before.

“There is not the slightest doubt,” thought the doctor, “that letter had been prepared in advance, and whether it should be sent or not depended on the answer I gave.”

We have already said that M. Jodon was not a wealthy man, and yet he would willingly have given a hundred-franc note to have known the contents of this letter, or even the name of the person to whom it was addressed. But his chase was almost ended. Madame Leon had reached the Hotel de Chalusse, and now went in. Should he follow her? His curiosity was torturing him to such a degree that he had an idea of doing so; and it required an heroic effort of will to resist the temptation successfully. But a gleam of common sense warned him that this would be a terrible blunder. Once already during the evening his conduct had attracted attention; and he began to realize that there was a better way of winning confidence than by intruding almost forcibly into other people's affairs. Accordingly he thoughtfully retraced his steps, feeling intensely disgusted with himself. "What a fool I am!" he grumbled. "If I had kept the old woman in suspense, instead of blurting out the truth, I might have learned the real object of her visit; for she had an object. But what was it?"

The doctor spent the two hours that remained to him before making his second visit in trying to discover it. But, although nothing prevented him from exploring the boundless fields of improbable possibilities, he could think of nothing satisfactory. There was only one certain point, that Madame Leon and Mademoiselle Marguerite were equally interested in the question as to whether the count would regain consciousness or not. As to their interests in the matter, the doctor felt confident that they were not identical; he was persuaded that a secret enmity existed between them, and that the housekeeper had visited him without Mademoiselle Marguerite's knowledge. For he was not deceived by Madame Leon, or by her pretended devotion to Mademoiselle Marguerite. Her manner, her smooth words, her tone of pious resignation, and the allusion to the grand name she had the right to bear, were all calculated to impose upon one; but she had been too much disconcerted toward the last to remember her part. Dr. Jodon lacked the courage to return to his sumptuous rooms, and it was in a little cafe that he thus reflected upon the situation, while drinking some execrable beer brewed in Paris out of a glass manufactured in Bavaria.

At last midnight sounded—the hour had come. Still the doctor did not move. Having been obliged to wait himself, he wished, in revenge, to make the others wait, and it was not until the cafe closed that he again walked up the Rue de Courcelles. Madame Leon had left the gate ajar, and the doctor had no difficulty in making his way into the courtyard. As in the earlier part of the evening, the servants were assembled in the concierge's lodge; but the careless gayety which shone upon their faces a few hours before had given place to evident anxiety respecting their future prospects. Through the windows of the lodge they could be seen standing round the two choice spirits of the household, M. Bourigeau, the concierge, and M. Casimir, the valet, who were engaged in earnest conversation. And if the doctor had listened, he would have heard such words as "wages," and "legacies," and "remuneration for faithful service," and "annuities" repeated over and over again.

But M. Jodon did not listen. Thinking he should find some servant inside, he entered the house. However, there was nobody to announce his presence; the door closed noiselessly behind him, the heavy carpet which covered the marble steps stifled the sound of his footsteps, and he ascended the first flight without seeing any one. The door opening into the count's room was open, the room itself being brilliantly lighted by a large fire, and a lamp which stood on a corner of the mantel-shelf. Instinctively the doctor paused and looked in. There had been no change since his first visit. The count was still lying motionless on his pillows; his face was swollen, his eyelids were closed, but he still breathed, as was shown by the regular movement of the covering over his chest. Madame Leon and Mademoiselle Marguerite were his only attendants. The housekeeper, who sat back a little in the shade, was half reclining in an arm-chair with her hands clasped in her lap, her lips firmly compressed, and her eyes fixed upon vacancy. Pale but calm, and more imposing and more beautiful than ever, Mademoiselle Marguerite was kneeling beside the bed, eagerly watching for some sign of renewed life and intelligence on the count's face.

A little ashamed of his indiscretion, the doctor retreated seven or eight steps down the stairs, and then ascended them again, coughing slightly, so as to announce his approach. This time he was heard. for Mademoiselle Marguerite came to the door to meet him. “Well?” he inquired.

“Alas!”

He advanced toward the bed, but before he had time to examine his patient Mademoiselle Marguerite handed him a scrap of paper. “The physician who usually attends M. de Chalusse has been here in your absence, monsieur,” said she. “This is his prescription, and we have already administered a few drops of the potion.”

M. Jodon, who was expecting this blow, bowed coldly.

“I must add,” continued Mademoiselle Marguerite, “that the doctor approved of all that had been done; and I beg you will unite your skill with his in treating the case.”

Unfortunately all the medical skill of the faculty would have availed nothing here. After another examination, Dr. Jodon declared that it would be necessary to wait for the action of nature, but that he must be informed of the slightest change in the sick man’s condition. “And I will tell my servant to wake me at once if I am sent for,” he added.

He was already leaving the room, when Madame Leon barred his passage. “Isn’t it true, doctor, that one attentive person would suffice to watch over the count?” she asked.

“Most assuredly,” he answered.

The housekeeper turned toward Mademoiselle Marguerite. “Ah, you see, my dear young lady,” she said, “what did I tell you? Listen to me; take a little rest. Watching is not suitable work for one of your age——”

“It is useless to insist,” interrupted the young girl, resolutely. “I shall remain here. I shall watch over him myself.”

The housekeeper made no reply; but it seemed to the doctor that the two women exchanged singular glances. “The devil!” he muttered, as he took his departure; “one might think that they distrusted each other!”

Perhaps he was right; but at all events he had scarcely left the house before Madame Leon again urged her dear young lady to take a few hours' rest. "What can you fear?" she insisted, in her wheedling voice. "Sha'n't I be here? Do you suppose your old Leon capable of losing herself in sleep, when your future depends upon a word from that poor man lying there?"

"Pray, cease."

"Ah, no! my dear young lady; my love for you compels me."

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Mademoiselle Marguerite; "enough, Leon!"

Her tone was so determined that the housekeeper was compelled to yield; but not without a deep sigh, not without an imploring glance to Heaven, as if calling upon Providence to witness the purity of her motives and the usefulness of her praiseworthy efforts. "At least, my dear lady, wrap yourself up warmly. Shall I go and bring you your heavy travelling shawl?"

"Thanks, my dear Leon—Annette will bring it."

"Then, pray, send for it. But we are not going to watch alone? What should we do if we needed anything?"

"I will call," replied Marguerite.

This was unnecessary, for Dr. Jodon's departure from the house had put an abrupt termination to the servants' conference; and they were now assembled on the landing, anxious and breathless, and peering eagerly into the sick-room.

Mademoiselle Marguerite went toward them. "Madame Leon and myself will remain with the count," she said. "Annette"—this was the woman whom she liked best of all the servants "Casimir and a footman will spend the night in the little side salon. The others may retire."

Her orders were obeyed. Two o'clock sounded from the church-tower near by, and then the solemn and terrible silence was only broken by the hard breathing of the unconscious man and the implacable ticktack of the clock on the mantel-shelf, numbering the seconds which were left for him to live. From the streets outside, not a sound reached this princely

abode, which stood between a vast courtyard and a garden as large as a park. Moreover, the straw which had been spread over the paving-stones effectually deadened the rumble of the few vehicles that passed. Enveloped in a soft, warm shawl, Madame Leon had again taken possession of her arm-chair, and while she pretended to be reading a prayer-book, she kept a close watch over her dear young lady, as if she were striving to discover her in-most thoughts. Mademoiselle Marguerite did not suspect this affectionate espionage. Besides, what would it have mattered to her? She had rolled a low arm-chair near the bedside, seated herself in it, and her eyes were fixed upon M. de Chalusse. Two or three times she started violently, and once even she said to Madame Leon: “Come—come and see!”

It seemed to her that there was a faint change in the patient’s face; but it was only a fancy—she had been deceived by the shadows that played about the room, caused by the capricious flame in the grate. The hours were creeping on, and the housekeeper, wearying at last of her fruitless watch, dropped asleep; her head fell forward on to her breast, her prayer-book slipped from her hands, and finally she began to snore. But Mademoiselle Marguerite did not perceive this, absorbed as she was in thoughts which, by reason of their very profundity, had ceased to be sorrowful. Perhaps she felt she was keeping a last vigil over her happiness, and that with the final breath of this dying man all her girlhood’s dreams and all her dearest hopes would take flight for evermore. Undoubtedly her thoughts flew to the man to whom she had promised her life—to Pascal, to the unfortunate fellow whose honor was being stolen from him at that very moment, in a fashionable gaming-house.

About five o’clock the air became so close that she felt a sudden faintness, and opened the window to obtain a breath of fresh air. The noise aroused Madame Leon from her slumbers. She rose, yawned, and rather sullenly declared that she felt very queer, and would certainly fall ill if she did not take some refreshment. It became necessary to summon

M. Casimir, who brought her a glass of Madeira and some biscuits. “Now I feel better,” she murmured, after her repast. “My excessive sensibility will be the death of me.” And so saying, she dropped asleep again.

Mademoiselle Marguerite had meanwhile returned to her seat; but her thoughts gradually became confused, her eyelids grew heavy, and although she struggled, she at last fell asleep in her turn, with her head resting on the count’s bed. It was daylight when a strange and terrible shock awoke her. It seemed to her as if an icy hand, some dead person’s hand, was gently stroking her head, and tenderly caressing her hair. She at once sprang to her feet. The sick man had regained consciousness; his eyes were open and his right arm was moving. Mademoiselle Marguerite darted to the bell-rope and pulled it violently, and as a servant appeared in answer to the summons, she cried: “Run for the physician who lives near here—quick!—and tell him that the count is conscious.”

In an instant, almost, the sick-room was full of servants, but the girl did not perceive it. She had approached M. de Chalusse, and taking his hand, she tenderly asked: “You hear me, do you not, monsieur? Do you understand me?”

His lips moved; but only a hollow, rattling sound, which was absolutely unintelligible, came from his throat. Still, he understood her; as it was easy to see by his gestures—despairing and painful ones, for paralysis had not released its hold on its victim, and it was only with great difficulty that he could slightly move his right arm. He evidently desired something. But what?

They mentioned the different articles in the room—everything indeed that they could think of. But in vain, until the housekeeper suddenly exclaimed: “He wishes to write.”

That was, indeed, what he desired. With the hand that was comparatively free, with the hoarse rattle that was his only voice, M. de Chalusse answered, “Yes, yes!” and his eyes even turned to Madame Leon with an expression of joy and gratitude. They raised him on his pillows, and brought him a small writing-desk, with some paper, and a pen that had been dipped in ink. But like those around him, he had

himself over-estimated his strength; if he could move his hand, he could not CONTROL its movements. After a terrible effort and intense suffering, however, he succeeded in tracing a few words, the meaning of which it was impossible to understand. It was only with the greatest difficulty that these words could be deciphered—"My entire fortune—give—friends—against——" This signified nothing.

In despair, he dropped the pen, and his glance and his hand turned to that part of the room opposite his bed. "Monsieur means his escritoire, perhaps?"

"Yes, yes," the sick man hoarsely answered.

"Perhaps the count wishes that it should be opened?"

"Yes, yes!" was the reply again.

"My God!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Marguerite, with a gesture of despair; "what have I done? I have broken the key. I feared the responsibility which would fall upon us all."

The expression of the count's face had become absolutely frightful. It indicated utter discouragement, the most bitter suffering, the most horrible despair. His soul was writhing in a body from which life had fled. Intelligence, mind, and will were fast bound in a corpse which they could not electrify. The consciousness of his own powerlessness caused him a paroxysm of frantic rage; his hands clinched, the veins in his throat swelled, his eyes almost started from their sockets, and in a harsh, shrill voice that had nothing human in it, he exclaimed: "Marguerite!—despoiled!—take care!—your mother!" And this was all—it was the supreme effort that broke the last link that bound the soul to earth.

"A priest!" cried Madame Leon! "A priest! In the name of Heaven, go for a priest!"

"Rather for a notary," suggested M. Casimir. "You see he wishes to make a will."

But at that moment the physician entered, pale and breathless. He walked straight to the bedside, glanced at the motionless form, and solemnly exclaimed: "The Count de Chalusse is dead!"

There was a moment's stupor—the stupor which always follows death, especially when death comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A feeling of mingled wonder, selfishness, and fear pervaded the group of servants. "Yes, it is over!" muttered the doctor; "it is all over!"

And as he was familiar with these painful scenes, and had lost none of his self-possession, he furtively studied Mademoiselle Marguerite's features and attitude. She seemed thunderstruck. With dry, fixed eyes and contracted features, she stood rooted to her place, gazing at the lifeless form as if she were expecting some miracle—as if she still hoped to hear those rigid lips reveal the secret which he had tried in vain to disclose, and which he had carried with him to the grave.

The physician was the only person who observed this. The other occupants of the room were exchanging looks of distress. Some of the women had fallen upon their knees, and were sobbing and praying in the same breath. But Madame Leon's sobs could be heard above the rest. They were at first inarticulate moans, but suddenly she sprang toward Mademoiselle Marguerite, and clasping her in her arms, she cried: "What a misfortune! My dearest child, what a loss!" Utterly incapable of uttering a word, the poor girl tried to free herself from this close embrace, but the housekeeper would not be repulsed, and continued: "Weep, my dear young lady, weep! Do not refuse to give vent to your sorrow."

She herself displayed so little self-control that the physician reprimanded her with considerable severity, whereat her emotion increased, and with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, she sobbed: "Yes, doctor, yes; you are right; I ought to moderate my grief. But pray, doctor, remove my beloved Marguerite from this scene, which is too terrible for her young and tender heart. Persuade her to retire to her own room, so that she may ask God for strength to bear the misfortune which has befallen her."

The poor girl had certainly no intention of leaving the room, but before she could say so, M. Casimir stepped forward. "I think," he dryly observed, "that mademoiselle had better remain here."

“Eh?” said Madame Leon, looking up suddenly. “And why, if you please?”

“Because—because——”

Anger had dried the housekeeper’s tears. “What do you mean?” she asked. “Do you pretend to prevent mademoiselle from doing as she chooses in her own house?”

M. Casimir gave vent to a contemptuous whistle, which, twenty-four hours earlier, would have been punished with a heavy blow from the man who was now lying there—dead. “Her own house!” he answered; “her own house! Yesterday I shouldn’t have denied it; but to-day it’s quite another thing. Is she a relative? No, she isn’t. What are you talking about, then? We are all equals here.”

He spoke so impudently that even the doctor felt indignant. “Scoundrel!” said he.

But the valet turned toward him with an air which proved that he was well acquainted with the doctor’s servant, and, consequently, with all the secrets of the master’s life. “Call your own valet a scoundrel, if you choose,” he retorted, “but not me. Your duties here are over, aren’t they? So leave us to manage our own affairs. Thank heaven, I know what I’m talking about. Everybody knows that caution must be exercised in a dead man’s house, especially when that house is full of money, and when, instead of relatives, there are—persons who—who are there nobody knows how or why. In case any valuables were missed, who would be accused of taking them? Why, the poor servants, of course. Ah, they have broad shoulders! Their trunks would be searched; and even if nothing were found, they would be sent to prison all the same. In the meantime other people would escape with the booty. No, Lisette! No one will stir from this room until the arrival of the justice——”

Madame Leon was bursting with rage. “All right!” she interrupted; “I’m going to send for the count’s particular friend, General——”

“I don’t care a fig for your general.”

“Wretch!”

It was Mademoiselle Marguerite who put an end to this indecent dispute. Its increasing violence had aroused her from her stupor. Casimir's impudence brought a flush to her forehead, and stepping forward with haughty resolution, she exclaimed: "You forget that one never raises one's voice in the chamber of death." Her words were so true, and her manner so majestic, that M. Casimir was silenced. Then, pointing to the door, she coldly added: "Go for the justice of the peace, and don't set foot here again, except in his company."

He bowed, stammered an unintelligible apology, and left the room. "She always gets the best of me," he growled, as he went downstairs. "But seals shall be put on everything."

When he entered the porter's lodge, M. Bourigeau was just getting up, having slept all night, while his wife watched. "Quick," ordered M. Casimir; "make haste and finish dressing, and run for the justice of the peace—we must have him here at once. Everything must be done regularly and in order, upstairs."

The concierge was in despair. "Heavens!" he exclaimed; "so the master's dead! What a misfortune!"

"You may well say so; and this is the second time such a thing has happened to me. I remember now what a shrewd fellow named Chupin once said to me. 'If I were a servant,' he remarked, 'before entering a man's service, I'd make him insure his life for my benefit in one of those new-fangled companies, so that I might step into a handsome fortune if he took it into his head to die.' But make haste, Bourigeau."

"That's a famous idea, but scarcely practicable," growled the concierge.

"I don't know whether it is or not. But at all events I'm terribly annoyed. The count was giving me enormous wages, and I had got him nicely into my ways. Well, after all, I shall only have to begin again!"

M. Bourigeau had not yet attained to the heights of such serene philosophy, and as he buttoned his overcoat, he groaned: "Ah! you're not situated as I am, Casimir. You've only yourself to look out for. I have my

furniture; and if I don't succeed in finding a position where I can have two rooms, I shall be obliged to sell part of it. What a blessed nuisance!"

As soon as he was dressed he started off on his mission; and M. Casimir, who dared not return to the house, began walking slowly to and fro in front of the lodge. He had made some thirty turns or so, and was beginning to feel impatient, when he saw Victor Chupin approaching. "You are always on hand at the right moment," remarked M. Casimir. "It's all over!"

Chupin turned eagerly. "Then our bargain holds?" he exclaimed. "You understand what I mean—the funeral, you know."

"It isn't certain that I shall have anything to do with it; but call again in three hours from now."

"All right, I'll be here."

"And M. Fortunat?" asked Casimir.

"He received what he called a 'violent shock' last evening, but he's better this morning. He instructed me to tell you that he should look for you between twelve and one—you know where."

"I'll endeavor to be there, although it may be difficult for me to get away. If I go, however, I'll show him the letter that caused the count's illness; for the count threw it away, after tearing it into several pieces, and I found some of the bits which escaped his notice as well as mademoiselle's. It's a strange letter, upon my word!"

Chupin gazed at the valet with a look of mingled wonder and admiration. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "how fortunate a man must be to secure a valet like you!"

His companion smiled complacently, but all of a sudden he remarked: "Make haste and go. I see Bourigeau in the distance, bringing the justice of the peace."

VII.

The magistrate who was now approaching the Chalusse mansion in the concierge's company, exemplified in a remarkable manner all the ideas that are awakened in one's mind by the grand yet simple title of "Justice of the Peace." He was the very person you would like to think of as the family magistrate; as the promoter of friendly feeling; as the guardian of the rights of the absent, the young, and the weak; as the just arbiter in unfortunate differences between those who are closely related; a sage of wide experience and boundless benevolence; a judge whose paternal justice dispenses with all pomp and display, and who is allowed by French statutes to hold his court by his own fireside, providing the doors stand open. He was considerably over fifty, tall, and very thin, with bent shoulders. His clothes were rather old-fashioned in cut, but by no means ridiculous. The expression of his face was gentleness itself; but it would not have done to presume upon this gentleness, for his glance was keen and piercing—like the glance of all who are expert in diving into consciences, and discovering the secrets hidden there. Moreover, like all men who are accustomed to deliberate in public, his features were expressionless. He could see and hear everything, suspect and understand everything, without letting a muscle of his face move. And yet the habitues of his audience-chamber, and his clerks, pretended that they could always detect the nature of his impressions. A ring which he wore upon one of his fingers served as a barometer for those who knew him. If a difficult case, or one that embarrassed his conscience, presented itself, his eyes fixed themselves obstinately upon this ring. If he were satisfied that everything was right, he looked up again, and began playing with the ring, slipping it up and down between the first and second joint of his finger; but if he were displeased, he abruptly turned the bezel inside.

In appearance, he was sufficiently imposing to intimidate even M. Casimir. The proud valet bowed low as the magistrate approached, and with his heart in his mouth, and in an obsequious voice he said: “It was I who took the liberty of sending for you, monsieur.”

“Ah!” said the magistrate, who already knew as much about the Hotel de Chalusse, and the events of the past twelve hours, as M. Casimir himself; for on his way to the house, he had turned Bourigeau inside out like a glove, by means of a dozen gentle questions.

“If monsieur wishes I will explain,” resumed M. Casimir.

“Nothing! It is quite unnecessary. Usher us in.”

This “us” astonished the valet; but before they reached the house it was explained to him. He discovered a man of flourishing and even jovial mien who was walking along in the magistrate’s shadow carrying a large black portfolio under his arm. This was evidently the clerk. He seemed to be as pleased with his employment as he was with himself; and as he followed M. Casimir, he examined the adornments of the mansion, the mosaics in the vestibule, the statuary and the frescoed walls with an appraiser’s eye. Perhaps he was calculating how many years’ salary it would require to pay for the decorating of this one staircase.

On the threshold of the death room the magistrate paused. There had been some change during M. Casimir’s absence. The doctor had left. The bed had been rearranged, and several candles were burning on a table covered with a white cloth. Madame Leon had gone to her own room, accompanied by two servants, to fetch a vessel of holy water and a branch of withered palm. She was now engaged in repeating the prayers for the dead, pausing from time to time to dip the palm branch in the holy water, and sprinkle the bed. Both windows had been opened in spite of the cold. On the marble hearth stood a chafing-dish full of embers from which rose spiral rings of smoke, filling the room with a pungent odor as a servant poured some vinegar and sugar on to the coals.

As the magistrate appeared, every one rose up. Then, after bestowing prolonged scrutiny upon the room and its occupants, he respectfully removed his hat, and walked in. “Why are so many people here?” he inquired.

“I suggested that they should remain,” replied M. Casimir, “because—”

“You are—suspicious,” interrupted the magistrate.

His clerk had already drawn a pen and some paper from his portfolio, and was engaged in reading the decision, rendered by the magistrate at the request of one Bourigeau, and in virtue of which, seals were about to be affixed to the deceased nobleman’s personal effects. Since the magistrate had entered the room, his eyes had not once wandered from Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was standing near the fireplace, looking pale but composed. At last he approached her, and in a tone of deep sympathy: “Are you Mademoiselle Marguerite?” he asked.

She raised her clear eyes, rendered more beautiful than ever, by the tears that trembled on her lashes, and in a faltering voice, replied: “Yes, monsieur.”

“Are you a relative? Are you connected in any way with the Count de Chalusse? Have you any right to his property?”

“No, monsieur.”

“Excuse me, mademoiselle, but these questions are indispensable. Who intrusted you to the care of M. de Chalusse, and by what right? Was it your father or your mother?”

“I have neither father nor mother, monsieur. I am alone in the world—utterly alone.”

The magistrate glanced keenly round the room. “Ah! I understand,” said he, at last; “advantage has been taken of your isolation to treat you with disrespect, to insult you, perhaps.”

Every head drooped, and M. Casimir bitterly regretted that he had not remained below in the courtyard. Mademoiselle Marguerite looked at the magistrate in astonishment, for she was amazed by his penetration. She was ignorant of his conversation with Bourigeau on the road, and

did not know that through the concierge's ridiculous statements and accusations, the magistrate had succeeded in discovering at least a portion of the truth.

"I shall have the honor of asking for a few moments' conversation with you presently, mademoiselle," he said. "But first, one question. I am told that the Count de Chalusse entertained a very lively affection for you. Are you sure that he has not taken care to provide for your future? Are you sure that he has not left a will?"

The girl shook her head. "He made one in my favor some time ago," she replied. "I saw it; he gave it to me to read; but it was destroyed a fortnight after my arrival here, and in compliance with my request."

Madame Leon had hitherto been dumb with fear, but, conquering her weakness, she now decided to draw near and take part in the conversation. "How can you say that, my dear young lady?" she exclaimed. "You know that the count—God rest his soul!—was an extremely cautious man. I am certain that there is a will somewhere."

The magistrate's eyes were fixed on his ring. "It would be well to look, perhaps, before affixing the seals. You have a right to require this; so, if you wish——"

But she made no reply.

"Oh, yes!" insisted Madame Leon; "pray look, monsieur."

"But where should we be likely to find a will?"

"Certainly in this room—in this escritoire, or in one of the deceased count's cabinets."

The magistrate had learnt the story of the key from Bourigeau, but all the same he asked: "Where is the key to this escritoire?"

"Alas! monsieur," replied Mademoiselle Marguerite, "I broke it last night when M. de Chalusse was brought home unconscious. I hoped to avert what has, nevertheless, happened. Besides, I knew that his escritoire contained something over two millions in gold and bank-notes."

Two millions—there! The occupants of the room stood aghast. Even the clerk was so startled that he let a blot fall upon his paper. Two millions! The magistrate was evidently reflecting. “Hum!” he murmured, meditatively. Then, as if deciding on his course, he exclaimed:

“Let a locksmith be sent for.”

A servant went in search of one; and while they were waiting for his return, the magistrate sat down beside his clerk and talked to him in a low voice. At last the locksmith appeared, with his bag of tools hanging over his shoulder, and set to work at once. He found his task a difficult one. His pick-locks would not catch, and he was talking of filing the bolt, when, by chance, he found the joint, and the door flew open. But the escritoire was empty. There were only a few papers, and a bottle about three-quarters full of a crimson liquid on the shelf. Had M. de Chalusse rose and shook off his winding sheet, the consternation would not have been greater. The same instinctive fear thrilled the hearts of everybody present. An enormous fortune had disappeared. The same suspicions would rest upon them all. And each servant already saw himself arrested, imprisoned, and dragged before a law court.

However, anger speedily followed bewilderment, and a furious clamor arose. “A robbery has been committed!” cried the servants, in concert. “Mademoiselle had the key. It is wrong to suspect the innocent!”

Revolting as this exhibition was, it did not modify the magistrate’s calmness. He had witnessed too many such scenes in the course of his career, and, at least, a score of times he had been compelled to interpose between children who had come to blows over their inheritance before their father’s body was even cold. “Silence!” he commanded sternly. And as the tumult did not cease, as the servants continued to cry, “The thief must be found. We shall have no difficulty in discovering the culprit,” the magistrate exclaimed, still more imperiously: “Another word, and you all leave the room.”

They were silenced; but there was a mute eloquence about their looks and gestures which it was impossible to misunderstand. Every eye was fixed upon Mademoiselle Marguerite with an almost ferocious

expression. She knew it only too well; but, sublime in her energy, she stood, with her head proudly erect, facing the storm, and disdaining to answer these vile imputations. However she had a protector near by—the magistrate in person. “If this treasure has been diverted from the inheritance,” said he, “the thief will be discovered and punished. But I wish to have one point explained—who said that Mademoiselle Marguerite had the key of the escritoire?”

“I did,” replied a footman. “I was in the dining-room yesterday morning when the count gave it to her.”

“For what purpose did he give it to her?”

“That she might obtain this vial—I recognized it at once. She brought it down to him.”

“Did she return the key?”

“Yes; she gave it to him when she handed him the vial, and I saw him put it in his pocket.”

The magistrate pointed to the bottle which was standing on the shelf. “Then the count himself must have put the vial back in its place,” said he. “Further comment is unnecessary; for, if the money had then been missing, he could not have failed to discover the fact.” No one had any reply to make to this quiet defence, which was, at the same time, a complete vindication. “And, besides,” continued the magistrate, “who told you that this immense sum would be found here? Did you know it? Which one of you knew it?” And as nobody still ventured any remark, he added in an even more severe tone, and without seeming to notice Mademoiselle Marguerite’s look of gratitude, “It is by no means a proof of honesty to be so extremely suspicious. Would it not have been easier to suppose that the deceased had placed the money somewhere else, and that it will yet be found?”

The clerk had been even less disturbed than the magistrate. He also was blase, having witnessed too many of those frightful and shameless dramas which are enacted at a dead man’s bedside, to be surprised at anything. If he had deigned to glance at the escritoire, it was only because he was curious to see how small a space would suffice to contain

two millions; and then he had begun to calculate how many years he would be obliged to remain a clerk before he could succeed in amassing such a fabulous sum. However, hearing his superior express the intention of continuing the search for the will, and the missing treasure, he abruptly abandoned his calculation, and exclaimed, “Then, I suppose, I can commence my report, monsieur?”

“Yes,” replied the magistrate, “write as follows:” And in a monotonous voice he began to dictate the prescribed formula, an unnecessary proceeding, for the clerk was quite as familiar with it as the magistrate himself:—“On the 16th of October, 186-, at nine o’clock in the morning, in compliance with the request of the servants of the deceased Louis-Henri-Raymond de Durtal, Count de Chalusse, and in the interest of his presumptive heirs, and all others connected with him, and in accordance with the requirements of clauses 819 (Code Napoleon) and 909 (Code of Procedure), we, justice of the peace, accompanied by our clerk, visited the residence of the deceased aforesaid, in the Rue de Courcelles, where, having entered a bedroom opening on to the courtyard, and lighted by two windows looking toward the south, we found the body of the deceased aforesaid, lying on his bed, and covered with a sheet. In this room were——” He paused in his dictation, and addressing the clerk, “Take down the names of all present,” said he. “That will require some little time, and, meanwhile, I will continue my search.”

They had, in fact, only examined the shelf of the escritoire, and the drawers were still to be inspected. In the first which he opened, the magistrate found ample proofs of the accuracy of the information which had been furnished him by Mademoiselle Marguerite. The drawer contained a memorandum which established the fact that the Credit Foncier had lent M. de Chalusse the sum of eight hundred and fifty thousand francs, which had been remitted to him on the Saturday preceding his death. Beside this document lay a second memorandum, signed by a stockbroker named Pell, setting forth that the latter had sold for the count securities of various descriptions to the amount of fourteen hundred and twenty-three thousand francs, which sum had been paid to

the count on the preceding Tuesday, partly in bank-notes and partly in gold. It was thus evident that M. de Chalusse had received a grand total of two million two hundred and seventy-three thousand francs within the past six days.

In the drawer which was next opened, the magistrate only found a number of deeds, bonds, leases, and mortgages; but they proved that public rumor, far from exaggerating the figures of the count's fortune, had diminished it, and this made it difficult to explain why he had contracted a loan. The third and last drawer contained twenty-eight thousand francs, in packages of twenty-franc pieces. Finally, in a small casket, the magistrate found a packet of letters, yellow with age and bound together with a broad piece of blue velvet; as well as three or four withered bouquets, and a woman's glove, which had been worn by a hand of marvellous smallness. These were evidently the relics of some great passion of many years before; and the magistrate looked at them for a moment with a sigh.

His own interest prevented him from noticing Mademoiselle Marguerite's agitation. She had almost fainted on perceiving these souvenirs of the count's past life so suddenly exhumed. However, the examination of the escritoire being over, and the clerk having completed his task of recording the names of all the servants, the magistrate said, in a loud voice, "I shall now proceed to affix the seals; but, before doing so, I shall take a portion of the money found in this desk, and set it apart for the expenses of the household, in accordance with the law. Who will take charge of this money?"

"Oh, not I!" exclaimed Madame Leon.

"I will take charge of it," said M. Casimir.

"Then here are eight thousand francs, for which you will be held accountable."

M. Casimir being a prudent man, counted the money himself, and after doing so, "Who will attend to the count's obsequies?" he inquired.

"You, and without loss of time."

Proud of his new importance, the valet hastily left the room, his self-complacency increased by the thought that he was to breakfast with M. Isidore Fortunat, and would afterward share a fat commission with Victor Chupin.

However, the magistrate had already resumed his dictation: “And at this moment we have affixed bands of white tape, sealed at either end with red wax, bearing the impress of our seal as justice of the peace, to wit: In the aforesaid chamber of the deceased: First, A band of tape, covering the keyhole of the lock of the escritoire, which had been previously opened by a locksmith summoned by us, and closed again by the said locksmith——” And so the magistrate and his clerk went from one piece of furniture to another, duly specifying in the report each instance in which the seals were affixed.

From the count’s bedroom they passed into his study, followed by Mademoiselle Marguerite, Madame Leon, and the servants. By noon every article of furniture in which M. de Chalusse would have been likely to deposit his valuables or a will, had been searched, and nothing, absolutely nothing, had been found. The magistrate had pursued his investigation with the feverish energy which the most self-possessed of men are apt to display under such circumstances, especially when influenced by the conviction that the object they are seeking is somewhere within their reach, perhaps under their very hand. Indeed, he was persuaded—he was sure—he would, in fact, have sworn that the Count de Chalusse had taken all the precautions natural in childless men, who have no near relatives to inherit their fortune, or who have placed their interest and affections beyond their family circle. And when he was obliged to abandon his search, his gesture indicated anger rather than discouragement; for apparent evidence had not shaken his conviction in the least. So he stood motionless, with his eyes riveted on his ring, as if waiting some miraculous inspiration from it. “For the count’s only fault, I am sure, was in being too cautious,” he muttered. “This is frequently the case, and it would be quite in keeping with the character of this man, judging from what I know of him.”

Madame Leon lifted her hands to heaven. “Ah, yes! such was, indeed, his nature,” she remarked, approvingly. “Never, no never, have I seen such a suspicious and distrustful person as he was. Not in reference to money—no, indeed—for he left that lying about everywhere; but about his papers. He locked them up with the greatest care, as if he feared that some terrible secret might evaporate from them. It was a mania with him. If he had a letter to write, he barricaded his door, as if he were about to commit some horrible crime. More than once have I seen him ——” The words died away on her lips, and she remained motionless and abashed, like a person who has just escaped some great peril. One word more, and involuntarily, without even knowing it, she would have confessed her besetting sin, which was listening at, and peering through, the keyholes of the doors that were closed against her. Still, she deluded herself with the belief that this slight indiscretion of her overready tongue had escaped the magistrate’s notice.

He certainly did not seem to be conscious of it, for he was giving his attention entirely to Mademoiselle Marguerite, who seemed to have regained the cold reserve and melancholy resignation habitual to her. “You see, mademoiselle,” he remarked, “that I have done all that is in my power to do. We must now leave the search to chance, and to the person who takes the inventory. Who knows what surprise may be in store for us in this immense house, of which we have only explored three rooms?”

She shook her head gently and replied: “I can never be sufficiently grateful for your kindness, monsieur, and for the great service you rendered me in crushing that infamous accusation. As regards the rest, I have never expected anything—I do not expect anything now.”

She believed what she said, and her tone of voice proved this so unmistakably that the magistrate was surprised and somewhat disturbed. “Come, come, my young lady,” he said, with almost paternal kindness of manner, “you ought not to despond. Still, you must have certain reasons for speaking as you do; and as I am free for an hour, we are going to have a plain talk, as if we were father and daughter.”

On hearing these words, the clerk rose with a cloud on his jovial face. He impatiently jingled his bunch of keys; for as the seals are successively affixed, each key is confided to the clerk, to remain in his hands until the seals are removed.

"I understand," said the magistrate. "Your stomach, which is more exacting in its demands than mine, is not satisfied with a cup of chocolate till dinner-time. So, go and get your lunch; on your return, you will find me here. You may now conclude the report, and request these parties to sign it."

Urged on by hunger, the clerk hastily mumbled over the remainder of the formula, called all the names that he had inserted in the report, and each of the servants advanced in turn, signed his or her name, or made a cross, and then retired. Madame Leon read in the judge's face that she also was expected to withdraw; and she was reluctantly leaving the room, when Mademoiselle Marguerite detained her to ask: "Are you quite sure that nothing has come for me to-day?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle; I went in person to inquire of the concierge."

"Did you post my letter last night?"

"Oh! my dear young lady, can you doubt it?"

The young girl stifled a sigh, and then, with a gesture of dismissal, she remarked, "M. de Fondege must be sent for."

"The General?"

"Yes."

"I will send for him at once," replied the housekeeper; and thereupon she left the room, closing the door behind her with a vicious slam.

VIII.

The justice of the peace and Mademoiselle Marguerite were at last alone in M. de Chalusse's study. This room, which the count had preferred above all others, was a spacious, magnificent, but rather gloomy apartment, with lofty walls and dark, richly carved furniture. Its present aspect was more than ever solemn and lugubrious, for it gave one a chill to see the bands of white tape affixed to the locks of the cabinets and bookcases. When the magistrate had installed himself in the count's arm-chair, and the girl had taken a seat near him, they remained looking at each other in silence for a few moments. The magistrate was asking himself how he should begin. Having fathomed Mademoiselle Marguerite's extreme sensitiveness and reserve, he said to himself that if he offended or alarmed her, she would refuse him her confidence, in which case he would be powerless to serve her as he wished to do. He had, in fact, an almost passionate desire to be of service to her, feeling himself drawn toward her by an inexplicable feeling of sympathy, in which esteem, respect, and admiration alike were blended, though he had only known her for a few hours. Still, he must make a beginning. "Mademoiselle," he said, at last, "I abstained from questioning you before the servants—and if I take the liberty of doing so now, it is not, believe me, out of any idle curiosity; moreover, you are not compelled to answer me. But you are young—and I am an old man; and it is my duty—even if my heart did not urge me to do so—to offer you the aid of my experience——"

"Speak, monsieur," interrupted Marguerite. "I will answer your questions frankly, or else not answer them at all."

"To resume, then," said he, "I am told that M. de Chalusse has no relatives, near or remote. Is this the truth?"

“So far as I know—yes, monsieur. Still, I have heard it said that a sister of his, Mademoiselle Hermine de Chalusse, abandoned her home twenty-five or thirty years ago, when she was about my age, and that she has never received her share of the enormous fortune left by her parents.”

“And has this sister never given any sign of life?”

“Never! Still, monsieur, I have promised you to be perfectly frank. That letter which the Count de Chalusse received yesterday, that letter which I regard as the cause of his death—well, I have a presentiment that it came from his sister. It could only have been written by her or—by that other person whose letters—and souvenirs—you found in the escritoire.”

“And—this other person—who can she be?” As the young girl made no reply, the magistrate did not insist, but continued: “And you, my child, who are you?”

She made a gesture of sorrowful resignation, and then, in a voice faltering with emotion, she answered: “I do not know, monsieur. Perhaps I am the count’s daughter. I should be telling an untruth if I said that was not my belief. Yes, I believe it, but I have never been certain of it. Sometimes I have believed, sometimes I have doubted it. On certain days I have said to myself, ‘Yes, it must be so!’ and I have longed to throw my arms around his neck. But at other times I have exclaimed: ‘No, it isn’t possible!’ and I have almost hated him. Besides, he never said a word on the subject—never a decisive word, at least. When I saw him for the first time, six years ago, I judged by the manner in which he forbade me to call him ‘father,’ that he would never answer any question I might ask on the subject.”

If there was a man in the world inaccessible to idle curiosity, it was certainly this magistrate, whose profession condemned him to listen every day to family grievances, neighborly quarrels, complaints, accusations, and slander. And yet as he listened to Mademoiselle Marguerite, he experienced that strange disquietude which seizes hold of

a person when a puzzling problem is presented. “Allow me to believe that many decisive proofs may have escaped your notice on account of your inexperience,” he said.

But interrupting him with a gesture, she sadly remarked: “You are mistaken; I am not inexperienced.”

He could not help smiling at what he considered her self-conceit. “Poor child!” said he; “how old are you? Eighteen?”

She shook her head. “Yes, by my certificate of birth I am only eighteen; but by the sufferings I have endured I am, perhaps, older than you are, monsieur, despite your white hair. Those who have lived such a life as I have, are never young; they are old in suffering, even in their childhood. And if by experience you mean lack of confidence, a knowledge of good and evil, distrust of everything and everybody, mine, young girl though I be, will no doubt equal yours.” She paused, hesitated for a moment, and then continued: “But why should I wait for you to question me? It is neither sincere nor dignified on my part to do so. The person who claims counsel owes absolute frankness to his adviser. I will speak to you as if I were communing with my own soul. I will tell you what no person has ever known—no one, not even Pascal. And believe me, my past life was full of bitter misery, although you find me here in this splendid house. But I have nothing to conceal; and if I have cause to blush, it is for others, not for myself.”

Perhaps she was impelled by an irresistible desire to relieve her overburdened heart, after long years of self-restraint; perhaps she no longer felt sure of herself, and desired some other advice than the dictates of her conscience, in presence of the calamity which had befallen her. At all events, too much engrossed in her own thoughts to heed the magistrate’s surprise, or hear the words he faltered, she rose from her seat, and, with her hands pressed tightly on her throbbing brow, she began to tell the story of her life.

“My first recollections,” she said, “are of a narrow, cheerless courtyard, surrounded by grim and massive walls, so high that I could scarcely see the top of them. At noontime in summer the sun visited one

little corner, where there was a stone bench; but in winter it never showed itself at all. There were five or six small, scrubby trees, with moss-grown trunks and feeble branches, which put forth a few yellow leaves at springtime. We were some thirty children who assembled in this courtyard—children from five to eight years old, all clad alike in brown dresses, with a little blue handkerchief tied about our shoulders. We all wore blue caps on week-days, and white ones on Sundays, with woollen stockings, thick shoes, and a black ribbon, with a large metal cross dangling from our necks. Among us moved the good sisters, silent and sad, with their hands crossed in their large sleeves, their faces as white as their snowy caps, and their long strings of beads, set off with numerous copper medals, clanking when they walked like prisoners' chains. As a rule, each face wore the same expression of resignation, unvarying gentleness, and inexhaustible patience. But there were some who wore it only as one wears a mask—some whose eyes gleamed at times with passion, and who vented their cold, bitter anger upon us defenceless children. However, there was one sister, still young and very fair, whose manner was so gentle and so sad that even I, with my mere infantile intelligence, felt that she must have some terrible sorrow. During play-time she often took me on her knee and embraced me with convulsive tenderness, murmuring: 'Dear little one! darling little one!' Sometimes her endearments were irksome to me, but I never allowed her to see it, for fear of making her still more sad; and in my heart I was content and proud to suffer for and with her. Poor sister! I owe her the only happy hours of my infancy. She was called Sister Calliste. I do not know what has become of her, but often, when my heart fails me, I think of her, and even now I cannot mention her name without tears."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was indeed weeping—big tears which she made no attempt to conceal were coursing down her cheeks. It cost her a great effort to continue: "You have already understood, monsieur, what I myself did not know for several years. I was in a foundling asylum, and I was a foundling myself. I cannot say that we lacked anything; and I should be ungrateful if I did not say and feel that these good sisters were charity personified. But, alas! their hearts had only a certain amount of

tenderness to distribute between thirty poor little girls, and so each child's portion was small; the caresses were the same for all, and I longed to be loved differently, to have kind words and caresses for myself alone. We slept in little white beds with snowy curtains, in a clean, well-ventilated dormitory, in the centre of which stood a statue of the Virgin, who seemed to smile on us all alike. In winter we had a fire. Our clothes were warm and neat; our food was excellent. We were taught to read and write, to sew and embroider. There was a recreation hour between all the exercises. Those who were studious and good were rewarded; and twice a week we were taken into the country for a long walk. It was during one of these excursions that I learned from the talk of the passers-by, what we were, and what we were called. Sometimes, in the afternoon, we were visited by elegantly-attired ladies, who were accompanied by their own children, radiant with health and happiness. The good sisters told us that these were 'pious ladies,' or 'charitable ladies,' whom we must love and respect, and whom we must never forget to mention in our prayers. They always brought us toys and cakes. Sometimes the establishment was visited by priests and grave old gentlemen, whose sternness of manner alarmed us. They peered into every nook and corner, asked questions about everything, assured themselves that everything was in its place, and some of them even tasted our soup. They were always satisfied; and the lady superior led them through the building, and bowed to them, exclaiming: 'We love them so much, the poor little dears! 'And the gentlemen replied: 'Yes, yes, my dear sister, they are very fortunate.' And the gentlemen were right. Poor laborers' children are often obliged to endure privations which we knew nothing of; they are often obliged to make their supper off a piece of dry bread—but, then, the crust is given them by their mother, with a kiss."

The magistrate, who was extremely ill at ease, had not yet succeeded in finding a syllable to offer in reply. Indeed, Mademoiselle Marguerite had not given him an opportunity to speak, so rapidly had this long-

repressed flood of recollections poured from her lips. When she spoke the word “mother,” the magistrate fancied she would show some sign of emotion.

But he was mistaken. On the contrary, her voice became harsher, and a flash of anger, as it were, darted from her eyes.

“I suffered exceedingly in that asylum,” she resumed. “Sister Calliste left the establishment, and all the surroundings chilled and repelled me. My only few hours of happiness were on Sundays, when we attended church. As the great organ pealed, and as I watched the priests officiating at the altar in their gorgeous vestments, I forgot my own sorrows. It seemed to me that I was ascending on the clouds of incense to the celestial sphere which the sisters so often talked to us about, and where they said each little girl would find her mother.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite hesitated for an instant, as if she were somewhat unwilling to give utterance to her thoughts; but at last, forcing herself to continue, she said: “Yes, I suffered exceedingly in that foundling asylum. Almost all my little companions were spiteful, unattractive in person, sallow, thin, and afflicted with all kinds of diseases, as if they were not unfortunate enough in being abandoned by their parents. And—to my shame, monsieur, I must confess it—these unfortunate little beings inspired me with unconquerable repugnance, with disgust bordering on aversion. I would rather have pressed my lips to a red-hot iron than to the forehead of one of these children. I did not reason on the subject, alas! I was only eight or nine years old; but I felt this antipathy in every fibre of my being. The others knew it too; and, in revenge, they ironically styled me ‘the lady,’ and left me severely alone. But sometimes, during playtime, when the good sisters’ backs were turned, the children attacked me, beat me, and scratched my face and tore my clothes. I endured these onslaughts uncomplainingly, for I was conscious that I deserved them. But how many reprimands my torn clothes cost me! How many times I received only a dry crust for my supper, after being soundly scolded and called ‘little careless.’ But as I was quiet, studious, and industrious, a quicker learner than the majority

of my companions, the sisters were fond of me. They said that I was a promising girl, and that they would have no difficulty in finding me a nice home with some of the rich and pious ladies who have a share in managing institutions of this kind. The only fault the sisters found with me was that I was sullen. But such was not really the case; I was only sad and resigned. Everything around me so depressed and saddened me that I withdrew into myself, and buried all my thoughts and aspirations deep in my heart. If I had naturally been a bad child, I scarcely know what would have been the result of this. I have often asked myself the question in all sincerity, but I have been unable to reply, for one cannot be an impartial judge respecting one's self. However, this much is certain, although childhood generally leaves a train of pleasant recollections in a young girl's life, mine was only fraught with torture and misery, desperate struggles, and humiliation. I was unwilling to be confirmed because I did not wish to wear a certain dress, which a 'benevolent lady' had presented for the use of the asylum, and which had belonged to a little girl of my own age who had died of consumption. The thought of arraying myself in this dress to approach the holy table frightened and revolted me as much as if I had been sentenced to drape myself in a winding-sheet. And yet it was the prettiest dress of all—white muslin beautifully embroidered. It had been ardently coveted by the other children, and had been given to me as a sort of reward of merit. And I dared not explain the cause of my unconquerable repugnance. Who would have understood me? I should only have been accused of undue sensitiveness and pride, absurd in one of my humble position. I was then only twelve years old; but no one knew the struggle in my mind save the old priest, my confessor. I could confess everything to him; he understood me, and did not reproach me. Still he answered: 'You must wear this dress, my child, for your pride must be broken. Go—I shall impose no other penance on you.' I obeyed him, full of superstitious terror; for it seemed to me that this was a frightful omen which would bring me misfortune, my whole life through. And I was confirmed in the dead girl's embroidered dress."

During the five-and-twenty years that he had held the position of justice of the peace, the magistrate had listened to many confessions, wrung from wretched souls by stern necessity, or sorrow, but never had his heart been moved as it now was, by this narrative, told with such uncomplaining anguish, and in a tone of such sincerity. However she resumed her story. “The confirmation over, our life became as gloomily monotonous as before; we read the same pious books and did the same work at the same hours as formerly. It seemed to me that I was stifling in this atmosphere. I gasped for breath, and thought that anything would be preferable to this semblance of existence, which was not real life. I was thinking of applying for the ‘good situation,’ which had so often been mentioned to me, when one morning I was summoned into the steward’s office—a mysterious and frightful place to us children. He himself was a stout, dirty man, wearing large blue spectacles and a black silk skullcap; and from morning until night, summer and winter, he sat writing at a desk behind a little grating, hung with green curtains. Round the room were ranged the registers, in which our names were recorded and our appearances described, together with the boxes containing the articles found upon us, which were carefully preserved to assist in identifying us should occasion arise. I entered this office with a throbbing heart. In addition to the stout gentleman and the Lady Superior, I found there a thin, wiry man, with cunning eyes, and a portly woman, with a coarse but rather good-natured face. The superior at once informed me that I was in the presence of M. and Madame Greloux, bookbinders, who had come to the asylum in search of two apprentices, and she asked me if I should like to be one of them. Ah! monsieur, it seemed to me that heaven had opened before me and I boldly replied: ‘Yes.’ The gentleman in the black skullcap immediately emerged from his place behind the grating to explain my obligations and duties to me at length, especially insisting upon the point, that I ought to be grateful—I, a miserable foundling, reared by public charity—for the generosity which this good gentleman and lady showed in offering to take charge of me and employ me in their workshop. I must confess that I could not clearly realize in what this great generosity which he so highly praised

consisted, nor did I perceive any reason why I should be particularly grateful. Still, to all the conditions imposed upon me, I answered, 'Yes, yes, yes!' so heartily that Madame Greloux seemed greatly pleased. 'It is evident that the child will be glad to get away,' she said to herself. Then the superior began to enumerate the obligations my employers would incur, repeating again and again that I was one of the very best girls in the asylum—pious, obedient, and industrious, reading and writing to perfection, and knowing how to sew and embroider as only those who are taught in such institutions can. She made Madame Greloux promise to watch over me as she would have watched over her own daughter; never to leave me alone; to take me to church, and allow me an occasional Sunday afternoon, so that I might pay a visit to the asylum. The gentleman with the spectacles and the skullcap then reminded the bookbinder of the duties of an employer toward his apprentices, and turning to a bookcase behind him, he even took down a large volume from which he read extract after extract, which I listened to without understanding a word, though I was quite sure that the book was written in French. At last, when the man and his wife had said 'Amen' to everything, the gentleman with the spectacles drew up a document which we all signed in turn. I belonged to a master."

She paused. Here her childhood ended. But almost immediately she resumed: "My recollections of these people are not altogether unpleasant. They were harassed and wearied by their efforts to support their son in a style of living far above their position; but, despite their sacrifices, their son had no affection for them, and on this account I pitied them. However, not only was the husband gloomy and quick-tempered, but his wife also was subject to fits of passion, so that the apprentices often had a hard time of it. Still, between Madame Greloux's tempests of wrath there were occasional gleams of sunshine. After beating us for nothing, she would exclaim, with quite as little reason, 'Come and kiss me, and don't pout any more. Here are four sous; go and buy yourself some cakes.'"

The justice started in his arm-chair. Was it, indeed, Mademoiselle Marguerite who was speaking, the proud young girl with a queenlike bearing, whose voice rang out like crystal? Was it she indeed, who imitated the harsh, coarse dialect of the lower classes with such accuracy of intonation? Ah! at that moment, as her past life rose so vividly before her, it seemed to her as if she were still in the years gone by, and she fancied she could still hear the voice of the bookbinder's wife.

She did not even notice the magistrate's astonishment. "I had left the asylum," she continued, "and that was everything to me. I felt that a new and different life was beginning, and that was enough. I flattered myself that I might win a more earnest and sincere affection among these honest, industrious toilers, than I had found in the asylum; and to win it and deserve it, I neglected nothing that good-will could suggest, or strength allow. My patrons no doubt fathomed my desire, and naturally enough, perhaps unconsciously, they took advantage of my wish to please. I can scarcely blame them. I had entered their home under certain conditions in view of learning a profession; they gradually made me their servant—it was praiseworthy economy on their part. What I had at first done of my own freewill and from a wish to please, at last became my daily task, which I was rigidly required to fulfil. Compelled to rise long before any one else in the house, I was expected to have everything in order by the time the others made their appearance with their eyes still heavy with sleep. It is true that my benefactors rewarded me after their fashion. On Sundays they took me with them on their excursions into the country, so as to give me a rest, they said, after the week's work. And I followed them along the dusty highways in the hot sunshine, panting, perspiring, and tottering under the weight of a heavy basket of provisions, which were eaten on the grass or in the woods, and the remnants of which fell to me. Madame Greloux's brother generally accompanied us; and his name would have lingered in my memory, even if it had not been a peculiar one. He was called Vantrasson. He was a tall, robust man, with eyes that made me tremble whenever he fixed them upon me. He was a soldier; intensely proud of his uniform; a great talker, and enchanted with himself. He evidently thought himself

irresistible. It was from that man's mouth that I heard the first coarse word at which my unsophisticated heart took offence. It was not to be the last one. He finally told me that he had taken a fancy to me, and I was obliged to complain to Madame Greloux of her brother's persecutions. But she only laughed at me, and said: 'Nonsense! He's merely talking to hear himself talk.' Yes, that was her answer. And yet she was an honest woman, a devoted wife, and a fond mother. Ah! if she had had a daughter. But with a poor apprentice, who has neither father nor mother, one need not be over-fastidious. She had made a great many promises to the lady superior, but she fancied that the utterance of a few commonplace words of warning relieved her of all further obligations. 'And so much the worse for those who allow themselves to be fooled,' she always added in conclusion.

"Fortunately, my pride, which I had so often been reproached with, shielded me. My condition might be humble, but my spirit was lofty. It was a blessing from God, this pride of mine, for it saved me from temptation, while so many fell around me. I slept, with the other apprentices, in the attic, where we were entirely beyond the control of those who should have been our guardians. That is to say, when the day's toil was over, and the work-shop closed, we were free—abandoned to our own instincts, and the most pernicious influences. And neither evil advice nor bad example was wanting. The women employed in the bindery in nowise restrained themselves in our presence, and we heard them tell marvellous stories that dazzled many a poor girl. They did not talk as they did from any evil design, or out of a spirit of calculation, but from pure thoughtlessness, and because they were quite devoid of moral sense. And they never tired of telling us of the pleasures of life, of fine dinners at restaurants, gay excursions to Joinville-le-Pont, and masked balls at Montparnasse or the Elysee Montmartre. Ah! experience is quickly gained in these work-shops. Sometimes those who went off at night with ragged dresses and worn-out shoes, returned the next morning in superb toilettes to say that they resigned their situations, as they were not made for work, and intended to live like ladies. They

departed radiant, but often before a month was over they came back, emaciated, hollow-eyed, and despairing, and humbly begged for a little work."

She paused, so crushed by the weight of these sad memories as to lose consciousness of the present. And the judge also remained silent, not daring to question her. And, besides, what good would it do? What could she tell him about these poor little apprentices that he did not know already? If he was surprised at anything, it was that this beautiful young girl, who had been left alone and defenceless, had possessed sufficient strength of character to escape the horrible dangers that threatened her.

However, it was not long before Mademoiselle Marguerite shook off the torpor which had stolen over her. "I ought not to boast of my strength, sir," she resumed. "Besides my pride, I had a hope to sustain me—a hope which I clung to with the tenacity of despair. I wished to become expert at my profession, for I had learned that skilled workers were always in demand, and could always command good wages. So when my household duties were over, I still found time to learn the business, and made such rapid progress that I astonished even my employer. I knew that I should soon be able to make five or six francs a day; and this prospect was pleasant enough to make me forget the present, well-nigh intolerable as it sometimes was. During the last winter that I spent with my employers, their orders were so numerous and pressing that they worked on Sundays as well as on week days, and it was with difficulty that I obtained an hour twice a month to pay a visit to the good sisters who had cared for me in my childhood. I had never failed in this duty, and indeed it had now become my only pleasure. My employer's conscience compelled him to pay me a trifle occasionally for the additional toil he imposed upon me, and the few francs I thus received I carried to the poor children at the asylum. After living all my life on public charity, I was able to give in my turn; and this thought gratified my pride, and increased my importance in my own eyes. I was nearly fifteen, and my term of apprenticeship had almost expired, when one bright day in March, I saw one of the lay sisters of the asylum enter

the work-room. She was in a flutter of excitement; her face was crimson, and she was so breathless from her hurried ascent of the stairs that she gasped rather than said to me: ‘Quick! come—follow me! Some one is waiting for you!’ ‘Who?—where?’—‘Make haste! Ah! my dear child, if you only knew——’ I hesitated; but Madame Greloux pushed me toward the door, exclaiming: ‘Be off, you little stupid!’ I followed the sister without thinking of changing my dress—without even removing the kitchen apron I wore. Downstairs, at the front door, stood the most magnificent carriage I had ever seen in my life. Its rich silk cushions were so beautiful that I scarcely dared to enter it; and I was all the more intimidated by a footman in gorgeous livery, who respectfully opened the door at our approach. ‘You must get into the carriage,’ said the sister; ‘it was sent for you.’ I obeyed her, and before I had recovered from my astonishment we had reached the asylum, and I was ushered into the office where the contract which bound me as an apprentice had been signed. As soon as I entered, the superior took me by the hand and led me toward a gentleman who was sitting near the window. ‘Marguerite,’ said she, ‘salute Monsieur le Comte de Chalusse.’”

IX.

For some little time there had been a noise of footsteps and a subdued murmur of voices in the vestibule. Annoyed by this interruption, although he perfectly understood its cause, the magistrate rose and hastily opened the door. He was not mistaken. His clerk had returned from lunch, and the time of waiting seemed extremely long to him. “Ah! it’s you,” said the magistrate. “Very well! begin your inventory. It won’t be long before I join you.” And closing the door he resumed his seat again. Mademoiselle Marguerite was so absorbed in her narrative that she scarcely noticed this incident, and he had not seated himself before she resumed. “In all my life, I had never seen such an imposing looking person as the Count de Chalusse. His manner, attire, and features could not fail to inspire a child like me with fear and respect. I was so awed that I had scarcely enough presence of mind to bow to him. He glanced at me coldly, and exclaimed: ‘Ah! is this the young girl you were speaking of?’ The count’s tone betrayed such disagreeable surprise that the superior was dismayed. She looked at me, and seemed indignant at my more than modest attire. ‘It’s a shame to allow a child to leave home dressed in this fashion,’ she angrily exclaimed. And she almost tore my huge apron off me, and then with her own hands began to arrange my hair as if to display me to better advantage. ‘Ah! these employers,’ she exclaimed, ‘the best of them are bad. How they do deceive you. It’s impossible to place any confidence in their promises. Still, one can’t always be at their heels.’

“But the superior’s efforts were wasted, for M. de Chalusse had turned away and had begun talking with some gentlemen near by. For the office was full that morning. Five or six gentlemen, whom I recognized as the directors of the asylum, were standing round the steward in the black skullcap. They were evidently talking about me. I was certain of this by the glances they gave me, glances which, however, were full of kindness.

The superior joined the group and began speaking with unusual vivacity, while standing in the recess of a window, I listened with all my might. But I must have overestimated my intelligence, for I could gain no meaning whatever from the phrases which followed each other in rapid succession; though the words 'adoption,' 'emancipation,' 'dowry,' 'compensation,' 'reimbursement for sums expended,' recurred again and again. I was only certain of one point: the Count de Chalusse wished something, and these gentlemen were specifying other things in exchange. To each of their demands he answered: 'Yes, yes—it's granted. That's understood.' But at last he began to grow impatient, and in a voice which impressed one with the idea that he was accustomed to command, he exclaimed, 'I will do whatever you wish. Do you desire anything more?' The gentlemen at once became silent, and the superior hastily declared that M. de Chalusse was a thousand times too good, but that one could expect no less of him, the last representative of one of the greatest and oldest families of France.

"I cannot describe the surprise and indignation that were raging in my soul. I divined—I felt that it was MY fate, MY future, MY life that were being decided, and I was not even consulted on the matter. They were disposing of me as if they were sure in advance of my consent. My pride revolted at the thought, but I could not find a word to say in protest. Crimson with shame, confused and furious, I was wondering how I could interfere, when suddenly the consultation ceased and the gentlemen at once surrounded me. One of them, a little old man with a vapid smile and twinkling eyes, tapped me on the cheek, and said: 'So she is as good as she is pretty!' I could have struck him; but all the others laughed approvingly, with the exception of M. de Chalusse, whose manner became more and more frigid, and whose lips wore a constrained smile, as if he had resolved to keep his temper despite all provocation. It seemed to me that he was suffering terribly, and I afterward learned that I had not been mistaken. Far from imitating the old gentleman's manner, he bowed to me very gravely, with an air of deference that quite abashed me, and went away after saying that he would return the next day to conclude the arrangements.

"I was at last left alone with the superior, whom I longed to question, but she gave me no time to do so, for with extreme volubility she began to tell me of my surprising good fortune, which was an unanswerable and conclusive proof of the kindness and protection of Providence. 'The count,' she said, 'was to become my guardian. He would certainly give me a dowry; and by and by, if I were grateful to him for his goodness, he would adopt me, a poor, fatherless and motherless girl, and I should bear the great name of Durtal de Chalusse, and inherit an immense fortune.' In conclusion, she said that there was no limit to the count's generosity, that he had consented to reimburse the asylum the money that had been spent on me, that he had offered to dower, I do not know how many poor girls, and that he had promised to build a chapel for the use of the establishment. This was all true, incredible as it might seem. That very morning, M. de Chalusse had called at the asylum, declared that he was old and childless, a bachelor without any near relatives, and that he wished to adopt a poor orphan. They had given him a list of all the children in the institution, and he had chosen me. 'A mere chance, my dear Marguerite,' repeated the superior. 'A mere chance—or rather a true miracle.' It did, indeed, seem a miracle, but I was more surprised than elated. I longed to be alone, so as to deliberate and reflect, for I knew that I was free to accept or decline this dazzling offer.

"I timidly asked permission to return to my employers to inform them of what had happened and consult with them; but my request was refused. The superior told me that I must deliberate and decide alone; and that when once my decision was taken, there could be no change. So I remained at the asylum, and dined at the superior's table; and during the night I occupied the room of a sister who was absent. What surprised me most of all was the deference with which I was treated. The sisters all seemed to consider me a person of great importance. And yet I hesitated.

"My indecision may seem absurd and hypocritical; but it was really sincere. My present situation was certainly by no means an enviable one. But the worst was over; my term as an apprentice had nearly expired, and my future seemed assured. My future! What could it be with the

Count de Chalusse? It was painted in such brilliant colors that it frightened me. Why had the count chosen me in preference to any of the other girls? Was it really chance which had decided him in his choice? On reflecting, the miracle seemed to me to have been prepared in advance, and I fancied that it must conceal some mystery. More than this, the thought of yielding myself up to a stranger terrified me. Forty-eight hours had been granted me to consider my decision, and till the very last instant I remained in doubt. Who knows? Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had returned to my humble life. At all events, I should have been spared a great deal of sorrow and humiliation. But I lacked the courage; and when the time expired, I consented to the new arrangement.

"Should I live a thousand years I shall never forget the day I left the foundling asylum to become the Count de Chalusse's ward. It was a Saturday, and I had given my answer to the superior on the evening before. The next morning I received a visit from my former employers, who, having been informed of the great change in my prospects, had come to bid me good-bye. The cancelling of my apprenticeship had at first caused some trouble, but eventually the count's gold silenced their objections. Still, they were sorry to part with me, as I plainly saw. Their eyes were moist with tears. They were sorry to lose the poor little servant who had served them so faithfully. At the same time, however, I noticed evident constraint in their manner. They no longer said 'thee' and 'thou' to me; they no longer spoke roughly; but they said 'you,' and addressed me as 'mademoiselle.' Poor people! they awkwardly apologized for having ventured to accept my services, declaring in the same breath that they should never be able to replace me at the same price. Madame Greloux, moreover, declared that she should never forgive herself for not having sharply reproved her brother for his abominable conduct. He was a good-for-nothing fellow, she said, as was proved by the fact that he had dared to raise his eyes to me. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was sincerely loved; and I was so deeply touched that if my decision had not been written and signed, I should certainly have returned to live with

these worthy people. But it was too late. A sister came to tell me that the superior wished to see me. I bade Father and Mother Greloux farewell and went downstairs.

"In the superior's room, a lady and two shop-girls, laden with boxes and parcels, were waiting for me. It was a dressmaker who had come with some clothes suited to my new station in life. I was told that she had been sent by the Count de Chalusse. This great nobleman thought of everything; and, although he had thirty servants to do his bidding, he never disdained to occupy himself with the pettiest details. So, for the first time, I was arrayed in rustling silk and clinging cashmere. My toilette was no trifling affair. All the good sisters clustered round me, and tried to beautify me with the same care and patience as they would have displayed in adorning the Virgin's statue for a fete-day. A secret instinct warned me that they were overdoing the matter, and that they were making me look ridiculous; but I did not mind. I allowed them to please themselves I could still feel Madame Greloux's tears on my hand, and the scene seemed to me as lugubrious as the last toilette of a prisoner under sentence of death. When they had completed their task, I heard a buzz of admiration round me. If the sisters were worthy of belief, they had never seen such a wonderful transformation. Those who were in the class-rooms or the sewing-room, were summoned to view and admire me, and some of the elder children were also admitted. Perhaps I was intended as an example for the latter, for I heard the lady superior say to them, 'You see, my dear children, the result of good behavior. Be diligent and dutiful, like our dear Marguerite, and God will reward you as He has rewarded her.' And, meantime, miserable in my finery, I waited—waited for M. de Chalusse, who was coming to take me away.

"At the appointed hour he appeared, with the same air of haughty reserve, that had so awed me on the occasion of our first meeting. He scarcely deigned to look at me, and although I watched him with poignant anxiety, I could read neither blame nor approval on his face. 'You see that your wishes have been scrupulously obeyed, Monsieur le Comte,' said the superior. 'I thank you,' he replied; 'and I shall prove the

extent of my gratitude to the poor children under your charge.' Then, turning to me: 'Marguerite,' he said, 'take leave of—your mothers, and tell them that you will never forget their kindness.'"

The girl paused, for her emotion had rendered her words almost unintelligible. But, with an effort, she speedily conquered her weakness.

"It was only then," she continued, "that I realized how much I loved these poor nuns, whom I had sometimes almost cursed. I felt now how close the ties were, that bound me to this hospitable roof, and to these unfortunate children, my companions in misery and loneliness. It seemed to me as if my heart were breaking; and the superior, who was generally so impassible, appeared scarcely less moved than myself. At last, M. de Chalusse took me by the hand and led me away. In the street there was a carriage waiting for us, not such a beautiful one as that which had been sent to fetch me from my workshop, but a much larger one, with trunks and boxes piled on its roof. It was drawn by four gray horses. I felt more dead than alive, as I entered the carriage and took the seat which the count pointed out. He sat down opposite to me. All the sisters had assembled at the door of the asylum, and even the superior wept without making any attempt to hide her tears. 'Farewell!' they all cried; 'farewell, farewell, dear child! Don't forget your old friends. We shall pray for your happiness.' Alas! God could not have heard their prayers. At a sign from M. de Chalusse, a footman closed the door, the postilions cracked their whips, and the heavy vehicle rolled away.

"The die was cast. Henceforth, an impassable gulf was to separate me from this asylum, whither I had been carried in my infancy half dead, and wrapped in swaddling clothes, from which every mark that could possibly lead to identification had been carefully cut away. Whatever my future might prove, I felt that my past was gone forever. But I was too greatly agitated even to think; and crouching in a corner of the carriage, I watched M. de Chalusse with the poignant anxiety a slave displays as he studies his new master. Ah! monsieur, what a wondrous change! A mask seemed to have fallen from the count's face; his lips quivered, a tender light beamed in his eyes, and he drew me to him, exclaiming: 'Oh,

Marguerite! my beloved Marguerite! At last—at last!' He sobbed—this old man, whom I had thought as cold and as insensible as marble; he crushed me in his close embrace, he almost smothered me with kisses. And I was frightfully agitated by the strange, indefinable feeling, kindled in my heart; but I no longer trembled with fear. An inward voice whispered that this was but the renewal of a former tie—one which had somehow been mysteriously broken. However, as I remembered the superior's assertion that it was a miracle in my favor—a wonderful interposition of Providence, I had courage enough to ask: 'So it was not chance that guided you in your choice?'

"My question seemed to take him by surprise. 'Poor Marguerite!' he murmured, 'dearly beloved child! for years I have been laboring to bring about this chance!' Instantly all the romantic stories I had heard in the asylum recurred to my mind. And Heaven knows there are plenty of these stories transmitted by the sisters from generation to generation, till they have become a sort of Golden Legend for poor foundlings. That sad formula, 'Father and mother unknown,' which figures on certificates of birth, acts as a dangerous stimulant for unhealthy imaginations, and leaves an open door for the most extravagant hopes. And thus influenced, I fixed my eyes on the face of the Count de Chalusse, striving to discover some resemblance in his features to my own. But he did not seem to notice my intent gaze, and following his train of thought, he muttered: 'Chance! It was necessary that they should think so, and they did think so. And yet the cleverest detectives in Paris, from old Tabaret to Fortunat, both masters in the art of following up a clue, had exhausted their resources in helping me in my despairing search.' The agony of suspense I was enduring had become intolerable; and unable to restrain myself longer, I exclaimed, with a wildly throbbing heart: 'Then, you are my father, Monsieur le Comte?' He pressed his hand to my lips with such violence that he hurt me, and then, in a voice quivering with excitement, he replied: 'Imprudent girl! What can you mean? Forget that unfortunate idea. Never utter the name of father—you hear me—never! I forbid it!' He had become extremely pale, and he looked anxiously

around him, as if he feared that some one had overheard me—as if he had forgotten that we were alone in a carriage which was dashing onward at full speed!

"I was stupefied and alarmed by the sudden terror which M. de Chalusse had displayed and could not control. What could it all mean? What sorrowful recollections, what mysterious apprehensions, had my words aroused in the count's mind? I could not understand or imagine why he should regard my question as strange or unnatural. On the contrary, I thought it perfectly natural, dictated as it had been by circumstances, and by the count's own words and manner. And, in spite of my confusion and agitation, the inexplicable voice which we call presentiment whispered in my heart: 'He has forbidden you to CALL him father, but he has not said that he is not your father.' However, I had not time to reflect or to question M. de Chalusse any more, though at that moment I should have had the courage to do so; afterward I did not dare.

"Our carriage had drawn up outside the railway station, and the next instant we alighted. Then, for the first time, I learned the magical power of money, I, a poor girl—reared by public charity—and who for three years had worked for my daily bread. M. de Chalusse found the servants, who were to accompany us, awaiting him. They had thought of everything, and made every possible arrangement for our comfort. I had scarcely time to glance round me before we were on the platform in front of a train, which was ready to start. I perceived the very carriage that had brought us to the station already fastened on a low open truck, and I was advancing to climb into it, when M. de Chalusse stopped me. 'Not there,' said he, 'come with me.' I followed him, and he led me to a magnificent saloon carriage, much higher and roomier than the others, and emblazoned with the Chalusse coat-of-arms. 'This is our carriage, dear Marguerite, he said. I got in. The whistle sounded; and the train started off."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was growing very tired. Big drops of perspiration stood out on her forehead, she panted for breath, and her voice began to fail her.

The magistrate was almost frightened. “Pray rest a little, mademoiselle,” he entreated, “there is no hurry.”

But she shook her head and replied: “It is better to go on. I should never have courage to begin again if I paused.” And thereupon she continued: “I had never gone farther than Versailles. This journey was at first as delightful as a glimpse into fairy-land. Our carriage was one of those costly whims which some millionaires indulge in. It consisted of a central saloon—a perfect chef-d’oeuvre of taste and luxury—with two compartments at either end, furnished with comfortable sleeping accommodation. And all this, the count seemed never weary of repeating, was mine—mine alone. Leaning back on the velvet cushions, I gazed at the changing landscape, as the train rushed madly on. Leaning over me, M. de Chalusse named all the towns and villages we passed: Brunoy, Melun, Fontainebleau, Villeneuve, Sens, Laroche. And each time the train stopped the servants came to ask if we wished for anything. When we reached Lyons, in the middle of the night, we found a delicious supper awaiting us. It was served as soon as we alighted, and in due time we were warned that the train was ready to start, and then we resumed our journey. You can imagine, perhaps, how marvellous all this seemed to a poor little apprentice, whose only ambition a week before was to earn five francs a day. What a change indeed! At last the count made me retire to one of the compartments, where I soon fell asleep, abandoning my efforts to distinguish what was dreamlike in my situation from reality. However, when I woke up I became terribly anxious. I asked myself what was awaiting me at the end of this long journey. M. de Chalusse’s manner continued kind, and even affectionate; but he had regained his accustomed reserve and self-control, and I realized that it would be useless on my part to question him. At last,

after a thirty hours' journey by rail, we again entered the count's berline, drawn by post-horses, and eventually M. de Chalusse said to me: 'Here is Cannes—we are at our journey's end.'

"In this town, which is one of the most charming that overlook the blue waters of the Mediterranean, the count owned a palace embowered among lovely orange-trees, only a few steps from the sea, and in full view of the myrtle and laurel groves which deck the isles of Sainte Marguerite. He told me that he proposed spending a few months here in seclusion, so as to give me time to accustom myself to my new position and the luxury that surrounded me. I was, indeed, extremely awkward, and my excessive timidity was increased by my pride. I did not know what to say, or what to do. I did not know how to use my hands, nor how to walk, nor how to carry myself. Everything embarrassed and frightened me; and I was conscious of my awkwardness, without being able to remedy it. I saw my blunders, and knew that I spoke a different language to that which was spoken around me. And yet the memory of Cannes will ever be dear to me. For there I first met the only friend I have now left in this world. I did not exchange a word with him, but by the quickened throbbings of my heart, when our eyes met, I felt that he would exert a powerful influence over my life, and events have since proved that I was not deceived. At that time, however, he was a stranger to me; and nothing on earth would have induced me to make inquiries concerning him. It was only by chance I learned that he lived in Paris, that his name was Pascal, and that he had come south as a companion to a sick friend.

"By a single word the count could have insured the happiness of my life and his own, but he did not speak it. He was the kindest and most indulgent of guardians, and I was often affected to tears by his tenderness. But, although my slightest wish was law, he did not grant me his confidence. The secret—the mystery that stood between us—was like a wall of ice. Still, I was gradually becoming accustomed to my new life, and my mind was regaining its equilibrium, when one evening the count returned home more agitated and excited, if possible, than on the day of my departure from the asylum. He summoned his valet, and, in a tone

that admitted no reply, he exclaimed, 'I wish to leave Cannes at once—I must start in less than an hour—so procure some post-horses instantly.' And in answer to my inquiring glance, he said: 'It must be. It would be folly to hesitate. Each moment increases the peril that threatens us.'

"I was very young, inexperienced, and totally ignorant of life; but my sufferings, my loneliness, and the prospect of being compelled to rely upon myself, had imparted to my mind that precocious maturity which is so often observed among the children of the poor. Knowing from the very first that there was some mystery connected with the count's life, I had studied him with a child's patient sagacity—a sagacity which is all the more dangerous, as it is unsuspected—and I had come to the conclusion that a constant dread rendered his life a burden. Could it be for himself that he trembled, this great nobleman, who was so powerful by reason of his exalted rank, his connections, and his wealth? Certainly not. Was it for me, then? Undoubtedly it was. But why? It had not taken me long to discover that he was concealing me, or, at least, that he endeavored by all means in his power to prevent my presence in his house from being known beyond a very limited circle of friends. Our hurried departure from Cannes confirmed me in my impression.

"It might have been truly called a flight. We left that same evening at eleven o'clock, in a pouring rain, with the first horses that could be procured. Our only attendant was the count's valet—not Casimir, the man who insulted me a little while ago—but another man, an old and valued servant, who has since died, unfortunately, and who possessed his master's entire confidence. The other servants were dismissed with a princely gratuity, and told to disperse two days after our departure. We did not return to Paris, but journeyed toward the Italian frontier, and on arriving at Nice in the dead of night, we drove directly to the quay. The postilions unharnessed the horses, and we remained in the carriage. The valet, however, hastened off, and more than two hours elapsed before he returned. He declared that he had found it very difficult to procure what he wished for, but that at last, by a prodigal outlay of money, he had succeeded in overcoming all obstacles. What M. de Chalusse desired was

a vessel ready for sea, and the bark which the valet had chartered now came up to the quay. Our carriage was put on board, we went below, and before daybreak we were under way.

"Three days later we were in Genoa, registered under a false name in a second class hotel. While we were on the open sea, the count had seemed to be less agitated, but now he was far from calm, and the precautions he took proved that he still feared pursuit. A malefactor flying from justice could not have taken greater pains to mislead the detectives on his track. And facts proved conclusively that I was the sole cause of the count's apprehension. On one occasion I even heard him discussing with his valet the feasibility of clothing me in masculine attire. And it was only the difficulty of obtaining a suitable costume that prevented him from carrying this project into execution. I ought to mention, however, that the servant did not share his master's anxiety, for three or four times I overheard him saying: 'The count is too good to worry himself so much about such bad stock. Besides, she won't overtake us. It isn't certain that she has even followed us. How can she know anything about it?' She! Who was she? This is what I racked my brain to discover, but without success. I must confess, monsieur, that being of a practical nature, and not in the least degree romantic, I arrived at the conclusion that the peril chiefly existed in the count's imagination, or that he greatly exaggerated it. Still he suffered none the less on that account, as was shown by the fact that the following month was spent in hurried journeys from one Italian city to another.

"It was the end of May before M. de Chalusse would consent to return to France; and then we went direct to Lyons. We had spent a couple of days there, when the count informed me that prudence required us to separate for a time—that our safety demanded this sacrifice. And without giving me time to say a word, he began to explain the advantages that would accrue from such an arrangement. I was extremely ignorant, and he wished me to profit by our temporary separation to raise my knowledge to a level with my new social position. He had, accordingly, made arrangements for me to enter the convent of

Sainte-Marthe, an educational establishment which is as celebrated in the department of the Rhone as the Convent des Oiseaux is in Paris. He added that it would not be prudent for him to visit me; and he made me solemnly promise that I would never mention his name to any of my schoolmates. I was to send any letters I might write to an address which he would give me, and he would sign his answers with a fictitious name. He also told me that the lady superior of Sainte-Marthe knew his secret, and that I could confide in her. He was so restless and so miserably unhappy on the day when he acquainted me with these plans, that I really believed him insane. Nevertheless, I replied that I would obey him, and to tell the truth, I was not ill pleased at the thought of the change. My life with M. de Chalusse was a monotonous and cheerless one. I was almost dying of ennui, for I had been accustomed to work, bustle, and confusion with the Greloux, and I felt delighted at the prospect of finding myself among companions of my own age.

"Unfortunately, M. de Chalusse had forgotten one circumstance, which made my two years' sojourn at Sainte-Marthe a lingering and cruel agony. At first I was kindly treated by my schoolmates. A new pupil is always welcome, for her arrival relieves the monotony of convent-life. But it was not long before my companions wished to know my name; and I had none other than Marguerite to give them. They were astonished and wished to know who my parents were. I could not tell an untruth; and I was obliged to confess that I knew nothing at all respecting my father or my mother. After that 'the bastard'—for such was the name they gave me—was soon condemned to isolation. No one would associate with me during play-time. No one would sit beside me in the school-room. At the piano lesson, the girl who played after me pretended to wipe the keyboard carefully before commencing her exercises. I struggled bravely against this unjust ostracism; but all in vain. I was so unlike these other girls in character and disposition, and I had, moreover, been guilty of a great imprudence. I had been silly enough to show my companions the costly jewels which M. de Chalusse had given me, but which I never wore. And on two occasions I had proved to them that I had more money at my disposal than all the other

pupils together. If I had been poor, they would, perhaps, have treated me with affected sympathy; but as I was rich, I became an enemy. It was war; and one of those merciless wars which sometimes rage so furiously in convents, despite their seeming quiet.

"I should surprise you, monsieur, if I told you what refined torture these daughters of noblemen invented to gratify their petty spite. I might have complained to the superior, but I scorned to do so. I buried my sorrow deep in my heart, as I had done years before; and I firmly resolved never to show ought but a smiling, placid face, so as to prove to my enemies that they were powerless to disturb my peace of mind. Study became my refuge and consolation; and I plunged into work with the energy of despair. I should probably still live at Sainte-Marthe now, had it not been for a trivial circumstance. One day I had a quarrel with my most determined enemy, a girl named Anais de Rochecote. I was a thousand times right; and I would not yield. The superior dared not tell me I was wrong. Anais was furious, and wrote I don't know what falsehoods to her mother. Madame de Rochecote thereupon interested the mothers of five or six other pupils in her daughter's quarrel, and one evening these ladies came in a body, and nobly and courageously demanded that the 'bastard' should be expelled. It was impossible, outrageous, monstrous, they declared, that their daughters should be compelled to associate with a girl like me—a nameless girl, who humiliated the other girls with her ill-gotten wealth. The superior tried to take my part; but these ladies declared they would take their daughters from the convent if I were not sent away. There was no help for it: I was sacrificed. Summoned by telegraph, M. de Chalusse hastened to Lyons, and two days later I left Sainte-Marthe with jeers and opprobrious epithets ringing in my ears."

X.

Once before, that very morning, the magistrate had witnessed a display of the virile energy with which misfortune and suffering had endowed this proud but naturally timid girl. But he was none the less surprised at the sudden explosion of hatred which he now beheld; for it was hatred. The way in which Mademoiselle Marguerite's voice had quivered as she pronounced the name of Anais de Rochecote proved, unmistakably, that hers was one of those haughty natures that never forget an insult. All signs of fatigue had now disappeared. She had sprung from her chair, and remembrance of the shameful, cowardly affront she had received had brought a vivid flush to her cheeks and a bright gleam to her eyes.

"This atrocious humiliation happened scarcely a year ago, monsieur," she resumed; "and there is but little left for me to tell you. My expulsion from Sainte-Marthe made M. de Chalusse frantic with indignation. He knew something that I was ignorant of—that Madame de Rochecote, who enacted the part of a severe and implacable censor, was famed for the laxity of her morals. The count's first impulse was to wreak vengeance on my persecutors; for, in spite of his usual coolness, M. de Chalusse had a furious temper at times. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I dissuaded him from challenging General de Rochecote, who was living at the time. However, it now became necessary to make some other arrangements for me. M. de Chalusse offered to find another school, promising to take such precautions as would insure my peace of mind. But I interrupted him before he had spoken a dozen words, declaring I would rather return to the book-binders than chance another such experiment. And what I said I meant. A subterfuge—a fictitious name, for instance—could alone shield me from persecution similar to what I had endured at Sainte-Marthe. But I knew that I was incapable of playing such a part—I felt that I should somehow confess everything. My

firmness imparted some resolution to M. de Chalusse. He exclaimed, with an oath, that I was right—that he was weary of all this deception and concealment, and that he would make arrangements to have me near him. 'Yes,' he concluded, embracing me, 'the die is cast, come what may!'

"However, these measures required a certain delay; and, in the meantime, he decided to install me in Paris, which is the only place where one can successfully hide from prying eyes. He purchased a small but convenient house, surrounded by a garden, in the neighborhood of the Luxembourg Palace, and here he installed me, with two old women and a trusty man-servant. As I needed a chaperon, he went in quest of one, and found Madame Leon."

On hearing this name, the magistrate gave the young girl a searching look, as if he hoped to discover what estimate she had formed of the housekeeper's character, as well as what degree of confidence she had granted her. But Mademoiselle Marguerite's face remained unaltered in expression.

"After so many trials," she resumed, "I thought I should now find rest and peace. Yes, I believed so; and the few months I spent in that quiet house will be the happiest of my life—I am sure of it. Judge of my surprise when, on going down into the little garden on the second day after my arrival, I saw the young man whom I had met at Cannes, and whose face had lingered in my memory for more than two years as the type of all that was best and noblest in the human countenance. He was standing near the gate. A cloud passed before my eyes. What mysterious freak of fate had caused him to pause there at that particular moment? This much is certain, he recognized me as I had recognized him. He bowed, smiling somewhat, and I fled indoors again, indignant with myself for not being angry at his audacity. I made many plans that day, but the next morning, at the same hour, I hid myself behind a Venetian blind, and saw him pause at the gate, and gaze at the garden with

evident anxiety. I soon learned that he lived near by, with his widowed mother; and twice a day, when he went to the Palais de Justice and returned, he passed my home."

Her cheeks were crimson now, her eyes were lowered, and she was evidently embarrassed. But suddenly, as if ashamed of her blushes, she proudly raised her head, and said, in a firmer voice: "Shall I tell you our simple story? Is it necessary? I should not have concealed anything that has passed from my mother, if I had been so happy as to possess a mother. A few moments' conversation now and then, the exchange of a few letters, the pressure of a hand through the garden gate, and that is all. Still, I have been guilty of a grave and irreparable fault: I have disobeyed the one rule of my life—frankness; and I am cruelly punished for doing so. I did not tell all this to M. de Chalusse—in fact, I dared not. I was ashamed of my cowardice; from day to day I vowed that I would confess everything, and yet I procrastinated. I said to myself every night, 'It shall be done to-morrow; but when the morrow came I said, 'I will give myself another day—just one more day.' Indeed, my courage failed me when I thought of the count's aristocratic prejudices; and besides, I knew how ambitious he was for my future. On the other hand, moreover, Pascal was always pleading: 'Don't speak now. My circumstances are constantly improving. The day is not far off when I shall be able to offer you wealth and fame. When that day comes I will go to your guardian and ask him for your hand; but in Heaven's name don't speak now.' I understood Pascal's motives well enough. The count's immense fortune frightened him, and he feared that he would be accused of being a fortune-hunter. So I waited, with that secret anguish which still haunts those who have been unhappy even when their present is peaceful, and their future seems bright. I kept my secret, saying to myself that such happiness was not meant for me, that it would soon take flight.

"It took flight all too soon. One morning I heard a carriage draw up outside our door, and the next moment the Count de Chalusse entered the sitting-room. 'Everything is ready to receive you at the Hotel de Chalusse, Marguerite,' said he, 'come!' He ceremoniously offered me his

arm, and I accompanied him. I could not even leave a message for Pascal, for I had never made a confidante of Madame Leon. Still, a faint hope sustained me. I thought that the precautions taken by M. de Chalusse would somewhat dispel the uncertainty of my position, and furnish me at least with some idea of the vague danger which threatened me. But no. His efforts, so far as I could discover, had been confined to changing his servants. Our life in this grand house was the same as it had been at Cannes—even more secluded, if that were possible. The count had aged considerably. It was evident that he was sinking beneath the burden of some ever-present sorrow. 'I am condemning you to a cheerless and melancholy youth,' he sometimes said to me, 'but it will not last forever—patience, patience!' Did he really love me? I think so. But his affection showed itself in a strange manner. Sometimes his voice was so tender that my heart was touched. At others there was a look of hatred in his eyes which terrified me. Occasionally he was severe almost to brutality, and then the next moment he would implore me to forgive him, order the carriage, take me with him to his jewellers', and insist upon me accepting some costly ornaments. Madame Leon declares that my jewels are worth more than twenty thousand francs. At times I wondered if his capricious affection and sternness were really intended for myself. It often seemed to me that I was only a shadow—the phantom of some absent person, in his eyes. It is certain that he often requested me to dress myself or to arrange my hair in a certain fashion, to wear such and such a color, or to use a particular perfume which he gave me. Frequently, when I was moving about the house, he suddenly exclaimed: 'Marguerite! I entreat you, remain just where you are!'

"I obeyed him, but the illusion had already vanished. A sob or an oath would come from his lips, and then in an angry voice he would bid me leave the room."

The magistrate did not raise his eyes from his talismanic ring; it might have been supposed that it had fascinated him. Still, his expression denoted profound commiseration, and he shook his head thoughtfully. The idea had occurred to him that this unfortunate young girl had been

the victim, not precisely of a madman, but of one of those maniacs who have just enough reason left to invent the tortures they inflict upon those around them.

Speaking more slowly than before, as if she were desirous of attracting increased attention on the magistrate's part, Mademoiselle Marguerite now continued: "If I reminded M. de Chalusse of a person whom he had formerly loved, that person may have been my mother. I say, MAY HAVE BEEN, because I am not certain of it. All my efforts to discover the truth were unavailing. M. de Chalusse seemed to take a malicious pleasure in destroying all my carefully-arranged theories, and in upsetting the conjectures which he had encouraged himself only twenty-four hours previously. Heaven only knows how anxiously I listened to his slightest word! And it can be easily understood why I did so. My strange and compromising connection with him drove me nearly frantic. It was not strange that people's suspicions were aroused. True, he had changed all his servants before my arrival here; but he had requested Madame Leon to remain with me, and who can tell what reports she may have circulated? It has often happened that when returning from mass on Sundays, I have overheard persons say, 'Look! there is the Count de Chalusse's mistress!' Oh! not a single humiliation has been spared me—not a single one! However, on one point I did not feel the shadow of a doubt. The count had known my mother. He frequently alluded to her, sometimes with an outburst of passion which made me think that he had once adored, and still loved her; sometimes, with insults and curses which impressed me with the idea that she had cruelly injured him. But most frequently he reproached her for having unhesitatingly sacrificed me to insure her own safety. He said she could have had no heart; and that it was an unheard of, incomprehensible, and monstrous thing that a woman could enjoy luxury and wealth, undisturbed by remorse, knowing that her innocent and defenceless child was exposed all the while to the hardships and temptations of abject poverty. I was also certain that my mother was a married woman, for M. de Chalusse alluded to her husband more than once. He hated him with a terrible hatred. One evening, when he was more communicative than usual, he

gave me to understand that the great danger he dreaded for me came either from my mother or her husband. He afterward did his best to counteract this impression; but he did not succeed in convincing me that his previous assertion was untrue."

The magistrate looked searchingly at Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Then those letters which we found just now in the escritoire are from your mother, mademoiselle?" he remarked.

The girl blushed. She had previously been questioned respecting these letters, and she had then made no reply. Now, she hesitated for a moment, and then quietly said: "Your opinion coincides with mine, monsieur."

Thereupon, as if she wished to avoid any further questioning on the subject, she hurriedly continued: "At last a new and even greater trouble came—a positive calamity, which made me forget the disgrace attached to my birth. One morning at breakfast, about a month ago, the count informed me that he expected two guests to dinner that evening. This was such an unusual occurrence that I was struck speechless with astonishment. 'It is extraordinary, I admit,' he added, gayly; 'but it is nevertheless true. M. de Fondege and the Marquis de Valorsay will dine here this evening. So, my dear Marguerite, look your prettiest in honor of our old friend.' At six o'clock the two gentlemen arrived together. I was well acquainted with M. de Fondege—the general, as he was commonly called. He was the count's only intimate friend, and often visited us. But I had never before seen the Marquis de Valorsay, nor had I ever heard his name until M. de Chalusse mentioned it that morning. I don't pretend to judge him. I will only say that as soon as I saw him, the dislike I felt for him bordered on aversion. My false position rendered his close scrutiny actually painful to me, and his attentions and compliments pleased me no better. At dinner he addressed his conversation exclusively to me, and I particularly remember a certain picture he drew of a model household, which positively disgusted me. In his opinion, a husband ought to content himself with being his wife's prime minister—the slave of her slightest caprice. He intended, if he

married, to allow the Marquise de Valorsay perfect freedom, with an unlimited amount of money, the handsomest carriages, and the most magnificent diamonds in Paris—everything, indeed, that could gratify her vanity, and render her existence a fairylike dream. 'With such ideas on her husband's part the marchioness will be very difficult to please if she is not contented with her lot,' he added, glancing covertly at me. This exasperated me beyond endurance, and I dryly replied: 'The mere thought of such a husband would drive me to the shelter of a convent.' He seemed considerably disconcerted; and I noticed that the general, I mean M. de Fondege, gave him a mischievous look.

"However, when the gentlemen had gone, M. de Chalusse scolded me severely. He said that my sentimental philosophy was quite out of place in a drawing-room, and that my ideas of life, marriage, and duty could only have been gained in a foundling asylum. As I attempted to reply, he interrupted me to sound the praises of the Marquis de Valorsay, who not only came of an ancient family, and possessed immense, unencumbered estates, but was a talented, handsome man into the bargain; in short, one of those favored mortals whom all young girls sigh for. The scales fell from my eyes. I instantly understood that M. de Chalusse had selected the Marquis de Valorsay to be my husband, and thus the marquis had designedly explained his matrimonial programme for my benefit. It was a snare to catch the bird. I felt indignant that he should suppose me so wanting in delicacy of feeling and nobility of character as to be dazzled by the life of display and facile pleasure which he had depicted. I had disliked him at first, and now I despised him; for it was impossible to misunderstand the shameless proposal concealed beneath his half-jesting words. He offered me my liberty in exchange for my fortune. That is only a fair contract, one might say. Perhaps so; but if he were willing to do this for a certain amount of money, what would he not do for a sum twice or thrice as large? Such were my impressions, though I asked myself again and again if I were not mistaken. No; the events that followed only confirmed my suspicions. Three days later the marquis came again. His visit was to the count, and they held a long conference in this study. Having occasion to enter the room, after the

marquis's departure, I noticed on the table a number of title deeds which he had probably brought for the count's inspection. On the following week there was another conference, and this time a lawyer was present. Any further doubts I might have felt were dispelled by Madame Leon, who was always well informed—thanks to her habit of listening at the keyholes. 'They are talking of marrying you to the Marquis de Valorsay—I heard them,' she remarked to me.

"However, the information did not terrify me. I had profited by the time allowed me for reflection, and I had decided upon the course I should pursue. I am timid, but I am not weak; and I was determined to resist M. de Chalusse's will in this matter, even if it became necessary for me to leave his house, and renounce all hopes of the wealth he had promised me. Still I said nothing to Pascal of my mental struggle and final determination. I did not wish to bind him by the advice which he would certainly have given me. I had his troth, and that sufficed. And it was with a thrill of joy that I said to myself: 'What does it matter if M. de Chalusse should be so angered by my refusal to obey him as to drive me from his house? It will rather be so much the better; Pascal will protect me.'

"But resistance is only possible when you are attacked; and M. de Chalusse did not even allude to the subject—perhaps because affairs had not yet been satisfactorily arranged between the marquis and himself—possibly because he wished to deprive me of the power to oppose him by taking me unawares. It would have been great imprudence on my part to broach the subject myself, and so I waited calmly and resignedly, storing up all my energy for the decisive hour. I willingly confess that I am not a heroine of romance—I do not look upon money with the contempt it deserves. I was resolved to wed solely in accordance with the dictates of my heart; but I wished, and HOPED, that M. de Chalusse would give me, not a fortune, but a modest dowry. He had become more communicative than usual on money matters, and took no pains to conceal the fact that he was engaged in raising the largest possible amount of ready cash. He received frequent visits from his stockbroker, and sometimes when the

latter had left him, he showed me rolls of bank-notes and packages of bonds, saying, as he did so: 'You see that your future is assured, my dear Marguerite.'

"I am only doing the count justice when I say that my future was a subject of constant anxiety to him during the last few months of his life. Less than a fortnight after he had taken me from the asylum, he drew up a will, in which he adopted me and made me his sole legatee. But he afterward destroyed this document on the plea that it did not afford me sufficient security; and a dozen others shared the same fate. For his mind was constantly occupied with the subject, and he seemed to have a presentiment that his death would be a sudden one. I am forced to admit that he seemed less anxious to endow me with his fortune than to frustrate the hopes of some persons I did not know. When he burned his last will in my presence, he remarked: 'This document is useless: they would contest it, and probably succeed in having it set aside. I have thought of a better way; I have found an expedient which will provide for all emergencies.' And as I ventured some timid objection—for it was repugnant to my sense of honor to act as an instrument of vengeance or injustice, or assist, even passively, in despoiling any person of his rightful inheritance—he harshly, almost brutally, replied: 'Mind your own business! I will disappoint the folks who are waiting for my property as they deserve to be disappointed. They covet my estates do they! Very well, they shall have them. I will leave them my property, but they shall find it mortgaged to its full value.'

"Unfortunate man! all his plans have failed. The heirs whom he hated so bitterly, and whom I don't even know, whose existence people have not even suspected, can now come, and they will find the wealth he was determined to deprive them of intact. He dreamed of a brilliant destiny for me—a proud name, and the rank of a marchioness—and he has not even succeeded in protecting me from the most shameful insults. I have been accused of theft before his body was even cold. He wished to make me rich, frightfully rich, and he has not left me enough to buy my bread—literally, not enough to buy bread. He was in constant terror

concerning my safety, and he died without even telling me what were the mysterious dangers which threatened me; without even telling me something which I am morally certain of—that he was my father. He raised me against my will to the highest social position—he placed that wonderful talisman, gold, in my hand; he showed me the world at my feet; and suddenly he allowed me to fall even to lower depths of misery than those in which he found me. Ah! M. de Chalusse, it would have been far better for me if you had left me in the foundling asylum to have earned my own bread. And yet, I freely forgive you."

Mademoiselle Marguerite reflected for a moment, questioning her memory to ascertain if she had told everything—if she had forgotten any particulars of importance. And as it seemed to her that she had nothing more to add, she approached the magistrate, and, with impressive solemnity of tone and manner, exclaimed: "My life up to the present hour is now as well known to you as it is to myself. You know what even the friend, who is my only hope, does not know as yet. And now, when I tell him what I really am, will he think me unworthy of him?"

The magistrate sprang to his feet, impelled by an irresistible force. Two big tears, the first he had shed for years, trembled on his eyelashes, and coursed down his furrowed cheeks. "You are a noble creature, my child," he replied, in a voice faltering with emotion; "and if I had a son, I should deem myself fortunate if he chose a wife like you."

She clasped her hands, with a gesture of intense joy and relief, and then sank into an arm-chair, murmuring: "Oh, thanks, monsieur, thanks!" For she was thinking of Pascal; and she had feared he might shrink from her when she fully revealed to him her wretched, sorrowful past, of which he was entirely ignorant. But the magistrate's words had reassured her.

XI.

The clock on the mantel-shelf struck half-past four. The magistrate and Mademoiselle Marguerite could hear stealthy footsteps in the hall, and a rustling near the door. The servants were prowling round about the study, wondering what was the reason of this prolonged conference. “I must see how the clerk is progressing with the inventory.” said the magistrate. “Excuse me if I absent myself for a moment; I will soon return.” And so saying he rose and left the room.

But it was only a pretext. He really wished to conceal his emotion and regain his composure, for he had been deeply affected by the young girl’s narrative. He also needed time for reflection, for the situation had become extremely complicated since Mademoiselle Marguerite had informed him of the existence of heirs—of those mysterious enemies who had poisoned the count’s peace. These persons would, of course, require to know what had become of the millions deposited in the escritoire, and who would be held accountable for the missing treasure? Mademoiselle Marguerite, unquestionably. Such were the thoughts that flitted through the magistrate’s mind as he listened to his clerk’s report. Nor was this all; for having solicited Mademoiselle Marguerite’s confidence, he must now advise her. And this was a matter of some difficulty.

However, when he returned to the study he was quite self-possessed and impassive again, and he was pleased to see that on her side the unfortunate girl had, to some extent, at least, recovered her wonted composure. “Let us now discuss the situation calmly,” he began. “I shall convince you that your prospects are not so frightful as you imagine. But before speaking of the future, will you allow me to refer to the past?” The girl bowed her consent. “Let us first of all consider the subject of the

missing millions. They were certainly in the escritoire when M. de Chalusse replaced the vial; but now they are not to be found, so that the count must have taken them away with him."

"That thought occurred to me also."

"Did the treasure form a large package?"

"Yes, it was large; but it could have been easily concealed under the cloak which M. de Chalusse wore."

"Very good! What was the time when he left the house?"

"About five o'clock."

"When was he brought back?"

"At about half-past six."

"Where did the cabman pick him up?"

"Near the church of Notre Dame de Lorette, so he told me."

"Do you know the driver's number?"

"Casimir asked him for it, I believe."

Had any one inquired the reason of this semi-official examination, the magistrate would have replied that Mademoiselle Marguerite's interests alone influenced him in the course he was taking. This was quite true; and yet, without being altogether conscious of the fact, he was also impelled by another motive. This affair interested, almost fascinated, him on account of its mysterious surroundings, and influenced by the desire for arriving at the truth which is inherent in every human heart, he was anxious to solve the riddle. After a few moments' thoughtful silence, he remarked: "So the point of departure in our investigation, if there is an investigation, will be this: M. de Chalusse left the house with two millions in his possession; and while he was absent, he either disposed of that enormous sum—or else it was stolen from him."

Mademoiselle Marguerite shuddered. "Oh! stolen," she faltered.

"Yes, my child—anything is possible. We must consider the situation in every possible light. But to continue. Where was M. de Chalusse going?"

“To the house of a gentleman who would, he thought, be able to furnish the address given in the letter he had torn up.”

“What was this gentleman’s name?”

“Fortunat.”

The magistrate wrote the name down on his tablets, and then, resuming his examination, he said: “Now, in reference to this unfortunate letter which, in your opinion, was the cause of the count’s death, what did it say?”

“I don’t know, monsieur. It is true that I helped the count in collecting the fragments, but I did not read what was written on them.”

“That is of little account. The main thing is to ascertain who wrote the letter. You told me that it could only have come from the sister who disappeared thirty years ago, or else from your mother.”

“That was, and still is, my opinion.”

The magistrate toyed with his ring; and a smile of satisfaction stole over his face. “Very well!” he exclaimed, “in less than five minutes I shall be able to tell you whether the letter was from your mother or not. My method is perfectly simple. I have only to compare the handwriting with that of the letters found in the escritoire.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite sprang up, exclaiming: “What a happy idea!”

But without seeming to notice the girl’s surprise, he added: “Where are the remnants of this letter which you and the count picked up in the garden?”

“M. de Chalusse placed them in his pocket.”

“They must be found. Tell the count’s valet to look for them.”

The girl rang; but M. Casimir, who was supposed to be engaged in making preparations for the funeral, was not in the house. However, another servant and Madame Leon offered their services, and certainly displayed the most laudable zeal, but their search was fruitless; the fragments of the letter could not be found. “How unfortunate!” muttered

the magistrate, as he watched them turn the pockets of the count's clothes inside out. "What a fatality! That letter would probably have solved the mystery."

Compelled to submit to this disappointment, he returned to the study; but he was evidently discouraged. Although he did not consider the mystery insoluble, far from it, he realized that time and research would be required to arrive at a solution, and that the affair was quite beyond his province. One hope alone remained.

By carefully studying the last words which M. de Chalusse had written and spoken he might arrive at the intention which had dictated them. Experience had wonderfully sharpened his penetration, and perhaps he might discover a hidden meaning which would throw light upon all this doubt and uncertainty. Accordingly, he asked Mademoiselle Marguerite for the paper upon which the count had endeavored to pen his last wishes; and in addition he requested her to write on a card the dying man's last words in the order they had been uttered. But on combining the written and the spoken words the only result obtained was as follows:—"My entire fortune—give—friends—against—Marguerite—despoiled—your mother—take care." These twelve incoherent words revealed the count's absorbing and poignant anxiety concerning his fortune and Marguerite's future, and also the fear and aversion with which Marguerite's mother inspired him. But that was all; the sense was not precise enough for any practical purpose. Certainly the word "give" needed no explanation. It was plain that the count had endeavored to write, "I give my entire fortune." The meaning of the word "despoiled" was also clear. It had evidently been wrung from the half-unconscious man by the horrible thought that Marguerite—his own daughter, unquestionably—would not have a penny of all the millions he had intended for her. "Take care" also explained itself. But there were two words which seemed absolutely incomprehensible to the magistrate, and which he vainly strove to connect with the others in an intelligible manner. These were the words "friends" and "against," and they were

the most legibly written of all. For the thirtieth time the magistrate was repeating them in an undertone, when a rap came at the door, and almost immediately Madame Leon entered the room.

"What is it?" inquired Mademoiselle Marguerite.

Laying a package of letters, addressed to M. de Chalusse, on the desk, the housekeeper replied: "These have just come by the post for the poor count. Heaven rest his soul!" And then handing a newspaper to Mademoiselle Marguerite, she added, in an unctuous tone: "And some one left this paper for mademoiselle at the same time."

"This paper—for me? You must be mistaken."

"Not at all. I was in the concierge's lodge when the messenger brought it; and he said it was for Mademoiselle Marguerite, from one of her friends." And with these words she made one of her very best courtesies, and withdrew.

The girl had taken the newspaper, and now, with an air of astonishment and apprehension, she slowly unfolded it. What first attracted her attention was a paragraph on the first page marked round with red chalk. The paper had evidently been sent in order that she might read this particular passage, and accordingly she began to peruse it. "There was a great sensation and a terrible scandal last evening at the residence of Madame d'A——, a well known star of the first magnitude ——"

It was the shameful article which described the events that had robbed Pascal of his honor. And to make assurance doubly sure, to prevent the least mistake concerning the printed initials, the coward who sent the paper had appended the names of the persons mixed up in the affair, at full length, in pencil. He had written d'Argeles, Pascal Ferailleur, Ferdinand de Coralth, Rochecote. And yet, in spite of these precautions, the girl did not at first seize the full meaning of the article; and she was obliged to read it over again. But when she finally understood it—when the horrible truth burst upon her—the paper fell from her nerveless hands, she turned as pale as death, and, gasping for breath, leaned heavily against the wall for support.

Her features expressed such terrible suffering that the magistrate sprang from his chair with a bound. “What has happened?” he eagerly asked.

She tried to reply, but finding herself unable to do so, she pointed to the paper lying upon the floor, and gasped: “There! there!”

The magistrate understood everything at the first glance; and this man, who had witnessed so much misery—who had been the confidant of so many martyrs—was filled with consternation at thought of the misfortunes which destiny was heaping upon this defenceless girl. He approached her, and led her gently to an arm-chair, upon which she sank, half fainting. “Poor child!” he murmured. “The man you had chosen—the man whom you would have sacrificed everything for—is Pascal Ferailleur, is he not?”

“Yes, it is he.”

“He is an advocate?”

“As I have already told you, monsieur.”

“Does he live in the Rue d’Ulm?”

“Yes.”

The magistrate shook his head sadly. “It is the same,” said he. “I also know him, my poor child; and I loved and honored him. Yesterday I should have told you that he was worthy of you. He was above slander. But now, see what depths love of play has brought him to. He is a thief!”

Mademoiselle Marguerite’s weakness vanished. She sprang from her chair, and indignantly faced the magistrate. “It is false!” she cried, vehemently; “and what that paper says is false as well!”

Had her reason been affected by so many successive blows? It seemed likely; for, livid a moment before, her face had now turned scarlet. She trembled nervously from head to foot, and there was a gleam of insanity in her big black eyes.

“If she doesn’t weep, she is lost,” thought the magistrate. And, instead of encouraging her to hope, he deemed it best to try and destroy what he considered a dangerous illusion. “Alas! my poor child,” he said sadly,

“you must not deceive yourself. The newspapers are often hasty in their judgment; but an article like that is only published when proof of its truth is furnished by witnesses of unimpeachable veracity.”

She shrugged her shoulders as if she were listening to some monstrous absurdities, and then thoughtfully muttered: “Ah! now Pascal’s silence is explained: now I understand why he has not yet replied to the letter I wrote him last night.”

The magistrate persevered, however, and added: “So, after the article you have just read, no one can entertain the shadow of a doubt.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite hastily interrupted him. “But I have not doubted him for a second!” she exclaimed. “Doubt Pascal! I doubt Pascal! I would sooner doubt myself. I might commit a dishonorable act; I am only a poor, weak, ignorant girl, while he—he——You don’t know, then, that he was my conscience? Before undertaking anything, before deciding upon anything, if ever I felt any doubt, I asked myself, ‘What would he do?’ And the mere thought of him is sufficient to banish any unworthy idea from my heart.” Her tone and manner betokened complete and unwavering confidence; and her faith imparted an almost sublime expression to her face. “If I was overcome, monsieur,” she continued, “it was only because I was appalled by the audacity of the accusation. How was it possible to make Pascal even SEEM to be guilty of a dishonorable act? This is beyond my powers of comprehension. I am only certain of one thing—that he is innocent. If the whole world rose to testify against him, it would not shake my faith in him, and even if he confessed that he was guilty I should be more likely to believe that he was crazed than culpable!”

A bitter smile curved her lips, she was beginning to judge the situation more correctly, and in a calmer tone she resumed: “Moreover, what does circumstantial evidence prove? Did you not this morning hear all our servants declaring that I was accountable for M. de Chalusse’s millions? Who knows what might have happened if it had not been for your intervention? Perhaps, by this time, I should have been in prison.”

“This is not a parallel case, my child.”

“It IS a parallel case, monsieur. Suppose, for one moment, that I had been formally accused—what do you think Pascal would have replied if people had gone to him, and said, ‘Marguerite is a thief?’ He would have laughed them to scorn, and have exclaimed, ‘Impossible!’”

The magistrate’s mind was made up. In his opinion, Pascal Ferailleur was guilty. Still it was useless to argue with the girl, for he felt that he should not be able to convince her. However, he determined, if possible, to ascertain her plans in order to oppose them, if they seemed to him at all dangerous. “Perhaps you are right, my child,” he conceded, “still, this unfortunate affair must change all your arrangements.”

“Rather, it modifies them.” Surprised by her calmness, he looked at her inquiringly. “An hour ago,” she added, “I had resolved to go to Pascal and claim his aid and protection as one claims an undeniable right or the fulfilment of a solemn promise; but now—”

“Well?” eagerly asked the magistrate.

“I am still resolved to go to him—but as an humble suppliant. And I shall say to him, ‘You are suffering, but no sorrow is intolerable when there are two to bear the burden; and so, here I am. Everything else may fail you—your dearest friends may basely desert you; but here am I. Whatever your plans may be—whether you have decided to leave Europe or to remain in Paris to watch for your hour of vengeance, you will need a faithful, trusty companion—a confidant—and here I am! Wife, friend, sister—I will be which ever you desire. I am yours—yours unconditionally.’” And as if in reply to a gesture of surprise which escaped the magistrate, she added: “He is unhappy—I am free—I love him!”

The magistrate was struck dumb with astonishment. He knew that she would surely do what she said; he had realized that she was one of those generous, heroic women who are capable of any sacrifice for the man they love—a woman who would never shrink from what she considered to be her duty, who was utterly incapable of weak hesitancy or selfish calculation.

“Fortunately, my dear young lady, your devotion will no doubt be useless,” he said at last.

“And why?”

“Because M. Ferailleur owes it to you, and, what is more, he owes it to himself, not to accept such a sacrifice.” Failing to understand his meaning, she looked at him inquiringly. “You will forgive me, I trust,” he continued, “if I warn you to prepare for a disappointment. Innocent or guilty, M. Ferailleur is—disgraced. Unless something little short of a miracle comes to help him, his career is ended. This is one of those charges—one of those slanders, if you prefer that term, which a man can never shake off. So how can you hope that he will consent to link your destiny to his?”

She had not thought of this objection, and it seemed to her a terrible one. Tears came to her dark eyes, and in a despondent voice she murmured: “God grant that he will not evince such cruel generosity. The only great and true misfortune that could strike me now would be to have him repel me. M. de Chalusse’s death leaves me without means—without bread; but now I can almost bless my poverty since it enables me to ask him what would become of me if he abandoned me, and who would protect me if he refused to do so. The brilliant career he dreamed of is ended, you say. Ah, well! I will console him, and though we are unfortunate, we may yet be happy. Our enemies are triumphant—so be it: we should only tarnish our honor by stooping to contend against such villainy. But in some new land, in America, perhaps, we shall be able to find some quiet spot where we can begin a new and better career.” It was almost impossible to believe that it was Mademoiselle Marguerite, usually so haughtily reserved, who was now speaking with such passionate vehemence. And to whom was she talking in this fashion? To a stranger, whom she saw for the first time. But she was urged on by circumstances, the influence of which was stronger than her own will. They had led her to reveal her dearest and most sacred feelings and to display her real nature free from any kind of disguise.

However, the magistrate concealed the emotion and sympathy which filled his heart and refused to admit that the girl's hopes were likely to be realized. "And if M. Ferailleur refused to accept your sacrifice?" he asked.

"It is not a sacrifice, monsieur."

"No matter; but supposing he refused it, what should you do?"

"What should I do?" she muttered. "I don't know. Still I should have no difficulty in earning a livelihood. I have been told that I have a remarkable voice. I might, perhaps, go upon the stage."

The magistrate sprang from his arm-chair. "You become an actress, YOU?"

"Under such circumstances it would little matter what became of me!"

"But you don't suspect—you cannot imagine——"

He was at a loss for words to explain the nature of his objections to such a career; and it was Mademoiselle Marguerite who found them for him. "I suspect that theatrical life is an abominable life for a woman," she said, gravely; "but I know that there are many noble and chaste women who have adopted the profession. That is enough for me. My pride is a sufficient protection. It preserved me as an apprentice; it would preserve me as an actress. I might be slandered; but that is not an irremediable misfortune. I despise the world too much to be troubled by its opinion so long as I have the approval of my own conscience. And why should I not become a great artiste if I consecrated all the intelligence, passion, energy, and will I might possess, to my art?"

Hearing a knock at the door she paused; and a moment later a footman entered with lights, for night was falling. He was closely followed by another servant, who said: "Mademoiselle, the Marquis de Valorsay is below, and wishes to know if mademoiselle will grant him the honor of an interview."

XII.

On hearing M. de Valorsay's name, Mademoiselle Marguerite and the magistrate exchanged glances full of wondering conjecture. The girl was undecided what course to pursue; but the magistrate put an end to her perplexity. "Ask the marquis to come up," he said to the servant.

The footman left the room; and, as soon as he had disappeared, Mademoiselle Marguerite exclaimed: "What, monsieur! after all I have told you, you still wish me to receive him?"

"It is absolutely necessary that you should do so. You must know what he wishes and what hope brings him here. Calm yourself, and submit to necessity."

In a sort of bewilderment, the girl hastily arranged her disordered dress, and caught up her wavy hair which had fallen over her shoulders. "Ah! monsieur," she remarked, "don't you understand that he still believes me to be the count's heiress? In his eyes, I am still surrounded by the glamor of the millions which are mine no longer."

"Hush! here he comes!"

The Marquis de Valorsay was indeed upon the threshold, and a moment later he entered the room. He was clad with the exquisite taste of those intelligent gentlemen to whom the color of a pair of trousers is a momentous matter, and whose ambition is satisfied if they are regarded as a sovereign authority respecting the cut of a waistcoat. As a rule, his expression of face merely denoted supreme contentment with himself and indifference as to others, but now, strange to say, he looked grave and almost solemn. His right leg—the unfortunate limb which had been broken when he fell from his horse in Ireland—seemed stiff, and dragged a trifle more than usual, but this was probably solely due to the influence of the atmosphere. He bowed to Mademoiselle Marguerite with every mark of profound respect, and without seeming to notice the magistrate's presence.

“You will excuse me, I trust, mademoiselle,” said he, “in having insisted upon seeing you, so that I might express my deep sympathy. I have just heard of the terrible misfortune which has befallen you—the sudden death of your father.”

She drew back as if she were terrified, and repeated: “My father!”

The marquis did not evince the slightest surprise. “I know,” said he, in a voice which he tried to make as feeling as possible, “I know that M. de Chalusse kept this fact concealed from you; but he confided his secret to me.”

“To you?” interrupted the magistrate, who was unable to restrain himself any longer.

The marquis turned haughtily to this old man dressed in black, and in the dry tone one uses in speaking to an indiscreet inferior, he replied: “To me, yes, monsieur; and he acquainted me not only by word of mouth, but in writing also, with the motives which influenced him, expressing his fixed intention, not only of recognizing Mademoiselle Marguerite as his daughter, but also of adopting her in order to insure her undisputed right to his fortune and his name.”

“Ah!” said the magistrate as if suddenly enlightened; “ah! ah!”

But without noticing this exclamation which was, at least, remarkable in tone, M. de Valorsay again turned to Mademoiselle Marguerite, and continued: “Your ignorance on this subject, mademoiselle, convinces me that your servants have not deceived me in telling me that M. de Chalusse was struck down without the slightest warning. But they have told me one thing which I cannot believe. They have told me that the count made no provision for you, that he left no will, and that—excuse a liberty which is prompted only by the most respectful interest—and that, the result of this incomprehensible and culpable neglect is that you are ruined and almost without means. Can this be possible?”

“It is the exact truth, monsieur,” replied Mademoiselle Marguerite. “I am reduced to the necessity of working for my daily bread.”

She spoke these words with a sort of satisfaction, expecting that the marquis would betray his disappointed covetousness by some significant gesture or exclamation, and she was already prepared to rejoice at his confusion. But her expectations were not realized. Instead of evincing the slightest dismay or even regret, M. de Valorsay drew a long breath, as if a great burden had been lifted from his heart, and his eyes sparkled with apparent delight. “Then I may venture to speak,” he exclaimed, with unconcealed satisfaction, “I will speak, mademoiselle, if you will deign to allow me.”

She looked at him with anxious curiosity, wondering what was to come. “Speak, monsieur,” she faltered.

“I will obey you, mademoiselle,” he said, bowing again. “But first, allow me to tell you how great my hopes have been. M. de Chalusse’s death is an irreparable misfortune for me as for yourself. He had allowed me, mademoiselle, to aspire to the honor of becoming a suitor for your hand. If he did not speak to you on the subject, it was only because he wished to leave you absolutely free, and impose upon me the difficult task of winning your consent. But between him and me everything had been arranged in principle, and he was to give a dowry of three millions of francs to Mademoiselle Marguerite de Chalusse, his daughter.”

“I am no longer Mademoiselle de Chalusse, Monsieur le Marquis, and I am no longer the possessor of a fortune.”

He felt the sharp sting of this retort, for the blood rose to his cheeks, still he did not lose his composure. “If you were still rich, mademoiselle,” he replied, in the reproachful tone of an honest man who feels that he is misunderstood, “I should, perhaps, have strength to keep the sentiments with which you have inspired me a secret in my own heart; but—” He rose, and with a gesture which was not devoid of grace, and in a full ringing voice he added: “But you are no longer the possessor of millions; and so I may tell you, Mademoiselle Marguerite, that I love you. Will you be my wife?”

The poor girl was obliged to exercise all her powers of self-control to restrain an exclamation of dismay. It was indeed more than dismay; she was absolutely terrified by the Marquis de Valorsay's unexpected declaration, and she could only falter: "Monsieur! monsieur!"

But with an air of winning frankness he continued: "Need I tell you who I am, mademoiselle? No; that is unnecessary. The fact that my suit was approved of by M. de Chalusse is the best recommendation I can offer you. The pure and stainless name I bear is one of the proudest in France; and though my fortune may have been somewhat impaired by youthful folly, it is still more than sufficient to maintain an establishment in keeping with my rank."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was still powerless to reply. Her presence of mind had entirely deserted her, and her tongue seemed to cleave to her palate. She glanced entreatingly at the old magistrate, as if imploring his intervention, but he was so absorbed in contemplating his wonderful ring, that one might have imagined he was oblivious of all that was going on around him.

"I am aware that I have so far not been fortunate enough to please you, mademoiselle," continued the marquis. "M. de Chalusse did not conceal it from me—I remember, alas! that I advocated in your presence a number of stupid theories, which must have given you a very poor opinion of me. But you will forgive me, I trust. My ideas have entirely changed since I have learned to understand and appreciate your vigorous intellect and nobility of soul. I thoughtlessly spoke to you in the language which is usually addressed to young ladies of our rank of life—frivolous beauties, who are spoiled by vanity and luxury, and who look upon marriage only as a means of enfranchisement."

His words were disjointed as if emotion choked his utterance. At times, it seemed as if he could scarcely command his feelings; and then his voice became so faint and trembling that it was scarcely intelligible.

However, by allowing him to continue, by listening to what he said, Mademoiselle Marguerite was encouraging him, even more—virtually binding herself. She understood that this was the case, and making a

powerful effort, she interrupted him, saying: “I assure you, Monsieur le Marquis, that I am deeply touched—and grateful—but I am no longer free.”

“Pray, mademoiselle, pray do not reply to-day. Grant me a little time to overcome your prejudices.”

She shook her head, and in a firmer voice, replied: “I have no prejudices; but for some time past already, my future has been decided, irrevocably decided.”

He seemed thunderstruck, and his manner apparently indicated that the possibility of a repulse had never entered his mind. His eyes wandered restlessly from Mademoiselle Marguerite to the countenance of the old magistrate, who remained as impassive as a sphinx, and at last they lighted on a newspaper which was lying on the floor at the young girl’s feet. “Do not deprive me of all hope,” he murmured.

She made no answer, and understanding her silence, he was about to retire when the door suddenly opened and a servant announced: “Monsieur de Fondege.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite touched the magistrate on the shoulder to attract his attention. “This gentleman is M. de Chalusse’s friend whom I sent for this morning.”

At the same moment a man who looked some sixty years of age entered the room. He was very tall, and as straight as the letter I, being arrayed in a long blue frock-coat, while his neck, which was as red and as wrinkled as that of a turkey-cock, was encased in a very high and stiff satin cravat. On seeing his ruddy face, his closely cropped hair, his little eyes twinkling under his bushy eyebrows, and his formidable mustaches a la Victor Emmanuel, you would have immediately exclaimed: “That man is an old soldier!”

A great mistake! M. de Fondege had never been in the service, and it was only in mockery of his somewhat bellicose manners and appearance that some twenty years previously his friends had dubbed him “the General.” However, the appellation had clung to him. The nickname had been changed to a title, and now M. de Fondege was known as “the

General" everywhere. He was invited and announced as "the General." Many people believed that he had really been one, and perhaps he fancied so himself, for he had long been in the habit of inscribing "General A. de Fondege" on his visiting cards. The nickname had had a decisive influence on his life. He had endeavored to show himself worthy of it, and the manners he had at first assumed, eventually became natural ones. He seemed to be the conventional old soldier—irascible and jovial at the same time; brusk and kind; at once frank, sensible and brutal; as simple as a child, and yet as true as steel. He swore the most tremendous oaths in a deep bass voice, and whenever he talked his arms revolved like the sails of a windmill. However, Madame de Fondege, who was a very angular lady, with a sharp nose and very thin lips, assured people that her husband was not so terrible as he appeared. He was not considered very shrewd, and he pretended to have an intense dislike for business matters. No one knew anything precise about his fortune, but he had a great many friends who invited him to dinner, and they all declared that he was in very comfortable circumstances.

On entering the study this worthy man did not pay the slightest attention to the Marquis de Valorsay, although they were intimate friends. He walked straight up to Mademoiselle Marguerite, caught her in his long arms, and pressed her to his heart, brushing her face with his huge mustaches as he pretended to kiss her. "Courage, my dear," he growled; "courage. Don't give way. Follow my example. Look at me!" So saying he stepped back, and it was really amusing to see the extraordinary effort he made to combine a soldier's stoicism with a friend's sorrow. "You must wonder at my delay, my dear," he resumed, "but it was not my fault. I was at Madame de Rochecote's when I was informed that your messenger was at home waiting for me. I returned, and heard the frightful news. It was a thunderbolt. A friend of thirty years' standing! A thousand thunderclaps! I acted as his second when he fought his first duel. Poor Chalusse! A man as sturdy as an oak, and who ought to have outlived us all. But it is always so; the best soldiers always file by first at dress-parade."

The Marquis de Valorsay had beaten a retreat, the magistrate was hidden in a dark corner, and Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was accustomed to the General's manner, remained silent, being well aware that there was no chance of putting in a word as long as he had possession of the floor. "Fortunately, poor Chalusse was a prudent man," continued M. de Fondege. "He loved you devotedly, my dear, as his testamentary provisions must have shown you."

"His provisions?"

"Yes, most certainly. Surely you don't mean to try and conceal anything from one who knows all. Ah! you will be one of the greatest catches in Europe, and you will have plenty of suitors."

Mademoiselle Marguerite sadly shook her head. "You are mistaken, General; the count left no will, and has made no provision whatever for me."

M. de Fondege trembled, turned a trifle pale, and in a faltering voice, exclaimed: "What! You tell me that? Chalusse! A thousand thunderclaps! It isn't possible."

"The count was stricken with apoplexy in a cab. He went out about five o'clock, on foot, and a little before seven he was brought home unconscious. Where he had been we don't know."

"You don't know? you don't know?"

"Alas! no; and he was only able to utter a few incoherent words before he died." Thereupon the poor girl began a brief account of what had taken place during the last four-and-twenty hours. Had she been less absorbed in her narrative she would have noticed that the General was not listening to her. He was sitting at the count's desk and was toying with the letters which Madame Leon had brought into the room a short time previously. One of them especially seemed to attract his attention, to exercise a sort of fascination over him as it were. He looked at it with hungry eyes, and whenever he touched it, his hand trembled, or involuntarily clinched. His face, moreover, had become livid; his eyes twitched nervously; he seemed to have a difficulty in breathing, and big drops of perspiration trickled down his forehead. If the magistrate were

able to see the General's face, he must certainly have been of opinion that a terrible conflict was raging in his mind. The struggle lasted indeed for fully five minutes, and then suddenly, certain that no one saw him, he caught up the letter in question and slipped it into his pocket.

Poor Marguerite was now finishing her story: "You see, monsieur, that, far from being an heiress, as you suppose, I am homeless and penniless," she said.

The General had risen from his chair, and was striding up and down the room with every token of intense agitation. "It's true," he said apparently unconscious of his words. "She's ruined—lost—the misfortune is complete!" Then, suddenly pausing with folded arms in front of Mademoiselle Marguerite: "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"God will not forsake me, General," she replied.

He turned on his heel and resumed his promenade, wildly gesticulating and indulging in a furious monologue which was certainly not very easy to follow. "Frightful! terrible!" he growled. "The daughter of an old comrade—zounds!—of a friend of thirty years' standing—to be left in such a plight! Never, a thousand thunderclaps!—never! Poor child!—a heart of gold, and as pretty as an angel! This horrible Paris would devour her at a single mouthful! It would be a crime—an abomination! It sha'n't be!—the old veterans are here, firm as rocks!"

Thereupon, approaching the poor girl again, he exclaimed in a coarse but seemingly feeling voice: "Mademoiselle Marguerite."

"General?"

"You are acquainted with my son, Gustave Fondege, are you not?"

"I think I have heard you speak of him to M. de Chalusse several times."

The General tugged furiously at his mustaches as was his wont whenever he was perplexed or embarrassed. "My son," he resumed, "is twenty-seven. He's now a lieutenant of hussars, and will soon be promoted to the rank of captain. He's a handsome fellow, sure to make

his way in the world, for he's not wanting in spirit. As I never attempt to hide the truth, I must confess that he's a trifle dissipated; but his heart is all right, and a charming little wife would soon turn him from the error of his ways, and he'd become the pearl of husbands." He paused, passed his forefinger three or four times between his collar and his neck, and then, in a half-strangled voice, he added: "Mademoiselle Marguerite, I have the honor to ask for your hand in marriage on behalf of Lieutenant Gustave de Fondege, my son."

There was a dangerous gleam of anger in Mademoiselle Marguerite's eyes, as she coldly replied: "I am honored by your request, monsieur; but my future is already decided."

Some seconds elapsed before M. de Fondege could recover his powers of speech. "This is a piece of foolishness," he faltered, at last with singular agitation. "Let me hope that you will reconsider the matter. And if Gustave doesn't please you, we will find some one better. But under no circumstances will Chalusse's old comrade ever desert you. I shall send Madame de Fondege to see you this evening. She's a good woman and you will understand each other. Come, answer me, what do you say to it?"

His persistence irritated the poor girl beyond endurance, and to put an end to the painful scene, she at last asked: "Would you not like to look—for the last time—at M. de Chalusse?"

"Ah! yes, certainly—an old friend of thirty years' standing." So saying he advanced toward the door leading into the death-room, but on reaching the threshold, he cried in sudden terror: "Oh! no, no, I could not." And with these words he withdrew or rather he fled from the room down the stairs.

As long as the General had been there, the magistrate had given no sign of life. But seated beyond the circle of light cast by the lamps, he had remained an attentive spectator of the scene, and now that he found himself once more alone with Mademoiselle Marguerite he came forward, and leaning against the mantelpiece and looking her full in the face he exclaimed: "Well, my child?"

The girl trembled like a culprit awaiting sentence of death, and it was in a hollow voice that she replied: “I understood—”

“What?” insisted the pitiless magistrate.

She raised her beautiful eyes, in which angry tears were still glittering, and then answered in a voice which quivered with suppressed passion, “I have fathomed the infamy of those two men who have just left the house. I understood the insult their apparent generosity conceals. They had questioned the servants, and had ascertained that two millions were missing. Ah, the scoundrels! They believe that I have stolen those millions; and they came to ask me to share the ill-gotten wealth with them. What an insult! and to think that I am powerless to avenge it! Ah! the servants’ suspicions were nothing in comparison with this. At least, they did not ask for a share of the booty as the price of their silence!”

The magistrate shook his head as if this explanation scarcely satisfied him. “There is something else, there is certainly something else,” he repeated. But the doors were still open, so he closed them carefully, and then returned to the girl he was so desirous of advising. “I wish to tell you,” he said, “that you have mistaken the motives which induced these gentlemen to ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Do you believe, then, that you have fathomed them?”

“I could almost swear that I had. Didn’t you remark a great difference in their manner? Didn’t one of them, the marquis, behave with all the calmness and composure which are the result of reflection and calculation? The other, on the contrary, acted most precipitately, as if he had suddenly come to a determination, and formed a plan on the impulse of the moment.”

Mademoiselle Marguerite reflected.

“That’s true,” she said, “that’s indeed true. Now I recollect the difference.”

“And this is my explanation of it,” resumed the magistrate. “‘The Marquis de Valorsay,’ I said to myself, ‘must have proofs in his possession that Mademoiselle Marguerite is the count’s daughter—

written and conclusive proofs, that is certain—probably a voluntary admission of the fact from the father. Who can prove that M. de Valorsay does not possess this acknowledgment? In fact, he must possess it. He hinted it himself.' Accordingly on hearing of the count's sudden death, he said to himself, 'If Marguerite was my wife, and if I could prove her to be M. de Chalusse's daughter, I should obtain several millions.' Whereupon he consulted his legal adviser who assured him that it would be the best course he could pursue; and so he came here. You repulsed him, but he will soon make another assault, you may rest assured of that. And some day or other he will come to you and say, 'Whether we marry or not, let us divide.'"

Mademoiselle Marguerite was amazed. The magistrate's words seemed to dispel the mist which had hitherto hidden the truth from view. "Yes," she exclaimed, "yes, you are right, monsieur."

He was silent for a moment, and then he resumed: "I understand M. de Fondege's motive less clearly; but still I have some clue. He had not questioned the servants. That is evident from the fact that on his arrival here he believed you to be the sole legatee. He was also aware that M. de Chalusse had taken certain precautions we are ignorant of, but which he is no doubt fully acquainted with. What you told him about your poverty amazed him, and he immediately evinced a desire to atone for the count's neglect with as much eagerness as if he were the cause of this negligence himself. And, indeed, judging by the agitation he displayed when he was imploring you to become his son's wife, one might almost imagine that the sight of your misery awakened a remorse which he was endeavoring to quiet. Now, draw your own conclusions."

The wretched girl looked questioningly at the magistrate as if she hesitated to trust the thoughts which his words had awakened in her mind. "Then you think, monsieur," she said, with evident reluctance, "you think, you suppose, that the General is acquainted with the whereabouts of the missing millions?"

“Quite correct,” answered the magistrate, and then as if he feared that he had gone too far, he added: “but draw your own conclusions respecting the matter. You have the whole night before you. We will talk it over again to-morrow, and if I can be of service to you in any way, I shall be only too glad.”

“But, monsieur—”

“Oh—to-morrow, to-morrow—I must go to dinner now; besides, my clerk must be getting terribly impatient.”

The clerk was, indeed, out of temper. Not that he had finished taking an inventory of the appurtenances of this immense house, but because he considered that he had done quite enough work for one day. And yet his discontent was sensibly diminished when he calculated the amount he would receive for his pains. During the nine years he had held this office he had never made such an extensive inventory before. He seemed somewhat dazzled, and as he followed his superior out of the house, he remarked: “Do you know, monsieur, that as nearly as I can discover the deceased’s fortune must amount to more than twenty millions—an income of a million a year! And to think that the poor young lady shouldn’t have a penny of it. I suspect she’s crying her eyes out.”

But the clerk was mistaken. Mademoiselle Marguerite was then questioning M. Casimir respecting the arrangements which he had made for the funeral, and when this sad duty was concluded, she consented to take a little food standing in front of the sideboard in the dining-room. Then she went to kneel in the count’s room, where four members of the parochial clergy were reciting the prayers for the dead.

She was so exhausted with fatigue that she could scarcely speak, and her eyelids were heavy with sleep. But she had another task to fulfil, a task which she deemed a sacred duty. She sent a servant for a cab, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and left the house accompanied by Madame Leon. The cabman drove as fast as possible to the house where Pascal and his mother resided in the Rue d’Ulm; but on arriving there, the front

door was found to be closed, and the light in the vestibule was extinguished. Marguerite was obliged to ring five or six times before the concierge made his appearance.

"I wish to see Monsieur Ferailleur," she quietly said.

The man glanced at her scornfully, and then replied: "He no longer lives here. The landlord doesn't want any thieves in his house. He's sold his rubbish and started for America, with his old witch of a mother."

So saying he closed the door again, and Marguerite was so overwhelmed by this last and unexpected misfortune, that she could hardly stagger back to the vehicle. "Gone!" she murmured; "gone! without a thought of me! Or does he believe me to be like all the rest? But I will find him again. That man Fortunat, who ascertained addresses for M. de Chalusse, will find Pascal for me."

XIII.

Few people have any idea of the great number of estates which, in default of heirs to claim them, annually revert to the government. The treasury derives large sums from this source every year. And this is easily explained, for nowadays family ties are becoming less and less binding. Brothers cease to meet; their children no longer know each other; and the members of the second generation are as perfect strangers as though they were not united by a bond of consanguinity. The young man whom love of adventure lures to a far-off country, and the young girl who marries against her parents' wishes, soon cease to exist for their relatives. No one even inquires what has become of them. Those who remain at home are afraid to ask whether they are prosperous or unfortunate, lest they should be called upon to assist the wanderers. Forgotten themselves, the adventurers in their turn soon forget. If fortune smiles upon them, they are careful not to inform their relatives. Poor—they have been cast off; wealthy—they themselves deny their kindred. Having become rich unaided, they find an egotistical satisfaction in spending their money alone in accordance with their own fancies. Now when a man of this class dies what happens? The servants and people around him profit of his loneliness and isolation, and the justice of the peace is only summoned to affix the seals, after they have removed all the portable property. An inventory is taken, and after a few formalities, as no heirs present themselves, the court declares the inheritance to be in abeyance, and appoints a trustee.

This trustee's duties are very simple. He manages the property and remits the income to the Treasury until a legal judgment declares the estate the property of the country, regardless of any heirs who may present themselves in future.

“If I only had a twentieth part of the money that is lost in this way, my fortune would be made,” exclaimed a shrewd man, some thirty years ago.

The person who spoke was Antoine Vaudore. For six months he secretly nursed the idea, studying it, examining it in all respects, weighing its advantages and disadvantages, and at last he decided that it was a good one. That same year, indeed, assisted by a little capital which he had obtained no one knew how, he created a new, strange, and untried profession to supply a new demand.

Thus Vaudore was the first man who made heir-hunting a profession. As will be generally admitted, it is not a profession that can be successfully followed by a craven. It requires the exercise of unusual shrewdness, untiring activity, extraordinary energy and courage, as well as great tact and varied knowledge. The man who would follow it successfully must possess the boldness of a gambler, the sang-froid of a duelist, the keen perceptive powers and patience of a detective, and the resources and quick wit of the shrewdest attorney.

It is easier to decry the profession than to exercise it. To begin with, the heir-hunter must be posted up with information respecting unclaimed inheritances, and he must have sufficient acquaintance with the legal world to be able to obtain information from the clerks of the different courts, notaries, and so on. When he learns that a man has died without any known heirs, his first care is to ascertain the amount of unclaimed property, to see if it will pay him to take up the case. If he finds that the inheritance is a valuable one, he begins operations without delay. He must first ascertain the deceased’s full name and age. It is easy to procure this information; but it is more difficult to discover the name of the place where the deceased was born, his profession, what countries he lived in, his tastes and mode of life—in a word, everything that constitutes a complete biography.

However, when he has armed himself with the more indispensable facts, our agent opens the campaign with extreme prudence, for it would be ruinous to awake suspicion. It is curious to observe the incomparable

address which the agent displays in his efforts to learn the particulars of the deceased's life, by consulting his friends, his enemies, his debtors, and all who ever knew him, until at last some one is found who says: "Such and such a man—why, he came from our part of the country. I never knew HIM, but I am acquainted with one of his brothers—with one of his uncles—or with one of his nephews."

Very often years of constant research, a large outlay of money, and costly and skilful advertising in all the European journals, are necessary before this result is reached. And it is only when it has been attained that the agent can take time to breathe. But now the chances are greatly in his favor. The worst is over. The portion of his task which depended on chance alone is concluded. The rest is a matter of skill, tact, and shrewdness. The detective must give place to the crafty lawyer. The agent must confer with this heir, who has been discovered at the cost of so much time and trouble and induce him to bestow a portion of this prospective wealth on the person who is able to establish his claim. There must be an agreement in writing clearly stating what proportion—a tenth, a third, or a half—the agent will be entitled to. The negotiation is a very delicate and difficult one, requiring prodigious presence of mind, and an amount of duplicity which would make the most astute diplomatist turn pale with envy. Occasionally, the heir suspects the truth, sneers at the proposition, and hurries off to claim the whole of the inheritance that belongs to him. The agent may then bid his hopes farewell. He has worked and spent money for nothing.

However, such a misfortune is of rare occurrence. On hearing of the unexpected good fortune that has befallen him, the heir is generally unsuspicious, and willingly promises to pay the amount demanded of him. A contract is drawn up and signed; and then, but only then, does the agent take his client into his confidence. "You are the relative of such a person, are you not?" "Yes." "Very well. He is dead, and you are his heir. Thank Providence, and make haste to claim your money."

As a rule, the heir loyally fulfils his obligation. But sometimes it happens that, when he has obtained undisputed possession of the property, he declares that he has been swindled, and refuses to fulfil his part of the contract. Then the case must go to the courts. It is true, however, that the judgment of the tribunals generally recalls the refractory client to a sense of gratitude and humility.

Now our friend M. Isidore Fortunat was a hunter of missing heirs. Undoubtedly he often engaged in other business which was a trifle less respectable; but heir-hunting was one of the best and most substantial sources of his income. So we can readily understand why he so quickly left off lamenting that forty thousand francs lent to the Marquis de Valorsay.

Changing his tactics, he said to himself that, even if he had lost this amount through M. de Chalusse's sudden death, it was much less than he might obtain if he succeeded in discovering the unknown heirs to so many millions. And he had some reason to hope that he would be able to do so. Having been employed by M. de Chalusse when the latter was seeking Mademoiselle Marguerite, M. Fortunat had gained some valuable information respecting his client, and the additional particulars which he had obtained from Madame Vantrasson elated him to such an extent that more than once he exclaimed: "Ah, well! it is, perhaps, a blessing in disguise, after all."

Still, M. Isidore Fortunat slept but little after his stormy interview with the Marquis de Valorsay. A loss of forty thousand francs is not likely to impart a roseate hue to one's dreams—and M. Fortunat prized his money as if it had been the very marrow of his bones. By way of consolation, he assured himself that he would not merely regain the sum, but triple it; and yet this encouragement did not entirely restore his peace of mind. The gain was only a possibility, and the loss was a certainty. So he twisted, and turned, and tossed on his bed as if it had been a hot gridiron, exhausting himself in surmises, and preparing his mind for the difficulties which he would be obliged to overcome.

His plan was a simple one, but its execution was fraught with difficulties. “I must discover M. de Chalusse’s sister, if she is still living—I must discover her children, if she is dead,” he said to himself. It was easy to SAY this; but how was he to do it? How could he hope to find this unfortunate girl, who had abandoned her home thirty years previously, to fly, no one knew where, or with whom? How was he to gain any idea of the life she had lived, or the fate that had befallen her? At what point on the social scale, and in what country, should he begin his investigations? These daughters of noble houses, who desert the paternal roof in a moment of madness, generally die most miserably after a wretched life. The girl of the lower classes is armed against misfortune, and has been trained for the conflict. She can measure and calculate the force of her fall, and regulate and control it to a certain extent. But the others cannot. They have never known privation and hardship, and are, therefore, defenceless. And for the very reason that they have been hurled from a great height, they often fall down into the lowest depths of infamy.

“If morning would only come,” sighed M. Isidore Fortunat, as he tossed restlessly to and fro. “As soon as morning comes I will set to work!”

But just before daybreak he fell asleep; and at nine o’clock he was still slumbering so soundly that Madame Dodelin, his housekeeper, had considerable difficulty in waking him. “Your clerks have come,” she exclaimed, shaking him vigorously; “and two clients are waiting for you in the reception-room.”

He sprang up, hastily dressed himself, and went into his office. It cost him no little effort to receive his visitors that morning; but it would have been folly to neglect all his other business for the uncertain Chalusse affair. The first client who entered was a man still young, of common, even vulgar appearance. Not being acquainted with M. Fortunat, he deemed it proper to introduce himself without delay. “My name is Leplaintre, and I am a coal merchant,” said he. “I was recommended to call on you by my friend Bouscat, who was formerly in the wine trade.”

M. Fortunat bowed. “Pray be seated,” was his reply. “I remember your friend very well. If I am not mistaken I gave him some advice with reference to his third failure.”

“Precisely; and it is because I find myself in the same fix as Bouscat that I have called on you. Business is very bad, and I have notes to a large amount overdue, so that—”

“You will be obliged to go into bankruptcy.”

“Alas! I fear so.”

M. Fortunat already knew what his client desired, but it was against his principles to meet these propositions more than half way. “Will you state your case?” said he.

The coal merchant blushed. It was hard to confess the truth; but the effort had to be made. “This is my case,” he replied, at last. “Among my creditors I have several enemies, who will refuse me a release. They would like to deprive me of everything I possess. And in that case, what would become of me? Is it right that I should be compelled to starve?”

“It is a bad outlook.”

“It is, indeed, monsieur; and for this reason, I desire—if possible, if I can do so without danger—for I am an honest man, monsieur—I wish to retain a little property—secretly, of course, not for myself, by any means, but I have a young wife and——”

M. Fortunat took compassion on the man’s embarrassment. “In short,” he interrupted, “you wish to conceal a part of your capital from your creditors?”

On hearing this precise and formal statement of his honorable intentions, the coal-merchant trembled. His feelings of integrity would not have been alarmed by a periphrasis, but this plain speaking shocked him. “Oh, monsieur!” he protested, “I would rather blow my brains out than defraud my creditors of a single penny that was rightfully theirs. What I am doing is for their interest, you understand. I shall begin business again under my wife’s name; and if I succeed, they shall be paid

—yes, monsieur, every sou, with interest. Ah! if I had only myself to think of, it would be quite different; but I have two children, two little girls, so that——”

“Very well,” replied M. Fortunat. “I should suggest to you the same expedient as I suggested to your friend Bouscat. But you must gather a little ready money together before going into bankruptcy.”

“I can do that by secretly disposing of a part of my stock, so——”

“In that case, you are saved. Sell it and put the money beyond your creditors’ reach.”

The worthy merchant scratched his ear in evident perplexity. “Excuse me,” said he. “I had thought of this plan; but it seemed to me—dishonorable—and—also very dangerous. How could I explain this decrease in my stock? My creditors hate me. If they suspected anything, they would accuse me of fraud, and perhaps throw me into prison; and then——”

M. Fortunat shrugged his shoulders. “When I give advice,” he roughly replied, “I furnish the means of following it without danger. Listen to me attentively. Let us suppose, for a moment, that some time ago you purchased, at a very high figure, a quantity of stocks and shares, which are to-day almost worthless, could not this unfortunate investment account for the absence of the sum which you wish to set aside? Your creditors would be obliged to value these securities, not at their present, but at their former value.”

“Evidently; but, unfortunately, I do not possess any such securities.”

“You can purchase them.”

The coal-merchant opened his eyes in astonishment. “Excuse me,” he muttered, “I don’t exactly understand you.”

He did not understand in the least; but M. Fortunat enlightened him by opening his safe, and displaying an enormous bundle of stocks and shares which had flooded the country a few years previously, and ruined a great many poor, ignorant fools which were hungering for wealth; among them were shares in the Tifila Mining Company, the Berchem

Coal Mines, the Greenland Fisheries, the Mutual Trust and Loan Association, and so on. There had been a time when each of these securities would have fetched five hundred or a thousand francs at the Bourse, but now they were not worth the paper on which they were printed.

"Let us suppose, my dear sir," resumed M. Fortunat, "that you had a drawer full of these securities——"

But the other did not allow him to finish. "I see," he exclaimed; "I see —I can sell my stock, and put the proceeds in my pocket with perfect safety. There is enough to represent my capital a thousand times over."

And, in a paroxysm of delight, he added:

"Give me enough of these shares to represent a capital of one hundred and twenty thousand francs; and give me some of each kind. I should like my creditors to have a variety."

Thereupon M. Fortunat counted out a pile of these worthless securities as carefully as if he had been handling bank-notes; and his client at the same time drew out his pocketbook.

"How much do I owe you?" he inquired.

"Three thousand francs."

The honest merchant bounded from his chair. "Three thousand francs!" he repeated. "You must be jesting. That trash is not worth a louis."

"I would not even give five francs for it," rejoined M. Fortunat, coldly; "but it is true that I don't desire to purchase these shares in my creditors' interest. With you it is quite a different matter—this trash, as you very justly call it, will save you at least a hundred thousand francs. I ask only three per cent., which is certainly not dear. Still, you know, I don't force any one to purchase them." And, in a terribly significant tone, he added: "You can undoubtedly buy similar securities on better terms; but take care you don't arouse your creditors' suspicions by applying elsewhere."

“He would betray me, the scoundrel!” thought the merchant. And, realizing that he had fallen into a trap, “Here are three thousand francs,” he sighed; “but at least, my dear sir, give me good measure, and throw in a few thousand francs more.”

The coal-merchant smiled the ghastly smile of a man who sees no way of escape from imposition, and has, therefore, resolved to submit with the best grace possible. But M. Fortunat’s gravity did not relax. He gave what he had promised—neither more nor less—in exchange for the bank-notes, and even gravely exclaimed: “See if the amount is correct.”

His client pocketed the shares without counting them: but before leaving the room he made his estimable adviser promise to assist him at the decisive moment, and help him to prepare one of those clear financial statements which make creditors say: “This is an honest man who has been extremely unfortunate.”

M. Fortunat was admirably fitted to render this little service; for he devoted such part of his time as was not spent in hunting for missing heirs to difficult liquidations, and he had indeed made bankruptcy a specialty in which he was without a rival. The business was a remunerative one, thanks to the expedient he had revealed to the coal-merchant—an expedient which is common enough nowadays, but of which he might almost be called the inventor. It consisted in compelling the persons who asked for his advice to purchase worthless shares at whatever price he chose to set upon them, and they were forced to submit, under penalty of denunciation and exposure.

The client who followed the coal-merchant proved to be a simple creature, who had called to ask for some advice respecting a slight difficulty between himself and his landlord. M. Fortunat speedily disposed of him, and then, opening the door leading into the outer office, he called: “Cashier!”

A shabbily-dressed man, some thirty-five years of age, at once entered the private sanctum, carrying a money-bag in one hand and a ledger in the other.

“How many debtors were visited yesterday?” inquired M. Fortunat.

“Two hundred and thirty-seven.”

“What was the amount collected?”

“Eighty-nine francs.”

M. Isidore Fortunat’s grimace was expressive of satisfaction. “Not bad,” said he, “not at all bad.”

Then a singular performance began. M. Fortunat called over the names of his debtors, one by one, and the cashier answered each name by reading a memorandum written against it on the margin of a list he held. “Such a one,” said the agent, “and such a one—and such—–” Whereupon the cashier replied: “Has paid two francs—was not at home —paid twenty sous—would not pay anything.”

How did it happen that M. Fortunat had so many debtors? This question can be easily answered. In settling bankrupts’ estates it was easy for him to purchase a large number of debts which were considered worthless, at a trifling cost, and he reaped a bountiful harvest on a field which would have yielded nothing to another person. It was not because he was rigorous in his demands; he conquered by patience, gentleness, and politeness, but also by unwearying perseverance and tenacity. When he decided that a debtor was to pay him a certain sum, it was paid. He never relaxed in his efforts. Every other day some one was sent to visit the debtor, to follow him, and harass him; he was surrounded by M. Fortunat’s agents; they pursued him to his office, shop, or cafe—everywhere, continually, incessantly—and always with the most perfect urbanity. At last even the most determined succumbed; to escape this frightful persecution, they, somehow or other, found the money to satisfy M. Fortunat’s claim. Besides Victor Chupin, he had five other agents whose business it was to visit these poor wretches. A list was assigned to each man every morning; and when evening came, he made his report to the cashier, who in turn reported to his employer. This branch of industry added considerably to the profits of M. Fortunat’s other business, and was the third and last string to his bow.

The report proceeded as usual, but it was quite evident that M. Fortunat's thoughts were elsewhere. He paused each moment to listen eagerly for the slightest sound outside, for before receiving the coal-merchant he had told Victor Chupin to run to the Rue de Courcelles and ask M. Casimir for news of the Count de Chalusse. He had done this more than an hour before; and Victor Chupin, who was usually so prompt, had not yet made his appearance.

At last, however, he returned, whereupon M. Fortunat dismissed the cashier, and addressed his messenger: "Well?" he asked.

"He is no longer living. They think he died without a will, and that the pretty young lady will be turned out of the house."

This information agreed so perfectly with M. Fortunat's presentiments that he did not even wince, but calmly asked: "Will Casimir keep his appointment?"

"He told me that he would endeavor to come, and I'd wager a hundred to one that he will be there; he would travel ten leagues to put something good into his stomach."

M. Fortunat's opinion coincided with Chupin's. "Very well," said he. "Only you were a long time on the road, Victor."

"That's true, m'sieur; but I had a little matter of my own to attend to—a matter of a hundred francs, if you please."

M. Fortunat knit his brows angrily. "It's only right to attend to business," said he; "but you think too much of money, Victor—altogether too much. You are insatiable."

The young man proudly lifted his head, and with an air of importance, replied: "I have so many responsibilities——"

"Responsibilities!—you?"

"Yes, indeed, m'sieur. And why not? My poor, good mother hasn't been able to work for a year, and who would care for her if I didn't? Certainly not my father, the good-for-nothing scamp, who squandered all the Duke de Sairmeuse's money without giving us a sou of it. Besides, I'm like other men, I'm anxious to be rich, and enjoy myself. I should

like to ride in my carriage like other people do. And whenever a gamin, such as I was once, opened the door for ME, I should put a five-franc piece in his hand——”

He was interrupted by Madame Dodelin, the worthy housekeeper, who rushed into the room without knocking, in a terrible state of excitement. “Monsieur!” she exclaimed, in the same tone as if she would have called “Fire!” “here is Monsieur de Valorsay.”

M. Fortunat sprang up and turned extremely pale. “What to the devil brings him here?” he anxiously stammered. “Tell him that I’ve gone out —tell him—”

But it was useless, for the marquis at that very moment entered the room, and the agent could only dismiss his housekeeper and Chupin.

M. de Valorsay seemed to be very angry, and it looked as if he meant to give vent to his passion. Indeed, as soon as he was alone with M. Fortunat, he began: “So this is the way you betray your friends, Master Twenty-per-Cent! Why did you deceive me last night about the ten thousand francs you had promised me? Why didn’t you tell me the truth? You knew of the misfortune that had befallen M. de Chalusse. I heard of it first scarcely an hour ago through a letter from Madame Leon.”

M. Fortunat hesitated somewhat. He was a quiet man, opposed to violence of any kind; and it seemed to him that M. de Valorsay was twisting and turning his cane in a most ominous manner. “I must confess, Monsieur le Marquis,” he at last replied, “that I had not the courage to tell you of the dreadful misfortune which had befallen us.”

“How—US?”

“Certainly. If you lose the hope of several millions, I also lose the amount I advanced to you, forty thousand francs—my entire fortune. And yet, you see that I don’t complain. Do as I do—confess that the game is lost.”

The marquis was listening with an air of suppressed wrath; his face was crimson, there was a dark frown on his brow, and his hands were clinched. He was apparently furious with passion, but in reality he was perfectly self-possessed. The best proof that can be given of his coolness is that he was carefully studying M. Fortunat's face, and trying to discover the agent's real intentions under his meaningless words. He had expected to find "his dear extortioner" exasperated by his loss, cursing and swearing, and demanding his money—but not at all. He found him more gentle and calm, colder and more reserved than ever; brimful of resignation indeed, and preaching submission to the inevitable. "What can this mean?" he thought, with an anxious heart. "What mischief is the scoundrel plotting now? I'd wager a thousand to one that he's forging some thunderbolt to crush me." And, in a haughty tone, he said aloud:

"In a word, you desert me."

With a deprecatory gesture, M. Fortunat exclaimed: "I desert you, Monsieur le Marquis! What have I done that you should think so ill of me? Alas! circumstances are the only traitors. I shouldn't like to deprive you of the courage you so much need, but, honestly, it would be folly to struggle against destiny. How can you hope to succeed in your plans? Have you not resorted to every possible expedient to prolong your apparently brilliant existence until the present time? Are you not at such a point that you must marry Mademoiselle Marguerite in a month's time, or perish? And now the count's millions are lost! If I might be allowed to give you some advice, I should say, 'The shipwreck is inevitable; think only of saving yourself.' By tact and shrewdness, you might yet save something from your creditors. Compromise with them. And if you need my services, here I am. Go to Nice, and give me a power of attorney to act for you. From the debris of your fortune, I will undertake to guarantee you a competence which would satisfy many an ambitious man."

The marquis laughed sneeringly. “Excellent!” he exclaimed. “You would rid yourself of me and recover your forty thousand francs at the same time. A very clever arrangement.”

M. Fortunat realized that his client understood him; but what did it matter? “I assure you——” he began.

But the marquis silenced him with a contemptuous gesture. “Let us stop this nonsense,” said he. “We understand each other better than that. I have never made any attempt to deceive you, nor have I ever supposed that I had succeeded in doing so, and pray do me the honor to consider me as shrewd as yourself.” And still refusing to listen to the agent, he continued: “If I have come to you, it is only because the case is not so desperate as you suppose. I still hold some valuable cards which you are ignorant of. In your opinion, and every one else’s, Mademoiselle Marguerite is ruined. But I know that she is still worth three millions, at the very least.”

“Mademoiselle Marguerite?”

“Yes, Monsieur Twenty-per-Cent. Let her become my wife, and the very next day I will place her in possession of an income of a hundred and fifty thousand francs. But she must marry me first; and this scornful maiden will not grant me her hand unless I can convince her of my love and disinterestedness.”

“But your rival?”

M. de Valorsay gave a nervous start, but quickly controlled himself. “He no longer exists. Read this day’s Figaro, and you will be edified. I have no rival now. If I can only conceal my financial embarrassment a little longer, she is mine. A friendless and homeless girl cannot defend herself long in Paris—especially when she has an adviser like Madame Leon. Oh! I shall win her! I shall have her!—she is a necessity to me. Now you can judge if it would be wise on your part to deprive me of your assistance. Would you like to know what I want? Simply this—the means to sustain me two or three months longer—some thirty thousand francs. You can procure the money—will you? It would make, in all, seventy thousand francs that I should owe you, and I will promise to pay you two

hundred and fifty thousand if I succeed—and I shall succeed! Such profit is worth some risk. Reflect, and decide. But no more subterfuges, if you please. Let your answer be plain yes or no."

Without a second's hesitation, M. Fortunat replied, "No."

The flush on the marquis's face deepened, and his voice became a trifle harsher; but that was all. "Confess, then, that you have resolved to ruin me," he said. "You refuse before you have heard me to the end. Wait, at least, until I have told you my plans, and shown you the solid foundation which my hopes rest upon."

But M. Fortunat had resolved to listen to nothing. He wished for no explanations, so distrustful was he of himself—so much did he fear that his adventurous nature would urge him to incur further risk. He was positively afraid of the Marquis de Valorsay's eloquence; besides, he knew well enough that the person who consents to listen is at least half convinced. "Tell me nothing, monsieur," he hastily answered; "it would be useless. I haven't the money. If I had given you ten thousand francs last night, I should have been compelled to borrow them of M. Prosper Bertomy. And even if I had the money, I should still say 'Impossible.' Every man has his system—his theory, you know. Mine is, never to run after my money. With me, whatever I may lose, I regard it as finally lost; I think no more about it, and turn to something else. So your forty thousand francs have already been entered on my profit and loss account. And yet it would be easy enough for you to repay me, if you would follow my advice and go quietly into bankruptcy."

"Never!" interrupted M. de Valorsay; "never! I do not wish to temporize," he continued. "I will save all, or save nothing. If you refuse me your help, I shall apply elsewhere. I will never give my good friends, who detest me, and whom I cordially hate in return, the delicious joy of seeing the Marquis de Valorsay fall step by step from the high position he has occupied. I will never truckle to the men whom I have eclipsed for fifteen years. No, never! I would rather die, or even commit the greatest crime!"

He suddenly checked himself, a trifle astonished, perhaps, by his own plain-speaking; and, for a moment, he and M. Fortunat looked into each other's eyes, striving to divine their respective secret thoughts.

The marquis was the first to speak. "And so," said he, in a tone which he strove to make persuasive, but which was threatening instead, "it is settled—your decision is final?"

"Final."

"You will not even condescend to listen to my explanation?"

"It would be a loss of time."

On receiving this cruel reply, M. de Valorsay struck the desk such a formidable blow with his clenched fist that several bundles of papers fell to the floor. His anger was not feigned now. "What are you plotting, then?" he exclaimed; "and what do you intend to do? What is your object in betraying me? Take care! It is my life that I am going to defend, and as truly as there is a God in heaven, I shall defend it well. A man who is determined to blow his brains out if he is defeated, is a terribly dangerous adversary. Woe to you, if I ever find you standing between me and the Count de Chalusse's millions!"

Every drop of blood had fled from M. Fortunat's face, still his mien was composed and dignified. "You do wrong to threaten me," said he. "I don't fear you in the least. If I were your enemy, I should bring suit against you for the forty thousand francs you owe me. I should not obtain my money, of course, but I could shatter the tottering edifice of your fortune by a single blow. Besides, you forget that I possess a copy of our agreement, signed by your own hand, and that I have only to show it to Mademoiselle Marguerite to give her a just opinion of your disinterestedness. Let us sever our connection now, monsieur, and each go his own way without reference to the other. If you should succeed you will repay me."

Victory perched upon the agent's banner, and it was with a feeling of pride that he saw his noble client depart, white and speechless with rage. "What a rascal that marquis is," he muttered. "I would certainly warn Mademoiselle Marguerite, poor girl, if I were not so much afraid of him."

XIV.

M. Casimir, the deceased Count de Chalusse's valet, was neither better nor worse than most of his fellows. Old men tell us that there formerly existed a race of faithful servants, who considered themselves a part of the family that employed them, and who unhesitatingly embraced its interests and its ideas. At the same time their masters requited their devotion by efficacious protection and provision for the future. But such masters and such servants are nowadays only found in the old melodramas performed at the Ambigu, in "The Emigre," for instance, or in "The Last of the Chateauvieux." At present servants wander from one house to another, looking on their abode as a mere inn where they may find shelter till they are disposed for another journey. And families receive them as transient, and not unfrequently as dangerous, guests, whom it is always wise to treat with distrust. The key of the wine-cellar is not confided to these unreliable inmates; they are intrusted with the charge of little else than the children—a practice which is often productive of terrible results.

M. Casimir was no doubt honest, in the strict sense of the word. He would have scorned to rob his master of a ten-sous piece; and yet he would not have hesitated in the least to defraud him of a hundred francs, if an opportunity had presented itself. Vain and rapacious in disposition, he consoled himself by refusing to obey any one save his employer, by envying him with his whole heart, and by cursing fate for not having made him the Count de Chalusse instead of the Count de Chalusse's servant. As he received high wages, he served passably well; but he employed the best part of his energy in watching the count. He scented some great family secret in the household, and he felt angry and humiliated that this secret had not been intrusted to his discretion. And if he had discovered nothing, it was because M. de Chalusse had been caution personified, as Madame Leon had declared.

Thus it happened that when M. Casimir saw Mademoiselle Marguerite and the count searching in the garden for the fragments of a letter destroyed in a paroxysm of rage which he had personally witnessed, his natural curiosity was heightened to such a degree as to become unendurable. He would have given a month's wages, and something over, to have known the contents of that letter, the fragments of which were being so carefully collected by the count. And when he heard M. de Chalusse tell Mademoiselle Marguerite that the most important part of the letter was still lacking, and saw his master relinquish his fruitless search, the worthy valet vowed that he would be more skilful or more fortunate than his master; and after diligent effort, he actually succeeded in recovering five tiny scraps of paper, which had been blown into the shrubbery.

They were covered with delicate handwriting, a lady's unquestionably; but he was utterly unable to extract the slightest meaning from them. Nevertheless, he preserved them with jealous care, and was careful not to say that he had found them. The incoherent words which he had deciphered on these scraps of paper mixed strangely in his brain, and he grew more and more anxious to learn what connection there was between this letter and the count's attack. This explains his extreme readiness to search the count's clothes when Mademoiselle Marguerite told him to look for the key of the escritoire. And fortune favored him, for he not only found the key, but he also discovered the torn fragments of the letter, and having crumpled them up in the palm of his hand, he contrived to slip them into his pocket. Fruitless dexterity! M. Casimir had joined these scraps to the fragments he had found himself, he had read and re-read the epistle, but it told him nothing; or, at least, the information it conveyed was so vague and incomplete that it heightened his curiosity all the more. Once he almost decided to give the letter to Mademoiselle Marguerite, but he resisted this impulse, saying to himself: "Ah, no; I'm not such a fool! It might be of use to her."

And M. Casimir had no desire to be of service to this unhappy girl, who had always treated him with kindness. He hated her, under the pretence that she was not in her proper place, that no one knew who or what she was, and that it was absurd that he—he, Casimir—should be compelled to receive orders from her. The infamous slander which Mademoiselle Marguerite had overheard on her way home from church, "There goes the rich Count de Chalusse's mistress," was M. Casimir's work. He had sworn to be avenged on this haughty creature; and no one can say what he might have attempted, if it had not been for the intervention of the magistrate. Imperatively called to order, M. Casimir consoled himself by the thought that the magistrate had intrusted him with eight thousand francs and the charge of the establishment. Nothing could have pleased him better. First and foremost, it afforded him a magnificent opportunity to display his authority and act the master, and it also enabled him to carry out his compact with Victor Chupin, and repair to the rendezvous which M. Isidore Fortunat had appointed.

Leaving his comrades to watch the magistrate's operations, he sent M. Bourigeau to report the count's death at the district mayor's office, and then lighting a cigar he walked out of the house, and strolled leisurely up the Rue de Courcelles. The place appointed for his meeting with M. Fortunat was on the Boulevard Haussmann, almost opposite Binder's, the famous carriage builder. Although it was rather a wine-shop than a restaurant, a capital breakfast could be obtained there as M. Casimir had ascertained to his satisfaction several times before. "Has no one called for me?" he asked, as he went in.

"No one."

He consulted his watch, and evinced considerable surprise. "Not yet noon!" he exclaimed. "I'm in advance; and as that is the case, give me a glass of absinthe and a newspaper."

He was obeyed with far more alacrity than his deceased master had ever required him to show, and he forthwith plunged into the report of the doings at the Bourse, with the eagerness of a man who has an all-

sufficient reason for his anxiety in a drawer at home. Having emptied one glass of absinthe, he was about to order a second, when he felt a tap on the shoulder, and on turning round he beheld M. Isidore Fortunat.

In accordance with his wont, the agent was attired in a style of severe elegance—with gloves and boots fitting him to perfection—but an unusually winning smile played upon his lips. “You see I have been waiting for you,” exclaimed M. Casimir.

“I am late, it’s true,” replied M. Fortunat, “but we will do our best to make up for lost time; for, I trust, you will do me the honor of breakfasting with me?”

“Really, I don’t know that I ought.”

“Yes, yes, you must. They will give us a private room; we must have a talk.”

It was certainly not for the pleasure of the thing that M. Fortunat cultivated M. Casimir’s acquaintance, and entertained him at breakfast. M. Fortunat, who was a very proud man, considered this connection somewhat beneath his dignity; but at first, circumstances, and afterward interest, had required him to overcome his repugnance. It was through the Count de Chalusse that he had made M. Casimir’s acquaintance. While the count was employing the agent he had frequently sent his valet to him with messages and letters. Naturally, M. Casimir had talked on these occasions, and the agent had listened to him; hence this superficial friendship. Subsequently when the marriage contemplated by the Marquis de Valorsay was in course of preparation, M. Fortunat had profited of the opportunity to make the count’s servant his spy; and it had been easy to find a pretext for continuing the acquaintance, as M. Casimir was a speculator, or rather a dabbler in stocks and shares. So, whenever he needed information, M. Fortunat invited M. Casimir to breakfast, knowing the potent influence of a good bottle of wine offered at the right moment. It is needless to say that he exercised uncommon care in the composition of the menu on a day like this when his future course depended, perhaps, on a word more or less.

M. Casimir's eye sparkled as he took his seat at the table opposite his entertainer. The crafty agent had chosen a little room looking out on to the boulevard. Not that it was more spacious or elegant than the others, but it was isolated, and this was a very great advantage; for every one knows how unsafe and perfidious are those so-called private rooms which are merely separated from each other by a thin partition, scarcely thicker than a sheet of paper. It was not long before M. Fortunat had reason to congratulate himself on his foresight, for the breakfast began with a dish of shrimps, and M. Casimir had not finished his twelfth, washed down by a glass of chablis, before he declared that he could see no impropriety in confiding certain things to a friend.

The events of the morning had completely turned his head; and gratified vanity and good cheer excited him to such a degree that he discoursed with unwonted volubility. With total disregard of prudence, he talked with inexcusable freedom of the Count de Chalusse, and M. de Valorsay, and especially of his enemy, Mademoiselle Marguerite. "For it is she," he exclaimed, rapping on the table with his knife—"it is she who has taken the missing millions! How she did it, no one will ever know, for she has not an equal in craftiness; but it's she who has stolen them, I'm sure of it! I would have taken my oath to that effect before the magistrate, and I would have proved it, too, if he hadn't taken her part because she's pretty—for she is devilishly pretty."

Even if M. Fortunat had wished to put in a word or two, he could have found no opportunity. But his guest's loquacity did not displease him; it gave him an opportunity for reflection. Strange thoughts arose in his mind, and connecting M. Casimir's affirmations with the assurances of the Marquis de Valorsay, he was amazed at the coincidence. "It's very singular!" he thought. "Has this girl really stolen the money? and has the marquis discovered the fact through Madame Leon, and determined to profit by the theft? In that case, I may get my money back, after all! I must look into the matter."

A partridge and a bottle of Pomard followed the shrimps and chablis; and M. Casimir's loquacity increased, and his voice rose higher and higher. He wandered from one absurd story to another, and from slander to slander, until suddenly, and without the slightest warning, he began to speak of the mysterious letter which he considered the undoubted cause of the count's illness.

At the first word respecting this missive, M. Fortunat started violently. "Nonsense!" said he, with an incredulous air. "Why the devil should this letter have had such an influence?"

"I don't know. But it is certain—it had." And, in support of his assertion, he told M. Fortunat how the count had destroyed the letter almost without reading it, and how he had afterward searched for the fragments, in order to find an address it had contained. "And I'm quite sure," said the valet, "that the count intended to apply to you for the address of the person who wrote the letter."

"Are you sure of that?"

"As sure as I am of drinking Pomard!" exclaimed M. Casimir, draining his glass.

Rarely had the agent experienced such emotion. He did not doubt but what this missive contained the solution of the mystery. "Were the scraps of this letter found?" he asked.

"I have them," cried the valet, triumphantly. "I have them in my pocket, and, what's more, I have the whole of them!"

This declaration made M. Fortunat turn pale with delight. "Indeed—indeed!" said he; "it must be a strange production."

His companion pursed up his lips disdainfully. "May be so, may be not," he retorted. "It's impossible to understand a word of it. The only thing certain about it is that it was written by a woman."

"Ah!"

"Yes, by a former mistress, undoubtedly. And, naturally, she asks for money for a child. Women of that class always do so. They've tried the game with me more than a dozen times, but I'm not so easily caught."

And bursting with vanity, he related three or four love affairs in which, according to his own account, he must have played a most ignoble part.

If M. Fortunat's chair had been a gridiron, heated by an excellent fire, he could not have felt more uncomfortable. After pouring out bumper after bumper for his guest, he perceived that he had gone too far, and that it would not be easy to check him. "And this letter?" he interrupted, at last.

"Well?"

"You promised to let me read it."

"That's true—that's quite true; but it would be as well to have some mocha first, would it not? What if we ordered some mocha, eh?"

Coffee was served, and when the waiter had closed the door, M. Casimir drew the letter, the scraps of which were fixed together, from his pocket, and unfolded it, saying: "Attention; I'm going to read."

This did not suit M. Fortunat's fancy. He would infinitely have preferred perusing it himself; but it is impossible to argue with an intoxicated man, and so M. Casimir with a more and more indistinct enunciation read as follows: "'Paris, October 14, 186—.' So the lady lives in Paris, as usual. After this she puts neither 'monsieur,' nor 'my friend,' nor 'dear count,' nothing at all. She begins abruptly: 'Once before, many years ago, I came to you as a suppliant. You were pitiless, and did not even deign to answer me. And yet, as I told you, I was on the verge of a terrible precipice; my brain was reeling, vertigo had seized hold of me. Deserted, I was wandering about Paris, homeless and penniless, and my child was starving!'"

M. Casimir paused to laugh. "That's like all the rest of them," he exclaimed; "that is exactly like all the rest! I've ten such letters in my drawer, even more imperative in their demands. If you'll come home with me after breakfast, I'll show them to you. We'll have a hearty laugh over them!"

"Let us finish this first."

“Of course.” And he resumed: “‘If I had been alone. I should not have hesitated. I was so wretched that death seemed a refuge to me. But what was to become of my child? Should I kill him, and destroy myself afterward? I thought of doing so, but I lacked the courage. And what I implored you in pity to give me, was rightfully mine. I had only to present myself at your house and demand it. Alas! I did not know that then. I believed myself bound by a solemn oath, and you inspired me with inexpressible terror. And still I could not see my child die of starvation before my very eyes. So I abandoned myself to my fate, and I have sunk so low that I have been obliged to separate from my son. He must not know the shame to which he owes his livelihood. And he is ignorant even of my existence.’”

M. Fortunat was as motionless as if he had been turned to stone. After the information he had obtained respecting the count’s past, and after the story told him by Madame Vantrasson, he could scarcely doubt. “This letter,” he thought, “can only be from Mademoiselle Hermine de Chalusse.”

However, M. Casimir resumed his reading: “‘If I apply to you again, if from the depth of infamy into which I have fallen, I again call upon you for help, it is because I am at the end of my resources—because, before I die, I must see my son’s future assured. It is not a fortune that I ask for him, but sufficient to live upon, and I expect to receive it from you.’”

Once more the valet paused in his perusal of the letter to remark: “There it is again sufficient to live upon, and I expect to receive it from you!—Excellent! Women are remarkable creatures, upon my word! But listen to the rest! ‘It is absolutely necessary that I should see you as soon as possible. Oblige me, therefore, by calling to-morrow, October 15th, at the Hotel de Homburg, in the Rue du Helder. You will ask for Madame Lucy Huntley, and they will conduct you to me. I shall expect you from three o’clock to six. Come. I implore you, come. It is painful to me to add that if I do not hear from you, I am resolved to demand and OBTAIN—no matter what may be the consequences—the means which I have, so far, asked of you on my bended knees and with clasped hands.’”

Having finished the letter, M. Casimir laid it on the table, and poured out a glassful of brandy, which he drained at a single draught. “And that’s all,” he remarked. “No signature—not even an initial. It was a so-called respectable woman who wrote that. They never sign their notes, the hussies! for fear of compromising themselves, as I’ve reason to know.” And so saying, he laughed the idiotic laugh of a man who has been drinking immoderately. “If I had time,” he resumed, “I should make some inquiries about this Madame Lucy Huntley—a feigned name, evidently. I should like to know—— But what’s the matter with you, Monsieur Fortunat? You are as pale as death. Are you ill?”

To tell the truth, the agent did look as if he were indisposed. “Thanks,” he stammered. “I’m very well, only I just remembered that some one is waiting for me.”

“Who?”

“A client.”

“Nonsense!” rejoined the valet; “make some excuse; let him go about his business. Aren’t you rich enough? Pour us out another glass of wine; it will make you all right again.”

M. Fortunat complied, but he performed the task so awkwardly, or, rather, so skilfully, that he drew toward him, with his sleeve, the letter which was lying beside M. Casimir’s plate. “To your health,” said the valet. “To yours,” replied M. Fortunat. And in drawing back the arm he had extended to chink glasses with his guest, he caused the letter to fall on his knees.

M. Casimir, who had not observed this successful manoeuvre, was trying to light his cigar; and while vainly consuming a large quantity of matches in the attempt, he exclaimed: “What you just said, my friend, means that you would like to desert me. That won’t do, my dear fellow! You are going home with me; and I will read you some love-letters from a woman of the world. Then we will go to Mourloup’s, and play a game of billiards. That’s the place to enjoy one’s self. You’ll see Joseph, of the Commarin household, a splendid comedian.”

“Very well; but first I must settle the score here.”

"Yes, pay."

M. Fortunat rang for his bill. He had obtained more information than he expected; he had the letter in his pocket, and he had now only one desire, to rid himself of M. Casimir. But this was no easy task. Drunken men cling tenaciously to their friends; and M. Fortunat was asking himself what strategy he could employ, when the waiter entered, and said: "There's a very light-complexioned man here, who looks as if he were a huissier's clerk. He wishes to speak with you, gentlemen."

"Ah! it's Chupin!" exclaimed the valet. "He is a friend. Let him come in, and bring us another glass. 'The more the merrier,' as the saying goes."

What could Chupin want? M. Fortunat had no idea, but he was none the less grateful for his coming, being determined to hand this troublesome Casimir over to his keeping. On entering the room Chupin realized the valet's condition at the first glance, and his face clouded. He bowed politely to M. Fortunat, but addressed Casimir in an extremely discontented tone. "It's three o'clock," said he, "and I've come, as we agreed, to arrange with you about the count's funeral."

These words had the effect of a cold shower-bath on M. Casimir. "Upon my word, I had forgotten—forgotten entirely, upon my word!" And the thought of his condition, and the responsibility he had accepted, coming upon him at the same time, he continued: "Good Heavens! I'm in a nice state! It is all I can do to stand. What will they think at the house? What will they say?"

M. Fortunat had drawn his clerk a little on one side. "Victor," said he, quickly and earnestly, "I must go at once. Everything has been paid for; but in case you need some money for a cab or anything of the sort, here are ten francs. If there's any you don't use, keep it for yourself. I leave this fool in your charge, take care of him."

The sight of the ten-franc piece made Chupin's face brighten a little. "Very well," he replied. "I understand the business. I served my apprenticeship as a 'guardian angel' when my grandmother kept the Poivriere." 2

“Above all, don’t let him return home in his present state.”

“Have no fears, monsieur, I must talk business with him, and so I shall have him all right in a jiffy.” And as M. Fortunat made his escape, Chupin beckoned to the waiter, and said:

“Fetch me some very strong coffee, a handful of salt, and a lemon. There’s nothing better for bringing a drunken man to his senses.”

XV.

M. Fortunat left the restaurant, almost on the run, for he feared that he might be pursued and overtaken by M. Casimir. But after he had gone a couple of hundred paces, he paused, not so much to take breath, as to collect his scattered wits; and though the weather was cold, he seated himself on a bench to reflect.

Never in all his changeful life had he known such intense anxiety and torturing suspense as he had just experienced in that little room in the restaurant. He had longed for positive information and he had obtained it; but it had upset all his plans and annihilated all his hopes. Imagining that the count's heirs had been lost sight of, he had determined to find them and make a bargain with them, before they learned that they were worth their millions. But on the contrary, these heirs were close at hand, watching M. de Chalusse, and knowing their rights so well that they were ready to fight for them. "For it was certainly the count's sister who wrote the letter which I have in my pocket," he murmured. "Not wishing to receive him at her own home, she prudently appointed a meeting at a hotel. But what about this name of Huntley? Is it really hers, or is it only assumed for the occasion? Is it the name of the man who enticed her from home, or is it the name given to the son from whom she has separated herself?"

But after all what was the use of all these conjectures? There was but one certain and positive thing, and this was that the money he had counted upon had escaped him; and he experienced as acute a pang as if he had lost forty thousand francs a second time. Perhaps, at that moment, he was sorry that he had severed his connection with the marquis. Still, he was not the man to despond, however desperate his plight might appear, without an attempt to better his situation. He knew how many surprising and sudden changes in fortune have been brought

about by some apparently trivial action. “I must discover this sister,” he said to himself—“I must ascertain her position and her plans. If she has no one to advise her, I will offer my services; and who knows——”

A cab was passing; M. Fortunat hailed it, and ordered the Jehu to drive him to the Rue du Helder, No. 43, Hotel de Homburg.

Was it by chance or premeditation that this establishment had received the name of one of the gambling dens of Europe? Perhaps the following information may serve to answer the question. The Hotel de Homburg was one of those flash hostelries frequented by adventurers of distinction, who are attracted to Paris by the millions that are annually squandered there. Spurious counts and questionable Russian princesses were sure to find a cordial welcome there with princely luxury, moderate prices, and—but very little confidence. Each person was called by the title which it pleased him to give on his arrival—Excellency or Prince, according to his fancy. He could also find numerous servants carefully drilled to play the part of old family retainers, and carriages upon which the most elaborate coat-of-arms could be painted at an hour’s notice. Nor was there any difficulty whatever in immediately procuring all the accessories of a life of grandeur—all that is needful to dazzle the unsuspecting, to throw dust in people’s eyes, and to dupe one’s chance acquaintances. All these things were provided without delay, by the month, by the day or by the hour, just as the applicant pleased. But there was no such thing as credit there. Bills were presented every evening, to those lodgers who did not pay in advance: and he who could not, or would not, settle the score, even if he were Excellency or Prince, was requested to depart at once, and his trunks were held as security.

When M. Fortunat entered the office of the hotel, a woman, with a crafty looking face, was holding a conference with an elderly gentleman, who had a black velvet skullcap on his head, and a magnifying glass in his hand. They applied their eyes to the glass in turn, and were engaged in examining some very handsome diamonds, which had no doubt been offered in lieu of money by some noble but impecunious foreigner. On hearing M. Fortunat enter, the woman looked up.

“What do you desire, monsieur?” she inquired, politely.

“I wish to see Madame Lucy Huntley.”

The woman did not reply at first, but raised her eyes to the ceiling, as if she were reading there the list of all the foreigners of distinction who honored the Hotel de Homburg by their presence at that moment. “Lucy Huntley!” she repeated. “I don’t recollect that name! I don’t think there’s such a person in the house—Lucy Huntley! What kind of a person is she?”

For many reasons M. Fortunat could not answer. First of all, he did not know. But he was not in the least disconcerted, and he avoided the question without the slightest embarrassment, at the same time trying to quicken the woman’s faulty memory. “The person I wished to see was here on Friday, between three and six in the afternoon; and she was waiting for a visitor with an anxiety which could not possibly have escaped your notice.”

This detail quickened the memory of the man with the magnifying glass—none other than the woman’s husband and landlord of the hotel. “Ah! the gentleman is speaking of the lady of No. 2—you remember—the same who insisted upon having the large private room.”

“To be sure,” replied the wife; “where could my wits have been!” And turning to M. Fortunat: “Excuse my forgetfulness,” she added. “The lady is no longer in the house; she only remained here for a few hours.”

This reply did not surprise M. Fortunat—he had expected it; and yet he assumed an air of the utmost consternation. “Only a few hours!” he repeated, like a despairing echo.

“Yes, monsieur. She arrived here about eleven o’clock in the morning, with only a large valise by way of luggage, and she left that same evening at eight o’clock.”

“Alas! and where was she going?”

“She didn’t tell me.”

You might have sworn that M. Fortunat was about to burst into tears. “Poor Lucy!” said he, in a tragical tone; “it was for me, madame, that she was waiting. But it was only this morning that I received her letter appointing a meeting here. She must have been in despair. The post can’t be depended on!”

The husband and wife simultaneously shrugged their shoulders, and the expression of their faces unmistakably implied: “What can we do about it? It is no business of ours. Don’t trouble us.”

But M. Fortunat was not the man to be dismayed by such a trifle.

“She was taken to the railway station, no doubt,” he insisted.

“Really, I know nothing about it.”

“You told me just now that she had a large valise, so she could not have left your hotel on foot. She must have asked for a vehicle. Who was sent to fetch it? One of your boys? If I could find the driver I should, perhaps, be able to obtain some valuable information from him.”

The husband and wife exchanged a whole volume of suspicions in a single glance. M. Isidore Fortunat’s appearance was incontestably respectable, but they were well aware that those strange men styled detectives are perfectly conversant with the art of dressing to perfection. So the hotelkeeper quickly decided on his course. “Your idea is an excellent one,” he said to M. Fortunat. “This lady must certainly have taken a vehicle on leaving; and what is more, it must have been a vehicle belonging to the hotel. If you will follow me, we will make some inquiries on the subject.”

And rising with a willingness that augured well for their success, he led the agent into the courtyard, where five or six vehicles were stationed, while the drivers lounged on a bench, chatting and smoking their pipes “Which of you was employed by a lady yesterday evening at about eight o’clock?”

“What sort of a person was she?”

“She was a handsome woman, between thirty and forty years’ old, very fair, rather stout, and dressed in black. She had a large Russia-leather travelling-bag.”

“I took her,” answered one of the drivers promptly. M. Fortunat advanced toward the man with open arms, and with such eagerness that it might have been supposed he meant to embrace him. “Ah, my worthy fellow!” he exclaimed, “you can save my life!”

The driver looked exceedingly pleased. He was thinking that this gentleman would certainly requite his salvation by a magnificent gratuity. “What do you want of me?” he asked.

“Tell me where you drove this lady?”

“I took her to the Rue de Berry.”

“To what number?”

“Ah, I can’t tell. I’ve forgotten it.”

But M. Fortunat no longer felt any anxiety. “Very good,” said he. “You’ve forgotten it—that’s not at all strange. But you would know the house again, wouldn’t you?”

“Undoubtedly I should.”

“Will you take me there?”

“Certainly, sir. This is my vehicle.”

The hunter of missing heirs at once climbed inside; but it was not until the carriage had left the courtyard that the landlord returned to his office. “That man must be a detective,” he remarked to his wife.

“So I fancy.”

“It’s strange we’re not acquainted with him. He must be a new member of the force.”

But M. Fortunat was quite indifferent as to what impression he had left behind him at the Hotel de Homburg, for he never expected to set foot there again. The one essential thing was that he had obtained the information he wished for, and even a description of the lady, and he felt

that he was now really on the track. The vehicle soon reached the Rue de Berry, and drew up in front of a charming little private house. “Here we are, monsieur,” said the driver, bowing at the door.

M. Fortunat sprang nimbly on to the pavement, and handed five francs to the coachman, who went off growling and swearing, for he thought the reward a contemptibly small one, coming as it did from a man whose life had been saved, according to his own confession. However, the person the Jehu anathematized certainly did not hear him. Standing motionless where he had alighted, M. Fortunat scrutinized the house in front of him with close attention. “So she lives here,” he muttered. “This is the place; but I can’t present myself without knowing her name. I must make some inquiries.”

There was a wine-shop some fifty paces distant, and thither M. Fortunat hastened, and ordered a glass of currant syrup. As he slowly sipped the beverage, he pointed to the house in question, with an air of well-assumed indifference, and asked: “Whom does that pretty dwelling belong to?”

“To Madame Lia d’Argeles,” answered the landlady.

M. Fortunat started. He well remembered that this was the name the Marquis de Valorsay had mentioned when speaking of the vile conspiracy he had planned. It was at this woman’s house that the man whom Mademoiselle Marguerite loved had been disgraced! Still he managed to master his surprise, and in a light, frank tone he resumed: “What a pretty name! And what does this lady do?”

“What does she do? Why, she amuses herself.”

M. Fortunat seemed astonished. “Dash it!” said he. “She must amuse herself to good purpose to have a house like that. Is she pretty?”

“That depends on taste. She’s no longer young, at any rate; but she has superb golden hair. And, oh! how white she is—as white as snow, monsieur—as white as snow! She has a fine figure as well, and a most distinguished bearing—pays cash, too, to the very last farthing.”

There could no longer be any doubt. The portrait sketched by the wine-vendor fully corresponded with the description given by the hotelkeeper in the Rue de Helder. Accordingly, M. Fortunat drained his glass, and threw fifty centimes on the counter. Then, crossing the street, he boldly rang at the door of Madame d'Argeles's house. If any one had asked him what he proposed doing and saying if he succeeded in effecting an entrance, he might have replied with perfect sincerity, "I don't know." The fact is, he had but one aim, one settled purpose in his mind. He was obstinately, FURIOUSLY resolved to derive some benefit, small or great, from this mysterious affair. As for the means of execution, he relied entirely on his audacity and sang-froid, convinced that they would not fail him when the decisive moment came. "First of all, I must see this lady," he said to himself. "The first words will depend solely upon my first impressions. After that, I shall be guided by circumstances."

An old serving-man, in a quiet, tasteful livery, opened the door, whereupon M. Fortunat, in a tone of authority, asked: "Madame Lia d'Argeles?"

"Madame does not receive on Friday," was the reply.

With a petulant gesture, M. Fortunat rejoined: "All the same I must speak with her to-day. It is on a matter of the greatest importance. Give her my card." So saying, he held out a bit of pasteboard, on which, below his name, were inscribed the words: "Liquidations. Settlements effected for insolvent parties."

"Ah! that's a different thing," said the servant. "Will monsieur take the trouble to follow me?"

M. Fortunat did take the trouble; and he was conducted into a large drawing-room where he was requested to sit down and await madame's coming. Left to himself, he began an inventory of the apartment, as a general studies the ground on which he is about to give battle. No trace remained of the unfortunate scene of the previous night, save a broken candelabrum on the chimney-piece. It was the one which Pascal Ferailleur had armed himself with, when they talked of searching him,

and which he had thrown down in the courtyard, as he left the house. But this detail did not attract M. Fortunat's attention. The only thing that puzzled him was the large reflector placed above the chandelier, and it took him some time to fathom with what object it was placed there. Without precisely intimidating him, the luxurious appointments of the house aroused his astonishment. "Everything here is in princely style," he muttered, "and this shows that all the lunatics are not at Charenton yet. If Madame d'Argeles lacked bread in days gone by, she does so no longer—that's evident."

Naturally enough this reflection led him to wonder why such a rich woman should become the Marquis de Valorsay's accomplice, and lend a hand in so vile and cowardly a plot, which horrified even him—Fortunat. "For she must be an accomplice," he thought.

And he marvelled at the freak of fate which had connected the unfortunate man who had been sacrificed with the unacknowledged daughter, and the cast-off sister, of the Count de Chalusse. A vague presentiment, the mysterious voice of instinct, warned him, moreover, that his profit in the affair would depend upon the antagonism, or alliance, of Mademoiselle Marguerite and Madame d'Argeles. But his meditations were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a discussion in an adjoining room. He stepped eagerly forward, hoping to hear something, and he did hear a man saying in a coarse voice: "What! I leave an interesting game, and lose precious time in coming to offer you my services, and you receive me like this! Zounds! madame, this will teach me not to meddle with what doesn't concern me, in future. So, good-bye, my dear lady. You'll learn some day, to your cost, the real nature of this villain of a Coralth whom you now defend so warmly."

This name of Coralth was also one of those which were engraven upon M. Fortunat's memory; and yet he did not notice it at the moment. His attention was so absorbed by what he had just heard that he could not fix his mind upon the object of his mission; and he only abandoned his conjectures on hearing a rustling of skirts against the panels of the door leading into the hall.

The next moment Madame Lia d'Argeles entered the room. She was arrayed in a very elegant dressing-gown of gray cashmere, with blue satin trimmings, her hair was beautifully arranged, and she had neglected none of the usual artifices of the toilette-table; still any one would have considered her to be over forty years of age. Her sad face wore an expression of melancholy resignation; and there were signs of recent tears in her swollen eyes, surrounded by bluish circles. She glanced at her visitor, and, in anything but an encouraging tone exclaimed: "You desired to speak with me, I believe?"

M. Fortunat bowed, almost disconcerted. He had expected to meet one of those stupid, ignorant young women, who make themselves conspicuous at the afternoon promenade in the Bois de Boulogne; and he found himself in the presence of an evidently cultivated and imperious woman, who, even in her degradation, retained all her pride of race, and awed him, despite all his coolness and assurance. "I do, indeed, madame, wish to confer with you respecting some important interests," he answered.

She sank on to a chair; and, without asking her visitor to take a seat: "Explain yourself," she said, briefly.

M. Fortunat's knowledge of the importance of the game in which he had already risked so much had already restored his presence of mind. He had only needed a glance to form a true estimate of Madame d'Argeles's character; and he realized that it would require a sudden, powerful, and well-directed blow to shatter her composure. "I have the unpleasant duty of informing you of a great misfortune, madame," he began. "A person who is very dear to you, and who is nearly related to you, was a victim of a frightful accident yesterday evening and died this morning."

This gloomy preamble did not seem to produce the slightest effect on Madame d'Argeles. "Whom are you speaking of?" she coldly asked.

M. Fortunat assumed his most solemn manner as he replied: "Of your brother, madame—of the Count de Chalusse."

She sprang up, and a convulsive shudder shook her from head to foot. “Raymond is dead!” she faltered.

“Alas! yes, madame. Struck with death at the very moment he was repairing to the appointment you had given him at the Hotel de Homburg.”

This clever falsehood, which was not entirely one, would, so the agent thought, be of advantage to him, since it would prove he was acquainted with previous events. But Madame d’Argeles did not seem to notice, or even to hear the remark. She had fallen back in her arm-chair, paler than death. “How did he die?” she asked.

“From an attack of apoplexy.”

“My God!” exclaimed the wretched woman, who now suspected the truth; “my God, forgive me. It was my letter that killed him!” and she wept as if her heart were breaking—this woman who had suffered and wept so much.

It is needless to say that M. Fortunat was moved with sympathy; he always evinced a respectful sympathy for the woes of others; but in the present instance, his emotion was greatly mitigated by the satisfaction he felt at having succeeded so quickly and so completely. Madame d’Argeles had confessed everything! This was indeed a victory, for it must be admitted that he had trembled lest she should deny all, and bid him leave the house. He still saw many difficulties between his pocket and the Count de Chalusse’s money; but he did not despair of conquering them after such a successful beginning. And he was muttering some words of consolation, when Madame d’Argeles suddenly looked up and said: “I must see him—I will see him once more! Come, monsieur!” But a terrible memory rooted her to the spot and with a despairing gesture, and in a voice quivering with anguish she exclaimed:

“No, no—I cannot even do that.”

M. Fortunat was not a little disturbed; and it was with a look of something very like consternation that he glanced at Madame d’Argeles, who had reseated herself and was now sobbing violently, with her face hidden on the arm of her chair. “What prevents her?” he thought. “Why

this sudden terror now that her brother is dead? Is she unwilling to confess that she is a Chalusse? She must make up her mind to it, however, if she wishes to receive the count's property—and she must make up her mind to it, for my sake, if not for her own."

He remained silent, until it seemed to him that Madame d'Argeles was calmer, then: "Excuse me, madame," he began, "for breaking in upon your very natural grief, but duty requires me to remind you of your interests."

With the passive docility of those who are wretched, she wiped away her tears, and replied, gently: "I am listening, monsieur."

He had had time to prepare his discourse. "First of all, madame," he remarked, "I must tell you that I was the count's confidential agent. In him I lose a protector. Respect alone prevents me from saying a friend. He had no secrets from me." M. Fortunat saw so plainly that Madame d'Argeles did not understand a word of this sentimental exordium that he thought it necessary to add: "I tell you this, not so much to gain your consideration and good-will, as to explain to you how I became acquainted with these matters relating to your family—how I became aware of your existence, for instance, which no one else suspected." He paused, hoping for some reply, a word, a sign, but not receiving this encouragement, he continued: "I must, first of all, call your attention to the peculiar situation of M. de Chalusse, and to the circumstances which immediately preceded and attended his departure from life. His death was so unexpected that he was unable to make any disposition of his property by will, or even to indicate his last wishes. This, madame, is fortunate for you. M. de Chalusse had certain prejudices against you, as you are aware. Poor count. He certainly had the best heart in the world, and yet hatred with him was almost barbaric in its intensity. There can be no doubt whatever, that he had determined to deprive you of your inheritance. With this intention he had already begun to convert his estates into ready money, and had he lived six months longer you would not have received a penny."

With a gesture of indifference, which was difficult to explain after the vehemence and the threatening tone of her letter, Madame d'Argeles murmured:

"Ah, well! what does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" repeated M. Fortunat. "I see, madame, that your grief prevents you from realizing the extent of the peril you have escaped. M. de Chalusse had other, and more powerful reasons even than his hatred for wishing to deprive you of your share of his property. He had sworn that he would give a princely fortune to his beloved daughter."

For the first time, Madame d'Argeles's features assumed an expression of surprise. "What, my brother had a child?"

"Yes, madame, an illegitimate daughter, Mademoiselle Marguerite, a lovely and charming girl whom I had the pleasure of restoring to his care some years ago. She has been living with him for six months or so; and he was about to marry her, with an enormous dowry, to a nobleman bearing one of the proudest names in France, the Marquis de Valorsay."

The name shook Madame d'Argeles as if she had experienced the shock of an electric battery, and springing to her feet, with flashing eyes: "You say that my brother's daughter was to marry M. de Valorsay?" she asked.

"It was decided—the marquis adored her."

"But she—she did not love him—confess that she did not love him."

M. Fortunat did not know what to reply. The question took him completely by surprise; and feeling that his answer would have a very considerable influence upon what might follow, he hesitated.

"Will you answer me?" insisted Madame d'Argeles, imperiously. "She loved another, did she not?"

"To tell the truth, I believe she did," the agent stammered. "But I have no proof of it, madame."

“Ah! the wretch!” she exclaimed with a threatening gesture; “the traitor! the infamous scoundrel! Now I understand it all. And to think that it occurred in my house. But no; it was best so, I can still repair everything.” And darting to the bell-rope, she pulled it violently.

A servant at once appeared. “Job,” she said, “hasten after Baron Trigault—he left the house a moment ago and bring him back. I must speak with him. If you do not overtake him, go to his club, to his house, to the houses of his friends, go to every place where there is any chance of finding him. Make haste, and do not return without him.”

And as the man turned to obey, she added: “My carriage must be in the courtyard. Take it.”

Meanwhile M. Fortunat’s expression of countenance had undergone a marked change. “Well!” thought he, “I have just made a mess of it! M. Valorsay is unmasked; and now, may I be hung, if he ever marries Mademoiselle Marguerite. Certainly, I do not owe much to the scoundrel, for he has defrauded me of forty thousand francs, but what will he say when he discovers what I’ve done? He will never believe me if I tell him that it was an involuntary blunder, and Heaven only knows what revenge he will plan! A man of his disposition, knowing that he is ruined, is capable of anything! So much the worse for me. Before night I shall warn the commissary of police in my district, and I shall not go out unarmed!”

The servant went off, and Madame d’Argeles then turned to her visitor again. But she seemed literally transfigured by the storm of passion which was raging in her heart and mind; her cheeks were crimson, and an unwonted energy sparkled in her eyes. “Let us finish this business,” she said, curtly; “I am expecting some one.”

M. Fortunat bowed with a rather pompous, but at the same time obsequious air. “I have only a few more words to say,” he declared. “M. de Chalusse having no other heir, I have come to acquaint you with your rights.”

“Very good; continue, if you please.”

“You have only to present yourself, and establish your identity, to be put in possession of your brother’s property.”

Madame d’Argeles gave the agent a look of mingled irony and distrust; and after a moment’s reflection, she replied: “I am very grateful for your interest, monsieur; but if I have any rights, it is not my intention to urge them.”

It seemed to M. Fortunat as if he were suddenly falling from some immense height. “You are not in earnest,” he exclaimed, “or you are ignorant of the fact that M. de Chalusse leaves perhaps twenty millions behind him.”

“My course is decided on, monsieur; irrevocably decided on.”

“Very well, madame; but it often happens that the court institutes inquiries for the heirs of large fortunes, and this may happen in your case.”

“I should reply that I was not a member of the Chalusse family, and that would end it. Startled by the news of my brother’s death, I allowed my secret to escape me. I shall know how to keep it in future.”

Anger succeeded astonishment in M. Fortunat’s mind. “Madame, madame, what can you be thinking of?” he cried, impetuously. “Accept—in Heaven’s name—accept this inheritance; if not for yourself, for the sake of——”

In his excitement, he was about to commit a terrible blunder. He saw it in time, and checked himself.

“For the sake of whom?” asked Madame d’Argeles, in an altered voice.

“For the sake of Mademoiselle Marguerite, madame; for the sake of this poor child, who is your niece. The count never having acknowledged her as his daughter, she will be left actually without bread, while her father’s millions go to enrich the state.”

“That will suffice, monsieur; I will think of it. And now, enough!”

The dismissal was so imperious that M. Fortunat bowed and went off, completely bewildered by this denouement. “She’s crazy!” he said to himself. “Crazy in the fullest sense of the word. She refuses the count’s

millions from a silly fear of telling people that she belongs to the Chalusse family. She threatened her brother, but she would never have carried her threats into execution. And she prefers her present position to such a fortune. What lunacy!" But, although he was disappointed and angry, he did not by any means despair. "Fortunately for me," he thought, "this proud and haughty lady has a son somewhere in the world. And she'll do for him what she would not consent to do for herself. Through her, with a little patience and Victor Chupin's aid, I shall succeed in discovering this boy. He must be an intelligent youth—and we'll see if he surrenders his millions as easily as his mamma does."

XVI.

It is a terrible task to break suddenly with one's past, without even having had time for preparation; to renounce the life one has so far lived, to return to the starting point, and begin existence anew; to abandon everything—the position one has gained, the work one has become familiar with, every fondly cherished hope, and friend, and habit; to forsake the known to plunge into the unknown, to leave the certain for the uncertain, and desert light for darkness; to cast one's identity aside, assume a strange individuality, become a living lie, change name, position, face, and clothes—in one phrase, to cease to be one's self, in order to become some one else.

This is indeed, a terrible ordeal, and requires an amount of resolution and energy which few human beings possess. The boldest hesitate before such a sacrifice, and many a man has surrendered himself to justice rather than resort to this last extremity. And yet this was what Pascal Ferailleur had the courage to do, on the morrow of the shameful conspiracy that had deprived him of his good name. When his mother's exhortations and Baron Trigault's encouraging words had restored his wonted clearness of perception, the only course he felt disposed to pursue was to disappear and fly from the storm of slander and contempt; and then, in a secure hiding-place, to watch for the time and opportunity of rehabilitation and revenge.

Madame Ferailleur and her son made all needful arrangements. "I shall start out at once," said Pascal, "and before two hours have elapsed I shall have found a modest lodging, where we must conceal ourselves for the present. I know a locality that will suit us, and where no one will certainly ever think of looking for us."

"And I," asked Madame Ferailleur, "what shall I do in the meantime?"

“You, mother; you must, at once, sell all that we possess here—everything—even my books. You will only keep such of our linen and clothes as you can pack in three or four trunks. We are undoubtedly watched; and so it is of the utmost importance that every one should imagine I have left Paris, and that you are going to join me.”

“And when everything is sold, and my trunks are ready?”

“Then, mother, you must send some one for a cab, and order the driver to take you to the Western Railway Station, where you will have the trunks removed from the cab and placed in the baggage-room, as if you did not intend to leave Paris till the next day.”

“Very good, I will do so; even if any one is watching us, he won’t be likely to suspect this ruse. But afterward?”

“Afterward, mother, you must go to the waiting-room upstairs, and you will find me there. I will then take you to the rooms I shall have rented, and to-morrow we’ll send a messenger with the receipt the railway people will give you, to fetch our luggage for us.”

Madame Ferailleur approved of this plan, deeming herself fortunate in this great calamity that despair had not destroyed her son’s energy and resources of mind. “Shall we retain our name, Pascal?”

“Oh, no. That would be an unpardonable imprudence.”

“What name shall we take, then? I must know, for they may ask me at the station.”

He reflected for a moment and then said: “We’ll take your maiden name, mother. It will bring us good luck. Our new lodgings shall be hired in the name of the Widow Maumejan.”

They talked for some time longer, anxious to take every precaution that prudence could suggest. And when they were convinced that they had forgotten nothing, Madame Ferailleur suggested that Pascal should start off. But before doing so he had a sacred duty to perform. “I must warn Marguerite,” he muttered. And seating himself at his desk, he wrote his beloved a concise and exact account of the events which had taken place. He told her of the course he intended to pursue; and

promised her that she should know his new abode as soon as he knew it himself. In conclusion, he entreated her to grant him an interview, in which he could give her the full particulars of the affair and acquaint her with his hopes. As for exculpating himself, even by so much as a single word—as for explaining the snare he had been the victim of, the idea never once occurred to him. He was worthy of Mademoiselle Marguerite; he knew that not a doubt would disturb the perfect faith she had in his honor.

Leaning over her son's shoulder, Madame Ferailleur read what he had written. "Do you intend to trust this letter to the post?" she inquired. "Are you sure, perfectly sure, that it will reach Mademoiselle Marguerite, and not some one else who might use it against you?"

Pascal shook his head. "I know how to insure its safe receipt," he replied. "Some time ago, Marguerite told me that if ever any great peril threatened us, I might call for the housekeeper at the Chalusse mansion and intrust my message to her. The danger is sufficiently great to justify such a course in the present instance. So I shall pass down the Rue de Courcelles, ask to see Madame Leon, and give her this letter. Have no fear, my dear mother."

As he spoke, he began to pack all the legal documents which had been confided to him into a large box, which was to be carried to one of his former friends, who would distribute the papers among the people they belonged to. He next made a small bundle of the few important private papers and valuables he possessed; and then, ready for the sacrifice, he took a last survey of the pleasant home where success had smiled so favorably upon his efforts, where he had been so happy, and where he had cherished such bright dreams of the future. Overcome by a flood of recollections, the tears sprang to his eyes. He embraced his mother, and fled precipitately from the house.

"Poor child!" murmured Madame Ferailleur; "poor Pascal!"

Was she not also to be pitied? This was the second time within twenty years that a thunderbolt had fallen on her in the full sunlight of happiness. And yet now, as on the day following her husband's death,

she found in her heart the robust energy and heroic maternal constancy which enable one to rise above every misfortune. It was in a firm voice that she ordered her servant to go in search of the nearest furniture dealer, no matter which, provided he would pay cash. And when the man arrived she showed him through the rooms with stoical calmness. God alone knew how intensely she was suffering. And yet while she was waiting for the dealer, each piece of furniture had acquired an extraordinary value in her eyes. It seemed to her as if each object were a part of herself, and when the man turned and twisted a chair or a table she almost considered it a personal affront.

The rich, who are accustomed from birth to the luxury that surrounds them, are ignorant of the terrible sufferings which attend such cases as these. The persons who do suffer are those of the middle classes, not the parvenus, but those who bid fair to become parvenus when misfortune overtook them. Their hearts bleed when inexorable necessity deprives them of all the little comforts with which they had gradually surrounded themselves, for there is not an object that does not recall a long ungratified desire, and the almost infantile joy of possession. What happiness they felt on the day when they purchased that large arm-chair! How many times they had gone to admire those velvet curtains in the shop windows before buying them! Those carpets represented months of self-denial. And that pretty clock—ah! they had fancied it would only herald the flight of prosperous and pleasant hours. And all these things the dealer handles, and shakes, and jeers at, and depreciates. He will scarcely condescend to purchase. Who would care to buy such trash? He knows that the owner is in need of money, and he profits by this knowledge. It is his business. “How much did this cost you?” he asks, as he inspects one piece of furniture after another.

“So much.”

“Well, you must have been terribly cheated.”

You know very well that if there is a cheat in the world, it is this same man; but what can you say? Any other dealer you might send for would act in the same way. Now, Madame Ferailleur’s furniture had cost some

ten thousand francs; and, although it was no longer new, it was worth at least a third of that sum. But she obtained only seven hundred and sixty francs for it. It is true, however, that she was in haste, and that she was paid cash.

Nine o'clock was striking when her trunks were at last piled on a cab, and she called out to the driver: "Take me to the Place du Havre—to the railway station." Once before, when defrauded by a scoundrel, she had been obliged to part with all her household treasures. Once before she had left her home, taking merely the wreck of her fortune with her. But what a difference between then and now!

Then, the esteem and sympathy of all who knew her was hers, and the admiring praise she received divested the sacrifice of much of its bitterness, and increased her courage two-fold. Now, she was flying secretly, and alone, under an assumed name, trembling at the thought of pursuit or recognition—flying as a criminal flies at thought of his crime, and fear of punishment. She had far less suffered on the day, when, with her son upon her knees, she journeyed to the cemetery, following all that was mortal of the man who had been her only thought, her love, her pride, her happiness, and hope. Though crushed by the sense of her irreparable loss, she had not rebelled against the hand that struck her; but now it was human wickedness that assailed her through her son, and her suffering was like that of the innocent man who perishes for want of power to prove his innocence. Her husband's death had not caused her such bitter tears as her son's dishonor. She who was so proud, and who had such good reason to be proud, she could note the glances of scorn she was favored with as she left her home. She heard the insulting remarks made by some of her neighbors, who, like so many folks, found their chief delight in other people's misfortunes.

"Crocodile tears," some had exclaimed. "She is going to meet her son; and with what he has stolen they will live like princes in America." Rumor, which enlarges and misrepresents everything, had, indeed, absurdly exaggerated the affair at Madame d'Argeles's house. It was

reported in the Rue d'Ulm that Pascal had spent every night at the gaming table for more than five years; and that, being an incomparable trickster, he had stolen millions.

Meanwhile, Madame Ferailleur was approaching the station. The cab horse soon slackened its pace to climb the acclivity of the Rue d'Amsterdam; and shortly afterward the vehicle drew up in the courtyard of the railway station. Faithfully observing the directions which had been given her, the worthy woman had her trunks taken to the baggage-room, declaring that she should not leave Paris until the next day, whereupon she received a receipt from the man in charge of the room. She was oppressed by vague apprehensions, and looked closely at every one who passed her; fearing the presence of spies, and knowing full well that the most profound secrecy could alone insure the success of Pascal's plans. However, she did not see a single suspicious looking person. Some Englishmen—those strange travellers, who are at the same time so foolishly prodigal and so ridiculously miserly—were making a great hue and cry over the four sous gratuity claimed by a poor commissionaire; but these were the only persons in sight.

Partially reassured, Madame Ferailleur hastily ascended the staircase, and entered the large waiting-room. It was here that Pascal had promised to meet her; but, though she looked round on all sides, she did not perceive him. Still, this delay did not alarm her much; nor was it at all strange, since Pascal had scarcely known what he would have to do when he left the house. She seated herself on a bench, as far back in the shade as possible and gazed sadly at the ever-changing throng, when all of a sudden she was startled by a man, who abruptly paused in front of her. This man proved to be Pascal. But his hair had been closely cut, and he had shaved off his beard. And thus shorn, with his smooth face, and with a brown silk neckerchief in lieu of the white muslin tie he usually wore, he was so greatly changed that for an instant his own mother did not recognize him. "Well?" asked Madame Ferailleur, as she realized his identity.

"I have succeeded. We have secured such rooms as I wished for."

"Where?"

"Ah!—a long way off, my poor mother—many a league from those we have known and loved—in a thinly populated part of the suburbs, on the Route de la Revolte, just outside the fortifications, and almost at the point where it intersects the Asnieres road. You will not be very comfortable there, but you will have the pleasure of a little garden."

She rose, summoning all her energy. "What does it matter where or what our abode is?" she interrupted, with forced gayety. "I am confident that we shall not remain there long."

But it seemed as if her son did not share her hopes, for he remained silent and dejected; and as his mother observed him closely, she fancied by the expression of his eyes, that some new anxiety had been added to all his other troubles.

"What is the matter?" she inquired, unable to master her alarm —"what has happened?"

"Ah! a great misfortune!"

"My God! still another?"

"I have been to the Rue de Courcelles; and I have spoken to Madame Leon."

"What did she say?"

"The Count de Chalusse died this morning."

Madame Ferailleur drew a long breath, as if greatly relieved. She was certainly expecting to hear something very different, and she did not understand why this death should be a great misfortune to them personally. One point, however, she did realize, that it was imprudent, and even dangerous, to carry on this conversation in a hall where a hundred persons were passing and repassing every minute. So she took her son's arm, and led him away, saying: "Come, let us go."

Pascal had kept the cab which he had been using during the afternoon; and having installed his mother inside, he got in himself, and gave his new address to the driver. "Now tell me all," said Madame Ferailleur.

Poor Pascal was in that state of mind in which it costs one actual suffering to talk; but he wished to mitigate his mother's anxiety as much as possible; and moreover, he did not like her to suppose him wanting in endurance. So, with a powerful effort, he shook off the lethargy that was creeping over him, and in a voice loud enough to be heard above the noise of the carriage wheels, he began: "This is what I have done, mother, since I left you. I remembered that some time ago, while I was appraising some property, I had seen three or four houses on the Route de la Revolte, admirably suited to our present wants. Naturally I went there first. A suite of rooms was vacant in one of these houses. I have taken it; and in order that nothing may interfere with the liberty of my movements, I have paid six months' rent in advance. Here is the receipt, drawn up in the name we shall henceforth bear." So saying, he showed his mother a document in which the landlord declared that he had received from M. Maumejan the sum of three hundred and fifty francs for two quarters' rent, etc. "My bargain concluded," he resumed, "I returned into Paris, and entered the first furniture shop I saw. I meant to hire the necessary things to furnish our little home, but the dealer made all sorts of objections. He trembled for his furniture, he wanted a sum of money to be deposited as security, or the guarantee of three responsible business men. Seeing this, and knowing that I had no time to lose, I preferred to purchase such articles as were absolutely necessary. One of the conditions of the purchase was that everything should be in the house and in its place by eleven o'clock to-night. As I stipulated in writing that the dealer should forfeit three hundred francs in case he failed to fulfil his agreement, I can rely upon his punctuality; I confided the key of our lodgings to him, and he must now be there waiting for us."

So, before thinking of his love, and Mademoiselle Marguerite, Pascal had taken the necessary measures for the execution of his plan to regain his lost honor. Madame Ferailleur had scarcely supposed him capable of so much courage and firmness, and she rewarded him with a warm pressure of the hand. Then, as he was silent: "When did you see Madame Leon, then?" she asked.

“When all the household arrangements were completed, mother. On leaving the furniture-shop, I found that I had still an hour and a quarter before me. I could defer no longer, and at the risk of obliging you to wait for me, I hastened to the Rue de Courcelles.”

It was evident that Pascal felt extreme embarrassment in speaking of Mademoiselle Marguerite. There is an instinctive delicacy and dislike of publicity in all deep passion, and true and chaste love is ever averse to laying aside the veil with which it conceals itself from the inquisitive. Madame Ferailleur understood this feeling; but she was a mother, and as such, jealous of her son’s tenderness, and anxious for particulars concerning this rival who had suddenly usurped her place in the heart where she had long reigned supreme. She was also a woman—that is to say, distrustful and suspicious in reference to all other women. So, without taking pity on Pascal’s embarrassment, she urged him to continue.

“I gave the driver five francs on condition that he would hurry his horses,” he resumed, “and we were rattling along at a rapid rate, when, suddenly, near the Hotel de Chalusse, I noticed a change in the motion of the vehicle. I looked out and saw that we were driving over a thick layer of straw which had been spread across the street. I can scarcely describe my feelings on seeing this. A cold perspiration came over me—I fancied I saw Marguerite in agony, dying—far from me, and calling me in vain. Without waiting for the vehicle to stop, I sprang to the ground, and was obliged to exercise all my self-control to prevent myself from rushing into the concierge’s lodge, and wildly asking: ‘Who is dying here?’ But an unforeseen difficulty presented itself. It was evident that I ought not to go in person to inquire for Madame Leon. Whom could I send? There were no commissionaires at the street corners, and nothing would have induced me to confide the message to any of the lads in the neighboring wine-shops. Fortunately, my driver—the same who is driving us now—is an obliging fellow, and I intrusted him with the commission, while I stood guard over his horses. Ten minutes later, Madame Leon left the house and came to meet me. I knew her at once,

for I had seen her a hundred times with Marguerite when they lived near the Luxembourg; and having seen me pass and repass so often, she recognized me in spite of my changed appearance. Her first words, 'M. de Chalusse is dead,' relieved my heart of a terrible weight. I could breathe again. But she was in such haste that she could not stop to tell me any particulars. Still I gave her my letter, and she promised me a prompt reply from Marguerite. Everybody will be up and moving about the house to-night, and she said she could easily make her escape for a few moments. So, at half-past twelve to-night she will be at the little garden gate, and if I am promptly at hand, I shall have a reply from Marguerite."

Madame Ferailleur seemed to be expecting something more, and as Pascal remained silent, she remarked: "You spoke of a great misfortune. In what does it consist? I do not perceive it."

With an almost threatening gesture, and in a gloomy voice, he answered: "The misfortune is this: if it had not been for this abominable conspiracy, which has dishonored me, Marguerite would have been my wife before a month had elapsed, for now she is free, absolutely free to obey the dictates of her own will and heart."

"Then why do you complain?"

"Oh, mother! don't you understand? How can I marry her? Would it be right for me to think of offering her a dishonored name? It seems to me that I should be guilty of a most contemptible act—of something even worse than a crime—if I dared speak to her of my love and our future before I have crushed the villains who have ruined me."

Regret, anger, and the consciousness of his present powerlessness drew from him tears which fell upon Madame Ferailleur's heart like molten lead; but she succeeded in concealing her agony. "All the more reason," she answered, almost coldly, "why you should not lose a second, but devote all your energy and intelligence to the work of justification."

"Oh, I shall have my revenge, never fear. But in the meantime, what is to become of HER? Think, mother, she is alone in the world, without a single friend. It is enough to drive one mad!"

“She loves you, you tell me. What have you to fear? Now she will be freed from the persecutions of the suitor they intended to force upon her, whom she has spoken to you about—the Marquis de Valorsay, is it not?”

This name sent Pascal’s blood to his brain. “Ah, the scoundrel!” he exclaimed. “If there was a God in heaven——”

“Wretched boy!” interrupted Madame Ferailleur; “you blaspheme when Providence has already interposed on your behalf. And who suffers most at this moment, do you think?—you, strong in your innocence, or the marquis, who realizes that he has committed an infamous crime in vain?”

The sudden stopping of the cab put an end to their conversation. Leaving the Route d’Asnieres, the driver had turned into the Route de la Revolte, and had drawn up in front of an unpretentious two-storied house which stood entirely alone. “We have arrived, mother,” said Pascal.

A man, who was standing on the threshold, stepped forward to open the cab door. It was the furniture-dealer. “Here you are at last, M. Maumejan,” said he. “Come in, and you’ll see that I’ve strictly fulfilled the conditions of our contract.” His words proved true. He was paid the sum stipulated, and went away satisfied.

“Now, my dear mother,” said Pascal, “allow me to do the honors of the poor abode I have selected.”

He had taken only the ground floor of this humble dwelling. The story above, which had an independent entrance and staircase, was occupied by the quiet family of the owner. Although the space was small, the architect had made the most of it. He had divided it into four small rooms, separated by a corridor; and the kitchen looked out upon a little garden about four times as large as an ordinary sheet. The furniture which Pascal had purchased was more than plain; but it was well suited to this humble abode. It had just been brought in, but any one would have supposed it had been in its place for a couple of years.

“We shall be very comfortable here,” declared Madame Ferailleur. “Yes, very comfortable. By to-morrow evening you won’t recognize the place. I have saved a few trifles from the wreck—some curtains, a couple of lamps, a clock—you’ll see. It’s wonderful how much four trunks can be made to hold.”

When his mother set him such a noble example Pascal would have blushed to allow himself to be outdone. He very quietly explained the reasons which had influenced him in choosing these rooms, the principal one being that there was no concierge, and he was therefore assured absolute liberty in his movements, as well as entire immunity from indiscreet gossip. “Certainly, my dear mother,” he added, “it is a lonely and unattractive neighborhood; but you will find all the necessaries of life near at hand. The owner of the house lives on the floor above. I have talked with the wife—they seem to be honest, quiet people—and she will pilot you about. I inquired for some one to do the heavy work, and she mentioned a poor woman named Vantrasson, who lives in the neighborhood, and who is anxious to obtain employment. They were to inform her this evening, and you will see her to-morrow. And above all, don’t forget that you are henceforth Madame Maumejan.”

Occupied with these arrangements for the future, he was still talking, when Madame Ferailleur, drawing out her watch, gently remarked: “And your appointment? You forget that the cab is waiting at the door.”

It was true; he had forgotten it. He caught up his hat, hastily embraced his mother, and sprang into the vehicle. The horses were almost exhausted, but the driver was so willing that he found a means of making them trot as far as the Rue de Courcelles. However, on arriving there, he declared that his animals and himself could endure no more, and after receiving the amount due to him, he departed.

The air was chilly, the night dark, and the street deserted. The gloomy silence was only disturbed at long intervals by the opening or shutting of a door, or by the distant tread of some belated pedestrian. Having at least twenty minutes to wait, Pascal sat down on the curbstone opposite the Hotel de Chalusse, and fixed his eyes upon the building as if he were

striving to penetrate the massive walls, and see what was passing within. Only one window—that of the room where the dead man was lying—was lighted up, and he could vaguely distinguish the motionless form of a woman standing with her forehead pressed against the pane of glass. A prey to the indescribable agony which seizes a man when he feels that his life is at stake—that his future is about to be irrevocably decided—Pascal counted the seconds as they passed by. He found it impossible to reflect, to deliberate, to decide on any plan of action. He forgot the tortures he had endured during the last twenty-four hours; Coralth, Valorsay, Madame d'Argeles, the baron, no longer existed for him. He forgot his loss of honor and position, and the disgrace attached to his name. The past was annihilated, as it were, and he could think of no future beyond the next few moments. His physical condition undoubtedly contributed to his mental weakness. He had taken no food that day, and he was faint from want of nourishment. He had come without an overcoat, moreover, and the cold night air chilled him to the bone. There was a strange ringing in his ears, and a mist swam before his eyes. At last the bell at the Beaujon Hospital tolled the appointed hour, and roused him from his lethargy. He seemed to hear a voice crying to him in the darkness, "Up! the hour has come!"

Trembling, and with tottering limbs, he dragged himself to the little gate opening into the gardens of the Chalusse mansion. Soon it softly opened, and Madame Leon appeared. Ah! it was not she that Pascal had hoped to see. Unfortunate man! He had been listening to that mysterious echo of our own desires which we so often mistake for a presentiment; and it had whispered in his heart: "Marguerite herself will come!"

With the candor of wretchedness, he could not refrain from telling Madame Leon the hope he had entertained. But, on hearing him, the housekeeper recoiled with a gesture of outraged propriety, and reproachfully exclaimed: "What are you thinking of, monsieur? What!

could you suppose that Mademoiselle Marguerite would abandon her place by her dead father's bedside to come to a rendezvous? Ah! you should think better of her than that, the dear child!"

He sighed deeply, and in a scarcely audible voice, he asked: "Hasn't she even sent me a reply?"

"Yes, monsieur, she has; and although it is a great indiscretion on my part, I bring you the letter. Here it is. Now, good-evening. I must go at once. What would become of me if the servants discovered my absence, and found that I had gone out alone——"

She was hurrying away, but Pascal detained her. "Pray wait until I see what she has written," he said, imploringly. "I shall perhaps be obliged to send her some message in reply."

Madame Leon obeyed, though with rather bad grace, and not without several times repeating: "Make haste!"—while Pascal ran to a street lamp near by. It was not a letter that Marguerite had sent him, but a short note, written on a scrap of crumpled paper, folded, and not sealed. It was written in pencil; and the handwriting was irregular and indistinct. Still, by the flickering light of the gas, Pascal deciphered the word "Monsieur." It made him shudder. "Monsieur!" What did this mean? In writing to him of recent times, Marguerite had always said, "My dear Pascal," or, "My friend."

Nevertheless, he continued: "I have not had the courage to resist the entreaties made to me by the Count de Chalusse, my father, in his last agony. I have solemnly pledged myself to become the wife of the Marquis de Valorsay.

"One cannot break a promise made to the dying. I shall keep mine, even though my heart break. I shall do my duty. God will give me strength and courage. Forget her whom you loved. She is now the betrothed of another, and honor commands her to forget your very name. Once more, and for the last time, farewell! If you love me, you will not try to see me again. It would only add to my misery.

"Think as though she were dead—she who signs herself—MARGUERITE."

The commonplace wording of this letter, and the mistakes in spelling that marred it, entirely escaped Pascal's notice. He only understood one thing, that Marguerite was lost to him, and that she was on the point of becoming the wife of the vile scoundrel who had planned the snare which had ruined him at the Hotel d'Argeles. Breathless, despairing, and half crazed with rage, he sprang toward Madame Leon. "Marguerite, where is she?" he demanded, in a hoarse, unnatural voice; "I must see her!"

"Oh! monsieur, what do you ask? Is it possible? Allow me to explain to you——" But the housekeeper was unable to finish her sentence, for Pascal had caught her by the hands, and holding them in a vicelike grip, he repeated: "I must see Marguerite, and speak to her. I must tell her that she has been deceived; I will unmask the scoundrel who——"

The frightened housekeeper struggled with all her might, trying her best to reach the little gate which was standing open. "You hurt me!" she cried. "Are you mad? Let me go or I shall call for help?" And twice indeed she shouted in a loud voice, "Help! murder!"

But her cries were lost in the stillness of the night. If any one heard them, no one came; still they recalled Pascal to a sense of the situation, and he was ashamed of his violence. He released Madame Leon, and his manner suddenly became as humble as it had been threatening. "Excuse me," he said, entreatingly. "I am suffering so much that I don't know what I'm doing. I beseech you to take me to Mademoiselle Marguerite, or else run and beg her to come here. I ask but a moment."

Madame Leon pretended to be listening attentively; but, in reality, she was quietly manoeuvring to gain the garden gate. Soon she succeeded in doing so, whereupon, with marvellous strength and agility, she pushed Pascal away, and sprang inside the garden, closing the gate after her, and saying as she did so, "Begone, you scoundrel!"

This was the final blow; and for more than a minute Pascal stood motionless in front of the gate, stupefied with mingled rage and sorrow. His condition was not unlike that of a man who, after falling to the bottom of a precipice, is dragging himself up, all mangled and bleeding,

swearing that he will yet save himself, when suddenly a heavy stone which he had loosened in his descent, falls forward and crushes him. All that he had so far endured was nothing in comparison with the thought that Valorsay would wed Marguerite. Was such a thing possible? Would God permit such a monstrous iniquity? “No, that shall never be,” he muttered. “I will murder the scoundrel rather; and afterward justice may do whatever it likes with me.”

He experienced that implacable, merciless thirsting for vengeance which does not even recoil before the commission of a crime to secure satisfaction, and this longing inflamed him with such energy that, although he had been so utterly exhausted a few moments before—he was not half an hour in making his way back to his new home. His mother, who was waiting for him with an anxious heart, was surprised by the flush on his cheeks, and the light glittering in his eyes. “Ah, you bring good news,” she exclaimed.

His only answer was to hand her the letter which Madame Leon had given him, saying as he did so, “Read.”

Madame Ferailleur’s eyes fell upon the words: “Once more, and for the last time, farewell!” She understood everything, turned very pale, and in a trembling voice exclaimed: “Don’t grieve, my son; the girl did not love you.”

“Oh, mother! if you knew——”

But she checked him with a gesture, and lifting her head proudly, she said: “I know what it is to love, Pascal—it is to have perfect faith. If the whole world had accused your father of a crime, would a single doubt of his innocence have ever entered my mind? This girl has doubted you. They have told her that you cheated at cards—and she has believed it. You have failed to see that this oath at the bedside of the dying count is only an excuse.”

It was true; the thought had not occurred to Pascal. “My God!” he cried in agony; “are you the only one who believes in my innocence?”

“Without proofs—yes. It must be your task to obtain these proofs.”

“And I shall obtain them,” he rejoined, in a tone of determination. “I am strong now that I have Marguerite’s life to defend—for they have deceived her, mother, or she would never have given me up. Oh! don’t shake your head. I love her, and so I trust her.”

XVII.

M. Isidore Fortunat was not the man to go to sleep over a plan when it was once formed. Whenever he said to himself, “I’ll do this, or that,” he did it as soon as possible—that very evening, rather than the next day. Having sworn that he would find out Madame d’Argeles’s son, the heir to the Count de Chalusse’s millions, it did not take him long to decide which of his agents he would select to assist him in this difficult task. Thus his first care, on returning home, was to ask his bookkeeper for Victor Chupin’s address.

“He lives in the Faubourg Saint-Denis,” replied the bookkeeper, “at No.—.”

“Very well,” muttered M. Fortunat; “I’ll go there as soon as I have eaten my dinner.” And, indeed, as soon as he had swallowed his coffee, he requested Madame Dodelin to bring him his overcoat, and half an hour later he reached the door of the house where his clerk resided.

The house was one of those huge, ungainly structures, large enough to shelter the population of a small village, with three or four courtyards, as many staircases as there are letters in the alphabet, and a concierge who seldom remembers the names of the tenants except on quarter-days when he goes to collect the rent, and at New Year, when he expects a gratuity. But, by one of those lucky chances made expressly for M. Fortunat, the porter did recollect Chupin, knew him and was kindly disposed toward him, and so he told the visitor exactly how and where to find him. It was very simple. He had only to cross the first courtyard, take staircase D, on the left-hand side, ascend to the sixth floor, go straight ahead, etc., etc.

Thanks to this unusual civility, M. Fortunat did not lose his way more than five times before reaching the door upon which was fastened a bit of pasteboard bearing Victor Chupin’s name. Noticing that a bell-rope hung beside the door, M. Fortunat pulled it, whereupon there was a

tinkling, and a voice called out, “Come in!” He complied, and found himself in a small and cheaply furnished room, which was, however, radiant with the cleanliness which is in itself a luxury. The waxed floor shone like a mirror; the furniture was brilliantly polished, and the counterpane and curtains of the bed were as white as snow. What first attracted the agent’s attention was the number of superfluous articles scattered about the apartment—some plaster statuettes on either side of a gilt clock, an etagere crowded with knickknacks, and five or six passable engravings. When he entered, Victor Chupin was sitting, in his shirt-sleeves, at a little table, where, by the light of a small lamp, and with a zeal that brought a flush to his cheeks, he was copying, in a very fair hand a page from a French dictionary. Near the bed, in the shade, sat a poorly but neatly clad woman about forty years of age, who was knitting industriously with some long wooden needles.

“M. Victor Chupin?” inquired M. Fortunat.

The sound of his voice made the young man spring to his feet. He quickly lifted the shade from his lamp, and, without attempting to conceal his astonishment, exclaimed: “M’sieur Fortunat!—at this hour! Where’s the fire?” Then, in a grave manner that contrasted strangely with his accustomed levity: “Mother,” said he, “this is one of my patrons, M’sieur Fortunat—you know—the gentleman whom I collect for.”

The knitter rose, bowed respectfully, and said: “I hope, sir, that you are pleased with my son, and that he’s honest.”

“Certainly, madame,” replied the agent; “certainly. Victor is one of my best and most reliable clerks.”

“Then I’m content,” said the woman, reseating herself.

Chupin also seemed delighted “This is my good mother, sir,” said he. “She’s almost blind now; but, in less than six months she will be able to stand at her window and see a pin in the middle of the street, so the physician who is treating her eyes promised me; then we shall be all right again. But take a seat, sir. May we venture to offer you anything?”

Although his clerk had more than once alluded to his responsibilities, M. Fortunat was amazed. He marvelled at the perfume of honesty which exhaled from these poor people, at the dignity of this humble woman, and at the protecting and respectful affection evinced by her son—a young man, whose usual tone of voice and general behavior had seemed to indicate that he was decidedly a scapegrace. "Thanks, Victor," he replied, "I won't take any refreshment. I've just left the dinner-table. I've come to give you my instructions respecting a very important and very urgent matter."

Chupin at once understood that his employer wished for a private interview. Accordingly, he took up the lamp, opened a door, and, in the pompous tone of a rich banker who is inviting some important personage to enter his private room, he said: "Will you be kind enough to step into my chamber, m'sieur?"

The room which Chupin so emphatically denominated his "chamber" was a tiny nook, extraordinarily clean, it is true, but scantily furnished with a small iron bedstead, a trunk, and a chair. He offered the chair to his visitor, placed the lamp on the trunk, and seated himself on the bed, saying as he did so: "This is scarcely on so grand a scale as your establishment, m'sieur; but I am going to ask the landlord to gild the window of my snuff-box."

M. Fortunat was positively touched. He held out his hand to his clerk and exclaimed: "You're a worthy fellow, Chupin."

"Nonsense, m'sieur, one does what one can; but, zounds! how hard it is to make money honestly! If my good mother could only see, she would help me famously, for there is no one like her for work! But you see one can't become a millionaire by knitting!"

"Doesn't your father live with you?"

Chupin's eyes gleamed angrily. "Ah! don't speak of that man to me, m'sieur!" he exclaimed, "or I shall hurt somebody." And then, as if he felt it necessary to explain and excuse his vindictive exclamation, he added: "My father, Polyte Chupin, is a good-for-nothing scamp. And yet he's had his opportunities. First, he was fortunate enough to find a wife like

my mother, who is honesty itself—so much so that she was called Toinon the Virtuous when she was young. She idolized him, and nearly killed herself by working to earn money for him. And yet he abused her so much, and made her weep so much, that she has become blind. But that's not all. One morning there came to him—I don't know whence or how—enough money for him to have lived like a gentleman. I believe it was a munificent reward for some service he had rendered a great nobleman at the time when my grandmother, who is now dead, kept a dramshop called the Poivriere. Any other man would have treasured that money, but not he. What he did was to carouse day and night, and all the while my poor mother was working her fingers to the bone to earn food for me. She never saw a penny of all his money; and, indeed, once when she asked him to pay the rent, he beat her so cruelly that she was laid up in bed for a week. However, monsieur, you can very readily understand that when a man leads that kind of life, he speedily comes to the end of his banking account. So my father was soon without a penny in his purse, and then he was obliged to work in order to get something to eat, and this didn't suit him at all. But when he didn't know where to find a crust he remembered us; he sought us out, and found us. Once I lent him a hundred sous; the next day he came for forty more, and the next for three francs; then for five francs again. And so it was every day: 'Give me this, or give me that!' At last I said, 'Enough of this, the bank's closed!' Then, what do you think he did? He watched the house until he saw me go out; then he came in with a second-hand furniture-dealer, and tried to sell everything, pretending that he was the master. And my poor, dear mother would have allowed him to do it. Fortunately, I happened to come in again. Let him sell my furniture? Not I. I would sooner have been chopped in pieces! I went and complained to the commissary of police, who made my father leave the house, and since then we've lived in peace."

Certainly this was more than sufficient to explain and excuse Victor Chupin's indignation. And yet he had prudently withheld the most serious and important cause of his dislike. What he refrained from telling was that years before, when he was still a mere child, without will

or discernment, his father had taken him from his mother, and had started him down that terrible descent, which inevitably leads one to prison or the gallows, unless there be an almost miraculous interposition on one's behalf. This miracle had occurred in Chupin's case; but he did not boast of it.

"Come, come!" said M. Fortunat, "don't worry too much about it. A father's a father after all, and yours will undoubtedly reform by and by."

He said this as he would have said anything else, out of politeness and for the sake of testifying a friendly interest; but he really cared no more for this information concerning the Chupin family than the grand Turk. His first emotion had quickly vanished; and he was beginning to find these confidential disclosures rather wearisome. "Let us get back to business," he remarked; "that is to say, to Casimir. What did you do with the fool after my departure?"

"First, monsieur, I sobered him; which was no easy task. The greedy idiot had converted himself into a wine-cask! At last, however, when he could talk as well as you and I, and walk straight, I took him back to the Hotel de Chalusse."

"That was right. But didn't you have some business to transact with him?"

"That's been arranged, monsieur; the agreement has been signed. The count will have the best of funerals—the finest hearse out, with six horses, twenty-four mourning coaches—a grand display, in fact. It will be worth seeing."

M. Fortunat smiled graciously. "That ought to bring you a handsome commission," he said, benignly.

Employed by the job, Chupin was the master of his own time, free to utilize his intelligence and industry as he chose, but M. Fortunat did not like his subordinates to make any money except through him. Hence his approval, in the present instance, was so remarkable that it awakened Chupin's suspicions. "I shall make a few sous, probably," he modestly replied, "a trifle to aid my good mother in keeping the pot boiling."

“So much the better, my boy,” said M. Fortunat. “I like to see money gained by those who make a good use of it. And to prove this, I’m about to employ you in an affair which will pay you handsomely if you prosecute it successfully.”

Chupin’s eyes brightened at first but grew dark a moment afterward, for delight had been quickly followed by a feeling of distrust. He thought it exceedingly strange that an employer should take the trouble to climb to a sixth floor merely for the purpose of conferring a favor on his clerk. There must be something behind all this; and so it behove him to keep his eyes open. However, he knew how to conceal his real feelings; and it was with a joyous air that he exclaimed: “Eh! What? Money? Now? What must I do to earn it?”

“Oh! a mere trifle,” replied the agent; “almost nothing, indeed.” And drawing his chair nearer to the bed on which his employee was seated, he added: “But first, one question, Victor. By the way in which a woman looks at a young man in the street, at the theatre or anywhere—would you know if she were watching her son?”

Chupin shrugged his shoulders. “What a question!” he retorted. “Nonsense! monsieur, it would be impossible to deceive me. I should only have to remember my mother’s eyes when I return home in the evening. Poor woman! although she’s half blind, she sees me—and if you wish to make her happy, you’ve only to tell her I’m the handsomest and most amiable youth in Paris.”

M. Fortunat could not refrain from rubbing his hands, so delighted was he to see his idea so perfectly understood and so admirably expressed. “Good!” he declared; “very good! That’s intelligence, if I am any judge. I have not been deceived in you, Victor.”

Victor was on fire with curiosity. “What am I to do, monsieur?” he asked eagerly.

“This: you must follow a woman whom I shall point out to you, follow her everywhere without once losing sight of her, and so skilfully as not to let her suspect it. You must watch her every glance, and when her eyes tell you that she is looking at her son, your task will be nearly over. You

will then only have to follow this son, and find out his name and address, what he does, and how he lives. I don't know if I explain what I mean very clearly."

This doubt was awakened in M. Fortunat's mind by Chupin's features, which were expressive of lively astonishment and discontent. "Excuse me, monsieur," he said, at last, "I do not understand at all."

"It's very simple, however. The lady in question has a son about twenty. I know it—I'm sure of it. But she denies it; she conceals the fact, and he doesn't even know her. She secretly watches over him, however—she provides him with money, and every day she finds some way of seeing him. Now, it is to my interest to find this son."

Chupin's mobile face became actually threatening in its expression; he frowned darkly, and his lips quivered. Still this did not prevent M. Fortunat from adding, with the assurance of a man who does not even suspect the possibility of a refusal: "Now, when shall we set about our task?"

"Never!" cried Chupin, violently; and, rising, he continued: "No! I wouldn't let my good mother eat bread earned in that way—it would strangle her! Turn spy! I? Thanks—some one else may have the job!" He had become as red as a turkey-cock, and such was his indignation that he forgot his accustomed reserve and the caution with which he had so far concealed his antecedents. "I know this game—I've tried it!" he went on, vehemently. "One might as well take one's ticket to prison by a direct road. I should be there now if it hadn't been for Monsieur Andre. I was thirsting for gold, and, like the brigand that I was, I should have killed the man; but in revenge he drew me from the mire and placed my feet on solid ground once more. And now, shall I go back to my vile tricks again? Why, I'd rather cut my leg off! I'm to hunt down this poor woman—I'm to discover her secret so that you may extort money from her, am I? No, not I! I should like to be rich, and I shall be rich; but I'll make my money honestly. I hope to touch my hundred-franc pieces without being obliged to wash my hands afterward. So, a very good evening to your establishment."

M. Fortunat was amazed, and at the same time much annoyed, to find himself forsaken on account of such a trifle. He feared, too, that Chupin might let his tongue wag if he left his employment. So, since he had confided this project to Chupin, he was determined that Chupin alone should carry it into execution. Assuming his most severe and injured manner, he sternly exclaimed: "I think you have lost your senses." His demeanor and intonation were so perfectly cool that Chupin seemed slightly abashed. "It seems that you think me capable of urging you to commit some dangerous and dishonorable act," continued M. Fortunat.

"Why—no—m'sieur—I assure you."

There was such evident hesitation in the utterance of this "no" that the agent at once resumed: "Come, you are not ignorant of the fact that in addition to my business as a collector, I give my attention to the discovery of the heirs of unclaimed estates? You are aware of this? Very well then: pray tell me how I am to find them without searching for them? If I wish this lady to be watched, it is only in view of reaching a poor lad who is likely to be defrauded of the wealth that rightfully belongs to him. And when I give you a chance to make forty or fifty francs in a couple of days, you receive my proposition in this style! You are an ingrate and a fool, Victor!"

Chupin's nature combined, in a remarkable degree, the vices and peculiarities of the dweller in the Paris faubourgs, who is born old, but who, when aged in years, still remains a gamin. In his youth he had seen many strange things, and acquired a knowledge of life that would have put the experience of a philosopher to shame. But he was not fit to cope with M. Fortunat, who had an immense advantage over him, by reason of his position of employer, as well as by his fortune and education. So Chupin was both bewildered and disconcerted by the cool arguments his patron brought forward; and what most effectually allayed his suspicions was the small compensation offered for the work—merely forty or fifty francs. "Small potatoes, upon my word!" he thought. "Just the price of

an honest service; he would have offered more for a piece of rascality." So, after considering a moment, he said, aloud: "Very well; I'm your man, m'sieur."

M. Fortunat was secretly laughing at the success of his ruse. Having come with the intention of offering his agent a handsome sum, he was agreeably surprised to find that Chupin's scruples would enable him to save his money. "If I hadn't found you engaged in study, Victor," he said, "I should have thought you had been drinking. What venomous insect stung you so suddenly? Haven't I confided similar undertakings to you twenty times since you have been in my employment? Who ransacked Paris to find certain debtors who were concealing themselves? Who discovered the Vantrassons for me? Victor Chupin. Very well. Then allow me to say that I see nothing in this case in any way differing from the others, nor can I understand why this should be wrong, if the others were not."

Chupin could only have answered this remark by saying that there had been no mystery about the previous affairs, that they had not been proposed to him late at night at his own home, and that he had acted openly, as a person who represents a creditor has a recognized right to act. But, though he felt that there WAS a difference in the present case, it would have been very difficult for him to explain in what this difference consisted. Hence, in his most resolute tone: "I'm only a fool, m'sieur," he declared; "but I shall know how to make amends for my folly."

"That means you have recovered your senses," said M. Fortunat, ironically. "Really, that's fortunate. But let me give you one bit of advice: watch yourself, and learn to bridle your tongue. You won't always find me in such a good humor as I am this evening."

So saying, he rose, passed out into the adjoining room, bowed civilly to his clerk's mother, and went off. His last words, as he crossed the threshold, were, "So I shall rely upon you. Be at the office to-morrow a little before noon."

"It's agreed m'sieur."

The blind woman had risen, and had bowed respectfully; but, as soon as she was alone with her son, she asked: “What is this business he bids you undertake in such a high and mighty tone?”

“Oh! an every-day matter, mother.”

The old woman shook her head. “Why were you talking so loud then?” she inquired. “Weren’t you quarrelling? It must be something very grave when it’s necessary to conceal it from me. I couldn’t see your employer’s face, my son; but I heard his voice, and it didn’t please me. It isn’t the voice of an honest, straightforward man. Take care, Toto, and don’t allow yourself to be cajoled—be prudent.”

However, it was quite unnecessary to recommend prudence to Victor Chupin. He had promised his assistance, but not without a mental reservation. “No need to see danger till it comes,” he had said to himself. “If the thing proves to be of questionable propriety after all, then good-evening; I desert.”

It remains to know what he meant by questionable propriety; the meaning of the expression is rather vague. He had returned in all honesty and sincerity of purpose to an honest life, and nothing in the world would have induced him, avaricious though he was, to commit an act that was positively wrong. Only the line that separates good from evil was not very clearly defined in his mind. This was due in a great measure to his education, and to the fact that it had been long before he realized that police regulations do not constitute the highest moral law. It was due also to chance, and, since he had no decided calling, to the necessity of depending for a livelihood upon the many strange professions which impecunious and untrained individuals, both of the higher and lower classes, adopt in Paris.

However, on the following morning he arrayed himself in his best apparel, and at exactly half-past eleven o’clock he rang at his employer’s door. M. Fortunat had made quick work with his clients that morning, and was ready, dressed to go out. He took up his hat and said only the one word, “Come.” The place where the agent conducted his clerk was the wine-shop in the Rue de Berry, where he had made inquiries

respecting Madame d'Argeles the evening before; and on arriving there, he generously offered him a breakfast. Before entering, however, he pointed out Madame d'Argeles's pretty house on the opposite side of the street, and said to him: "The woman whom you are to follow, and whose son you are to discover, will emerge from that house."

At that moment, after a night passed in meditating upon his mother's prophetic warnings, Chupin was again beset by the same scruples which had so greatly disturbed him on the previous evening. However, they soon vanished when he heard the wine-vendor, in reply to M. Fortunat's skilful questions, begin to relate all he knew concerning Madame Lia d'Argeles, and the scandalous doings at her house. The seeker after lost heirs and his clerk were served at a little table near the door; and while they partook of the classical beef-steak and; potatoes—M. Fortunat eating daintily, and Chupin bolting his food with the appetite of a ship-wrecked mariner—they watched the house opposite.

Madame d'Argeles received on Saturdays, and, as Chupin remarked, "there was a regular procession of visitors."

Standing beside M. Fortunat, and flattered by the attention which such a well-dressed gentleman paid to his chatter, the landlord of the house mentioned the names of all the visitors he knew. And he knew a good number of them, for the coachmen came to his shop for refreshments when their masters were spending the night in play at Madame d'Argeles's house. So he was able to name the Viscount de Coralth, who dashed up to the door in a two-horse phaeton, as well as Baron Trigault, who came on foot, for exercise, puffing and blowing like a seal. The wine-vendor, moreover, told his customers that Madame d'Argeles never went out before half-past two or three o'clock, and then always in a carriage—a piece of information which must have troubled Chupin; for, as soon as the landlord had left them to serve some other customers, he leant forward and said to M. Fortunat: "Did you hear that? How is it possible to track a person who's in a carriage?"

"By following in another vehicle, of course."

“Certainly, m’sieur; that’s as clear as daylight. But that isn’t the question. The point is this: How can one watch the face of a person who turns her back to you? I must see this woman’s face to know whom she looks at, and how.”

This objection, grave as it appeared, did not seem to disturb M. Fortunat. “Don’t worry about that, Victor,” he replied. “Under such circumstances, a mother wouldn’t try to see her son from a rapidly moving carriage. She will undoubtedly alight, and contrive some means of passing and repassing him—of touching him, if possible. Your task will only consist in following her closely enough to be on the ground as soon as she is. Confine your efforts to that; and if you fail to-day, you’ll succeed to-morrow or the day after—the essential thing is to be patient.”

He did better than to preach patience—he practised it. The hours wore away, and yet he did not stir from his post, though nothing could have been more disagreeable to him than to remain on exhibition, as it were, at the door of a wine-shop. At last, at a little before three o’clock, the gates over the way turned upon their hinges, and a dark-blue victoria, in which a woman was seated, rolled forth into the street. “Look!” said M. Fortunat, eagerly. “There she is!”

XVIII.

The woman in the carriage was none other than Madame Lia d'Argeles. She was attired in one of those startling costumes which are the rage nowadays, and which impart the same bold and brazen appearance to all who wear them: so much so, that the most experienced observers are no longer able to distinguish the honest mother of a family from a notorious character. A Dutchman, named Van Klopen, who was originally a tailor at Rotterdam, rightfully ascribes the honor of this progress to himself. One can scarcely explain how it happens that this individual, who calls himself "the dressmaker of the queens of Europe," has become the arbiter of Parisian elegance; but it is an undeniable fact that he does reign over fashion. He decrees the colors that shall be worn, decides whether dresses shall be short or long, whether paniers shall be adopted or discarded, whether ruches and puffs and flowers shall be allowed, and in what form; and his subjects, the so-called elegant women of Paris, obey him implicitly.

Madame d'Argeles would personally have preferred less finery, perhaps, but it would not have done for her to be out of the fashion. She wore an imperceptible hat, balanced on an immense pyramidal chignon, from which escaped a torrent of wavy hair. "What a beautiful woman!" exclaimed the dazzled Chupin, and indeed, seen from this distance, she did not look a day more than thirty-five—an age when beauty possesses all the alluring charm of the luscious fruit of autumn. She was giving orders for the drive, and her coachman, with a rose in his buttonhole, listened while he reined in the spirited horse. "The weather's superb," added Chupin. "She'll no doubt drive round the lakes in the Bois de Boulogne——"

"Ah, she's off!" interrupted M. Fortunat. "Run, Victor, run! and don't be miserly as regards carriage hire; all your expenses shall be liberally refunded you."

Chupin was already far away. Madame d'Argeles's horse went swiftly enough, but the agent's emissary had the limbs and the endurance of a stag, and he kept pace with the victoria without much difficulty. And as he ran along, his brain was busy. "If I don't take a cab," he said to himself, "if I follow the woman on foot, I shall have a perfect right to pocket the forty-five sous an hour—fifty, counting the gratuity—that a cab would cost."

But on reaching the Champ Elysees, he discovered, to his regret, that this plan was impracticable, for on running down the Avenue de l'Imperatrice after the rapidly driven carriage, he could not fail to attract attention. Stifling a sigh of regret, and seeing a cab at a stand near by, he hastily hailed it. "Where do you want to go, sir?" inquired the driver.

"Just follow that blue victoria, in which a handsome lady is seated, my good fellow."

The order did not surprise the cabman, but rather the person who gave it; for in spite of his fine apparel, Chupin did not seem quite the man for such an adventure. "Excuse me," said the Jehu, in a slightly ironical tone, "I——"

"I said exactly what I mean," retorted Chupin, whose pride was severely wounded. "And no more talk—hurry on, or we shall miss the track."

This last remark was correct, for if Madame d'Argeles's coachman had not slackened his horse's speed on passing round the Arc de Triomphe, the woman would have escaped Chupin, for that day at least. However, this circumstance gave the cabman an opportunity to overtake the victoria; and after that the two vehicles kept close together as they proceeded down the Avenue de l'Imperatrice. But at the entrance of the Bois de Boulogne Chupin ordered his driver to stop. "Halt!" he exclaimed; "I shall get out. Pay the extra cab charges for passing beyond the limits of Paris!—never! I'll crawl on my hands and knees first. Here are forty sous for your fare—and good-evening to you."

And, as the blue victoria was already some distance in advance, he started off at the top of his speed to overtake it. This manoeuvre was the result of his meditations while riding along. “What will this fine lady do when she gets to the Bois?” he asked himself. “Why, her coachman will take his place in the procession, and drive her slowly round and round the lakes. Meantime I can trot along beside her without attracting attention—and it will be good for my health.”

His expectations were realized in every respect. The victoria soon turned to the left, and took its place in the long line of equipages which were slowly winding round the lake. Having gained the foot-path which borders the sheet of water, Chupin followed the carriage easily enough, with his hands in his pockets, and his heart jubilant at the thought that he would gain the sum supposed to have been spent in cab hire, in addition to the compensation which had been promised him. “This is a strange way of enjoying one’s self,” he muttered, as he trotted along. “There can’t be much pleasure in going round and round this lake. If ever I’m rich, I’ll find some other way of amusing myself.”

Poor Chupin did not know that people do not go to the Bois to enjoy themselves, but rather to torment others. This broad drive is in reality only a field for the airing of vanity—a sort of open-air bazaar for the display of dresses and equipages. People come here to see and to be seen; and, moreover, this is neutral ground, where so-called honest women can meet those notorious characters from whom they are elsewhere separated by an impassable abyss. What exquisite pleasure it must be to the dames of society to find themselves beside Jenny Fancy or Ninette Simplon, or any other of those young ladies whom they habitually call “creatures,” but whom they are continually talking of, and whose toilettes, make-up, and jargon, they assiduously copy!

However, Chupin indulged in none of these reflections. He was engaged in noting Madame d’Argeles’s evident anxiety and restlessness. She looked eagerly on all sides, sometimes half leaning out of her carriage, and immediately turning her head whenever she heard the gallop of a horseman behind her. She was evidently looking or waiting

for some one, but the person did not make his appearance, and so, growing weary of waiting, after driving three times round the lake, she made a sign to her coachman, who at once drew out of line, and turned his horse into a side-path. Chupin hastened after the victoria, keeping it in sight until he was fortunate enough to meet an empty cab, which he at once hired. Madame d'Argeles's coachman, who had received his orders, now drove down the Champs Elysees, again crossed the Place de la Concorde, turned into the boulevards, and stopped short at the corner of the Chaussee d'Antin, where, having tied a thick veil over her face, Madame Lia abruptly alighted and walked away.

This was done so quickly that Chupin barely had time to fling two francs to his driver and rush after her. She had already turned round the corner of the Rue du Helder, and was walking rapidly up the street. It was a little after five o'clock, and dusk was setting in. Madame d'Argeles had taken the side of the street allotted to the uneven numbers. After she had passed the Hotel de Homburg, she slackened her pace, and eagerly scrutinized one of the houses opposite—No. 48. Her examination lasted but a moment, and seemed to be satisfactory. She then turned, and rapidly retraced her steps as far as the boulevard, when, crossing the street to the side of the even numbers, she walked up it again very slowly, stopping before every shop-window.

Convinced that he had almost reached the goal, Chupin also crossed, and followed closely at her heels. He soon saw her start and resume her rapid gait. A young man was coming toward her so quickly indeed that she had not time to avoid him, and a collision ensued, whereupon the young man gave vent to an oath, and hurling an opprobrious epithet in her face, passed on.

Chupin shuddered. "What if that should be her son?" he thought. And while he pretended to be gazing into a shop window, he stealthily watched the poor woman. She had paused, and he was so near that he could almost have touched her. He saw her raise her veil and follow her

insulter with a look which it was impossible to misunderstand. “Oh! oh! It was her son that called her that——” said Chupin to himself, quite horrified. And without more ado, he hastened after the young man.

He was between two and four-and-twenty years of age, rather above the medium height, with very light hair and an extremely pale complexion. His slight mustache would have been almost imperceptible if it had not been dyed several shades darker than his hair. He was attired with that studied carelessness which many consider to be the height of elegance, but which is just the reverse. And his bearing, his mustache, and his low hat, tipped rakishly over one ear, gave him an arrogant, pretentious, rowdyish appearance. “Zounds! that fellow doesn’t suit my fancy,” growled Chupin, as he trotted along. For he was almost running in his efforts to keep pace with Madame d’Argeles’s insulter. The latter’s haste was soon explained. He was carrying a letter which he wished to have delivered, and no doubt he feared he would not be able to find a commissionaire. Having discovered one at last, he called him, gave him the missive, and then pursued his way more leisurely.

He had reached the boulevard, when a florid-faced youth, remarkably short and stout, rushed toward him with both hands amicably extended, at the same time crying, loud enough to attract the attention of the passers-by: “Is it possible that this is my dear Wilkie?”

“Yes—alive and in the flesh,” replied the young man.

“Well, and what the devil have you been doing with yourself? Last Sunday, at the races, I looked for you everywhere, and not a vestige of Wilkie was to be found. However, you were wise not to go. I am three hundred louis out of pocket. I staked everything on Domingo, the Marquis de Valorsay’s horse. I thought I was sure to win—yes, sure. Well, Domingo came in third. Can you understand that? If every one didn’t know that Valorsay was a millionaire, it might be supposed there had been some foul play—yes, upon my word—that he had bet against his own horse, and forbidden his jockey to win the race.” But the speaker

did not really believe this, so he continued, more gayly: “Fortunately, I shall retrieve my losses to-morrow, at Vincennes. Shall we see you there?”

“Probably.”

“Then good-by, until to-morrow.”

“Until to-morrow.”

Thereupon they shook hands, and each departed on his way.

Chupin had not lost a word of this conversation. “Valorsay a millionaire!” he said to himself. “That’s good! Ah, well! now I know my little gamecock’s name, and I also know that he goes to the races. Wilkie that must be an English name; I like the name of d’Argeles better. But where the devil is he going now?”

M. Wilkie had simply paused to replenish his cigar-case at the tobacco office of the Grand Hotel; and, after lighting a cigar, he came out again, and walked up the boulevard in the direction of the Faubourg Montmartre. He was no longer in a hurry now; he strolled along in view of killing time, displaying his charms, and staring impudently at every woman who passed. With his shoulders drawn up on a level with his ears, and his chest thrown back, he dragged his feet after him as if his limbs were half paralyzed; he was indeed doing his best to create the impression that he was used up, exhausted, broken down by excesses and dissipation. For that is the fashion—the latest fancy—chic!

“Will you never have done?” growled Chupin.

“You shall pay for this, you little wretch!” He was so indignant that the gamin element in his nature stirred again under his fine broadcloth, and he had a wild longing to throw stones at M. Wilkie. He would certainly have trodden on his heels, and have picked a quarrel with him, had it not been for a fear of failing in his mission, and thereby losing his promised reward.

He followed his man closely, for the crowd was very great. Light was coming on, and the gas was lit on all sides. The weather was very mild, and there was not an unoccupied table in front of the cafes, for it was

now the absinthe hour. How does it happen that every evening, between five and seven o'clock, every one in Paris who is known—who is somebody or something—can be found between the Passage de l'Opera and the Passage Jouffroy? Hereabout you may hear all the latest news and gossip of the fashionable world, the last political canards—all the incidents of Parisian life which will be recorded by the papers on the following morning. You may learn the price of stocks, and obtain tips for to-morrow's Bourse; ascertain how much Mademoiselle A's necklace cost, and who gave it to her; with the latest news from Prussia; and the name of the bank chairman or cashier who has absconded during the day, and the amount he has taken with him.

The crowd became more dense as the Faubourg Montmartre was approached, but Wilkie made his way through the throng with the ease of an old boulevardier. He must have had a large circle of acquaintances, for he distributed bows right and left, and was spoken to by five or six promenaders. He did not pass the Terrasse Jouffroy, but, pausing there, he purchased an evening paper, retraced his steps, and about seven o'clock reached the Cafe Riche, which he entered triumphantly. He did not even touch the rim of his hat on going in—that would have been excessively BAD form; but he called a waiter, in a very loud voice, and imperiously ordered him to serve dinner on a table near the window, where he could see the boulevard—and be seen.

"And now my little fighting-cock is going to feed," thought Chupin. He, too, was hungry; and he was trying to think of some modest restaurant in the neighborhood, when two young men passed near him and glanced into the cafe.

"Look, there's Wilkie!" observed one of them.

"That's so, upon my word!" responded the other. "And he has money, too; fortune has smiled upon him."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, by watching the fellow; one can tell the condition of his purse as correctly as he could himself. If his funds are low, he has his meals brought to his room from a cook-shop where he has credit; his mustache

droops despondingly; he is humble even to servility with his friends, and he brushes his hair over his forehead. When he is in average circumstances, he dines at Launay's, waxes his mustache, and brushes his hair back from his face. But when he dines at the Cafe Riche, my boy, when he has dyed his mustache, and tips his hat over his ear, and deports himself in that arrogant fashion, why, he has at least five or six thousand francs in his pocket, and all is well with him."

"Where does he get his money from?"

"Who can tell?"

"Is he rich?"

"He must have plenty of money—I lent him ten louis once, and he paid me back."

"Zounds! He's a very honorable fellow, then." Thereupon the two young men laughed, and passed on.

Chupin had been greatly edified. "Now I know you as well as if I were your concierge," he muttered, addressing the unconscious Wilkie; "and when I've followed you home, and learned your number, I shall have richly earned the fifty francs M. Fortunat promised me." As well as he could judge through the windowpane, M. Wilkie was eating his dinner with an excellent appetite. "Ah!" he exclaimed, not without envy, "these fighting-cocks take good care of their stomachs. He's there for an hour at least, and I shall have time to run and swallow a mouthful myself."

So saying, Chupin hastened to a small restaurant in a neighboring street, and magnificently disbursed the sum of thirty-nine sous. Such extravagance was unusual on his part, for he had lived very frugally since he had taken a vow to become rich. Formerly, when he lived from hand to mouth—to use his own expression—he indulged in cigars and in absinthe; but now he contented himself with the fare of an anchorite, drank nothing but water, and only smoked when some one gave him a cigar. Nor was this any great privation to him, since he gained a penny by it—and a penny was another grain of sand added to the foundation of his future wealth. However, this evening he indulged in the extravagance of a glass of wine, deciding in his own mind that he had fairly earned it.

When he returned to his post in front of the Cafe Riche, M. Wilkie was no longer alone at his table. He was finishing his coffee in the company of a man of his own age, who was remarkably good-looking—almost too good-looking, in fact—and a glance at whom caused Chupin to exclaim: "What! what! I've seen that face somewhere before—". But he racked his brain in vain in trying to remember who this newcomer was, in trying to set a name on this face, which was positively annoying in its classical beauty, and which he felt convinced had occupied a place among the phantoms of his past. Irritated beyond endurance by what he termed his stupidity, he was trying to decide whether he should enter the cafe or not, when he saw M. Wilkie take his bill from the hands of a waiter, glance at it, and throw a louis on the table. His companion had drawn out his pocketbook for the ostensible purpose of paying for the coffee he had taken; but Wilkie, with a cordial gesture, forbade it, and made that magnificent, imperious sign to the waiter, which so clearly implies: "Take nothing! All is paid! Keep the change." Thereupon the servant gravely retired, more than ever convinced of the fact that vanity increases the fabulous total of Parisian gratuities by more than a million francs a year.

"My gallant youths are coming out," thought Chupin. "I must keep my ears open." And approaching the door, he dropped on one knee, and pretended to be engaged in tying his shoestrings. This is one of the thousand expedients adopted by spies and inquisitive people. And when a man is foolish enough to tell his secrets in the street, he should at least be wise enough to distrust the people near him who pretend to be absorbed in something else; for in nine cases out of ten these persons are listening to him, possibly for pay, or possibly from curiosity.

However, the young men whom Chupin was watching were far from suspecting that they were under surveillance. M. Wilkie came out first, talking very loud, as often happens when a man has just partaken of a good dinner, and is blessed with an excellent digestion. "Come, Coralth,

my good fellow, you won't desert me in this way? I have a box for the Varietes, and you must go with me. We'll see if Silly imitates Theresa as perfectly as they say."

"But I have an appointment."

"Oh, well, let it wait. Come, viscount, is it agreed?"

"Ah, you do with me just as you like."

"Good! But, first of all let us take a glass of beer to finish our cigars. And do you know whom you will find in my box?"

At this moment they passed, and Chupin rose to his feet. "Coralth," he muttered, "Viscount de Coralth. He's not one of our clients. Let me see, Coralth. This is certainly the first time I have ever heard the name. Can it be that I'm mistaken? Impossible!"

The more he reflected, the more thoroughly he became convinced of the accuracy of his first impression, consoling himself with the thought that a name has but a slight significance after all. His preoccupation had at least the advantage of shortening the time which he spent in promenading to and fro, while the friends sat outside a cafe smoking and drinking. It was still M. Wilkie who monopolized the conversation, while his companion listened with his elbow resting on the table, occasionally nodding his head in token of approbation. One thing that incensed Chupin was that they loitered there, when one of them had a ticket for a box at the theatre in his pocket.

"Idiots!" he growled; "they'll wait till the play's half over before they go in. And then they'll let the doors slam behind them for the express purpose of disturbing everybody. Fools, go!"

As if they had heard the command, they rose suddenly, and an instant after they entered the Varietes. They entered, but Chupin remained on the pavement, scratching his head furiously, in accordance with his habit whenever he wished to develop his powers of imagination. He was trying to think how he might procure admission to the theatre without paying for it. For several years he had seen every play put upon the stage in

Paris, without spending a sou, and he felt that it would be actually degrading to purchase a ticket at the office now. “Pay to see a farce!” he thought. “Not I. I must know some one here—I’ll wait for the entr’acte.”

The wisdom of this course became apparent when among those who left the theatre at the close of the first act he recognized an old acquaintance, who was now working on the claque, [3] and who at once procured him a ticket of admission for nothing. “Well, it is a good thing to have friends everywhere,” he muttered, as he took the seat assigned him.

It was a very good place they had given him—a seat in the second gallery commanding an excellent view of the house. The first glance around told him that his “customers,” as he styled them, were in a box exactly opposite. They were now in the company of two damsels in startling toilettes, with exceedingly dishevelled yellow hair, who moved restlessly about, and giggled and stared, and tried in every possible way to attract attention. And their stratagem succeeded. However, this did not seem to please the Viscount de Coralth, who kept himself as far back in the shade as he possibly could. But young Wilkie was evidently delighted, and seemed manifestly proud of the attention which the public was compelled to bestow upon his box. He offered himself as much as possible to the gaze of the audience; moved about, leaned forward, and made himself fully as conspicuous as his fair companions. Less than ever did Chupin now forgive Wilkie for the insult he had cast in the face of Madame Lia d’Argeles, who was probably his mother.

As for the play, M. Fortunat’s emissary did not hear twenty words of it. He was so overcome with fatigue that he soon fell asleep. The noise and bustle of each entr’acte aroused him a little, but he did not thoroughly wake up until the close of the performance. His “customers” were still in their box, and M. Wilkie was gallantly wrapping the ladies in their cloaks and shawls. In the vestibule, he and M. de Coralth were joined by several other young men, and the whole party adjourned to a neighboring cafe. “These people are certainly afflicted with an unquenchable thirst,” growled Chupin. “I wonder if this is their everyday life?”

He, too, was thirsty after his hastily eaten dinner; and necessity prevailing over economy, he seated himself at a table outside the cafe, and called for a glass of beer, in which he moistened his parched lips with a sigh of intense satisfaction. He sipped the beverage slowly, in order to make it last the longer, but this did not prevent his glass from becoming dry long before M. Wilkie and his friends were ready to leave. "It seems to me we are going to stay here all night," he thought, angrily.

His ill-humor was not strange under the circumstances, for it was one o'clock in the morning; and after carrying all the tables and chairs round about, inside, a waiter came to ask Chupin to go away. All the other cafes were closing too, and the fastening of bolts or the clanking of shutter chains could be heard on every side. On the pavement stood groups of waiters in their shirt-sleeves, stretching and yawning, and inhaling the fresh night air with delight. The boulevard was fast becoming deserted—the men were going off in little groups, and female forms could be seen gliding along in the dark shadow cast by the houses. The police were watching everywhere, with a word of menace ever ready on their lips; and soon the only means of egress from the cafes were the narrow, low doorways cut in the shutters through which the last customers—the insatiable, who are always ordering one thimbleful more to finish—passed out.

It was through a portal of this sort that M. Wilkie and his companions at last emerged, and on perceiving them, Chupin gave a grunt of satisfaction. "At last," he thought, "I can follow the man to his door, take his number, and go home."

But his joy was short-lived, for M. Wilkie proposed that the whole party should go and take supper. M. de Coralth demurred to the idea, but the others over-ruled his objections, and dragged him away with them.

XIX.

"Ah! this is a bad job!" growled Chupin. "Go, go, and never stop!"

What exasperated him even more than his want of sleep was the thought that his good mother must be waiting for him at home in an agony of anxiety; for since his reformation he had become remarkably regular in his habits. What should he do? "Go home," said Reason; "it will be easy enough to find this Wilkie again. There can be little doubt that he lives at No. 48, in the Rue du Helder." "Remain," whispered Avarice; "and, since you have accomplished so much, finish your work. M. Fortunat won't pay for conjectures, but for a certainty."

Love of money carried the day; so, weaving an interminable chaplet of oaths, he followed the party until they entered Brebant's restaurant, one of the best known establishments which remain open at night-time. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning now; the boulevard was silent and deserted, and yet this restaurant was brilliantly lighted from top to bottom, and snatches of song and shouts of laughter, with the clatter of knives and forks and the clink of glasses, could be heard through the half opened windows.

"Eight dozen Marennes for No. 6," shouted a waiter to the man who opened oysters near the restaurant door.

On hearing this order, Chupin shook his clenched fist at the stars. "The wretches!" he muttered through his set teeth; "bad luck to them! Those oysters are for their mouths, plainly enough, for there are eight of them in all, counting those yellow-haired women. They will, no doubt, remain at table until six o'clock in the morning. And they call this enjoying themselves. And meanwhile, poor little Chupin must wear out his shoe-leather on the pavement. Ah! they shall pay for this!"

It ought to have been some consolation to him to see that he was not alone in his misery, for in front of the restaurant stood a dozen cabs with sleepy drivers, who were waiting for chance to send them one of those

half-intoxicated passengers who refuse to pay more than fifteen sous for their fare, but give their Jehu a gratuity of a louis. All these vehicles belonged to the peculiar category known as “night cabs”—dilapidated conveyances with soiled, ragged linings, and drawn by half-starved, jaded horses.

However, Chupin neither thought of these vehicles, nor of the poor horses, nor, indeed, of the drivers themselves. His wrath had been succeeded by philosophical resignation; he accepted with good grace what he could not avoid. As the night air had become very cool, he turned up the collar of his overcoat, and began to pace to and fro on the pavement in front of the restaurant. He had made a hundred turns perhaps, passing the events of the day in review, when suddenly such a strange and startling idea flashed across his mind that he stood motionless, lost in astonishment. Reflecting on the manner in which M. Wilkie and the Viscount de Coralth had behaved during the evening, a singular suspicion assailed him. While M. Wilkie gradually lost his wits, M. de Coralth had become remarkably cold and reserved. He had seemed to oppose all M. Wilkie’s propositions; but he had agreed to them at last, so that his objections had produced much the same effect as a stimulant. It seemed then as if M. de Coralth had some strange interest in wishing to gain ascendency over his friend. At least such was Chupin’s opinion. “Oh, oh!” he murmured. “What if HE should be working up the same little scheme? What if he were acquainted with Madame Lia d’Argeles? What if he knew that there’s a fortune waiting for a claimant? I shouldn’t at all be surprised if I found that he wanted to cook his bread in our oven. But father Fortunat wouldn’t be pleased with the news. Ah! no—he wouldn’t even smile——”

While carrying on this little conversation with himself, he stood just in front of the restaurant, looking up into the air, when all of a sudden a window was thrown noisily open, and the figures of two men became plainly visible. They were engaged in a friendly struggle; one of them seemed to be trying to seize hold of something which the other had in his

hand, and which he refused to part with. One of these men was M. Wilkie as Chupin at once perceived. “Good!” he said to himself; “this is the beginning of the end!”

As he spoke, M. Wilkie’s hat fell on the window-sill, slipped off, and dropped on to the pavement below. With a natural impulse Chupin picked it up, and he was turning it over and over in his hands, when M. Wilkie leant out of the window and shouted in a voice that was thick with wine: “Halloo! Eh, there! Who picked up my hat? Honesty shall be rewarded. A glass of champagne and a cigar for the fellow who’ll bring it me in room No. 6.”

Chupin hesitated. By going up, he might, perhaps, compromise the success of his mission. But on the other hand his curiosity was aroused, and he very much wished to see, with his own eyes, how these young men were amusing themselves. Besides, he would have an opportunity of examining this handsome viscount, whom he was certain he had met before, though he could not tell when or where. In the meantime, M. Wilkie had perceived him.

“Come, you simpleton!” he cried; “make haste. You can’t be very thirsty.”

The thought of the viscount decided Chupin. Entering the restaurant and climbing the staircase, he had just reached the landing when a pale-looking man, who had a smoothly-shaven face and was dressed in black, barred his way and asked: “What do you want?”

“M’sieur, here’s a hat which fell from one of your windows and——”

“All right, hand it here.”

But Chupin did not seem to hear this order. He was beginning a long explanation, when a curtain near by was pushed aside, and M. Wilkie called out: “Philippe! eh, Philippe!—bring me the man who picked up my hat.”

“Ah!” said Chupin, “you see, m’sieur, that he asks for me.”

“Very well,” said Philippe. “Go on, then.” And raising the portiere he pushed Chupin into room No. 6.

It was a small, square apartment, with a very low ceiling. The temperature was like that of a furnace, and the glare of the gaslights almost blinded one. The supper was over, but the table had not yet been cleared, and plates full of leavings showed that the guests had fairly exhausted their appetites. Still, with the exception of M. Wilkie, every one present seemed to be terribly bored. In one corner, with her head resting on a piano, sat one of the yellow-haired damsels, fast asleep, while, beside the window, M. de Coralth was smoking with his elbows propped upon the table. The four other young men were looking on phlegmatically. “Ah! here’s my hat,” exclaimed M. Wilkie, as soon as Chupin appeared. “Wait and receive your promised reward.” And thereupon he rang the bell, crying at the top of his voice: “Henry, you sleepy-head—a clean glass and some more of the widow Cliquot’s champagne!”

Several bottles were standing upon the table, only half empty, and one of M. Wilkie’s friends called his attention to this fact, but he shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. “You must take me for a fool,” he said, contemptuously. “A man doesn’t drink stale wine when he has the prospect of such an inheritance as is coming to me.”

“Wilkie!” interrupted M. de Coralth, quickly; “Wilkie!”

But he was too late; Chupin had heard and understood everything. His conjectures had proved correct. M. Wilkie knew his right to the estate; M. Fortunat had been forestalled by the viscount, and would merely have his labor for his pains. “No chance for the guv’nor!” thought the agent’s emissary. “And what a blow after the De Valorsay affair! It’s enough to give him the jaundice!”

For a youth of his age, Chupin controlled his feelings admirably; but the revelation came so suddenly that he had started despite himself, and changed color a trifle. M. de Coralth saw this; and, though he was far from suspecting the truth, his long repressed anger burst forth. He rose abruptly, took up a bottle, and filling the nearest glass, he rudely exclaimed: “Come, drink that—make haste—and clear out!”

Victor Chupin must have become very sensitive since his conversion. In former times he was not wont to be so susceptible as to lose his temper when some one chanced to address him in a rather peremptory manner, or to offer him wine out of the first available glass. But M. de Coralth inspired him with one of those inexplicable aversions which cannot be restrained "Eh! tell me if it's because we've drank champagne together before that you talk to me like that?" the young fellow retorted, savagely.

It was only a random shot, but it reached home. The viscount seemed touched to the quick. "You hear that, Wilkie," said he. "This will teach you that the time of your compatriot, Lord Seymour, has passed by. The good-humored race of plebeians who respectfully submitted to the blows with which noblemen honored them after drinking, has died out. This ought to cure you of your unfortunate habit of placing yourself on terms of equality with all the vagabonds you meet."

Chupin's hair fairly bristled with anger. "What! what!" he exclaimed; "I'll teach you to call me a vagabond, you scoundrel!"

His gesture, his attitude, and his eyes were so expressive of defiance and menace that two of the guests sprang up and caught him by the arm. "Go, go," they said.

But he freed himself from their grasp. "Go!" he replied. "Never! He called me a vagabond. Am I to pocket the insult quietly and walk off with it? You can scarcely expect that. First, I demand an apology."

This was asking too much of the Viscount de Coralth. "Let the fool alone," he remarked, with affected coolness, "and ring for the waiters to kick him out."

It did not require this new insult to put Chupin in a furious passion. "Come on!" he exclaimed. "Ah, ha! Where's the fellow who'll turn me out? Let him come. I'll teach him a lesson!" And as he spoke he squared his shoulders, inflated his chest, and threw the weight of his entire body on his left leg, after the most approved method of sparring-masters.

"Go, go!" insisted Wilkie's friends.

“Yes, I’ll go with pleasure, but your friend must go, too. Is he a man? Then let him come, and we’ll settle this outside.” And seeing that they were again trying to seize him: “Hands off!” he thundered, “or I’ll strike. You were not obliged to invite me here. It isn’t my business to furnish amusement to parties who’ve drunk too much wine. And why should you despise me? It’s true I haven’t any money while you have plenty—that I work and you carouse. Still that’s no reason why you should scorn me. Besides, those who are poor in the morning are sometimes rich in the evening. Every dog has his day. I have an idea that I shall have some coin when yours is all gone. Then it will be my turn to laugh; and as I’m a good-natured fellow, I will give you my half-smoked cigars.”

M. Wilkie seemed delighted. He had climbed on to the piano and seated himself, with his feet on the keyboard; and there, as on a judgment seat, he listened and applauded, alternately taking Chupin’s part, and then the viscount’s. “Bravo, gamin!” or, “Give it to him, Coralth!” he shouted in turn.

This irritated the viscount exceedingly. “I see that we shall be obliged to call in the police to settle the affair,” he said, sneeringly.

“The police!” roared Chupin. “Ah! that won’t do, you scamp—” But his voice died away in his throat, and he stood motionless, speechless, with his arm raised as if he were about to strike, and his eyes dilated with astonishment.

For a change of expression in M. de Coralth’s face had enlightened him; and he suddenly recollected when and under what circumstances he had known this so-called viscount. He remembered, too, the name he had borne when he first met him. “Oh!” he stammered; “oh! oh!”

However, the effect of this discovery was to dispel his anger, or rather to restore his calmness, and, addressing M. de Coralth, he exclaimed: “Don’t be angry at what I’ve said, m’sieur; it was only a jest—I know that there’s a wide difference between a poor devil like me and a viscount like you—I haven’t a sou, you see, and that maddens me. But I’m not so very bad-looking, fortunately, and I’m always hoping that the daughter of some rich banker will fall in love with me and marry me. Some people

have such luck, you know. If I meet with any you may be sure I shall pass myself off as the lost child of some great personage—of a duke, for instance—and if the real son exists, and troubles me, why I'll quietly put him out of the way, if possible."

With but one exception the persons present did not understand a single word of this apparent nonsense; and indeed the yellow-haired damsels stared at the speaker in amazement. Still it was evident that each of these words had a meaning, and a terrible meaning for M. de Coralth. Accustomed for years to control his features, he remained apparently unmoved—he even smiled; but a close observer could have detected anguish in his eyes, and he had become very pale. At last, unable to endure the scene any longer, he drew a hundred-franc bank-note from his pocketbook, crumpled it in his hand and threw it at Chupin, saying: "That's a very pretty story you are telling, my boy; but we've had enough of it. Take your pay and leave us."

Unfortunately, the note struck Chupin full in the face. He uttered a hoarse cry of rage, and, by the way in which he seized and brandished an empty bottle, it might have been imagined that M. de Coralth was about to have his head broken. But no. Thanks to a supreme effort of will, Chupin conquered this mad fury; and, dropping the bottle, he remarked to the young women who were uttering panic-stricken shrieks: "Be quiet; don't you see that I was only in fun."

But even M. Wilkie had found the fun a little rough, and even dangerous. Several of the young fellows present sprang up, with the evident intention of pushing Chupin out of the room, but he checked them with a gesture. "Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen," he said. "I'm going, only let me find the bank-note which this gentleman threw at me."

"That's quite proper," replied M. Wilkie, approvingly; "look for it."

Chupin did so, and at last found it lying almost under the piano. "Now," he remarked, "I should like a cigar."

A score or so were lying in a dish. He gravely selected one of them and coolly cut off the end of it before placing it in his mouth. Those around watched him with an air of profound astonishment, not understanding this ironical calmness following so closely upon such a storm of passion. Then he, Victor Chupin, who had, it seems to me, but one aim in life—to become rich—Victor Chupin, who loved money above anything else, and had stifled all other passions in his soul—he who often worked two whole days to earn five francs—he who did not disdain to claim his five sous when he went to hire a cab for his employer—he, Chupin, twisted the bank-note in his fingers, lit it at the gas, and used it to light his cigar.

"Ah! he's crazy!" murmured the yellow-haired damsels, with despair in their voices.

But M. Wilkie was enthusiastic. "There's form!" said he. "Fine form and no mistake!"

But Chupin did not even deign to turn his head. He opened the door, and standing on the threshold, he bowed to M. de Coralth with an ironical smile. "Until we meet again, Monsieur Paul," said he. "And kindly remember me to Madame Paul, if you please."

If the others had been less astonished, they would have no doubt have remarked the prodigious effect of this name upon their brilliant friend. He became ghastly pale and fell back in his chair. Then, suddenly, he bounded up as if he wished to attack his enemy. But pursuit seemed likely to yield no result, for Chupin was already on the boulevard.

It was daybreak. Paris was waking up; the bakers were standing at their doors, and boys in their shirt-sleeves, with their eyes swollen with sleep, were taking down the shutters of the wine-shops. A cloud of dust, raised by the street-sweepers, hung in the distance; the rag-pickers wandered about, peering among the rubbish; the noisy milk-carts jolted along at a gallop, and workmen were proceeding to their daily toil, with hunches of bread in their hands. The morning air was very chilly; nevertheless, Chupin seated himself on a bench across the boulevard, at a spot where he could watch the entrance of the restaurant without being seen. He had just experienced one of those sudden shocks which so

disturb the mind, that one becomes insensible to outward circumstances, whatever they may be. He had recognized in the so-called Viscount de Coralth, the man whom he had hated above all others in the world, or, rather, the only man whom he hated, for his was not a bad heart. Impressionable to excess like a true child of the faubourgs, he had the Parisian's strange mobility of feeling. If his anger was kindled by a trifle, the merest nothing usually sufficed to extinguish it. But matters were different respecting this handsome viscount! "God! how I hate him!" he hissed through his set teeth. "God! how I hate him!"

For once, years before, as he had confessed to M. Fortunat, Chupin had been guilty of a cowardly and abominable act, which had nearly cost a man his life. And this crime, if it had been successful, would have benefited the very fellow who concealed his sinful, shameful past under the high-sounding name of Coralth. How was it that Chupin had not recognized him at once? Because he had worked for this fellow without knowing him, receiving his orders through the miserable wretches who pandered to his vices. He had only seen him personally once or twice, and had never spoken to him. Later—too late—he discovered what vile intrigue it was that he had served. And when he became sincerely repentant he loathed this Coralth who had caused his crime.

Nor was this all. The recognition of Coralth had inspired him with remorse. It had aroused in the recesses of his conscience a threatening voice which cried: "What are you doing here? You are acting as a spy for a man you distrust, and whose real designs you are ignorant of. It was in this way you began before. Have you forgotten what it led to? Have you not sin enough already upon your conscience? Blood enough upon your hands? It is folly to pretend that one may serve as a tool for villains, and still remain an honest man!"

It was this voice which had given Chupin the courage to light his cigar with the bank-note. And this voice still tortured him, as seated on the bench he now tried to review the situation. Where, indeed, was he? With rare good luck he had discovered the son whom Madame Lia d'Argeles had so long and successfully concealed. But contrary to all expectations,

this young fellow already knew of the inheritance which he was entitled to. M. de Coralth had already achieved what M. Fortunat had meant to do; and so the plan was a failure, and it was useless to persist in it.

This would have ended the matter if Chupin had not chanced to know the Viscount de Coralth's shameful past. And this knowledge changed everything, for it gave him the power to interfere in a most effectual manner. Armed with this secret, he could bestow the victory on M. Fortunat, and force M. de Coralth to capitulate. And he could do this all the more easily, as he was sure that Coralth had not recognized him, and that he was perhaps ignorant of his very existence. Chupin had allowed himself to be carried away by a sudden impulse of anger which he regretted; he had made an ironical illusion to his enemy's past life, but after all this had done no particular harm. So nothing prevented him from lending M. Fortunat his assistance, and thus killing two birds with one stone. He could have his revenge on Coralth, and at the same time insure his patron a large fee, of which he could claim a considerable share for himself. But no! The idea of deriving any profit whatever from this affair inspired him with a feeling of disgust—honor triumphed over his naturally crafty and avaricious nature. It seemed to him that any money made in this way would soil his fingers; for he realized there must be some deep villainy under all this plotting and planning; he was sure of it, since Coralth was mixed up in the affair. "I will serve my guv'nor for nothing," he decided. "When a man is avenged, he's well paid."

Chupin decided upon this course because he could think of no better plan. Still, if he had been master of events he would have acted otherwise. He would have quietly presented the government with this inheritance which he found M. Wilkie so unworthy of. "The devil only knows what he'll do with it," he thought. "He'll squander it as my father squandered the fortune that was given him. It is only fools who meet with such luck as that."

However, his meditations did not prevent him from keeping a close watch over the restaurant, for it was of the utmost importance that M. Wilkie should not escape him. It was now broad daylight, and customers

were leaving the establishment; for, after passing what is generally conceded to be a joyous night, they felt the need of returning home to rest and sleep. Chupin watched them as they emerged. There were some who came out with drooping heads, mumbling incoherent phrases; while others who were equally intoxicated, but more nervous, evinced considerable animation, and sang snatches of songs, or jested loudly with the street-sweepers as they passed on. The more sober, surprised by the sunlight, and blushing at themselves, slunk hastily and quietly away. There was one man, moreover, whom the waiters were obliged to carry to his cab, for he could no longer stand on his feet.

At last Chupin saw the individual clad in black whom Wilkie had addressed as Philippe, and who had endeavored to prevent him from entering the restaurant, come out, and walk rapidly away. He was warmly clad in a thick overcoat, but he shivered, and his pale, wan face betrayed the man who is a martyr to the pleasures of others—the man who is condemned to be up all night and sleep only in the daytime—the man who can tell you how much folly and beastliness lurk in the depths of the wine-cup, and who knows exactly how many yawns are expressed by the verb "to amuse one's self." Chupin was beginning to feel uneasy. "Can M. Wilkie and his friends have made their escape?" he wondered.

But at that very moment they made their appearance. They lingered awhile on the pavement to chat, and Chupin had an opportunity of observing the effect of their night's dissipation on their faces. The brilliant sunlight made their eyes blink, and the cold sent purple blotches to their bloated cheeks. As for the young women with yellow hair, they appeared as they really were—hideous. They entered the only cab that remained, the most dilapidated one of all, and the driver of which had no little difficulty in setting his horse in motion; whereupon the gentlemen went off on foot.

Many persons would have been vexed and even humiliated by the necessity of appearing at this hour on the boulevard in disorderly attire, which plainly indicated that they had spent the night in debauchery. But with the exception of the Viscount de Coralth, who was evidently out of

humor, the party seemed delighted with themselves, as it was easy to see by the way they met the glances of the passers-by. They considered themselves first-class form—they were producing an effect—they were astonishing people. And what more could they desire?

One thing is certain—they were irritating Chupin terribly. He was following them on the opposite side of the boulevard, at some little distance in the rear, for he was afraid of being recognized. "The wretches!" he growled. "One couldn't draw a pint of manly blood from the veins of all six of them. Ah, if they knew how I hate them!"

But he had not long to nurse his wrath. On reaching the Rue Drouot, two of the gentlemen left the party, and two more went down the Rue Lepelletier. M. Wilkie and the viscount were left to walk down the boulevard alone. They linked their arms and carried on an animated conversation until they reached the Rue du Helder, where they shook hands and separated. What had they said at parting? What agreement had been made between them? Chupin would willingly have given a hundred sous from his private purse to have known. He would have given as much more to have been able to double himself, in order to pursue the viscount, who had started off in the direction of the Madeleine, without having to give up watching and following his friend. But the days of miracles are over. So Chupin sighed, and, following Wilkie, he soon saw him enter No. 48 of the Rue du Helder. The concierge, who was at the door busily engaged in polishing the bell-handle, bowed respectfully. "So there it is!" grumbled Chupin. "I knew he lived there—I knew it by the way that Madame d'Argeles looked at the windows yesterday evening. Poor woman! Ah! her son's a fine fellow and no mistake!"

His compassion for the unhappy mother seemed to recall him to a sense of duty. "Scoundrel that I am!" he exclaimed, striking his forehead with his clenched fist. "Why, I'm forgetting my own good mother!" And as his task was now ended, he started off on the run, taking the shortest

cut to the Faubourg Saint-Denis. “Poor mother!” he said to himself as he tore along, “what a night she must have had! She must have cried her eyes out!”

He spoke the truth. The poor woman had passed a night of agony—counting the hours, and trembling each time the door of the house opened, announcing some tenant’s return. And as morning approached, her anxiety increased. “For her son would not have allowed her to remain in such suspense,” she said to herself, “unless he had met with some accident or encountered some of his former friends—those detestable scamps who had tried to make him as vile as themselves.” Perhaps he had met his father, Polyte Chupin, the man whom she still loved in spite of everything, because he was her husband, but whom she judged, and whom indeed she knew, to be capable of any crime. And of all misfortunes, it was an accident, even a fatal accident, that she dreaded least. In her heroic soul the voice of honor spoke even more loudly than the imperious instinct of maternity; and she would rather have found her son lying dead on the marble slabs of the Morgue than seated in the dock at the Assize Court.

Her poor eyes were weary of weeping when she at last recognized Victor’s familiar step approaching down the passage. She hastily opened the door, and as soon as she FELT that he was near her, for she could not see him, she asked: “Where have you spent the night? Where have you come from? What has happened?”

His only answer was to fling his arms round her neck, following alike the impulse of his heart and the advice of experience, which told him that this would be the best explanation he could give. Still it did not prevent him from trying to justify himself, although he was careful not to confess the truth, for he dreaded his mother’s censure, knowing well enough that she would be less indulgent than his own conscience.

“I believe you, my son,” said the good woman, gravely; “you wouldn’t deceive me, I’m sure.” And she added: “What reassured me, when you kissed me, was that you hadn’t been drinking.”

Chupin did not speak a word; this confidence made him strangely uneasy. “May I be hung,” he thought, “if after this I ever do anything that I can’t confess to this poor good woman!”

But he hadn’t time for sentimental reflections. He had gone too far to draw back, and it was necessary for him to report the result of his researches as soon as possible. Accordingly, he hastily ate a morsel, for he was faint with hunger, and started out again, promising to return to dinner. He was in all the greater haste as it was Sunday. M. Fortunat was in the habit of passing these days in the country, and Chupin feared he might fail to see him if he was not expeditious in his movements. And while running to the Place de la Bourse, he carefully prepared the story he meant to relate, deeply impressed by the wisdom of the popular maxim which says: “It is not always well to tell the whole truth.” Ought he to describe the scene at the restaurant, mention Coralth, and say that there was nothing more to be done respecting M. Wilkie? After mature deliberation he decided in the negative. If he revealed everything, M. Fortunat might become discouraged and abandon the affair. It would be better to let him discover the truth himself, and profit by his anger to indicate a means of vengeance.

It happened that M. Fortunat had decided not to go to the country that Sunday. He had slept later than usual, and was still in his dressing-gown when Chupin made his appearance. He uttered a joyful cry on seeing his emissary, feeling assured that he must be the bearer of good news, since he came so early. “You have succeeded, then?” he exclaimed.

“Yes, monsieur.”

“You have discovered Madame d’Argeles’s son?”

“I have him.”

“Ah! I knew that you were a clever fellow. Quick, tell me everything. But no, wait a moment.”

He rang the bell, and Madame Dodelin at once made her appearance. “Put another plate on the table,” said the agent. “M. Chupin will breakfast with me—and serve us at once. You agree, don’t you, Victor? It’s ten o’clock; I’m hungry; and we can talk better over a bottle of wine.”

This was a great honor; and it gave Chupin a fitting idea of the value of the service he had rendered. He was not too much elated, however; though he felt very sorry that he had eaten before he came. On his side, M. Fortunat by no means regretted having conferred this favor on his clerk, for the story which the latter related, caused him intense delight. "Very good!—well done," he exclaimed every other minute. "I could not have done better myself. You shall be abundantly rewarded, Victor, if this affair is successful." And at this thought his satisfaction overflowed in a complacent monologue: "Why shouldn't it succeed?" he asked himself. "Could anything be more simple and certain? I can make any demand I please—one, two, three hundred thousand francs. Ah, it was a good thing that the Count de Chalusse died! Now, I can forgive Valorsay. Let him keep my forty thousand francs; he's quite welcome to them! Let him marry Mademoiselle Marguerite; I wish them a large and flourishing family! And Madame d'Argeles, too, has my benediction!"

He was so confident his fortune was made that at noon he could restrain himself no longer. He hired a cab and accompanied by Chupin he set out for M. Wilkie's abode, declaring that he would wake that young gentleman up if needs be, but at all events he must see him without delay. When he reached the Rue du Helder, he told Chupin to wait in the cab, and then entering the house, he asked: "Monsieur Wilkie?"

"On the second floor, the door to the right," replied the concierge.

M. Fortunat ascended the stairs very slowly, for he felt the necessity of regaining all his composure, and it was not until he had brought himself to a proper frame of mind that he rang the bell. A small servant, M. Wilkie's fag, who took his revenge in robbing his employer most outrageously, came to the door, and began by declaring that his master was out of town. But M. Fortunat understood how to force doors open, and his manoeuvres succeeded so well that he was finally allowed to enter a small sitting-room, while the servant went off, saying: "I will go and inform monsieur."

Instead of wasting time in congratulating himself on this first achievement the agent began to inspect the room in which he found himself, as well as another apartment, the door of which stood open. For he was of the opinion that a dwelling-place indicates the character of its inmate, as surely as a shell indicates the form of the creature that inhabits it. M. Wilkie was comfortably lodged; but his rooms were most pretentiously ornamented. They were indeed decorated in more than doubtful taste. There were very few books lying about, but costly riding-whips, spurs, rifles, cartridge-boxes, and all the paraphernalia of a fashionable sporting man, were here in abundance.

The only pictures on the wall were a few portraits of celebrated horses, which foreshadowed the fact that M. Wilkie must have, at least, an eighth share in some well-known racer. After this inspection, M. Fortunat smiled complacently. “This young fellow has expensive tastes,” he thought. “It will be very easy to manage him.”

However his reflections were interrupted by the return of the servant, who exclaimed: “My master is in the dining-room, and if monsieur will enter——”

The heir-hunter did enter, and found himself face to face with M. Wilkie, who was partaking of a cup of chocolate. He was not only up, but he was dressed to go out—dressed in such a style that he would have been taken for a respectable groom. A couple of hours’ sleep had made him himself again; and he had regained the arrogance of manner which was the distinguishing trait of his character, and a sure sign that he was in prosperous circumstances. As his unknown visitor entered he looked up, and bruskly asked: “What do you want?”

“I called on business, monsieur.”

“Ah, well! this isn’t a favorable moment. I must be at Vincennes for the races. I’m interested in a horse. So, you understand——”

M. Fortunat was secretly amused by M. Wilkie’s nonchalance. “The young fellow won’t be in so much of a hurry when he learns my business,” he thought. And he replied aloud: “I can explain what brings me in a few words, monsieur.”

"Proceed, then."

M. Fortunat began by closing the door which had been intentionally left open by the servant; and then, returning to M. Wilkie's side, he began with an air of the greatest mystery: "What would you give a shrewd man if he suddenly placed you in undisputed possession of an immense fortune—of a million—two millions, perhaps?"

He had prepared this little effect most carefully, and he fully expected to see Wilkie fall on his knees before him. But not at all; the young gentleman's face never moved a muscle; and it was in the calmest possible tone, and with his mouth half full that he replied: "I know the rest. You come, don't you, to sell me the secret of an unclaimed inheritance, which belongs to me? Very well, you have come too late."

If the ceiling had fallen and crushed M. Fortunat there and then he would, mentally at least, have not been in a more pitiable condition. He stood silent, motionless, utterly confounded, with his mouth wide open, and such an expression of consternation in his eyes that M. Wilkie burst into a hearty laugh. Still the agent struggled against fate, and ultimately faltered: "Let me explain—permit me——"

"Oh, it would be useless. I know my rights. I have already arranged with a party to prosecute my claims; the agreement will be signed on the day after to-morrow."

"With whom?"

"Ah, excuse me; that's my affair."

He had finished his chocolate, and he now poured out a glass of ice-water, drank it, wiped his mouth, and rose from the table. "You will excuse me, my dear sir, if I leave you," he remarked. "As I said before, I am going to Vincennes. I have staked a thousand louis on 'Pompier de Nanterre,' my horse, and my friends have ventured ten times as much. Who knows what may happen if I'm not there at the start?" And then, ignoring M. Fortunat as completely as if he had not existed, M. Wilkie exclaimed: "Toby, you fool! where are you? Is my carriage below? Quick,

bring me my cane, my gloves, and my glasses. Take down that basket of champagne. Run and put on your new livery. Make haste, you little beast, I shall be too late."

M. Fortunat left the room. The frightful anger that had followed his idiotic stupor sent his blood rushing madly to his brain. A purple mist swam before his eyes; there was a loud ringing in his ears, and with each pulsation of his heart his head seemed to receive a blow from a heavy hammer. His feelings were so terrible that he was really frightened. "Am I about to have an attack of apoplexy?" he wondered. And, as every surrounding object seemed to whirl around him, the very floor itself apparently rising and falling under his feet, he remained on the landing waiting for this horrible vertigo to subside and doing his best to reason with himself. It was fully five minutes before he dared to risk the descent; and even when he reached the street, his features were so frightfully distorted that Chupin trembled.

He sprang out, assisted his employer into the cab, and bade the driver return to the Place de la Bourse. It was really pitiful to see the despair which had succeeded M. Fortunat's joyful confidence. "This is the end of everything," he groaned. "I'm robbed, despoiled, ruined! And such a sure thing as it seemed. These misfortunes happen to no one but me! Some one in advance of me! Some one else will capture the prize! Oh, if I knew the wretch, if I only knew him!"

"One moment," interrupted Chupin; "I think know the man."

M. Fortunat gave a violent start. "Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Excuse me, monsieur—it must be a vile rascal named Coralth."

It was a bellow rather than a cry of rage that escaped M. Fortunat's lips. To a man of his experience, only a glimmer of light was required to reveal the whole situation. "Ah! I understand!—I see!" he exclaimed. "Yes, you are right, Victor; it's he—Coralth—Valorsay's tool! Coralth was the traitor who, in obedience to Valorsay's orders, ruined the man who loved Mademoiselle Marguerite. The deed was done at Madame d'Argeles's house. So Coralth knows her, and knows her secret. It's he who has outwitted me." He reflected for a moment, and then, in a very

different tone, he said: “I shall never see a penny of the count’s millions, and my forty thousand francs are gone forever; but, as Heaven hears me, I will have some satisfaction for my money. Ah!—so Coralth and Valorsay combine to ruin me! Very well!—since this is the case, I shall espouse the cause of Mademoiselle Marguerite and of the unfortunate man they’ve ruined. Ah, my cherubs, you don’t know Fortunat yet! Now well see if the innocent don’t get the best of you, and if they don’t unmask you. I shall do my best, since you have forced me to do it—and gratis too!”

Chupin was radiant; his vengeance was assured. “And I, monsieur,” said he, “will give you some information about this Coralth. First of all, the scoundrel’s married and his wife keeps a tobacco-shop somewhere near the Route d’Asnieres. I’ll find her for you—see if I don’t.”

The sudden stopping of the vehicle which had reached the Place de la Bourse, cut his words short. M. Fortunat ordered him to pay the driver, while he himself rushed upstairs, eager to arrange his plan of campaign —to use his own expression. In his absence a commissionaire had brought a letter for him which Madame Dodelin now produced. He broke the seal, and read to his intense surprise: “Monsieur—I am the ward of the late Count de Chalusse. I must speak to you. Will you grant me an interview on Wednesday next, at a quarter-past three o’clock? Yours respectfully,

“MARGUERITE.”

XX.

When Mademoiselle Marguerite left the dead count's bedside at ten o'clock at night to repair to Pascal Ferailleur's house, she did not yet despair of the future. Father, friend, rank, security, fortune—she had lost all these in a single moment—but she could still see a promise of happiness in the distance.

She suffered undoubtedly, and yet she experienced a sort of bitter pleasure at the thought of uniting her life to the man who was as unfortunate as herself, who was slandered as she herself had been slandered, branded with the most cruel and unjust imputations, and had neither fortune nor friends. Others might scorn them; but what did they care for the world's disdain so long as they had the approval of their consciences? Would not their mutual esteem suffice since they loved each other? It seemed to Marguerite that their very misfortunes would bind them more closely to each other, and cement the bonds of their love more strongly. And if it were absolutely necessary for them to leave France—ah, well! they would leave it. To them Fatherland would always be the spot where they lived together.

As the cab approached the Rue d'Ulm she pictured Pascal's sorrow, and the joy and surprise he would feel when she suddenly appeared before him, and faltered: "They accuse you—here I am! I know that you are innocent, and I love you!"

But the brutal voice of the concierge, informing her of Pascal's secret departure, in the most insulting terms, abruptly dispelled her dreams. If Pascal had failed her, everything had failed her. If she had lost him, she had lost her all. The world seemed empty—struggling would be folly—happiness was only an empty name. She indeed longed for death!

Madame Leon who had a set of formulas adapted to all circumstances, undertook to console her. "Weep, my dear young lady, weep; it will do you good. Ah! this is certainly a horrible catastrophe. You are young,

fortunately, and Time is a great consoler. M. Ferailleur isn't the only man on earth. Others will love you. There are others who love you already!"

"Silence!" interrupted Marguerite, more revolted than if she had heard a libertine whispering shameful proposals in her ear. "Silence! I forbid you to add another word." To speak of another—what sacrilege! Poor girl. She was one of those whose life is bound up in one love alone, and if that fails them—it is death!

The thought that she was utterly alone added to the horror of her situation. Whom could she depend upon? Not on Madame Leon. She distrusted her; she had no confidence whatever in her. Should she ask for the advice of either of her suitors? The Marquis de Valorsay inspired her with unconquerable aversion, and she despised the so-called General de Fondege. So her only friend, her only protector was a stranger, the old justice of the peace who had taken her defence, by crushing the slander of the servants, and whom she had opened her heart to. But he would soon forget her, she thought; and the future, such as it was presented to her imagination, seemed a terrible one. However, she was too courageous to remain for long in despair—she struggled against her sorrow; and the thought that she might, perhaps, reach Pascal through M. Fortunat at last occurred to her mind. This hope was her sole chance of salvation. She clung to it as a shipwrecked mariner clings to the plank which is his only hope of life.

When she returned to the mansion her mind was made up, and she had regained her usual composure. For ten minutes or so she had been praying by the count's bedside, when M. Bourigeau, the concierge, appeared and handed her a letter which had just been brought to the house. It was addressed to "Mademoiselle Marguerite de Durtal de Chalusse, at the Hotel de Chalusse, Rue de Courcelles."

Mademoiselle Marguerite blushed. Who was it that addressed her by this name which she no longer had the right to bear? She studied the handwriting for a moment, but she did not remember ever having seen it before. At last, however, she opened the letter and read: "My dear, dear

child." "Dear child!" indeed. What could this mean? Was there any one in the world sufficiently interested in her welfare, or loving her enough, to address her in this style? She quickly turned the sheet to see the signature; and when her eyes fell on it she turned pale. "Ah!" she exclaimed, involuntarily, "ah! ah!"

The letter was signed: "Athenais de Fondege." It had been written by the General's wife. She resumed her perusal of it, and this is what she read: "I this instant hear of the cruel loss you have sustained, and also learn that, for want of testamentary provisions, the poor Count de Chalusse leaves you, his idolized daughter, almost without resources. I will not attempt to offer you consolation, God alone can assuage certain sorrows. I should come and weep with you if I were not kept in bed by illness. But to-morrow, whatever happens, I shall be with you before breakfast. It is at such a time as this, my poor dear afflicted child, that one can tell one's true friends; and we are yours as I hope to prove. The General feels that he should be insulting and betraying the memory of a man who was his dearest friend for thirty years, if he did not take the count's place, if he did not become your second father. He has offered you our modest home; you have refused. Why? With the authority conferred upon me by my age and my position as the mother of a family, I tell you that you ought to accept. What other course can you possibly think of? Where would you go, my poor, dear child? But we will discuss this matter to-morrow. I shall find a way to persuade you to love us, and to allow yourself to be loved. In MY heart you will fill the place of the beloved and lamented daughter I have lost—my beautiful and gentle Bathilde. Once more I say farewell until to-morrow—trusting that you will accept the sympathy and affection of your best friend,

"ATHENAIS DE FONDEGE."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was thunderstruck, for the writer of this epistle was a lady whom she had only met five or six times, who had never visited her, and with whom she had scarcely exchanged twenty words. Moreover, she well remembered certain glances with which Madame de Fondege had, on one occasion, tried to crush her—glances so

full of cruel contempt that they had drawn bitter tears of sorrow, shame, and anger, from the poor girl. The count himself had said to her at the time: “Don’t be so childish, Marguerite, as to trouble yourself about this foolish and impudent woman.”

And now this same woman sent her a letter overflowing with sympathy, and claimed her affection and confidence in the tone of an old and tried friend. Was such a change natural? Not being what is called a credulous person, Mademoiselle Marguerite was unable to believe it. She divined that Madame de Fondege must have had some hidden motive in writing such a letter—but what motive was it? Alas! she divined this also only too well. The General, suspecting that she had stolen the missing money, had imparted his suspicions to his wife; and she, being as avaricious and as unscrupulous as himself, was doing her best to secure the booty for her son. Such a calculation is a common one nowadays. Steal yourself? Fie. never! You would not dare. Besides, you are honest. But it is quite a different thing to profit by other people’s rascality. Besides, there are no risks to be encountered.

On perusing the letter a second time, it seemed to Mademoiselle Marguerite that she could hear the General and his wife discussing the means of obtaining a share of the two millions. She could hear Madame de Fondege saying to her husband: “You are a block-head! You frightened the girl by your precipitancy and roughness. But fortunately, I’m here. Let me manage the affair; and I’ll prove that women are far more clever than men.” And, thereupon, she had seized her pen, and commenced this letter. In Mademoiselle Marguerite’s opinion, the epistle betrayed the joint efforts of the pair. She could have sworn that the husband had dictated the sentence: “The General feels that he should be insulting and betraying the memory of a man who was his dearest friend for thirty years, if he did not become your second father.” On the other hand, the phrase, “I shall find a way to persuade you to love us, and to allow yourself to be loved,” was unmistakably the wife’s work. The writer’s insincerity was fully revealed by one passage of the letter. “You will fill the place of the beloved daughter I have lost,” wrote Madame de

Fondege. It is true that she had once had a daughter; but the child had died of croup when only six months old, and more than twenty-five years previously.

It was strange, moreover, that this letter had not been sent until ten o'clock in the evening; but, on reflection, Mademoiselle Marguerite was able to explain this circumstance satisfactorily to herself. Before taking any decided step, M. and Madame de Fondege had wished to consult their son; and they had been unable to see him until late in the evening. However, as soon as the brilliant hussar had approved the noble scheme concocted by his parents, a servant had been dispatched with the letter. All these surmises were surely very plausible; but it was difficult to reconcile them with the opinion advanced by the magistrate—that M. de Fondege must know what had become of the missing millions.

Mademoiselle Marguerite did not think of this, however. She was losing her presence of mind at thought of the odious suspicions which rested on her, suspicions which she had seemed to read in the eyes of all who approached her, from Dr. Jodon to the Marquis de Valorsay. It is true that the magistrate had taken her defence; he had silenced the servants, but would that suffice? Would she not remain branded by an abominable accusation? And even the consciousness of her innocence did not reassure her, for Pascal's case warned her that innocence is not a sufficient safeguard against slander.

Could she hope to escape when he had succumbed? She could tell by the agony that was torturing her own heart, how much he must have suffered. Where was he now? Beyond the frontiers of France? They had told her so, but she did not, could not believe it. Knowing him as she knew him, it seemed to her impossible that he had accepted his fate so quickly and without a struggle. A secret presentiment told her that his absence was only feigned, that he was only biding his time, and that M. Fortunat would not have far to go in search of him. It was in M. de Chalusse's bedroom that she thus reflected, but a few steps from the bed on which reposed all that was mortal of the man whose weakness had made her life one long martyrdom, whose want of foresight had ruined

her future, but whom she had not the heart to censure. She was standing in front of the window with her burning forehead resting against the glass. At that very moment Pascal was waiting, seated on the curbstone opposite the mansion. At that very moment he was watching the shadow on the window-curtain, wondering if it were not Marguerite's. If the night had been clear she might have discerned the motionless watcher in the street below, and divined that it was Pascal. But how could she suspect his presence? How could she suspect that he had hastened to the Rue de Courcelles as she had hastened to the Rue d'Ulm?

It was almost midnight when a slight noise, a sound of stealthy footsteps, made her turn. Madame Leon was leaving the room, and a moment later Marguerite heard the house-door leading into the garden open and shut again. There was nothing extraordinary about such an occurrence, and yet a strange misgiving assailed her. Why, she could not explain; but many trivial circumstances, suddenly invested with a new and alarming significance, recurred to her mind. She remembered that Madame Leon had been restless and nervous all the evening. The housekeeper, who was usually so inactive, who lounged in her arm-chair for hours together, had been moving uneasily about, going up and down stairs at least a dozen times, and continually glancing at her watch or the clock. Twice, moreover, had the concierge come to tell her that some one wished to see her. "Where can she be going now, at midnight?" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite; "she who is usually so timid?"

At first, the girl resisted her desire to solve the question; her suspicions seemed absurd to her, and, besides, it was distasteful to her to play the spy. Still, she listened, waiting to hear Madame Leon re-enter the house. But more than a quarter of an hour elapsed, and yet the door did not open or close again. Either Madame Leon had not left the house at all, or else she was still outside. "This is very strange!" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Was I mistaken? I must convince myself." And, obeying a mysterious influence, stronger than her own will, she left the room and went down the stairs. She had reached the hall, when the garden door suddenly opened, and Madame Leon came in. The lights in

the hall were burning brightly, so that it was easy to observe the housekeeper's manner and countenance. She was panting for breath, like a person who had been running. She was very pale, and her dress was disordered. Her cap-strings were untied, and her cap had slipped from her head and was hanging over her shoulders. "What is the matter with you?" asked Mademoiselle Marguerite in astonishment. "Where have you been?"

On seeing the girl Madame Leon recoiled. Should she fly off or remain? She hesitated for an instant; and it was easy to read her hesitation in her eyes. She decided to remain; but it was with a constrained smile and in an unnatural voice that she replied: "Why do you speak to me like that, my dear young lady? One might suppose you were angry with me. You must know very well that I've been in the garden!"

"At this hour of the night?"

"MON DIEU! yes—and not for pleasure, I assure you—not by any means—I—I——" She was evidently seeking for some excuse; and, for a moment or two, she stammered forth one incoherent sentence after another, trying to gain time and imploring Heaven to grant her an inspiration.

"Well?" insisted Mademoiselle Marguerite, impatiently. "Why did you go out?"

"Ah! I—I—thought I heard Mirza barking in the garden. I thought she had been forgotten in all the confusion, and that the poor creature had been shut out, so I summoned all my courage, and——"

Mirza was an old spaniel that M. de Chalusse had been very fond of, and the animal's caprices were respected by all the inmates of the house.

"That's very strange," remarked Mademoiselle Marguerite, "for when you rose to leave the room, half an hour ago, Mirza was sleeping at your feet."

"What—really—is it possible?"

"It's certain."

But the worthy woman had already recovered her self-possession and her accustomed loquacity at the same time. “Ah! my dear young lady,” she said, bravely, “I’m in such sorrow that I’m losing my senses completely. Still, it was only from the kindest of motives that I ventured into the garden, and I had scarcely entered it before I saw something white run away from me—I felt sure it was Mirza—and so I ran after it. But I could find nothing. I called ‘Mirza! Mirza!’ and still nothing. I searched under all the trees, and yet I could not find her. It was as dark as pitch, and suddenly a terrible fear seized hold of me—such a terrible fright that I really believe I called for help, and I ran back to the house half crazed.”

Any one hearing her would have sworn that she was telling the truth. But, unfortunately, her earlier manner had proved her guilt.

Mademoiselle Marguerite was not deceived when she said to herself: “I am on the track of some abominable act.” However, she had sufficient self-control to conceal her suspicions; and she pretended to be perfectly satisfied with the explanation which the house-keeper had concocted. “Ah, my dear Leon, you are altogether too timid; it’s absurd,” she said, kindly.

The housekeeper hung her head. “I know that I make myself ridiculous,” she said, humbly. “But how can I help it? When a person’s frightened, she can’t reason. And that white object which I saw, as plainly as I see you, what could it have been?” And, convinced that her fable was believed, she grew bolder, and ventured to add: “Oh, my dear young lady, I shall tremble all night if the garden isn’t searched. Pray send the servants out to look. There are so many thieves and rascals in Paris!”

Under any other circumstances Mademoiselle Marguerite would have refused to listen to this ridiculous request; but, determined to repay the hypocrite in her own coin, she replied. “Very well; it shall be done.” And calling M. Casimir and Bourigeau, the concierge, she ordered them to take a lantern and explore the garden carefully.

They obeyed, though with rather bad grace, not being particularly courageous, either of them, and, of course, they found nothing.

"No matter," said Madame Leon, "I feel safe now." And she did indeed feel more tranquil in mind. "I had a lucky escape!" she said to herself. "What would have become of me, if Mademoiselle Marguerite had discovered the truth?"

But the housekeeper congratulated herself on her victory too soon. Mademoiselle Marguerite not only suspected her of treason, but she was endeavoring to procure proofs of it. She felt certain that the plausible housekeeper had deceived her, and cruelly wronged her as well. But what she could not understand was, how Madame Leon had been able to do so. She had spent a long time in fruitless conjectures, when suddenly she remembered the little garden gate. "The deceitful creature must have used that gate," she thought.

It was easy for her to verify her suspicion. The little gate had not been exactly condemned, but many months had elapsed since it had been used; so it would be a very simple matter to ascertain whether it had been recently opened or not. "And I will know for certain before an hour has passed," said Mademoiselle Marguerite to herself.

Having come to this conclusion, she feigned sleep, keeping a sharp watch over Madame Leon from between her half-closed eyelids. The housekeeper, after twisting uneasily in her arm-chair, at last became quiet again; and it was soon evident that she was sleeping soundly. Thereupon Mademoiselle Marguerite rose to her feet and stole noiselessly from the room downstairs into the garden. She had provided herself with a candle and some matches, and as soon as she struck a light, she saw that her surmises were correct. The little gate had just been opened and closed again. The cobwebs round about the bolts were torn and broken; the rust which had filled the keyhole had been removed, and on the dust covering the lock the impress of a hand could be detected. "And I have confided my most precious secrets to this wicked woman!" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Fool that I was!"

Already thoroughly convinced, she extinguished her candle. Still, having discovered so much, she wished to pursue her investigation to the end, and so she opened the little gate. The ground outside had been soaked by the recent rains, and had not yet dried, and by the light of the neighboring street-lamp, she plainly distinguished a number of well-defined footprints on the muddy soil. An experienced observer would have realized by the disposition of these footprints that something like a struggle had taken place here; but Mademoiselle Marguerite was not sufficiently expert for that. She only understood what a child would have understood—that two people had been standing here for some time. Poor girl! She had not seen Pascal when he was sitting in front of the mansion some hours before! And now no presentiment warned her that these footprints were his. In her opinion, the man who had been talking with Madame Leon was either M. de Fondege, or the Marquis de Valorsay—that is to say, Madame Leon was hired to watch her and to render an account of all she said and did.

Her first impulse was to denounce and dismiss this miserable hypocrite; but as she was returning to the house, an idea which an old diplomatist need not have been ashamed of entered her mind. She said to herself that as Madame Leon was unmasked she was no longer to be feared; so why should she be sent away? “A known spy can undoubtedly be made a most valuable auxiliary. Why shouldn’t I make use of this wicked woman?” thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. “I can conceal from her what I don’t wish her to know, and with a little skill I can make her carry to her employers such information as will serve my plans. By watching her, I shall soon discover my enemy; and who knows if, by this means, I may not succeed in finding an explanation of the fatality that pursues me?”

When Mademoiselle Marguerite returned to her place beside the count’s bedside, she had calmly and irrevocably made up her mind. She would not only retain Madame Leon in her service, but she would display even greater confidence in her than before. Such a course was most repugnant to Marguerite’s loyal, truthful nature; but reason

whispered to her that in fighting with villains, it is often necessary to use their weapons; and she had her honor, her life, and her future to defend. A strange and but imperfectly defined suspicion had entered her mind. To-night, for the first time, she thought she could discover a mysterious connection between Pascal's misfortunes and her own. Was it mere chance which had struck them at the same time, and in much the same manner? Who would have profited by the abominable crime which had dishonored her lover, had it not been for M. de Chalusse's death and her own firmness? Evidently the Marquis de Valorsay, for whom Pascal's flight had left the field clear.

All these thoughts were well calculated to drive away sleep; but the poor girl was only twenty, and it was the second night she had watched by the count's bedside. Thus at last fatigue overcame her, and she fell asleep.

In the morning, about seven o'clock, Madame Leon was obliged to shake her to rouse her from the kind of lethargy into which she had fallen. "Mademoiselle," said the housekeeper, in her honeyed voice; "dear mademoiselle, wake up at once!"

"What is the matter? What is it?"

"Ah! how can I explain? My dear young lady, the undertaker's men have come to make arrangements for the ceremony."

Those in charge of the last rites had indeed arrived, and their heavy tread could be heard in the hall and in the courtyard. M. Casimir, who was bursting with self-sufficiency, hurried here, there? and everywhere, indicating, with an imperious gesture, where he wished the black hangings, embroidered with silver and emblazoned with the De Chalusse arms, to be suspended. As the magistrate had given him carte-blanche, he deemed it proper, as he remarked to Concierge Bourigeau, to have everything done in grand style. But he took good care not to reveal the fact that he had exacted a very handsome commission from all the people he employed. The hundred francs derived from Chupin had only whetted his appetite for more. At all events, he had certainly spared no pains in view of having everything as magnificent as possible; and it was

not until he considered the display thoroughly satisfactory that he went to warn Mademoiselle Marguerite. “I come to beg mademoiselle to retire to her own room,” he said.

“Retire—why?”

He did not reply by words, but pointed to the bed on which the body was lying, and the poor girl realized that the moment of eternal separation had come. She rose, and dragged herself to the bedside. Death had now effaced all traces of the count’s last agony. His face wore its accustomed expression again, and it might have been fancied that he was asleep. For a long time Mademoiselle Marguerite stood looking at him, as if to engrave the features she would never behold again upon her memory. “Mademoiselle,” insisted M. Casimir; “mademoiselle, do not remain here.”

She heard him, and summoning all her strength, she leaned over the bed, kissed M. de Chalusse, and went away. But she was too late, for in passing through the hall she encountered the undertakers, who carried on their shoulders a long metallic case enclosed in two oaken ones. And she had scarcely reached her own room before a smell of resin told her that the men were closing the coffin which contained all that was mortal of M. de Chalusse, her father.

So, none of those terrible details, which so increase one’s grief, were spared her. But she had already suffered so much that she had reached a state of gloomy apathy, almost insensibility; and the exercise of her faculties was virtually suspended. Whiter than marble, she fell, rather than seated herself, on a chair, scarcely perceiving Madame Leon, who had followed her.

The worthy housekeeper was greatly excited, and not without cause. As there were no relations, it had been decided that M. de Fondege, the count’s oldest friend, should do the honors of the mansion to the persons invited to attend the funeral; and he had sworn that he would be under arms at daybreak, and that they might positively depend upon him. But the hour fixed for the ceremony was approaching, several persons had already arrived, and yet M. de Fondege had not put in an appearance. “It

is incomprehensible," exclaimed Madame Leon. "The General is usually punctuality personified. He must have met with some accident." And in her anxiety she stationed herself at the window, whence she could command a view of the courtyard, carefully scrutinizing every fresh arrival.

At last, about half-past nine o'clock, she suddenly exclaimed: "Here he is! Do you hear, mademoiselle, here's the General!"

A moment later, indeed, there was a gentle rap at the door, and M. de Fondege entered. "Ah, I'm late!" he exclaimed; "but, dash it all! it's not my fault!" And, struck by Mademoiselle Marguerite's immobility, he advanced and took her hand. "And you, my dear little one, what is the matter with you?" he asked. "Have you been ill? You are frightfully pale."

She succeeded in shaking off the torpor which was stealing over her, and replied in a faint voice; "I am not ill, monsieur."

"So much the better, my dear child, so much the better. It is our little heart that is suffering, is it not? Yes—yes—I understand. But your old friends will console you. You received my wife's letter, did you not? Ah, well! what she told you, she will do—she will do it. And to prove it, in spite of her illness, she followed me—in fact, she is here!"

XXI.

Mademoiselle Marguerite sprang to her feet, quivering with indignation. Her eyes sparkled and her lips trembled as she threw back her head with a superb gesture of scorn, which loosened her beautiful dark hair, and caused it to fall in rippling masses over her shoulders. “Ah! Madame de Fondege is here!” she repeated, in a tone of crushing contempt—“Madame de Fondege, your wife, here!”

It seemed to her an impossibility to receive the hypocrite who had written the letter of the previous evening—the accomplice of the scoundrels who took advantage of her wretchedness and isolation. Her heart revolted at the thought of meeting this woman, who had neither conscience nor shame, who could stoop so low as to intrigue for the millions which she fancied had been stolen. Mademoiselle Marguerite was about to forbid her to enter, or to retire herself, when the thought of her determination to act stealthily restrained her. She instantly realized her imprudence, and, mastering herself with a great effort, she murmured: “Madame de Fondege is too kind! How can I ever express my gratitude?”

Madame de Fondege must have heard this, for at the same moment she entered the room. She was short, and very stout—a faded blonde, with her complexion spoilt by a multitude of freckles. She had very large hands, broad, thick feet, and a shrill voice; and the vulgarity of her appearance was all the more noticeable on account of her pretensions to elegance. For although her father had been a wood-merchant, she boasted of her exalted birth, and endeavored to impress people with the magnificence of her style of living, though her fortune was problematical, and her household conducted in the most frugal style. Her attire suggested a continual conflict between elegance and economy—between real poverty and feigned prodigality. She wore a corsage and overskirt of black satin; but the upper part of the underskirt, which was

not visible, was made of lute-string costing thirty sous a yard, and her laces were Chantilly only in appearance. Still, her love of finery had never carried her so far as shop-lifting, or induced her to part with her honor for gewgaws—irregularities which are so common nowadays, even among wives and mothers of families, that people are no longer astonished to hear of them.

No—Madame de Fondege was a faithful wife, in the strict and legal sense of the word. But how she revenged herself! She was "virtuous;" but so dangerously virtuous that one might have supposed she was so against her will, and that she bitterly regretted it. She ruled her husband with a rod of iron. And he who was so terrible in appearance, he who twirled his ferocious mustaches in such a threatening manner, he who swore horribly enough to make an old hussar blush, became more submissive than a child, and more timid than a lamb when he was beside his wife. He trembled when she turned her pale blue eyes upon him in a certain fashion. And woe to him if he ventured to rebel. She suppressed his pocket-money, and during these penitential seasons he was reduced to the necessity of asking his friends to lend him twenty-franc pieces, which he generally forgot to return.

Madame de Fondege was, as a rule, most imperious, envious, and spiteful in disposition; but on coming to the Hotel de Chalusse she had provided herself with any amount of sweetness and sensibility, and when she entered the room, she held her handkerchief to her lips as if to stifle her sobs. The General led her toward Mademoiselle Marguerite, and, in a semi-solemn, semi-sentimental tone, he exclaimed: "Dear Athenais, this is the daughter of my best and oldest friend. I know your heart—I know that she will find in you a second mother."

Mademoiselle Marguerite stood speechless and rigid. Persuaded that Madame de Fondege was about to throw her arms round her neck and kiss her, she was imposing the most terrible constraint upon herself, in order to conceal her horror and aversion. But she was unnecessarily alarmed. The hypocrisy of the General's wife was superior to that of Madame Leon. Madame de Fondege contented herself with pressing

Mademoiselle Marguerite's hands and faltering: "What a misfortune! So young—so sudden! It is frightful!" And, as she received no reply, she added, with an air of sorrowful dignity: "I dare not ask your full confidence, my dear unfortunate child. Confidence can be born only of long acquaintance and mutual esteem. But you will learn to know me. You will give me that sweet name of mother when I shall have deserved it."

Standing at a little distance off, the General listened with the air of a man who has a profound respect for his wife's ability. "Now the ice is broken," he thought, "it will be strange if Athenais doesn't do whatever she pleases with that little savage."

His hopes were so brightly reflected upon his countenance, that Madame Leon, who was furtively watching him, became alarmed. "Ah! what do these people want?" she said to herself; "and what do all these endearments mean? Upon my word, I must warn my patron at once." And, fancying that no one noticed her, she slipped quietly and noiselessly from the room.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite was on the watch. Determined to fathom the plotting that was going on around her, and frustrate it, she realized that everything depended upon her watchfulness and her ability to profit even by the most futile incidents. She had noticed the General's triumphant smile, and the look of anxiety that had suddenly clouded Madame Leon's face. So, without troubling herself about "the proprieties," she asked M. and Madame de Fondege to excuse her for a second, and darted alter the housekeeper. Ah! she did not need to go far. Leaning over the banisters, she saw Madame Leon and the Marquis de Valorsay in earnest conversation in the hall below; the marquis as phlegmatic and as haughty as usual, but the house-keeper fairly excited. Marguerite at once understood that as Madame Leon knew that the marquis was among the funeral guests, she had gone to warn him of Madame de Fondege's presence. This trivial circumstance proved that M. de Fondege's interests were opposed to those of M. de Valorsay; that they must, therefore, hate each other, and that, with a little patience and

skill, she might utilize them, one against the other. It also proved that Madame Leon was the Marquis de Valorsay's paid spy and that he must therefore have long been aware of Pascal's existence. But she lacked the time to follow out this train of thought. Her absence might awaken the Fondeges' suspicions; and her success depended on letting them suppose that she was their dupe. She therefore returned to them as soon as possible, excusing herself for her abrupt departure as well as she could; but she was not accustomed to deceive, and her embarrassment might have betrayed her had it not been for the General, who fortunately interrupted her by saying: "I, too, must excuse myself, my dear child; but Madame de Fondege will remain with you. I must fulfil a sacred duty. They are waiting for me downstairs, and they are no doubt becoming impatient. It is the first time in my life that I was ever behind time."

The General was right in losing no more time. At least a hundred and fifty guests had assembled in the reception-rooms on the ground floor, and they were beginning to think it very strange that they should be kept waiting in this style. And yet curiosity somewhat tempered their impatience. Some of the strange circumstances attending the count's death had been noised abroad; and some well-informed persons declared that a fabulous sum of money had been stolen by a young girl. It is true, they did not think this embezzlement a positive crime. It certainly proved that the young lady in question possessed a strong and determined character; and many of the proudest among the guests would gladly have taken the place of De Valorsay, who, it was rumored, was about to marry the pretty thief and her millions.

The person who was most disturbed by the delay was the master of the ceremonies. Arrayed in his best uniform, his thin legs encased in black silk stockings, his mantle thrown gracefully over his shoulders, and his cocked hat under his arm, he was looking anxiously about for some one in the assembled crowd to whom he could give the signal for departure. He was already talking of starting off when M. de Fondege appeared.

The friends of M. de Chalusse who were to hold the cords of the pall came forward. There was a moment's confusion, then the hearse started, and the whole cortege filed out of the courtyard.

Deep silence followed, so deep that the noise made in closing the heavy gates came upon one with startling effect. "Ah!" moaned Madame de Fondege, "it is over."

Marguerite's only reply was a despairing gesture. It would have been impossible for her to articulate a syllable—her tears were choking her. What would she not have given to be alone at this moment—to have been able to abandon herself without constraint to her emotions! Alas! prudence condemned her to play a part even now. The thought of her future and her honor lent her strength to submit to the deceitful consolations of a woman whom she knew to be a dangerous enemy. And the General's wife was by no means sparing of her consolatory phrases; in fact, it was only after a long homily on the uncertainty of life below that she ventured to approach the subject of her letter of the previous evening. "For it is necessary to face the inevitable," she pursued. "The troublesome realities of life have no respect for our grief. So it is with you, my dear child; you would find a bitter pleasure in giving vent to your sorrow, but you are compelled to think of your future. As M. de Chalusse has no heirs, this house will be closed—you can remain here no longer."

"I know it, madame."

"Where will you go?"

"Alas! I don't know."

Madame de Fondege raised her handkerchief to her eyes as if to wipe a furtive tear away, and then, almost roughly, she exclaimed: "I must tell you the truth, my child. Listen to me. I see only two courses for you to adopt. Either to ask the protection of some respectable family, or to enter a convent. This is your only hope of safety."

Mademoiselle Marguerite bowed her head, without replying. To learn the plans which the General's wife had formed she must let her disclose them. However, the girl's silence seemed to make Madame de Fondege

uncomfortable, and at last she resumed: “Is it possible that you think of braving the perils of life alone? I cannot believe it! It would be madness. Young, beautiful, and attractive as you are, it is impossible for you to live unprotected. Even if you had sufficient strength of character to lead a pure and honest life, the world would none the less refuse you its esteem. Mere prejudice, you say? You are quite right; but it is nevertheless true that a young girl who braves public opinion is lost.”

It was easy to see by Madame de Fondege’s earnestness that she feared Mademoiselle Marguerite would avail herself of this opportunity of recovering her liberty. “What shall I do, then?” asked the girl.

“There is the convent.”

“But I love life.”

“Then ask the protection of some respectable family.”

“The idea of being in any one’s charge is disagreeable to me.”

Strange to say, Madame de Fondege did not protest, did not speak of her own house. She was too proud for that. Having once offered hospitality, she thought it would arouse suspicion if she insisted. So she contented herself with enumerating the arguments for and against the two propositions, remarking from time to time: “Come, you must decide! Don’t wait until the last moment!”

Mademoiselle Marguerite had already decided but before announcing her decision she wished to confer with the only friend she had in the world—the old justice of the peace. On the previous evening he had said to her: “Farewell until to-morrow,” and knowing that his work in the house had not been concluded, she was extremely surprised that he had not yet put in an appearance.

While conversing with Madame de Fondege she had dexterously avoided compromising herself in any way when suddenly a servant appeared and announced the magistrate’s arrival. He entered the room, with his usual benevolent smile upon his lips, but his searching eyes were never once taken off Madame de Fondege’s face. He bowed, made a

few polite remarks, and then addressing Marguerite, he said: “I must speak with you, mademoiselle, at once. You may tell madame, however, that you will certainly return in less than a quarter of an hour.”

Marguerite followed him, and when they were alone in the count’s study and the doors had been carefully closed, the magistrate exclaimed: “I have been thinking a great deal of you, my child, a great deal; and it seems to me that I can explain certain things which worried you yesterday. But first of all, what has happened since I left you?”

Briefly, but with remarkable precision, Marguerite recounted the various incidents which had occurred—her useless journey to the Rue d’Ulm, Madame Leon’s strange midnight ramble and conversation with the Marquis de Valorsay, Madame de Fondege’s letter, and lastly, her visit and all that she had said.

The magistrate listened with his eyes fixed on his ring “This is very serious, very serious,” he said at last. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps M. Ferailleur is innocent. And yet, why should he abscond? why should he leave the country?”

“Ah! monsieur, Pascal’s flight is only feigned. He is in Paris—concealed somewhere—I’m sure of it; and I know a man who will find him for me. Only one thing puzzles me—his silence. To disappear without a word, without giving me any sign of life——”

The magistrate interrupted her by a gesture. “I see nothing surprising in that since your companion is the Marquis de Valorsay’s spy. How do you know that she has not intercepted or destroyed some letter from M. Pascal?”

Mademoiselle Marguerite turned pale. “Great Heavens! how blind I have been!” she exclaimed. “I did not think of that. Oh, the wretch! if one could only question her and make her confess her crime. It is horrible to think that if I wish to arrive at the truth, I must remain with her and treat her in the future just as I have treated her till now.”

But the magistrate was not the man to wander from the subject he was investigating. “Let us return to Madame de Fondege,” said he. “She is extremely unwilling to see you go out into the world alone. Why?—

through affection? No. Why, then? This is what we must ascertain. Secondly, she seems indifferent as to whether you accept her hospitality or enter a convent."

"She seems to prefer that I should enter a convent."

"Very well. What conclusion can we draw from that? Simply, that the Fondege family don't particularly care about keeping you with them, or marrying you to their son. If they don't desire this, it is because they are perfectly sure that the missing money was not taken by you. Now, let me ask, how can they be so certain? Simply because they know where the missing millions are—and if they know——"

"Ah! monsieur, it is because they've stolen them!"

The magistrate was silent. He had turned the bezel of his ring inside, a sure sign of stormy weather, so his clerk would have said—and though he had his features under excellent control he could not entirely conceal some signs of a severe mental conflict he was undergoing. "Well, yes, my child," he said, at last. "Yes, it is my conviction that the Fondeges possess the millions you saw in the count's escritoire, and which we have been unable to find. How they obtained possession of the money I can't conceive—but they have it, or else logic is no longer logic." He paused again for a moment, and then he resumed, more slowly: "In acquainting you with my opinion on this subject, I have given you, a young girl, almost a child, a proof of esteem and confidence which, it seems to me, few men are worthy of; for I may be deceived, and a magistrate ought not to accuse a person unless he is absolutely certain of his guilt. So you must forget what I have just told you, Mademoiselle Marguerite."

She looked at him with an air of utter astonishment. "You advise me to forget," she murmured, "you wish me to forget."

"Yes; you must conceal these suspicions in the deepest recesses of your heart, until the time comes when you have sufficient proof to convict the culprits. It is true that it will be a difficult task to collect such proofs; but it is not impossible, with the aid of time, which divulges so

many crimes. And you may count upon me; I will give you the benefit of all my influence and experience. It shall never be said that I allowed a defenceless girl to be crushed while I saw any chance of saving her."

Tears came to Mademoiselle Marguerite's eyes. So the world was not composed entirely of scoundrels! "Ah! how kind you are, monsieur," she said; "how kind you are!"

"To be sure!" he interrupted, in a benevolent tone. "But, my child, you must help yourself. Remember this: if the Fondeges suspect our suspicions, all is lost. Repeat this to yourself at every moment in the day —and be discreet, impenetrable; for people with unclean consciences and hands are always distrustful of others."

There was no necessity to say anything more on this point; and so, with a sudden change of tone he asked: "Have you any plan?"

She felt that she could, and ought, to confide everything to this worthy old man, and so rising to her feet, with a look of energy and determination on her face, she replied in a firm voice: "My decision is taken, monsieur, subject, of course, to your approval. In the first place I shall keep Madame Leon with me, in whatever capacity she likes, it doesn't matter what. Through her I shall no doubt be able to watch the Marquis de Valorsay, and perhaps eventually discover his hopes and his aim. In the second place, I shall accept the hospitality offered me by the General and his wife. With them, I shall be in the very centre of the intrigue, and in a position to collect proofs of their infamy."

The magistrate gave vent to an exclamation of delight. "You are a brave girl, Mademoiselle Marguerite," he said, "and at the same time a prudent one. Yes; that is the proper course to pursue."

Nothing now remained save to make arrangements for her departure. She possessed some very handsome diamonds and other costly jewels; should she keep them? "They are undoubtedly mine," said she; "but after the infamous accusations levelled at me, I can't consent to take them away with me. They are worth a very handsome amount. I shall leave them with you, monsieur. If the courts restore them to me later—well—I shall take them—and not without pleasure, I frankly confess." Then as

the magistrate questioned her anxiously as to her resources, she replied: "Oh! I'm not without money. M. de Chalusse was generosity itself, and my tastes are very simple. From the money he gave me for my clothes I saved more than eight thousand francs in less than six months. That is more than sufficient to maintain me for a year."

The magistrate then explained that when the court took possession of this immense estate, it would surely allow her a certain sum. For whether the count was her father or not, he was at any rate her officially appointed guardian, and she would be considered a minor. And in support of his assertion, he quoted Article 367 of the Civil Code, which says: "In the event of the officially appointed guardian dying without adopting, his ward, the said ward shall be furnished during her minority with the means of subsistence from the said guardian's estate," etc., etc.

"An additional reason why I should give up my jewels," said Mademoiselle Marguerite.

The only point that now remained was to decide upon some plan by which she could communicate with her friend, the magistrate, without the knowledge of the General or his wife. The magistrate accordingly explained a system of correspondence which would defy the closest surveillance, and then added: "Now, make haste back to your visitor. Who knows what suspicions your absence may have caused her?"

But Mademoiselle Marguerite had one more request to make. She had often seen in M. de Chalusse's possession a little note-book, in which he entered the names and addresses of the persons with whom he had business transactions. M. Fortunat's address must be there, so she asked and obtained permission to examine this note-book, and to her great joy, under the letter "F," she found the entry: "Fortunat (Isidore), No. 28 Place de la Bourse." "Ah! I'm sure that I shall find Pascal now!" she exclaimed. And after once more thanking the magistrate, she returned to her room again.

Madame de Fondege was awaiting her with feverish impatience. "How long you stayed!" she cried.

"I had so many explanations to give, madame."

“How you are tormented, my poor child!”

“Oh, shamefully!”

This furnished Madame de Fondege with another excuse for proffering her advice. But Mademoiselle Marguerite would not allow herself to be convinced at once. She raised a great many objections, and parleyed for a long time before telling Madame de Fondege that she would be happy to accept the hospitality which had been offered her. And her consent was by no means unconditional. She insisted on paying her board, and expressed the wish to retain the services of Madame Leon to whom she was so much attached. The worthy housekeeper was present at this conference. For an instant she had feared that Mademoiselle Marguerite suspected her manoeuvres but her fears were now dispelled, and she even congratulated herself on her skilfulness. Everything was arranged, and the agreement had been sealed with a kiss, when the General returned about four o’clock. “Ah, my dear!” cried his wife, “what happiness! We have a daughter!”

But even this intelligence was scarcely sufficient to revive her husband’s drooping spirits. He had almost fainted when he heard the earth falling on M. de Chalusse’s coffin; and this display of weakness on the part of a man adorned with such terrible and ferocious mustaches had excited no little comment. “Yes, it is a great happiness!” he now replied. “But thunder and lightning! I never doubted the dear girl’s heart!”

Still both he and his wife could scarcely conceal their disappointment when the magistrate informed them that their beloved daughter would not take her diamonds. “Dash it!” growled the General. “I recognize her father in this! What delicacy! almost too much, perhaps!”

However, when the magistrate informed him that the court would undoubtedly order the restitution of the jewels, his face brightened again, and he went down to superintend the removal of Mademoiselle Marguerite’s trunks, which were being loaded on one of the vehicles of the establishment.

Then the moment of departure came. Mademoiselle Marguerite acknowledged the parting remarks of the servants, who were secretly delighted to be freed from her presence, and then, before entering the carriage, she cast a long, sad look upon this princely mansion which she had once had the right to believe her own, but which she was, alas! now leaving, in all probability, for ever.

The conclusion of this narrative will be found in the volume called “Baron Trigault’s Vengeance.”

FOOTNOTES

1 (return)

[French gamblers use this expression which they explain by the fact that Charlemagne departed this life with all his possessions intact, having always added to his dominions without ever experiencing a loss. Historically this is no doubt incorrect, but none the less, the expression prevails in France.—TRANS.]

2 (return)

[See “Lecoq the Detective” by Emile Gaboriau]

3 (return)

[The body of hired applauders who are employed at most Parisian theatres to stimulate the enthusiasm of the audience.—Trans.]

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE COUNT'S MILLIONS ***
Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.
Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.
START: FULL LICENSE

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG™ LICENSE

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> *This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.*

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.
1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.
1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg electronic works provided that:

- • You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- • You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- • You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- • You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.
1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg

Project Gutenberg is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 41 Watchung Plaza #516, Montclair NJ 07042, USA, +1 (862) 621-9288. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet

and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate.

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.