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# MARRIAGES OF ADVENTURE

EMILE GABORIAU

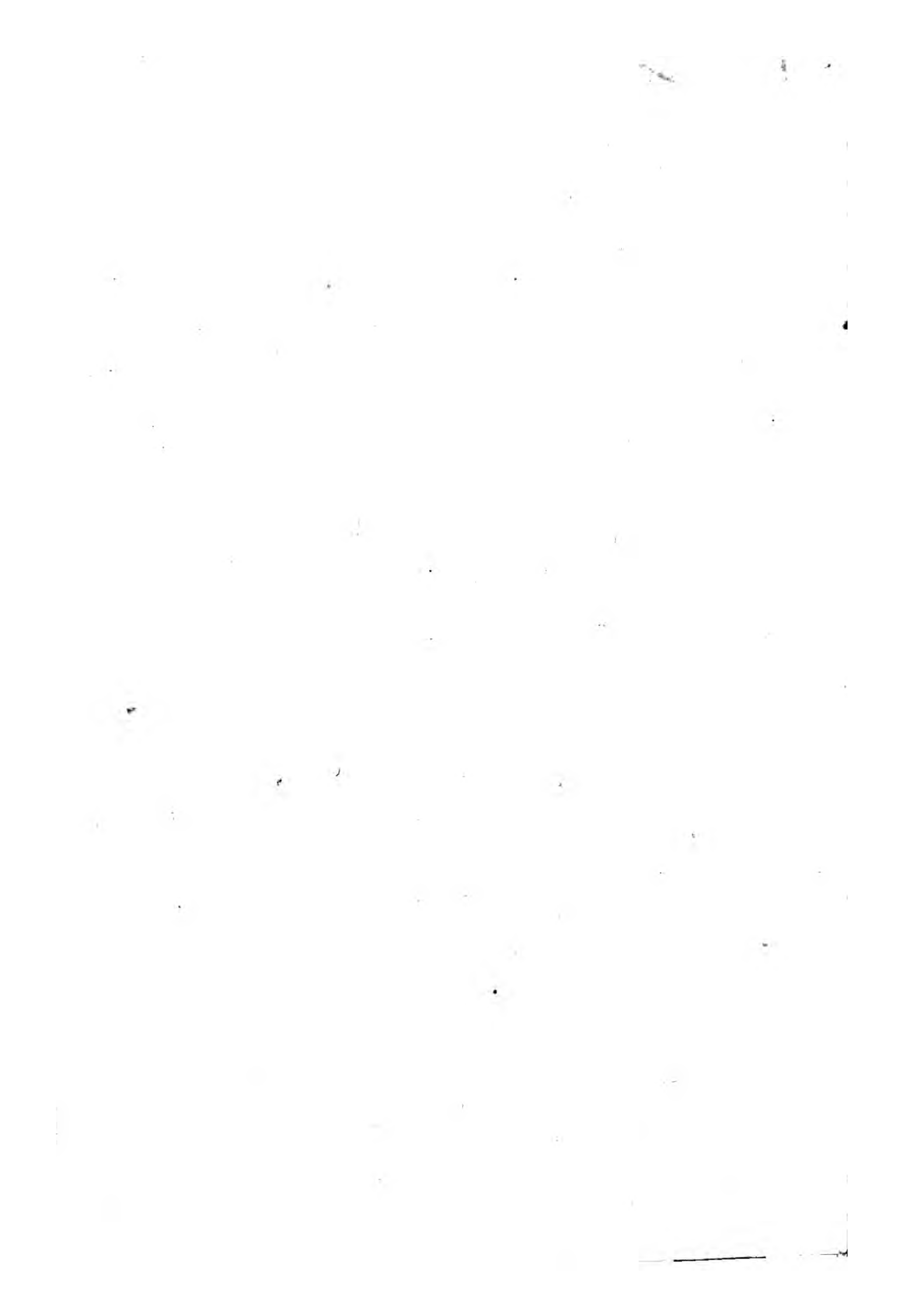




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## MARRIAGES OF ADVENTURE





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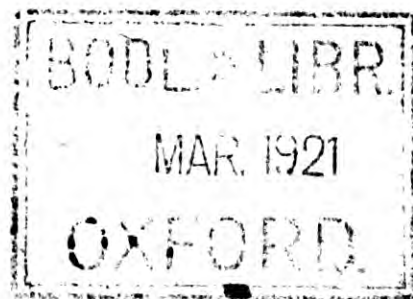
(MARIAGES D'AVENTURE)

By  
EMILE GABORIAU



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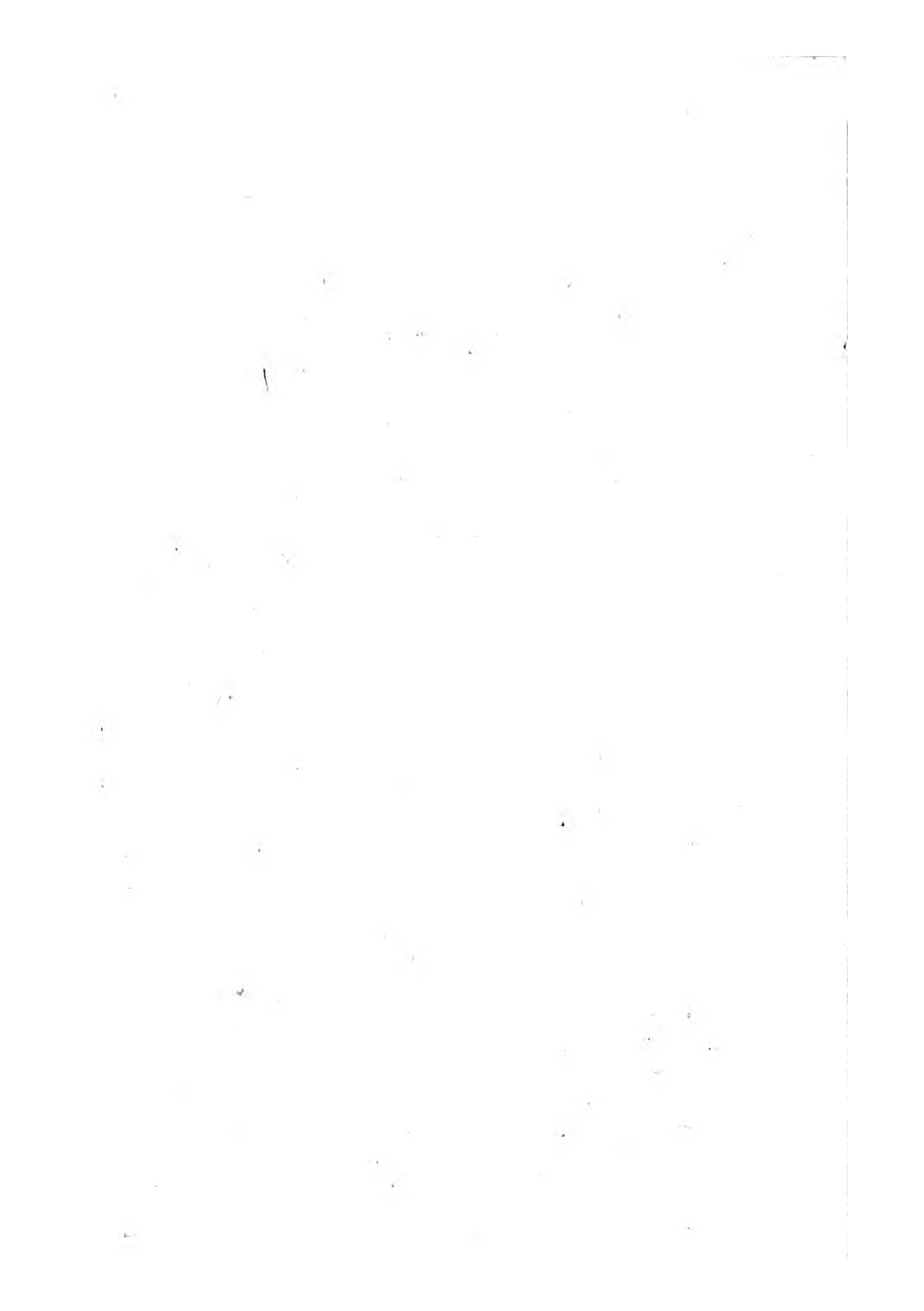
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## FOREWORD.

MADAM,—

No doubt you remember that at Eaux-Bonnes, one evening this summer, I was unwise enough to have a wager with your mother, and lost my bet. Our stake was left to discretion, and your mother was kind enough not to take full advantage of her victory.

“Sir,” said she to me, “I must have a book from you. But let us understand each other thoroughly: I want a book that a woman does not have to hide when someone comes to call; a book that I may forget and leave lying on the table of my drawing-room without being in dread of some thoughtless girl opening it—a book that my daughter can read, in fact.”

I felt none too happy when I heard my sentence. Aren't the books that everybody can read just those that nobody ever does read? I've heard this paradox maintained by people who wanted to make others believe that ladies nowadays only like highly-flavoured literature.

However, I have done my penance with good will. One must honourably discharge one's debts.

I have always discharged those one pays with ink.

Here is the book, then, madam; I venture to

dedicate it to you, since it was meant for you. If I did not think that a young lady's name should never be uttered—much less printed—I would have written yours on this its first page. Such a patroness would have brought it good luck, I'm sure.

EMILE GABORIAU.

# MARRIAGES OF ADVENTURE

## CHAPTER I

### A CONTRAST IN FRIENDS

**T**HE exact reason why Pascal Divorne tendered his resignation less than a fortnight after leaving the School of Civil Engineering, where he was one of the most distinguished students, was never really known.

He never troubled himself to explain it, and never gave any reason for it, perhaps because there was no good reason to give—I mean the sort of excellent reason that rests on assured interest and enlightened selfishness, the only sort of reason that is deemed conclusive by licensed judges.

At the same time he had plenty of opportunities for avoiding the truth or even for telling fibs. All the distant relatives and the acquaintances he had in Paris pumped him judiciously. They thought they were on the track of some secret, perhaps a little bit of scandal—it was attractive. He was hard-hearted enough to disappoint these good busy-bodies, who always have the well-worn excuse of a kind interest they never really feel for poking their noses into other people's business. He openly scoffed at the nice sort of people who are always ready to open their hearts to confidences, and

their mouths for giving good advice, but, if the necessity arose, would not open their purses for anything on earth.

Some of them got quite disagreeable about it. Pascal used to get these into a corner, and look all round like a worried conspirator, and then talk big about politics, though as a matter of fact he had never touched politics in his life. This was a great success ; the silly idiots went off in a fright, thinking the prison doors of Mont St. Michel were gaping for them already.

People got tired of this and let Pascal alone, but they said he was an unsociable young fellow and not any too straightforward, and that one ought not to trust him too much, especially as his opinions were far too advanced.

Then there were his friends. To them he said, without going into details, that he was a Frenchman, and a very good one at that, but that he could not stand any sort of uniform, even if it were decorated like a shrine, and that a government job didn't suit him ; he would rather trust to luck than take a regular appointment, big or little, whether fairly won or not ; in fact, he would a thousand times rather be independent than have any sort of official position, even a minister's portfolio, though God Almighty Himself should give it him.

Naturally, his friends did not bother themselves at all about hidden motives for his actions ; what did it matter to them what he did ? They said with one accord that he spoke with the voice of Wisdom herself, and that he was undoubtedly quite right.

There was only one who reproached the young

engineer, and blamed his rash impetuosity in a fatherly sort of way. But this was Pascal's bosom friend, his chum at Henry IV.'s College. They had been students together, and had stuck to each other ever since.

This "faithful Achates" who had taken on Mentor's part was Eugène Lorilleux. He was two or three years older than Pascal. Eighteen months ago he had got his diploma as a Doctor of Medicine, and now he was toiling to work up a practice.

He was just at the first steps of this career, more difficult and risky than any other. He had some patients, but patients who were bad payers or did not pay at all. He had to climb up eighty steps to write a prescription. He both gave advice gratis and got fees for it; but as in both cases his clients were poor people, it was really not worth while making any difference.

But he possessed his soul in patience. He was waiting for that happy chance which they say comes within reach of everybody three times in his life—the chance one ought to know how to avail oneself of.

He was a glutton for work, and thought he would win fame and fortune by his scientific knowledge and his ability. He was wrong about this, and still is. There is no doubt about his learning, but what he has not got is quick apprehension, coolness and nerve. Self-possessed enough in his study, imperturbable in theory, what he lacks at the patient's bedside is the sense, the sudden inspiration, which makes the really great healers.

At the same time, Lorilleux is no ordinary man. His great misfortune is that he has never known enthusiasm. He has never known youth or boy-



hood. He was born old. As you see him to-day, so he was at fourteen, on the school forms, when he was finishing in the third class. Nothing has changed in him, figure or character. He is a stiff, solemn little fellow. He carries his gravity, dignity, and self-respect so far that he sometimes makes himself ridiculous.

But his characterless face is not the mirror of his mind; it is a blank page on which there is nothing to read. He is sharper than a Norman countryman; and his special weakness is thinking that everybody else is as sharp as he is. He does not believe in any action being without a motive, and always wants to find out some hidden object.

You cannot make him understand that people often act spontaneously, without any plan in their mind; he will always tell you "there's something behind that." He passes his time in foiling fantastic plots by clever manœuvres, or laboriously unravelling the imaginary thread of some terribly complicated web. These exaggerated apprehensions and investigations are the bane of his existence. His friends often chaff him about these peculiar bugbears of his. "Hallo! Lorilleux," they say, "have you run the little brute to earth yet?"

In short, this calculating gentleman looks on life as a series of algebraic problems, the solutions of which clever people have always got up their sleeves. From ten years of age he has drawn himself up a line of conduct which, he thinks, gives no opening for chance, and he has not deviated from it a hair's breadth.

After this, ought one to be astonished at his narrowness of mind and limited ideas? He is a living contrast to Pascal, who has large ideas, a

certain boldness in conception, and great courage in initiative. And so he reproached him with being Quixotic.

The contrast of character would be sufficient explanation for the close friendship of the two young men, but there was something else as well.

For a long time now the doctor had had ideas about his friend, of which the latter had no notion. That went back to their college days.

Lorilleux had a sister, ten years younger than himself, whom he loved devotedly. Often, at an age when other young fellows think of nothing but pleasure, he worried himself about this child. Their mother, Mme. Lorilleux, was a widow; a life annuity was almost all her property, and would die with her. What would become of the little girl if her mother happened to die? Or even leaving such a misfortune out of the calculation, what would be her position later on? A girl without a dowry does not often get married, and her family, which already had difficulty in making both ends meet every year, could certainly not give her one; her brother would not have had time to save up one for her by the time she was twenty. Where could a husband be found for her?

Ideas such as these were worrying this precocious schemer of seventeen, when it came into his head that his friend Pascal would be, later on—in ten years—an excellent match for this beloved sister of his.

This seemed a fine idea to the far-sighted college boy. He stuck to it; it never left him. By dint of constantly turning it over in his mind, looking at it from every point of view, and calculating all the probabilities, he came to think of it not only

as an admirable and necessary idea, but as one which ought to be successful with a little patience and skill.

"Money," he used to say to himself, "will be no obstacle; Pascal's family is rich, and he is the most disinterested of men. My sister will be pretty, modest, well brought up; she will make her husband happy and be the best of mothers. Pascal will certainly take a fancy to her. Besides, if he does not marry her for love, he will do it out of regard for me, his best friend, so as to strengthen the ties of our friendship and become my brother-in-law. So I am ensuring the happiness of two people who are dear to me. All my actions should be directed to this end."

This was why Lorilleux became and remained the bosom friend of Pascal, why he took such a tender interest in all that concerned him. He knew pretty nearly to a *centime* the figure of the fortune which should come to him one day, and he had gone to spend a fortnight in Brittany with his "future brother-in-law's" family, with the sole idea of studying the character of the relatives his sister would have. He came back convinced that there would be no difficulties in that quarter.

Moreover, never a word or a hint escaped from him. He said nothing to rouse any suspicion of his projects or to awake attention—he was too prudent for that. His sister was still too young; Pascal had not even left college yet. He had to wait—he waited.

But also, what care he took of this friend of his! What a fuss he made of him! How anxiously he sought information about everything that concerned his family! Was there not, as so often



happens in the country, some girl cousin being brought up with this very idea of a match? No, nothing of that sort.

When Pascal was received at the Polytechnic School, Lorilleux was certainly the better pleased of the two. How he congratulated his friend! What a pæan he sung over him! And to himself he said, "Now my sister is going to marry an artillery officer."

But Pascal came out with a third class and decided on the School of Civil Engineering.

"Hurrah," said Lorilleux to himself—he was not surprised at this decision—"garrison life would not have suited my sister. She'll be a civil engineer's wife; that's much more like my idea for her"—and he shook hands with himself.

His disappointment can be imagined, when the young engineer handed in his resignation without consulting him or giving him any warning. This act of independence displeased the doctor very much; indeed, he thought it downright indecent—giving up a sure position, a magnificent career!

"Deuce take the fool!" said he, in the same tone as he would have said, "My poor sister has got a husband who plays fool's tricks."

However, he concealed his annoyance a little. Pascal was a Breton, which is as much as to say that he was tenacious enough of his ideas. It was impossible to make him reverse a decision; Lorilleux did not try to do so—it would have cast a chill on relations which were always of such a friendly warmth. But he blamed the fool vigorously. The folly was committed, it had to be made the best of, and already the doctor had a certain engineer's post in view.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked Pascal. "You've wasted five years."

"You think so, my dear fellow? I thought I had been employing my time profitably!"

"But once more, what are you going to decide on?"

"You'll see—I've got a plan of my own."

"Ah," answered Lorilleux irritably, "you hadn't said anything to me about it."

"It's a surprise."

"Well, no one wishes you success more sincerely than I do; but life isn't a novel. Look out for deceptions. In any case, as your friend I can't conceal my opinion that you've done a foolish thing."

## CHAPTER II

### THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

UNFORTUNATELY Lorilleux's opinion was shared by M. Divorne senior, a solicitor attached to the court of first instance\* at Lannion (Cotes-du-Nord).

The news of this untimely resignation came on him like a thunderbolt; he was cut to the heart. Here was an end to his most cherished wishes, the projects which as a good family man he had reared on the head of this his only son.

To see Pascal, heir to his name and fortune, civil engineer at Lannion; to walk down the street with this son of his, splendid in his laced uniform, sword by his side, cocked hat on his head—that had been the dream of his life; and now, just as it was going to become a reality, it had faded away through an incomprehensible caprice. M. Divorne called it a caprice, because Pascal said plainly and simply that he was resigning, without any explanation or excuse.

It was enough to drive one mad, and the lawyer naturally flew into a rage. He sent his curse to Pascal; there was certainly justification enough for a score of curses.

Nevertheless, after the first shock had passed, the unfortunate father tried to think—perhaps he ought to have done that first! He asked himself how far a young man of twenty-four, who had

\* Civil court of inferior jurisdiction.



gained admission first to the Polytechnic School and then to the School of Civil Engineering, one whose education represents a capital of more than thirty thousand francs, has the right to give in his resignation without the consent of his relatives or his tutors. Had he really the right?

The solicitor tried to raise the doubt. He consulted authorities. Alas! He had to submit to the evidence, and with sincere annoyance he had to recognise a gap in the law. He cursed the legislature, and accused him of want of foresight—interpreter and warm admirer as he was of decrees and ordinances.

Then, as if there were any need to keep his grief alive and stir up his wrath, all the faces he met in the streets of Lannion looked doleful; they seemed to have passed the word round. The fact was that in less than no time the news had got all round the town. The very first evening they were talking about it in ten different places; the father was pitied, the son condemned without appeal.

From that day, Pascal was a black sheep. His fellow-townsmen decided that he was a young waster, who would never do anything, and would no doubt come to a bad end. It was very hard on a solicitor to have a son like that, who maybe would disgrace him some day.

Someone even said that M. Divorne had aged ten years in two days. A little more and they would have said his hair had turned white in one night; there are instances on record of this miracle happening, after shocking catastrophes.

In short, they would have made Pascal ruin his family, commit forgery, and qualify for penal

servitude ; he would never have been so disgraced ; such is the kindliness of the charitable souls in these country places.

Madame Divorne had a score of visitors during the week ; never had she received so many lady friends. All the women who knew her a little found a good excuse to come and find out exactly what had happened, to assure themselves personally of the truth, and twist the dagger in the wound a bit—if there were a wound at all.

It must be said that while they condemned the son, and sympathised with the father's vexation, people generally thought that this blow was well-deserved. The lawyer had always been prosperous, and prosperity is an unpardonable sin in little provincial towns. The success of one is a bitter wrong for all. Jealousy lies dormant in all hearts. How much relentless, venomous hate there is in the world, which has had only this to start from !

M. Divorne was envied more than anybody. They had known him a poor man, and now he was rich. They remembered him in his ratteen jacket when he was a humble clerk in his predecessor's office, and now he had one of the prettiest houses in town. Ah ! he had done some good jobs !

"Look at his chances," said people whose stupid caution or notorious incapacity had doomed them to stagnant mediocrity. "Look at his chances !"

As a matter of fact, a small legacy had enabled him to study a little, his wife's portion had paid his solicitor's qualification fees, and since then he had always prospered. His economies had gone on in snowball fashion.

And how many fathers had felt humbled before,

when they compared their sons with his ! Hadn't he displayed the satisfaction which this boy gave him, when he came home every year loaded with wreaths and with nothing but top places in his examinations ! And later on, hadn't he crowed enough about his expectations !

So what happened was a just retribution, a proof that one ought to fight shy of these model college-boys, these young people who were so clever ; they think they are better than other people, they want to do differently from their fathers, and they turn out badly. It is an old saying—it doesn't do to be too clever.

So for the next fortnight everybody who met the solicitor, inwardly delighted as they were, thought it showed good taste to put on an expression suited to the supposed acuteness of paternal grief. At the court he got condolences offered him every day, in company with consoling grips of the hand. As this increased his irritation so much the more, he came almost to think that Pascal had committed a crime. He used to go home madder than ever, and for want of anyone better he used to vent his spite on his wife, whose blind, imprudent maternal weakness had of course been the cause of all the trouble.

However, by dint of considering the situation and studying it, M. Divorne at last persuaded himself that the damage was not irremediable.

He was thinking seriously of writing to the Minister of the Interior, of going to Paris to ask for an audience, when one fine evening Pascal dropped like a bomb into the paternal mansion. He had come by the coach which plies between Rennes and Brest.



They certainly weren't expecting him! Josette, the elderly maid, who had gone to answer the door, grumbling at the rude person who presumed to ring so loud at such an hour, nearly fell over backwards when she recognised her young master. For, as she boasted later on, she recognised him at first sight, though he was awfully changed, and grown "bigger and stouter" during the three years that had passed since she had last seen him.

She gave a cry of joy and surprise, and, dropping the candle, rushed up the stairs calling every one to her, as if the house were on fire. Pascal, meanwhile, had shut the door and was groping his way along in the dark.

"It's me," he cried, laughing. "It's me, don't upset yourself so."

In response to Josette's piercing cries, the parlour door had opened. "Well, what's the matter, what's the matter, now?" asked the lawyer, surprised at this disturbance.

Josette, upset as she was, could not nearly find words yet. But Madame Divorne had recognised her son's voice and rushed to meet him. And while the lawyer was still saying, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" Pascal was in the arms of his mother, who was crying with joy and nearly stifling him as she strained him to her heart.

Through him, this darling son, she had suffered a great deal during the past fortnight, but his mere presence was his complete justification, and everything was forgiven, or rather, forgotten.

As to M. Divorne, he thought it due to his dignity to appear unmoved. Could he do less, to vindicate the principle of paternal authority? He succeeded, it is true, in suppressing his emotion, but not

easily, and not without a rather sour expression which concealed a tear. But, in short, he remained becomingly cold and severe, and his face expressed displeasure even while he kissed the son who used to be his joy and pride.

As a matter of fact, that was all he could do. At his son's embrace, he felt his anger melting like snow before April breezes. Tenderness overpowered him. He would not make an exhibition of his weakness, and making an excuse of "urgent business"—urgent business in Lannion, at nine o'clock at night!—he went out in a hurry, blowing his nose unreasonably hard.

The prodigal had returned, and the father had not ordered the fatted calf to be killed to celebrate his return, like him of the Scriptures. True, the father in the Scriptures was not a solicitor attached to the court of first instance.

So Pascal stayed at home alone with his mother. The traveller's supper had to be got for him; he had the appetite of a man who for two days has lived on refreshments snatched in a hurry at railway bars—that is to say, that as he did not care to choke himself, he was half-starved. Josette made haste to lay the table before the fireplace. She went to and fro from the parlour to the kitchen, and the kitchen to the parlour, losing her head and making ten trips for one; now and then she wiped away a tear or broke a plate as proof of her emotion.

Madame Divorne had seated herself opposite her son as he pegged away. She was in ecstasy; she admired him and could go on doing so for years. But an explanation between Pascal and his father was imminent, and this explanation might



be a stormy one. Couldn't she put Pascal up to something, get him to make some concession? She wanted to interpose, and risk drawing the weight of two people's anger upon herself.

"Your father is very angry, you naughty boy," said she. "You're giving us, at least you're giving him, a lot of trouble."

"No, mother dear, I assure you; come, don't upset yourself, nothing'll come of it."

"At any rate, you ought to have told him and asked his advice."

"With a certainty of a refusal! That's stupid! I should have gone out of my way for trouble; think of it."

"At least promise me to be reasonable if he scolds you; don't get in a temper."

"I'll promise; but you'll see I was right."

"Ah, I hope so," murmured Madame Divorne sadly.

Pascal kissed her, and his cause was won. Besides, she was ready to take her son's part, being sure that he could not be in the wrong.

But that is what all mothers are hard to convince of! Ah! they pay dearly for their tender excuses.

It seems that the lawyer did not recover his courage on the way. When he came back, the urgent business disposed of, his face was far from showing any increased severity. There was no question of anything. He talked most amicably to his son; he laughed and joked—but said not a word about the resignation.

Nor was there any question of it next day, nor on the following days. Nevertheless, heaven knows that people did not scruple to ask him wherever he appeared:

"So your son is here! Well?"

The rumour of this sudden return of his had spread very quickly. The porter had been seen going into the lawyer's house with a trunk and a hat-box; the house was besieged with visitors. But Madame Divorne defended her threshold; that day she made enemies who have not forgiven her yet.

Once Pascal took it into his head to go out. He had not gone a hundred yards down the street before five people, two of whom he hardly knew and one of whom he did not know at all, came and shook hands with him and hypocritically asked him for news of the School of Civil Engineering.

He went home again in a hurry, cursing his fellow-townsmen, and swearing he would not put his nose outside the door again.

The days went on, and M. Divorne seemed to have completely forgotten his grievance against his son.

A dozen times the latter, worried by this state of uncertainty, wanted to have the explanation which he had come for; but his mother always restrained him.

"Wait," said she to him. "I know your father; he takes a long time to make up his mind. He has been thinking things over ever since you came. When he has completely come to a decision, he'll let you know it, never fear."

And in fact, one morning, after breakfast, when the cloth had been removed, the lawyer, in a serious manner, asked his son to give him his whole attention.

"Now, then," thought Pascal, "the time is come at last."

In the ordinary way M. Divorne was long-winded

enough ; it used to be cast up at him at the court, but never did he abuse the precious gift of speech as he did on this solemn occasion.

The opening of his discourse was a sort of hymn to paternal affection. Who had realised its duties more than he ? He called his son to witness it ; had he not given proofs enough of his affection ? And what had been his reward ?

Then he passed to the innumerable anxieties which children cause. Nothing was forgotten, not even the worries of teething, and a post-chaise journey to Paris on an occasion when Pascal had been ill. This was the first section.

The second dealt with pecuniary sacrifices. This was longer. The lawyer calculated and figured out all he had expended—even down to the price of a pair of shoes, almost—in order to give his son the benefits of that education which he had himself missed.

At last, as was proper, in a third part, he opened the chapter of compensations ; he reckoned up the recompense of all sorts which Pascal owed him. There were plenty of these, and he did not leave out one.

In short, this speech was like the reading of the balance-sheet of paternity, with its worries and losses on one side and its pleasures and profits on the other. Up to now, M. Divorne demonstrated, the balance was against his son, and he, as his father, considered himself his creditor.

“ And now,” he said, as one who is approaching his conclusion, “ I hope, Pascal, that you will not upset this state of affairs. You must have been thinking things over since you have been here ; you must be regretting that you have so foolishly



ruined your career. Reverse your decision ; apply to the minister—he will not refuse you re-entry, and I am ready to forgive you for the severe annoyance you have caused me.”

The effect produced was far from what M. Divorne expected. Pascal was silent for a few moments, as if he had been rallying all his resources. One might have thought he was hesitating to reply. At last he said firmly :

“ Father, it is not possible to do what you wish. I assure you my application would be refused ; besides, I could not bring myself to make it.”

“ Very well,” said the lawyer, in a most dissatisfied way. “ It’s so easy nowadays to carve out a position for oneself. You’ve found something better, no doubt.”

“ If not better, at any rate more to my tastes. You must consider that I did not act without reflection. As to my intentions, I have come here on purpose to tell you about them ; this was particularly necessary, as I shall need your assistance.”

“ That’s really very fortunate. So I understand that you did take me into consideration. And in what respect can I be of service to you ? ”

“ Before undertaking anything I must have the funds, and I was expecting——”

“ Ah, now we’re coming to it,” said the lawyer in a jeering tone. “ You want funds. But it seems to me that before abandoning a ready-made career you ought to have been sure of my goodwill. If I were to refuse—and I certainly *shall* refuse——”

“ But, father,” said Pascal a little impatiently, “ I fancy that about ten years ago one of my aunts left me forty thousand francs in her will.”

If an elderly female litigant of sixty, on the point of winning one of her lawsuits, had come to say to the lawyer, "I am giving it up," she would not have given him such a surprise as his son's words did.

"That means that you want to see my accounts," he said bitterly. Ah! it was a cruel shock.

In vain Pascal defended himself; the blow had gone home. He tried to explain his plans for the future, he wanted to justify himself, and explain how he would use the money he wanted; M. Divorne would not even listen to him.

"Ah! what does that matter to me?" he said. "I don't want to hear about it."

Indeed, he had got far away from the actual discussion. He had forgotten even the resignation; all he was thinking about was how to rescue this money which Pascal, as he had to admit to himself, was quite justifiably asking for.

He tried to think of some plan for giving him as little as possible, being sure that so young a man could only make some reprehensible use of such a large sum.

"Come, Pascal," said he at last, "I understand you want some money. But you might have set about asking me for it in a different way. Am I an unreasonable father, now? Have I ever refused you any? You have not misused it, I admit. But you have been working hard for five years now; perhaps you want some recreation; you'd like to travel a bit——"

"No, father, if you would let me speak, I——"

"Be quiet and attend; no doubt you've got into debt—good gracious! All youngsters do——"

"I don't owe anyone a penny."



"But listen to me now, it's nothing I ask of you. Speak out; you want five thousand francs?"

"Dear father——"

"You want more—all right, you shall have ten thousand francs."

And the lawyer got up and went towards the door, as much as to say that the discussion was closed. Pascal understood that the matter had to be settled.

"Father," he said, "I must have all or nothing."

"Nothing, then," replied M. Divornè in a bullying tone, coming back; "nothing. Do you think, you young fool, that I am going to let you squander your little fortune?"

"But this money is necessary to me. I must have it."

"Oh, you must have it; very well. Your aunt left you a farm, a farm which I shall make over to you in good order, with an advantageous lease. All right, take your property and make your own arrangements. What are you going to do with it?"

"Sell it."

"And you think that you'll get money at a day's notice that way? You must wait for an opening, look out for a purchaser, post up some hand-bills——"

"I'll look out, and I'll post up the bills."

"But you're not considering, my poor boy; and what would people say at Lannion, if they saw you selling so much as a franc's worth of land? Do you know what they'd say?"

"What do I care?" said Pascal sharply. "I'm going to order the hand-bills straight away."

M. Divorne knew his son; he understood that he had made up his mind.

"Wait," he said. "I want to spare you this humiliation. I'll find the money, if I must make a sacrifice."

Pascal, who was sorry for having allowed himself to lose his temper for an instant, wanted to seize his father's hands, but he repulsed him.

"Spare yourself useless protestations," said he, and he added, ironically, "I hope you'll be good enough to let me have a week." And he went out, slamming the door.

During this discussion, Madame Divorne had not said a word; she was crying. Pascal, whose resolution was strengthened by his father's anger, felt himself weakening before his mother's tears. He knelt down by her, and took her hands. "Mother," said he, "Mother dear, say the word, and I give up my plans, and try to withdraw my resignation."

Madame Divorne's eyes lighted up with joy, and with triumph as well. How her son loved her! What would he not sacrifice for her, firm as he was just a little while ago?

"No, Pascal dear, no; follow your ideas, I believe in you."

"Mother dear, at any rate I must tell you——"

"Nothing; I don't want to hear anything. Once more, I believe in you; besides, should I understand?" And when he persisted, she put her hands over his mouth.

The house was very dismal during the next few days. The lawyer was glum and speechless. He was never to be seen except at meal-times; the rest of the time he shut himself up in his office. Madame Divorne shed tears in secret.

Pascal had never thought of causing such misery. He would have given a couple of years of his life

to be able to get away—or if he could only have talked about his projects and explain his plans. But no; the one or two attempts he made with his father were fruitless, and his mother always said, “I believe in you,” and would not let him say a word.

At last, on the day he named, M. Divorne took his son into his office. “Here are the guardianship accounts,” said he, showing him a bundle of documents. “See if I have not administered your property like a good father. Read these, and give me my receipt.”

Pascal took up a pen.

“No, read them,” insisted the lawyer.

And, as the young man refused, he took the documents and read them aloud himself, emphasising certain details, and stopping every now and then to ask, “Are you satisfied with my administration?”

The documents were lengthy. Pascal was nearly bored to death when at last this reading, a regular torture which lasted three hours, came to an end.

“Now,” said the father, “here’s your money. It comes, as you have been able to satisfy yourself, to forty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty-six francs and sixty centimes. Count it and see that it’s all there.”

Pascal started to put the notes and cash in his pocket; but his father stopped him.

“No, count it, I tell you; I insist on it.”

He had to obey. Then the lawyer said, “We’re quits, aren’t we? When do you go?”

“As soon as possible; to-morrow, if I can get a seat in the coach—they are expecting me in Paris.”

"Well, you mustn't keep them waiting."

"But, father, I don't like it that we should part like this; you are not fair to me and I——"

"That's all fairy-tales!" said the lawyer irritably. "Leave me alone, I've got some work to do."

Next morning at nine o'clock the boy from the coach-office came to tell Pascal that they were putting the horses to the coach, and that there was only just time to get to the office.

The leave-taking was painful. Madame Divorne was sobbing; to see the way she hugged her son, one might have thought she was embracing him for the last time. Pascal was almost as much overcome as his mother; he could hardly keep the tears back—he could not have uttered a word.

In circumstances like these M. Divorne showed clearly the force of his character and the power of his will—a will of iron. Not only did he refuse to embrace his son, but he would not even shake hands with him. He even assumed a chaffing, unconcerned tone.

"Remember," said he to his son, "that you're carrying the whole of your fortune with you. When you've squandered it, which will be before long, I fancy, you'll no doubt do me the honour of coming to me for help; I am going to have your room ready, anyhow."

Pascal went off to the coach by himself, from which fact the good Lannion folks concluded that his father had just turned him out of doors for good.



## CHAPTER III

### AN ORIGINAL PARTNERSHIP

**I**T will be six years next February since Pascal returned to Paris from his trip to Brittany. He arrived at Montparnasse station by the five o'clock in the morning train. There was a nice little frost—five or six degrees below zero. Still, no passenger was found frozen to death in the train, an accident which did happen now and then in winter before the railway companies hit on the happy idea of using the waste steam from the engine for the benefit of the passengers.

Pascal had had a dismal journey. He was devoted to his parents, and the idea of the pain he had been giving them weighed on his heart like remorse for a crime. Never had a journey seemed so long ; it seemed as if the engine-wheels went round without making progress ; he longed to get to Paris. A few hours' sleep would have eased his impatience ; but several times he composed himself for a nap in vain ; he had hardly shut his eyes before one of the swarm of officials whom the company maintain and pay to keep passengers awake woke him up ; every now and then they wanted his ticket, to make a lot of holes of various patterns in it with their little steel instruments.

Besides, the young engineer had not been used to going about with forty thousand francs on him. The bundle of bank-notes in his pocket

was rather on his mind. Like the prudent soul he was, he kept his hand on it from Lannion to Paris, and got to his destination with his arm stiff with cramp.

Tired out, and with aching legs, he got to the hall where by old-established custom passengers wait for their luggage for an hour or so. He had just sat down when he heard himself hailed by a jubilant shout of "Mr. Engineer! Mr. Engineer!" Turning round, he saw at the railing, thoughtfully arranged to keep fresh arrivals away from their friends who have got there first, a big, jolly-faced fellow making all sorts of friendly signals, and hastened to him.

"Here you are at last, Mr. Engineer," said this worthy. "I got your letter and was expecting you. I hope you've had a pleasant journey, anyhow."

"Only so-so. Ah, Lantier, old chap, if only I hadn't given you my word! Well, I've got the cash."

"Hush, don't speak so loud, for goodness' sake—suppose someone heard you! One doesn't talk out loud like that about money. Mine's ready, too, it's in the bank—I couldn't sleep while I had it at home. We'll turn over this money to some purpose, if you like!"

"Yes," sighed Pascal, "one mustn't throw up the game."

"Throw up the game, Mr. Engineer, with all the trumps in hand—you must be joking! Come on, you must put up at my house, only a few steps from here."

"But, my dear chap, I shall be awfully in your way."

"A gentleman like you in the way! You wouldn't hurt my feelings by putting up at a hotel? You have a nice nap till breakfast time—we'll talk afterwards. Come on, I'm on the scent of a fine job. I'll go now and look for a cab."

If Lantier did not fire a salute in honour of "Mr. Engineer," it was simply because he hadn't got the cannon. But the house had been turned inside out; a nice warm bedroom, a bottle of old wine, and a bowl of savoury soup were awaiting him. When he was ready to get into bed, Lantier said, "I'll leave you now; call if you want anything."

"Thanks, I only want a sleep. So long, partner."

The good fellow shut the door softly and went off on tiptoe. "That's the fact," said he to himself, "I am his partner. Fancy me being the partner of a man like him—the cleverest student in the Civil Engineering School!"

Jean Lantier, Pascal's partner, is to-day a well-to-do Parisian contractor. He will never be very rich; he is not ambitious enough for that. He looks forward to retiring from business as soon as he can settle fifty thousand écus on each of his daughters—he has three—and still leave himself an income of twenty thousand francs a year.

Twenty years before Jean Lantier was trundling a barrow on the high road, an employee of the Public Works and a jolly healthy fellow. As he was getting sixty-seven francs a month, allowing for the contribution deducted for the superannuation fund, had a good character, and was not bad-looking, he determined to find a helpmate and settle down.

He got married, and his wife's dowry was a



round sum of six thousand francs in hard cash. His wife was nice-looking, good-natured and a good manager; he thought he was the luckiest fellow alive.

But babies arrived. His family grew, but his pay remained the same, and he felt the pinch. He only earned enough to keep himself and his family from starvation; he had to draw on his savings when he had been used to putting money by. "Things can't go on like this," he was always grumbling; and one fine day he did a reckless thing. "I'll chance my luck," said he, and he handed over his shovel and barrow to the Public Works, in spite of his wife, who tried to coax him to have patience.

With a capital of two thousand écus he plunged into earthwork contracts. But one has to serve one's apprenticeship in every trade; he learnt this fact to his cost. His first undertaking swallowed up half his capital, but he was not disheartened. Feeling that he needed more education, he studied in the evenings, and even went to the expense of lessons. After two or three blank enterprises, which showed neither profit nor loss, he succeeded in recovering his capital, risked it again, this time to increase it, and ultimately doubled it.

At forty years of age, he had a capital of forty thousand francs and not a centime owing to anyone; and he had lived comfortably, and neither his wife nor his children had wanted for anything.

It was about this time that Jean Lantier made the acquaintance of Pascal, who was directing the work for which he had the contract. The young engineer took a fancy to his contractor, who was hard-working and intelligent, a man one could



rely on. Everyone who knew him liked him, though his fellow-contractors called him a blackleg, because he had a way of carrying out an agreement, once he had signed it, even if he lost by it.

It so happened that Pascal had the chance of doing a very considerable service to his contractor, and, for once in a way, the recipient of the favour was grateful for it. Jean Lantier, who had always professed great respect for the Public Works, concentrated all this respect on the young engineer. Soon his admiration knew no bounds; he went about everywhere singing his praises, and fully believed in all the good he said about him.

When the work was finished, the contractor did not lose sight of Pascal; he went to see him pretty often, sometimes just for the pleasure of talking to him, and sometimes to ask his advice. He would have jumped into the fire for this engineer friend of his, though he could not have said why.

However, Pascal's last year as student was coming to a close, and he was already seriously thinking of giving in his resignation. The only reason why he hesitated and delayed was that he wanted to find a chance to employ his energy and abilities immediately. He waited impatiently for the result of an application which he had just made to a big railway company, but their reply was slow in coming.

It was Jean Lantier who quite unsuspectingly put an end to the young fellow's hesitation. At that time the mania for demolition in Paris was at its height, if indeed it has slackened since! Whole wards got notice to quit, crowded streets came down and were replaced by new thoroughfares as if by magic. Lantier was dreaming of setting

up as a house-breaker—a trade which is quite a modern growth, which has its big men and its dupes, but can show a good number of millionaires.

However, before attempting anything, before risking his luck and his cash on a sealed tender, the contractor went to consult the young engineer. The worthy man was intoxicated by his hopes—his plans had rather gone to his head. He talked about them continually and with the volubility of enthusiasm, and he set them forth with the clearness that conviction brings. He was not long in making things clear to Pascal. He explained to him the secrets of a trade which was then not nearly so well known as it is to-day, and showed him the ins and outs of it. He spoke with an expert's authority, for he had long studied the building industry, from the point of view of demolition as well as of construction. When a man has spent twenty years in scraping together forty thousand francs sou by sou, he does not risk them all on a single throw if he can help it.

But Lantier was sure of his ground. He had already tried some small speculations and done well out of them ; he could have taken up dozens of jobs, and he only regretted one thing—that he had been too timid and cautious. Besides, he had the head for the work. Never was there a house-breaker so clever at making profit out of old materials ; he was the first who thought of making a wholesale trade of selling wood from broken-up buildings as firewood. He employs twenty men in the great timber-yard which he has set up near the old Monceaux barrier, and every day he cuts up there hundreds of cords of large timber, which is bought by well-to-do people, and thousands of

small five-sou faggots—cheap fuel for humble households.

Pascal could not help giving his whole attention to a man whose success was so assured that he could reckon on doubling his capital in less than a year.

“You see, Mr. Engineer,” Lantier would say, “this is how the thing is done. The city council want to demolish a district and then reconstruct it, you understand? Of course they must thoroughly clear the site and pull down the existing buildings. So what do they do? They mark out the district into lots of two, or four, or ten houses, according to circumstances; then they put up the lots to contract. The contractors make their bids, and the one who bids highest gets the lot. You will understand that business people have sufficient common sense to agree to keep prices up. So when one has contracted for five or six lots, that’s a good stroke of business done.”

“But you want plenty of money for that,” objected Pascal.

“Not so much as you think. The council let you have credit; all they want is some security, an amount which varies according to the importance of the lot. But before long the cash comes in. You see everything in a house is saleable, from gable to foundations, from cellar to attic. Building is going on as well as house-breaking, and it pays the builders to buy old material, which is just as good as new; and they’re not long in buying up the house-breaker’s stock-in-trade. You sell them slates, doors, window-frames, fire-places, floor-tiles, flights of steps—everything, in fact, stone, wood or iron. You use the ceiling-laths for two-



sou bundles of firewood, you cut up any beams that are too old to be used again, you clean the bricks ; you can even find a sale for the plaster."

" But do you really make money out of it ? "

" By the bushel, sir, by the bushel. Look here, you remember that big fellow Joigny, who used to work with me, don't you ? Well, at the present moment he's driving in his carriage, if you please ; a carriage of his own that he's bought and paid for. And yet he was a fool and a slacker, and started with two sous capital, and borrowed at that. Ah, if I only had a hundred thousand francs instead of forty thousand, and the luck to have a gentleman like you in the business with me——"

Lantier broke off, seeing his auditor's attention was wandering.

" Ah," murmured Pascal in answer to his own inmost thoughts, " it's a very attractive idea."

" What—what do you mean—what do you say ? " cried the contractor. " Does it strike you the same way ? No, that's too much to expect, yet it's just what I want to make my fortune. What I find I can't do is to take a large view. I get nervous over a big undertaking, and so I miss my best chances. And then you've got to work up a connection, as they call it—look up this man and that, and talk things over with the bigwigs to keep in the swim, and I'm not up to that ; but if I had you with me—why, I shouldn't be afraid of putting my foot in it ; I'd go and see the departmental chief himself—I would indeed—and I'd say to him, ' You want all Paris pulled down—all right, I'll take on the job, and this gentleman here, who's an engineer, will rebuild it for you,



and build it a lot better, I'll warrant, than all your architects."

Pascal smiled at the good fellow's enthusiasm.

"You may laugh," continued the latter, "but I'd be as good as my word. Pulling down isn't the whole job; there's rebuilding—that's your business. And there's a lot to be made in that as well. You can get enough out of three old houses to make a new one. There's nothing smarter than that—. But this is nonsense! Are you really giving a thought to all I've been chattering about?"

"Listen, Lantier," replied Pascal, "I must have time to think over all you've just been saying to me. I can make up the hundred thousand francs, and I might possibly fall in with your idea of the partnership. Call again in three days' time, and I'll give you your answer."

On the appointed day, but long before the hour, Lantier, who had been on thorns all the time, called on the engineer, his heart in a flutter with anxiety and hope.

"Well," said Pascal, as soon as he came in, "I've thought it over, and decided on it."

Lantier was half-crazy with delight. "Paris is ours!" he cried, and hugged the engineer in his excitement, only to beg pardon directly for taking such a liberty.

Then they arranged that Pascal should go to Brittany to get the necessary funds. The contractor, while his partner was away, was to get his own capital together and look out for a good opening, as they did not want to lose a moment.

The pair proved that they well knew the value of time. On the very day he arrived, Pascal found

his task awaiting him. As soon as he had had breakfast, after enjoying a good nap, Lantier got out a big sheet of paper covered with his notes, and proved to him the desirability of buying half-a-dozen houses in the Rue de la Harpe, which was then being pulled down to make room for the Boulevard de Sebastopol.

When Lantier had finished, they arranged to go together next day to see the property they were to buy. They went, and after many hours spent in measuring, reckoning, and calculating the probable value of everything, they agreed on their fixed offer, and the same evening Pascal drew up the first tender of the firm of Pascal and Lantier.

They had every chance of securing the contract, for they had bid high, but for this first enterprise of theirs, they had determined to be content with a very small margin of profit, though enough to guarantee them against loss; they reckoned it at about thirty thousand francs. There was nothing to be done then but to wait for the result.

However, Pascal could not stay with his partner indefinitely, though the latter would have been delighted if he had been willing to do so. He set out to look for quarters—a difficult task enough—and after climbing about a hundred flights of stairs, at last secured a furnished flat, which was small and not at all comfortable; but these lodgings were only a few paces from the Guildhall, which was to be the base of his operations. Indeed, all business connected with public works is arranged right under the roof of the Hall of the Prefecture of the Seine in a glazed gallery at the top of a hundred and eighty stairs.

Pascal had hardly got settled in his new quarters,

when Lorilleux, who had at last heard of his return, hastened to call on him. The doctor had been pretty uneasy for the last month. What had become, he wondered, of his sister's future husband? What was he thinking of doing? Was he going to return? He was losing heart; and so he now came in a hurry to get information.

As he entered his friend's lodgings, he bumped against Jean Lantier, of whom, dressed as he was like a prosperous working man, he took no particular notice.

"At last I've caught the truant," he said as soon as he entered. "Here's the homing-pigeon returned; shake hands, and then I'll be a living note of interrogation. Now then, will you be good enough to say what you mean by this prank of yours?"

"I'll be delighted, especially as it's impossible now to reverse my decision."

"That means to say that you disregarded my advice—in your folly you slighted my wisdom. Very well! I've not altered my mind; you've made a fool of yourself!"

"I don't think so."

"Then give your excuses; stand up for yourself—I'm listening."

"Well, my dear chap, I'm now a dealer in old houses, a mason on a large scale, a house-breaker, if that suits you better."

"Oh, that's impossible!" cried the doctor, "when you've been a student at the Polytechnic School—you must be joking!"

"Not a bit of it—and that big fellow, all covered with plaster, whom you ran into as you came in, is my partner. He'd just come to tell me that



we've got the contract for nine houses in the Rue de la Harpe ; we're going to start breaking them up to-morrow."

Then he told the doctor all about the partnership, his trip to Brittany, the forty thousand francs, and M. Divorne's annoyance.

Lorilleux listened to him looking more than amazed. Every now and then " Oh's " and " Ah's " escaped him in his astonishment, and he held up his hands in utter distraction. At last, when Pascal had finished speaking, he said :

" My dear man, you've lost your head, there's no getting away from that. You think life's a novel, and you've behaved like the hero of an evening paper serial. When Paul Fénel wants one of his characters to be rich, he can give him a million without opening his purse, but in real life you don't pick up millions that way."

" How do you know ? " said Pascal, rather conceitedly.

" It's not advice that you want," replied the doctor, " it's a cold douche. You're just a poet who's strayed into the School of Civil Engineering, and that's a long way from Parnassus. Would anyone have believed a mathematician could behave so ? Poor chap, you don't know anything about life and its difficulties, and I'm sorry to see that you are going to learn to your cost. But you might have taken me as your example."

" Do you know, you're not very encouraging ! "

" Alas ! That is just because I'm right."

They said no more on this subject. As Pascal had remarked, it was too late to retrace his steps, and Lorilleux by persisting would have irritated his friend to no purpose. But the doctor went



away more annoyed than he had been before. This freak of his friend's, he said, at any rate to himself, meant the loss of forty thousand francs to his sister, for he looked on this money as thrown away, and grieved over it accordingly. But one thing consoled him, and that was, that most likely the experience would cool Pascal's ardour very considerably, and bring him back to more practical notions. Folly in the past, they say, is a guarantee of wisdom in the future. The fool had better run through forty thousand francs before marriage than ruin himself when he had a family. Besides, the lesson was not actually ruining him; he had still a nice little competence to inherit later on.

Such were Lorilleux's reflections. After all, as misfortune has always its beneficial side, he thought to himself, with some satisfaction, that this affair would put Pascal at his disposal. So he kept in touch with him, and determined to be more careful than ever and keep a stricter eye on him. With such a policy, Pascal certainly would not give him the slip, while as an engineer in the provinces, he could very easily have got married without giving his friend warning, and where would that individual's plans be in that event?

It can be imagined, after this, that the doctor was a constant visitor of Pascal's; nearly every day he came to spend the evening with him.

"How's the plot developing?" he would say now and then.

"Not so badly," Jean Lantier's partner would reply.

Indeed, adventurous as the enterprise was, the profits were solid enough. The houses in the Rue de la Harpe had yielded less than had been expected,

but some others had paid better. Two important lots near Saint Lazare, in particular, had shown a quite unexpected profit.

It is true that the two partners, Pascal as the brain and Lantier as the hands of the firm, did not spare pains nor energy. Pascal was running about from morn till night, paying calls by the dozen, drawing up agreements and contracts, haunting the committee-rooms and offices of the Guildhall. Lantier, up to his knees in plaster, kept account of the stone and timber, and never stuck at a bottle of wine to clinch a small transaction.

This activity gave Lorilleux much food for thought, and he could not help noticing how prosperous the pair looked. Pascal put on a more confident manner, he had the self-possessed bearing of the successful man; as for Lantier, he was developing a "corporation."

"So he wasn't deceiving me," said the doctor to himself, "he's getting on, sure enough. It's extraordinary, it's beyond reason, but after all, it's all to the good; he's working for my sister, and I ought to congratulate myself twice over, as his friend and his brother-in-law-to-be."

Pascal's parents had naturally been the first to receive news of the success of his enterprises. Though they would not listen to what he said when he was at Lannion, he knew well enough they would read what he wrote. He did not fail to write often, but only Madame Divorne replied. Regularly every week she sent her son a nice long affectionate letter, such as only a mother can write. As to the attorney, he maintained an obstinate silence; he seemed to have forgotten the use of a quill.

At first Pascal was very much hurt by this obstinacy on his father's part, but, little by little, he came to trouble about it less, knowing very well that he would give in, and that his anger would not be maintained against good solid arguments in the way of Government stock or mortgages.

And the young engineer was in a position to advance such arguments. The business flourished more and more ; the house-breakers did not know where to ply the mattock first. So well did the partners thrive that when they took stock at the end of two years, they found they had a little over a hundred and sixty thousand francs each. Twenty-sou pieces had grown into five-franc pieces, as Jean Lantier put it.

This magical result dazzled Lorilleux ; he would have called it in question, but had nothing to say ; the figures were there to prove it.

"Ought you not to stop now ?" said he to his friend. "Aren't you running the risk of losing what you have been so lucky in getting, if you go on speculating ?"

Pascal turned a deaf ear to this. He had not gone into the masonry business, as he said, to stop when he was on the high road to fortune. The doctor had to silence that fidgety monitor he called his prudence.

He consoled himself with the thought that his sister would have her carriage, and he resolved sometimes to borrow it from her to dazzle certain patients who refused to believe in talent when it went afoot.

But Pascal was not thinking of a carriage yet, or at any rate not talking of one. All he did was to resolve to make himself comfortable, which



he was not in his present cramped lodgings. He liked comfort and thought he had fairly earned it. So he took a pretty flat in the Rue de Rivoli, overlooking St. Jacques' Square, and did not have to pay much more than three times a fair rent for it. The view, to be quite fair, was included, and it was one of the best in Paris, for it had not been as yet shut off by those two intrusive theatres, stupid, pretentious erections that they are; that unrivalled gem, the tower of St. Jacques, alongside them, looks as if it were there as a protest from art and good taste.

Like a wise man who wants to be able to make repairs or decorate without running the risk of having his rent raised or getting notice to quit next day, Pascal took out a lease. Besides the rent, he had to pay some small charges which increased the amount agreed on by a sixth, but he was not disposed to haggle over a trifle like that; one must follow the fashion. He paid for six months in advance, put his hands in the porter's and took the oath of allegiance to the rules of the house, signed an inventory of fixtures which cost him seventeen francs fifty-five centimes, complied with a few more formalities, and at last had a home of his own. That's all one has to go through to get settled down in Paris.

Then he got the workmen into his flat. There were seven rooms; he made them into three, which meant that he could receive more than two people at once, stretch out his arms without risking barking his knuckles, and sneeze without the danger of cracking the glass of his clock-case.

The landlord let him carry out what alterations



he liked, with the firm resolve to make him pay through the nose later on for these outrages on his fixtures. Pascal really did become rather rash now ; he played Croesus, and spent as much as twelve thousand francs in beautifying his belongings. For this money he got some handsome furniture, carpets and hangings in the best of taste, and three or four bronzes of a kind which one does not see on top of the clock in every fashionable hairdresser's shop.

Strangely enough, in these circumstances Lorilleux seemed to forget his position as Mentor ; far from preaching economy, he almost encouraged extravagance. He had judged that the flat would be big enough for a young married couple, and he thought that buying furniture was unavoidable expenditure, and might as well be undertaken at the start. He took a keen interest in the arrangements of the flat, the wood of the furniture, and the colour of the hangings, because in his mind's eye it was his sister's flat that was being furnished. So strongly did he feel this, that he talked his friend out of buying a little masterpiece of Bouchier's, because he thought the subject was unsuitable. But this was the only purchase he discouraged.

About this time, and quite suddenly, a rumour as to Pascal's immense wealth got about in Lannion. He had opened his purse, and the chink of the gold reached the ears of his fellow-townsmen. The whole town soon knew for certain that M. Divorner's son was a multi-millionaire.

This astounding news had been brought home by two youths from the town, who had gone to Paris to seek their fortunes, and come back to the country sadder and wiser, the poorer by

several thousand écus, but firmly convinced that many are called but few chosen. They had needed Pascal's assistance, and got it at the critical moment. These simple souls made their gratitude the measure of their fellow-townsmen's wealth, and told everyone who cared to listen to them that he drove his carriage and had a town house like a palace in the Arabian Nights.

People did not more than half believe them till all they had said was more than confirmed by a young student to whom Pascal had on one occasion lent eighty francs to enable him to go to a masked ball, and another time a hundred to satisfy an importunate tailor.

This young man, who had dined now and then with Pascal, was for ever full of this subject. The oak furniture and bronze statuettes had fairly dazzled him; even to-day they don't know, in the Latin Quartier, about all the "old oak" stuff that is made in Paris out of varnished millboard, or the Florentine bronzes which are really electro-bronzed putty.

So the student, who had not yet got over his amazement at Pascal's magnificence and generosity, struck awe into his fellow-townsmen with his descriptions, which were in quite good faith. According to him the engineer washed his hands in a basin of gold, and slept at night on a mattress stuffed with bank-notes.

With these exaggerations swallowed as facts, Pascal got to be more admired than he had been scorned before. The fathers who used to shudder at the idea of owning a son like him, now held him up to their boys as a shining example; and those who had been hard on him could not pardon

themselves for the grievous offence of treason to property. Ah, money does talk!

The most immediate and striking result of this veering round of public opinion was the descent of an avalanche of letters on Pascal; one correspondent wrote to remind him of his existence, another to ask his influence on a nephew's behalf, a third to tell him about people who had been backbiting him. A town councillor ventured to write to him asking charity "for the poor of Lannion, his native town." Pascal did not answer any of the letters, but sent five hundred francs for the poor. This regal munificence made it clear that his wealth had not been exaggerated; it proved that he was the kind of man whose signature on a scrap of paper gives it the value of ready cash. He was hailed as a millionaire. As to asking where and how he had won this enormous fortune, nobody ever thought of that; one only asks poor unsuccessful devils awkward questions like that.

The net result of all this was that the importance of M. Divorne senior also increased remarkably; the respect in which he was held went up sky-high. He shared the benefit of his son's success; some of the golden rays from Pascal's crown of glory were reflected from his brow, and respectful recognition, as the father of so rich a man, became his lot.

For all that, the attorney was the only man who did not believe in what he called "this provincial tittle-tattle." True enough, Pascal had written to say he was making money, but was this likely? He had told his son that he would ruin himself, and the prediction had to be fulfilled; a father must be in the right. So he still kept



on waiting to see him come home reduced to beggary.

The arrival of the five hundred francs, which was very quickly reported everywhere, shook his convictions. Who could assure him of the falsity of all these rumours? Every day one saw more remarkable things happen. He was worried, and very much upset in mind. All his ideas were turned topsy-turvy, and he did not quite know whether to be vexed because his prophecy had not been fulfilled, or to rejoice at his son's success, always supposing this success were real.

The lawyer could not endure this state of uncertainty, but it did not suit him that the idea of going to verify the facts should come from himself. Very diplomatically he led his wife, who asked nothing better, on to coaxing him to go to Paris. For the sake of appearances he resisted for a time, not very strongly, it is true, and at last seemed as if he were yielding to the pleadings of the anxious mother. One day he admitted defeat, and as he had made his arrangements beforehand, came to a decision abruptly, and went off without warning. He wanted to surprise his son—who was not the least bit surprised. He was having a quiet talk with Lorilleux, who spent most of his evenings with him, when his father came in. He was mildly astonished, but very much pleased; for a long time he had been waiting and hoping for this little triumph. He felt really happy as he embraced his father, who on this occasion relaxed his habitual austerity and was weak enough to show some feeling.

At the first glance the lawyer saw that there must be some truth in Pascal's letters, and ac



cordingly he felt a little ashamed of his persistent "firmness"; but he would not show it, and made a point of being kind and affectionate.

As he wanted to know the facts, he spoke at length and with some humour about the reports which had been making a stir at Lannion. Pascal laughed heartily at his fellow-townsmen's lively imagination, but did not leave his father long in ignorance, and told him in a few words the amount of his fortune. He had capital bringing in eight thousand francs annually, all made in a little over two years.

There was a good deal of difference between this modest income and the millions he had been credited with; indeed, in comparison it was a small amount. But this small amount seemed huge to the attorney. Looking back on his own career, he recalled to mind that at his son's age, twenty-six, he was only a junior clerk in a country office, with a meagre salary of a thousand francs a year. All this money, made in such a short time, upset all his ideas. He felt compelled to say that this wealth was, to his mind, too easily won. He praised the days when one took twenty-five years to get together an income of four thousand francs, forgetting that a hundred thousand francs in that golden age stood for the equivalent of nearly as many écus in this our age of iron. Then, as he was one of those men who must always be in the right, even when the evidence has shown them their mistake, he trotted out his pet hobby again, and proved as clear as daylight to his son that he had been absolutely in the wrong in giving in his resignation and refusing to listen to the wise counsels of his father, whose experience was so

much greater. But he did it without bitterness and simply to save his face.

"If you had all these millions they imagine you've got," said he to his son, "I should still say you have acted wrongly. I am too much attached to my principles to change them because of one success. You have succeeded, but you ought to have failed. One exception does not upset the rule, and you're the one exception."

Pascal agreed to everything with the best grace imaginable. What good would it have done him to contest opinions as firm as a rock? The sea wears the rock away at last! Besides, he would have had to stand up to two opponents, for Lorilleux added his eloquence to the attorney's. Lorilleux had his triumph at last; he had found someone who looked on life as he did, and he took full advantage of his position.

This first evening of their acquaintance put the lawyer and the doctor upon the best of terms, and the ensuing fortnight did nothing but increase the esteem and friendship they felt for each other. The more they talked, the clearer it became that they sympathised with each other's views on all possible subjects. The artful Lorilleux very cleverly took advantage of this bit of good luck to establish a firm hold on the affections of his friend's father. By dint of infinite care and tact, he even ventured to discuss Pascal's matrimonial future, and was at the height of bliss when he thought he had found out that M. Divorne would not take a dowry into consideration with regard to any girl his son should choose to marry.

The fortnight passed like a dream of bliss for the attorney. His happiness would have been

unalloyed if Pascal had had one of those designations which look so well on a visiting card ; but this he had not, for one cannot make any decent show with such a title as "house-breaker." He could not conceal from his son his dissatisfaction at this. "If they ask me what your profession is," said he to him, "what shall I tell them?"

"Well, dad," said Pascal, "am I not still an engineer, and more the architect than ever? Tell them I've rebuilt Paris, if you like."

"You're always joking," said the attorney, irritably. "Whenever are you going to take things seriously like M. Lorilleux? He's a sound man, if you like, and understands life, too. You're in luck all round, for you've got a devoted friend in him, and that's not an everyday thing."

M. Divorne took a great liking to Jean Lantier as well. It is true he had been a little surprised at first to find his son's partner a man who would have looked more at home in a workman's jacket than a frock-coat, but he was much taken with the man's honest straightforwardness. The contractor had given a big dinner in honour of his partner's father, and the style of the banquet, the splendour of the table service, and the excellence of the wines, completely astonished the attorney, who never imagined that a man could spend his days among litter and rubble and come home in the evenings to a home so comfortable, not to say luxurious.

At last M. Divorne went off highly delighted, making his son promise to come to spend a few days at Lannion at least once a year.

"Certainly," said he to his wife when he got back, "the boy's made himself a fine position ;"

and Madame Divorne's delight can be easily imagined. "No doubt," said she to herself, "Pascal will be thinking of getting married soon, and I'd better look out for a girl who will be good enough for him."

The same idea had struck Jean Lantier at about the same time. "If I could get one of my girls married to Mr. Engineer, what a bit of luck that would be for her; and what an honour for me to have someone from the Civil Engineering School in the family! We'll see. My three girls will soon be old enough; they're pretty and well-bred—well, he can take his pick of them."

So it came about that Pascal's bachelor freedom was being menaced from three sides at once; a fact of which he had no suspicion whatever.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

**M** DIVORNE'S visit, and a couple of trips to Brittany to see his mother, were the only notable events in Pascal's life for six years, at any rate till the last year, so untroubled was his existence, and so regular were his habits.

He could have indulged in any sort of pleasure, as he had the means and the liberty which young men so often sigh for, but he did not waste them in that way—the devil had turned monk without waiting to be sick.

Never was there a young fellow who kept himself so clear of the silly and disreputable amusements that ensnare most young business men—those pinchbeck successors of the great revenue farmers of the eighteenth century, who unite with the young men of fashion to form a silly clique and try to copy the vices of the lords of misrule, only to succeed in making exhibitions of themselves. If Pascal were not exactly a paragon of virtue, he certainly would have deserved well of a mother-in-law.

But the credit for this exemplary behaviour was not all his. A good deal must be put down to Lorilleux, who watched over his friend like a mother over her son, or rather over her daughter. Night and day, like Argus with his hundred eyes all wide open, the doctor mounted guard over

his brother-in-law-to-be ; he could have given points to the dragon that guarded the garden of the Hesperides, only to be slain at his post by Hercules, who thus at one blow got the golden apples and taught sentries a lesson for all time.

Once or twice, Pascal nearly became engaged, and then the doctor's talents had full play. He was a typical petty intriguer, and was up to any little trick or device in the way of obstruction, without being any too particular as to whether it were honourable or not.

He looked after Pascal like a conscientious guardian after his ward, and so tactfully that he roused no suspicions—at least so he thought.

What Lorilleux particularly dreaded was that his friend should go into society. Parisian ball-rooms are hung round with cobwebs, spun by mammas all keen on getting their dear girls off, to catch the unsuspecting bachelor ; and so eligible young men disport themselves there in constant peril of entanglement. One evening's rashness and a man's done for ; he's marked down, flattered, got round, bamboozled, caught, tied up, and married off before he knows where he is—he's made his proposal before he's made his choice, indeed, before he knew he wanted to get married at all.

The doctor had heard all about this from the best authorities, if he had not observed it personally. So he set about preventing Pascal from profiting by his important position, and as he did not want his friend to go into society—since he could not be sure of dancing attendance on him there—he provided him with a social world of his own.

Thanks to his disinterested efforts, Pascal's quarters became the meeting-place of a set of young

men of his own age who were not only good company, but well-connected, and all of note in some way or other. But Lorilleux had carefully assured himself of one thing before he admitted them to the coterie—he saw that none of them had a sister to get off!

Pascal let him have his way; he had seen his little game long ago, but it did not worry him at all. He had no idea what he was driving at, but if he had had any, it would not have upset him. The only people who are afraid of being domineered over are those weak individuals who know they can be worried into giving way, and submitting to a stronger will; this keeps them constantly on the lookout for encroachments on their liberty; and so, always on tenterhooks through listening to Peter's opinions and Paul's advice, they are most unpleasant company. They flare up at a word and think they are showing their independence, talk a lot about their freedom, and then go and do what they were wanted to do all along. If they get married, their ladies' crinolines conceal the garment which the other sex alone are supposed to wear.

Lorilleux had none of these little pointless outbursts to face; Pascal knew his own mind far too well to fear anyone's influence, and so far from being annoyed by his friend's officiousness, he liked him all the better for it. Besides, it suited him exactly, for he did not care about going out, while at the same time he liked to have people to talk to. He was never so happy as when he was in the company of a few bosom friends, and that happened nearly every evening, greatly to the disgust of the porter, who, especially in wet weather,



felt it a distinct grievance that so many people were encouraged to go tramping up his well-beeswaxed stairs.

All the rest of Pascal's time was taken up by his business, which was growing in importance daily. He went personally into everything, and attended ungrudgingly to the minutest details. Never was there a more energetic contractor, and he had the happy knack of communicating this fiery energy of his to all the people in his employ. He knew a good worker when he met him ; and he was a good paymaster, having a deeply-rooted objection to a cheese-paring policy. The result was that his staff worked hard and never wasted his time ; as they knew that they would be well paid if they put in overtime, they went about their work with a will, knowing they were sure of getting their deserts. The efficiency of his management was so remarkable that his business rivals thought his men must be bewitched. They racked their brains over the puzzle, which was really no puzzle at all ; Pascal was a man who could make himself popular and did not grudge a thousand-franc note where it would do good.

After they had done a great deal of house-breaking, the two partners had tackled building, a risky trade at which the smartest business man may come to grief, but they did well at this, too, because of their commonsense views.

Messrs. Pascal and Lantier did not need to consult statistics to know that rich people are not more numerous in Paris than anywhere else, and they made their calculations accordingly. Unfortunately, those worthy plutocrats, the ground landlords, have not grasped this painful fact as



yet, so the architects they employ put up nothing but gorgeous and palatial residences with elaborately-sculptured balconies and marble-paved halls. You can tell them that they are on the wrong tack, that there are not many people who can pay a rent of 1,000 écus, if you like, but they won't listen to you. Presently, when these palaces will still have no tenant but a crusty jack-in-office of a porter, when the "to let" bills have braved the elements for years, the pockets of the proprietors will feel the pinch, and they will be sorry to have saddled themselves with such unprofitable piles of masonry. They will divide and sub-divide their magnificent rooms by a liberal use of party-walls; but this proceeding will not make convenient apartments, and they will still have to charge a very high rent. Plenty of people will be ruined at the business, and no doubt this will make the rest think a bit, and they will give up building palaces, and come back to good old-fashioned houses again.

Being, then, sensible men without lofty architectural ambitions, Pascal and his partner confined their operations to putting up houses fit to live in.

A hard-working man with a family to bring up on an income of less than twenty thousand francs—and there are a few people in this unfortunate position—could find a suitable home in them. The result was that they had tenants from cellar to attic as soon as they were put up; the rents were reasonable, but high enough to bring in a return of seven or eight per cent. on the capital invested, which is not to be sneezed at.

Of course such convenient houses were even easier to sell than to let. Before the bunch of

flowers, which the workmen put on the last mantel-piece they finished by way of goodwill, had had time to wither, some buyer would come along. Pascal was getting a reputation among sound architects, and his social standing was visibly improving.

This uninterrupted success, which was simply due to plenty of ability and good sense, perplexed Lorilleux a great deal. As he had not the sense to understand the reason of it, he consoled himself by harping on the same old string, and throwing the brick which Messrs. Stick-in-the-mud always have on hand for clever people who get on—"He's one of the lucky ones!" As for himself, he thought bitterly, he had no luck at all. In spite of the promise in the Gospel, he reaped no crop for all his diligent sowings. Every morning he awoke to some small disappointment; every day he found his far-sighted calculations at fault somewhere. And he persisted in laying the blame on circumstances, instead of on himself, not understanding that where ability shows itself is in rising superior to circumstances, or at any rate in turning them to one's own advantage.

The doctor had been dreaming of fame and fortune, and they seemed to be more than ever beyond his reach. His name was still unknown to fame, and his most important patient was a retired druggist, who had gone to live in the country and found that now he had at last pure air to breathe, he had the ill luck to develop lung trouble.

So, little by little, Lorilleux's disposition had become soured, his complexion had taken on that jaundiced hue which is envy's livery; he was getting overbearing, touchy and snappish. He always looked on the black side of things, and

no longer troubled to conceal his hatred and contempt of his fellows. Everywhere he thought he saw schemers and knaves who were sharper than he was, and he fretted over his own dulness of wit.

The doctor had other worries as well to spoil his slumbers and darken his brow. It was plain that Pascal was making money very fast, and such prosperity, especially as it had come so quickly that it had upset all his ideas, was a dreadful anxiety to him. Would it not stand in the way of his pet scheme?

In the light of ordinary experience, Pascal with an income of twenty thousand francs was not so likely to act disinterestedly as when he was, comparatively speaking, a poor man.

The doctor, who had been shaking hands with himself whenever a speculation of his friend's was successful, was reduced to hoping that he might have a bit of a reverse to make a hole in this wealth of his.

He took himself seriously to task for having let matters slide so long, and made up his mind to unmask his batteries, not in a hurry, but with prudent deliberation. Unmask is quite the right word: no living soul had any notion of Lorilleux's intentions—even his own mother was not in his confidence.

Our astute diplomatist had not let the least hint of his secret escape him. His sister, like his friend, knew nothing about the plan he had hugged to his bosom for fourteen long years. And what a secret it was—the dream of a life-time!

With tactfulness beyond his years, Lorilleux had taken care not to let his friend get intimate with his family. He had guessed that the marriage



of two young people who had grown up together is most unlikely; seeing one another every day is apt only to lead to a mild brother-and-sisterly friendship. So, thanks to his artful precautions, Pascal and Mademoiselle Lorilleux had only seen each other on a few occasions, and those carefully stage-managed. They had not actually talked to each other a dozen times.

Thus it was that the doctor set himself the task of bringing the young people together—a weighty undertaking, but he thought all the difficulties had been smoothed over, though he still dreaded “his cursed luck.” Pascal was nearly thirty now, and had all the personal attractions necessary to capture the feminine heart. Mademoiselle Lorilleux was eighteen, and a very pretty brunette, with a most engaging style and an air of distinction. Her brother had taken care that she should have a much sounder education than girls usually get, and in his relentless determination he had actually done his best to break the poor girl’s spirit by tyrannizing over her to his heart’s content, so as to prepare her for the happy days when she would find a gentler hand upon the reins.

When the doctor thought of his own behaviour to these two—the friend he watched over so vigilantly and the sister he loved so dearly—he could not help being struck with admiration at his own cleverness and metaphorically patting himself on the back. They seemed to him made for each other; he liked to imagine them married, and himself at home with them, reaping his reward in witnessing their happiness.

Once he had made up his mind to bring matters to a head, the doctor realised that before all else



he must judiciously familiarise Pascal with the idea of marriage, make him want to get married, in fact. This took some time, but the doctor had all unsuspectingly two powerful allies in this preliminary campaign. Madame Divorne had hunted out a daughter-in-law after her own heart, an heiress, and did not want to see her trouble wasted. In all her letters she sang the praises of this pearl of Brittany and dropped some delicate hints on the subject of marriage into the bargain.

Then Jean Lantier, who had the goods to dispose of, was always saying how silly a man was to live alone when there were such a lot of nice girls about, girls who have been educated at the best boarding-schools in Paris—those admirable establishments wherein the least brilliant young lady very soon learns to dress three times a day.

But Lorilleux himself could act much more directly, as he came into contact with Pascal every day; and he had thought out a nice little plan for influencing his friend. He had made out that he had been seized by the matrimonial fever himself. This subterfuge gave him the chance of talking openly, since his insinuations simply passed as the effusions of a confidential friend. And so he "let himself go" on the subject of the bitterness of solitude and the boredom of the bachelor, and sang the praises of matrimonial bliss and the righteous happiness of two kindred souls whose union has the sanction of Church and State.

Then he discoursed at length on the reasons for his decision to marry. A man ought to marry young, he said. Where's the sense in waiting till one's second childhood before settling down, like those unconscionable old dotards who seem to be

after a nurse rather than a wife? They lead an innocent girl to the altar, and what does she get from them in exchange for her fresh youth? A heart gone cold, a disillusioned mind, a worn-out person—in fact, a heap of miscellaneous wreckage. And a nice life they have of it! You should just get to know some couples of this sort a year after the knot has been tied! Now in England, America or Germany they are much more sensible; there everybody marries the girl of his choice, and marries her for herself alone, without any of those low mercenary motives that make our French marriages mere commercial speculations, business contracts which are wrangled over in cold blood by notaries, and not entered into at all unless the figures are satisfactory.

In those other happy lands, it isn't the dowry the bridegroom is after, so every girl, if she is good-looking and good-tempered, gets married, whether she is rich or poor; only the plain ones have to join the ranks of the old maids, and even they need not, unless they don't know enough to make up for their want of beauty by other good qualities.

In this strain would Lorilleux hold forth with all the eloquence of conviction. Every day he thought out some new way of presenting his well-worn theme. He got almost rhapsodical when on the subject of the honeymoon; you might have thought that he learnt by heart in the morning, and paraphrased in the evening, whole pages of that nice clever book which made the reputation and the fortune of M. Legouve, and has done a bit for the literary success and the renown of that gentleman's son.

Pascal was not in the least moved by all this

eloquence. When Lorilleux described his ideal woman—which means that he drew a word-picture of his own sister—and then said: "Yes, I've made up my mind, as soon as I find a girl like that, I'll get married," Pascal would reply, "Yes, I would if I were you."

Then it needed all the doctor's will-power to keep from saying to his friend, "But what are you going to do yourself?"

As a matter of fact, however, the young engineer had two or three times anticipated the question which was always on Lorilleux's lips.

"I shall get married, like everybody else, I expect," he said, "but I am not old enough to be in any hurry yet. I'm very comfortable as I am, and I don't find my bachelorhood at all unpleasant. Besides, in the times we are living in, a wife is a luxury that is still beyond my means. You must be really very well off if you're not to make discretion the better part of valour and put the dowry before every other consideration, and I want to be able to make my choice without thinking about money at all."

If Lorilleux was chilled by Pascal's lack of enthusiasm, at any rate he was delighted with his disinterestedness. Heaven knows that was just what he wanted. "A wife ought to be quite dependent on her husband," said he.

But in his heart he used to curse the ladies for making men think that a wife is a luxury, and that only a rich man can afford to marry. It is this depressing idea that keeps the convents full. Ten frivolous flirts make a hundred old maids, and for every wife who ruins her husband, fifty men swear to live and die in single blessedness.



Lorilleux's persistence had soon had some result, at any rate. His matrimonial hobby had furnished the friends who came to see Pascal nearly every evening with a topic for conversation. He had implanted the idea in their minds, it had taken root, and now it should bear fruit. It usually is so among a number of young men; one makes up his mind to something, and the others soon take up the same idea—it is the old story of Panurge's flock of sheep.

Meanwhile the doctor was unmercifully chaffed; they all pretended to humour him in his hobby, to get some fun out of him.

"Doctor," one would say, "I've spotted what you want; a hundred and twenty thousand francs and more to come. I've seen the figures of the parents' fortune at a notary's office."

"Lorilleux," another would assure him, "I've seen the photograph of a charming girl in Badie's window, only a few steps from Pascal's place here; she's just the sort you're looking for, so trot round and find out her address."

The doctor took all this in very good part, which was unusual behaviour for him.

"Upon my word," he would say, "you seem to know my business better than I do! It's always like that when a steady-going man thinks of marriage, but the trouble is that though he'd suit the girls people find for him all right, they're not the sort to suit him by any means."

And he would say to himself, "Go on, my boys, laugh to your hearts' content! The rough-rider brings the horse up to the jump he wants him to take a hundred times if necessary, and at last the horse does take the jump. You'll all take



yours, though that doesn't interest me, but so will Pascal, and that's what I'm after."

The Machiavellian Lorilleux had got thus far in the wily game he was playing when one evening one of the coterie came in with a most seductive suggestion. This youth, although he joined in the laugh, had taken the matter seriously as well; he had talked to half-a-dozen old ladies he knew about a good match, and they had not been long in finding one out for him. So he had come to offer to introduce Lorilleux. "There's no obligation incurred by having a look," as he put it.

The doctor listened very attentively to the information supplied him, raised some objections, and finally refused to go.

"We'll never get him off, he's too full of crotchets when it comes to the point," said one of the young fellows. "If he doesn't want to die an old bachelor, there's only one thing more to be done, and that's to patronise M. de Saint-Roch, the bachelor's friend in need."

Everyone must have at least heard of this eccentric and mysterious individual, who styles himself the ambassador between families. He boasts of having invented the profession of matrimonial agent, and takes the credit of having thrown a new and favourable light on marriage just when that institution was getting into something very like disrepute.

So when it was suggested that Lorilleux should apply to this genius there was a roar of laughter; but the doctor did not frown at it.

"Why not?" said he in all seriousness. "But I'd like to know beforehand if M. de Saint-Roch really has ever got anyone off."

"What, don't you believe in him, you hardened sceptic?" replied the originator of the idea. "Don't you ever read the papers? Look at the first one you get hold of, and you'll be enlightened. The great ambassador condescends to hire the outside page of the five biggest papers for his advertisement now and again. There he comes out in all his glory. He notifies families that he has on his books a fine selection of unmarried young ladies and of widows—any age from sixteen to sixty, all qualified to adorn any society by their brains, beauty and breeding, and with these attractions enhanced by a nice little bit of dowry, say a million or thereabouts."

"Oh, yes," retorted Lorilleux, "I know all about that. I've read how M. de Saint-Roch has the honour to be employed by the leading families in the aristocracy, in the legal profession, in the army, and in business. I've also read how all the royal families in Europe regularly avail themselves of his services; I've even noted that you must write his address in a legible hand, but in spite of all this information I'm not yet convinced. So I simply repeat my original question: 'Has he ever actually got anyone off?'"

"But, doctor, in Paris alone there are at least a dozen of these matrimonial agents."

"What does that prove?"

"That if there were no trade doing, they wouldn't be keeping shop."

"I've seen shops open that weren't doing any business, all the same."

"So you really think, my good Æsculapius, that the originator of matrimonial agencies spends a hundred thousand francs a year on advertising

in newspapers simply and solely for amusement, and to show off ? ”

This reasoning appeared conclusive to Lorilleux, and he gave in ; but the conversation still kept to this topic. For whom did M. de Saint-Roch find wives, and where, and how did he do it ? How did he set about it ? None of the company could answer any of these questions.

“ Well, gentlemen,” said one of them at length, “ I must admit having nearly given way a dozen times to the temptation to write to M. de Saint-Roch myself.”

“ Good gracious ! What for ? ” asked the doctor.

“ Just out of curiosity.”

“ To tell the truth,” said Pascal, “ I’ve thought of it myself, too ; the man’s a puzzle to me.”

“ Then,” objected Lorilleux, “ you oughtn’t to write, but go and call on him personally ; that would be more interesting, and you could find out more that way.”

“ That’s so, certainly,” said Pascal laughing ; “ and I’ll satisfy your curiosity and my own as well by giving this man of mystery a call.”

“ It’s certainly a good idea,” said the doctor with a shrug. “ I give you full credit for it.”

“ Do you see anything absurd in it ? ”

“ No, really ; go, if it will interest you. But I do think it’s rather bad form to call on a man with the idea of turning him to ridicule ; that’s a schoolboy’s trick, not a thing for a grown man to do.”

But this spoil-sport sentiment was howled down.

“ That’s arranged, then,” agreed the company. “ Pascal’s going to investigate, and if he brings us a favourable report, we’ll all bestow our patronage on M. de Saint-Roch without further delay.”



## CHAPTER V

### THE MARRIAGE BROKER AT HOME

**T**HE founder of the marriage-broker's profession rents the first floor of a fine house at the junction of two of the best streets in the Quartier de la Chaussée d'Antin.

There are at least sixteen windows in the front of his premises, and the rich curtains which can be seen from outside give the public some idea of the sumptuousness of the interior. The choice of this house was a master-stroke in itself. Being on the corner, it opens on to two different streets. There are two staircases leading up to the broker's premises, and if you look about a bit, you find at least one back staircase with a dark passage leading to yet another street.

M. de Saint-Roch makes a lot of these three exits in his advertisements, as they afford the necessary privacy for his clients. He has no false pride, and does not insist on his visitors arriving with a flourish of trumpets.

Finally, as if to give both the ladies and the gentlemen a colourable excuse for calling, a fashionable dressmaker occupies the third floor, and on the second a banker has his offices, whence you hear the chink of cash as you go upstairs—a sound of the happiest augury!

This mansion of mystery no doubt has two porters, since it has two front doors, but no one has ever seen either of them. There are the two



porters' lodges all right, but no crusty countenance glares through the windows of either; no voice growls out to a caller, "Where are you going?"—a question which might be embarrassing.

Instead of porters one has something much better; notices in gold letters on a polished black background, which so to speak take visitors by the hand, conduct them upstairs, and lead them wherever they want to go—to the banker, the dressmaker, or the matrimonial gentleman himself.

By whichever of the two doors you enter this house of good omen, you feel at home at once, as Pascal did when he called. Guided by the pointing hands on the wall, he went upstairs. There are three doors opening on the first floor landing, and on all three is emblazoned the illustrious name of the ambassador of matrimony.

Pascal rang the bell at the first door he came to. Before its vibrations had died away the door opened, and he was confronted by a gorgeous flunkey, with more gold lace on his coat than a cathedral beadle.

"Can I see M. de Saint-Roch?" asked Pascal.

"If monsieur will be so kind as to come with me," replied the splendid servitor respectfully, "I will conduct monsieur to him." And, pulling aside a damask curtain, he led the young man along a passage lighted by ground-glass windows, where their footsteps fell noiselessly on the rich pile of the carpet.

Pascal smiled as he went along; he thought of the rumours about the marriage-broker's wonderful home; the mysterious doors, private staircases, dark corridors, all were there right enough—only

it might have been more in keeping if the attendants had been deaf-mutes.

At last his guide showed him into a little parlour hung with silk of a striking shade, a delicate lilac.

"If monsieur will kindly take a seat, I will tell monsieur he is here," said he, as he rung a bell on the table three times.

"Shall I have to wait long?"

"Monsieur now knows that monsieur is expecting him in the lilac parlour," replied the attendant with a bow. "He will be here to see monsieur immediately." He bowed again and noiselessly withdrew, carefully closing the door behind him.

"The deuce," thought Pascal, "they seem to have a parlour for every colour in the rainbow in this place; let's have a look round in this one, anyhow."

This lilac parlour is, as a matter of fact, a little masterpiece of vulgar luxury and extravagance in bad taste—the sort of thing to dazzle an old-clothes woman. There is gilding on everything from the arms of the easy-chairs to the roses on the ceiling. Every piece of furniture is upholstered with hand-made embroidery, and no two of them are alike. The carpet, with its figured design, is the last word in absurdity; it is supposed to depict Madame Pompadour at her toilet—or anything else you like, for only the artist who designed it could say what it really is meant to represent.

The rest of the room is in keeping with what we have seen. But what gives the lilac parlour a character all its own is the number of pictures of all descriptions hanging on the walls, to say nothing of the extraordinary number of little knick-

knacks scattered about on the mantelpiece, the tables, and on what-nots.

There is something of everything, bronzes, plaster casts, marble, porcelain, and wood carvings. In fact, the place looks like a curiosity shop, with all this display of works of art. They are works of art with a vengeance! Unspeakable monstrosities, statuettes that make your blood run cold, and paintings that would give you a nightmare. There is one good picture and three middling ones, and some bronzes from Barbedienne's—these might pass muster, but as for the rest——!

Pascal examined the collection with profound disgust. Under every object there was a label with an inscription such as "To our very kind friend"; "To the giver of my happiness"; "With the kind regards of a mother made happy"; "In token of gratitude"; etc., etc. All these works of art were gifts, evidently, but who were the givers? The design of the clock was a chubby Cupid blowing with all his might on a brazier, with an inscription engraved underneath, "So will our love always glow."

M. de Saint-Roch's latest client was lost in conjecture. He was standing spell-bound before Cupid and his fire when the door was opened gently, and the matrimonial ambassador appeared in person.

He is a little plump man—so chubby and fresh-coloured that it does one good to look at him. Roses and lilies bloom on his smooth-shaven cheek, the kind of roses and lilies that the perfumers sell in little jars. His pursed-up mouth, when it opens simpering like a lover's sonnet, shows an array of pearly white teeth which are the latest thing



in dentistry. His glance is like a madrigal, gay and gentle all at once.

Smart, well-groomed, and scented, he leaves his trail behind him ; every movement or gesture of his is like shaking a scent sachet. He has the youthful graces of one of Watteau's shepherds, and it would do your heart good to see all his affected poses. Vestris would have lost her heart to his bowing and scraping ; he is the god of dancing-masters in human form.

His flowered waistcoat recalls the fashion of the First Empire ; and he is fated to be the last to wear a cornflower-blue swallow-tail coat with chased gold buttons. He has eschewed knee-breeches, but his big feet are squeezed into smart beaver pumps decorated with diamond buckles, and his fat, hairy hands are half concealed by ruffles of Mechlin lace. He has a mania for jewellery, and gleams and twinkles all over like the sky on a frosty night in December. His fingers are loaded with rings, and when he throws his coat open it is like a jeweller's show-case ; there is a perfect constellation of pins and studs on his cravat and frilled shirt. His waistcoat is overflowed by a triple cascade of gold chains, for he never wears less than three watches, and the various trinkets attached to the chains are enough to stock a museum by themselves. He does not wear ear-rings, it is true, but his fair and exquisitely curled wig is a perfect dream.

Pascal was quite dazzled when this glittering object appeared in the doorway ; but the matrimonial ambassador was not unduly elated by this result—his personal vanity must have been thoroughly satisfied long ago. But as his latest



client's surprise made him look extremely nervous, he felt he must reassure him. So in the most ladylike and seductive tone he made the very simple remark :

"I see, sir, you were studying my humble collection of votive offerings."

"Votive offerings?" echoed Pascal.

"What I mean by that expression," continued the illustrious matchmaker, "is that all the things you see here are the expressions of my clients' gratitude. My lady friends had kindly thoughts of me as they embroidered these chair-covers; and these bronzes and pictures are pledges of a grateful memory that cannot die."

Pascal bowed; he was quite at a loss for words to express his astonishment.

"So," continued the matrimonial ambassador in a sentimental tone, "I like having these offerings of gratitude around me; they are my most cherished possessions, and the sweetest recompense for my labours. But I can assure you they're not all to be seen here by any means. I've got seven other rooms all as full of them as this is."

"I can see, sir," said Pascal, "you have been the means of getting a great many people married."

"One-third of the population of France, or thereabouts," replied M. de Saint-Roch modestly. "But a lot of them don't know it was my doing, and a lot more have forgotten me."

"Is that possible?"

"It has happened, anyhow. Ah, sir," and here the ambassador's feelings seemed almost to overpower him, "I have met with much ingratitude. My motives have been unworthily questioned, and actions have even been brought against me. But

the decision has always been in my favour, and I have taken good care to have the cases reported in print, with a dozen counsel's speeches. I have legal opinion justifying my proceedings from the point of view both of morality and of law ; and besides—but surely these presents you see here speak better in my defence than any barrister, and are my finest testimonials ! ”

“ I should not dream of disputing it,” put in Pascal.

“ Fortunately,” continued M. de Saint-Roch, “ there is still some gratitude left in this world. This little plastic group was sent me only this morning by a young couple who got married through me last year ; that picture was the gift of another couple whose marriage I arranged four years ago. Now those two have given me real satisfaction ; they have just got their fifth child, a girl, and they want me to stand godfather to her. There are any number of married couples who keep a warm place for me in their hearts ; they write me and tell me of any piece of good fortune that comes their way, and if there should by any chance be any little conjugal difference, they call me in to arbitrate, and I soon put matters to rights.”

“ That is the greatest credit to any man.”

“ And to any profession, my dear sir. Ah, if I only had the time, I should like to undertake to keep the flame of wedlock pure and bright when I had kindled it. For that one would want a department for insurance against domestic troubles. Married people could then submit any little differences to a jury composed of people of both sexes. When their decision had been given, a tactful advocate could take the erring party in hand and

bring him or her to reason. But I beg your pardon, sir—I'm taking up too much of your time ; please be so good as to come into my office " ; and this remarkable individual flattened himself against the wall, to let Pascal pass him, with the supple grace of a professor of deportment.

M. de Saint-Roch's office is much like any other business office—it is dirty and untidy enough for a lawyer's, and almost dusty enough ; but the marriage-broker's flunkeys do condescend to sweep away the cobwebs, and wipe down the gilded leather of the document-cases which line the walls of the room.

The matrimonial ambassador with his own august hand pulled forward an armchair for his youthful client, and ensconced himself before a huge desk loaded with papers and bundles of documents tied up with red tape.

" Sir," Pascal had a chance to say at last, " I have called on you because I wish to marry."

" Good, my dear sir, very good indeed," replied M. de Saint-Roch. " A most excellent idea. Marriage, my dear sir, is man's real reason for existence. I can fairly say this, as I have earned the right of calling myself the sole renovator of that sacred institution. The Almighty and myself have said to man : ' Take unto thyself a wife.' And though I am not a married man myself, that is only because I have a sacrosanct mission ; I have devoted myself to celibacy like a father-confessor, for I am the repository of so many secrets that I dread association with a beloved woman."

" That gives me complete confidence in you."

" Loyalty and discretion, sir, that's my motto. You did the wisest thing you could possibly do



in coming to me. How do marriages come about, I ask you?—I don't mean in exceptional cases, but just in the ordinary course of things. Why, old ladies are always crazy to get people off—the old harridans! But what assurances or control have you got? You marry with your eyes shut and take your bride on trust. If you are chivalrously disposed, your chivalry is taken advantage of; you are told there are piles of money, and you get none at all. But by now you are involved; false pride keeps your mouth shut, and in spite of your rage, you can't back out."

Pascal made a gesture of dissent.

"Oh, I know there are exceptions," said M. de Saint-Roch; "but when people deal with me there are no surprises and no deception. The outstanding merit of my business, my dear sir, is that you can always take the papers and documents I give you to your notary and get them verified, and that without being in any way involved. That is the source of my unrivalled reputation——"

"This is all very well, sir," interrupted Pascal, "but isn't it time we got back to the business I came to you about?"

"That's what we're going to talk about, but, my dear sir, I had to go into this explanation first."

Thereupon Pascal's cross-examination began.

The marriage-broker wanted to know everything, his name, profession, family, address, means, disposition, and the most intimate personal details, and took notes of the young man's replies as he gave them. When he had finished questioning him, he said:

"Now, my dear sir, you can make your mind easy; we'll soon have you suited."



"Soon!" replied Pascal in surprise. "I thought you'd do it immediately."

"How you do run on!" said the ambassador, quite shocked, apparently. "Ah, the hot-headedness of youth!" continued he, playfully. "Do you think a marriage can be arranged like——"

"I'm sorry, but I thought——"

"That I'd got the lady ready packed up for you in one of those despatch-cases? But, speaking in earnest, to-day's Thursday; come here again next Wednesday, and I shall have had time to do something for you." With these words, M. de Saint-Roch got up—the audience was over.

At that moment came four rings on the bell. "Ah!" said the ambassador, "someone's waiting for me in the pink parlour."

"All right, Wednesday, then," said Pascal, going to the door; but M. de Saint-Roch held him back, saying, "Not that way, not that way! Good gracious, you might meet somebody. Nobody ever meets anybody in this house—it's specially arranged to avoid that. I'd undertake to have twenty people call here at the same time and have everyone think no one else was on the premises. This way, please."

And, opening a door masked by despatch-cases, he put Pascal under the guidance of a servant, who led him through a dark passage into the street.

That evening Pascal told the whole story of his visit to the broker down to the smallest detail, and no story was ever listened to more attentively. But it was only the first act of the play, after all, and Lorilleux, who had been greatly edified by the recital of the ambassador's exhortations to matrimony, agreed with the rest.

Pascal duly kept the appointment. This time he had to wait in a parlour with hangings of apple-green, but of much the same depth of tint as those of the first; he had no time to get impatient, for M. de Saint-Roch came in almost immediately.

But there was a marvellous difference between the reception he got this time and the previous interview. He was received like a long-lost son, and the ambassador did not know how to make enough of him.

"Well," he said, "I've not forgotten you. Ah! you are a very honourable young man, and I congratulate you on it; why aren't all my clients like you?"

"What do you mean? In what respect like me?"

"Oh, you're too modest, my dear boy. You haven't told me how well off you are. Didn't you tell me your father had an income of ten thousand francs and a practice worth fifty thousand? His practice is worth forty thousand écus, and his income is pretty nearly twenty thousand francs. Why, his Kerpris farm alone brings him in twelve thousand francs a year; then he's got some splendid woods near Guingamp, and some fine meadows along the Trieux into the bargain."

Pascal had the surprise of his life when he heard this. Here was a stranger who knew his affairs better than he did himself; how on earth had M. de Saint-Roch managed to ferret out this information?

"And that's not all," continued the founder of the marriage-broker's trade. "You gave your personal assets as three hundred thousand francs; well, you're worth a lot more than that. Docto

Lorilleux goes about saying you've got twice as much, but your partner M. Lantier puts the amount at four hundred and fifty thousand."

"How the deuce did you find all that out?" said Pascal.

"Aha," said M. de Saint-Roch, with a smile. "One just goes to one's intelligence office!"

"Sir!"

"Now you're not getting angry, surely? Come, now, do you think I arrange marriages between people without knowing what I am about? That would be a fine way of doing business! You must know that I keep myself posted in every detail of my clients' lives. I know all the circumstances of yours better than your bosom friend Doctor Lorilleux does, and so I could tell you a few things you haven't told him—for instance, why you gave in your resignation six years ago."

"Oh, as to that——"

"My dear sir, you resigned because you knew you would be gazetted to a provincial appointment, and at that particular time nothing on earth would have tempted you away from Paris, nothing on earth! A certain love affair——"

Pascal blushed scarlet; the man's knowledge seemed uncanny. "He must be a wizard," he thought, "or a secret agent of the police." He was sorry he had come, and was on the point of losing his temper.

"I know that was all over long ago," added M. de Saint-Roch, "and in any case, you needn't worry yourself; my house, as I told you, is like the confessional. I am so overawed by the enormous responsibility which weighs on me, that I have purposely avoided training anyone as an



understudy. I shall carry my secrets to the grave with me ; my practice, claims, notes, and correspondence will all perish when I do, and then the marriage-broking trade will sink into the puerile and discredited condition I found it in."

He pronounced the last few words with some show of feeling in his voice, and his made-up countenance expressed deep dejection. Pascal did not know whether he ought to laugh or be annoyed. Was the man a quack or really sincere ? " What a mountebank he is ! " thought the young man. However, his usual smirk gradually overspread the features of the worthy eccentric, and he said :

" Now let's talk about business ; you are young, good-looking, a good talker, and well off—it will be a very easy matter to get you married, and the business will soon be fixed up. Now tell me honestly, as you would your father-confessor, are you looking to better yourself by marriage—do you want a big dowry ? "

" I don't pretend to despise money ; it's a very good thing to have, but I don't want to marry unless I love the girl."

" Well, you're quite right. Sometimes I have to come down to arranging one of these business matches, but I never like doing it. Suppose we say, means corresponding to your own, and a girl you feel you can love."

" That's my idea exactly."

M. de Saint-Roch got up, took a huge register, and opened it on his desk. Then he said, tapping it, " I've got down in this register all the finest fortunes in France and abroad, and all the necessary evidence in support of the facts."



Pascal came forward to have a look at this collection of the heiresses of Europe, but the ambassador said, "Oh! you can look as long as you like, but you won't be able to make anything out. All my registers are kept in cypher, and I alone have the key to it."

Turning over the leaves of his register, he began to make his comments:—

"One and a half million francs—that's too much. A hundred thousand—that's not enough. Here's someone who must have a nobleman—nothing lower than a baron will do. Someone else wants no one but an army man—queer fads some of these parents have! Perhaps this will suit you, now: A million in cash, the lady a widow of fifty-three——"

"No, thanks."

"Let's have another look. Here they want the husband to be manager of a factory; then there's a young lady who must have a non-smoker, and she's got no dowry to countenance her whims! Another little lady will only marry a fair man, and you're dark—just as well for you, perhaps! Now here's one of my best clients, she's been married three times already; she's twenty-nine, with five children."

"Next, please!"

"Perhaps this will do: Two hundred thousand francs, eighteen years of age, very well educated, daughter of good people——"

"That sounds all right."

"Besides, the figure I named is only what she's got now. She'll come into a magnificent fortune, and before long, too. The mother is old and in very poor health—and all the money is on her

side. As to the girl herself, she's really very handsome, I assure you—tall and fair, with a splendid figure. But to be quite frank with you, I'm afraid she's very uncertain-tempered—at any rate, they can't keep a servant more than two months in that house."

"Good Lord!"

"Yes, when one gets married one looks for a longer stay than that! And the parents insist on their son-in-law living with them——"

"That wouldn't suit me; and, besides, I don't fancy fair girls."

"I see," said M. de Saint-Roch, and went on with his selections. "Ah, we've come to it now," he cried. "The lady is a really charming brunette of twenty, and she's never been to a boarding-school, mother being rather strait-laced, but she's very well educated for all that. She's a girl with a very nice disposition, good-tempered, bright and lively, rather childish still, but not a flirt, and she's able to manage a house all right. The father used to be a manufacturer at Roubaix, but he retired three years ago; he's a thoroughly straightforward fellow, with nothing crotchety about him. As for his fortune, it's a big one, I can assure you, not far short of a million in real estate; and the dowry they're offering is a hundred thousand écus."

"We'd better stop there," said Pascal. "If we go further we may fare worse."

"That's so, I think. I'm certain you'll like the lady. By the way, I ought to have said that the figure I gave you for the dowry is only an approximation, within somewhere about fifty thousand francs—as a matter of fact, the old gentleman is a bit near."

"That doesn't matter—I've told you my ideas; I'm not exacting on that point. And now, what is this young lady's name, and when can I make her acquaintance?"

"Wait a bit, you'll know her name soon enough; we'll soon get you introduced to her. Well, now, there's just one little formality to go through, quite a trifle."

So saying, M. de Saint-Roch handed a slip of paper to his new client and asked him to be so kind as to sign it. By so doing, Pascal noticed, he pledged himself to pay the matrimonial ambassador a sum equivalent to five per cent. of the dowry on the day after his marriage to the lady, the space for whose name was left blank.

"Now we've come to the point," thought Pascal. "Shall I sign? Oh, well, I don't see how I can ever lose a centime over it." And he signed his name at the foot of the document in his neatest handwriting.

M. de Saint-Roch took the pen in his turn and then, in the blank space left for the lady's name, he wrote "Antoinette Gerbeau."

"Antoinette," read Pascal. "That's a pretty name."

"You're beginning well," said the ambassador graciously, "and I'll soon be sending you some news." Therewith he showed his client out with the same precautions as on his previous visit.

The story of this second interview was just as well received by the young engineer's friends as his tale of the first had been, but they did not care much for the final episode. The idea of signing a contract grated on them; they saw the man of business under the blue coat of Cupid's commercial

traveller. So almost all of them declared that they would never have left their own signatures in such a den of hocus-pocus, and vowed that M. de Saint-Roch would have to do without their custom.

Lorilleux, seeing them in this frame of mind, returned to the position he had taken up before and asserted more stoutly than ever that this matrimonial ambassador had never got anyone married. This time they agreed, and counselled him, as he was still bent on matrimony, to try somewhere else.



## CHAPTER VI.

### THE FATEFUL MEETING

**T**HREE days had passed since Pascal had, as he believed, seen the last of M. de Saint-Roch. He had not given him another thought, when one evening his man brought him a letter which had come during the forenoon. He opened it and read :

“MY DEAR SIR AND ESTEEMED PATRON,—

“I have just heard of an excellent opportunity for you to see Mademoiselle Gerbeau. My esteemed friend the Chevalier de Jeufilas will call for you at nine o'clock this evening. He wishes to have the pleasure of taking you to a ball, where you will meet the young lady.

“I hope sincerely this letter will reach you in time, for so good an opportunity may never occur again, for the young lady goes into society very little.

“Believe me, dear Sir

“and esteemed Patron,

“Yours ever,

“J.-D. DE SAINT-ROCH.”

“So he's coming at nine, deuce take him,” said Pascal to himself, “and it's half-past eight now, so I've only just time to make myself scarce, unless I'm set on making the gentleman's acquaintance.”

Just at that moment the servant announced :  
“Monsieur le Chevalier de Jeufilas.”

The Chevalier is a gentleman who moves in

the best society, genial, courteous, and well-bred. His age is a puzzle, but it ought to be somewhere between thirty and sixty-five. What you particularly notice about him at the first glance is that he is very well dressed, and at his buttonhole are the ribbons of two or three Orders, one of them a light maroon. He speaks with a slight lisp.

On this occasion he did not seem in the slightest degree embarrassed by calling on a perfect stranger in this way. He bowed politely to Pascal, and said, "Sir, a great friend of mine who thinks very highly of you has told me you wish to go more into society. I shall feel it an honour to be allowed to introduce a gentleman so eminent as yourself at the houses to which I have entry."

Pascal could not help noticing the refinement of his visitor's pose and speech, even while he himself was floundering in a maze of excuses. He explained that he had only been home a few minutes, and so had only just found that the Chevalier was going to call. The fact was, that though he was keenly interested, he did not like the idea of going out with a friend of M. de Saint-Roch.

"I'm not dressed, sir," Pascal said finally, "and I should not like to trespass on your kindness."

"Oh, don't let that trouble you," answered the Chevalier, "there's no hurry, and I assure you I don't mind waiting."

Pascal's curiosity got the better of him, and after a little more beating about the bush he made up his mind to go with M. de Jeufilas. He offered him a cigar to smoke while he was waiting, but the Chevalier declined it, because, as he explained,

although he liked a good cigar, he made it a rule never to smoke just before going into ladies' society.

As he was dressing, Pascal thought to himself, "Where on earth does M. de Saint-Roch get hold of acquaintances like that? The man's a model of good breeding. If a man is afraid of smelling of tobacco when he goes into the company of ladies he must be either a gentleman or a hair-dresser, and there's no doubt about this Chevalier being a gentleman. This is getting interesting."

The Chevalier's carriage was in waiting, and as soon as he had taken his seat in it by Pascal's side, he said, "Our host to-night is a retired magistrate, a great friend of mine, who gives two or three dances every season. It's a most comfortable house to visit, and I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself."

From the reception he got from his hostess when M. de Jeufilas had introduced him as an old and intimate friend, Pascal saw at once that the Chevalier was very highly respected, and liked personally even more. His companion's introduction alone secured for him the warm and kindly greeting which is the lot of a guest who is a valued personal friend as well. As to the house, it was just as the ambassador's friend had described it.

Pascal felt considerable relief; he had not feared being led into a trap, but he had had considerable doubts as to whether he were not going to be introduced to some very queer people.

After the introduction, M. de Jeufilas took his young friend aside and said to him in a quite unconcerned tone, "Just look down the room at that pretty girl on one of those seats by the window; she's in the front row and three places from the



curtain—yes, that's the one. Isn't she absolutely charming? That's Mademoiselle Antoinette Gerbeau. Her father's a very dear friend of mine, her mother's a perfect paragon, and I'm very intimate with the whole family."

So saying, he left his young friend to his reflections, as he put it.

Pascal would have been hard to please indeed if he had not agreed with the Chevalier, for Mademoiselle Gerbeau was a really lovely girl. Her hair was dark and very abundant, framing as it were her face, which had the sweetest expression, and setting off the exquisite purity of her complexion; her lips were full and smiling, and her large dark eyes shone with a certain wilfulness as well as gaiety. Just now a waltz was being played, and no doubt she did not like sitting still; every now and then she looked round at her mother, who was sitting just behind, as if to reproach her for forbidding such enjoyment.

"M. de Saint-Roch has certainly told nothing but the truth," thought Pascal; but at the same time, now that he was actually face to face with this beautiful girl, the memory of the marriage-broker grated on him. He wished he could forget the part that worthy had played, and have only chance to thank for the sight of such unparalleled beauty.

"At any rate, I'll try to get her to give me a dance," said he to himself, and he walked round the room, keeping close to the seats so as to be out of the way of the waltzers, till he came to Mademoiselle Gerbeau. She was engaged, he found, for all the quadrilles except the first one; nobody had thought of asking her for that, thinking she



must have promised it already. She was rather disgusted at the prospect of having to play wall-flower during a quadrille, in addition to being forbidden to waltz, so she received Pascal very graciously, not so much because he was agreeable and good-looking, as because he was the partner she wanted at the moment.

Pascal did not like dancing, and he thought the modern quadrille was a singularly silly form of amusement, but this particular one in which Mademoiselle Gerbeau was his partner seemed to him all too short, though he would have had some trouble in explaining why. There had been, certainly, nothing very engrossing in the partners' conversation. All he had done was, during the intervals, to whisper some of those commonplaces which are the correct accompaniments of a quadrille, and as much a part of a dancing man's outfit as the handkerchief in his dress-coat pocket, while Mademoiselle Gerbeau had simply murmured a few timid monosyllables in reply. That had been all, yet when the orchestra stopped, and he was quite out of breath with the effort to keep up with music borrowed from the opera of the day or from some piece of Beaumain's, he wanted to cry "Encore!" And while he took his partner back to her seat, which he did by the longest way round so as to feel her arm on his a few minutes longer, he asked her to give him a mazurka, since she was engaged for all the other quadrilles.

"I don't dance in mazurkas, sir," she replied rather wistfully.

"Then will you let me ask you again before your mother?" Pascal pleaded. "I don't think she will refuse me, at any rate."

She looked up at him, blushing to find he had read her thoughts. She was really eager to try this fascinating dance, but her mother was strongly opposed to it. So, without much hope of getting the permission which had several times been refused, she said in a low voice: "Please do, sir."

Our scheming friend Pascal certainly knows how to talk people round, and his eloquence on this occasion brought about an immediate assent from Madame Gerbeau—not such an easy matter as might appear, for the lady has fixed, not to say immovable, principles, and is not to be induced to depart from them. Until this evening she had solemnly laid it down 'for all the world to know, that never, never should her daughter have anything to do with those unseemly dances in which a gentleman is allowed to put his arm round a young lady's waist. She had not only sworn it but cried it from the house-tops; it was the first regulation in the maternal charter she had drafted on the day when she took her daughter to her first ball. Everybody knew all about it. So when Mademoiselle Antoinette was actually seen dancing the mazurka, and with a good-looking young stranger, the natural conclusion was that there was something afoot, and that this favoured partner was her intended husband. As for Pascal, he rose to the occasion magnificently. He actually danced two or three quadrilles with other girls, in the hope of thus being able to claim another mazurka. But when, towards two o'clock in the morning, he looked round for Madame Gerbeau in hopes of getting her consent again, she was nowhere to be seen.

He was very much disappointed and disgusted

at having taken so much exercise all for nothing. Then, for the first time, he remembered the Chevalier, and after a good deal of trouble, found him at last in the card-parlour.

He was playing *écarté*, and winning; and he looked quite a different man. He had lost his calmness, and his face was all excitement, feverish yet controlled; his eyes seemed aflame and glittered like the gold which gleamed in a pile before him.

"That's the key to the enigma," thought Pascal. "The man's a gamester, and that's how M. de Saint-Roch has got hold of him. Poor fellow, what a terrible bondage!"

As soon as he saw his young friend, the Chevalier made a friendly signal to him, as much as to say, "Wait a moment." Immediately the game lost its hold on him, his features regained their repose, and the fire in his eyes died down.

As soon as he could leave the table, he rose and came to Pascal, saying "Well?" with obvious anxiety in his look and tone.

"I'm absolutely delighted—bewitched, in fact," replied the young man. "She's the loveliest girl I've ever seen in my life."

"Is that so?" said the Chevalier, as pleased, evidently, as he had been anxious before. "Well, I'm not surprised at all. Now shall I introduce you to her father? He's a friend of mine, as I told you."

"I'd like to be introduced, but I fancy the ladies have gone now."

The Chevalier took out his watch. "Nearly three o'clock; it is too late, unfortunately; those ladies always go home at two. Madame Gerbeau has rigid rules about everything, though you've



made her break one to-night, anyhow. She must have taken a great fancy to you."

"Oh, you mean about the mazurka——"

"If you had known the lady as well as I do, you would realise the immensity of her condescension in that matter. But are you engaged to-morrow morning, may I ask?"

"Why?"

"I'd like you to come to lunch with me and meet M. Gerbeau."

"I'm absolutely free," replied Pascal with alacrity.

"Well, then, to-morrow, or rather this morning, if you're strolling in Jouffray Passage at eleven sharp, I'll meet you accidentally, as it were."

"All right, I'll be sure to turn up."

At three minutes past eleven Pascal was just walking down the passage for the second time when he saw the Chevalier in the distance, approaching arm in arm with a gentleman of sixty, prosperous-looking and withal pleasant-faced, M. Gerbeau, in point of fact.

The Chevalier greeted his young friend with well-feigned surprise at their fortunate meeting, said that he had gone out that morning with the intention of dragging his old friend Gerbeau into a bit of mild dissipation, and asked him to join them at lunch, an invitation which Pascal accepted with undisguised pleasure.

They had not far to go to the restaurant, but M. de Jeufilas managed on the way to whisper an abridged biography of Pascal into M. Gerbeau's ear with such success that by the time they got to the door the ex-manufacturer knew that his fellow-guest was an admirable young fellow, whose behaviour equalled his ability, a former pupil at



the Polytechnic School, of a distinguished and wealthy family, and with the final attraction of four hundred thousand francs personal property. As a matter of fact, the Chevalier managed to get all this out between two puffs of his cigar, for he had no objection to smoking during the forenoon.

This clever performance had its reward. Before they had got to the dessert, Pascal was already in the good graces of Antoinette's father, and he made a complete conquest of him over the coffee.

Now M. Gerbeau, although as a manufacturer he had shown himself an excellent man of business, did not know very much about the building trade. And so, for the last eighteen months, he had found himself running a business which was not doing at all well. He had been seized all of a sudden by that craze for building which entered the heads of so many unfortunates who were living comfortably on their means, and conceived the unfortunate idea of selling his property in Saintonge and investing the proceeds in some plots in Paris ; he had to pay a middleman an exorbitant price for these, and then made another unlucky resolve—to build houses on them.

To anyone who is not a builder, a house in course of erection is a financial puzzle, in which one cannot see how the money goes. M. Gerbeau was in the unfortunate position of knowing he was being robbed, but not being able to make out how, or to fix the blame on anyone. This was a real anxiety to him, because he felt vaguely that speculation is like machinery ; if you get your finger caught in it, you will soon have to cut off your arm to

save the rest of your person from going the same way as the finger. Good money is soon thrown away after bad, and one's finances soon run out.

M. Gerbeau told Pascal his troubles, and Pascal promised to get him out of them, and help him to cut his losses if necessary, with as little sacrifice as possible. He kept his word, and after he had spent a week in going to and fro, estimating and calculating, he put the ex-manufacturer in a position to understand how he stood. This bit of experience cost M. Gerbeau a clear sixty thousand francs, and he shuddered as he thought of the financial gulf from which he had so narrowly escaped. He understood that without Pascal's assistance he might have been ruined, and he was proportionately grateful to him.

Naturally all these proceedings and the arrangements that had to be made resulted in Pascal's being a frequent visitor at M. Gerbeau's house for some days after their first meeting; several times he was invited to dine there. Thus he had frequent opportunities of meeting Mademoiselle Antoinette, which only resulted in the confirming of the first favourable impression, so that he was soon even more deeply enthralled. Besides, he noticed in the family an atmosphere of good feeling, prosperity and ease which reminded him of his own home; and Madame Gerbeau, dignified as she was without being starched, and affectionate without being weak, seemed to be his own mother over again. Last, but not least, he knew very well now that he was really in love with Antoinette.

The result of all this was to make him wish the marriage-broker could be safely stowed away

below ground, secrets, documents, notes, registers written in cypher, and all. The image of M. de Saint-Roch, more tricked out than Jezebel, with his unctuous affectation of paternal benevolence, absolutely haunted him. He could not curse the man, for after all it was through him that he had met the girl he loved, but for all that he would have been delighted to blot him out of existence!

Then his own signature, so legibly written at the foot of the contract, came into his mind. That wretched agreement seemed to shine before his eyes in letters of fire; he felt as if he had signed an arrangement with the devil.

He was also haunted by another demon, calling up a fresh set of remorseful thoughts, in the form of the Chevalier, and he was even a worse affliction, because the marriage-broker seldom came out of his den, while it was hardly possible to avoid meeting the Chevalier in person, as he was a friend of the family into which Pascal hoped to enter by marriage. He would be at the wedding, with a satanic smile flickering over his countenance, no doubt! Pascal would gladly have given half his wealth to have made Antoinette's acquaintance without meeting these two intermediaries in his love affair.

And then he had no one to whom he could tell his troubles, no friend with whom he could take counsel. Nothing on earth would have made him confide in anyone, not even in his bosom friend Lorilleux. He shuddered at the bare idea of anyone ever getting to know that he had got a wife by M. de Saint-Roch's kind offices.

However, he had to make up his mind. He told M. Gerbeau of his love for his daughter, and the ex-manufacturer was delighted, though he



asked him to wait a few days till he could talk to the girl and her mother.

Their reply was favourable, and three days after this declaration Pascal was definitely allowed to pay his addresses to her.

But whom had he to thank for this prompt decision which gave him his heart's desire? Alas, it was the Chevalier de Jeufias, who had wasted no time in looking up his young friend's credentials, but had answered for him on his own responsibility; he had spent a whole afternoon in singing the praises of his friend to Madame Gerbeau, going into the minutest details that could interest a mother with her daughter's happiness at heart; he had described Pascal's life from day to day, talked about his family as if he had known them twenty years, and drawn a most lifelike and flattering portrait of M. Divorne and his wife.

It is quite true that he had said nothing that was not quite correct. But the idea of owing his happiness to such a man and of being his accomplice! For, after all, the Chevalier had really been lying, because he talked confidently of matters he had not verified, and of other things of which he knew nothing at all. What disgrace and shame this meant to Pascal! He did not know whether to feel furiously angry or blissfully happy.



## CHAPTER VII

### A STAB IN THE DARK

**F**OR the next fortnight Pascal, who used to be such a stay-at-home, was always away. His friends kept coming and finding him out, and his man always had the same reply for them: "Monsieur is gone out, and he said he would not be back this evening."

Jean Lantier wanted to see his partner about some business which he said needed attending to at once, but no partner was to be found.

Lorilleux racked his brains with conjectures and worried himself nearly crazy. Of course, this could not go on for ever, and one evening the matrimonial schemes in both their minds brought them to his office at ten o'clock at night to wait for him.

Jean Lantier, under pressure from his wife, wanted to talk about the eligibility of one of his daughters; Lorilleux had decided to invite his friend to dine with his family in a couple of days, with the idea of formally presenting him to his sister. At eleven o'clock, Pascal came in beaming. He had spent the evening talking to Mademoiselle Antoinette, and to a certain whispered question he had ventured on putting she had not answered "No."

He came home firmly resolved to write to his family asking their sanction of the marriage and to announce it publicly. That would be much the best way to avert any suspicions that might have arisen; and it would leave M. de Saint-

Roch and the Chevalier in a fix they could not get out of. M. Gerbeau's building speculations were a satisfactory explanation of Pascal's introduction to his family, for business relations often lead to a warm personal friendship.

"Well, we're in luck at last!" cried Lorilleux, as soon as the young engineer came in. "We've been waiting for you for two hours. You've become most infernally difficult of access! But how smart you look! Have you been dining with a prince of the blood? I never saw you so well dressed." As a matter of fact, Pascal had become quite a dandy since his first meeting with Mademoiselle Antoinette.

"Well, one must wear a bit more than Adam's apron," he replied gaily. "When one is on the war-path one ought to try and dress like the conquering hero. So you think I look well in my war-paint?"

"War—conquests?" stammered Lorilleux.

"Nothing else; are you upset because I've been acting on the advice you've been dinning into my ears for ages past? By the way—I've hardly seen you for the last fortnight—have you found your ideal girl yet?"

The doctor felt something terrible was coming. "No, not yet," he answered; "the kind of girl I'm looking for isn't easy to find."

"Yes," said Jean Lantier, "it's like trying to get hold of an eel in a bag of adders."

"You are too particular as well," replied Pascal. "Now, as I was not expecting to get an angel, I've got what I want, by Jove! I think I've got hold of the eel all right, to use Lantier's expression. To cut it short, as you two are my best friends,

I'm telling you first what everybody will soon know: I've made up my mind to get married!"

This news fell on the young engineer's two friends like a thunderbolt.

Lantier sat down heavily in an armchair. Lorilleux stood stock still, stiffer than Lot's wife when she was turned into salt, and whiter than his own medical cravat.

Pascal stared at them in astonishment. "Well," he said, "the news of my marriage doesn't seem to send you into ecstasies. I thought that you would sympathise with my good fortune, and congratulate me."

"You're not joking, then?" said Lantier.

"Joking, indeed! Why, I expect the wedding to take place in three weeks, and I hope you'll be there, old man. Then we'll see about building a nice little house for me, and have our housewarming before the winter."

"I'm completely at your service," said the contractor with a sigh. "I came to see you," he added, "to talk over a bit of business I have in view—or rather had; but there's no hurry, and some other time will do. It's getting late now, and I've chosen rather an awkward time, perhaps."

He nodded to Lorilleux, who looked at him with unseeing eyes, shook hands with Pascal, and went out, his heavy footsteps slowly dying away as he walked down the staircase he had gone up so confidently and joyously two hours ago. Just as he left Pascal disappeared into another room, leaving Lorilleux alone in his office. Then at last the doctor shook off his torpor, only to fall into one of those fits of cold fury which afflict people



of his temperament. It was bile, not blood, that rushed to his head and choked and blinded him. With one single sentence, Pascal had upset the castle in the air on which he had spent his life, and he was buried beneath its ruins. "Everything is gone, and all hope as well," were the words which rang in his ears, and his rage increased; he felt he could commit any crime. How he hated this man, his friend of yesterday! In a few minutes his hatred had risen to a really awful pitch.

"The wretch," he growled between his clenched teeth, "the cur, to play our friendship false like this. I'll make him pay for what I'm feeling now. If I wrecked his life it would not even be fair compensation for this—" and he walked up and down the office with the feverish restlessness of a madman, haggard-eyed and fiercer than a tiger pacing to and fro in its den, and beat his clenched fists on the walls. He could have stabbed Pascal with the greatest pleasure, had it not been that his mind was set on plotting a more subtle stroke of vengeance.

But he had reached the limit of his endurance; after only a minute of this blind fury he sank down into a chair. His anger burnt as hotly as ever—he was just the sort of man to keep it glowing for years—but little by little he recovered his self-possession. His drawn face regained its usual impassivity, and he began to collect his thoughts, unconsciously crumpling in his hand some papers which lay before him on a table.

All at once the signature of a letter caught his eye; it was the key to the puzzle of Pascal's recent conduct. "A letter from M. de Saint-Roch,"



said he to himself, and he read the communication which the marriage-broker had written to advise his client that a friend of his was going to call on him. The date, fitting in as it did with Pascal's disappearance, told Lorilleux more than the most elaborate and long-winded explanation could have done. "There's no doubt about it," he thought, "it's this Mademoiselle Gerbeau that he's marrying! If I want any further confirmation of the idea, Pascal himself will give it me directly. Fancy getting married by the aid of that Saint-Roch fellow! What a horrible idea! But there's hope still," he murmured after a moment's reflection. "I'll parry this blow yet, sharp and sudden as it has been."

Yielding to a sudden inspiration, which caused his pale face to brighten for an instant, he took a pen and began to write. Just then Pascal called from the next room, "Aren't you coming in here where it's warm, doctor? It's devilish cold there in my office, and we shall be able to talk much more comfortably here, so come in and bring the cigars with you."

"I'm coming directly," called the doctor in reply. "Just let me finish this letter I'm writing."

As a matter of fact he wrote two letters. One ran:

"DEAR M. DIVORNE,—

"If you want to avert a hopeless disaster, come here without a moment's delay. Your son has fallen into the hands of a rascally marriage-broker whose name perhaps you know—M. de Saint-Roch. This man is trying to get him to marry into the sort of family all decent people fight shy of, and work off on him the sort of

girl that always goes begging. Pascal is in love, and, of course, blind. He keeps away even from his best friends, and has done so for some time. Besides, nothing they said would have any effect on him—you know how obstinate he is. Only you can save this misguided young man from disgrace and despair.

“ A FRIEND.

“ P.S.—Perhaps it would be just as well not to show Pascal this letter. But come, and come at once.”

The other note, which was to M. Gerbeau, was worded as follows :

“ MY DEAR FRIEND,—

“ I have the honour sincerely to congratulate you ; you are indeed a good father and free from any strait-laced fads ! You are going to marry your daughter to a man who was introduced to you by that rascally matrimonial agent, M. de Saint-Roch ! Your Antoinette has a happy life before her, and you ought to be proud of a son-in-law who has made a big fortune by shady speculations, always supposing he really has got any money, about which I have my doubts. You will feel still more elated when you know why M. Pascal Divorne had to leave the School of Civil Engineering under a cloud. He'll tell you, if you ask him. So come on, old boy, scrape your cash together for the dowry.

“ As it's possible that you may not believe me, I am enclosing as evidence an autograph letter from the great Saint-Roch.

“ Heartiest congratulations, old pal. When is the wedding coming off ? ”

 In this second letter Lorilleux carefully enclosed

M. de Saint-Roch's note. Then he fastened up his two anonymous communications, put the address on the first, and joined Pascal with the idea of finding out from him what address ought to go on the second one. He was now as happy as a man who has just seen a tile smash on the pavement after only missing his head by a couple of feet.

"Well," he said to Pascal, "now we are alone together, perhaps you'll tell me about your romance, you old dissembler."

The young engineer asked for nothing better than a chance to talk about his Antoinette, and discoursed at length on that subject as only a lover can. He took good care, however, not to mention the ambassador and his colleague the Chevalier. All he said was that an acquaintance of his had recommended him to an ex-manufacturer who wanted to consult an architect. He had had the luck to save the good man from ruining himself, and so become intimate with him; thus he had met the girl, asked to be allowed to pay his addresses to her, and got permission, and that was the whole story.

"You've forgotten to mention this worthy gentleman's name," said the doctor.

"His name's Gerbeau."

"I was right, then," thought Lorilleux. Aloud he said, "Where does your charmer's father live?"

"At number five, Rue Pavée," replied Pascal innocently.

"What! you're marrying a girl out of the Marais, that lower-middle-class hole!"

"My dear man, the Marais, after the Faubourg



St. Germain, is the best district to pick up an heiress in—don't you make any mistake. Besides, it's one of those few out-of-the-way parts of Paris where you can still get a house fit to live in, with proper rooms and staircases that two people can go up abreast."

"Well, you're a lucky dog," said the doctor, "but I've stupidly forgotten to put something in that letter I've just scribbled off."

So he went back into Pascal's office again and wrote, in a disguised hand, as he had done all along, the following address on his second anonymous letter:

"To Monsieur Gerbeau, Manufacturer,  
" 5, Rue Pavée,  
" Marais,  
" Paris."

When he had finished, he came and said to Pascal, "Good-bye, I leave you to your blissful thoughts of the fair Antoinette. I'm going to post my letters and then go home and try to dream that I've found an Antoinette of my own."

Lorilleux certainly did not feel any remorse for the contemptible treachery to which he was stooping. In his eyes, Pascal's conduct, and the trouble it was causing himself, would have justified a great deal more of such perfidy. But the blow which had fallen on him was still too recent not to have left its traces. In spite of his self-control, his face, pale enough in the ordinary way, was now quite livid, and the drops of sweat on his temples showed how severe was the task of restraining his feelings, while his hand shook even as it returned his friend's honest clasp.

 "There's something very queer about you to-



night," said Pascal, looking hard at him. "Has anything gone wrong, or are you feeling ill?"

"There's really nothing the matter," said Lorilleux, "I've never felt better in my life;" and he lost no time in taking his departure, for he felt he needed badly to be alone, and the two anonymous letters were fairly burning a hole in his pocket. But when he got to the post-office, he reflected.

"If I post the letter to M. Gerbeau to-night," he told himself, "no doubt he'll show Pascal the door all right, but very likely Pascal will find out some way of having an explanation, and a reconciliation may come about after all. If, on the other hand, I wait till M. Divorne has time to get here, the paternal fury of these two worthy gentlemen will result in such a storm that the marriage will be broken off for good and all. It'll take four days altogether for this letter to get to M. Divorne and for him to get here, so I'll wait four days before throwing my firebrand into M. Gerbeau's premises."

And Lorilleux went to bed, as proud as Titus when he could say he had not wasted the day.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BOMB EXPLODES

**I**T was eight o'clock in the morning, and Pascal, who had risen with the dawn—that is to say, he had been up for a quarter of an hour—was going round his flat, rule in hand.

“Well,” said he, as he took various measurements, “we certainly shan’t be able to live here; the place is far too small. If I were to put up the party walls again and restore the old seven rooms, it wouldn’t make the place any bigger, though I know that isn’t what my landlord thinks. I’ll have to go somewhere else, and that’s a pity, for I shall miss the greenery in the square a great deal. Certainly there will be some compensation in also losing the view of the roof of the Lyric Theatre, which looks just like a gigantic trunk that has lost its handles.”

Here Pascal’s soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of M. Divorne.

“Why, father!” he cried, dropping his rule in his astonishment.

“Yes, it is I,” replied the attorney, “but just one word first of all; is it true that you are getting married?”

“I wrote and told you so myself.”

“And that the match was arranged by a trafficker in heiresses?”

Now Pascal had taken particular care not to say a word about M. de Saint-Roch in his letter,

so he was very much astonished, and still more upset, to find the attorney knew about him; but he never thought of telling a lie about it, knowing he could safely confide in his father. So he said:

"That's true, too."

"What a piece of folly!"

"You might give me a chance to tell you how it came about. It began as a joke which turned to earnest, and the result will be to make me happy for life."

Pascal's story was long in the telling, because he went into the minutest details.

M. Divorne listened with the same patient attention that he gives to his clients when they are detailing the facts of a case. But when it was finished he said:

"My poor boy, can't you see you have been trapped, and have been deceived by some very clever acting?"

"But, father, I really think that chance——"

"And you don't mind taking chances, eh? But bear in mind that people of this sort don't make their snares of white thread; if they weren't cleverer than that, they'd never catch anyone. I don't mind admitting that their trap was cleverly set and might have caught an older bird than you. But for all that they can't take in an experienced old lawyer like me, I give you my word!"

The attorney's words roused the viper's brood of suspicions in Pascal's heart, but he tried to stand up for the Gerbeau family nevertheless.

"Now look here," his father interrupted him, "what do you really know about these people? Who has given you any information about them

or vouched for them in any way? All the information you have has come from a couple of tricksters who have joined forces to coax you into their trap, that is to say, to get you to marry into a discredited and bankrupt family."

"How do you know they're bankrupt?"

"You've just told me yourself that if you had not come to his assistance M. Gerbeau would have been ruined by a building speculation, if he were not ruined already. Are you sure that was the only disastrous speculation he was involved in? He may have had many of the same sort."

"Well, if it is only a matter of money, I've got enough for us both."

"Have it your own way, then; suppose, for the sake of argument, I admit he is really a rich man; does that make him respectable? Good heavens! I know plenty of millionaires who are absolute rogues. But from the way in which these people have behaved, I feel I can say with the greatest confidence that you ought to break off your engagement."

Pascal had nothing to say; at his father's words, the scales seemed to be falling from his eyes. Perhaps he had been acting very rashly, after all!

"Now listen to me, my boy," said the attorney, "let's use our common sense a bit. When an honourable man wants to find a husband for his daughter, does he go to this Monsieur—what does the astute gentleman call himself?"

"De Saint-Roch."

"Let it go at that. If you had a daughter, is that the way in which you would try to get her married? Of course not! That consideration alone ought to have opened your eyes. And then,



look you, you made the acquaintance of the family quite unceremoniously, without reference or introduction except the word of an associate, for all that might be worth. You get into the house like a beggar into a church, and without more ado you are allowed to pay your addresses to the daughter. Now can't you see, people who will permit that——"

"But, father, they are received by people of really good social standing. It was at a ball given by an ex-magistrate——"

"So you believe in this ex-magistrate, the gentleman whose house is always open to your friend the knight of the road! My poor boy! The ball you danced at was got up for your benefit and the other dancers were hired for that evening only!"

"Oh! come now, father! I flatter myself I can read faces a bit."

"My dear fellow, you've only got to pay enough and you can hire plenty of people whose faces will never give them away! But do you want me to agree with you on all these points? All right, then; I'll allow that the family is rich and of the highest position; then it's the daughter who——"

"For heaven's sake, father," said Pascal, deeply hurt, "don't talk like that about her, so lovely and innocent as she is! Oh, if you had only met her, the sight of her sweet face and clear eyes would be enough to convince you that your suspicions were unjust."

M. Divorne shrugged his shoulders. "You're thirty years old," said he, "and yet you can talk like that. Why, my boy, by the time I was eighteen, I knew exactly how much these airs of

innocence were worth. You are still under the delusion that a pair of lovely eyes with a look of shy gentleness are the outward expression of the innocent soul within! But when a woman is bent on deceit, her eyes will give no more idea of what is in her heart than the smooth glassy surface of a lake gives of the mud and rubbish at the bottom of its clear waters."

"But I love her!" cried Pascal, moved almost to tears. "I love her!"

"Alas," my poor boy, said M. Divorne, "I fear your love is hopeless. But before making any decision, one ought to look round and make inquiries, and that's what I'm going to do to-day, that is to say, as soon as you've given me something to eat, for I'm absolutely starving."

While they had breakfast, M. Divorne did his best to console his son.

"Come now," he said, "don't take it to heart so, we'll find you another girl, if you can't marry this one. Your mother had already looked one out for you, and while I am about it, I may as well tell you that the news of your marriage grieved your mother very much indeed; in fact, she cried when she heard of it. If you had only consulted her, all this trouble would never have come to pass. You would have come to Lannion, and seen the girl she had chosen for you, and you would have loved her instead. But there's no harm done, you'll love her yet, if this marriage you've planned falls through."

"I could never love any girl but Antoinette," sighed poor Pascal.

"Really," said the attorney, nodding gravely, "is it as bad as all that? Well, we mustn't keep

you in suspense any longer ; you'll know for certain this very evening. Get a cab called for me, and give me the addresses of the girl's father and of the precious pair of confederates. By the way, do you happen to know any of the friends of this Gerbeau family, or their enemies—I don't care which ? ”

“ I don't even know any of their relatives.”

“ You are a perfect masterpiece, upon my word. But it would help us a lot if you did. Come, think a bit, try and refresh your memory.”

“ It's no use my thinking, I can't recall anybody at all, except perhaps their notary.”

“ Their notary ? You knew him and didn't mention it to me, and you didn't consult him ? My dear fellow, when a marriage is being arranged, the notaries are the fountain-heads of information, and they're the only people one goes to—that's what they're there for. What's his name ?—quick ! ”

“ Maître Bertaud.”

“ Bertaud ! I don't know the name, but that doesn't make much difference ; it's his position that matters. That makes him a friend of mine at once, or ought to ; all government officials are my friends—we all practically belong to the same fraternity. I'll go and call on him first. Well, I'm off now. Don't worry yourself.”

It is very certain that if M. Divorne had thought that he would find the Gerbeau family's credentials were even tolerable, let alone highly satisfactory, he would not have investigated them, but simply refused his consent unconditionally, and then taken advantage of the shock this would have given Pascal to make him promise to give up this matri-



monial idea of his. But what he was expecting was to hear some queer stories about parents like these, who could put their daughter up for auction at a marriage-broker's; he was quite ready for grievous revelations and curious secrets, and promised himself the pleasure of listening to such things even as he got into the cab, the more so as when he left Lannion he had faithfully promised his wife to break off this marriage.

The revelations he expected would do that for him, and he would not have to use either diplomacy or authority. The result would be that Pascal not only would have no grievance against him, but would even be grateful to him for meeting him half-way, and for not pressing the breaking off of the marriage before taking proceedings which showed such an extreme measure to be really necessary. He was still occupied with these reflections as he went up Maître Bertaud's staircase.

Meanwhile Pascal, left alone with his reflections, was feeling far from happy. Had he really been the victim of a conspiracy? It is true that appearances were in favour of the old attorney's view, but then appearances are proverbially deceptive. But how and why did Mademoiselle Gerbeau's name get into M. de Saint-Roch's register of heiresses? There must be something in that which wanted clearing up. How bitterly he regretted having gone so far in a game of blind-man's-buff as he had done! Experience and reason kept telling him that his father was right. But his lover's heart insisted on pleading the cause of Antoinette.

The sound of an angry altercation in the hall broke off his reflections, and almost immediately



the Chevalier de Jeufilas entered, or rather burst in, in flat defiance of the strict orders Pascal had given to his man to admit nobody.

Pascal's first thoughts were not of the best. They impelled him to fall on the Chevalier's neck, not to embrace, but to throttle him. Fortunately he restrained himself, and his wrath quite subsided as soon as he had taken a longer look at M. de Saint-Roch's friend and agent.

Poor M. de Jeufilas! He seemed to have aged by ten years in a single night. Grief had marked his temples with deep wrinkles. He had lost his upright carriage, and walked with a stoop, his head shaking as with palsy. His appearance had lost its exquisite correctness, his cravat was rumpled, his shoes mud-splashed, and the artistic, natural parting of his few remaining locks of hair had been quite spoilt. It was evident that he, too, had had a terrible shock, and he seemed quite as miserable as his young friend. Anyone could see he was badly upset; his countenance was dejected and his voice shook, but his lisp still clung to him.

"Ah!" said he in a heartbroken voice, "it's all up. But you look so depressed that I see you know all about it." And the Chevalier, quite overcome, sat down, or rather collapsed, in an armchair.

"Yes," replied Pascal, "my father's arrived—"

"It's not a question only of your father. Didn't you get M. Gerbeau's letter?"

"Some letters have come this morning," said Pascal, "but I haven't opened them yet. They're all there on the mantelpiece."

The Chevalier dragged himself from his chair,

took his young friend's correspondence, and began to look through the letters, newspapers, and circulars that had come by the morning's post.

"Here's Gerbeau's letter," he said presently, "I know the writing. May I——?" and without waiting for Pascal's consent, he tore open the envelope, and quickly glanced through the letter, saying as soon as he had done so, "There's no hope at all; I know Gerbeau thoroughly; he'd die sooner than admit himself in the wrong. Here," he added, handing the letter to the young man, "read it—but for goodness' sake, don't lose your temper over it."

The caution was certainly not unnecessary. M. Gerbeau had penned his epistle in a towering rage, and had not minced matters. He said:

"You need not trouble to call at my house again, sir; no one will be at home to you there henceforth. Everything has come out; I have been told of the crafty manœuvres you used to worm your way into my confidence. I know also who were the disgusting accomplices who tricked me into allowing you in my house, and I am equally well informed as to your expulsion from the Civil Engineering School. What I regret most bitterly is being under an obligation to you. Put any price you like on your services, even to half my property, but never more dare to aspire to my daughter's hand."

Pascal read this abusive letter very slowly and carefully. He could not make much out of it, it is true; but its meaning worried him very little. What did puzzle him was what could have induced M. Gerbeau to write it.

"Is this a put-up game?" said he to himself,

"and if so, what's the idea? Very likely to work up the quarrel in anticipation, so as to forestall the inquiries my father is making. But how could they know he was coming?"

He could not think of any satisfactory answers to these questions, and at last laid the letter calmly on the table, an action which much astonished M. de Jeufas, who was watching him and expected to see him fly into a rage.

"Well!" he asked, "what do you think of it?"

"I don't know what to think. M. Gerbeau must have lost his senses. He writes to me in this abusive way, and I'm hanged if I can understand why."

"What, don't you see what he is driving at?"

"I beg your pardon; I can see all right that he's changed his mind about letting me marry his daughter, but that's all I can understand. He didn't mind bringing in M. de Saint-Roch to advertise her to me."

"But, my good sir, the reason why he's turned round on you is because he knows now Saint-Roch was in the business."

"That's too much of a good thing!" replied Pascal. "Do you think I'm going to believe that M. Gerbeau didn't know his daughter's name was in your friend's register, 'with confirmatory evidence,' to use his expression?"

"On my honour, he did not."

"Well, then, I'm at a loss altogether."

"The explanation is quite simple, though. When Saint-Roch engineers a marriage, one of the parties generally has no idea that he has anything to do with it. Did you think he was personally acquainted



with all the people he brings together? Not a bit of it. He's got his agents and collaborators, who work for him, get him all the information he wants, and——"

"Share the percentage he gets; a most admirable arrangement! And so, Chevalier, you're one of those collaborators—nice word that—are you not?"

M. de Jeufas could not help blushing under Pascal's sardonic gaze. For an instant words failed him in his embarrassment. Then he plucked up enough courage to reply:

"Well, yes, I am one of Saint-Roch's agents, I must confess. You see, one's got to live, and I've seen worse trades than mine. As for the disgrace, if disgrace there is, I'm in good company; more than one man of high position and well-decorated, and plenty of pious, honourable, and highly respectable old ladies. Ah, Saint-Roch can boast of more than one agent whom no one would ever suspect of doing such work, or have any idea of distrusting. But, after all, where's the harm if one acts honourably?"

"Very honourably," said Pascal sarcastically.

"I mean what I say, sir, and so I can explain to you quite candidly how Saint-Roch runs his business. He's got his agents, as I said; I'm one. I draw up a list of all the eligible girls I can think of in my set, in fact in my friends' families, and I get together what information I can about their fortunes and their characters. I do the same by the young men, and I pass on all the information to Saint-Roch. His other co-operators go to work in the same way. He re-copies our lists in cypher in his register, and then he is in a position to offer eligible partners of either sex, quite without their



own knowledge. That was what happened in the case of Mademoiselle Gerbeau. Sometimes even a marriage is arranged without anyone having applied direct to Saint-Roch at all, and that's where his cleverness comes in ; everything is done by the agents, whom he brings together for the purpose."

Although Pascal still looked downcast, he was now glad at heart, and could have hugged the Chevalier, whom he trusted implicitly ; that gentleman's afflicted countenance and tone were too obviously genuine to be mere acting. Hope began to spring up again in the young man's breast.

"So, then," he told himself, "I shall not lose Antoinette after all."

"Now there's another question," he said aloud. "How did M. Gerbeau get this information?"

"I ought to have told you that at first ; by an anonymous letter——"

"Oh!"

"Yes, an anonymous letter, and what's more, one which must have been written by some friend of yours."

"Sir," said Pascal, "my friends are men of honour."

"Well, it was from someone who visits you here, for to the letter was attached the note in which Saint-Roch told you I was calling on you."

"Impossible!" cried the young man, and, rushing to his desk, he tried to find the momentous note ; but in vain he rummaged in the drawers, turned the cases inside out, and shook all the papers one by one. No note was to be found, and he came and sat down much disheartened.

"An anonymous letter!" said he. "It's in-

credible! But, still, when I come to think, who told my father about it?"

"Ah," replied the Chevalier, "you have a very treacherous enemy somewhere."

"I'll find him out all right. I wish I could only look at the letter he wrote to M. Gerbeau for five minutes."

"Go and ask M. Gerbeau for it if you like," said M. de Jeufilas despondently; "I admit I don't feel up to that myself. He behaved in a most unbecoming manner to me this morning—pretty nearly kicked me out."

"But how on earth does a man of your position come to be in the pay of a marriage-broker?"

"Poverty, sir. I used to be well off, and now I'm poor. Can I work for my living in an ordinary way at my age? Besides, what is there I can do?"

"And I am sorry for you, too. Yours is a sad case."

"It would be unfair to abuse me, anyhow. This Gerbeau business spells ruin for me. If it gets out, away go my honour, credit, and position, and no one will ever receive me again."

Pascal was moved with pity for the unhappy gentleman. "Whatever happens," he said to him, "I assure you, you can count on my silence."

"But can I count on Gerbeau's? This morning he turned me out—me, the Chevalier de Jeufilas—the shame of it! And by this time, no doubt, he's told a score of people about it."

"I may be wrong," said Pascal, "but it seems to me that M. Gerbeau will keep his mouth shut for his daughter's sake, if for no other reason. You're worrying yourself for nothing."

Unfortunately nothing Pascal could say could

cheer up the unhappy collaborator. He was wounded to the heart, and a mere shadow of his old self. When he withdrew, he shook the young man's hand affectionately as he gave him a final bit of advice. "You have a very dangerous enemy," said he, "and you should be on your guard." But the advice was quite unnecessary; Pascal, stung to the quick by the outrage to his love, was firmly resolved to hunt out the wretch who had thus played the traitor. It was quite possible that M. Gerbeau would refuse to reconsider his decision, and then his own life would be spoilt; so he determined on revenge.



## CHAPTER IX

### A SACRILEGIOUS VISITOR

**M** DE SAINT-ROCH sat at his desk, facing the portentous array of green cases which held such weighty secrets and his registers written in cryptic cypher. His eyes were aglow with the fire of inspiration as he pursued his labours in the cause of humanity, for he was getting up a prospectus, one of those striking advertisements of his which sometimes afford light reading even in the *Ami de la Religion*, when they adorn its back page. It was a stiff job, fairly bristling with difficulties; the paper he wrote on was covered with erasures and corrections, for this advertisement formed part of the business aspect of the great Ambassador's mission. He has to pay heavily for every line, and the proprietor of an advertising medium is niggardly of his space, so it is absolutely necessary to say a great deal in a few words, and our propagandist-pioneer was trying to say it. The present prospectus, which sounded a clarion call to all unwedded hearts, was addressed especially to family men.

"Wise fathers," he wrote, "I am the guardian of family honour. It is I, Saint-Roch—head of the only and original firm—who invented marriage forty years ago. My establishment is the ante-chamber of the mayor's office, and my goodwill practically amounts to marriage itself. If you have any difficulty in getting your daughters off,



put them in my hands, and I will see them comfortably settled. Write to me in a legible hand ; I have just received a fine assortment of princes of the blood, all desirous of marriage, and all of the finest quality. Family men, you will live to bless me, Saint-Roch, for——”

Just then six rings at the bell made him start. “ Ah ! ” said he, “ that’ll be a client in the pearl-grey parlour,” and he promptly poked his prospectus into a drawer, opened a wardrobe, and took out a cornflower-blue coat just like the one he was wearing, except that this second one was quite new, and the other very shabby. He put on the new coat, and looked in the glass to see if he were as smart as a marriage-broker ought to be. He pulled down his lace cuffs, adjusted his shirt-frill, arranged his cataract of watch-chains becomingly, rubbed the stones in his rings till they shone again, and gave a smarter set to his curled wig with an affected jerk of his head.

Then he bestowed on his reflection a last ingratiating smirk and proceeded to the pearl-grey parlour, where no doubt “ custom ” was eagerly awaiting him. As he entered, with his usual courtly and affable manner, he favoured his new client with a gracious bow, three times repeated, as prescribed by the best professors of deportment, with heels in line, toes out, body slightly bent, elbow drawn back, hand on heart.

Just as he had got through the second bow and was beginning the third, his client, with no consideration whatever for his frill, clutched him by the throat, and roared out “ Scoundrel ! ” Frightened out of his wits, he sprang aside, and

tried to put the table between himself and this very unceremonious caller. In carrying out this swift strategic movement to the rear, he bumped against the table and upset half-a-dozen votive offerings in porcelain, which fell down and smashed with a frightful crash.

"This must be somebody I've just married off who's sick of his bargain already," thought the ambassador; "that's all right, I know that sort." It was no newly-married client, however, but none other than M. Gerbeau. Lorilleux's anonymous letter to him was doing its work; he was more like a tiger broken loose than the worthy and dignified ex-manufacturer the world knew, for the knowledge that his daughter's name was in M. de Saint-Roch's register had sent him pretty nearly crazy. He had vowed to give the ambassador a good thrashing, and had called for that express purpose. However, the inventor of marriage, ensconced behind the table, had now pulled himself together a bit. "I warn you," said he, "that if you persist in this violent conduct, I will call my servants. So now, if you have anything to say to me, you can say it, but in a reasonable way. Who are you, and what——?"

"I'll tell you who I am, you rogue," replied the ex-manufacturer. "I'm an outraged father whose daughter's good name you've nearly succeeded in dragging through the mud, you infernal quack! My name's Gerbeau, you beastly higgler, and you've tried to foist on me a son-in-law with a tarnished reputation, a fellow called Pascal Divorne, who's been kicked out of the School of Civil Engineering."

"Shut up!" cried M. de Saint-Roch. "Don't

you dare to insult a young man whose little finger is worth more than your whole carcass ! ”

“ You’d insult me, would you, you villain ! ” returned M. Gerbeau. “ Just wait till I get hold of you ! ” and he rushed round the table to seize the marriage-broker. But M. de Saint-Roch was too quick for him, and the chase and the dispute went on.

“ Who told you to meddle with my daughter’s affairs ? ”

“ I’m not accountable to anyone.”

“ I’ll have the law on you.”

“ I don’t care, I’ve got decisions upholding the respectability of my honourable profession.”

Presently they came to a standstill, fairly tired out and quite out of breath. But good heavens ! what havoc the chase had made in M. de Saint-Roch’s elaborate attire ! His gold watch-chain hung in a tangle, his frill was a mere dangling rag, one of his cuffs was half torn off, and his beautiful fair wig was all askew on his head !

Our noble ambassador had not lost his gift of eloquence, and he did his best to soothe the ferocity of M. Gerbeau therewith.

“ You talk of prosecuting me, sir,” he cried, “ but surely it is I who should prosecute you for your unseemly violence. You have insulted the noblest profession on earth ; you are casting aspersions on my inspired mission.”

“ Blackguard ! ” hissed M. Gerbeau between his clenched teeth.

“ You are not the first who has tried to slander me to the public and posterity, but the law has vindicated my innocence. Do you know the judgments that have been given in my favour ? ”



"I don't care a fig for them!"

"Have you read my counsels' speeches?"

"A fat lot I care for them!"

"Well, I can show you counsel's opinion; I've had it printed."

M. Gerbeau began to feel a bit ashamed of his exhibition of temper.

"That has got nothing to do with it," said he savagely. "What I can't stand is your infernal impudence in dragging my daughter's name into your filthy business. I won't go away from here till I've torn up the page in your register where it's written, and I forbid you ever to meddle with her affairs again. You'll have to promise me that, and, what's more, give me some security that you'll keep your word."

"Very good," replied the ambassador; "be so kind as to come with me into my office, sir, and we'll have a full explanation."

As the explanation had begun with so much animation, it naturally took a long time—indeed, was pretty nearly interminable. For all that, the ambassador rose nobly to the occasion; never had he spoken so feelingly and touchingly. Quite oblivious of his disordered appearance, which at any other time would have ruined his self-confidence and paralysed his eloquence, he kept on putting up arguments, not to exonerate but to justify himself. He was hoping against hope still to get the marriage arranged; no one knew better than himself that it really was a good match!

First of all he tried to overcome M. Gerbeau's prejudices; to conciliate him he even tore apart the veil of mystery which hid his operations from the public gaze, and exposed all the ingenious



machinery of the business. Then he extolled the nobility of his vocation and the benefits of his benevolent intervention in matrimony. "Isn't this profession of mine," said he, "one of the splendid developments of our present-day civilisation, just as much as gas-lamps, ready-made clothes, omnibuses, and telegraphs?"

But he was at his best when he came to Pascal, and expatiated on all the fine qualities of this young engineer, so rich and yet so steady, a regular phoenix of a son-in-law. He even let himself be so carried away by his subject as to forget his promise of secrecy, and to clear Pascal of the cruel charge of having been expelled from the Civil Engineering School, he disclosed the real reason why he had resigned.

But his eloquence was all wasted. M. Gerbeau was as cold as marble, and all he did was to remind the ambassador every now and then what he had really called on him for, and in no uncertain tones either. At last, seeing that M. de Saint-Roch seemed to be likely to go on for ever, he said:

"You can cut the rest of the cackle; I don't believe a word you say—I beg your pardon, I do believe that you have a deep personal interest in M. Divorne's marriage."

"Well, sir, if it comes to that, notaries have an interest in getting their clients married."

"Yes, but they're government officials. You can trust them; their honesty and discretion are——"

Here the ambassador thought he saw a chance to make a telling point.

"Their discretion," he cried, "ah, I can see, sir, that you don't realise what mine is, although

I've spent more than a hundred thousand francs in advertising it to everybody. A secret is safer with me than your money with the Bank of France. My premises here are the world's confessional, and the sepulchre of everyone's secrets. None of the confidences made to me will ever be disclosed ; even death will never make me betray them. When I die, everything, my records, registers, and notes, will follow me to the grave ; I have never trained an understudy. You can look in these registers of mine if you like. Just cast an eye over this inventory of all the heiresses on earth ; you'll not be able to make anything out, because you see it's all in cypher, and I alone have the key."

Here the distant ringing of a bell abruptly checked the flow of the broker's eloquence ; he listened intently till he heard the fifth ring, and muttered : " Deuce take whoever's come bothering me just now ! There's somebody in the sky-blue parlour." Immediately after a servant opened one of the office doors and beckoned to M. de Saint-Roch, who went towards him, saying to M. Gerbeau, " Please excuse me a moment."

" Sir," whispered the servant, " there's a gentleman in the blue parlour."

" I know that, I heard the bell. What did you come and disturb me for ? "

" Monsieur should know that the gentleman seems in an awful temper. He won't wait, and looks like smashing the place up."

" The deuce ! What sort of a man is he ? "

" A tall gentleman with gold-rimmed spectacles, rather elderly, well-dressed, but looks as if he came from the country ; here's his card."

M. de Saint-Roch took the card, glanced at it, and uttered a joyful exclamation as he read :

PIERRE DIVORNE,

Attorney-at-law.

"Pascal's father," he thought. "This is really providential"; and, with one of those sudden flashes of genius which win their battles for great generals, he brushed past the servant and darted down the passage, leaving his visitor alone with his astonishment.

M. Divorne, senior, had just left Maître Bertaud's office, where the notary had given him such unexpected information, with equally unexpected references, about Antoinette's family, that he bitterly regretted having promised his wife to break off the marriage. But he stuck to his word, and resolved more strongly than ever to refuse his consent to it. He had only called on the marriage-broker to vent his anger on him by giving him a piece of his mind.

Naturally, when M. de Saint-Roch burst in, he did not receive him very cordially. However, the ambassador did not waste his breath in replying to him, but seized his arm and almost pushed him out of the room, saying :

"Come into my office, come into my office," and as soon as he had got him there—"Sir," this to his first visitor—"I have the honour to introduce you to M. Pierre Divorne, solicitor to the court at Lannion, and M. Pascal's father." Then, turning to the attorney, he said, "I beg to introduce you to M. Gerbeau, formerly manufacturer at Roubaix, and the father of Mademoiselle Antoinette."

The two gentlemen bowed stiffly to each other,



while M. de Saint-Roch took his seat at the desk with the air of a perfectly disinterested spectator. For awhile the attorney and the manufacturer found nothing to say to each other; then they both began to speak at once, each trying to shout the other down.

M. Gerbeau, who had not investigated the matter for himself and still persisted in thinking he was being imposed upon, was naturally in the worse temper; he talked much louder than the lawyer, and kept on saying:

"I won't listen to you, and I won't have your son marry my daughter at any price."

Presently this unmerited slight on his son began to exasperate M. Divorne in his turn.

"Come on, then, let's go to Maître Bertaud and thrash the whole thing out," he suggested.

"Very well," said M. Gerbeau.

They went out by the front way, without caring whether they met anyone, and without taking any further notice of M. de Saint-Roch. That worthy was not in the least upset by this want of courtesy; in fact, he rubbed his hands with glee.

"They've gone off to the notary's," he told himself; "that's a good sign. Well, it's been a bit unpleasant, but it'll be all right now; that means ten thousand francs at least. Jeufilas must have three thousand out of it, which leaves seven thousand clear profit for me."

He sat down again at his desk and went on with his advertisement, closing it as follows:

"M. de Saint-Roch's proudest boast is that he acts without thought of self. Universal morality is his aim, the encouragement of marriage



is his method, and 'secrecy and disinterestedness' is his watchword."

Our astute friend was not mistaken in his anticipations; at the notary's office the whole tangle was straightened out. Maître Bertaud well knew how to give a practical application to that beautiful sentiment which was the legacy of a retiring village notary to his successor: "Remember, young man, you're put here as a buffer to deaden the shock of conflicting interests." Most judiciously did he play his part of mediator between M. Gerbeau, who still disliked the idea of giving his daughter to Pascal, and M. Divorne, who was very keen on securing the lady, now that his native obstinacy had been aroused by this implied slight to his beloved son.

At last, thanks to the boundless patience of M. Bertaud, most suave of notaries, everything ended happily, and after only about half-a-day's haggling, the marriage was agreed on and definitely arranged, and the contract all but signed.

Among other conditions, it was stipulated that M. Gerbeau should give his daughter a hundred thousand écus down; this was making him pay at least fifty thousand francs more than he had intended, but M. Divorne and the notary between them had forced his hand. The attorney, in taking up such a firm stand in the matter of the dowry, never dreamed that he was working more in the marriage-broker's interests than in his son's.

Finally, the date of the wedding was fixed, and the two fathers, now the best of friends, left Maître Bertaud's office together. M. Divorne was all impatience to give his son the good news.

The Chevalier's visit had reassured Pascal a

great deal, but he never expected so speedy an escape from his troubles. He nearly collapsed when he saw his father and M. Gerbeau come in, but unexpected good tidings do not cause a very lasting shock. He was soon told all that had happened in the offices of the pioneer-propagandist and the notary, and soon saw that the elder gentlemen were both more surprised than he was.

"Who would ever have thought of this happening?" repeated M. Divorne; and as a matter of fact he would have found some difficulty in explaining how he had all at once forgotten his solemn promise to his wife.

"What will always puzzle me," said M. Gerbeau, "is how our dear boy here could have thought of doing such an extraordinary, unheard-of thing as applying to that Saint-Roch fellow."

"Oh, as to that," replied Pascal, "I give you my word I did the thing just for a harmless bit of fun."

"Marriage is a funny subject for practical jokes," said M. Divorne, seriously; "you've been playing with fire."

"There's another thing," said Pascal. "Who on earth could have dreamed of my good friend the ambassador being in it at all, unless some friend of mine had been officious enough to write to you? The mean hound wanted to play me a dirty trick, though as it turned out he has done me the greatest kindness. But I'd like to know whom I've got to thank for his kind intentions all the same."

"The handwriting may help you," said M. Gerbeau. "Here's the letter he sent me."

"And here's the one I got," said M. Divorne.

The handwriting proved to be too well disguised

to tell Pascal anything. He looked over the letters again and again, racking his brains in the effort to divine what motive the writer could have had, and at last noticed his own initials, a P. and D. in embossed letters at the corner of the two sheets of paper.

"Good Lord!" said he, "these letters were written here in my flat."

"But who wrote them?" cried M. Gerbeau and the attorney together.

"Ah, there you have me," said Pascal, "you see, so many friends of mine come here."

At the same time, the young man thought to himself that Lorilleux and Jean Lantier were the only people who could have got hold of M. de Saint-Roch's note. Then Pascal remembered Lorilleux's unnatural paleness when he had last seen him, and he recalled to mind how that evening the doctor had stayed some little time in his office by himself to write a letter, as he had said. It was clear that he was the culprit.

Such contemptible treachery on the part of his boyhood's friend was a crushing blow to Pascal; treason in friendship is harder to bear than treason in love, since it is more unexpected. However, he took care not to mention the name of the man he had mentally convicted. In spite of his anger at the doctor's treachery, he was still loyal and shrank from holding the name of his old college chum up to scorn; he was ashamed, too, to admit that he had allowed himself to be deceived by false pretences. So when M. Gerbeau, after a long pause, asked him, "Well, can you guess? Have you any clue?" he replied, "No, not even a suspicion."

"You should try to get to the bottom of it," suggested the attorney. "If you don't get the matter cleared up, you'll never be able to trust any of your friends again."

"I'd rather try and forget about such a dirty trick," said Pascal resolutely; and he crumpled up the letters and flung them in a corner, resolving all the same to pick them up presently and keep them to overwhelm the treacherous Lorilleux with well-deserved confusion.

"All right," said M. Gerbeau, "we'll forget all about it, and all about Saint-Roch and his precious satellite Jeuflas into the bargain. Universal amnesty's the word. Well, I'm off home to console my poor girl, who was, I don't mind telling you now, crying her eyes out when I left."

Pascal was hard-hearted enough not to feel altogether distressed that Mademoiselle Antoinette had taken the trouble so much to heart, and no doubt the warmth of the parting embrace he gave his future father-in-law was inspired by gratitude to him for saying so.



## CHAPTER X

### THE DOCTOR CORNERED

**L**IKE a skilled miner who retreats in a hurry as soon as he has lighted the fuse of the mine he has laid, Lorilleux had kept well in the background while he awaited the explosion of his anonymous bombs, and he did not put in an appearance till the day following the very eventful one on which Pascal's marriage was arranged. Artfully concealing his real anxiety, he asked in a chaffing tone, as he sat down in an armchair, "What's the news? I'm worked to death; all my patients seem to have agreed to be ill on the same day. And, by the way, how about your marriage?"

"It's all settled. I'll soon be married to Mademoiselle Gerbeau."

"Ah!" said the doctor, turning pale, "and how about your father?"

"He's been here since yesterday morning."

"He's consented, then?"

"Who's to stop him?"

Lorilleux, very much taken aback, was asking himself whether he had not mixed the addresses of his anonymous letters, when Pascal got up, and without any heat, handed them to him, saying, "Here, old man, these two letters of yours nearly wrecked my marriage; I'd burn them if I were you, for you don't want anyone else to know you've descended to writing them."

The doctor had called on his friend expecting anything but this. He stammered a few words of excuse and tried to deny the charge, but further speech failed him, for he choked with shame and grief. He got up, hid his face in his hands, and made for the door, staggering like a drunken man.

Pascal stopped him, saying: "I can't let our twenty years' friendship end like this; I'll forgive you, Lorilleux."

"Ah," cried the unhappy doctor, bursting into tears, "you're doing a very noble thing, for you don't know what my motive was."

"I don't want to know."

"You'd be doing another generous thing in listening to me; do listen, for pity's sake. This marriage of yours, old man, is the worst buffet fate could deal me. It has ended the dream of my life."

"What—my marriage with Mademoiselle Gerbeau?"

"Yes, because I'd got a wife ready for you myself; my own sister, as a matter of fact. You were the only man I thought good enough for her, and I was hoping to make you both happy. I've been dreaming of bringing off this match for the last fifteen years——"

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me? I might have had three or four children by this time."

"I thought it was best to wait."

"My dear chap, I've told you a dozen times that people who sit and wait till the fruit drops into their mouth won't get much dessert."

"Abuse me as much as you like," groaned the doctor, "but for heaven's sake don't laugh at me."

"I've never been more serious in my life," replied Pascal; "now, just consider the vanity of people's schemes. You wanted me to marry your sister, my mother had picked out an heiress for me, and Lantier was hoping to give me one of his daughters, but you've all been reckoning without your host, for I'm marrying someone I've met quite by accident. You see, old chap, getting married is one of those things one does by impulse."

Lorilleux was too crushed to reply.

"Listen now," said Pascal. "Are you willing for once in your life to do a sensible thing? I want you, here and now, and with your eyes shut, to accept a proposal I'm going to make, which will prove to you I'd forgiven you before you came."

"I'll do anything you like to ask."

"Lantier, as I said, wanted me to marry one of his daughters. It's the eldest one, and the dowry is two hundred thousand francs. I can assure you she's a really nice girl, but Lantier never said anything to me about her till this morning. Now it's too late, and I'm in love with somebody else. Only, as he was very much cut up about it, I thought of another son-in-law for him—yourself. He jumped at the idea; will you agree? Is it a bargain?"

"You might let me have a few days to think it over."

"Not an hour. It must be 'yes' or 'no,' here and now."

Poor Lorilleux, at his wits' end, and half crazy at the idea of having to make up his mind on such an important matter at such short notice, shut his eyes, feeling like a man who has lost his way

and suddenly finds himself on the edge of a precipice. To have to decide on the most important act in one's life in such a hurry was positive torture to a man like him, used to weighing the pros and cons in the veriest trifles.

At last he managed to overcome the habit of a lifetime.

"All right, I agree," he said, adding under his breath, "after all, my sister will be the better off for my marrying a rich wife."

"Then I can tell Lantier it'll be all right?" said Pascal.

"Yes, I've always had rotten luck, but perhaps this idea of yours'll change it."

"My dear chap, if you want good luck, you must keep the door open for it," was the reply.

\* \* \* \* \*

That very evening, to avoid any possible trouble later on, Pascal after much hesitation ventured—against his father's advice and even M. Gerbeau's—to tell Mademoiselle Antoinette the whole story, including the part the marriage-broker and the Chevalier had played in it. In answer his sweetheart simply gave him her hands, as I hope, dear reader, yours will give you hers when you have a great favour to ask her.

However, the Chevalier de Jeufilas was not asked to the wedding, which took place a fortnight later.



## CHAPTER XI

### THE AMBASSADOR IS DISMISSED

**T**HE young couple had been settled for a month in a delightful house in the Champs-Élysées, fitted up with the greatest care by the devoted Jean Lantier, now the father-in-law of Doctor Lorilleux, and M. Divorne and his wife, who were delighted with their daughter-in-law, had gone back to Brittany, when one morning a gentleman called who said he wanted to see Pascal on most important business. He was elaborately dressed for a morning caller; over his cornflower-blue coat he wore a light wadded overcoat lined with white satin, and his gloves were of a delicate straw-colour, while he carried his hat in his hand so as not to upset the exquisite arrangement of his flaxen wig.

The servant who let him in thought at first that the gorgeous stranger must have been to a ball and mistaken the house now he had come home, but as he insisted that he had called on very urgent business, he ventured to show him into his master's office.

"Good-day, my dear client," said M. de Saint-Roch in his most honeyed accents, "I simply could not help intruding on your happiness by this surprise visit; I hope you will pardon the liberty, which is also the only recompense I seek!"

Pascal did not even trouble to offer the ambassador a chair.

"Well, my dear boy," continued the marriage-broker, "don't you feel inclined to bestow your blessing on your friend? I didn't let you down, did I? Old Gerbeau paid up handsomely, eh? Three hundred thousand francs is a tidy sum——"

"I'm very busy this morning," interrupted Pascal. M. de Saint-Roch heaved a deep sigh, murmuring "Ingratitude again! He's soon forgotten whom he has to thank for being a happy Benedict."

"What do you want?"

"Only a very little matter," replied the ambassador. "You know we had a little agreement signed that I should get five per cent. of the dowry. You've got a hundred thousand écus, and that means fifteen thousand francs for me."

"Suppose I won't pay?" said Pascal with a smile.

"You will have your joke," said M. de Saint-Roch, turning pale under his rouge nevertheless. "Fancy begrudging the price of your happiness!"

"But suppose I'm not joking, and I mean to stand out?"

"Then, I regret to say, the matter would have to come before the Courts, and I should certainly win the case. You know I can show cases——"

"That'll do," said Pascal. "Here's your money, you paragon of disinterestedness!"

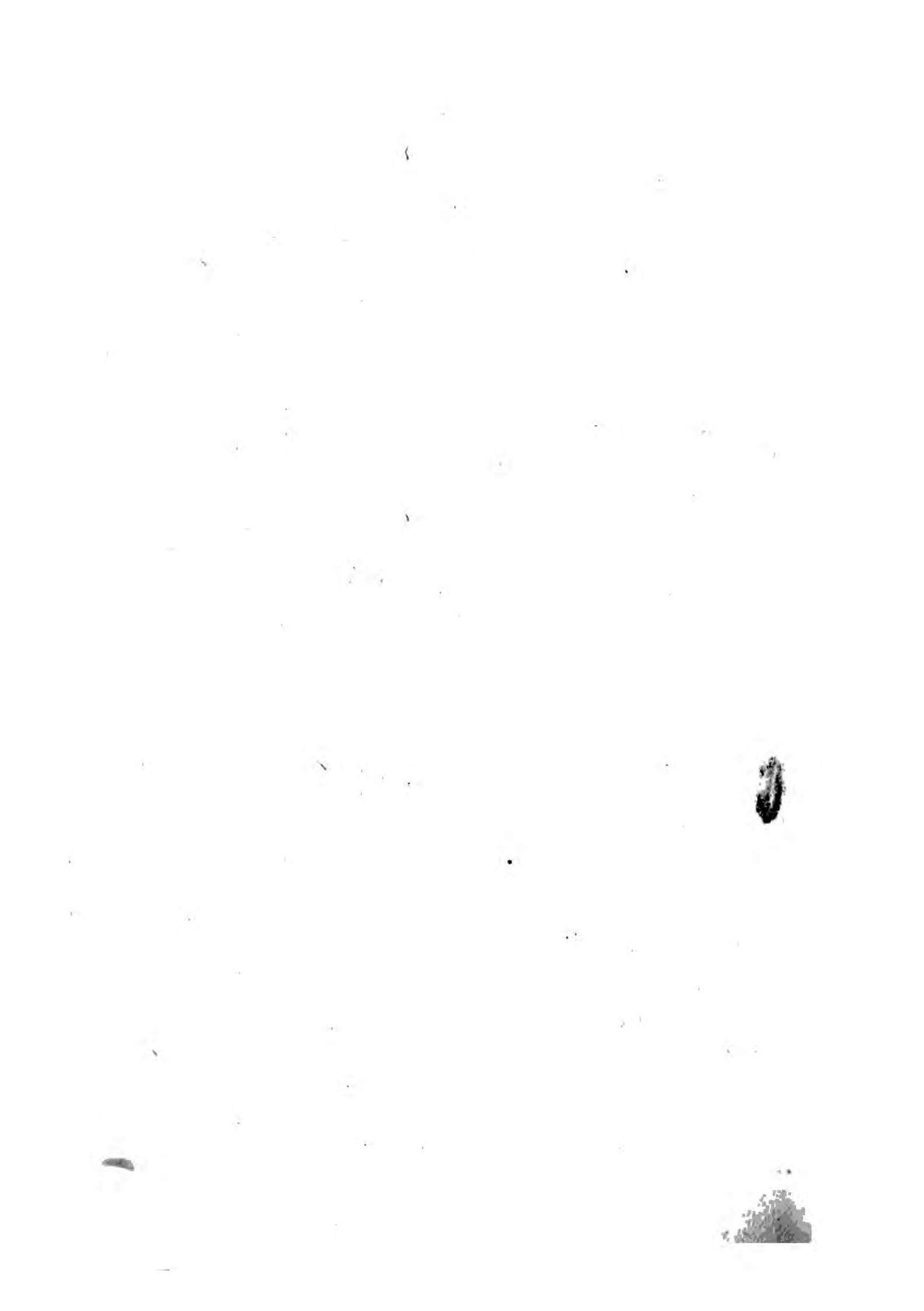
"Ah, my dear boy," cried the great man in a sentimental tone, "I knew I could trust your gratitude. It's a debt of bliss you're discharging." Then, noticing a little paper-weight on the desk, he said, "I'll take this as a souvenir which I shall value more than these bank-notes you've just given me. Do I not feel like your second father, when I look at this pious gift from a lady——"

"Good-bye, M. de Saint-Roch," said Pascal, fairly pushing his "second father" towards the door. But Hymen's caricature stopped on the threshold for a last whispered word:

"Dear boy," he said, "if ever—which heaven forbid—you should have the misfortune to lose your dear wife—remember what I did for you and don't forget to honour me with your patronage again."

BOOKED IN ADVANCE





# BOOKED IN ADVANCE

## CHAPTER I

### A LOCAL LION

**E**VERYBODY said—even his friends, and friends are always so impartial—that Hector Malestrat was the Triton among the minnows in Bordeaux, and that he deserved the position.

In 1859, when this story opens, he was a very good-looking fellow, though a bit foppish, perhaps, and rather inclined to put on side and not by any means to under-value himself. He was twenty-nine, pleasant to look at, well-off, and fortunate in his tailor. His town-house in Bordeaux was the talk of the place, his horses and carriages were admired by all, and his servants' liveries set the fashion for all the flunkies; while his country place at Arcachon had made a bilious Englishman quite ill with envy. In short, Fortune in one of her pranks had amused herself by emptying a regular cornucopia on this lucky mortal's head.

Hector was the only son of a ship-owner who had been very rich, and in spite of that so honest that his name to all Bordeaux stood for honour in commerce. Towards the end of his business career, and just as he was thinking seriously of retiring to enjoy the millions he had made, he was over-

whelmed by such a combination of disasters as no one could have foreseen. The failure of several business houses in England and Holland, three shipwrecks, and a huge fall in wines, combined to bring him within an ace of ruin. In fact anyone else would have gone under, but as his unequalled credit enabled him to keep his head above water, the storm blew over and left him still afloat.

Though he had not been actually ruined, he had lost so much that he was a poor man in comparison with what he had been. He took this very much to heart, like all men who are used to prosperity and do not know what the struggle for existence means, and therefore give up at the first reverse; and the death of his wife, who had been married to him twenty-five years and stood next to his business in his heart, was the last straw of a burden already too heavy for him to bear. He never held up his head again after this final blow, and lingered on only about a year, dying in despondency at not having been able to recover from what he called his downfall. With his last breath he begged his son to forgive him for having brought him to beggary by his imprudence.

So at thirty-three Hector found himself an orphan but his own master and with an income which was still pretty nearly a hundred thousand francs. His father on his deathbed had recommended him to keep on in the business; but after thinking things over he decided that as his tastes were not extravagant, he had enough money as it was. So he wound up the shipping concern without counting the cost, put the shutters up, and would not hear a word more about business, saying life

wasn't any too long even if one did nothing else but amuse one's self.

From that time onwards he followed his own bent, and spent his income in the most light-hearted way in the company of some smart youngsters of his set, who had always been only too glad to follow his lead, and later on became the absolute satellites of this social star.

Hector, like a true child of this calculating century, had a good deal of method in his madness. He promised himself, and kept his word, that he would not let anyone get round him ; so he closed his ears and even his heart to all. He was as cautious in his expenditure as any lawyer ; he allowed himself sixty thousand francs a year for his various fancies, and never exceeded the amount by as much as ten francs.

This was quite enough to give him a good position ; but he was clever enough to rise to the highest pinnacle of social esteem. A scandal in high society, in which he was involved, first gave him a lift ; he went on as he had so happily begun, and the local chronicles assure us that the ladies very rarely proved unkind. It is true that he was very discreet in such affairs, and did not risk his reputation as champion in the lists of love by joining battle where the day was lost beforehand, or the result even doubtful.

There was plenty to keep him busy besides. If a dancer with any silly Puritanical ideas appeared on the stage of the leading theatre, our hero was sure to be at the head of the clique who hissed the too strait-laced charmer until she had to give in or get out. He generally made a point of imposing his



sway on the prima donna, who was glad to get his protection at the price, since he ruled the front boxes of the theatre with a rod of iron, and there was no appeal from his veto on the critical first nights. Her reward was thunderous applause at the shortest notice, avalanches of bouquets and wreaths, an ovation on her benefit night and a blank cheque drawn by her lord and master on his account—with Cupid.

After this all he needed to crown the edifice of his reputation was two or three duels. So he fought a few, and came off without a scratch, while his antagonists were not too badly hurt. Thus he got glory without remorse, and the triumph of victory without any ill-feeling, and also a reputation for dare-devil courage which protected him from any open acts of malice. Besides, people were a bit afraid of his rather heavy-handed wit, for, like all men who have a certain amount of bounce, as he had taken all risks, he thought he had a right to say what he liked.

As a change from such intellectual and elevating pursuits as these Hector hunted, or cruised on his yacht, according to the time of year. He also broke in his own horses to harness and went in for riding. When he passed quite a number of people used to stop on the kerb, or at any rate turn to gaze after him. The little work-girls, smart and coquettish in their ribbon-frilled bonnets, could not stare at him enough ; his progress down a street was marked by a murmur of admiration, as people said to each other, " Look, look, there's M. Malestrat ! "

Such an ovation is the choicest of pleasures,

the greatest a vain man can have in a country town. Such a gratification is impossible in Paris, where Rastignac and de Marsay pass unnoticed in the crowd on the boulevards; why, most Parisians don't know even the great Rothschild by sight.

Hector had thought of going in for racing, but the sad experience of a friend of his, who spent a million francs on his stable to be rewarded with a prize of eight hundred, gave him a very homely insight into the risks of the turf; it was like a notice-board at the edge of a precipice. So his most expensive recreation was still gambling. There is a great deal of play at Bordeaux; one has only to go anywhere near the Grand Theatre after midnight to realise that. Gleams of light come from the clubs through the chinks of the shutters, closed in accordance with the police regulations, and in the silence, one can easily hear the chink of gold on the tables. It is like a temptation from fortune, a sort of sign hung up before the door to say "You can win money here." Unfortunately, you pretty often lose a bit as well, but Hector was very lucky.

So this lord of fashion was very much envied, flattered and traduced. Some called him a spend-thrift, and others said he was mean; you can't please everybody. Some of those gentlemen whose winnings at baccarat are suspiciously high, called him a gamester. Some experienced gourmets went so far as to pass adverse criticisms on his cellar and table. To crown all, two or three fair ladies, after risking their reputations to no purpose for his sake, revenged themselves by getting their

false teeth into his reputation. But he had on his side all the pretty marriageable girls—he was supposed to be such a dreadful man!—all the mammas who kept an eye on him with the idea of capturing him for their daughters—it was confidently asserted that he was not exacting as to dowry—and finally the people who borrowed money of him. Indeed, his adherents made quite a respectable force. So he had the proper retinue of the successful man—friends and enemies, flatterers and backbiters.

In spite of all this, our favourite of fortune was being bored to extinction.

Like so many people, Hector was not as black as he was painted. It would have been a great mistake to judge his character by his mode of life. He had done a great many foolish things, but had not become wedded to folly. He was simply following the ways of the world, which often lead an able man under the yoke of fools. At first the idea of being a man of fashion had flattered his vanity; but, his end once attained, he made it a point of honour to keep up his reputation, and so his vanity was a kind of clog which he dared not cut loose. He would have liked to have some purpose in life, but he could not find one. False modesty, a touch of diffidence, and the chains of habit kept him back.

He did his best to think of some way of getting out of the groove into which he had sunk, but nothing occurred to him. What could he go in for, at his age? Supposing he went into business again? But the only real interest in business is money-making, and he already had more money



than he knew what to do with. He might have set to work at something, but what, and what would they say in Bordeaux? Brave as he was in a duel, he knew that he was afraid of public opinion. Was he not one of the public himself, and had not their opinion given him his position? He was ashamed at his own lack of independence. He rather looked down on his set, but he had a very real dread of their ridicule. In fact, he had not been living as he liked, but to please other people, as he very well saw. The idea irritated him beyond measure. If things were to go on as they had done, he could see himself losing all interest in life, yet still he could not make up his mind to anything.

The fact is that he had got all he could out of his present mode of life, which was drearier than any college don's complimentary oration, and more monotonous than the wag of a pendulum, in spite of the apparent variety in its interests.

When he came home in the evening he would sink into his armchair, more tired than an actor after six hours on the stage, and say, with a yawn and a feeling of utter disgust with life, "It's always the same thing—always the same thing!"

If his friends could only have seen him then! But he concealed his boredom, excruciating as it was, so successfully that even his valet never suspected it.

At last, one morning, he had an inspiration which seemed to him absolutely Providential.

"Why shouldn't I chuck it all," he said to himself, "and marry and settle down?"

He followed up the happy inspiration at once, and without any apprehensions or hesitations made



up his mind there and then to get married in three months' time, which was quick work for a man who up to then had no more looked forward to getting married than a young, ambitious, and energetic clerk in a government office looks forward to retiring. He did not bestow a thought on all the little circumstances, trivial or serious, unfortunate or lucky, which unite to make married life either heaven or hell, nor on the seven delights which the Arab poet says fill the heart of the married man. He did not even ask himself the grim question which rises ghost-like before all on the eve of tying the knot, "Shall I be happy or wretched?" His only reflection was, "I've had enough of bachelor life, and marriage will be a change, anyhow."

Forthwith he proceeded to build himself a castle in the air in this style: "My wife is going to be pretty, amusing, and very rich. We'll have the best house in Bordeaux. She will be a perfect hostess, we shall have a great many receptions, and I shall be envied by everyone, which is just what I like."

So after playing to the gallery all his bachelor days, he was going to keep up the folly as a married man. That very evening he told his friends at the club of this new idea of his, saying that he had quite made up his mind about it. As soon as he went out, there was quite a hubbub with queries and comments: "What bee had got into his bonnet?" "Was he going mad?" "Fancy putting his neck in the noose at his age!" "He might have consulted his friends, too." "What's the use of having friends if one doesn't?"

His special cronies were quite hurt about it,

and thought he had slighted them. It was really serious news for those of his acquaintance who were every-day guests at his table. These gentry foresaw that a married man is not likely to be so lavish in his expenditure as a bachelor; they felt he had let them in, and their faces looked as pinched as they expected their stomachs to be after this.

Hector's matrimonial resolve proved an all-absorbing topic of conversation. So interesting did it prove that people even deserted the baccarat table for it. As he had been winning all that evening, it was clear that he had not spoken as he did out of pique. So everybody tried to find out the wonderful woman who had laid the mighty Hector low. They discussed all the marriageable girls and widows in the place, and were no nearer finding the lady than before. At last, at two in the morning, the meeting broke up, having come to the conclusion that he must have been carrying on some love affair they knew nothing about.

As a matter of fact there was a wife ready for him, but there was no question of love. An arrangement had been in existence for the last seventeen years by which Hector was to marry a girl who was thereby also reserved for him. Her name was Aurélie Blandureau, and she lived in Paris. Of this little detail his friends were absolutely ignorant.

Many years before, when he was making his first anxious ventures in business with borrowed capital, M. Malestrat had had a partner, M. Blandureau.

Very soon this partner of his tired of the business. He did not understand it very well, and besides, he thought it would take a long time to make a

big pile in Bordeaux. So he went off to Paris, started an agency business, and got married. Both his commercial and his matrimonial ventures were successful, and he had already made over five hundred thousand francs when his wife presented him with a daughter. M. Malestrat, who was asked to stand godfather to her, came to Paris for the christening, and brought his son, who was a boy of ten at the time. On the evening of the christening day there was a big dinner, and after every one had pledged the baby girl's mother in very copious potations, the two partners solemnly swore to each other that these two children of theirs should marry. There was nothing in writing, and nothing said about terms in case of breach of the agreement ; but both were men of honour, and every one knows what that means.

So by both families, this marriage-to-be was considered quite as definitely arranged as if it had received the sanction of the mayor. M. Blandureau, in any letter he wrote, always asked about his daughter's future husband, and M. Malestrat returned the compliment by inquiring affectionately after the future wife of his boy.

Hector had always heard this "arrangement" spoken of as something quite settled. No one ever consulted him about it ; besides, he took no interest in it. All he knew was that it would come into effect when Mademoiselle Blandureau was eighteen.

After M. Malestrat's business disaster, there had indeed been a risk of the agreement being broken off. The shipbuilder wrote to his friend as soon as he knew how he stood, telling him candidly that

his income was now less than a hundred thousand francs, and offering to release him from their agreement. M. Blandureau would not hear of it.

"What is done is done," he wrote, very honourably, by return of post. "My daughter will have one million five hundred thousand francs as her dowry, so I don't care about money. If you hadn't got a sou, we'd still keep our word to each other."

When the father died, Hector did not care to question the agreement. He continued the correspondence with M. Blandureau. Every year, on New Year's Day and on St. Aurelia's Day, he sent the young lady a box of presents so big that it had to go by rail. Delicate attentions like these amounted to a formal engagement, and this was the explanation of Hector's startlingly sudden decision to marry; it was for him merely a matter of "commercial morality."

Besides, he knew nothing whatever about the lady he was to marry except that she was tall and dark, and had been educated at the Convent of the Sacred Heart.



## CHAPTER II

### PREPARING FOR THE DAY

**I**F you don't want to go back on a resolution it is a good plan to arrange matters so that you can't. This is what Hector did. He "burnt his boats" by writing to his father-in-law-elect to tell him "that, at the end of September, he was coming to remind him of a certain agreement that meant all the world to him."

Thereupon he set out about making his arrangements for the journey. This was no light task. He had to put his affairs in order and to efface all evidence of his stormy past.

As he expected to come back to Bordeaux a married man, he did not wish to leave behind any souvenirs of his previous pursuits. He did not want to have experiences like some married men, whose rest is rudely disturbed by the ghosts of long-forgotten bachelor indiscretions. He took all precautions and did his best to make everything safe. Before he committed his relics to the bosom of the deep, he took care to tie them to a stone big enough to keep them there.

The last act in this sacrificial scene was the immolation of his trophies from the lists of love. He had shut himself up in his room with a nice big fire in the grate for this holocaust. As he turned out the contents of the drawers of his writing-

table in double handful, he felt as if he were stirring up the ashes of a once inflammable heart. It meant a review of his past and a searching of his conscience which more than once brought a blush to his cheek.

But everything went into the grate without mercy, if not without regret; faded ribbons, dried-up bouquets, portraits in miniature, rings, silky curls dark and fair, notes violet—or verberna-scented; nothing was spared. He paused for a glance at each letter. Did not each different hand mean the beginning of a new chapter?

Hector sighed as he watched the smoke roll up the chimney, carrying with it lots of glowing paper where the writing showed for an instant as if written in fire. It seemed to him as if his youth had all gone in smoke.

Even when he stirred up the burning mass with the tongs, he asked himself what all these relics really stood for? Nothing but broken promises, oaths forsworn, vanished illusions, true love, tears or remorse.

When there was nothing left but a heap of ashes, with a few charred flakes fluttering like black butterflies over them, he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now then," he said to himself, "that's done with. I've nothing to fear now, and I feel a new man."

Next day he got his upholsterer to call. He wanted all the furniture altered while he was away. Then he gave over his house to the painters, with the order to scrape off all the paint and paper from cellar to attic, and then re-paint and re-paper the whole house. By this last act he gently but firmly

turned himself out of doors by making his home uninhabitable.

It was towards the end of June that Hector, having paid all his farewell calls, went away from Bordeaux. Three months had still to pass before he could make the acquaintance of his future wife. This did not trouble him. He had the idea that a tour in Switzerland is an indispensable preliminary to matrimony, and so he went there. He was taking a long way round, but all roads lead to Rome. Hector was delighted to have a little time before him to collect his thoughts and get used to the change to come. One can't get used to a new outlook as easily as to a new pair of slippers, and he had to get accustomed to this new idea of his. He practised the grave manner becoming to a man who is on the point of taking up the responsibilities of family life, and he thought it suited him. He had ordered his tailor to make his new clothes in a sober style, for he could see the truth of the old proverb about the cowl making the monk.

After less than a month of this sort of thing he had already become quite a different man. Several times he was surprised to find himself thinking he was married already, and had been a Benedict for several years; and if he happened to be speaking to a girl he found himself involuntarily using quite a paternal tone.

His tramps about Switzerland during the next six weeks did not result in his seeing much of the country, for he looked at everything with pre-occupied eyes, and really saw nothing. The most beautiful scenery left him cold, for his mind was far away.

By degrees he unconsciously roused his imagination to a high pitch. When he left Bordeaux he was in no hurry to get to his destined wife, but now all of a sudden he found himself burning with impatience. He counted the days and even the hours. The glamour of the unknown drew him like a magnet. He even got as far as sighing for Mademoiselle Aurélie, and—a far more serious symptom—not at all inclined to laugh at himself thereat. This went on until a month before the appointed day when he found himself at Tours, only six hours' journey from Paris. How on earth had he got there? he asked himself as soon as he had collected his wandering wits.

He burned to be at his journey's end. The distance of the date lent enchantment to his mental view of M. Blandureau's house and made it seem like the promised land. There his Aurélie was queen. He had only to get to the station, take his ticket, and that very evening he could be at her side. It was a great temptation.

But what a thing it would be to do—to take them by surprise like that, and drop into their house like a notice of demolition! Would they not take it as a sign of bad taste, a coarse disregard of their feelings, a suggestion of inferiority? When an agreement is to be carried out the correct thing is not so much being ready a fortnight before as being scrupulously punctual on the appointed day. With a great effort he curbed his impatience and forced himself to go on waiting.

How on earth was he to get through that last interminable month all by himself at Tours? He could only think of two other courses—to retrace



his steps, or to spend his few remaining weeks of bachelor liberty in studying Parisian life incognito. He really knew very little about the capital. He had been there, as we have seen, when a little boy, but had never cared about revisiting the city since he had attained years of discretion. He was so afraid of forming an unfavourable opinion of his native city when he came back. After six months on the Boulevard des Italiens, would the Fosses de l'Intendance be good enough for him? Perhaps he would think Bordeaux a shabby little place altogether, and he did not like that idea. He did not make the experiment, and resolved to stick to his native place, where his social position was far higher than it could possibly be in Paris. In the true Cæsarian vein he preferred to be the first man in the second city of France rather than the second in the capital.

But now on the eve of his marriage, he felt a dread of Paris and some distrust of himself. His change of heart was still too recent. And indeed, he would have been ill-advised to choose the great city as a place in which to settle down quietly till his wedding-day arrived. The women fair and frail who besieged St. Anthony are quartered there and walk the streets in silk. Hector thought he would have all his life to go exploring in, after he was married. He had better keep such adventures in reserve, as something to fall back upon in case of need.

At the same time he did not care about playing the wandering lover any longer. He was at his wits' end to know what to do when he luckily remembered one of his boyhood's friends, who had,

he thought, pitched his tent on the banks of the Loire somewhere between Blois and Tours.

This friend of his had often come to see him at Bordeaux, and on each visit had urged him to come and stay at his house. He had promised, as promises cost nothing, and what is more, had meant to keep his word, but something had always turned up at the last moment to prevent him going. However, he was very fond of this old school chum and thought very highly of him.

At this particular moment he clutched at this lucky hint from memory like a drowning man at a branch. He dressed in a hurry and went out to find where his friend lived. Now everybody in Tours knows M. Ferdinand Aubanel. He lives on his fine estate, La Fresnaie, five short leagues from the town, and to judge from the glowing accounts he received of his friend's magnificent place, Hector concluded that the "tent" must be a fine country house. There was nothing more to find out, so he hired a barouche, and as he proceeded along the road towards La Fresnaie, he thought to himself that it is a very good thing to have friends pretty nearly everywhere.

## CHAPTER III

### HECTOR MEETS HIS FATE

**T**HE carriage crawled along with the horses trotting as if they were marking time, and the driver half asleep. Hector never thought of grumbling. Buried in thought, he enjoyed the measured swaying of the vehicle, while he solaced his mind by contemplating the peaceful landscape of Touraine.

The road was a picturesque one ; now it ran along the side of a shady hill and overlooked the Loire, then it plunged into some verdant valley, with many turns which lessened the abruptness of the descent. But before long they came to a cross-road.

"Now we're getting there," said the driver, letting his whip fall on his sorry steeds, which did not mend their pace nevertheless. Already there were numerous signs of the vicinity of some fine country-house. The effect on the master's eye was evident. The quickset hedges were well-kept, even, and without any gaps, the ditches well-cleared, and the trees so trimmed that they gave plenty of shade without making the road damp.

The carriage passed two farms, nestling in their clumps of elms, while above them in the distance rose the pointed top of a dovecot. In one meadow they were cutting the aftermath, the season being

rather late that year, and the air was fragrant with the scent of the new-mown hay. In a well-fenced enclosure some thoroughbred horses were grazing. At the sound of the carriage-wheels they raised their clean-cut heads, and one, no doubt a favourite, came up to the gate, and leaned its graceful neck over the bars.

Then the house came in sight, at the end of a very long avenue of chestnut-trees. It was not exactly what one would call a chateau, but a fine, extensive, unpretentious, middle-class house, flanked by two large hospitable-looking wings set a little back, with a whole floor devoted to guests' rooms. At the entrance gate, a servant was standing like a sentry, shading his eyes from the sun with his hand; he seemed to be looking questioningly at the carriage, no doubt in order to announce the visitor's arrival as soon as possible.

"They're expecting someone, evidently," said Hector to himself; "I'm not so lucky as I thought, for I may find I've come at the wrong time."

As they got nearer he recognised the servant whom he had seen at Bordeaux with his master. He, for his part, seemed to recognise Hector, for he signalled with his hat, and when the carriage drew up in the courtyard, he said to him:

"Ah, sir, here you are at last! The master is in a perfect fever of expectation, he has waited for you so long."

"Why, was he expecting me?" said Hector. He did not catch the man's reply, for the simple reason that Ferdinand had rushed up and was treating him to a suffocating hug.

"Oh! thanks, thanks," he said, "it's a real



good turn you're doing me. You've shown yourself a real friend in need by coming : I knew you would come. You must have dropped everything to oblige me when you got my letter."

"My dear man, I've been away from Bordeaux these three months. I only came here because I wanted to see you again. I never got your letter, and its pure luck——"

"Well, if that's so, let's be thankful for it. It's done the needful, but I'm not surprised ; I've got luck to order now. I'm the most fortunate of mortals. If you've a wish, pass it on to me ; I'll wish for you, and you'll get what you want. My luck's so extraordinary that it makes me quite nervous—it's too good to last. But here I'm keeping you standing out here—I must be off my head. I'm awfully anxious for your advice, so come on ; perhaps you'd like something to eat and drink ? "

Ferdinand began shouting orders to his servants ; the whole house was in a flurry. Then he led his friend in, keeping a tight hold on his arm and squeezing it under his own, as if to keep him from escaping and to make sure he was really there in the flesh.

All along the passages, and up the stairs, he kept on talking breathlessly.

"The reason why I wrote to you to come at once," he said, "is because I want you to be witness to my marriage contract, for, my dear Hector, I'm getting married the day after to-morrow. The girl—no, she's not a girl, she's an angel, absolutely lovely—but you'll see for yourself. I'm madly in love, I fairly worship her. And to think that in two days'

time she'll be mine, mine only and for ever ; I give you my word, I'm half crazy with delight at the bare idea. I'm always thinking it's only a lovely dream—don't wake me up, for old acquaintance's sake, if it is. The day after to-morrow—but what an age to wait—how shall I live it out ? There are twenty-four hours in the day, with sixty minutes in each of them—time enough for my hair to turn white. And she's in love with me yes, old man, she really is, she's admitted it, and she'll say the same to you if you ask her. Her name's Herminie. We'll go straight up to the top of the house and I can show you from there where she lives ; you'll see her in person this evening—come on, come on."

"It's a regular craze, evidently," thought Hector ; "everybody's getting married. It's just as well I've decided on it, for if I'd waited any longer all the girls would have been snapped up. Blessings on poor old dad for his foresight in booking one for me !"

By this time they had reached the first storey landing. Ferdinand opened a door, and stood back to let his friend pass him, saying, "Come in, come in, this is my bachelor den ; I shan't use it much longer, we're having another room done up, this one next door ; the upholsterers are just putting in the finishing touches now. It's a masterpiece, a regular satin-lined snuggery. But I beg your pardon, Hector, old man, look where you're going ; I'll get you a chair."

He got one, not without some trouble. The bachelor's den was in a state of chaos ; utter confusion reigned in it. It was full of a most extra-

ordinary mixture of things, all dumped down pell-mell; bed, table, chairs were all occupied. The very floor was full of litter, and by no means safe to walk about on: two half-emptied packing-cases were right in the gangway, with evidences of the unpacking processes all around, boards bristling with threatening nails, pliers, hammer, and chisel.

At the window stood a well-dressed man, who bowed respectfully to the two friends as they came in. In his hand was a narrow wax-cloth ribbon marked with numerals in gold, a tape-measure, in fact.

"This is my tailor," said Ferdinand to his friend, "he's come from Paris with these two boxes full of clothes. I've retained him to work for me for the last month."

"And you mean to say you're going to try on all those clothes?"

"Of course I am, as you'll see directly; and what's more, I want you to criticise. It's just the subject on which your opinion's more valuable to me than anyone else's; aren't you the leader of fashion, or rather, fashion itself personified? You've only got to cast an approving eye on a waistcoat, and that waistcoat becomes the correct thing forthwith."

Ferdinand had been taking his clothes off as he spoke, and the tailor solemnly handed him the new garments one by one for him to try on. This was a long job, as according to him there was nothing right about them. "Ah!" he groaned, "I'm a perfect sight, I can see it now. I've been living in a fool's paradise. Look at me, Hector, do look; don't I look absolutely common, quite the lout, in fact? Don't you think I'm a regular



scarecrow? My good tailor, these clothes you've been making me are an atrocious fit: these trousers are too short and wide, and this waistcoat's too long and narrow; my legs look like an elephant's, and my chest is squeezed so tight that I can't draw in my breath."

The tailor's dignity was seriously upset. He said everything was quite correct and suited monsieur admirably. He had never seen better-cut clothes or a gentleman so hard to please.

So the trying-on process recommenced.

"After all," said Ferdinand, "one must in fairness allow something for our hideous modern fashions! The stove-pipe hat has been the death of dignity. And how are you to look handsome or noble or romantic in a rag like our black frock-coat? Everybody looks as if they had been cast in the same mould. If the Belvedere Apollo walked the earth to-day, he'd only look like a barber. Elegance went out with clocked stockings, and style vanished along with powdered hair."

"Raise your arm a little, sir," was the tailor's only reply; "yes, that's right. Now please turn your head—that'll do."

"According to you," said Hector, "one ought to dress for one's wedding as if it were a fancy-dress ball; then you could get yourself up just as you like, and wear a crusader's hauberk, shoes with long-pointed toes or boots in the style of Louis XIII, a gold-laced hat, a mediæval apprentice's jerkin, and a seventeenth century exquisite's cravat. You could go and pick out your costume at the fancy-dress shop at the Porte St. Martin."

"You think you're being funny, old man,



but you've just hit on a fine illuminating idea. But, to speak seriously, do I look good enough for a girl so lovely and refined and romantic-looking as she is? No, I look simply awful; I wish I had a fairy godmother—I'd dress like the hero in the tale about the Ass's Skin, in trousers cut from Heaven's blue, a waistcoat of sunbeam gold, and a coat of butterfly-wing."

"Monsieur looks very well as he is," said the tailor; "will he be so kind as to walk about a little?"

Ferdinand walked a few paces.

"Quite all right!" said Hector, decisively, and not any too soon, for there were no more clothes left in the boxes! But there still remained the momentous question as to how the frock-coat was to be worn. Ferdinand wanted it buttoned all the way up, in M. de Girardin's style. Hector stood out for leaving it completely open; it looked more dignified that way. The tailor insisted that it ought to be held together by a "twin button"—he had brought some on purpose. He mentioned several of his patrons, each more remarkable for noble lineage than the last, as exponents of this particular fashion.

They could not come to any agreement, so Ferdinand declared that he would trust that inspiration which comes to one at critical moments to guide him aright.

This decision set the tailor free, but there was no release for Hector. He now had to give his opinion on the casket for the wedding presents.

This had been placed on the tea-table in the big drawing-room.

It was a beautiful piece of work, such as Tehan sometimes sends out, and most exquisitely finished—a great oval chest of inlaid rose-wood, with lock and handles of silver, so beautifully wrought that it seemed that only fairy chisels could have touched them.

Hector privately determined to get one just like it when he married Mademoiselle Blandureau.

“Well, what do you think of it?” asked Ferdinand.

“It’s admirable.”

“That’s what I thought myself. But what worries me is that it doesn’t look nearly big enough, and if that’s so, what’s to be done?”

This triumph of workmanship seemed to Hector to be of very respectable dimensions. But after he had taken a look round the room, he could understand his friend’s anxiety.

That gentleman must evidently have ransacked a dozen of the most expensive establishments in Paris to get together all these wonderful presents for his wife. Hector was lost in genuine admiration of the Cashmere shawls and lace, the caskets and rich stuffs, the jewellery and fans. He could see that they stood for a lot of money.

“My aunt and I hunted all over the place for a fortnight to get all that together,” said Ferdinand.

“Well, the old lady was aiding and abetting you in a fine bit of extravagance. Do you happen to be the heir to a throne which has become vacant, or are you trying to ruin yourself?”

“Ruin myself! Can’t be done, dear boy. I’ve tried it three times, just for the fun of the thing, before I met Herminie, and I couldn’t bring it off.

So soon as I'd made a bit of a gap in my capital, a legacy would drop bang into my lap. I could see that if I went on all the rest of my family would die off. So I stopped in time. All you see here hasn't cost me a sou ; I've just had a legacy from an uncle. I've spent the lot on this collection, but I don't grudge it for a smile from Herminie, and all that worries me, as I said, is the fear that the coffer won't hold everything. But after all, my aunt'll see to that ; she's coming here the first thing to-morrow morning, for to-morrow I must send the presents off. Come and have some dinner."

"He's certainly quite off his head," thought Hector.

Ferdinand was, equally certainly, not off his feed, as he forthwith proceeded to show most conclusively. He ate enough for four, and talked the whole time. But he had hardly swallowed the last mouthful before he got up and dragged Hector off willy-nilly. "I must go and call on my *fiancee*," said he, "though I've already done so twice to-day. I want to introduce you to her, you see ; aren't you my dearest friend ? I've often told her about you, so she knows you by repute. She lives half-a-league from here ; we'll walk, if you don't mind, for I feel I can do with some fresh air and exercise."

As they walked along the road which leads from La Fresnaie to Corines-Eclase, the seat of Ferdinand's future relatives, Hector noticed that his friend's self-possession was rapidly deserting him. When he entered the drawing-room, he turned all the colours of the rainbow in quick succession,



and as he introduced Hector he stammered most pitifully.

"The deuce," thought our hero, "he's very hard hit, evidently." And out of the corner of his eye he took a glance at Mademoiselle Herminie. She had turned as red as a peony. She had risen to make a nervous little curtsy, but sat down again almost at once. All her attention seemed fixed on the embroidery she was working at. But Hector noticed that her hands shook so that she could hardly hold her needle. Besides, though her head was bent over her work and her eyes lowered, he caught the glance she gave at Ferdinand.

All her soul was in that soft tender look, full of innocent surrender and the promise of devotion.

"She's in love with him, too," he said to himself; "well, that's all to the good! He's a thorough good fellow, and deserves his luck."

While Ferdinand went to the side of his lady-love, Hector remained with her parents, talking of indifferent things, about Switzerland which he had toured with unseeing eyes, and about Bordeaux. Whenever he stopped speaking, he could hear the whispered conversation of the lovers as they sat at the work-table, with their heads so close that their locks met.

The house was all astir. In a room apart, the milliners were at work on the trousseau. In the kitchen and pantry everyone was busy with the preparations for the big dinner which would be given on the morrow before the ceremony of signing the contract.

Of course they had to go and see the dresses.



Ferdinand went out with his *fiancee* and her mother. Hector stayed behind with the father, who took the opportunity to sing the praises of his son-in-law-to-be and enlarged interminably on this congenial topic.

The two friends came back in the evening by a path which was supposed to be a short cut, and turned out to be much longer than the highway. Ferdinand went first as guide, opening the wicket-gates in the meadow fences, and warning Hector when there was a ditch to be jumped over.

On the threshold of the room that had been got ready for the traveller, they parted with a final handshake as they wished each other good-night.

Hector found himself in one of those nice large rooms which await a welcome visitor in good country houses, and conspire with his host to render his stay a long one. Everything about it was eloquent of home and comfort. Here at any rate, was a place in which air and space had not been begrudged by an architect subservient to a stingy landlord. The ceiling was a good twelve feet from the floor, and you could have driven a carriage through any of the windows.

A comfortable arm-chair confronted you as you went in, its hospitable arms giving mute invitation to the pleasures of rest and reflection. Hector gave an exclamation of joy ; he felt at home again at last. For two whole months he had been getting hotel-dust on his clothes, making himself sore on hard arm chairs, getting stiff joints in damp beds, and never feeling easy about anything, even the absolute cleanliness of the bed-clothes. So it can easily be imagined with what pleasure he

inhaled the scent of orris-root which clung to the dainty towels, and gloated over the snowy immaculateness of the sheets.

He undressed as quickly as he could, promising his poor weary limbs ten good hours, neither more nor less, of dreamless repose.

He was reckoning without his host. Just as he was dropping off, in came Ferdinand in his dressing-gown, and sat down without ceremony on the foot of the bed. He had, it seemed, any number of things to talk about still, all of the greatest importance, and he made this an excuse for gossiping at random. Hector laughed at his absurd chatter, and every now and then tried to get rid of him. But Ferdinand, who did not feel at all sleepy himself, kept on with his "Just a moment, there's one thing more I want to say, and then I'm off," till at last, on the stroke of five in the morning, Hector succeeded, partly by persuasion, and partly by pushing, in turning him out.

But trying to get to sleep after one has been kept awake is a hopeless job, as Hector soon found out, for already the quiet of the house was being shattered by various early-morning noises.

In the courtyard, the new carriage, the bridal chariot, had just come in ; they were pulling open the doors of the coach-house, and the stable-boys were shouting to each other. The corridors rang with the clattering of the servants' wooden shoes, for every one of the retainers had been mobilised to take part in the ceremony. The glazier came in from Tours with a lot of copper and tin-ware moulds, and workmen with hods and more wooden shoes ; the outfit made such a terrific row that

it sounded like the bells of a village church travelling by road, and they unpacked the lot with still more noise. The staircases fairly groaned as a regular battalion of workmen escalated them. The upholsterers were putting up the seats in the ball-room, and lugging their step-ladders all along the banisters; the whole building shook with hammering, as the hangings were fixed up with a prodigal expenditure of nails.

Soon the voice of Ferdinand rang out above the din; he shouted orders to everyone at once, men and women alike, and leaned out of his window calling on all the saints in the calendar, for his aunt, old Mademoiselle Aubanel, had just arrived.

Hector rose to the occasion; he got up and came downstairs. Ferdinand had clearly lost his head; Hector took his place and made himself the old lady's right-hand man. Under her directions he took charge of the crowd of servants and workmen, and looked after everything with the coolness and presence of mind of a ship's captain in a storm at sea.

Ferdinand had disappeared from the scene. "You'd better go and see your bride-to-be, my boy," his aunt had said to him, and had not needed to tell him twice. At last, everything was in order, or pretty nearly so. There's always something left undone, but one must stop some time, or one may go further and fare worse.

There was barely enough time to get off to the dinner at the lady's residence, half-a-league away, even if one did avoid the so-called short cut.

It was a five-course dinner, a long, elaborate affair, in the usual Touraine style. Gamache, if



he could come back to earth, would choose Touraine to be married in. The table groaned under its load of bottles and glasses, the light twinkled on a profusion of cut-glass. There were thirty-eight people at table, and at least two dishes for each person. They all knew each other—in fact, were all more or less nearly related. Hector might have felt rather out of it, if Ferdinand had not been talking so much about him. As it was, people saw how chummy the two were, and noticed how gratefully the old lady beamed on her gallant assistant, and so they treated him as one of themselves. An elderly cousin said, "He's just like one of the family," which raised a general laugh, for on this happy evening they were ready to laugh at everything or nothing. Hector was a good fellow, and looked the part, which is better still, whatever people say. The prospective bridegroom felt proud of his friend—he almost wanted him in his pocket, as they say. Every now and then he even took his eyes off his sweetheart to smile gratefully at him for his share in the general goodwill and gaiety.

But when the dinner came to an end, behold, two gentlemen all in black, with high white chokers, arose and walked in grave silence into the drawing-room.

"Those gentlemen are the notaries," said one of the ladies who sat on either side of Hector. The company followed them. In the drawing-room the chairs had been arranged in a circle, and the company sat down. In the middle, on a table, were some new swan-quill pens ready for the signatures, and a big scarlet inkstand.



The elder notary stood up, his spectacles on his nose, and the contract in his hand. There was a deep silence; you could have heard the future bridegroom's heart beating if you had listened hard enough.

Then the old notary began to read the contract. He went droning along through the clauses and conditions, the surnames and Christian names of the contracting parties; now and then he got stuck over a hard word, and even hemmed and hawed a bit. He stuttered whenever he got to one of those technical bits, which can't be left out though they are of no earthly use, the skeleton, as it were, of all legal documents. At the end of each sentence, he raised his voice a little and stopped to take breath; he made quite a business of turning over every fresh leaf. The clauses were very long, so long that he had to recover his wind two or three times in the middle of them, and they were so involved, and bristled so with crackjaw words, that their complications seemed to be a regular nursery for possible lawsuits.

The elderly cousin, who was rather apoplectically inclined, was grumbling under his breath. Such an infliction as this, after a dinner which was a bit hard on one's digestion, amounted to something very like a practical joke, he thought. Hector had all he could do to keep himself awake. Ferdinand was not on a bed of roses either, and squirmed on his chair like Guatimozin on the grill.

At last the dreary contract came to an end; the notary's voice became quite animated as he read the last few sentences, and everyone got up to affix their signature.

Hector, half asleep as he was, had followed the example of the rest, and was standing waiting for his turn, the notary having given precedence to the ladies. He was gazing idly about the room, pleased to see so many happy faces, when quite by chance he cast his eyes on the table.

Then he saw, holding one of the pens, such a dear, delicate, perfect little hand, that he was quite captivated by it.

It was an inexpressibly dainty little hand; the fingers were long and tapering, with the first joints slightly arched and the tips daintily inclined upwards; the nails were narrow and pink, with a pearly touch at their roots, and showed up beautifully against the clear skin, very fair, but rose-tinted like a child's—against the light it seemed transparent—and under this delicate skin one could trace the blue lines of the veins, as if the blood were blue and could be seen flowing. A wrist of divine mould and exquisite delicacy joined this lovely hand to the white arm which peeped from its sleeve of lace.

Hector was lost in admiration of all these points of loveliness. Instinctively he edged his way between the gentlemen standing around him, so as to be able to get a look at the owner of such a perfect hand as this was.

"It's bound to be a woman of thirty-five at least," he said to himself; "that's just my luck." But he was wrong. The hand belonged to a girl hardly eighteen years of age, as lovely as a dream, and picturesque enough to set a stock-broker writing sonnets to her. Her hair was very fair and glossy, with just that warm light in it which

is the pride of a Venetian beauty. Twisted up by the unskilled hands of a country-bred lady's maid, it was kept in place by a comb that was fairly buried in the mass of silky gold, so heavy that one feared—or hoped—every moment that it would break loose and fall like a golden mantle on the lovely shoulders whose outline one could trace under a plain chemisette, frilled with lace round the neck—the dress of a school-girl.

“Where could my eyes have been?” said Hector to himself. “Fancy not noticing such a glorious girl!”

And there he stood, quite forgetting to pick up his quill, though it was his turn to sign and the notary had spoken to him three times.

Then they went off to the registrar's office, which was only a few hundred yards away. Hector had gallantly offered his arm to old Mademoiselle Aubanel, but he hurried the poor old lady along rather inconsiderately, so anxious was he to get another look at the golden-haired girl.

He did not succeed in getting near her again till they got to the town-hall. She was leaning on the arm of the elderly cousin, in charming unconsciousness of her own loveliness; he was talking gaily to her, and she was smiling. Her big blue eyes sparkled with innocent fun. At one witticism of her escort's, she laughed outright, and then her parted rosy lips disclosed a set of teeth of pearly whiteness.

“She's the loveliest girl alive,” murmured Hector to himself as he got back to his friend's house.

There he shut himself up in his room, and when Ferdinand wanted to come in as he had done the



night before, he absolutely refused to open the door, swearing that he was asleep, and didn't mean to get up even if the house were on fire.

But a sweet vision kept him awake a long time, nevertheless—suppose Mademoiselle Aurélie were like her! The next day was the great day of all. For a long time yet the civil marriage at the registrar's office will be to everyone only a tedious formality, a comedy played before some ponderous individual who is often far too familiar already, and not at all imposing-looking, in spite of his tricoloured official scarf.

At eleven o'clock—they believe in getting married early in Touraine—a dozen large open carriages came for the wedding-guests. The sky was kind, and it was a lovely day. Never was there a gayer, happier wedding-party. It was like one of those lovely mornings which are the promise of a glorious day.

There were flowers everywhere; the coachmen wore huge bouquets, and the horses were more decked out than a sheep in the Saint-Jean procession. All along the paths stood groups of country-people, the men waving their hats and the women cheering.

The carriages rolled smoothly along sandy by-ways through that lovely Loire valley country, the sight of which makes one want to turn field-labourer, and along those beautiful high-roads which make people who walk on them envy the lot of the country postman who has to do so every day.

After the ceremony, Hector saw his charmer of the evening before in the porch. His friend



was passing at the time, and he called to him. "Who is that exquisite young creature?" he asked.

"A neighbour of ours," said the other nonchalantly, and pointing towards the horizon. "Look, her mother lives in that small chateau you can see half-way down the hill there, like a white spot in the midst of the trees."

She was one of the bridesmaids, and according to custom was put under Hector's escort. So all the rest of the day she hung on his arm, laughing and chattering as gaily as the wild birds in the elms in the park. The pair wandered about in the rear of the company along the broad garden paths and through the groves. Of course he had to tell her all about his life-long friendship with Ferdinand, and how he had decided to visit him. Her questions had the audacity of absolute innocence, and once or twice Hector could not conceal his surprise. Then she turned her great eyes on him with a startled look, but soon recovered her thoughtless gaiety. He thanked his stars that she had pitched on such an easy topic for conversation, for otherwise he would have been quite at a loss for something to say. In her company, he forgot absolutely even all those silly ineptitudes and elegant formalities which are the sham attempts at sparkling conversation with which strangers try to entertain each other. Now and then, as he talked, she would stoop to pick a flower as she walked, and pluck off its petals mechanically, and to do this she had to lean more heavily on his arm to support herself, and he could admire the supple grace of her form; or perhaps a branch would get caught in the folds of her dress, and

she would laugh and disentangle herself. Or she would prick her fingers and pop them in her mouth and bite them with her pretty pearly teeth.

Full of delighted surprise, Hector gave himself up to the charms of this irresistibly seductive innocence of hers. Her modest, unworldly graces so fascinated him that he did not even try to analyse the new sensations which were creeping over him.

When he found himself next her at table, he silently cursed anyone who spoke to her and made her answer, but he watched her with interest and smiled when she shyly sipped at the rare wine in her chased wine-glass.

At six o'clock sharp—it was still broad daylight—the squeak of fiddles was heard; the ball was to begin in the arbour, and be continued later on in the ball-room.

At the first notes she had got up from the table, and Hector had followed her example. He danced all night, as vigorously as a student in vacation, wiping his brow after each quadrille, and giving a hand at all the square dances. Waltzes, polkas, and mazurkas, he tackled them all. He might have been one of those poor nobodies who are asked out simply for their dancing. Mademoiselle Aubanel could not help complimenting him on his agility, but he did not hear her. A remnant of his natural prudence remained to whisper to him:

“You mustn't ask her for more than one dance out of every five.”

So he danced with all the ladies, young and old, pretty and plain, and paid delicate attentions and witty compliments to them all.

He had never felt so pleased with himself in his life. Not that he cared for the world at that moment; he was lost in his personal enjoyment, and he probably would have liked the ball to last till the judgment-day, since he was booked up for dances up to the thirty-seventh quadrille.

But all of a sudden, just on three in the morning, they discovered the bride was no longer among them. She had disappeared. What could have become of her?

That was the signal for retreat, which soon looked more like a rout, in spite of the efforts of the elderly cousin, who tried to get up a cotillon and said he'd put the rural police on to the dancers if they deserted. He called aloud on Hector to help him.

But Hector had just given his arm to the golden-haired beauty and was taking her and her mother to their carriage. The hall was in confusion, full of people looking for shawls and cloaks.

The girl pouted a little rebelliously. "We're going away awfully early, mamma," she said.

"Now quick, quick, darling," said her mother, "cover up your neck and shoulders and arms well, it's cold outside; if you don't look out, you'll get inflammation of the lungs; now, quick, quick, put on this shawl, and then this wrap, and then this scarf, and this nice big cloak over everything, and tie this handkerchief over your head as well."

The young lady shivered and laughed at once. She could hardly walk, muffled up as she was like a mummy in its bandages, so Hector had almost to carry her to the carriage; then he helped her



mother to spread a big carriage-rug over her, and they both thanked him.

The coachman whipped up his horses. Hector stood on the steps alone, in sorrowful amazement, like a dreamer who has just awaked from a lovely dream, or a child looking at the fragments of a favourite toy.

He had noticed that her carriage had the brightest lamps of them all ; so as long as he could, he watched their gleam along the winding road ; they shone or disappeared as it ran up or down hill, like will-o'-the-wisps.

At last he lost sight of them, but he hoped to pick them up again from the ball-room windows. He ran upstairs and glued his face to the glass, trying to find them among the shadows of the trees.

The ball-room, but for him, was empty now. In the distance could still be heard the rumbling of the last carriages dying away in the night. The tired servants went wearily about turning down the lamps and blowing out the candles.

Hector was just forcing himself to go to bed, when Ferdinand, looking extremely nervous, rushed through the room like a whirlwind.

He caught him by the arm and almost forced him to stop.

"What's her name?" he asked.

"Whose name? My wife's? Herminie."

"I'm not talking about your wife."

But Ferdinand had succeeded in shaking him off, and was already disappearing in the distance.



## CHAPTER IV

### A STRUGGLE WITH CONSCIENCE

**I**T turned out that the lady's name was Louise d'Ambleçay, and that she was only just seventeen years of age.

Her mother, the Baroness d'Ambleçay, had lost her husband after a few happy years of married life. Young and well-to-do though she was, she determined never to marry again; she could not bear the idea of parting from her only daughter, and so made up her mind to educate her at home.

Her assistants in this delicate task were an old abbé, very scholarly, very intellectual, and even more eccentric, and an English governess. For a wonder, the English lady happened to be very musical; and, more wonderful still, she was not at all romantic. The priest and the governess are still living with the family, and no doubt will spend the rest of their days at the d'Ambleçay chateau, engaged in their eternal controversy as to the right system of education. For each of them has a pet system, though it must be confessed that neither has ever tried it on their pupil.

So it was that Louise had the unusual good luck of escaping the boarding-school and the convent, institutions whose atmosphere ruins so many young girls. A sickly sheep will make shorter work of

a fold than a wolf, and with all the care in the world one cannot always be sure of excluding that kind of sheep. Besides, even the best of them institutions send the girls out with their heads full of prejudices and silly ideas, and it is only with infinite difficulty that they get rid of these when they go out into the world later on.

It was this education under the mother's eye that gave Louise the enchanting innocence, instinctive grace, and unassuming artlessness which were even more attractive than her exceptional beauty.

Madame d'Ambleçay led a very secluded life. Overwhelmed with grief at the death of her husband, she had shut herself up in her country-house and refused to see anyone. When time had dried her tears and brought back the smiles to her face, she still clung to the same way of living, feeling that she was happier in her peaceful seclusion than she could hope to be in society.

However, she entertained to the extent of asking, every year, some of her relatives at Tours to stay a fortnight at the chateau, and also received visits from several of her neighbours in the district who had been friends of her husband—worthy gentlemen who, in spite of high lineage, had the grace to be contented or to seem so, and were eccentric enough to keep off the subject of politics, at any rate in the company of ladies.

The gossips of the neighbourhood often puzzled themselves as to why Madame d'Ambleçay seemed not to trouble about getting her daughter "settled." Some extra-inquisitive souls—the kind of matrons who hawk their girls round at all the local town-

hall and assembly-room balls, with the one idea of getting them off—had even put the question to her point-blank. Madame d'Ambleçay generally replied that there was no hurry. Thereupon the dear creatures had charitably decided that the baroness was sacrificing Louise to her maternal selfishness, and keeping her in ruthless seclusion with the idea of making an old maid of her, willy-nilly.

Hector soon heard all this and a great deal more from his friend's wife. Madame Aubanel was Louise's bosom friend—in fact, the only friend she had. So he unconsciously made her his confidant. He was constantly on the look-out for a chance to speak to her alone, and never missed an opportunity of taking her arm. He was as assiduous in his attentions as Ferdinand, though he thought his friend made himself ridiculous by his honeymoon uxoriousness.

It must be said that though he was for ever talking about Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, Hector tried all the time to appear quite unconcerned, and, as he thought, successfully. But he was a very poor dissembler, and it was only his pre-occupation that prevented him from seeing an occasional sly smile flit across the face of the young wife. She knew well enough what was in the mind of her husband's friend.

Alas! he did not know that himself, at any rate at first. If he dissembled, it was in quite good faith. He was the first to be thrown off the scent. He stayed on at La Fresnaie, though he had made up his mind to go on the day after his friend's wedding, simply because he could not do

anything else ; he was quite convinced of that. He was at no loss for excuses and reasons of the best. In Touraine there is never a big entertainment but has its sequel next day, never a wedding without a succession of "breakfasts." Relatives and friends vie with each other in entertaining the happy pair. The cooks are kept busy all day for a fortnight, while the violins make night hideous ; balls, dinners, and picnics follow hard on each other. Not until the whole clan and clique are fairly tired out does this craze for social pleasures expire.

Now, could Hector refuse the invitations with which he was fairly snowed under ? By no means, unless he wanted to slight his friend. And wherever he went he kept meeting Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, whose mother had been drawn from her retirement by the marriage of her daughter's friend.

A less experienced Lothario than Hector would certainly have noticed a curious change in the young lady's manner. Gay and confiding as she had been on the day when they first met, she became more and more reserved. The better she knew him, the less at home she seemed to be with him, unlike what usually happens.

He did not notice this, although he prided himself on his knowledge of the sex, because the skill of the most accomplished rake deserts him as soon as he really falls in love, just as the best actor would make a terrible mess of his part if he really felt the passion he is supposed to feign. However, the days went by, and every evening Hector used to pack his trunk, only to unpack it again in the morning. He was disgusted with his own weak-



ness ; he felt that he was a bore and a fool into the bargain, to be staying there as he was, the proverbial third person that spoils company, playing gooseberry to a honeymoon couple, and the skeleton, so to speak, at love's feast. Often he felt heartily ashamed of himself. " Poor Ferdinand," he thought, " must be thoroughly sick of my company. If I had been in his place I should have politely shown friend Hector the door long ago."

But Ferdinand was not so hard-hearted ; he was delighted to have his friend with him. He was always saying the nicest things about love and friendship, and never troubled himself about anything except his uncanny good luck, which really was beginning to worry him a bit. He would have gone on like this for a century without suspecting what was on his friend's mind, if his wife had not given him a hint.

This she did one morning when they were breakfasting by themselves. Hector had got up with the sun that day, and gone out to try and get a few partridges, as he said, but really with the idea of doing a little scouting about near Madame d'Ambleçay's chateau. Ferdinand was singing the praises of this paragon of a friend, who was giving them weeks of his time and quite neglecting his own business—business of some sort he must have.

" Are you quite sure, dear," asked Madame Aubanel, " that it is only his friendship for you—for us—that is keeping M. de Malestrat here ? "

" Of course," replied Ferdinand, with his mouth full. " What other reason——"

" There might be some other reason—something very pretty, quite young, with golden hair——"

"Nonsense!"

"Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, for instance?"

"Do you mean to say you think he's in love with your little friend? What an idea? But, after all, why not? They say she's an awfully nice girl."

"They say! As if you didn't know her yourself!"

"Of course I know her; but you know very well, madam, that for the last two years I've had eyes for none but you."

"And I hope you'll always be like that."

"On my honour I shall," said Ferdinand earnestly. "But to return to what you think you've found out. Hector in love—not likely! Why hasn't he said anything about it to me? It would be the height of secretiveness to act like that—high treason to a friend. I'll have it out with him, and I warrant you I'll play father-confessor to some purpose."

As a matter of fact, the sinner was only too ready to confess.

After three weeks of the most absurd, but not the less uncomfortable, searchings of heart that lover ever had to go through, Hector had at last made up his mind.

At their first meeting, on the night of the ball, after a delightful day, he had had no time for reflection. The charming Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay engaged all his thoughts, and he was the helpless captive of her charms.

Only on the morrow the memory of Mademoiselle Blandureau, the unknown lady whom he was to marry, cruelly came to mar his happiness. He soon

banished the unwelcome thought, saying to himself that he would have plenty of time to think of his future wife—all the rest of his life, in fact—and so he continued to centre all his thoughts on Louise.

But the awkward memory returned, clearer and more insistent than ever. The figure of Mademoiselle Aurélie Blandureau insisted on intruding on Hector's dreams, cold and severe as remorse, saying :

"So this is how you behave, unworthy swain, while I am waiting for you. I see you have quite forgotten the letter you wrote my father hardly two months ago. Your treachery is disgraceful."

"Forgive me, reproachful shade," Hector would murmur. "You ought to know that this means nothing ; I shall be going away soon and forgetting the lady you so wrongly accuse me of putting before you."

"I am your wife, to all intents and purposes," the shade of Mademoiselle Aurélie would reply ; "all your thoughts henceforth should be of me only. You have no right to let another woman share your heart. Did your father promise you to me, or not ? You yourself have acknowledged that you are bound to me. Is this your way of meeting an obligation which has been ratified twice over ? What will my too-confiding father, M. Blandureau, say to such conduct !"

"Yes, alas !" murmured Hector. "What will M. Blandureau say ?"

And he bowed his head in shame. He could not help admitting that the shade of his *fiancée* was right, and he tried to appease her by fair promises.



At last the time came when, after much searching of heart, he had to confess to himself that he had absolutely lost his heart to Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay for good and all. He was more in love than he had ever been—more than he had thought anyone could be.

This was the last straw. The shade of Aurélie became inexorable. It haunted and worried him night and day, and gave him not a moment's respite. He felt himself caught in an inextricable labyrinth between the past and the present, with no hope of escape in the future. He racked his brains to find a way of reconciling what he regarded as his duty with his heart's desire. But, like all imaginative men, he could only think of romantic and impossible plans.

He would have liked to give up the idea of marrying Mademoiselle Blandureau, but he did not want to go back on his word. The idea of failing to meet his obligations when they fell due was terrible to him. Yet that seemed to be the only way of escape. He rejected it, embraced it again, worried over it a long time, and at last had to make up his mind to it.

"My father," he said to himself, "undertook this obligation on my behalf, but he had no right to do so. I was wrong in giving my consent. But, in point of fact, what did I promise? To love Mademoiselle Blandureau; but love cannot be constrained, and I love another. If I kept my word, I should still be acting dishonourably, for I should be storing up misery for myself and Aurélie as well. So I ought to ask for release. I am not responsible; it is not a case of fraudulent



bankruptcy, but of want of assets. I can fairly plead for a composition."

Resolved not to miss the chance of happiness which lay within his reach, he argued out with himself in full the case for breaking off his agreement.

In what would he be wronging Mademoiselle Aurélie? In nothing at all, that was clear. She had never set eyes on him, and therefore could not be in love with him: that made it certain that her feelings would not suffer. Being very rich, she could pick and choose among a number of admirers; so her prospects in life would not suffer either.

Thenceforward all that troubled him was the fact that he would have to ask M. Blandureau to release him from his word. This awful prospect kept him on thorns for two days more. But he fought down this scruple with the rest, and made up his mind to write when it was all over—in other words, after he had asked for the hand of Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay.

Accordingly, he bade all care adieu, dismissed the haunting spectre of Mademoiselle Aurélie, and, now that he had only his love to think of, looked about for an opportunity of boldly declaring himself.

"Boldly," however, is rather too strong a word. The dashing Hector had become uncommonly nervous. He would have waited a long time yet, had not Madame Aubanel brought matters to a head. For the hundredth or thousandth time, and as awkwardly as usual, he had just dragged Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay's name into the conversation.

"Do you think she objects to my staying here?" he asked. "I know she used to be your bosom friend, Madame, and yet she has not come to see you once since you have been married."

"Ah! you've noticed that, have you? It looks queer," said Madame Aubanel.

Ferdinand began to laugh, but Hector, though he blushed, stuttered, and got thoroughly confused, stuck to his point. Two minutes later, he was at it again with a question that was always in his mind.

"I suppose she's never thought about marriage at all?"

"Now, how should I know?" replied the young wife with a smile. "You ought to have asked her yourself. You've had plenty of opportunities when you've been dancing with her."

"Well, I did think of it," confessed Hector, "but to tell the truth, I hardly dared to."

"You should have had more pluck."

"What? You think there was a chance—she's been saying something to you——?"

"How you run on! I don't think or know anything, and no one's been telling me anything."

"Oh, Madame, you are unkind," replied Hector, much taken aback; "when I was making up my mind——"

"To ask for her hand? Well, have a try; but I'm afraid you won't find it all plain sailing."

"Well, I'm not one of the aristocracy, I admit."

"Oh! that wouldn't matter."

"What is the difficulty, then? Do tell me, Madame."

"It's a secret."

This was too much for Ferdinand, who had for the last five minutes been making desperate efforts to restrain his mirth. When he saw the woe-begone look on his friend's face on hearing these words pronounced, he could not contain himself longer. He fairly guffawed as he held his sides and rocked to and fro in his chair. He could scarcely splutter out a few sentences between the peals of merriment.

"Go on talking," my dear Hector," he said, "you're a masterpiece. Ah! if you could only see yourself now—you are too funny for words! You've never been so entertaining in your life!"

The infection had spread to Madame Aubanel, and she laughed as well. Hector got up in a rage.

"Well, yes," he cried. "I do love Mademoiselle Louise. Where's the joke in that?"

As they made no reply, he went on:

"Yes, I love her, and I've set my heart on marrying her. And I'm going to make a clean breast of it, too. I'm going straight off to ask for her hand to-day—this very minute. I shall go straight out of this house to Madame d'Ambleçay's

"And you'll tell her?" queried Ferdinand.

"I shall say to her: 'Madame, I love your daughter; I think that she regards me——'"

"You're conceited enough."

"I'm only repeating what your wife's just told me."

"Oh, come now, sir! the idea!" interrupted Madame Aubanel.

Hector looked daggers at her.

"I may have been cruelly misled by some ex-

pressions you used ; at any rate, I won't say that, then," he retorted. " No, I'll say—I'll say—well, really, I don't know what I shall say ; but I'll start talking and explain as I go on. In any case, I shall be done with this miserable uncertainty which has been putting me on the rack. I can't bear uncertainty—it's as bad as toothache to me. And when I've got a tooth that aches till I can't sleep, I don't hesitate to have it extracted." And he stalked out, leaving his friends in another fit of laughter.

" My word ! " said Ferdinand complacently, " the poor chap's quite off his head ; he's as crazy as I was the day before I married you ! "

" Now then, sir ! " said Madame Aubanel merrily, shaking her finger at her husband.

" I shall be crazy for you a long time yet, don't you fret. But to speak seriously, I hope Hector will pull off this match all right ; we'd start a regular colony of friends hereabouts. Do you really think he's got a chance ? "

" I've good reason to think Louise would be quite agreeable."

" Well, that's something, anyhow."

" Yes, but unfortunately I've just as good reason to think that Madame d'Ambleçay will put up a strong opposition to the match."

" Never mind ! One's courage rises wonderfully when one knows the girl is true ; for my part, I swear that if your relations had opposed our marriage——"

" Hush ! Here he is."

And Hector came in again, looking as solemn as a Deputy on the day of voting on the Address,



and dressed all in black like a notary or a hotel-manager, except for the straw-coloured gloves which he was pulling on.

"I'm off to the Chateau d'Ambleçay," said he in a determined tone.

His friends proceeded to give various good reasons why he should not go, but nothing they could say availed against his obstinacy.

"I want the business settled," said he. "I feel up to trying my fortune now, so I'm going to do it before my courage oozes out. They must have got the horses in now. Good-bye; wish me good luck."

As soon as he had gone, Madame Aubanel urged her husband to go after the rash lover, who, she thought, was certain to wreck his chances by some inconsiderate act or other.

"I shan't put myself out, I tell you," replied Ferdinand. "Do you really think, my dear girl, that he'll ever get as far as the Baroness's place? Not a bit of it! It's nearly an hour's drive from here; that'll give him time to think, and we'll soon see him come crawling back."

## CHAPTER V

### AN ENGLISH RIVAL

**A**S a matter of fact, Hector did begin to think a bit once he found himself alone in the carriage and fairly on the way to the Baroness's chateau.

What sort of adventure was this he had embarked upon? Was it not rather a silly one? To go off like this all by himself, and ask Madame d'Ambleçay, point-blank, for the hand of her daughter, was asking for a refusal. Why should he risk his life's happiness on a single throw? He might just as well wait, and try to win his way to the good graces of Louise's mother, and get his friends to help him.

But, though he turned all this over in his mind, he went on all the same; not because he did not like facing Ferdinand's chaff if he turned back, but in obedience to an inward prompting, an inexplicable presentiment, which bade him persevere.

On the way he met a beggar, and greatly to that individual's surprise, gave him all the money he had on him; if there had been a church by the roadside, he would have gone in and burnt a votive taper. The noise of the wheels scared some magpies which were picking about in the road, and he was glad to notice that there were

three of them and that they flew off to the right, for this is a sure sign of good luck.

In the courtyard of the chateau, a great mastiff, not any too well-favoured or clean, came and fawned on him and began to lick his hands. He patted it gently. The friendliness of the dog also seemed to him to be a good omen. Worry and waiting must have made him superstitious.

As he went through the garden he thought he caught a glimpse of a white dress disappearing in the shrubbery. He saw or rather guessed that it was Louise.

Presently he was conducted to the drawing-room and asked to wait, while Madame d'Ambleçay was informed of his visit. This gave him time to pull himself together. He needed it, for just now his proceedings seemed to him to be sheer madness.

A little more, and he would have crept out like a thief, when the baroness came in.

She is a lady of forty, but no one would credit her with that age. The calm, quiet life she has led has kept for her the youthful bloom which in the city the ladies lose at twenty. No one could guess that she has known trouble were it not for her snowy hair, which makes a strange contrast to her youthful-looking face, and is the best proof of the depth of her sorrow for the loss of her husband. Her voice is sweet and rather melancholy, and her manner gracious and dignified. In short, everything about her breathes the distinction which money can never buy.

Her fine eyes expressed a little surprise when they lighted on Hector, but only for a moment.

She thought that no doubt he was leaving La Fresnaie and had come to pay her a farewell call. With a graceful gesture she motioned him to an armchair and took her seat on a sofa.

Hector was looking very pale, like a man who has rashly plunged into a dangerous undertaking and suddenly realises it is too late to draw back. He could see now that he would have to be very tactful if he wished to win his bride, and managed to fight down his feelings a little. "I mustn't beat about the bush," he thought to himself, "but go straight to the point; I'll explain afterwards." So he spoke up clearly, though with a trembling voice.

"Madame," said he, "I have fallen in love with your daughter at first sight. If you would do me the honour of considering me worthy of her, my whole life would not be long enough for me to express my gratitude."

Madame d'Ambleçay rose hastily from her seat, putting her hand to her forehead. A number of little incidents which she had either not noticed at all or not considered worth troubling about flashed suddenly before her mind. She blamed herself for blindness and want of foresight.

"How careless of me!" she murmured, as she sat down again. "How careless!"

"Forgive me, Madame," continued Hector with an imploring gesture, "forgive me for my unconventional, I may say inconsiderate, way of approaching you. I have simply yielded to my affection, which has completely overpowered me. I know that according to the ordinary usages of society, a friend or relative undertakes to put



the question I have just asked you myself. But, alas! I have no relatives—I am quite alone in the world. I appreciate that you know hardly anything about me, but any day you like a whole town is ready to bear witness to the respectability of my family. If you wish to try my sincerity, Madame, I can wait for years——”

The cold, stern look that had come over the face of the baroness froze further words on Hector's lips, and there was silence for a moment, during which they both felt equally uncomfortable.

“Believe me, sir,” said Madame d'Ambleçay at last, still striving to overcome her emotion and surprise, “I consider myself highly honoured by the request you have just made. Still, it would have been better had you given me some notice of it beforehand, because had I known your intention I could have spared you the pain of a refusal, for it is impossible for me to accede to your wishes——.”

“Oh! Madame!” exclaimed Hector despairingly.

“Yes, sir, impossible!”

She said it firmly, as if her final resolution had been taken, and in reply was heard a stifled cry, apparently from the next room.

“Listen,” said the baroness apprehensively, motioning to Hector to be silent.

Almost immediately came the dull sound of someone sinking to the floor in a swoon, and Madame d'Ambleçay rushed to one of the doors of the drawing-room.

She parted the hangings and opened the door quickly, glanced into the adjoining room, and, turning to Hector, who had followed her, said,

"I must ask you to excuse me for a little while."

The door closed behind her, and the young man was left alone.

Who had uttered that cry? Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, evidently. So she was an eaves-dropper? Under any other circumstances Hector would have been much amused at this serio-comic situation, with its little touch of the deplorable vulgarity of spying. But for the present his sense of humour had deserted him. He had hardly the heart even to rejoice at the poor girl's involuntary betrayal of her feelings. What influence would it have on Madame d'Ambleçay's decision? That was the burning question for him.

Devoured by anxiety and worry, not knowing whether he ought to give way to hope or fear, he sank into an armchair, with ears alert for every sound in the house. His fate now hung in the balance. One word would put the final touch to his despair or bring happiness again to his heart.

He was so deeply immersed in his gloomy reflections that he did not see the door open to admit Louise's old tutor, and did not know the priest was there till he touched him gently on the arm.

Then he started like a sleeper who has been rudely awakened with a bucket of cold water. His look of blank amazement and wildly rolling eyes made the abbé smile in spite of himself.

"Sir," said he, "the baroness will no doubt be with you again shortly, but she did not like the idea of leaving you all alone, so she has asked me to keep you company."

The young man bowed in reply.

"This good old parson," said he to himself, "will be sure to let out what's going on, whether he means to or not."

Vain hope! Though Hector was as cunning and diplomatic as he knew how, he got nothing by it. To all his questions, roundabout or straightforward, the artful priest managed to reply at considerable length without telling him anything. Indeed, after more than an hour's conversation, the disgusted lover found himself not a whit the wiser. He was feeling much disconcerted, when to his great joy the baroness came to interrupt their tete-a-tete. The abbé almost immediately discreetly withdrew.

Madame d'Ambleçay's countenance was very sorrowful. Anyone could have seen she had been crying; and she still had some trouble to keep back her tears. Hector's heart would have been touched by the sad change in the poor lady's expression if he had not been so miserable himself. Grief makes one selfish.

"Before everything, sir," said the Baroness imploringly, "swear to me that, come what may, you will never breathe a word about what has just taken place."

"I swear I will not, madame."

The unmistakeable note of sincerity in Hector's voice was not lost on Madame d'Ambleçay. She thanked him only with a look, but that look said more than any words of thanks could have done.

"Just now, sir," she said, "my only reply to your unforeseen request was one word, 'Impossible.' But"—she blushed as she spoke—"then I had not spoken to my daughter. Now, after talking



things over with her, I may say I do not think that it will ever be possible for me to give you her hand."

Hector was fully alive to the difference in this second refusal. But it was another blow, nevertheless. He had been expecting something better. Again all his high hopes were dashed rudely to the ground. The baroness went on :

"My daughter's marriage has been definitely arranged a very long time ago. Baron d'Ambleçay himself on his death-bed told me the name of the husband he had fixed on for our daughter. I swore to carry out his wishes, and one does not break an oath taken at the bedside of a dying man. It may break my heart, it may break the heart of Louise as well, but we must keep our sacred vow. One cannot be altogether miserable if one is conscious of having done one's duty."

"Then is there no hope for me at all?" asked Hector.

"Listen to me, sir, and then you can judge for yourself. At the time of the Revolution, my late husband's grandfather left the country with his family, his wife and their five children. All his property was sequestered, and before long he found himself in the depths of poverty. He had taken refuge in London, and, as they knew no one in that city, he and all his family were in great danger of dying in sheer want from cold and hunger. To earn a morsel of bread for his children, he took a job as porter for a rich merchant, and his wife, one of the Cinq-Cygnés, went out as a charwoman in the neighbourhood. But what could they do? The wife fell dangerously ill. A heartless landlord was going to turn the unfortunate family into the



street, as they could not find the rent, and it would have been all up with them had not Providence, of whose help one must never despair, sent them a saviour. A rich baronet took up my husband's grandfather and extended the most generous hospitality to him and all his family, and that not for a few days or months, but for years together. In fact, the d'Ambleçay family owed their existence to this generous man, a true friend in need. And later on, when the stormy days of the Revolution were over, it was by his means that they got back to France and recovered some of their property. The remembrance of this kindness has been handed on in our family like an heirloom, sir."

"I understand," replied Hector, weakly.

"Well, sir, to-day we find ourselves in a position to discharge this obligation. The family of this noble Englishman met with misfortune in its turn—his son was ruined. Several times my husband went and put his whole fortune at his disposal; but he would never accept a penny from those who were indebted to his father for what was more precious than life itself. He might have set to work, undertaken something or other, and tried to recover his prosperity; but you know the profound, insurmountable horror the English nobility feel for everything connected with trade. The baronet shut himself up in his ancestral country-seat, preferring to bear poverty patiently rather than enjoy riches acquired in what he considered an unbecoming occupation for one of his rank. At last he died, leaving his son nothing but poverty and an unblemished name. It is this son, sir, whom Louise must marry."

"Ah!" cried Hector, carried away by his despair, "the Englishman only parted with some of his money, but you, madame, are sacrificing your daughter."

"This marriage, sir," said the baroness sternly, "was an arrangement between this young man's father and my husband. It was the only way we had of helping a family which had been cruelly tried, and was too proud to accept charity in return for charity. For it was charity they had shown to the d'Ambleçay family. The young baronet has been prepared for this for a long time; he is aware of our agreement, he knows that my daughter is his destined bride, the date fixed for their marriage is drawing near, and, to be quite candid with you——"

Hector's livid paleness alarmed the baroness, and she hesitated a minute after uttering these words. Then she took courage, and said faintly, with averted head:

"We are expecting him now at any moment."

"You are cruel, madame," returned Hector, bitterly. "There was no need to soften your refusal."

"I modified what I said at first, because before I had spoken to Louise I was against you; now I am on your side. I would have done all I could to hasten the celebration of this marriage of hers, but now I shall do nothing——"

"Then what are you hoping for?"

"I put my trust in God, sir. Perhaps my daughter's *fiance* may forget his promise, perhaps he may not care for Louise—who knows what may happen?"

Hector shook his head despondently.

"If one could only help him to be forgetful ! Ah ! if I knew him, I would go and tell him——"

"You would tell him nothing at all, sir. If you so much as mentioned my daughter's name in his presence, your chances would be worse than they are to-day."

"But I am rich. If half my fortune——"

"If the question were only one of money, it would have been settled long ago."

"Ah !" said Hector under his breath, "what a piece of tragic folly it is to arrange marriages in advance like this ! My father also, madame," he continued aloud, "had decided that I must marry the daughter of a friend of his. And this friend is expecting me——"

"So there was this other obstacle in the way, and you did not tell me about it ?"

"If only that were all !" he said recklessly.

"I can excuse your words, sir," said Madame d'Ambleçay stiffly, "for it is your heart, not your head, that prompted them. Please bear in mind that even if the baronet failed to keep his promise to his father, I would not bestow Louise's hand on you unless your *fiancee* were married. . . . But I must beg of you to allow me to go back to my daughter, and to put your trust in Providence. There is still one favour, though, that I should like to ask of you——"

A gesture of assent from Hector interrupted her.

"I know what you mean, madame," said he ; "and I will leave La Fresnaie to-night."

He took his leave of the baroness, and withdrew in despair, with his head in a whirl, and his bosom swelling with grief. He felt he was leaving his



heart behind in that little Touraine chateau. As he walked slowly across the courtyard to his carriage, trying to guess which of the many windows belonged to Louise's room, the abbé rejoined him. He bowed sadly to the priest, envying him his good luck. Did he not spend his life almost side by side with Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay? He saw her every day, and could talk to her at any time.

"My dear sir," said the old tutor to him, "I beg your pardon for following you like this, but did you not say just now that you were going to Paris soon?"

"I shall be there to-morrow," said Hector with a sigh.

"Indeed, that's fortunate! I should be very much obliged to you if you would be so kind as to execute a little commission for me . . . ."

"I am quite at your service, sir."

"Oh, it's only to give this letter from me to Mademoiselle Louise's *fiance*, Sir James Wellesley, who happens to be staying in Paris just now, at the Hotel des Etrangers in the Rue de Rivoli."

Hector's hand shook with joy as he took the letter, and the abbé, as he went with him to the carriage, could not thank him enough.

"What's the meaning of this?" thought Hector, as soon as he was alone again. "Madame d'Ambleçay had not told me this confounded Englishman's name; is this a roundabout way of doing so now? Does she mean to give me her tacit permission to do all I can to break off the engagement? No, that's not likely. Is it Louise who—ah, no! no! that's not possible; it is some idea of the abbé's—I fancy he's as smart as they make them, for all



his airs of simplicity. His pupil's grief has made him take my side. He knows the proverb, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves,' and it's plain that he's giving me a hint to assist Providence a bit, and has put the means of doing so into my hands. A word to the wise is enough! I'll not breathe a word about Madame d'Ambleçay to M. Wellesley, but if I ever let him get as far as Touraine, may I lose Louise!"

Hector found his friends at La Fresnaie quite concerned at his long absence, and his depressed countenance did not reassure them. "Have you failed?" asked Madame Aubanel.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say, and I haven't much hope left either."

Hector was a man of his word; he said nothing about the scene in the drawing-room, but he gave them the gist of his conversation with Louise's mother. When he told them about the letter the abbé had given him to deliver for him, he found Madame Aubanel agreed with his conclusions.

"He's giving you a helping hand," said she, "but be very careful. I've known the baroness ever since I was a little girl, and I've never known her alter her mind. Don't say a word about Louise to Sir James. The one thing that surprises me is that she did not refuse you absolutely. There's something behind that; I don't know what, but I'll find out. I ought to tell you that I know the history of the d'Ambleçay family, and about this agreement . . . ."

"And you never said a word to me about it!" cried Ferdinand. "Here's my wife with a secret she's been keeping from me already—that's high

treason, if you like. But what do you mean to do, poor old chap? "

" Well, go off this very night, in the first place ; then I'll be guided by circumstances. What would you do yourself, if you were in my place? "

" To tell the truth, I really don't know. But I will say this, that if a rival—especially an Englishman—had come between Herminie and me...."

" Well? "

" I'd have strangled him straight off, without mercy. For in the first place, I can't stand the English."

" That's a pity! I must admit I've rather a weakness for them."

" What an infatuation! "

" I renounce it, then. But, all the same, your method is too rough."

" Whatever you do, Mr. Hector," put in Madame Aubanel in conclusion, " be careful, be very careful."

A few hours later, Ferdinand was taking his friend to the railway station which lay nearest, though even this was three leagues off.

Hector was explaining to him an ingenious and infallible plan he had just thought out.

" What I mean to do, my dear chap," he said, " is to go and look up this damned Englishman, show him all the attention in my power, take him into my confidence, and put my house and my banking-account at his disposal."

" That's very generous of you."

" Isn't it? Then I've got him. He becomes my bosom friend, we are always together, we have but one mind, he looks at everything as I do."

" That's all right so far ; but then? "

"Then, my dear Ferdinand, I proceed to inoculate this son of perfidious Albion with the virus of all the vices of our cankered civilisation. I stir up in his heart all the passions which destroy feeling, intellect, and health, and lead to bankruptcy. I make him a gambler, a drunkard, and a libertine. I make him plunge over head and ears into the most loathsome depths of debauchery. I want to have him, in a year's time from now, lost to honour and overwhelmed with debt, without a hair on his head or a penny in his purse...."

"Easy, Hector; your hatred is carrying you beyond all decent feeling."

"I've not finished yet. Now that he's ruined, I come to his assistance; I lend him as much money as he wants, and more. I fatten up his vices to some purpose. I give him a hundred, two hundred, five hundred thousand francs to play with, if he wants it—well, it'll be devilish strange if Madame d'Ambleçay accepts a man like that for a son-in-law. However, granting that she is ready to sacrifice her daughter to such a waster, then I'm ready to put the screw on. I've taken measures beforehand and made the Englishman sign notes of hand; so I sell him up, and send him to rot in prison at Clichy...."

"The devil!" said Ferdinand, "you are a cold-blooded villain, and no mistake. My idea of doing the thing was rough, I admit, and yours is quite gentle, but it's quite as outrageous in other respects."

"Don't upset yourself, my dear boy. On the day after I'm married to Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay, I settle an income of twenty thousand francs on him for life. As to the rest of his troubles, he must

put up with them. What does he mean by coming sneaking around to try to marry the girl I'm in love with ? ”

By this time the two friends had reached the station. When Hector had taken his ticket and booked his luggage, Ferdinand drew him aside.

“Listen,” said he mysteriously, “a photographer came to La Fresnaie this summer....”

“What on earth are you chattering about....”

“Don't be so impatient. He wasn't a very brilliant exponent of the art, but I got him to take a portrait of my wife. Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay seized the opportunity to have some photographs taken as well. My wife had one of them, and I've stolen it for you ; here it is.”

“Oh ! my dear Ferdinand, give it to me, quick ; you are the best fellow alive. Shall I give you the last drop of my blood ? ”

“Not to-day, thanks. The portrait doesn't flatter her, but you know fair girls never do come out well. Well, good-bye ! The train's just going to start ; send me your address, and we'll keep you posted—”

Hector got into a carriage, sincerely blessing the abbé, Madame Aubanel, Ferdinand, and the art of photography with all its professors.

He was considerably disgusted to find he had not got the compartment all to himself. But when the other passengers dropped off to sleep, he took the photograph of Mademoiselle Louise out of his pocket a hundred times at least and paid the prettiest compliments to it.





## CHAPTER VI

### QUEEN BLANDURETTE

**A**T Paris, Hector was anxiously awaited. His letter to the Blandureau family had given them three months' notice, and the time had not been wasted. Everything was ready for the arrival of the future bridegroom. The household was as smart as a regiment before a review. The servants, in their new liveries, were a sight for sore eyes, the drawing-room furniture was all new, from the door-stops and window-jambs to the "old masters" which the ex-merchant likes buying—if the price is not too high—to encourage art.

M. Blandureau was full of feverish impatience for his future son-in-law's arrival. All preparations had been made; why did he not come? And he counted the days. Madame Blandureau seemed to be on the fidget as well, though in her case it was rather through curiosity than anxiety.

Mademoiselle Aurélie alone did not seem to take any interest in the approaching great event. If she felt any anxiety, she did not betray it. She possessed her soul in perfect calm and patience, as became an old pupil of the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

Everybody has known or knows the Blandureau family, or if not, they very soon will.

Describing them is like painting a realistic picture

in words: "Interior of the house of a merchant who has retired with a huge fortune." The picture will be a very fair illustration of the class as long as men get rich in business, which is likely to be a good long time yet.

People who had had dealings with M. Blandureau in his capacity of commission-agent for the United States—a business which has fallen off a great deal of late—say that he is an honest man all round. He is all round as regards his person as well. His portly paunch seems to want a sling under it; his legs are too short, and his arms not long enough, either. His head is somewhat bald on top, and his features have a rather sharp expression. His quick, beady eyes are an index of his character, for he cannot keep still for five minutes together.

M. Blandureau would be the best fellow alive if he could forget about his money. Sometimes he does, and then he is the best of company. You can talk to him, and he will listen with the greatest politeness, and any remarks he may make will be sensible and unaffected.

But if he happens to remember that he is a millionaire, good-bye to good manners. You soon find you are no longer talking to a gentleman, but to a blunt, unmannerly boor. He rides rough-shod over everybody, interrupts them when they speak, and talks the greatest nonsense in a dictatorial tone. Then he is the self-made man at his very worst.

The bane of M. Blandureau's existence is boredom. He wanted to make a big pile, and he has done it. He has realised his dearest wish and attained his end in life, and now finds he has nothing left to

make the said life worth living. I am sure he curses the vanity that urged him to retire from business. So sure as the last day of the month comes round he gets the cold shivers because there are no bills falling due. The days drag on unconscionably, though he does everything he can think of to kill time; his chief pleasure is reading the papers, and he might even start one of his own if he were convinced that those wretched radicals are not casting envious eyes on his property.

His sudden changes of mood are pretty unpleasant for people about him, but they are never seriously annoyed, because they know that he is really good-natured enough at heart. They know, too, that, petty tyrant as he is, he has to put up with a good deal of bullying for his own part. No despot was ever so abject a slave as well. His daughter, the haughty Aurélie, rules him with a rod of iron. He has never dared to stand up to this girl of his, whom he worships with very genuine awe. He is swayed by her whims more readily than any weathercock by the breeze, and when he feels ashamed of his weakness, he restores his self-respect by bullying his unfortunate wife.

Thus it comes about that poor Madame Blandureau is the slave both of her husband, whom she fears and respects—for he has got on in the world—and her daughter, whom she admires and dreads at once for her high spirit and haughty ways.

A clerk in the passport office would find a description of Madame Blandureau very easy to draw up—forehead of medium height, eyes of medium shade, stature medium—in fact, everything about her is medium, except her intellect, which is poor.

Her greatest intellectual pleasure is to sit absorbed in one of M. d'Ennery's plays, and her patronage has had its share in the well-deserved success of "The Sheep's Trotter."

This poor lady thinks she is lucky to be so well off, but as a matter of fact her money is her worst affliction.

She has thirty-six dresses, each more magnificent than the last, and not one of them suits her. She would like to dress simply, but her husband will have her dress up to his money. She would like to take a walk now and again, but her husband will not let her put her nose out-of-doors unless she goes in a carriage, with a footman on the box beside the coachman. Worst of all, she has to manage a houseful of maids whose pert ways and smart appearance impress her enormously and impose on her just as much.

Mademoiselle Blandureau is not in the least like her mother. She is the autocratic ruler of the household, a queen on whose power there is no constitutional check; everyone's will has to give way to hers. Purse-proud lower-middle-class people love to bow their necks to the yoke of their insolent offspring.

Mademoiselle Aurélie's character is plainly to be read in her appearance. Proud and wayward, she can find no pleasure in anything that does not pander to her outrageous vanity. She goes through life aping royalty, as it were. She is a tall girl, with a fine majestic walk, very dark, and with a hard expression. Her black eyes have the cold glitter of steel. Never will you see a gleam of tenderness there, nor a tear, except tears shed in



temper. Her curt, abrupt way of speaking is even haughtier than her look.

She may, perhaps, be fond of her parents. It is true that she treats her mother as if she were just a cut above a lady's maid, but she looks on her father with a favourable eye for making such a big pile, though it must be admitted that she has never forgiven him for being born with such a name as Blandureau.

This ridiculous, silly, vulgar name—as she would call it—was the bane of her girlhood, and is still a very sore point with her.

Her horror for her family name goes back to her schooldays at the Convent.

When she found herself among the daughters of the old aristocracy, she made the fatal mistake of trying to give herself airs over them because their parents were not so rich as hers. She was well paid out for this. Her schoolfellows gave her to understand that a girl whose father has such a name as Blandureau is only fit to marry some broken-down aristocrat and furbish up his shabby coat-of-arms with her money, and that in this world below there is only one social advantage that is worth having—to be able to boast of a Crusader among one's ancestors.

The teasing of her schoolfellows made Aurélie furious; she gave herself more airs than ever, so the baiting got worse as well, and she was given the nickname of "Blandurette," which stuck to her for good. No pen could tell how much this annoyed her.

At last, on one breaking-up day, when her father, by her express orders, had sent a regular state-coach of a carriage for her, her enemies during their play-

time concocted a long ballad, to the tune of Cadet-Roussel, in her honour. The first stanza ran :

Our high and mighty Blandurette  
Looks like a dressed-up scullery-pet ;  
To show off her best clothes, ha ! ha !  
She's got a barrow from papa.  
Breeding will out—it can't be hid,  
Say, isn't she a charming kid ?

The other half-a-hundred verses were no worse than this—and no cleverer either, but they were quite enough to make Mademoiselle Aurélie nearly die with rage ; she did go into hysterics, and next day left the Convent for good. After that, her education was continued at home. But that school nickname of " Blandurette " was a bitter memory for the rest of her life. She has never been to see any of her old schoolfellows, and if she meets one of them by accident she looks as if she could eat her.

The only reason why Mademoiselle Aurélie's thoughts ever strayed to her marriage was that it gave her a hope of getting rid of this wretched name. The day on which she could change it would be the happiest in her life.

It is true that Hector was not of noble birth, but his name, Malestrat, had a nice dignified ring about it. Besides, she hoped to get her husband to put a " de " before it, or even to get a title, which they say is not so very difficult provided only you've got the money.

At the time when this chapter opens, the whole of the Blandureau family were installed in their country house at Ville d'Avray, although winter was just setting in. It is " good form " to stay and

be bored to death in the country till the beginning of the new year; the noble families who live in the Faubourg St. Germain are not too high and mighty to practise this bit of economy.

The house at Ville d'Avray is the outcome of M. Blandureau's boredom.

He spent three years and nearly five hundred thousand francs on this erection, which he playfully calls his chocolate-box.

As a matter of fact, it is constructed after the style of the cakes which restaurant-keepers put on as the centre-piece at wedding-breakfasts and club dinners. All the known styles of architecture meet and clash in it in a perfectly glorious muddle. It has towers and pointed arches, pepper-box cupolas and an Italian peristyle, mediæval gables, Greek columns and fantastic turrets, and a verandah like a planter's bungalow in the tropics to finish off with. There are a few architects in Paris who are enjoying incomes of a hundred thousand francs as a reward for decorating the landscape round about Paris, which used to be so pretty, with monstrosities of this kind.

"Blandureau's Folly," as the neighbours have charitably nicknamed it in compliment to the retired merchant, is built partly of stone and partly of bricks of every colour of the rainbow. Its walls are agreeably diversified by paintings and inlaid work in marble and porcelain. It looks like something Chinese, say, a pagoda, and as you catch sight of it you involuntarily stop to see if some Oriental figure of fun is not coming out.

The house stands in the middle of a large and well-timbered park. M. Blandureau, if he had had



his way, would have cut down the old trees and put in Japanese sumachs instead ; but Mademoiselle Aurélie would not let him. So he had to expend his energies on the garden, which he tried to make into a miniature edition of the Bois de Boulogne. It can boast of rockeries, a grotto, two bridges, a pond and a stream ; there is even a waterfall as well. An old horse works all day long to draw up the water for the stream from a well ; and while the poor drudge is baited the waterfall has to stop.

Hector alighted at Ville d'Avray at four o'clock in the afternoon on the day after he left La Fresnaie. M. Blandureau, who had not seen him since he was ten years old, did not know him till he had told his name. Then he hugged him effusively, called him his son, and shouted for every servant in the house, to say nothing of breaking a hand-bell. The noise brought Madame Blandureau on the scene in a hurry, and her husband introduced their future son-in-law to her.

" But where's Aurélie got to ? " he asked. " She must be in the garden."

So the garden was scoured to find her, but without success.

As soon as she had heard the news of her future husband's arrival, she had rushed straight off to her room. As she only " slipped into a few rags," she was hardly there a couple of hours. Then she swept down in all her glory, to the rustling of a silk dress which trailed half-a-yard behind her.

She looked like a statue of Dignity that had come to life and stepped down from its pedestal.

" Come along, come along ! " cried M. Blandureau



to her, and the worthy man took her hand and put it in Hector's.

"Now, my children, kiss each other," said the happy father.

But the children did not feel like kissing.

Mademoiselle Aurélie drew back with a curtsy as cold as it was correct. Hector bowed low in reply.

The young lady had already made up her mind that her destined husband would never win her heart.

Hector was saying to himself, in spite of his engaging smile :

"Good Lord ! I can't stand this stately female ! If I hadn't already made up my mind to break off the engagement, I should do so now."

So Hector at once set to work to study Mademoiselle Blandureau's character, with the idea of making her dislike him as quickly as possible and so getting his dismissal. The trouble was that M. Blandureau had taken a great fancy to him ; he thought he looked a good fellow, and our retired merchant likes men of that type.

But it is the one type that Mademoiselle Aurélie cannot stand. Hector has the manners of a gentleman, which is as much as to say that he is unaffected. Mademoiselle Aurélie, whose social experience has not been very wide, thinks this unaffectedness is a sign of low breeding. Her idea of distinction is striking attire, an imposing manner, a solemn countenance, and, in short, that self-confidence which gives so many blockheads the insufferable manners they inflict on the world at large.

By the end of an hour, Hector could read his *fiancee* like a book. So at the dinner-table he talked with the sportive humour and boisterous gaiety of

a commercial traveller. Unawed by the prim look on Mademoiselle Aurélie's countenance, he persisted in calling M. Blandureau "papa-in-law" and his wife "mamma-in-law."

He talked business all through dinner, garnishing his conversation liberally with figures. It is true that he does not know anything about business, but that doesn't matter; he talked on gaily about speculations, rises and falls of the market, freights, and ships in lading.

He had, he said, hit on a very fine idea for a big enterprise which he meant to undertake as soon as possible after he got married. His plan was to make a corner in Mexican raw hides, and so hold up supplies; then he could impose his own terms on tanning concerns in France, keep up the price of hides, and make a handsome profit out of the speculation.

This style of conversation made Mademoiselle Aurélie turn quite pale with disgust.

But when the dessert came on, Hector talked quite differently. He got quite sentimental, and said a great deal about his dreams of the future. He hoped, he said, to find peace and happiness at last when he got married; his wife could be his cashier and look after his accounts and his business correspondence.

"Just think, Mademoiselle," said he, addressing Aurélie directly, "of the big things we could engineer and the huge profits we should make, for there will be hardly any expense in staff salaries."

The young lady made no reply, but privately determined to do her best to upset her future husband's plans. ¶

Hector overdid his part a bit, but that was all to the good, for at last he almost managed to disgust M. Blandureau as well as his daughter.

However, as it was getting very late, the merchant did not like the idea of Hector's going back to Paris that night. He offered to put him up, but a sign from his daughter prevented him from pressing the invitation. "Perhaps you're right, after all," said he to the young man, "our house is pretty nearly uninhabitable at this time of year."

He was quite right—his house is pretty uninhabitable enough at any time of year.

As Hector took his leave, he whispered in M. Blandureau's ear: "Well, when is the wedding to be?"

"Oh!" replied the other, "there's no hurry; we'll have another talk about it, as there's plenty of time."

Hector went off in high delight. "Well, that part of the business is settled all right," said he to himself. "Now then, there's only the Englishman left to be tackled!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE RIVALS MEET

**A**T nine o'clock next morning, Hector, decorously attired in black, although it was so early in the day, presented himself at the Hotel des Etrangers.

"Sir James Wellesley?" he said inquiringly to a servant.

"If monsieur will be so good as to come with me, I will take him to the gentleman," said the man.

So Hector was shown into a sitting-room and asked to wait.

The room was on the fourth storey, and quite small; it was fitted up with a kind of furniture one always finds in hotels—no doubt it is manufactured specially for them, since one never sees anything like it elsewhere.

On a large table in the middle of it lay a map of Paris, well garnished with pins, while on the mantelpiece was a complete collection of the books that are published for the benefit of our neighbours across the Channel: "Promeneur à Paris," "Guide des Musées," "Art de connaître Paris en trois jours," "Traveller's Illustrated Guide to Paris," and Murray's "Guide."

Hector had only waited five minutes when the door opened and Sir James appeared.

He is a man of about thirty years of age, and a typical specimen of the traditional Englishman. It is true that his hair is not very fair, but his whiskers are as red as anyone could wish. His complexion is as clear and fresh as a schoolboy's.



His eyes are a nice china-blue, without the faintest trace of expression ; he is very tall and as stiff as a poker, seems to have an impediment in his speech, and is got up in the latest Regent Street style, which is copied from the fashions in the Rue Vivienne. Sir James is the embodiment of cant ; never did a baronet so stately, cold, polished, reserved and bashful parade his British pride on French soil. Only once in his life has he fallen short of perfect correctness in behaviour, and that was on the boat between Dover and Calais, when he failed to control his unruly stomach, so that an old lady near him had to say " For shame ! " and " Shocking ! "

Sir James knows very little French ; so he was still struggling with embarrassed tongue for words when Hector opened the conversation by asking : " It is to M. Wellesley that I have the honour of speaking, is it not ? "

" Yes," replied the baronet.

So Hector took the abbé's letter out of his pocket, and, handing it to his rival, said, " Here is a letter, sir, which I have been asked to give you."

" Excuse me, sir," said Sir James as he broke the seal.

As the abbe had thoughtfully written the letter in English, it only took M. Wellesley a few seconds to run through it.

The old priest had no doubt said some kind things about Hector, for Sir James's manner underwent a complete and immediate change. He became as courteous, not to say cordial, as he had been stiff before.

After an hour's conversation, though it was rather laboriously conducted owing to linguistic difficulties, the two young men felt quite at home together.

Sir James told his new friend that he was on his way to Touraine to get married. He was only stopping in Paris to improve his knowledge of French so as to be able to speak it intelligibly when he met his destined bride.

Hector thought that his English acquaintance would have to stay in Paris for a good long time.

The latter then admitted he was feeling terribly bored in Paris ; he did not know a soul in the place and was living all alone. Moreover, he always fancied that everyone he spoke to made fun of him. If he went into a shop, the shopkeeper always fleeced him ; if he went to the theatre he could not follow the piece ; he did not even like the ballet at the Opera, where he thought the gyrations of Mademoiselle Emma Livry were too French altogether. In short, he was very dull and very disappointed with Paris, as he said with a sigh.

But his face lighted up when Hector told him that he was expecting to be in Paris for several weeks, and would put himself entirely at his disposal, show him the sights, and introduce him to the people he knew. Sir James, with feeling in his tone swore eternal friendship to his rescuer, as he called him.

" Yes, we shall be the best of friends " said Hector to himself ; " you're so green that I shall be able to carry out my plan with ease, and I'll stick to you till you're quite out of court as a husband."

Then, to cement their new-found friendship, Aurélie's *fiance* proposed to the Englishman to take him to M. Blandureau's house that very evening. But, knowing the susceptibility of a Tory baronet, he took good care not to tell him that his friend M. Blandureau had made his money in business.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PLUTOCRAT AND ARISTOCRAT

**A** COMMERCIAL career, so they say, is not exactly calculated to bring out the higher qualities of heart and mind. For all that, it is business life that has dowered M. Blandureau with a rare and shining virtue which influences his whole character and gives him a certain originality as men go nowadays.

In his vanity he is a fanatical upholder of what he calls "commercial morality." This enthusiasm dates from the very start of his commercial life, when he made a point of paying all his promissory notes on the exact day when they fell due.

He might have stopped at that, and not have worried himself with unnecessary scruples. The business man's code is liberal enough to suit anybody. You buy, you settle the date, you pay up, and that is all people expect or care about.

But M. Blandureau wanted to be a cut above the ordinary business man. His name on a bill made it as good as a bank-note, so he must needs make his word as good as his signature. Thereupon he strained every nerve to fulfil his verbal engagements as scrupulously as his contracts in writing, and was wont to talk very contemptuously of rogues who did not admit an obligation unless there were something down against them in black and white. If you were doing any business with him, and he



said, "That's agreed on," you could make your mind easy, just as if you had had a contract drawn up by a couple of notaries.

Several times he found himself involved in unprofitable speculations, with nothing to bind him but his word; but though he could have got out of them, he refused to do so, and bore his losses without a murmur. If he had been poor and struggling, people might have called him a fool; but as he was rich, he was all the better thought of.

There was something rather fine in the way in which he insisted on meeting his obligations in affairs of this kind; he had always paid up to the last centime. And so, in New York, Paris and London, it was always said on 'Change that Blandureau's word was as good as gold.

This commercial proverb was intensely flattering to the merchant's self-esteem, and made him more conceited than ever. It was his pride and joy. After all, there are plenty of mottoes to be seen under coats-of-arms on splendid carriages which are not worth half as much.

"The Bank of France," M. Blandureau would often say with conscious pride, "wants three signatures on a draft before it hands over the cash, but it would lend money on my word alone."

Perhaps that was going rather too far; but even the errors of such a nature are pardonable. There are so many people who have not enough good in them to excuse their faults!

Vanity, like nobility, has its obligations. M. Blandureau realised this, and towards the close of his business career he would have unhesitatingly gone bankrupt and failed to meet his obligations



on due date rather than "fail to liquidate his word"—to use his own picturesque phrase.

Now that he has retired from business, he carries out his principles in private life; they are his rule of conduct, and regulate his most trivial actions; in fact, his commercial morality has become a regular craze with him.

Never be so ill-advised as to fail to keep any appointment you may have made with him, unless you want to lower yourself immensely in his estimation; he would say you had neither honesty nor consideration about you.

On the other hand, you can depend on him absolutely if he has given you this precious word of his, which is honoured at the Bank, on any matter, however trivial.

If you have asked him to dinner, and he has accepted, you can be sure he'll turn up, come rain, snow, or thunder bolts; if he is ill, he'll come all the same; he would get up from his death-bed to keep the appointment. And he will do justice to the dinner, and eat and drink in appreciation of your hospitality, if he dies of indigestion when he gets home.

With a character like this, M. Blandureau could not dream of breaking off the marriage which had been agreed on long ago between him and M. Malestrat, senior; he had never even conceived of the possibility of so doing. Hector had been lucky enough to prejudice himself in his eyes, but he might have got himself disliked a thousand times more without any danger to an agreement he considered sacred.

Thus Hector was grievously mistaken in thinking

his affairs in this direction had taken a favourable turn. If on the evening of their first meeting M. Blandureau had given an evasive reply to his future son-in-law when he asked, "When is the wedding to be?" it was only because he wanted time for reflection. He had been bitterly disappointed, and could not control his disgust and irritation; and so he obeyed one of those first impulses one should always distrust.

Hector had not gone far before the ex-merchant had begun to reproach himself bitterly for giving him a reply which might awake some suspicion in his mind, and lead him to think that he was being played with and would be politely given the cold shoulder under some pretext or other presently. If it had not been so late, M. Blandureau would certainly have gone after his son-in-law-to-be; but he did not even know his address in Paris. So he went to bed, resolving to excuse himself to Hector on the morrow.

"I don't care much about this match," said he to himself, "but for that very reason I ought to do my best to bring it off, as my honour is at stake."

This, in effect, was his reply, when Mademoiselle Aurélie told him very emphatically that she could never love the husband he had chosen for her.

"I can do nothing, my poor child," he told her; "we are involved in a speculation which is not turning out well, and must take the consequences. It is all the more creditable to keep one's word when one must suffer for it, and we'll keep ours. Blandureau's word is as good as gold."

Seeing that the young lady's expression was eloquent of dissatisfaction, he added: "Come, you

mustn't take it to heart so. What have I promised M. Malestrat? To give him your hand. So marry him you must. But fortunately I have not promised him your heart as well. So if you find you don't like him any more when you are married to him, well! you can sue for a legal separation, or even arrange in a friendly way to lead your lives apart, if he is agreeable."

Mademoiselle Aurélie could not help smiling at this original way of regarding the holy estate of matrimony, and she did not protest further. She knew that nothing she could say to her father would be of the slightest use, and had resigned herself to the idea of marrying Hector. When it came to the point, she did not think the prospect absolutely intolerable, since no one else so far had succeeded in winning her heart. "He'll do just as well as anyone else," she thought, and already she had in her mind a deep-laid plan for getting the upper hand of him as soon as they were married.

Nobody troubled to ask Madame Blandureau for her opinion, for the simple reason that the good lady never has any in the ordinary way. But this time she had; and it was that her future son-in-law was the nicest and most attractive young fellow a girl could be engaged to. "My dear, good boy," she thought, "thank heaven you won't have time to find out my daughter's disposition; you'll be married to her in a fortnight, and so I shall be able to spend the rest of my days in peace. Heaven bless you as I do!"

Such was the state of feeling in the Blandureau family when, on the day after his arrival, Hector



determined to bring his new-found friend, Sir James Wellesley, to Ville d'Avray.

This was the young baronet's first introduction to that French society which is still credited, in London as in nearly all the capitals in Europe, with being the wittiest, the most cynical, and the most pitilessly critical in the world; all of which goes to show that a good name is better than riches, and that one can live for a long time on a well-established reputation.

Sir James had spent part of the day in preparing himself for this momentous and decisive introduction. Just because he was more afraid of ridicule than of anything else, he had managed to exaggerate all his eccentricities. He was more icy and solemn and starched than ever; in fact, so stiff that he could hardly move. He walked like a clockwork figure, and his angular bend when he bowed reminded one of a pocket-knife being shut up. His countenance expressed to perfection that sovereign contempt for the world in general which is one of the Briton's prerogatives. In short, although at heart he did not feel at all comfortable at the prospect of coming up for judgment before French ladies, he had the unshakeable assurance and sublime self-confidence of a man who knows his worth, and feels sure that if a hair were plucked from his head, Lord Palmerston would think nothing of fitting out a hundred men-of-war and spending a million pounds to compel restitution and have that hair put back in its place again.

Hector's idea in offering to introduce the young Englishman to Parisian society had simply been to lay the foundations of a friendship which he hoped



would be the ruin of his hated rival. He certainly never thought that gentleman would be in any way a social success.

He never made a greater mistake in his life !

The Blandureau family were absolutely fascinated by Sir James Wellesley ; he seemed to them a glorious embodiment of the great traditions of the nobility. Madame Blandureau said afterwards that she had thought that day when she saw him come in that he must be an emperor at the very least.

Hector found himself immediately condemned to play second fiddle ; indeed, he was so absolutely eclipsed that he might as well not have been there. The future son-in-law's nose was quite put out of joint by the newcomer.

Never had the vain old merchant done the honours of his house with so much grace and affability.

He showered the most delicate—one might almost say dutiful—attentions on his unaccustomed guest. But when he found that Sir James was heir to a peerage, and had an uncle in the House of Lords, he became absolutely obsequious.

He now always addressed him as " My lord," and brought out the title with an obviously gratified emphasis—made a mouthful of it, as they say.

No one would have recognised the M. Blandureau who makes such a parade of his theories of radicalism and equality. In spite of his habit of saying bluntly what he thinks of the clergy and the nobility whenever he gets the chance, he did not seem at all displeased at having a genuine specimen of the English aristocracy, the proudest and haughtiest on earth, as a guest at his table.

If he took any notice of Hector, it was to con-

gratulate him on his aristocratic acquaintances, and thank him for having thought of introducing this noble foreigner.

Mademoiselle Aurélie was, if possible, more deeply impressed than her father, and she had no more idea of concealing the fact than he had. Before Sir James Wellesley's glance, which expressed nothing but self-satisfaction, she blushed like a school-girl. For the first time in her life she felt shy and nervous. Besides, she had another very queer feeling, as if her heart were fluttering a little.

Indeed, could one have imagined any gentleman so decorously stiff, so absolutely icy, and with such aristocratic dignity? Was he not really the perfection of official etiquette and solemnity?

It is the usual thing for girls, whether they admit it or not, to cherish in their heart some impossible ideal hero whose like they never meet in real life; but Mademoiselle Blandureau was the lucky exception.

A great change very quickly came over her. The steely hardness died out of her eyes, her voice became softer, her movements and carriage less imperious. She seemed to be losing her queenly ways, and becoming a simple girl again.

Moreover, she was so thoughtful and attentive in her behaviour to her mother that that lady was quite thunderstruck. She could not understand the alteration at all, and her astonished eyes seemed mutely to question everyone present as to the reason for this extraordinary affability.

The haughty Aurélie had simply met her match at last. Sir James, for his part, very soon found out what a good impression he had made. There

are little shades of manner that the most cultured courtesy cannot imitate, which very soon enable a man of the world to take the measure of the reception he is receiving.

The baronet began to feel more at home, and to get over his nervousness. He had come as a complete stranger, but before an hour had passed he felt he was among friends. So he unbent a little, became less frigid, and came out of his shell a bit.

When he started with Hector, Sir James had vowed not to open his mouth. He was well aware that his French was not his strong point, and he did not want to make a laughing-stock of himself.

When he felt sure that he was safe from ridicule, he ventured to talk, and talked a great deal. It is true that his hosts could not understand much of what he said, but they listened all the more intently for that.

This first evening in the Englishman's company confirmed Aurélie's distaste for Hector. While she listened with half an ear to Sir James Wellesley as he tried to explain to M. Blandureau the difference between a Whig and a Tory, a point on which that worthy has never had any clear ideas, she was involuntarily drawing comparisons between the two young men, which turned out much to poor Hector's disadvantage.

How vulgar and frivolous she thought him ! He was bright, witty and jocular, and talked with the animation of a Southerner ; he laughed a great deal, and, what was worse, made other people laugh as well.

What a difference there was between the two men—Hector with his good-natured expression and

bright, rather quizzical glance, and Sir James with his frigid features and bleak stare !

How easy it was to see even at a glance which was the English peer's nephew and which the Bordeaux merchant's son ! For, after all, M. Malestrat was one of the commercial class. Mademoiselle Aurélie grew very sad as all these reflections passed through her mind.

"And yet," said she to herself, "it's this very man that I dislike so much that I've got to marry !" She nearly began to cry at the bare idea, and for the first time as yet blamed her father for his rashness in choosing her a husband without consulting her wishes. Never in her life had she felt so thoroughly miserable.

Sir James seemed quite unconscious of the flight of time, and it was not till midnight that he said at last he must be going.

As M. Blandureau was showing his guests out, he made "My lord" promise to come again as often as possible.

"I promise you I will," replied the baronet, and when he was alone with Hector again he said, "I can't tell you how much I admire that girl ; I think she's absolutely charming and adorable."

Hector opened his mouth to say, "Mademoiselle Aurélie is engaged to me," but some inexplicable presentiment arrested the words.



## CHAPTER IX

### SIR JAMES'S TURN

**W**HEN Hector had framed his iniquitous plan for ruining the rival of whom the Baroness d'Ambleçay had told him, he had not reckoned with his own conscience ; he had been goaded on by despair, which is the way to madness.

When he had had time to recover his self-possession and think things over, his sense of honour began to assert itself, and he realised to the full the wickedness of his project. He was horrified at having entertained such an idea even for a moment, and abandoned it forthwith. Still, it looked as if nothing short of a miracle could get him out of his difficulties. All he could do was to wait. So he waited, with the cruel forebodings of the wretch over whose head there hangs an inevitable sentence.

The only reason why he continued to call at M. Blandureau's house was that he did not like to be the first to suggest breaking off the match ; besides, he felt sure that some day or other he would get a polite dismissal. He certainly did not behave at all like a young man who has received formal permission to pay his addresses to a lady, for he only turned up once or twice a week.

But it did not matter if he stayed in town. There was now a regular caller at the house at Ville d'Avray, who carried out most punctiliously the duties Hector was neglecting.

Sir James was another of those men who believe in keeping their word. He had promised M. Blandureau to call sometimes, and he did so every day.

Yes, every day the baronet showed himself as brave as he was ceremonious, for he put up with three or four hours' conversation with the retired merchant, who was delighted to find that a man whose uncle had a seat in the Upper House was such an attractive listener. Never had he had such a long-suffering and good-natured auditor.

It is true that the prospective peer's remarks usually proved conclusively that he either had not heard or had not understood anything his host had been saying, but M. Blandureau was not the man to be upset by a trifle like that. He put down the baronet's incoherent replies to the difficulty he had in expressing himself in French, and simply talked all the harder.

The fact is that while he seemed to be giving the most polite attention to the father's discourses, the baronet had eyes and ears only for the daughter. Deeply smitten as he had been on the evening of their first meeting, the baronet fairly worshipped Mademoiselle Aurélie by the next day. Before the week was out he was madly in love, in fact he quite lost his appetite, but unfortunately he did not lose his memory as well.

The poor fellow was racked by just the same compunction that had tormented Hector when he met Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay and forsook M. Blandureau's daughter.

But in this case the delinquent had a better excuse. Struck as if by lightning by Mademoiselle

Aurélie's charms, he had had no time to think, and had hopelessly lost his heart by the time he remembered Louise. Nevertheless, his conscience remorselessly cried: "You are no gentleman—you have forfeited your honour!"

Yet what can the sense of duty do against passion's command? Already Sir James had to admit to himself that he might as well die as keep away from Aurélie.

Besides, there were other considerations to afflict him. He was poor, and he knew that Mademoiselle Aurélie's father was an exceedingly rich man. This wealth was an insuperable obstacle in the English gentleman's eyes. Though he had hardly enough to live upon, he professed a lofty disdain for money. But who would believe in his disinterestedness? Could any modern heiress be expected to do so? Supposing he asked M. Blandureau for his daughter's hand, would it not be put down simply as an attempt on the part of a penniless aristocrat to speculate on his name in the hope of repairing the family fortunes?

But one look from Mademoiselle Aurélie was enough to banish these gloomy reflections, and the lady's eyes met the baronet's a good deal oftener than once.

In spite of his haughty bearing, Sir James is a diffident man. He is a modest one as well; for a long time he dared not trust indications of a luck which seemed too good to be true. He could see well enough that the girl did not try to keep out of his way. When he called, she soon came down to the drawing-room if she did not happen to be there already. And more than once, as he left the house, he thought he had seen her lifting a corner of the



lace window-curtains and following him with her eyes till he got into his carriage. He put all this down to chance, and refused to attach any significance to it, until one day that very chance which he had been so charitably crediting with his good fortune found him alone with Mademoiselle Aurélie.

It was only for a short time—hardly five minutes—but one can say a lot in five minutes, especially if no words pass; and these two did not speak. They stood facing each other, trembling with emotion, and gazing into each other's eyes.

It was all up with Sir James's self-control, and love's magnetism drew him out of all his inbred respect for convention. With an assurance which he has never been able to explain even yet, he took the liberty of raising Mademoiselle Aurélie's hand reverently to his lips.

The hand was not withdrawn; in fact, he thought he could feel a slight pressure of the lady's fingers—her mute reply to his unspoken avowal. No doubt he would presently have succeeded in stammering out a few words, had not M. Blandureau come in. The merchant was quite unconscious of his daughter's blushes and the baronet's embarrassed air. He had a newspaper in his hand, and wanted to ask "his lordship" for some explanation of the conduct of the British Cabinet in the *San Jacinto* affair. Only by prodigious effort did Sir James manage to regain his self-control. What would he not have given to get Blandureau out of the way? He was sure now that he had his lady's love, and he naturally wanted to enjoy his happiness; but no, he had to try to frame a reply to her father's



wearisome enquiries as to what he thought about the seizure of the Confederate commissioners.

The poor baronet at the moment could only think of one thing, and that was that Mademoiselle Aurélie was the loveliest girl alive. He fell back on generalities and talked for a good quarter of an hour round the British political axiom of the day, "The principles of morality are eternal, but we must have cotton."

Alas! this day, which had begun so brightly for Sir James, was destined to end very differently for him. In the morning, as we have seen, he had received the mute avowal of Mademoiselle Blandureau's love; that very evening he learnt that she was engaged to Hector and would become his wife in less than a month.

It was the ex-merchant himself who broke the fatal news to him. Sir James, quite unnerved by the blow, turned very pale, and stammered tremblingly, "Is that so? Is that really so?"

His agitation was only too perceptible this time, and M. Blandureau could not help noticing it. "What is the matter, my lord?" he asked.

"I am feeling unwell, very unwell," said the baronet.

He bade them good-day and withdrew without even noticing what anyone could have seen, that Aurélie was as much agitated as himself.

By the time he got home he was in a state of excitement impossible to describe. His cold self-possession had quite deserted him. He talked aloud and gesticulated when he was alone in his room.

"I must be under a curse," he said; "it's all up with me now. I've broken my word of honour,

I've forgotten Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay—been false to my own *fiancee*, and now here I am capturing the heart of my friend's sweetheart as well, and he the only friend I've got in this country. He'll think I'm a traitor and an utterly mean and contemptible fellow."

His first impulse led him to write to Hector, confessing the sin he had committed unawares; but on reflection he destroyed the letter.

Then his face was lit up by a sudden inspiration. "Yes," said he, "it's the only thing I can do; I've made up my mind to that."

Next day he called on M. Blandureau again as if nothing had happened.

But he was leading a most wretched life. So long as he was in Mademoiselle Aurélie's company he was in the seventh heaven; as soon as he was alone, he felt as if he had suddenly dropped out of it into the bottomless pit.

## CHAPTER X

### A LITTLE MISUNDERSTANDING

**N**OW, however, M. Blandureau began to take in the situation. He did not feel quite sure, but he had what they call in a court of law serious presumptions in the matter.

He was very considerably disgusted. He had been flattering himself that Sir James had been calling daily in order to enjoy his society. When he found out that it was quite possible that his daughter might very well have been a counter-attraction, his self-esteem was wounded to the quick.

It was not that he would not have been delighted to see his daughter married to the nephew of an English peer ; he would have given half his money to realise such a glorious dream as that. But he had given his word to Hector, and so his only thought was to hasten on the marriage which had been arranged and to communicate his suspicions to his son-in-law-to-be.

Hector had his own suspicions as well. One day when he had called at M. Blandureau's house—an event which had become more and more rare—he had seen an English grammar and a pocket-dictionary on the table.

This shed a new light on the situation, and his heart swelled with joy and hope as he opened the books. The leaves had been cut, and some pencil-marks on the margins showed that the books had

been used. "Ah!" thought Hector, "Mademoiselle Aurélie has too much sense to try to learn English without a teacher. My friend James is the professor, I fancy. I hope she'll soon be able to talk like any Lancashire lass!"

He went off in a happier frame of mind than he had been in for a long time.

"I'll keep out of these young people's way," he said to himself; "if M. Blandureau wants to see me, he'll come and look me up."

That gentleman, after vainly waiting for his son-in-law-to-be to call on him, did pay him a surprise visit one morning, and seemed very much upset.

"Do you love my daughter?" he asked Hector bluntly.

"Certainly," replied Hector, "as if she were my sister."

"Well," continued M. Blandureau, "I've got some grave news for you. Your friend Lord Wellesley is in love with her."

Hector had the greatest difficulty in concealing his satisfaction.

"Are you quite sure of that?" he asked.

"Nearly sure; at any rate I think that we ought to bestir ourselves, and get her married to you as soon as possible."

"I see," said Hector; "well, I'm very much obliged to you, and I'll think it over." And as M. Blandureau was inclined to be pressing, he talked as if they had a week of Sundays before them. M. Blandureau went away considerably surprised to find his prospective son-in-law such a laggard in love.

A bigger surprise was awaiting him when he got



home. His daughter had been asking for him. She really loved Sir James, and had fully made up her mind to break with Hector, cost what it might. Such a proceeding would be advantageous, she thought, in numerous ways. For one thing, she would be able to marry into the titled class, and be called "my lady." Money was no consideration, as she would have enough for them both. She would be going to live in England, where no one would dream of taunting her with her plebeian origin. Last, but not least, as we have seen, she loved Sir James.

So, in her most determined accents, she declared to her father that she would never marry Hector.

The rage and astonishment of the retired merchant at this declaration of Aurélie's can hardly be imagined.

"Do you know what you are saying, my girl?" he stuttered, "you know very well I have pledged my word!"

"You'll have to go back on it then, father!"

"Never!" cried the merchant, "never! Blaudureau's word is as good as gold!"

"It may be, if you've given it," replied Mademoiselle Aurélie, "but I've made no promise, and so I've no word to keep."

"But, you misguided girl," he father retorted, "the mere presence of this young man here implied your acceptance of him. I've given a note of hand, and you've endorsed it. Besides, think how you'll make Hector suffer. Do you want to ruin his life?"

"Do you really think he cares for me, father?"

"Cares for you? I wish you could have heard

him say, as he said to me only an hour ago, 'I love Mademoiselle Aurélie as if she were my sister.'"

The girl could not help laughing outright. "So that's your idea of love?" said she.

"I can assure you," replied M. Blandureau most positively, "that I did not love your mother at all when we were married. And yet we've been happy together, Heaven knows!"

"Well," replied Mademoiselle Aurélie, "I don't want that sort of happiness at any price, father, and what's more," she added defiantly, "I'm not the sort of girl to be coerced."

"And I'm not the sort of man," roared M. Blandureau, "to break his word, even if the world stops turning and the sun is snuffed out."

With that he went out, slamming the door behind him.

It would have taken a good deal more to frighten Mademoiselle Aurélie, and she did not give up hope by any means.

An hour later Hector received a little note from her, in which she appealed to his feelings as a gentleman and asked him to release her. That was all; she gave no reason.

Hector, of course, could not humour Mademoiselle Aurélie's whims quite so readily as all that. He wanted at least to see her and talk things over first. As there was not much time, he jumped into a cab and drove off to Ville d'Avray.

It was about a fortnight since he had last seen Mademoiselle Blandureau, and now he hardly knew her again, so changed was she under the influence of real love. She was still as statuesque as ever, but the statue was aglow with the vital spar

She blushed as she told him very frankly about her love affair. She would never have written to Hector as she had done, she said, had she not been sure that Sir James loved her ; and the strained, wistful expression on her face, when at the finish she again begged for her freedom, fairly went to Hector's heart.

"I will do as you wish, mademoiselle," said he, "and hope thereby I shall gain your friendship instead of the love I could not inspire."

Under any other circumstances, Hector would have done a good deal to avoid having a quarrel with M. Blandureau, but now he was so happy that he hardly troubled about him. As a matter of fact, the merchant did not give him a very cordial reception. Although he was really delighted to have the match broken off, he made it a point of honour to seem most indignant about it. He pleaded with Hector, offered to forbid Sir James his house, and offered a bigger dowry, and when he saw that the young man's resolution was not to be shaken, he abused him roundly and accused him of behaving dishonourably.

"Your father would never have acted as you are doing," said he, "but as you absolutely refuse to marry my daughter—for the refusal of the match comes from your side, I hope, and has no excuse—you must sign a declaration about it for me."

Hector was only too glad to sign it, and, as soon as he had taken his leave of M. Blandureau, he went off to the nearest café, and wrote a note to Ferdinand, saying simply :

"Everything's settled. Come here as soon as you can, I want you."



The very same evening, M. Blandureau granted a certain request that Sir James made him, and even took advantage of the change in his prospective son-in-law to knock five hundred thousand francs off the dowry.

It was then that the baronet first discovered that his father-in-law-to-be had been in trade. This aroused his prejudices, but he succeeded in silencing their voice, especially by the reflection, "Who'll know about that in England?"

Two days later, as Hector was just finishing dressing, a hotel servant came and told him that a gentleman wanted to see him very particularly.

"Show him up," said Hector, thinking that it must be Ferdinand, and went to meet his friend. However, it was not Ferdinand, but Sir James, looking paler and even more solemn than usual. In his hand was a mahogany case, which he put down on the table.

"I want to talk to you on a very serious matter," he said to Hector. "Are you sure no one can overhear us?"

"Quite," replied Hector, rather taken aback by these remarks.

The Englishman went to the door, and after satisfying himself that it was properly closed, turned to his friend again and said:

"Sir, I have been guilty of a very mean action, and feel I am unworthy of your friendship. I despise myself, and my own conscience reproaches me more bitterly than you could. I was engaged to a girl, and I have forsaken her; yesterday I had to write to her and tell her that I had acted in this dishonourable way; to-day I have come



to say to you, ' My dear fellow, I have been behaving towards you in a most underhanded way ; I have won the heart of the girl you were to marry—I love Aurélie, and she returns my love. Her father has just promised to give me her hand.' ”

“ You are the best and kindest fellow alive,” cried Hector, hugging his baronetship affectionately. “ If ever you want a real friend in need, come to me. My whole fortune is at your service, if you want it.”

Sir James could only conclude that his confession had sent Hector out of his senses, and this redoubled his remorse.

“ Try to compose yourself,” said he. “ I’ve one thing more to say. I’ve come here prepared to give you the fullest satisfaction. There are a brace of pistols in that case, and one of them is loaded. You can take your choice, and——”

“ Fight a duel with you ! ” cried Hector. “ Why, in Heaven’s name ? There’s nothing to be upset about ; I never cared for Mademoiselle Aurélie.”

“ That does not affect the question,” replied Sir James, “ or make my behaviour honourable or excusable. But, I say once more, I’ve got the pistols there——”

“ You must be mad,” said Hector, shrugging his shoulders. “ Just think ; you’ve taken Mademoiselle Aurélie from me, and now you want to kill me into the bargain ! ”

This was too much for Sir James, who turned scarlet with rage.

“ It is too late to draw back now,” said he ; “ I shall never be able to bear the sight of you again after humbling myself to apologise to you as I have just done. You have refused the satisfaction

I offered you, so now I must ask you to give me satisfaction yourself."

This ridiculous dispute would certainly have ended in a duel, had it not been interrupted by the appearance of Ferdinand. He had got Hector's note and come up to town with all speed. As soon as he had heard all about the trouble, he said to Hector: "Leave it to me; I can speak English like any Cockney, and I'll soon settle matters with Sir James."

Ferdinand had a fine idea of settling matters! No sooner was Hector out of the room than he told Sir James all about his friend and Mademoiselle d'Ambleçay.

The Englishman was fairly beside himself. "I've been made a fool of!" he cried, and then proceeded to demand satisfaction so loudly and insistently that Hector came in again in a hurry to find out what the row was about. More explanations followed, with the result that next day Hector obliged Sir James with a nice little rapier-prick in the arm, which had the effect of putting back the date of his marriage for half a year.

But this little bit of bloodshed ended in the reconciliation of the friends who had been estranged for a day.

## CHAPTER XI

### EXCHANGE IS NO ROBBERY

**F**ERDINAND felt prouder than any victorious Roman general in his triumph when, after three weeks' absence from La Fresnaie, he came back to it along with his friend Hector.

The travellers had been anxiously awaited. The house had a holiday look which betrayed to passers-by the joy of its inmates. Madame Aubanel, who had been kept posted up by her husband in everything that had been happening in Paris, had arranged the nicest of surprises for Hector. With much expenditure of eloquence, she had persuaded Madame d'Ambleçay to come and dine at La Fresnaie and bring her daughter with her. The baroness had tried to cry off, but had had no excuses worth giving. Sir James had formally notified her that he wished to break off the engagement, and she had written to release him from his word.

So, when Hector came into the drawing-room, the first person he saw was Louise, and the long look that the lovers exchanged spoke most eloquently and romantically of their past troubles and their present happiness.

Hector had not dreamed of such good luck as this, for he had been fearing some new obstacles would arise. He was so overcome that he had to lean on his friend's arm for support, as he bowed courteously to the baroness.

"The only reason why I venture to come into your presence again, madame," said he, in a voice

shaken with emotion, "is that I have fulfilled the conditions you thought it your duty to impose upon me." So saying, he handed her a letter.

This letter had been written to say that M. and Madame Blandureau had the honour to inform their friends and acquaintances that a marriage had been arranged between their daughter, Mademoiselle Aurélie Blandureau, and Sir James Wellesley.

The fact that the bridegroom was only styled "Sir" and not "Lord" was not the fault of the merchant; he had argued the point with the baronet for over a couple of hours before giving in.

Madame d'Ambleçay glanced through the letter, the contents of which were stale news to her, and, turning to her daughter, said, with well-feigned disappointment, "Ah, my poor child, here's Sir James throwing you over for someone else."

Mademoiselle Louise had been shaking hands with herself for the last fortnight and more over this very welcome bit of infidelity, but she did her best to look surprised; she even—little hypocrite that she was—tried to pull a woe-begone face. But she was not used to deception, and her shining eyes gave the lie very prettily to the disappointed expression.

"And when is Sir James Wellesley getting married?" the baroness asked Hector.

"On the third of May next," replied Ferdinand for him, "thanks to my good offices in judiciously speeding matters up."

"Well, then," said Madame d'Ambleçay, "I think we can make our own arrangements for that date." And, taking her daughter's hand, she put it in Hector's.

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M. and Madame Hector Malestrat have now settled down in Touraine. Just at present they are staying in the Chateau d'Ambleçay, waiting for the completion of a very charming house of their own which they are having built within a league of La Fresnaie. Hector never went back to Bordeaux, and, if you look in the *Petits Affiches*, you will most likely notice an advertisement to this effect: "For sale, in one of the best quarters of Bordeaux, the Malestrat mansion, renovated throughout and magnificently decorated."

Mademoiselle Aurélie, now Lady Wellesley, is queening it at Follingham Castle, her husband's seat in Lincolnshire.

When her maiden name happened to be mentioned before some of the local leaders of society, she lost no time in giving these ladies to understand that the Blandureau family is related to the best blood in France.

Her husband worships her, and she returns his affection, and altogether she is so happy that she never even thinks of hoping that his uncle will die and make her a peeress.

But neither Hector nor Sir James, if they have any children, will ever dream of arranging marriages for them twenty years ahead—they know too well what that may mean. "Marriages arranged in advance by the parents," says M. Blandureau now, "are bills of exchange drawn on the future, and the future is a very bad payer."

Dame Fortune is, and always will be, the head of the marriage-brokers' profession.







