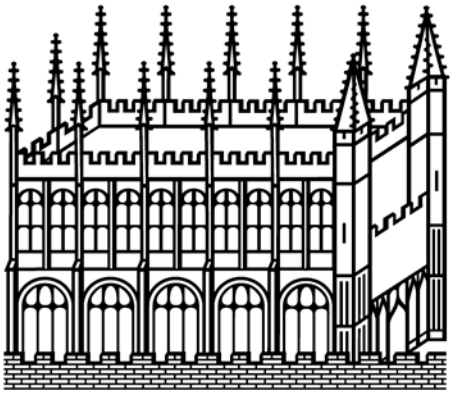

The Works of
GUY DE MAUPASSANT

DAY & NIGHT

AND OTHER STORIES

Translated by
MARJORIE LAURIE

TALES OF DAY AND NIGHT

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TALES OF DAY AND NIGHT

The works of Guy de Maupassant

TALES OF DAY AND NIGHT

Newly translated into English
by
MARJORIE LAURIE

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MAUPASSANT, Henri René Albert Guy de.—Born at the Château de Miromesnil, Seine-Inférieure, August 5th, 1850; died at Passy, Paris, July 6th, 1893. A French novelist. He went to school at Yvetot, and graduated from the college of Rouen, while Gustave Flaubert, his godfather, looked after his literary training. He spent about ten years in the Civil Service in the Navy Department. In February, 1879, his one-act play "Histoire du vieux temps" was performed in Paris, without, however, attracting any special attention. The next year, however, the success of his short story "Boule de Suif" stamped him at once as a writer of marked ability. Then he published in rapid succession "La Maison Tellier" (1881), "Mademoiselle Fifi" (1882), "Contes de la Bécasse" (1883), "Une Vie" (1883), "Miss Harriet" (1884), "Les Sœurs Rondoli" (1884), "Au Soleil" (1884), "Clair de Lune" (1884), "Yvette" (1884), "Bel-Ami" (1885), "Contes du jour et de la nuit" (1885), "Contes et nouvelles" (1885), "M. Parent" (1886), "La petite Roque" (1886), "Toine" (1886), "Contes Choisis" (1887), "Mont-Oriol" (1887), "Le Horla" (1887), "Pierre et Jean" (1888), "Sur l'eau" (1888), "Le rosier de Madame Husson" (1888), "Fort comme la mort" (1889), "La Main Gauche" (1889), "Histoire d'une fille de ferme" (1890), "La Vie errante" (1890), "L'Inutile Beauté" (1890), "Notre Cœur" (1890). Among his other works are "Trois contes," "En mer," "L'homme de lettres" (1892), and two plays, "Musotte" (1891) and "La paix du ménage" (*Comédie Française*, March 6th, 1893). The insanity and death of a brother unbalanced him, and he attempted suicide during a fit of depression in December 1891, general paresis set in, and he had to be confined in a private asylum.—From the "Century Cyclopædia of Names."

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The TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT *in a recent leading article on Guy de Maupassant said: "It is certain that those who know Maupassant only in his English can never know him wholly, but the amount of their knowledge will depend upon the relation of the translator's English to Maupassant's French; and it is here that with some pleasure, we observe a* superiority in the British Edition *translated by Marjorie Laurie* over the very unequal American Edition."

I. TIMBUCTOO

THE boulevard, that river of life, lay quivering in the gold-dust of the setting sun. The whole sky was suffused with dazzling crimson, and behind the Madeleine a great, flaming cloud flooded the long avenue from end to end with slanting, fiery rays, which shimmered like vapour from a brasier. In that burning haze the gay, pulsating throngs moved as if transfigured. Faces shone golden; black coats and hats had a purple lustre, and glossy shoes glittered on the asphalt pavement.

Outside the cafés, a multitude of men sat absorbing shining, bright-coloured beverages, which glowed like jewels dissolved inside the tumblers. In contrast to the civilians in their thin dark suits, were two officers in full uniform, dazzling every eye with the glitter of their gold lace. They chatted away with spontaneous cheerfulness in that atmosphere of exuberant life, in the radiant glow of evening. They watched the passers-by, the men with their leisurely saunter, the women with their air of haste and the heady, provocative fragrance they left in their wake. Presently a huge negro, his portly figure arrayed in black, his piqué waistcoat flashing with trinkets, his face shining as if it had been waxed all over, strolled past the café. He had a triumphant air, and smiled at his brother men, at the newspaper boys, at the dazzling sky. His smile embraced all Paris. He was so tall that he towered above the crowd, and as he passed, all the loungers turned round to admire his back view. Suddenly he caught sight of

the two officers, and made straight for them, forcing his way between the crowded tables. He stood gazing at them with shining, enraptured eyes, and grinned from ear to ear, his white teeth gleaming like a crescent moon in an inky sky. Unable to account for his delight, the two men stared in amazement at this ebony giant.

"Good mawnin', Lefn'n," he roared in a voice that moved all the spectators to laughter. One of the officers was a colonel, the other a major.

"I don't know you, sir," replied the major. "I can't imagine what you want with me."

"I sholy love you, Lefn'n Védié. You 'member, siege of Bézi. Plenty grapes. You come find me."

Utterly at a loss the major gazed fixedly at the negro and ransacked his memory.

"Timbuctoo!" he suddenly burst out.

The negro slapped his thighs ecstatically, and gave vent to an incredible roar of laughter.

"Yes, yes, ya, Lefn'n sah. You reckinise Timbuctoo. Yes, sah, good mawnin', sah."

Laughing heartily himself, the major held out his hand. Suddenly grave, Timbuctoo seized it, and before the major could prevent him, kissed it after the fashion of Arabs and negroes.

"Come, Timbuctoo," said the embarrassed officer severely. "We're not in Africa. Take that chair and tell me what you are doing here."

Timbuctoo threw out his chest, and stammering in his hurry, began his story:

"Made heap money, heap money. Got big restaurant, good food, Prussians. Yes, sah, stealing plenty money. French cooking. Timbuctoo, he Emperor's ole cook, ha ha! got two hund'ed tousand franc! ha! ha! ha! Mawnin', mawnin' Lefn'n, sah!"

He went into paroxysms of laughter and his eye had a gleam of delirious joy. The major, who understood

his queer lingo, spent some time questioning him and then said:

"Well, Timbuctoo. Good-bye for the present. See you again soon."

The negro at once sprang to his feet, and this time grasped the major's outstretched hand and shook it. Still laughing, he shouted:

"Good-bye, Lefn'n, sah, Good-bye," and away he went in such glee that he kept gesticulating to himself as he walked, till people thought him crazy.

"Who is that brute?" asked the colonel.

"A first-rate fellow and a good soldier. I'll tell you about him. It's rather amusing.

"You may remember that at the beginning of the war of 1870, I was shut up in Bézières, or Bézi as that fellow calls it. It was a blockade rather than a siege. We were invested, but the Prussian lines were out of range of our guns; they had given up bombarding us and were slowly starving us out. I was a subaltern at the time. Our garrison consisted of all sorts and conditions of troops, the shattered remnants of regiments that had been wiped out, stragglers and marauders, who had got cut off from their units.

We had a little of everything including eleven Turcos, who turned up one evening from goodness knows where. Bewildered, tattered, starving, and drunk to a man, they presented themselves at the gates of the town. They were handed over to me. I soon realised that every form of discipline was lost on them. They were always absent without leave; they were continually drunk. I tried everything. But neither guard-room nor cells had the slightest effect on them. My men would disappear for whole days, as completely as if the earth had swallowed them, and when they turned up again they were reeling drunk. They had no money. How did they manage it? Where did they get the liquor? And what liquor

was it? I was all the more keenly intrigued because of the interest I took in these savages of mine, with their eternal laughter and their ways of great mischievous children. Presently I noticed that they paid a blind allegiance to the tallest of them all, the fellow you saw just now. He ordered them about; he directed their mysterious expeditions with the authority of an all-powerful and absolute chief. I sent for him and questioned him. The interview lasted fully three hours, such was my difficulty in making head or tail of his extraordinary gibberish. He, poor devil, made incredible efforts to explain himself. He coined new words; he gesticulated, puffed and sweated with agony; mopped his forehead, broke off, only to begin again, as soon as he thought he had hit on a new medium of expression. In the end I gathered that he was the son of a great chief, a kind of negro king, somewhere in the vicinity of Timbuctoo. When I asked him his name he replied:

'Chavaharibouhalikkranafotapolara,' or something to that effect. I felt that it would simplify matters to call him Timbuctoo, after the place of his birth. Within a week the whole garrison had adopted the name.

By this time we were all burning to discover where this African princeling obtained his liquor. In the end I chanced upon the secret in rather a curious way. One morning I was on the ramparts, studying the horizon, when I saw something moving in one of the vineyards. The vintage was at hand and the grapes were ripe, but this suggested nothing to me. I assumed that there was a spy in the vineyard, creeping towards the town, and I organised a complete expedition for catching the prowler. With the general's permission I took command myself. I sent out, by three different gates, three small detachments, with orders to join forces at the vineyard and to surround it. To cut off the man's retreat, one party

had to do a march of at least an hour. A sentry I had posted on the walls for that purpose, signalled to me that the person I had observed had not emerged from the vineyard. We advanced in absolute silence, creeping almost on our faces along the ditches, till at last we reached the spot I had marked down. Rapidly I deployed my men, who made straight for the vineyard and discovered—Timbuctoo on all fours devouring grapes straight off the vine, or rather lapping them as a dog laps soup, snatching off bunch after bunch with his teeth. I tried to get him on to his legs, but it was no use and I realised why he was crawling on hands and knees. As soon as he was dragged to his feet, he swayed for a moment or two, flung out his arms and fell flat on his nose. I have never in all my life seen a man so hopelessly drunk. He had to be carried back to barracks on a couple of vine props. All the way home he never stopped laughing and flourishing his arms and legs.

The secret was out. Those rascals of mine intoxicated themselves straight from the vine. When they were too drunk to move, they slept it off on the spot. As for Timbuctoo, his passion for grapes was preposterous, incredible. He lived among the vines, like the thrushes, whom by the way, he regarded with the hatred of a jealous rival.

'Dose th'ushes eatin' all de grapes,' he would complain. 'Drunken debbils.'

One evening I was summoned to the ramparts. Something could be seen moving across the plain in our direction. I had left my field-glasses behind and could not make out what it was. But it had the appearance of a serpent uncoiling itself. A convoy, perhaps, or something of the sort. I sent out a small party to meet this odd caravan, which shortly afterwards made its triumphal entry. On a kind of altar composed of rough

chairs, Timbuctoo and nine of his comrades bore eight severed, sanguinary, grinning heads. The eleventh Turco was leading a horse, with another horse attached to its tail, and followed by six more secured in similar fashion. The following was their report. On their way to the vineyards, my Africans had suddenly sighted a detachment of Prussians approaching a village. Instead of taking to their heels, they had hidden themselves. The Prussian officers dismounted at an inn for purposes of refreshment, whereupon my eleven sportsmen sprang out, routed the Uhlans, who thought it was an ambush; despatched first the two men on guard, then the colonel and his staff of five officers. That day I embraced Timbuctoo. I saw, however, that he was walking with difficulty and feared that he was wounded. But he laughingly reassured me.

'Timbuctoo got heap stuff, take home.'

Timbuctoo, I regret to say, made war not for honour but for gain. Everything he found, everything he considered of any value, and especially everything that glittered, went straight into his pocket. And what a pocket! It was a yawning chasm, extending from hip to ankle. He called it his 'hold-all', a word he had picked up somewhere, and a hold-all it certainly was. He had wrenched off the buttons and gold braid on the Prussian uniforms, the copper spikes on the helmets, and had crammed his booty into his hold-all, which was full to overflowing. Every day he pocketed any shining trifle he came across, odds and ends of tin or silver, to the detriment of his figure, which sometimes looked extremely ludicrous. This princeling with his consuming passion for all that glistened, meant to return with his spoils to the land of the ostriches, to whom he was certainly own brother. What would he have done without his hold-all, I wonder. Swallowed his loot, I presume. Every morning found his pocket empty. He

must have had a store-house where he hoarded his treasures. But I could never discover it.

When the general was informed of Timbuctoo's doughty deed, he had the bodies, which had been left in the neighbouring village, hastily interred, to conceal the fact that they had been decapitated. The Prussians returned the following day. The mayor and seven of the principal inhabitants were immediately shot by way of reprisals, for having betrayed the presence of the Germans.

. . . . . .

Winter was upon us. We were worn out and desperate. There was fighting every day now. Our starving men could hardly walk. Three of the Turcos had been killed, but the remaining eight, alone out of the whole garrison, remained plump and sleek and always ready for a scrap. Timbuctoo was actually getting fat. He said to me one day:

'You heap hungry, sah. I got good meat.'

And to my surprise he brought me an excellent fillet. But what meat could it be? We had no cattle left, nor sheep, nor goats, nor donkeys, nor pigs. Even horse was unobtainable. All this occurred to me after I had eaten my steak. Then a horrible suspicion flashed across my mind. These negroes were born uncommonly close to the regions where cannibalism is rife. And every day numbers of soldiers fell in the vicinity of the town. I questioned Timbuctoo, but he would not answer and I did not press the point. Ever afterwards, however, I declined his offerings.

The fellow worshipped me. One evening, when we were on outpost duty, there was a sudden fall of snow. We were sitting on the ground. I glanced pityingly at my poor negroes whose teeth were chattering beneath that powdering of icy crystals. I was very cold myself and began to cough. Immediately I felt a great warm

wrap enveloping me. It was Timbuctoo's cloak which he had thrown round my shoulders. I got up and returned it to him.

'Keep it, my lad. You need it more than I do.'

'No, Lefn'n, sah. You keep. Timbuctoo not wanting. Plenty warm.'

He looked at me with pleading eyes.

'Do as you're told,' I said, 'Take your cloak. I insist.'

He sprang to his feet and drew his sword, which he always kept as sharp as a scythe. Seizing the rejected garment in one hand, he exclaimed:

'You not keep cloak, me cut it up, no use to nobody.'

He would have carried out his threat. I gave in.

. . . . . .

A week later we capitulated. A few of the garrison had succeeded in making their escape. The rest of us had to evacuate the town and surrender to the victorious enemy. I was on my way to the Place d'Armes, where we were to assemble, when I stopped, petrified with astonishment, at the spectacle of a gigantic negro in white duck with a straw hat on his head. It was Timbuctoo. He was beaming all over, and with his hands in his pockets, was walking up and down in front of a small shop, with two plates and two glasses displayed in the window.

'What are you up to?' I asked.

'I not goin' away,' he replied, 'I good cook. I cook for cunnel in Algeria. Cook for P'ussians now. Stealing heap heap money.'

There were ten degrees of frost and I shivered at the sight of this negro in his white duck. He seized my arm and drew me into the shop. There I saw a huge sign-board. He had some sense of decency, for he was waiting for us to go before hanging it over his door.

Some confederate had painted the inscription, which ran as follows:

'SOLDIERS' CHOP-HOUSE.
BY MONSIEUR TIMBUCTOO, LATE CHEF TO HIS MAJESTY THE EMPEROR.
PARISIAN COOKERY. MODERATE TERMS.'

In spite of the despair that wrung my heart I could not help laughing, as I left my negro to his new trade. It was surely better than dragging him away into captivity. As you see the rascal has prospered. To-day Bézières belongs to Germany. Timbuctoo's restaurant is the first step towards our revenge."

II. MARROCA

You asked me, my dear fellow, to send you an account of my impressions and experiences, particularly my love affairs, during my sojourn in that land of Africa, which has always had such an attraction for me. You were pleased to be facetious in advance about my dusky amours, as you called them, and pictured my return, attended by a large black female with a yellow bandana round her head and ablaze with garments of startling colours. The turn of the blackamoor ladies will come, no doubt. I have seen a dark damsel or two, who has left me not unwilling to dabble some day in those murky depths. But I began my amorous career with something more attractive, something singularly original.

In your last letter you said:

"I have only to know how the people of a country make love to be able to describe their surroundings accurately, although I have never set foot there."

Well, in Africa, I may inform you, they make love with a sort of fury. From the day of your arrival you are conscious of a quivering ardour, a feeling of exultation, a sudden tenseness of desire, a languour pervading you to the very finger tips, and all this stimulates to fever pitch your amorous propensities, your capacity for physical sensation, from the merest contact of hands to that nameless impulse, which is responsible for so many of our follies.

Let me explain. I do not know if the kind of love, which springs from the heart, the love of soul for soul, sentimental idealism, Platonic affection in short, can exist beneath this African sky. I rather doubt it. But

the other kind of love, that of the senses, which has merit, great merit, of its own, is a truly terrible thing in a climate like this. The heat, the atmosphere, continually scorching you and fretting you to a fever, the suffocating blasts from the south, the fiery waves emanating from the great desert, which lies at your very door, the sultry sirocco, more searing, more consuming than flames, a whole continent in perpetual conflagration, burnt to the very stones by a monstrous and devouring sun, all this inflames the blood and has a maddening, a bestialising effect upon the body.

But to my story. I pass over my first days in Algeria. After visiting Bona, Constantine, Biskra and Setif I approached Bougie by way of the gorges of Chabet and a wonderful road cut through the Kabyle forests, and skirting the coast at a height of six hundred feet above the sea. It follows the contours of the lofty mountain, till it reaches that magnificent Bay of Bougie, unsurpassed in beauty by the Bays of Naples, Ajaccio and Douarnenez, which are the loveliest I have seen. I except, however, from my comparison that incredible Bay of Porto on the west coast of Corsica, with its girdle of crimson granite and its fantastic, blood-red giants in stone, known as the Calanche of Piana. From far away, long before you round the immense basin where those tranquil waters slumber, you catch a glimpse of Bougie. Surrounded by woods, it lies on the steep slopes of a lofty mountain, a white streak upon that green incline, like the foam of a cascade, dashing down to sea.

As soon as I set foot in that tiny and enchanting town, I knew that I should make a long stay there. From every point the eyes behold a perfect ring of peaks, crooked, jagged, horned, grotesque, forming so close a circle as almost to shut out the sight of the open sea and to lend the bay the aspect of a lake. The water

is the colour of turquoise and crystal clear. The sky, vaulted in amazing beauty overhead, is of an azure as intense as if painted with a double coating of pigment. Sea seems mirrored in sky, as sky in sea, each reflecting the other.

For ruins, the city of Bougie is unique. As soon as you land, you are confronted, on the quay itself, with remains so grandiose that you might mistake them for operatic scenery. These are the ivygrown ruins of the old Saracen gate. Among the wooded hills surrounding the town, ruins crop up everywhere, sections of Roman walls, fragments of Saracen architecture, traces of Arab structures.

I rented a small Moorish house in the upper part of the town. You must be familiar with the type. It has often been described. There are no windows in the outer walls; the whole building is lighted from top to bottom by means of an inner courtyard. The first floor consists of a spacious and airy hall, where you live during the day, and there is a flat roof where you spend the night. I lost no time in adopting the custom that prevails in all hot countries, that of the noonday siesta. It is Africa's hour of stifling heat, when you can hardly breathe, when the streets, the fields, the long, glaring roads, are deserted; the hour, when everyone is asleep, or at least trying to sleep, in the lightest attire. My hall, with the slender, Arabic columns, I had furnished with a large luxurious divan, covered with rugs from Jebel-Amur. In the garb of Assan, I retired every noon to my couch, but I was always too restless to sleep.

My dear fellow, there are two forms of torture on this earth, which I trust you may never experience: lack of water and lack of women. I don't know which is more intolerable. In the desert, one could commit any atrocity for the sake of a glass of cold, clear water. What would

one not give, in certain coast towns, for a wholesome and comely lass?

One day I was feeling more than usually on edge, and tried in vain to close my eyes. My limbs were tingling as if with pins and needles. I kept tossing from side to side in an agony of restlessness. At last I could stand it no longer. I got up and went out. It was a blazing afternoon in July. The paving-stones were as hot as a baker's oven. In a moment my shirt was wringing wet and stuck to my body. Over the whole length of the horizon floated a thin, white vapour, the burning breath of the sirocco, which is like heat in tangible form. I went down to the sea, and, rounding the harbour, wandered along the shore of the charming bay, where the baths are. The craggy mountain, mantled with brushwood and tall, aromatic shrubs of pungent odour, curves around this cove. All along the beach the sea laps against great, brown rocks. Not a soul was in sight. Nothing stirred. Never a sound, not the cry of a beast, nor the flutter of a bird, nor even the murmur of the sea, which lay as still as if swooning in the heat of the sun. Only in the scorching air my ear seemed to discern a dull roaring as of fire. Suddenly, behind one of those half-submerged rocks in that glassy sea, I became aware of a slight movement. I turned round and caught sight of a tall, naked girl, up to her breasts in the water, enjoying her bathe, in perfect confidence that she was utterly alone, in that hour of sweltering heat. Her face was turned towards the open sea. Unaware of my presence, she was bobbing gently up and down. What an astonishing picture she made, this beautiful woman, in a sea as clear as glass with that dazzling sunshine pouring down upon her. For beautiful she was, amazingly beautiful, tall, and modelled like a statue. She turned round, uttered a cry, and half swimming, half walking, disappeared behind her rock.

Sooner or later, I reflected, she would have to come out. So I sat me down on the beach and waited. Presently her head, with its piled up wealth of tumbled, black hair, peered cautiously out. She had a wide mouth with thick, everted lips; and large, challenging eyes. Her skin, slightly tanned all over by the African climate, had the texture of old ivory, smooth and firm. Evidently she came of some superb, white race, tinged, however, by the sun of the Ethiopians.

"Go away," she called to me.

Her sonorous voice, of a strength corresponding to her physique, had a guttural quality.

I did not stir.

"It's not right of you, sir, to stay there," she added, rolling her r's like the rattling of wheels.

Still I made no movement, and the head withdrew. Ten minutes elapsed. Then slowly and stealthily, first her hair, then her forehead, then her eyes, reappeared. She was like a child playing hide and seek and peeping out to watch the seeker.

This time she was evidently very angry.

"You'll make me catch my death," she scolded, "I won't come out till you go away."

At this I rose and walked off, not however, without frequently turning round. When she thought I was far enough away, she came crouching out of the water, with her back towards me. She disappeared into a cranny in the rock, with a petticoat screening the entrance.

The next day, I returned to the same spot. She was in the water again, but this time she wore a complete bathing dress. She burst out laughing and flashed her glittering teeth at me. By the end of the week we were friends, and within a fortnight more intimate still. She was called Marroca, a nickname no doubt, which she pronounced as if it contained at least a dozen r's. The

daughter of Spanish settlers, she had married a Frenchman, of the name of Pontabèze, who was in Government service. I never discovered exactly what duties he performed. But his time was evidently fully occupied, which was all I cared about.

After a while, she changed the hour for her bathe, and came to my house every day for the noontide siesta —if siesta it could be called. She was really a splendid creature, of a somewhat animal type, but magnificent for all that. Her eyes seemed to be always burning with desire; her parted lips, her sharp teeth, her very smile, had something savagely sensual about them, something which invested her whole body with a kind of animalism, rendering her at once inferior and superb, a being destined for unbridled passion, suggesting to my mind those obscene divinities of antiquity, who pursued their lawless loves in woods and meadows.

Never was woman more voluptuous. Her amorous demonstrations were swiftly succeeded by deathlike trances, from which she would suddenly awaken in my arms, eager for more embraces, with fresh kisses tingling on her lips. At the same time, her mind was of inconceivable simplicity and her ringing laughter stood her in place of ideas. With instinctive pride in her beauty, she despised even the thinnest of veils, and would wander about the house, dancing and skipping, with reckless and unthinking shamelessness. Weary at last of caresses, she would sink into deep, calm slumber, on the divan by my side. In the overwhelming heat, her bronzed skin would break out into tiny beads of sweat and emit a feral and sensuous fragrance.

Now and then of an evening, when her husband happened to be away on duty, she would return to me. We would lie on the ground together with diaphanous Eastern fabrics for our only covering. When the great, radiant, tropic moon rode in the sky, illuminating the

town and the bay in their girdle of mountains, we saw on all the other roofs as it were a host of silent phantoms, now reclining, now rising and moving to a fresh spot, to lie down again, beneath the languorous warmth of a sky that had lost its fierceness. Undeterred by the brightness of the African night, Marroca persisted in exposing herself naked to the rays of the moon. She never troubled her head about the neighbours, who could see us plainly, and often, in spite of my horrified protests, she would send through the evening air, long-drawn, thrilling cries, which set the dogs howling in the distance.

One evening as I was dozing under the vast, star-flecked canopy of the sky, she came and knelt beside me on my rug and with her broad, everted lips close to my ear she murmured:

"I want you to come and sleep in my house one night."

I was mystified.

"Sleep in your house?"

"Yes, next time my husband goes away, I want you to come and take his place."

I could not help laughing.

"Why should I when you can come here?"

With her mouth so near my own, that I could feel her breath warm within my throat and my moustache moist with it, she whispered:

"It's to leave me a memory."

The rolling of her r's was like a torrent rushing over a rocky bed. I still failed to catch her meaning, and she put her arms round my neck.

"When you are gone, I shall remember, and when I kiss my husband, I shall pretend it's you." And now her reverberating r's had the rumble of friendly thunder.

Touched and at the same time amused, I murmured:

"You must be crazy. I prefer to stay at home."

To tell the truth, I have no liking for assignations beneath the conjugal roof. I regard them as traps, in which a fool is bound to be caught. But she pleaded and entreated and even wept.

"I'll show you how I adore you."

Adore! The word echoed like the rolling of a drum beating the attack. Her desire seemed to me so strange that I could not fathom it. Then, on reflection, I thought I could dectect some deep-seated feeling of rancour towards her husband, a secret desire for revenge which prompts a woman to deceive her husband and to do so with all the more zest, beneath his own roof and among his own possessions.

"Is your husband unkind to you?" I asked.

She looked at me reproachfully.

"O no, he's very kind."

"Then it's you who don't care for him?"

She gazed at me with wide, wondering eyes.

"Yes, I do. I'm very fond of him, very fond of him indeed. Only I don't care for him as much as I do for you, heart of mine."

I could not make her out. As I was still puzzling over it, she printed upon my lips one of those kisses of whose potency she was fully aware.

"You will come, won't you?" she coaxed.

But I stood firm, and without further ado, she dressed and went away.

She did not return for a week. On the ninth day, she reappeared and standing on the threshold of my room, she said solemnly:

"Will you come and sleep in my house to-night? If you refuse, I shall just go away again."

A week is a long time, my dear fellow, and in Africa, a week counts for fully a month.

"I'll come," I cried, opening my arms. She threw herself into them.

That night she waited for me in a neighbouring street, and took me home with her.

She and her husband occupied a small, low-pitched house near the port. We passed through the kitchen, which served as dining-room, and entered a clean, white-washed bedroom, with family photographs all round the walls and paper flowers under glass shades. Marroca seemed beside herself with joy. She danced round me exclaiming:

"Now you're at home with us. Now you're at home."

I certainly behaved as if I was. And yet, I confess, I felt uncomfortable, apprehensive even. In those unfamiliar surroundings I was reluctant to part with that portion of my attire, without which a man, taken by surprise, is as helpless as he is ridiculous, and quite incapable of taking action. But she snatched it from me by force and with the rest of my clothes, carried it off into the next room. Before long, however, I regained my composure and did my best to prove it to her. We had not thought of sleep, when, two hours later, we were startled by a sudden and violent knocking at the door and a man's deep voice exclaiming:

"Marroca, it's I."

She gave a jump.

"My husband! Quick. Get under the bed."

I was distractedly hunting for my trousers, but she gave me a push.

"Quick, quick!" she gasped.

Without a murmur, I threw myself on my face and crawled under the bed. She went into the kitchen, and I could hear her opening and closing a cupboard. Then she returned carrying some object which I could not make out. This she hurriedly deposited in a corner. Her husband seemed to be losing patience, so she called out in a loud, firm voice:

"I can't find the matches . . . Oh, here they are . . . I'll let you in."

She opened the door and her husband entered. All I could see of him was a pair of enormous feet. If the rest of him was in proportion, he must have been a giant. I heard the sound of kisses, a pat on the bare skin, laughter. Then he remarked, in a Marseilles accent:

"I forgot my purse, you see, so I had to come back. What a sleep you were having!"

He went to the chest of drawers and spent a long time looking for what he wanted. Then he returned to Marroca, who had flung herself on the bed as if worn out, and tried, apparently, to embrace her. But he was irritably repulsed with a fusillade of angry r's. His feet were so near my hiding-place that I could hardly resist an insane, idiotic and inexplicable impulse to touch them gently. But I controlled myself.

His advances met with no encouragement and he was hurt.

"How horrid you are to-day!" he exclaimed, rueful but acquiescent. "Good-bye, my pet."

Another resounding kiss, and the immense feet turned about. I could see the big nails studding his boots, as he withdrew into the next room. The house door closed behind him. I was saved.

Crestfallen and woebegone I crawled slowly forth from my refuge, and while Marroca, stark naked as before, began dancing a jig around me, clapping her hands and shrieking with laughter, I dropped heavily into a chair. But I shot up again immediately. I had landed on something cold, and being as innocent of clothes as my fellow culprit, I had received a shock. I turned round to look. This thing, on which I had sat down, proved to be a small axe for splitting wood, with an edge as sharp as a knife. How had it got there?

I had not noticed it when I entered the room. When she saw me jump, Marroca was seized with a fit of merriment, which made her choke and cough and scream and clasp her stomach with both hands. I considered her outburst of mirth uncalled for and unseemly. We had risked our lives in this idiotic way; I could still feel a cold shudder all down my spine, and I felt a little injured by her hysterical laughter.

"Suppose your husband had seen me?" I queried.

"No danger of that," she retorted.

"No danger? I like that. What do you mean? He had only to stoop down and he would have seen me."

She stopped laughing. A smile still lingered on her face as she gazed at me with her great, unblinking eyes, where new desires were already kindling.

"He would never have stooped down."

"O come," I protested. "He might have dropped his hat, and then he would have had to pick it up . . . and then . . . a pretty figure I should have cut in this costume."

She laid her round, robust arms on my shoulders and lowered her voice to an amorous whisper.

"Well, he would certainly never have got up again."

"Why not?" I asked, obtusely.

She winked one eye slyly and pointed to the chair on which I had sat down. Her outstretched finger, the set of her jaw, her parted lips, her sharp, shining, savage teeth—all these indicated to me the little hatchet with its sharp glittering edge. She made as if to seize it. Then, her left arm clasping me so closely that her side was pressed against my own, her right arm described the movement necessary for decapitating a kneeling man.

This, my dear fellow, is how they regard, over here, the respective claims of conjugal fidelity, love and hospitality.

III. A DUEL

THE war was over. The Germans had occupied France, and the country lay quivering like a vanquished wrestler under the knee of the conqueror. The first trains from horror-stricken, famished, despairing Paris, crawled slowly along through villages and countryside in the direction of the newly established frontiers. The first batches of travellers gazed through the windows at the devastated plains and burnt-out hamlets. At the door of every house left standing, there were Prussian soldiers in black helmets with copper spikes, sitting astride their chairs and smoking their pipes. Others were chatting or helping with the work as if they were members of the family. In every town on the railway line whole regiments could be seen drilling in the square, while now and then a guttural word of command could be heard above the rumbling of the wheels.

Monsieur Dubuis had served in the National Guard throughout the siege of Paris, and was now on his way to Switzerland to join his wife and daughter, whom he had prudently sent out of the country before the German invasion. Neither hunger nor hardship had reduced the ample girth of the wealthy, peace-loving tradesman. He had endured all the terrible tribulations with despairing fortitude, coupled with bitter comments on the barbarous nature of man. Although he had done duty on the ramparts and had mounted guard on many a freezing night, it was only now, when the war was over and he himself on the way to Switzerland, that he first set eyes on the Prussians. With horror and resentment he beheld

these armed and bearded foreigners, who were making themselves at home on the soil of France, and he felt within his soul a fever of helpless patriotism and at the same time a strong impulse towards prudence, that newly acquired instinct, which we have never shaken off.

His compartment was shared by two Englishmen as stout as himself. They were bent on sight-seeing and surveyed all things with calm, enquiring eyes. They conversed in their own language, now and then referring to their guide book, and reading extracts aloud, in order to identify the places to which it referred.

The train drew up in the station of a little town, and a Prussian officer, with much clanking of his sword, climbed up the steps into the compartment. He was tall, wore a tightly fitting uniform, and was mantled up to the eyes by a flaming red beard. His face was bisected horizontally by a long moustache of paler hue, which stuck out on either side. With smiles of excited curiosity the two Englishmen at once set to work to study him, while Monsieur Dubuis pretended to be absorbed in his newspaper. He shrank into his corner, like a thief confronted with a policeman. When the train went on, the Englishmen resumed their conversation and their efforts to identify the exact position of each battlefield. As one of them was pointing out a distant village, the Prussian officer, flinging out his long legs and lolling back in his seat, remarked in Teutonic French:

"I killed twelve Frenchmen in that village over there, and took more than a hundred prisoners."

"Aoh! and what is the name of the village?" asked the Englishmen with lively interest.

"Pharsbourg. You should have seen me take those scallywag Frenchmen by the ears."

And he stared at Monsieur Dubuis with an insolent smile on his bearded face.

The train trundled along, past village after village in enemy occupation. German soldiers could be seen on every road, in every field, at every station exit, and conversing outside the cafés. They covered the earth like the locusts of Africa.

The Prussian stretched out his hand.

"If I had been in command, I should have taken Paris and burnt it to the ground and killed every man, woman and child. No more France!"

"Aoh yes," murmured the Englishmen, with perfunctory politeness.

"In another twenty years," the officer continued, "the whole of Europe will be ours. Prussia is stronger than all the rest."

The Englishmen were ruffled and made no reply. All expression vanished from their faces, which looked like waxen masks between their drooping whiskers. The Prussian officer burst out laughing. Still lolling back in his seat, he continued to utter his taunts. He scoffed at abject France and insulted the prostrate foe. He sneered at Austria, vanquished in a previous war. He ridiculed the desperate, but vain resistance, offered by various provincial departments; at the militia and the ineffectual artillery. He declared that Bismarck intended to build an iron city with the captured guns. Presently he shoved his boots up against the thigh of Monsieur Dubuis, who crimsoned to the ears and looked away. The Englishmen seemed oblivious to everything around them, as if, of a sudden, they were once more secluded within the confines of their island, far from the clamour of the outer world.

The officer pulled at his pipe and said, with a look at the Frenchman:

"You haven't any tobacco on you?"

"No, sir," replied Monsieur Dubuis.

"I'll trouble you to get out at the next stop and buy

me some. I'll give you a tip," he added with another guffaw.

The train whistled and began to slow down. It passed some charred station-buildings and drew up. The German opened the carriage door and seized the Frenchman by the arm.

"Do as I told you and be quick about it."

The station was occupied by a detachment of Prussian troops. More soldiers were standing at the wooden barriers looking on. The engine gave a warning whistle. Monsieur Dubuis hurriedly jumped down on to the platform, and, disregarding the gesticulations of the stationmaster, sprang into the next compartment. He found himself alone. His heart was beating so violently that he had to unbutton his waistcoat. Panting for breath, he mopped his forehead. Presently the train halted at another station. Immediately, the Prussian officer appeared at the door of the compartment and entered. Close upon him followed the two Englishmen, actuated by curiosity. The German took the seat opposite the Frenchman. He was still laughing.

"So you declined to carry out my order?"

"Yes, sir," replied Monsieur Dubuis.

The train began to move.

"Well I shall have to cut off your moustache to fill my pipe."

So saying the German stretched out his hand towards his neighbour's face. Impassive as ever, the two Englishmen watched the proceedings with their calm gaze. The German clutched at the Frenchman's moustache and began pulling it. Dubuis struck up his arm with the back of his hand, and seizing him by the collar hurled him on to the seat. Beside himself with rage, his temples swelling, his eyes suffused with blood, he kept a strangle hold on his enemy with one hand, while savagely pounding his face with the clenched fist of the other. The

Prussian struggled; he tried to draw his sword and to grapple with his adversary, who was on top of him, pinning him down with the sheer weight of his vast bulk. Never pausing to take breath, he kept launching his blows, hardly knowing where they fell. Blood was flowing freely. Half-throttled, the German was groaning and spitting out broken teeth. But he could not shake off this fat and angry man, who was pommelling him. The Englishmen had left their seats to obtain a closer view. Agog with joy and excitement, they stood looking on, ready to lay a wager on one or other of the combatants. Exhausted by his exertions Monsieur Dubuis suddenly jumped up and without a word resumed his seat.

The Prussian was too bewildered, too overcome with pain and surprise, to fly at his enemy's throat. When he recovered his breath, he exclaimed:

"I challenge you to a duel with pistol. If you refuse, I'll kill you on the spot."

"I'll meet you whenever you please," replied Monsieur Dubuis.

"We are just getting into Strasburg," returned the German, "I will find two brother officers to act as my seconds. There will be time before the train goes on."

Monsieur Dubuis, who was puffing as vigorously as the locomotive, turned to the two Englishmen.

"Will you act as my seconds?"

"Aoh yes!" they exclaimed in one breath.

The train halted. Within a minute, the Prussian had found two brother officers, who produced a pair of pistols, and the party set out for the ramparts. The Englishmen, anxious not to lose the train, kept pulling out their watches; they insisted on hurrying and on settling the preliminaries without waste of time. Monsieur Dubuis had never before had a pistol in his hand.

He was stationed at a distance of twenty paces from his opponent.

"Are you ready?" asked one of the seconds.

As he signified his assent Dubuis noticed that one of the Englishmen had put up his umbrella to protect himself from the sun. A voice rang out:

"Fire!"

Without pausing to take aim, Monsieur Dubuis pressed the trigger, and to his utter amazement, saw his adversary reel, throw up his arms, and pitch forward on his face. He had shot him dead.

"Aoh!" exclaimed one of the Englishmen, in a voice quivering with exultation, gratified curiosity, and genial impatience. His companion, who still held his watch in his hand, seized Monsieur Dubuis by the arm and hurried him along at a run in the direction of the railway station, while his friend, his elbows close to his side, his fists doubled up, marked time:

"One, two, one, two."

Trotting along in line, regardless of their corporations, the trio resembled three droll figures from a comic paper. Just as the train was starting, they jumped into their carriage. The two Englishmen took off their travelling caps, waved them in the air, and gave three hearty cheers. Then both of them solemnly shook hands with Monsieur Dubuis, and retired to their own corner of the carriage.

IV. ST. ANTHONY

People called him St. Anthony, partly because Anthony happened to be his name, partly perhaps, because he was a jolly companion, a stout trencherman and a hearty drinker, with a turn for practical joking and an eye for a petticoat, and this despite the fact that he was over sixty. A peasant of the Caux district, he was tall and florid, with a well developed chest and stomach, perched on a pair of long legs, which seemed too lean for his ample frame. He was a widower, and, except for a maidservant and two labourers, lived alone on his farm, which he managed with much shrewdness. Careful of his own interests, he had an excellent head for business, and for everything relating to stockraising and agriculture. He had two sons and three daughters, who had married well and lived in the neighbourhood. Once a month they all came to dinner with their father. He was famous for his strength throughout the district. "As strong as St. Anthony" had become a household word.

At the time of the Prussian invasion, St. Anthony, sitting in the village pothouse, vowed he would eat an army. Like all true Normans, he was a braggart, with a braggart's underlying streak of cowardice. He thumped the table with his fist till it shook and the

glasses and cups danced about. Red in the face, a cunning gleam in his eyes, he shouted with pot-valiant ferocity:

"I must eat them up. By God I must!"

He never dreamt that the Prussians would penetrate as far as Tanneville. After he had heard that they had reached Rautôt, he never left the house, but stayed at the little window of the kitchen, keeping his eye continually on the high road and expecting every minute to see bayonets pass by. One morning, as he and his household were at their soup, the door was thrown open and Monsieur Chicot, the mayor of the Commune, entered, followed by a soldier in a black helmet with copper spike. St. Anthony sprang to his feet, while his servants looked on, expecting to see him annihilate the Prussian. But he merely shook hands with the mayor, who explained the situation to him.

"Here's one for you, St. Anthony. They arrived last night. Mind you don't play the fool. They threaten to shoot the lot of us and burn the whole place down, if the least little accident occurs. Now I've warned you. Give him something to eat. He seems a decent lad. Good-bye. I have to see the others. There are enough to go round."

He took his departure.

With haggard face, St. Anthony stared at his Prussian. He was a stout youth, with sleek, white skin, blue eyes, fair hair, and bearded to the cheek-bones. He seemed a stupid, shy, good-humoured sort of fellow. The astute Norman took his measure in a moment and with a feeling of relief, motioned him to a seat.

"Will you have some soup?" he asked.

The foreigner did not understand, and with sudden effrontery, Anthony thrust a brimming plateful under his nose.

"Here, lap that up, you fat swine."

"Ja," replied the soldier and fell to greedily, while the farmer, feeling that he had saved his face, winked at his servants, who were making strange grimaces, divided between terror and suppressed laughter.

When the Prussian had gulped down his soup, St. Anthony gave him a second plateful, which he likewise disposed of, but he refused a third helping in spite of the farmer's persistence.

"Come, stow it away," he urged him. "We'll fatten you up, you swine, you, or I'll know the reason why."

All that the soldier grasped was that he was to be nourished to his heart's content. He gave an amiable smile and signified that he could hold no more. With an assumption of familiarity, St. Anthony patted his Prussian on the stomach.

"My porker is as tight as a drum," he remarked.

Then he was suddenly convulsed with speechless mirth and turned an apoplectic red. Such a funny idea had occurred to him that he almost choked with laughter.

"I've got it. I've got it," he gasped. "St. Anthony and his pig. There you see the pig."

The three servants joined in his laughter. The old man was so tickled that he called for a bottle of his best brandy and treated them all. They drank to the Prussian, who smacked his lips in polite appreciation.

"Great stuff, what?" the farmer roared at him. "You don't get liquor like that at home, do you, Pig?"

From that day onwards, old Anthony never stirred without his Prussian. He had taken a line of his own. This was his private form of revenge, a revenge that was a credit to such an inveterate humorist. Though in the grip of mortal terror, the whole countryside rocked with laughter at St. Anthony's jest, when the

conquerors' backs were turned. When it came to practical joking, nobody could compare with him. No one else had such notions. What a wag the fellow was! Every afternoon he called on the neighbours, arm in arm with his German, whom he introduced with some facetious remark.

"Here he is," he exclaimed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Here's this pig of mine. Take a look at him. Isn't he fattening nicely?"

The yokels would grin with delight:

"Isn't the old boy killing?"

"I'll sell him to you for three pistoles, Cæsar."

"Done with you, Anthony, and you shall help us to eat the sausages."

"No, one of his trotters for me. Just feel him. Solid fat all through."

The rustics winked at one another, but were careful not to laugh too uproariously for fear the Prussian should begin to suspect that they were poking fun at him. Anthony, however, grew more daring every day. Pinching the man's thighs and slapping him on the back, he would remark:

"Nothing but solid fat and crackling."

He would pick up his Prussian in herculean arms that could lift an anvil.

"He weighs a good six hundred and there's no waste about him."

He induced the neighbours to offer food to his pig wherever he went. This became the chief entertainment of the day.

"It doesn't matter what it is," he remarked. "He'll eat anything."

They would set before him bread and butter, potatoes, cold stew, and pork sausages, which suggested the witticism:

"Your own, and very choice."

Gratified by these attentions, the dense, good-humoured German accepted whatever was offered him and would make himself ill, rather than give offence by refusing. He was certainly putting on flesh. To St. Anthony's delight, his uniform was becoming too tight for him.

"You know, Pig," he said to him, "they'll have to get you a new stye one of these days."

The two had really become the best of friends. When business took the old man into the neighbourhood, the Prussian always insisted on accompanying him, simply for the pleasure of his society.

It was bitter weather and freezing hard. The terrible winter of 1870 was destined, it seemed, to visit France with every kind of tribulation. Old Anthony, who looked ahead and never missed an opportunity, found that his stock of manure was insufficient for the spring ploughing. So he bought a midden belonging to a neighbour who was short of cash. He arranged to go over every evening and remove a cartload at a time. Daily, at dusk he set out for Haule's farm, which was about a mile away, with his faithful pig trotting beside him. Feeding the brute had become an entertainment to which all the country people came flocking, as they did to High Mass on Sundays. But the soldier's suspicions had been aroused, and sometimes, when the laughter became too boisterous, his eyes would roll uneasily and flash with an angry gleam. One day when he had eaten till he could eat no more, he refused to touch another morsel, and attempted to get up and go away. But St. Anthony caught him with a turn of the wrist, and putting his powerful hands on his shoulders, forced him so roughly back into his chair that it collapsed under him. This mishap was received with peals of laughter.

Beaming all over, Anthony helped his pig onto his

legs and pretended to minister to his injuries. Then he exclaimed:

"'Pon my soul, if you won't eat, you shan't refuse to drink."

He sent to the inn for brandy. The soldier rolled his eyes resentfully but did not reject the liquor. On the contrary, he drank all that was offered him, while, to the delight of the bystanders, Anthony drank level with him. Red as a tomato, his eyes burning, the Norman filled and refilled the glasses, and as he tossed off his own, he bawled out:

"Here's to you."

Without a word, the Prussian gulped down glass after glass. It was a match, a duel, a battle. Which of the pair would outlast the other? When the litre of brandy was drained to the last drop, both had reached the end of their tether. Yet neither could claim the victory. Honours were even. There was nothing for it, but to resume their bout on the following day.

The two men reeled out of the house and turned homewards, walking beside the loaded cart, which the horses dragged slowly along. It was beginning to snow. There was no moon and the night was dark save for the melancholy glimmer rising from the dead whiteness of the plains. The cold seized upon the pair and made them more drunk than ever. Disgusted at not having scored a victory, St. Anthony relieved his feelings by pushing against the Prussian's shoulder and trying to upset him into the ditch. The soldier kept backing away from these onslaughts, and each time he muttered some German words in angry tones, which sent the peasant into loud guffaws. Finally the Prussian lost his temper, and just as Anthony was preparing to jostle him again, he dealt him such a tremendous blow with his fist that the gigantic Norman staggered. Thereupon the old man, who was maddened by the brandy he had drunk, seized

the soldier round the body, shook him for a few moments, as if he were a small child, and flung him clean across the road. Elated by this feat, he folded his arms and indulged in a new outburst of laughter. The soldier had lost his helmet. Bareheaded, he sprang to his feet and drawing his sword rushed upon old Anthony. The peasant at once seized his whip by the middle—a huge, straight whip of hollywood, immensely tough and supple. Sure of killing his man, the Prussian came on with his head down and his weapon held straight out in front of him. But old Anthony caught hold of the blade, which was pointing full at his stomach, thrust it aside, and brought the handle of his whip sharply down on his enemy's temple. The Prussian collapsed at his feet. Dazed and distraught with horror, old Anthony stared at the body, which lay face downwards, at first twitching convulsively, then lapsing into immobility. He stooped down, turned him over, and stood gazing at him. The German's eyes were closed, and a trickle of blood oozed from a gash on the temple.

Dark though it was, old Anthony could see the brown stain that the blood left upon the snow. Utterly dismayed he lingered there, while the horses continued to move slowly onwards with the loaded cart. What was he to do? He would be shot. His farm would be burnt and the whole countryside laid to waste. What was to be done? How was he to hide the corpse, conceal the murder, outwit the Prussians? In the deep hush that brooded over the snowy landscape, he could hear the sound of distant voices. Panicstricken, he picked up the helmet, and replaced it on his victim's head. Then clasping him round the loins, he hoisted him up, ran with him after the cart, and deposited his burden on the top of the manure. Once home was reached, he could think out his next move. He walked slowly along, racking his

brains, but to no purpose. He fully realised his predicament and gave himself up for lost.

When he entered the yard, a light was showing at an attic window; the maid was still awake. He backed the cart smartly till it stood on the brink of the manure pit. Reflecting that when the load was turned out, the body, now lying on the top, would be deposited underneath the heap in the bottom of the trench, he tipped up the cart. As he had foreseen, the corpse was completely buried beneath the manure.

Anthony smoothed the heap over with his pitchfork, which he then stuck in the ground beside it. Calling one of the farmhands he bade him put the horses in the stable. Then he betook himself to his own room, and went to bed, still trying to decide upon his next step. Not a single idea occurred to him. Lying quietly between the sheets, he felt his terror growing upon him. He would certainly be shot. He was sweating with fear and his teeth were chattering. At last he could stand it no longer. Shivering all over, he rose, and went down to the kitchen. He took the brandy bottle from the cupboard and returned with it to his room. He drank two large glasses straight off. A new wave of intoxication succeeded the first, but it in no way allayed his agony of mind. What a Godforsaken fool he was to have landed himself in such a quandary!

He walked up and down the room, casting about for subterfuges, explanations, evasions. Every now and then he would take another pull at the brandy to put some heart into him. But not a plan, not the ghost of a plan, suggested itself. Towards midnight his watchdog Dévorant, a brute with a strain of wolf in him, broke out into deathlike howls. Old Anthony shivered to the marrow of his bones. Each time his dog began his lugubrious, long-drawn cry, a shudder of horror ran all over him. Worn out, distracted, aching in every limb,

he collapsed into a chair, and listened anxiously for Dévorant to lift up his voice again. He was shaken by every tremor with which panic afflicts the quivering nerves. The clock in the room below struck five. The dog never ceased his howling, and the old man was beside himself. At last he got up, intending to let him off the chain in the hope of silencing him. He went downstairs, opened the door and plunged into the darkness. It was still snowing. Against the background of unrelieved white, the farm buildings stood out like great splashes of black. Anthony made his way to the kennel. The dog was straining at the chain. As soon as he was released, he gave one spring, then, his coat bristling, his legs rigid, his fangs bared, he stopped dead, with his head turned towards the dunghill.

"What's up with you, you brute?" gasped Anthony, who was trembling from head to foot.

He took a few steps forward, and peered into the vague gloom of the shadowy yard. There he beheld, seated upon his dunghill, a figure, the figure of a man. Panting and aghast he gazed at the apparition. Then his eyes lighted on the handle of the pitchfork planted in the ground beside him. He snatched it up, and in one of those transports of terror that inspire even cowards with boldness, he dashed forward to investigate. It was he; it was the Prussian. Covered with mire, he had crawled out from beneath the manure, where he had lain, till warmed and revived. Mechanically he had sat himself down on the midden. Befouled with blood and filth, stupefied with drink, stunned by the blow and exhausted by his wound, there he had remained with the snowflakes powdering him all over. He caught sight of Anthony, and, too dazed to grasp the situation, he tried to get up. But as soon as the old man recognised the soldier, he began to foam at the mouth like a rabid animal.

"You swine, you!" he gabbled. "Not dead, aren't you? You'd give me away, would you? You wait . . . you wait."

He flew at the German. Lifting his pitchfork like a lance, he drove it with all the force of both arms into the man's chest, plunging the four iron prongs in up to the socket. Uttering a long-drawn moan, the soldier fell backwards, while the old peasant drew out his weapon and thrust it again and again into belly, stomach, throat, stabbing with the rage of a madman, riddling the quivering body from head to foot while the blood gushed out in violent spurts. At last, breathless with the fierceness of his exertions, sobered by the fact of the murder, he desisted, and drew deep breaths of air into his lungs. Then, as the cocks in the henroost began to crow and daybreak was at hand, he set to work to bury his victim. He scooped out a hole in the dunghill, till he reached the soil below, and dug yet deeper, working in frenzied haste, in a fury of energy, with violent movements of limbs and body. When the pit was deep enough, he rolled the corpse into it with the aid of his pitchfork, shovelled back the earth, trod it down carefully, and replaced the manure. He smiled, as he watched the swiftly falling snow completing his task and covering up all trace of the deed with a veil of white. Finally he stuck the pitchfork back on the dunghill and returned to his room. The brandy bottle, still half-full, was standing on the table. He drained it at one gulp, threw himself on his bed and fell into a profound sleep.

He woke perfectly sober, his mind calm and alert, able to grapple with the situation and to anticipate every development. Within an hour he was scouring the country for news of his soldier. He sought out the German officers and asked why they had taken his man away from him. Their friendship was so universally

known that not a soul suspected him. He actually gave a direction to the investigations by remarking that the Prussian used to go out every night running after girls.

An old retired policeman, who kept an inn in the next village and owned a pretty daughter, was arrested and shot.

V. THE COLONEL'S VIEWS

"Upon my word," exclaimed Colonel Laporte, "I may be old and gouty; my legs may be as stiff as gate-posts, but even now, if a woman, a pretty one, told me to go through the eye of a needle, I know I should jump through it, like a clown through a hoop. I shall never change, not till my dying day. It's in my blood. I am an old buck, I am, one of the old school. The sight of a woman, a pretty woman, thrills me from top to toe. And that's the truth.

But then, gentlemen, in France we all have a touch of the same spirit. We have not lost our chivalry. We remain the knights of love, the knights of happy chance, since we can no longer be the bodyguard of God, Who has been abolished. Women, my friends, no one can ever banish from our hearts. There she is and there she will stay. We love her; we shall always love her; we shall continue to commit every kind of folly for her sake, so long as France remains on the map of Europe. And even if France were blotted out, there would still be Frenchmen.

Under the gaze of a woman, a pretty woman, I, for my part, feel capable of anything. Lord, when I feel those eyes penetrating me, those infernally fascinating eyes of hers, which set the blood on fire, I don't know what I wouldn't do,—fight, wrestle, break the furniture,

prove myself the strongest, bravest, most reckless, most devoted of mankind.

But I am not the only one, by no means. I will take my oath that the whole French Army is just the same. From drummer-boy to General, we all go at it, hell for leather, when a woman, a pretty woman, is concerned. Remember all that Joan of Arc inspired us to do in the old days. Why, bless my soul, if only a woman, a pretty one, had taken command on the eve of Sedan, when Marshal MacMahon was wounded, I wager we should have marched through the Prussian lines and drunk her health out of the enemy's guns. It was not a Trochu, who was needed at Paris, but a St. Geneviève.

A little incident of the war has just occurred to me, which proves us capable of anything when a woman is watching us. At that time I was only a captain, and was in command of a scouting party, who were retreating through country, overrun by the Prussians. The enemy were on all sides of us and driving us hard. We were worn out, dog tired, and dying of exhaustion and hunger. Well, we had to reach Bar-sur-Tain before morning, or we should be wiped out, cut to pieces. It is a mystery to me how we had so far managed to escape. Our stomachs were empty and we had thirty miles to do that night, thirty miles with snow underfoot, and fresh snow falling. I thought to myself :

'It's all up. These poor devils will never manage it.'

We had had no food since the previous evening. All that day we had lain hidden in a barn, huddling close together for warmth, incapable of speaking or moving, sleeping by fits and starts, as one does when utterly exhausted. By five o'clock, night was upon us, the livid night of snowbound landscapes. I roused my men. A number of them refused to get up; their joints were so cramped with cold and exposure that they could hardly move or stand. Before us stretched the plain, like a

great, white, clean-scraped cowhide with the snow falling thick upon it. Down and down, straight as a curtain, drifted those white flakes, covering everything with a thick, heavy, icy pall, like a mattress of frozen flock. It seemed like the end of the world.

'Come, lads, step out,' I said.

But they gazed at that white veil floating down from the sky, as if to say:

'We've had enough. Better die where we are.'

I drew my revolver.

'I'll blow out the brains of the first man who shirks.'

And so they started off, moving very slowly, as if their legs were powerless. I sent four men on ahead, at a distance of four hundred yards, to keep a look out. The rest followed, huddled together in a formless mass, each man keeping up as best he could. I placed the least exhausted of the men in the rear, with orders to hurry on laggards by prodding them in the back with their bayonets. The snow seemed to be burying us alive. It lay without melting on caps and greatcoats, till we looked like spectres of dead soldiers, unutterably weary. I thought to myself:

'Only a miracle can save us.'

Now and then we halted for a few minutes to let the stragglers close up. We could hear nothing save the vague whisper of the snow, the almost inaudible flurry of the flakes, touching and mingling as they fell. Some of the men shook themselves; others remained motionless.

I gave the order to start again. Shouldering their rifles, with a look of utter exhaustion, they resumed the march. Suddenly the scouts fell back. Something had roused their suspicions. They had heard the sound of voices ahead of them. Halting the rest of the party, I sent a sergeant and six men to reconnoitre. Suddenly, a cry, a shrill cry, in a woman's voice, rang out through

the brooding silence of the snows, and a few minutes later, two prisoners, an old man and a girl, were brought to me.

I questioned them in a low voice. They were running away from the Prussians, who had occupied their house that evening and proceeded to get drunk. The father feared for his daughter and, without even warning the servants, they had escaped together into the darkness. They were evidently people of some social standing.

'You must come with us,' I said, and we resumed our march. The old man knew the country and acted as guide. It stopped snowing, the stars shone out, and the cold became intense. The girl, who was clinging to her father's arm, walked with short stumbling steps, as if in pain. Now and then she murmured:

'My feet are quite numb.'

I believe I suffered even more than the child herself, to see her dragging along through the snow.

At last she stopped and exclaimed:

'Father, I'm so tired. I can't go another step.'

The old man tried to carry her, but he could not even lift her in his arms, and with a deep sigh she collapsed on to the ground.

The men all gathered round her while I stamped up and down, utterly at a loss. I could not bring myself to leave this girl and her father to their fate. At last one of my men, who came from Paris and was nicknamed 'Smarty', exclaimed:

'Come, boys, we'll carry the young lady, or hang it all, we're no Frenchmen.'

I believe I uttered an oath or two myself, from sheer pleasure.

'Good lads,' I said, 'I'll lend a hand myself.'

Away to the left in the gloom, we could make out the trees of a little copse. Some of the men went off and

speedily returned with branches tied together to form a litter.

'Which of you fellows will lend his coat to a pretty girl?' cried Smarty.

A dozen greatcoats were hurled at him, and in another moment the girl was snugly tucked up in the litter under a pile of warm wraps. Six men carried her on their shoulders, and proud to share the burden, I took my place at the right hand corner in front. When the march was resumed, the men stepped out more briskly and cheerfully than before. It was as if they had been revived with wine. I actually caught a joke or two. You see it only needs a woman to galvanize a Frenchman. Stimulated, inspirited, the men were almost in proper marching order again. I heard one old fellow, a volunteer, who was walking behind the litter, waiting to take his turn as soon as the first man began to flag, remark to his neighbour in an audible whisper:

'I'm not a young man, but blimey, there's nothing like a woman to put heart into a chap.'

Till three in the morning we marched almost without a halt. Then the scouts again fell back and the whole party lay down on the snow, where they were visible only as a blurred shadow.

I gave my orders in an undertone and behind me I could hear the sharp metallic click of rifles being loaded.

Yonder, in the middle of the plain, some mysterious thing was moving. It was like a great monster, now running along, now lengthening out like a snake, now curling into a ball, now making sudden darts to left or right, now pausing, now advancing. Of a sudden this wandering shape drew near us, and I beheld a party of a dozen Uhlans, who had lost their way. They were advancing in single file at a rapid trot. When they were near enough for me to hear distinctly the snorting of the

horses, the rattle of arms, the creaking of saddles, I gave the order to fire.

Fifty rifle shots shattered the silence of the night. There were four or five more reports, then a last solitary shot. When the blinding smoke cleared away, we saw that all twelve men, and nine of the horses, had fallen. The three surviving horses dashed off at a furious gallop, one of them dragging the body of its rider, who was caught by the foot in the stirrup and bumped along the ground in a sickening fashion.

A soldier behind me broke into a terrible laugh. Another, a married man perhaps, remarked:

'More widows.'

'Quick work,' added a third.

A head peeped out from the litter.

'What is happening? Is it a fight?'

'Nothing of any consequence, Mademoiselle,' I answered, 'we have just been polishing off a dozen Prussians.'

'Poor things,' she murmured, and snuggled down again under the greatcoats out of the cold.

We marched on for a long while, till at last the sky grew pale; the snow began to gleam and glow and glisten; while a rosy flush suffused the eastern firmament.

A distant voice challenged us:

'Who goes there?'

I halted the party and went forward to make our identity known. We had won through to the French lines.

As my men marched past the guard, the major to whom I had made my report, caught sight of the litter, and asked in a resonant voice:

'What have you got there?'

A small rosy face peeped out, smiling through tangled curls:

'Only me.'

All the men burst out laughing while their hearts thrilled with delight. Smarty, who was marching beside the litter, waved his cap and shouted:

'France forever!'

It was a charming and chivalrous gesture, which moved me strangely, I know not why. I felt as if we had saved our country, done a thing that other men would not have done, a trifling thing in itself, yet in the truest sense, patriotic. I shall never forget that little face, you may be sure. If my advice were asked about the suppression of drums and trumpets, I should suggest replacing them with pretty girls, one for each regiment. They would do more than even the strains of the Marseillaise. God bless my soul, how it would hearten the men to see a Madonna, a real live Madonna, riding beside the Colonel."

He paused for a moment; then, nodding his head with an air of conviction, he drew his moral:

"We are all alike, we Frenchmen. We do love a pretty woman."

VI. MIDGE

A RIVERSIDE MEMORY

"THE queer things I saw!" he began. "The amazing young women I met in the old days when I used to go boating! I have often longed to write a little book, entitled: 'On the Seine', describing that strenuous, lighthearted existence, of impecuniousness and gaiety, of robust and uproarious merrymaking, which I led when I was in my twenties. I was then a penniless clerk. Now I am a successful man with plenty of money to throw away on the whim of the moment. In those days my heart was seething with a thousand modest hopes, a thousand impossible desires, which gilded life with all the glory of a dream. Nowadays I can imagine no impulse strong enough to rouse me from my nap in my easy chair.

Difficulties there were, yet how pleasant, how simple it was to divide one's time between the office in Paris and the river at Argenteuil. For ten years, my great, my solitary, my consuming passion was for the Seine. Ah that fair, calm, changeful, evil-smelling river with its glamour and its foulness. I think I loved it so dearly, because it gave me, as it now seems to me, such a sense of life. Ah those walks along the flowery banks, while my friends, the frogs, lay cooling their bellies and dreaming on a leaf of the water-lilies, dainty and frail, floating among the tall slender grasses, which suddenly opened and showed me, behind a willow, a page from a Japanese

picture book, a kingfisher darting away from me like a streak of blue flame. How I doated on it all, with an instinctive love, which my eyes conveyed to my whole body, flooding it with deep and primitive delight. Other men cherish memories of voluptuous nights, but mine are of sunrises breaking through the veils of morning mist, which hovered and brooded, white as death before the coming of dawn, then, as the first ray stole across the meadows, flushed to a rosiness that ravished the heart. And I have memories of the moon, turning the quivering, rippling water to a silver sheen that made each dream burst into flower. For me all this, the symbol of eternal illusion, sprang from that malodorous river, which swept all the refuse of Paris down to the sea.

And then, what fun we had, my friends and I! We were a band of five, who are now serious-minded men. As we were all of us poor, we formed a kind of club with quarters in a horrible pothouse, where a single room served us for dormitory. Here I spent what were certainly the most hilarious nights of my existence. We cared for nothing in the world but amusement and boating. With one exception, we all had a passion for the oar. I shall never forget the extraordinary pranks and adventures we five dare-devils indulged in, too incredible, too preposterous for anyone of the present day to believe. Even on the Seine, all that sort of thing has died out. The wild spirits that possessed us no longer exist in the souls of the rising generation. Between us we had purchased a boat with money painfully scraped together. What jokes we had in that boat of ours! We shall never laugh like that again. It was a large wherry, rather heavy, but solid, roomy and comfortable.

I will spare you a description of my comrades. We all had nicknames. There was Swipes, a small, quick-

witted fellow; Tomahawk, with his fierce expression, grey eyes and raven hair; La Tôque, who was lazy and witty, and the only one who never handled an oar, on the plea that he might upset the boat; and slim, dandified, well-groomed One Eye, so called from a recent novel by Cladel and because he wore a monocle. Me they dubbed Joseph Prunier. We lived in perfect harmony; our only regret was that we had no lady at the helm. A woman is a necessity in a river boat and for these reasons: she keeps hearts and minds on the alert, because she stimulates, amuses, distracts, lends piquancy, and strikes a note of colour with her red parasol, which glides along, showing above the green banks. But no ordinary riverside girl would serve the purpose of five young men, who were so totally different from the common herd. What we required was something amusing, original, devil-may-care, something, in fact, almost impossible to discover. All our experiments with sundry damsels were unsuccessful; they had no idea of steering and were utterly useless in a boat, while their predilection was for the wine that intoxicates rather than for the water that flows and carries wherries. We would keep them for a Sunday and then drop them in disgust.

Well, one Saturday evening, One Eye brought us a slip of a girl, lively, vivacious, ribald, full of that waggishness which serves the Paris street Arabs of either sex for wit. She was attractive, but not pretty, a mere sketch of a woman with a suggestion of everything, one of those silhouettes an artist dashes off in three lines on the restaurant tablecloth, between a glass of brandy and a cigarette. The first evening her unexpectedness surprised and amused us too much for us to take her measure. Dropped into the midst of a bunch of men, ready for any folly, she soon became mistress of the situation. By the following evening she had made a

conquest of every one of us. She herself was utterly irresponsible. Born with a glass of absinthe inside her, which her mother had tossed off in the very moment of giving her birth, she had never been sober since. Her wet-nurse, she informed us, used always to restore her system with rum, and she invariably referred to the bottles standing in rows behind the bar as her 'sainted family'. I do not know which of us christened her Midge, nor why she was given that nickname, but it suited her and stuck to her. Every week our boat, the Floating Leaf, plied up and down the Seine between Asnières and Maisons-Laffitte with its crew of five cheerful and robust young men, steered by a merry, feather-brained chit of a girl, beneath a sunshade of coloured paper. She treated us as slaves, whose business it was to row her on the river, and we were all very fond of her.

We were all very fond of her, at first, for a thousand reasons, but later for one only. Seated in the stern of the boat, she rattled away, like a little windmill turning in the breeze that blew across the river. Her never-ending chatter was like the light, continuous whirring of one of those mechanical toys with wings, which spin round and round in the wind. Quite casually she would come out with the most surprising, the most unseemly, the most preposterous remarks. Like a piece of patch-work, made up of scraps and shreds of every shape and colour, not firmly sewn together, but merely tacked, her nature was the strangest mixture of the fancifulness of fairy tales, of broad humour, shamelessness, impudence, unexpectedness, drollery, and fresh air—such fresh air and scenery as is enjoyed from a balloon in flight.

We used to ply her with questions to provoke the replies, which she unearthed heaven knows whence. The one we used to tease her with most frequently was:

'Why do they call you Midge?'

She would give such absurd reasons that we had to stop rowing to laugh. As a woman, too, she had her charm for us. To our favourite question:

'Why do they call you Midge?'

La Tôque, who never rowed, but spent the whole day lounging beside her in the stern, once made the following reply:

'Because she's a little Spanish-fly.'

And so she was, a little, buzzing, tantalising fly, not the ordinary, poisonous, shiny, mottled blister-fly, but a tiny creature with red wings, who was beginning strangely to trouble the peace of the whole crew of the Floating Leaf. Many were the foolish jokes made aboard the Floating Leaf, on which our little fly had settled.

Since Midge's introduction, One Eye had begun to give himself airs, the supercilious airs of a gentleman with a woman of his own, towards four other men with none. Sometimes he abused his privileges to such an extent that he would annoy us by kissing Midge under our eyes, by perching her on his knee after meals, and by flaunting many other prerogatives as humiliating to us, as they were tantalising.

A part of the dormitory had been curtained off for them.

I soon discovered that we four celibates were nursing the same grievance in our lonely hearts:

'For what reason, by virtue of what law of exemption, by what inadmissible principle, should Midge, who seems unhampered by any scruples, remain faithful to her lover, when not even women of the highest rank are true to their husbands?'

Our reasoning was correct, as we soon discovered. Our only regret was for the time we had wasted by not arriving sooner at this conclusion. Midge deceived One Eye with all the rest of the crew of the Floating Leaf.

She made no difficulties and raised no objections. She was ours for the asking.

Prudish people will be horrified at this. But why? What popular courtesan does not possess a dozen lovers, and which of them is so simple as not to know it? Is it not the fashion to have one's evening at the house of some notable cocotte, as one has one's evening at the Opera, the Français, and even at the Odéon, since it took to semi-classical productions? Ten men combine to keep one mistress, who has the delicate task of duly allotting her time, just as ten men club together to keep a race-horse, which is bestridden only by one jockey, true symbol of the passionate lover.

From motives of delicacy we left Midge to One Eye from Saturday evening till Monday morning. The week-end on the river was his. We deceived him only during the week, in Paris, far from the Seine, and that, for boating men like ourselves, was almost equivalent to not deceiving him at all. The situation had this peculiarity. We four, who filched her favours, were aware that we shared her. We discussed it with one another and even with Midge herself, who would laugh at our veiled allusions. Only One Eye seemed utterly in the dark. His anomalous position lent a certain constraint to our attitude towards him: it seemed to isolate him, set him apart, to raise a barrier between us and our old intimacy and fellowship. From our point of view, he had a difficult part to play, and a rather ridiculous one, that of the deceived lover, almost the deceived husband. As he was remarkably intelligent and had a certain caustic humour, we wondered at times, somewhat uneasily, whether he had his suspicions. He took the trouble to enlighten us, in a way that stung for the moment. We had agreed to lunch at Bougival and were pulling away vigorously. La Tôque that morning wore the complacent air of the gratified male.

Seated beside our cox, and, in our opinion, leaning against her with rather too much freedom, he suddenly cried out:

'Stop.'

Our eight oarblades were lifted out of the water. Then, turning to his neighbour, he said to her:

'Why do they call you Midge?'

Before she could reply, the voice of One Eye called curtly from the bows:

'Because she settles on every bit of carrion she sees.'

A deep and embarrassed silence ensued, followed by a general desire to laugh. Midge herself was dumbfounded.

Suddenly La Tôque exclaimed:

'Go on rowing,' and the boat glided onwards. The incident was closed and the sky was clear again. This little episode in no way interfered with our customs. It merely restored the cordial relations between One Eye and ourselves. He still remained Midge's privileged owner from Saturday evening till Monday morning, his superiority over the rest of us having been clearly established by that definition of his, which, by the way, put an end to all further questions on the subject of her nickname. Thenceforth we contented ourselves with the secondary part of grateful and considerate friends, who discreetly profited by week-days, without the slightest rivalry among them.

For about three months all was well. Then, suddenly, Midge's attitude towards us underwent a curious change. She was less cheerful, and seemed nervous, restless, almost irritable. We kept asking her what was the matter.

'Nothing,' she would reply. 'Leave me alone.'

The situation was explained to us by One Eye, one Saturday evening. We had just sat down to table in

the small dining-room, which Barbichon, the owner of our pothouse, reserved for us. We had had our soup and were waiting for the fish, when our friend, who seemed likewise ill at ease, took Midge's hand in his and then proceeded to address us:

'My dear fellows, I have a most serious communication to make to you, which may lead to prolonged discussions. We shall have time to deliberate between the courses. Our poor Midge has given me some disastrous information and has asked me to break it to the rest of you. She is going to have a child. I have only two words to add. This is not the time to abandon her, and the question of paternity must not be raised.'

At first we were seized with consternation and a sense of impending calamity. Each looked at his companions with a longing to fix the blame on someone else. But who was the culprit? Who indeed? Never had I felt so keenly the perfidy of nature, whose cruel jest it is never to allow a man the positive certainty that he is the father of his child. Little by little our dismay yielded to a feeling of reassurance, based, paradoxically enough, on a vague sentiment of solidarity. Tomahawk, who rarely spoke, summed up the first indications of recaptured serenity in these words:

'Well, never mind. Union is strength.'

A cook's boy brought in a dish of fried gudgeon, but our minds were still too troubled for us to fall to as usual.

'In view of her condition,' One Eye resumed, 'she has had the delicacy of feeling to make a full confession to me. My friends, we are all of us equally to blame. Let us shake hands and adopt the child.'

This proposal was unanimously accepted. We raised our arms above the plate of fish and swore to adopt the infant. Suddenly reassured and relieved of the crushing burden of anxiety, which for a month had been torturing

this pitiful, winsome, erratic, little victim of love, she faltered:

'O you dears, you dears. . . . How good you are, how good you are, how good you are. . . . Thank you all.'

It was the first time we had ever seen her in tears. After this, whenever we were on the river, we used to discuss the child, as if it were already born, and each of us manifested a tender and ridiculous interest in the gradual and regular development of our cox's figure.

We would stop rowing and exclaim:

'Midge!'

'Well?'

'Boy or girl?'

'Boy.'

'What is he going to be?'

She would let her imagination run riot, and reel off interminable stories with the most amazing incidents, from the day of his birth to his final triumph. He was everything by turns, in the ingenuous fancy of this extraordinary little being, who now lived in our midst respected by all of us, whom she called her five papas. She pictured him as a sailor, discovering a new continent bigger than America; as a general, restoring Alsace and Lorraine to France; as an emperor founding a dynasty of wise, noble sovereigns, who were to bestow enduring happiness upon our country; as an alchemist, discovering first the secret of making gold, then that of immortality; as an aeronaut, inventing some means of visiting the stars and making of the boundless heavens one vast thoroughfare for human beings, the fulfilment of all the most impossible and splendid dreams. How amusing, how charming, she was, poor child, all that summer.

On the twentieth of September her hopes were blasted. We had been lunching at Maisons-Laffitte and were passing St. Germain, when she felt thirsty and asked

us to stop at Le Pecq. She was beginning to feel her burden, and to her great annoyance could no longer skip about nor jump from the boat to the bank as she used to do. But in spite of our protests and opposition, she persisted in attempting it, and a score of times she would have fallen, had we not caught her in our outstretched arms. That day, prompted by one of those impulses of bravado through which sick or weary athletes sometimes meet their death, she was rash enough to take it into her head to jump ashore before the boat had stopped. Just as we were coming alongside, before we could guess her intention and prevent her, she sprang to her feet and jumped for the jetty. But, it was beyond her strength. She just touched the stone edge with her toes, slipped, struck the sharp corner full with her body, and with a piercing scream, disappeared under the water. With one accord all five of us plunged in and pulled out the poor little soul, exhausted, pale as death and already racked with cruel pangs. We had to carry her without delay to the nearest inn, and to send for a doctor. For ten hours she endured appalling sufferings with heroic fortitude, while in an agony of anxiety and pity, we gathered around her. She was delivered of a dead child, and for several days her life hung in the balance. At last the doctor said:

'I think she'll pull through now. She must have an iron constitution, that girl.'

With hearts full of joy we trooped into her room. One Eye acted as spokesman.

'You are out of danger, little Midge. I can't tell you how glad we are.'

For the second time we saw her weep. Looking at us through a mist of tears, she faltered:

'O if you only knew . . . if you only knew . . . how sorry I am. I shall never forgive myself.'

'What's all this, little Midge?'

'I killed him; I killed him. I never meant to, but I did. O how unhappy I am.'

She went on sobbing. We stood round her sympathetically, but could think of nothing to say.

'Did you see him?' she asked.

'Yes,' we replied in unison.

'It was a boy, wasn't it?'

'Yes.'

'A beautiful child?'

We hesitated. Then Swipes, the least scrupulous of us all, took the plunge.

'Very beautiful.'

He was, however, ill-advised, for she began moaning, almost screaming with grief. At last One Eye, who perhaps cared for her more than any of us, had a happy inspiration, which served to soothe her. Kissing her tear-stained lids, he said:

'Cheer up, little Midge, cheer up. We'll provide you with another one.'

Her sense of humour, which was in her very bones, was quick to respond. Half in jest, half in earnest, though still tearful and wrung with grief, she glanced up at us all.

'Really and truly?' she asked.

'Really and truly,' we assured her as one man."

VII. SEEING LIFE

WHAT instinct is keener than curiosity in woman? In her eagerness to realise, grasp, enact her dreams, there is nothing she will not do to gratify her desire. Once her restless curiosity is aroused, she is capable of every act of folly, restlessness, audacity. She will stop at nothing. I am alluding to women, who are women indeed, endowed with that triple nature, which, superficially cold and calculating, comprises three secret recesses. The first is filled with the inappeasable restlessness of women; the second with that subtle and dangerous hypocrisy, masquerading as piety, which is the special weapon of the sanctimonious; the third with that fascinating raffishness, that exquisite fickleness, that bewitching caprice, that wayward perversity, which drives the too confiding and ingenuous lover to suicide, while delighting his sophisticated rival.

The heroine of my story was a little provincial person, who had hitherto remained dowdily virtuous. Her life, superficially uneventful, was devoted to domestic duties, which included the care of a busy husband and two children to whom she was an excellent mother. But the heart within her was throbbing with unsatisfied curiosity, with a craving for the unknown. She was always dreaming of Paris, and she devoured the society journals, whose descriptions of parties, frocks and gaieties were fuel to her burning desires. But above all, she derived a mysterious excitement from certain paragraphs packed with innuendo, certain suggestive phrases, half lifting veils, and affording vistas of unholy and devastating joys. From her corner of the provinces,

she beheld Paris in an apotheosis of lurid and baleful splendour. During long nights of dreaming, lulled by the rhythmic snores of her husband, as he lay beside her on his back, with a silk handkerchief round his head, she thought of all those famous men, whose names shine out on the front pages of the newspapers, like the greater stars in a cloudy sky. She pictured to herself their hectic careers of incessant debauch; their orgies fraught with all the appalling voluptuousness of antiquity and with refinements of sensuality too intricate for her even to imagine. To her the boulevards were maelstroms of human passions and the houses mysterious haunts where the strangest rites of love were celebrated. And she felt that her youth was vanishing. She was growing old and had known nothing of life save the trivial and odious round of daily duties, which is supposed to constitute domestic bliss. Preserved in that still atmosphere like a winter pear in a cupboard, she had retained her youthful comeliness. But inwardly she was tortured, ravaged, consumed by secret yearnings. Was she fated to go to her grave, she wondered, without ever having tasted those unholy raptures, without ever having plunged, were it once and once only, body and soul, into the voluptuous vortex of Paris?

After patient plotting, she found a pretext for a trip to Paris, and elicited an invitation from some relations. Her husband was unable to accompany her, so she set out alone. As soon as she arrived, she trumped up a story about some friends she had met who lived on the outskirts of Paris, as an excuse for absenting herself for a couple of days, or, rather, nights, should occasion arise.

Then she set out on her quest. She wandered up and down the boulevards, but nothing did she see, except licensed vice on the prowl. She gazed into all the principal cafés and scrutinised the agony column in the

Figaro, which roused her every morning like a tocsin, a rallying cry of love. But there was never a hint of those tremendous orgies, indulged in by artists and actresses, nor anything to indicate to her those temples of vice, secret as Ali Baba's treasure cave and closing at a magic word; hidden away like the catacombs of Rome and dedicated to the mysteries of a proscribed religion. Her relations were insignificant, middle-class people, who could not introduce her to any of the celebrated men whose names were ringing in her head. In despair, she had almost decided to go home, when chance came to her aid.

One day, as she was walking down the rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, she paused to look into a shop window full of those highly coloured curios, which attract the eye with specious brightness. She was admiring the array of dainty ivory figurines, tall vases in glowing enamel, fantastic bronzes, when she observed the dealer inside the shop, bowing obsequiously to a stout little man with a bald head and grey beard, and exhibiting to him a squat, round-bellied grotesque, which he declared to be unique. Each of his phrases was punctuated with his client's name, a famous name, which rang out like a clarion call. The other customers, young women with immaculately dressed cavaliers, directed swift, discreet glances of well-bred admiration at the famous author, who for his part was covetously eyeing the porcelain image. The man was as hideous as the figure; they were as like each other as ugly twins.

"As it's you, Monsieur Jean Varin," said the dealer, "you shall have it for a thousand francs, which is just what I gave for it. No one else would get it under fifteen hundred. But I pride myself on my connection of artists and literary men, and I give them special prices. They all come to me, Monsieur Jean Varin.

Only yesterday Monsieur Busnach bought a fine old cup from me. The other day I sold a pair of candlesticks like these—aren't they beauties?—to Monsieur Alexandre Dumas. Why, that bit you have there, Monsieur Zola has only to set eyes on it and he'll buy it on the spot, Monsieur Varin."

Fascinated by the curio, but deterred by the price, Monsieur Varin stood there painfully hesitating, as regardless of spectators and admirers, as if he had been alone in the desert.

Trembling all over, she entered the shop and boldly fixed her eyes upon him. She never paused to consider whether he were young, well-dressed and handsome. Enough for her that he was Jean Varin, Jean Varin in person.

After a long and poignant struggle he put the figure back on the table.

"No, it's too dear," he sighed.

The dealer waxed more eloquent than ever.

"O Monsieur Varin! Too dear? Why it's worth two thousand francs, if it's worth a sou."

"I daresay," replied Monsieur Varin ruefully, still gazing at the little man with the enamel eyes. "But I can't afford it."

With an impulse of wild audacity, she stepped forward.

"What will you let me have it for?" she asked.

"Fifteen hundred francs, Madam," replied the astonished dealer.

"I will take it."

Varin, who had hitherto failed so much as to notice her, now turned swiftly round and looked her critically up and down between narrowed eyelids, noticing her points with the glance of an expert. The smouldering fires within her blazed up and lent her sparkle, charm, vivacity. He reflected, moreover, that a woman who will

give fifteen hundred francs for a curio is no ordinary stranger.

With a bewitching gesture of deprecation she turned to him.

"I beg your pardon," she said in a voice that shook, "I am afraid I spoke too soon. Perhaps you had not made up your mind."

"Yes thank you, madam," he replied with a bow.

"In any case," she pursued emotionally, "if you should change your mind, either to-day or later, the curio is yours. I only bought it because you fancied it."

He was evidently flattered and smiled at her.

"How did you know who I was?"

With a burst of eloquence, she poured out her admiration for him and quoted from his works. Leaning his elbow on a table as he talked, he fixed her with his piercing eyes and tried to fathom her. The dealer was enchanted with this human advertisement of his wares and every now and then, as fresh customers entered, he called from the far end of the shop:

"Just look there. Just look at Monsieur Varin. Isn't it a picture?"

All eyes turned towards the pair, and she trembled with delight at being thus seen in conversation with one of the Elect. At last, like a general ordering the attack, she obeyed an impulse of supreme daring.

"Monsieur Varin," she said, "I want you to do me a favour, a great favour. Allow me to present you with the curio, in remembrance of a woman you talked to for ten minutes, who cherishes for you a passionate admiration."

He declined. She insisted. Immensely amused and laughing heartily, he stood his ground.

"Very well," she said obstinately, "I shall go and

leave it at your house immediately. Where do you live?"

He refused to give her his address, but she obtained it from the dealer, and after paying for her purchase she made a dash for a cab. Determined not to have this gift imposed upon him in such a preposterous manner, Monsieur Varin rushed after her. He caught her up, just as she was jumping into a four-wheeler. He flung himself in, and landed almost on top of her, owing to the jolting of the cab as it drove off. Much ruffled, he seated himself beside her. But in spite of his protests and entreaties she remained obdurate. As they drew up at the door of his house, however, she proposed her terms.

"I'll let you off," she said, "if in return you will promise to do just as I please for the rest of the day." The strangeness of her request appealed to him and he consented.

"What do you generally do at this hour?" she asked.

"Go for a walk," he replied, after a moment's hesitation."

"To the Bois, then," she ordered in resolute tones, and they set out together.

She made him name for her benefit all the well-known women, especially those of easy virtue, and give a detailed account of their lives, habits, homes and vices.

"What do you do now?" she asked as evening began to fall.

"I have my absinthe," he replied, laughing.

"Then, Monsieur Varin," she rejoined solemnly, "let us have our absinthe."

They entered a big café on the boulevard, a favourite haunt of his, where he met other literary men. He introduced them all to her. She was frantic with delight, and her head kept ringing with the words: "At last! At last!"

As time went on, she said:

"Is this your dinner hour?"

"Yes, Madam."

"Then let us have dinner."

"What do you do in the evenings?" she asked as they emerged from the Café Bignon.

He looked at her intently.

"It depends. Sometimes I go to the theatre."

"Well then, let us go to the theatre."

They went to the Vaudeville, where, in compliment to him, seats were presented to them, and, supreme glory, she sat by his side in the balcony stalls in full view of the whole audience.

After the theatre he kissed her hand gallantly.

"All that remains for me, Madam, is to thank you for a delicious day——"

She broke in upon him.

"What do you do at this hour of the night?"

"Why . . . I go home."

She broke into a laugh, a quavering laugh.

"Well then . . . let us go home."

Neither spoke again. Now and then she shivered from head to foot. She wanted to remain, and she wanted to run away, but in her heart of hearts, she was firmly resolved to see it through to the end. As they went upstairs she was so overcome with nervousness that she had to cling to the banisters. Panting a little, he led the way, holding a wax vesta in his hand.

As soon as she was inside the room, she hastily undressed, slipped into bed without a word, and lay huddled close to the wall. She was as unsophisticated as the lawful wife of a country attorney could be, while he proved more exacting than a pasha of three tails. Neither understood the other in the least. Eventually he went off to sleep, and the night slipped away disturbed only by the ticking of the clock. She remained

motionless, thinking of conjugal experiences at home. By the yellow beam of a Chinese lantern she gazed, disconsolately, at the obese little man by her side. He lay on his back, his round belly bulging beneath the bedclothes, like a balloon filled with gas. His long-drawn snores and snuffles, his ludicrous wheezings, were like the croaking of an organ pipe. His few remaining hairs, as if tired of their long spell of duty, plastered down over his bald pate to hide the ravages of time, had seized the opportunity to stand grotesquely on end. At last, with the dawn, a glimmer of light stole in through the closed curtains. Noiselessly she rose and dressed. She had half opened the door, when the creaking of the bolt woke him. He rubbed his eyes, but it was several moments before he regained full possession of his senses. Then it all came back to him.

"So you're off, are you?" he asked.

She stood there covered with confusion.

"Why yes," she faltered. "It's morning."

He sat up in bed.

"Well now," he said, "it's my turn to ask a favour."

As she made no reply, he continued:

"You have puzzled me confoundedly ever since yesterday. Be honest and tell me what you meant by it all. I can't make it out."

Blushing like an innocent girl, she went slowly towards him.

"I wanted to know . . . about . . . about . . . vice . . . Well . . . it's not a bit amusing."

With this she escaped from the room, down the stairs, and out into the street.

An army of scavengers was at work, cleaning pavements and roadways and pushing the dirt and rubbish into the gutters. With the regular motions of reapers in a field they swept the mud before them into semi-circles. She passed them in every street, moving auto-

matically like clock-work figures, with the same mechanical action. And she felt as if the process had been applied to her own person, as if all those feverish dreams of hers had been swept into the gutter.

Chilled and breathless, she fled homeward, with no idea in her head, save the swish of those brooms, cleansing Paris at break of day. As soon as she set foot in her own room, she burst into tears.

VIII.
OLD LETTERS

An eight-hours railway journey disposes certain people to sleep, and afflicts others with insomnia. In my case every journey is followed by a sleepless night. I arrived about five in the afternoon to spend three weeks with my friends the Murets d' Artus at Abelle, their country place. This charming house, which was built by their grandfather at the end of the eighteenth century, has always remained in the hands of his descendants. It has, accordingly, that homely atmosphere a house acquires, from having been furnished, and continuously occupied, enlivened, cherished, by the same family. Nothing in it is ever changed. Nothing of the spirit of the place is lost. It has never been dismantled. The hangings have never been taken down, but have grown old and dim and faded on the self-same walls. Not a stick of the familiar furniture is ever removed. Only, now and again, it is rearranged to make room for some recent acquisition, which is received like a new baby, entering a family of brothers and sisters.

The house stands on a hill, and is surrounded by grounds sloping down to the river, which is spanned by a stone bridge. Beyond the stream lie the meadows, where the lush grass is browsed upon by sleek, slow-moving cows, with liquid eyes that seem suffused by the dews and mists and moisture of their pasture. I love this place as one loves a thing one passionately

yearns to possess. I return here every autumn with the keenest pleasure, and I leave it reluctantly. After dinner, in the midst of this friendly, quiet family, who have accepted me as one of themselves, I said to my friend Paul Muret:

"What room have you given me this year?"

"Aunt Rose's."

An hour later Madame Muret d' Antus, followed by her three children, two bouncing lasses and an imp of a boy, escorted me to Aunt Rose's room, which I had never occupied before. When they left me, I examined the walls and the furniture and the whole aspect of the room, to make myself feel at home in it. I knew the room, but not well. I had only entered it once or twice to cast a casual glance at the pastel portrait of Aunt Rose, after whom it was named. Old Aunt Rose with her ringlets, obscured behind the glass, did not appeal to me in the least. She had the look of one of those worthy dames of a bygone day, full of principles and precepts, as well equipped with moral maxims as with cookery receipts, one of those venerable aunts, who banish gaiety, the dour and wrinkled angels of provincial households. I had never heard her mentioned. I knew nothing about her life or her death. Did she belong to this century, or to the last? Had she departed this life after a monotonous existence or a stormy one? Had she yielded to heaven the virgin soul of a spinster, the placid soul of a wife, the tender soul of a mother, or a soul tumultuous with passion? It was all one to me. Her mere name, Aunt Rose, struck me as absurd, commonplace, unpleasing. I took a candle to examine her forbidding countenance, high up on the wall, in an old frame of gilded wood. Then deeming it not only trivial, and unprepossessing, but positively repellent, I turned my attention to the furniture. All of it was late Louis XVI, and of the revolutionary and Directoire

periods. Not a chair, not a curtain, of more recent date had been introduced into the chamber, which had that subtle aroma of the past, the scents of woodwork, draperies, upholstery, tapestries, which haunt certain rooms, where human hearts have throbbed, loved and suffered.

I went to bed, but I could not sleep. After a restless hour or two, I decided to get up and write some letters. In the hope of finding ink and paper, I opened a small mahogany writing-table with brass fittings, standing between the two windows. But it contained nothing beyond an old penholder of porcupine's quill, nibbled a little at the end. Just as I was closing the desk my attention was attracted by a glittering speck. It looked like a small, round, yellow pin-head, slightly projecting in the corner of a ledge. Scraping it with my finger I thought I felt it move. I seized it between my nails and pulled as hard as I could. It came out easily, and proved to be a long, gold pin, which had been pushed for concealment into a hole in the wood. What was it there for? I guessed at once that it must have been used to work the spring of a secret drawer, and I began to hunt for it. It took me a long time. After at least two hours of investigation, I discovered a second hole almost exactly opposite the first, but inside a groove. I pushed my pin home. A tiny wooden lid sprang up in my face, and I saw two packets of letters, yellow with age, and tied together with a blue ribbon.

I read them. Here are two, which I have transcribed.

"So you ask me to return your letters, my love. I obey, but at the cost of much pain. Of what are you afraid? That I may lose them? They are kept under lock and key. That they may be stolen? I guard them, because they are my dearest treasures.

Yes, it is pain and grief to me. I have wondered, if at the bottom of your heart you nurse some lingering

regret, not because you have loved me, for I know that you still care for me, but because you have recorded in black and white that ardent love, in hours when your heart poured itself out, not to me, but to the pen between your fingers. When we are in love, we are seized with a yearning, a tender yearning, to confide it, to speak or write of it. And so, we speak and we write. Your spoken words take wing; those fervent, delicious murmurs, all airy music and love, vanish as soon as they are uttered, lingering only in the memory, where we can neither see, nor touch, nor kiss them, as we can the words your hand has written.

Your letters? Yes, I give them back to you. But ah! the pain of it. Doubtless, when it was too late, your delicacy shrank from the thought of those indelible phrases. In the depths of your sensitive, timorous soul which flinches at an imperceptible subtlety, you regretted that you had written to a man that you loved him. You remembered certain passages, which troubled you. So you said to yourself:

'I must reduce those words to ashes.'

Be easy. Be at rest. Here are your letters. I love you."

. . . . . .

"Dear Friend,

No, you did not understand; you did not divine my motive. I do not regret, I shall never regret, having told you of my love. I shall go on writing to you; only you must return my letters as soon as you have received them. You will be shocked, when I tell you the reason for my demand. It is not romantic, as you supposed, but prosaic. I am afraid, not, indeed, of you, but of some mischance. I have sinned. I do not wish my guilt to injure others. Let me make my meaning clear. One or other of us may suddenly die. You ride every day;

you may be killed by a fall from your horse; you may die from a blow, a duel, a heart attack, a carriage accident, from a thousand different causes, for while there is only one death there are more ways of coming by it than we have days to live.

And then, your sister, your brother, your sister-in-law would find my letters!

Do you suppose they are fond of me? I hardly think so. And even if they adored me, is it conceivable that two women and a man, sharing a secret—and such a secret—could keep it to themselves?

It seems atrocious of me first to discuss your death and then to express my doubts as to the discretion of your relations. But we shall all of us die some day, shall we not? And it is almost inevitable that one of us will depart this life before the other. One ought to be prepared for every contingency, even for this one. Now I intend to keep your letters with my own in the secret drawer of my little writing-table. I will show you them lying there in their silken hiding-place, sleeping side by side, brimming with our passion, like two lovers in one tomb.

'But,' you will object, 'if you die first, my dear, your husband will find these letters of yours.'

O I have no fear of that. To begin with, he does not know about my secret drawer, and in any case, he would never look for it. And even if he should find the letters, after my death, there is nothing to fear. Has it never struck you how many love letters must have been discovered in their hiding-place, after a woman's death? I have been pondering the matter for a long time, and the result of all my cogitations was that I decided to ask you to return my letters.

You must know that never, for anything in the world, will a woman burn, tear, destroy the letters that tell her that she is beloved. Our whole life, all our hopes,

expectations, dreams, are wrapped up in them. These little pages, inscribed with our name and wooing us with delicious flattery, are relics, and we women always worship at shrines, especially the shrines of which we are ourselves the saints. Our love-letters are our title-deeds to beauty, charm, fascination, our secret pride of sex; they are the treasures of our hearts. No, no. A woman will never destroy these private and delectable archives of her past.

But, like everyone else, we die. And then . . . and then . . . someone finds these letters. Who finds them? The husband. What does he do about it? Nothing. He burns them.

O I have often thought about this, often and often. Remember that every day women die, women who were beloved. Every day the traces, the proofs of their guilt fall into the husband's hands. And yet no scandal, no duel ever results.

Consider, my dear, the nature of man, the heart of man. He will take vengeance on the living woman; he will fight the man, who has dishonoured him; he will kill him, provided she is still alive, because . . . well, why? I hardly know. But if after her death, the husband finds such proofs, he burns them, he ignores them, he continues to shake hands with the dead woman's lover; he is only too thankful that these letters did not fall into the clutches of a stranger; he is only too glad to know that they are destroyed.

O I know there are men, friends of mine, who must have burnt such proofs, and who affect to know nothing, men who would have fought in a fury of rage, if they had come across them during her lifetime. But she is dead. Honour wears a different aspect. The tomb is the sovereign remedy for conjugal infidelity.

And so I may safely keep these letters of yours, which in your hands, would be a menace to both of us.

I challenge you to deny that I am right.
I love you and kiss your hair.

Rose."

I raised my eyes to Aunt Rose's portrait, and as I gazed at that severe, wrinkled, somewhat malevolent countenance, I thought how little we know of the souls of women, how different they prove from what they seemed, how we shall never learn the secret of their inborn and artless guile, of their serene duplicity.

De Vigny's line came into my head:

" Still our companion, she, of the inconstant heart."

IX. THE LOG

It was a small drawing-room, hung with heavy tapestries and discreetly perfumed. On the wide hearth a great fire was blazing, while in the corner of the mantelpiece, a solitary lamp with an old lace shade, shed its soft radiance on the pair who sat there talking. The mistress of the house, whose hair was white with advancing years, was one of those delicious old ladies, whose unwrinkled skin, smooth as the finest vellum, is perfumed through and through, imbued with fragrance, steeped in the subtle essences with which she has laved it all these years. Her hand, as you kiss it, emits the delicate scent of an open box of Florentine orris powder. Her visitor was an old acquaintance, who had never married, a friend for every day, a companion on life's journey—that, and nothing more.

Neither had spoken for perhaps a minute. They both sat gazing dreamily into the fire, in one of those sympathetic silences of friends, who need not be always talking, in order to enjoy each other's company. Suddenly a log of wood, a great stump bristling with blazing roots, crashed down. It jumped over the andirons, and rolled out into the room, on to the carpet, scattering sparks all round. With a little cry, the old lady started up as if to run away, while her companion kicked the great log back into the fireplace, and stamped out the smouldering patches with the sole of his boot. All that remained of the disaster was a pungent smell of burning.

As he resumed his seat opposite his friend, he looked at her with a smile:

"That's the reason," he said, pointing to the log he had replaced on the hearth. "That's the reason I never married."

Much surprised, she glanced at him with the alert eyes of a woman, whose curiosity is aroused, a woman no longer young, whose interest is meditated, subtle and not without a spice of malice.

"Tell me about it," she commanded.

"Thereby hangs a tale," he replied, "and rather a sorry one. All my old comrades used to puzzle their heads at the sudden coolness that arose between one of my best friends, Julian by name, and myself. They could never understand how two such bosom friends, two such inseparables, could all at once become almost strangers to each other. This is how it came about.

At one time Julian and I used to live together. We were never apart, and the friendship that united us seemed too strong for anything to break. One evening he came home, and told me that he was going to be married. I was struck to the heart. It was as if he had robbed or betrayed me. When your friend takes unto himself a wife it is all over, absolutely over. A woman's passion, jealous, stormy, exacting, sensuous, cannot tolerate the firm, trustful, frank affection, springing from the spirit and from the heart, which unites two men. However strong the love that welds together a man and a woman, the two are none the less alien in soul and mind. They remain enemies, beings of different race. It is always a case of tamer and tamed, of master and slave. Sometimes one has the upper hand, sometimes the other, but they are never equals. Hand clasps hand, quivering with ardour. There is never that sturdy, steadfast grip, that clasp which seems to unlock two

hearts, and to lay them bare in an impulse of strong, sincere and manly affection. Instead of marrying, and begetting, as a solace for advancing age, children who will only abandon him, the wise man should take to himself a staunch and trusty friend, that the two may grow old together, in that communion of thoughts, which can only exist between man and man.

Well, my friend Julian married. His wife was a charmingly pretty, vivacious little creature, with dimples and fair curly hair. To all appearance she worshipped him. At first I seldom went near them, as I was afraid I should be in the way. But they both seemed fond of me and glad to see me; and they were always asking me to the house. Little by little I yielded to the charm of this pleasant intimacy. I dined with them frequently, and when I returned home at night, my house seemed cheerless and deserted and I often dallied with the idea of following Julian's example and getting married myself. They seemed a devoted couple, and were always together. Well, one evening, Julian wrote to ask me to dinner and I accepted.

'My dear fellow,' he said, as soon as I arrived, 'I have to go out after dinner on business. I am counting on you to stay and keep Bertha company. I shan't be back till eleven. You can expect me at eleven sharp.'

'It was really my idea, asking you to dinner,' said the young woman with a smile.

'You are too kind,' I murmured, and as I took her hand I was conscious of the friendly and lingering pressure of her fingers. But I thought nothing of it. We sat down to dinner and about eight o'clock Julian went off.

As soon as he left us, a curious feeling of embarrassment suddenly came over his wife and myself. It

was the first time we had ever been alone together, and although our intimacy had ripened day by day, this *tête à tête* was a new experience. I talked of everything and nothing, in an endeavour to stave off an awkward silence. She did not respond, but sat on the opposite side of the hearth, one foot stretched out towards the fire, her head down, and her eyes wandering, as if lost in some perplexing reverie. When my small talk was exhausted, I, too, fell silent. It is extraordinary how difficult it sometimes is to think of anything to say. I felt, moreover, that there was something in the air, something new, invisible, impossible to define, that kind of mysterious warning, which makes you aware of the designs, be they good or bad, which another person has upon you. This oppressive silence lasted for some time. At last Bertha roused herself.

'Do put on another log, Monsieur Paul; the fire is nearly out.'

I opened the wood-box, which stood just where yours does, took the biggest log there was, and laid it on the top of the smouldering pyramid. Again we lapsed into silence. In a minute or two, the log was blazing so furiously that it scorched our faces. Bertha raised her eyes to mine, and there was a strange expression in them.

'Now it's too hot,' she remarked. 'We'll sit over there on the sofa.'

So we transferred ourselves to the sofa.

Looking me full in the face, she said abruptly:

'Suppose a woman said she was in love with you, what would you do?'

'Why,' I replied in confusion. 'It's a situation one can't foresee. It would depend on the woman.'

She gave a laugh, which rang false, a short, nervous, tremulous laugh, vibrant enough to crack fine crystal.

'Men,' she remarked, 'are neither enterprising nor intelligent.'

There was another silence.

'Have you ever been in love, Monsieur Paul?' she presently resumed.

I pleaded guilty.

"Tell me about it,' she commanded.

I spun some yarn or other.

She listened attentively, with frequent manifestations of disapproval and contempt.

'No,' she broke in, 'you know nothing about it. Love is not real love, I feel, unless it wrings the heart, tortures the nerves, racks the brain, unless—how shall I put it?—unless it is dangerous, terrible, almost criminal, almost sacrilegious, a kind of betrayal. I mean that it should be capable of violating every barrier, however sacred, every law, every bond of fraternal loyalty. The calm, easy, safe, legalised kind—can you call that love?'

I did not know what to say, but inwardly I made this sage reflection.

'O, woman's mind, always the same!'

While she was speaking, she put on a casual, sanctimonious, little air, and snuggled down among the cushions, till she lay full length on the sofa with her head on my shoulder. Her skirt was hitched up a little to show a glimpse of red silk stocking, gleaming crimson in the dancing firelight.

'Now I've frightened you,' she remarked in a minute or so. I denied the accusation, and she let herself sink upon my bosom.

'Suppose,' she murmured, without looking at me. 'Suppose I were to tell you I was in love with you, what would you do?'

Before I could think of a reply, her arms were round my neck, drawing my head down, while her lips found

my own. Ah, my friend, I assure you it was no laughing matter. I to betray Julian? I to become the lover of this perverse, sophisticated little fool, who must have been appallingly sensual, if she was already dissatisfied with her husband? I to be always tricking and deceiving and feigning love, for the mere attraction of forbidden fruit, with the risks it involved and the friendship it violated? It was the last thing I wanted. But what was I to do? Follow the example of Joseph? A very ridiculous rôle, as well as a very difficult one. For with all her falseness, the young woman was certainly seductive, thus flushed with audacity, quivering, vehement. Let him, whose lips have never known the passionate kiss of a woman who offers herself . . . let him cast the first stone. Another minute and . . . you understand. Another minute and I was . . . that is to say, she was . . . she it was, of course, who was lost . . . or would have been . . . had we not suddenly been startled by a tremendous crash. The log, Madam, that log which I had put on the fire, hurled itself into the room, knocking over shovel and fender, rolling on and on like a tornado of flame, setting light to the carpet, and finally coming to rest under an armchair, which in another moment would have been in flames.

I threw myself upon it like a madman and while I was restoring that friendly brand to the hearth, the door flew open, and in came Julian, beaming all over.

'I'm free,' he cried. 'The business took two hours less than I expected.'

So you see, dear friend, but for that log, I should have been caught in the act. And what the consequences would have been is obvious even to you sitting here. I took care never again, in all my life, to land myself in such a predicament.

After a time I noticed that Julian was giving me the cold shoulder, and I suspected that his wife was sapping our friendship. Gradually he closed his door to me, and now we never meet. I never married. That, I think, will hardly surprise you."

X. JULIE ROMAIN

A YEAR ago last spring I was wandering on foot along the Mediterranean coast. What can be more delightful than to let the fancy roam, while, caressed by wind and sea, you swing along, skirting the mountainside that overlooks the sea? The dreams that haunt you! The illusions, the romances, the adventures that flit through the soul of the rover, in the course of a two hours' tramp! Hopes innumerable, vague and beguiling, are breathed in with the wind, with the balmy, quickening air, and awake in the heart a hunger for happiness, which keeps pace with the physical appetite, stimulated by the exercise. Ideas, swift and enchanting, soar into the air and sing like birds.

I was following the long road that runs from St. Raphael into Italy, or rather that theatrical, ever-changing panorama, which seems the ideal setting for all the great love poems of earth. And I reflected how, from Cannes, where all is ostentation, to Monaco, a mere gambling hell, not a soul comes to this region except to swagger about and squander money. Beneath that exquisite sky, in that garden of roses and orange blossom, every form of degrading vanity, vulgar display and base greed, is manifested, and the human spirit is exhibited, in all its servility, ignorance, arrogance, cupidity.

On the margin of one of those adorable bays which are revealed at every turn of the road, I suddenly caught sight of a group of four or five villas lying at the foot

of the mountain and fronting the sea. The background was a wilderness of pinewoods running far inland, in two deep valleys with no apparent path or outlet. One of these chalêts was so charmingly pretty that I paused outside the door to admire it. It was a small white house with brown woodwork, covered to the eaves with climbing roses. And such a garden! It was a carpet of flowers of every hue and form, all growing together in studied and charming confusion. Flowers sprang up all over the lawn and clustered on either side of the steps leading up to the terrace, while from every window trails of blue or yellow blossom hung down over the dazzling façade. The terrace, which had a stone balustrade and ran the whole length of the house, was festooned with great crimson bell-flowers like splashes of blood. At the back, a long avenue of flowering olive trees stretched away to the foot of the mountain. "Villa d' Antan" was inscribed on the door in small gold letters. What poet or fairy, I wondered, dwelt in this Paradise. What inspired recluse had discovered this retreat and created this dream of a house, set in the heart of a posy?

A few steps further on I saw a man breaking stones by the roadside, and I asked him who owned this gem of a place.

"Madame Julie Romain," was the reply.

Julie Romain! Long ago, in my childhood, I had heard endless stories about her, great actress that she was, the rival of Rachel. Never was woman more admired. Never was woman more beloved—that above all, beloved! O the duels, the suicides, of which she was the cause! The fame of her romantic adventures! But how old was the enchantress now? Sixty? Seventy? Seventy-five? Julie Romain here in this house! The woman, who was worshipped by the greatest musician and the subtlest poet of our country. I was only twelve

at the time, but I can still remember the wave of excitement that swept all over France, when she fled to Sicily with one lover, after her shattering rupture with the other. It was after a first night, when the audience had acclaimed her for half an hour on end and had recalled her eleven successive times. She and the poet eloped together, travelling by postchaise, as was then the custom. They crossed the sea to that legendary island, daughter of Greece, there to revel in their love in the shade of the Conque d'Or, the great orange groves, which surround Palermo.

They had climbed Etna, so the story ran, and, cheek to cheek, their arms round each other, had leaned over the monstrous crater, as if they would fling themselves into its fiery jaws.

He was dead, the poet, the maker of verse so disturbing, so penetrating, so profound, that it had thrown one whole generation off its balance; so subtle, so mysterious, that it had revealed a whole new world to a new race of poets. And he, the deserted rival, he too, was dead, who for her sake had created music, that still lingered in the memory of men, rhapsodies full of triumph and despair, at once heart-rending and maddening.

And she, Julie Romain, was there, in that house with its veil of blossom. I did not stop to think, but rang the bell. The door was opened by a young footman, an awkward lad of eighteen with coarse hands. I scribbled a neat little compliment on my visiting card, accompanied by an ardent petition that she would deign to receive me. Possibly she knew my name and would open her door to me. After a brief absence the footman returned and invited me to follow him. He shewed me into a prim, neat drawing-room in the style of Louis Philippe, where a little maid-servant of sixteen, slim of figure, but of no beauty whatever, was removing, in my

honour, the dust sheets from the heavy, formal furniture. On the walls hung three portraits, one representing the actress in one of her rôles, one the poet in the long, close-fitting frock-coat and ruffled shirt of his day, the third the musician, seated at the clavecin. Golden-haired and charming, though with the mincing airs of that day, she looked down, with a smile on her gracious lips and in the depths of her blue eyes. It was a careful, delicate, elegant, restrained piece of work. All three portraits seemed to be posing for the benefit of posterity. The whole atmosphere of the room was eloquent of bygone days and departed friends.

A door opened and a tiny figure glided into the room. It was an old, old lady, with white eyelashes and bandeaux of white hair, a little white mouse of a woman, with hurried, furtive ways. She gave me her hand.

"Thank you," she said in a voice still clear and fresh and thrilling. "How kind of you men of to-day to remember the women of the past. Pray be seated."

I told her how much her house had charmed me; how I had asked the owner's name, and, on hearing it, had been unable to resist the temptation to ring at her door.

"I appreciate your visit all the more," she replied, "because it is the first of its kind ever paid me. When your card with its graceful message was brought to me, I was as startled as if an old friend, dead these twenty years, had suddenly been announced. I myself am dead now, as good as dead. No one remembers me, no one will give me a thought, until the day when I really die. Then for three days the newspapers will be full of Julie Romain, anecdotes about her, incidents, reminiscences, enthusiastic praises. And that will be the end of me."

She paused for a moment.

"It won't be long now," she resumed. "A few more

months, or days perhaps, and of this tiny little woman there will be nothing left save a tiny little skeleton."

She raised her eyes to her own portrait, which smiled at her, smiled at the little old lady, who was such a caricature of her youthful self. Then Julie Romain glanced at her two lovers, the scornful poet and the inspired musician. They seemed to ask each other:

"What is this old wreck to you and me?"

An indefinable, poignant, overwhelming sadness clutched at my heart, the sadness of lives outworn, still struggling in a flood of memories, like men drowning in deep waters. From my chair I could see a string of smart carriages with their freight of young, pretty, wealthy women and smiling, complacent men, travelling swiftly along the road from Nice to Monaco. Her glance followed mine and she guessed my thoughts.

"One can't have one's life twice over," she murmured with a smile of resignation.

"But how wonderful yours must have been!" I cried.

"Wonderful and sweet," she sighed. "That is why I regret it so bitterly."

I saw that she was longing to talk about herself, and with the utmost tenderness, as if touching on an aching wound, I drew her out. She spoke of her triumphs and raptures, of her friends, of her whole dazzling career.

"To what do you attribute your keenest joys, your purest happiness? To the stage?"

"O no," she replied, so vehemently that I smiled.

With a mournful glance at the portraits of the two men, she added:

"I owed it all to them."

"Which of the two?" I could not refrain from asking.

"Both. Sometimes I actually find myself confusing them a little in my mind. And of one of them, nowadays, I cannot think without remorse."

"Then really your gratitude is due, not so much to them, as to love itself. They were merely its interpreters."

"Yes, but what interpreters!"

"Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps another man might have loved you equally well, if not better, a plain man, who would have devoted to you his whole life, his whole heart, all his thoughts, all his hours, and all his being? With those two you had a pair of formidable rivals, Music and Poetry."

"Never!" she exclaimed, in that voice of hers, so youthful still with its soul-stirring appeal. "Another man might have loved me more, but he could never have loved so exquisitely. They sang to me the music of love, those two, as no one else on earth could sing it. Ah how intoxicating it was! Who else is there, in all the world, able to discern in sounds and words the wonders they found there? Is mere love enough, without the art that can glorify passion with all the poetry and music of heaven and earth? They knew the secret, those two, of driving a woman distraught with verse and melody. Perhaps you are right. There may have been more illusion than reality in our passion. But it is the illusions that waft you to the skies, while the realities bind you to earth. Other men may have loved me more, but it was these two who taught me to know and understand and worship love."

Her tears began to flow. She wept silently, despairingly. I pretended not to notice and gazed into the distance.

"You see," she resumed after a pause of several minutes, "with most people, the heart grows old with the body. But with me that is not so. My poor body is sixty-nine, but my poor heart is twenty. And that is why I live here all alone, with my flowers and my dreams."

Another long silence ensued. She recovered her composure and said with a smile:

"How you would laugh, if you knew . . . if you knew . . . how I spend my evenings . . . when the weather is fine. I am quite ashamed of myself. But I am sorry for myself, too."

Plead as I might, she refused to reveal her secret, and I rose to take my departure.

"So soon!" she exclaimed.

I told her I was dining at Monte Carlo.

"Won't you stay and dine with me?" she asked hesitatingly. "It would give me such pleasure."

I accepted her invitation with alacrity. Overjoyed, she rang for the little maid, and when she had given some orders, she took me all over the house. A conservatory full of plants, opening off the dining-room, commanded the whole extent of the long avenue of orange trees, which stretched away to the foot of the mountain. A low chair, hidden away among the plants, led me to assume that the old lady often sat there. We strolled into the garden to admire the flowers. Dusk was slowly falling. It was one of those mild, still evenings, when earth gives forth all its perfumes.

It was almost dark when we sat down to table. We lingered long over an excellent dinner, and the two of us became fast friends, as soon as she realised the depths of sympathy she had stirred within my heart. She sipped a thimbleful of wine, as they used to say, and became more confiding and expansive.

"Come and look at the moon," she said. "I love the moon, the friendly moon. She witnessed my keenest joys. I feel as if all my memories were stored within her. I have only to gaze at her for them all to come back to me. And then . . sometimes . . of an evening . . . I treat myself to such an enchanting little scene . . . perfectly idyllic . . . perfectly idyllic . . . if you only

knew. But no, you would laugh at me. I simply couldn't . . I shouldn't dare . . I really shouldn't."

"Come, come," I pleaded. "Why won't you let me into the secret? I promise not to laugh . . I swear I won't. Now, do . . ."

As she still hesitated, I caught her hands in mine, those pitiful little hands of hers, so thin and cold, and I kissed each in turn over and over again, just as they used to do, her two lovers in bygone days. She was moved.

"You promise not to laugh?" she asked irresolutely.

"I swear it."

"Very well, then, come along."

She rose from the table, and as the young footman, an ungainly object in his green livery, drew back her chair she whispered something in his ear in a low hurried voice.

"Certainly, Madam, immediately," he replied.

She took my arm and drew me into the conservatory.

The avenue of orange trees was a delight to the eyes. Straight down the centre, the full moon, now risen, shed a narrow track of silver, a long shaft of light, which glided through the dark domes of the trees and fell upon the yellow sand. All the trees were in blossom and the night air was laden with their sweet heady perfume. Among the sombre foliage, thousands of fireflies were twinkling and glittering like star dust.

"What a setting for a love scene," I exclaimed.

"Yes, isn't it? Isn't it? You shall see."

She made me sit down beside her.

"How a night like this," she sighed, "makes one regret one's youth. But you care for none of these things, you modern materialists, you speculators, merchants and business men. You have even lost the art of talking to us. By 'us' I mean the young of my sex. Love affairs have degenerated into vulgar intrigues,

which often originate in an unconfessed dressmaker's bill. If the bill seems to you more than the woman is worth, you beat a retreat. But if you rate her higher, you foot the bill. Pretty customs! Pretty lovemaking!"

She took my hand.

"Look!" she murmured.

I gazed bewildered and entranced.

From the far end of the avenue, down the path of moonlight, came a youthful pair, their arms around each other. It was charming to see them, as they tripped along, entwined, now bathed in pools of radiance, now plunged again in shadow. The boy wore a suit of white satin in eighteenth century style and a hat with a sweeping ostrich feather. The girl had a gown with panniers and her powdered hair was piled high on her head, after the fashion of the fair ladies of the Regency. A hundred paces away, they halted in the middle of the avenue and ceremoniously embraced. Suddenly I recognised the two young servants, and I was seized by one of those terrible paroxysms of mirth that rend one's very vitals. But not a sound escaped my lips. Convulsed with agony, I choked back my laughter, as a man whose leg is being amputated, represses the screams that force their way through throat and jaws.

But as soon as the two young people retreated towards the far end of the avenue, they recovered their charm. They drew ever further away, until they vanished like a dream and were lost to sight. The avenue looked very desolate without them.

I, too, took my departure, for I had no wish to see them again, and I feared that it might be unduly prolonged, this scene, which conjured up the past, the whole histrionic, passionate, delusive, seductive past, with its specious glamour, its genuine charm, which could still stir the pulses of this ancient tragedy queen, this worn-out breaker of hearts.

XI.

THE DECORATION

CERTAIN persons are born with a ruling passion, a vocation, or even the mere germ of a desire, manifesting itself as soon as they can speak and think. From earliest childhood, Monsieur Sacrement had one solitary idea in his head, a yearning for a decoration. As a tiny child, he used to wear a tin cross of the Legion of Honour, as other children would wear a military cap. Hand in hand with his mother, he would parade the streets, proudly throwing out his little chest to show off his red ribbon and his pinchbeck badge. His scholastic career was undistinguished, and he failed to matriculate. Then, being at a loss for an occupation and possessed of private means, he married a good-looking girl. They lived in Paris where they led the usual existence of wealthy, middle-class people. They were not in society, but had their own circle of friends and could boast the acquaintance of two heads of departments, and of a Deputy, who aspired to ministerial rank. But the ambition Sacrement had conceived in infancy never deserted him. The thought that he had no right to a little coloured ribbon in the lapel of his frockcoat rankled continually. On the boulevards, the sight of any man with a decoration struck him to the heart. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at such favoured mortals, with a feeling of

jealous resentment. Sometimes he would spend the long, idle afternoon, counting them.

"Let me see," he muttered. "I wonder how many I shall meet between the Madeleine and the Rue Drouot."

He would saunter along, glancing at every coat, with an eye quick to detect the little red emblem from afar. By the end of his walk he was always surprised at their number.

"Eight officers and seventeen chevaliers! What a lot! How outrageous to scatter the crosses about so lavishly! I wonder if I shall meet as many on the way home."

He would slowly retrace his steps, with a feeling of exasperation, when the hurrying crowds got in his way and caused him to miss some possible addition to his score. He knew the quarters chiefly frequented by members of the Legion. The Avenue de l'Opéra could not compare with the Rue de la Paix, and they seemed to prefer the right-hand side of the boulevard to the left. The Palais Royal, however, swarmed with them and they had, it appeared, their favourite cafés and theatres. Whenever Monsieur Sacrement caught sight of a group of white-haired old gentlemen, standing in the middle of the pavement and obstructing the thoroughfare, he would murmur:

"Officers of the Legion,"

and with difficulty refrain from raising his hat. He had often noticed that officers of the Legion could be distinguished by their bearing from mere chevaliers. There was a difference in the poise of the head. Anyone could see that officially they enjoyed higher consideration and wider respect.

There were, however, moments when Monsieur Sacrement was seized with rage and animosity towards these men with their orders. He regarded them with the

hatred of the Socialist. Infuriated by that plethora of crosses, as a starving man by the sight of great shops crammed with food, he would return home, expostulating vehemently:

"Are we never going to get rid of this pestilential government?"

"What is the matter with you to-day?" his wife would ask in surprise.

"The matter is that I'm sick of the injustice I see on every side. Ah there's a lot in what the Communists say."

After dinner, however, he would go out again and gaze at the decorations in the jewellers' show cases. He studied all these insignia of divers shapes and varied colours, and hungered for them all. He pictured himself, at some public function, in a vast hall packed with enraptured crowds. Resplendent as a star, his opera hat under his arm, his bosom blazing with row upon row of orders that plastered it, he could see himself pacing in solemn state at the head of a procession, amid murmurs of respect and a hum of admiration. But alas! he had no claim to any distinction whatever.

"The Legion of Honour," he mused, "is really unattainable by any man not a public functionary. But suppose I tried to get myself elected to the Academy."

He had, however, no idea how to set about it. When he mentioned it to his wife, she was astounded.

"The Academy!" she exclaimed. "Why, what have you done to deserve it?"

He flew into a rage.

"Do try to take in what I'm saying. It was precisely what I was wondering, what action to take. How dense you are at times."

"Quite so," she replied with a smile. "But I haven't the least idea."

He had a flash of inspiration.

"Suppose you were to broach the subject to our friend Rosselin, the Deputy. He might be able to give me some valuable advice. It would hardly do for me to tackle him directly. It's rather a difficult and delicate matter. But coming from you it would seem natural."

Madame Sacrement carried out his suggestion, and Monsieur Rosselin promised to put in a good word for him with the minister. But Sacrement soon became so importunate that at last the Deputy told him to send in a formal application, accompanied by a statement of his claims. His claims! There was the rub. He had not even a degree. Nothing daunted, he set to work and began to write a pamphlet on "The People's Right to Education." But for lack of ideas it remained unfinished. He beat about for less exacting themes and made several further attempts. His first completed production dealt with "The Instruction of Children through the Medium of the Eyes." His proposal was to establish in the poorer quarters of the town, free theatres for the benefit of young children, who could be brought thither by their parents from earliest infancy and acquire, by means of a magic lantern, some idea of every branch of human knowledge. There would be regular courses. The eye would instruct the brain, the pictorial impressions stamp themselves upon the memory, thus in a manner of speaking, rendering knowledge visible. What could be simpler than this method of inculcating general history, geography, natural history, botany, zoology, anatomy?

He had this pamphlet printed, and addressed one copy to every Deputy, ten copies to every Minister, ten to each of the Paris newspapers, five to each provincial journal, while the President of the Republic received fifty.

Then he conceived the idea of itinerant libraries, the State to send forth handcarts of books, like handcarts

of oranges, to perambulate the streets. On payment of a subscription of one sou, each citizen was to be entitled to the loan of ten volumes a month.

"The people," observed Monsieur Sacrement, "will only put themselves out for their own amusement. If they will not go to the font of learning, it must come to them."

None of these ventures created the slightest stir. Nothing daunted, he sent in his application and was informed that the matter had been noted and would receive attention. Confident of success he waited, but there was no result. At last he decided to take the initiative in person. He asked for an interview with the Minister of Public Instruction and was received by a secretary, still very youthful, but already austere, almost awe-inspiring. Like a pianist at the keyboard, he controlled a number of small white knobs, by means of which he could summon porters, ushers and subordinate clerks. He assured Sacrement that his business was proceeding along the right lines, and recommended him to resume his remarkable activities. Monsieur Sacrement returned to his writing.

At this stage Monsieur Rosselin, the Deputy, began to evince a profound sympathy with Sacrement's ambition, and bestowed upon him much excellent and useful advice. He himself had achieved a decoration, no one knew on what grounds. He suggested new subjects for Monsieur Sacrement's researches, and introduced him to several societies of learned men, who were chiefly concerned with the more obscure bypaths of science, with a view to figuring in the Honours list. He even championed his cause at the Ministry. In the last few months, Monsieur Rosselin had adopted the habit of dropping in at the Sacrements' for meals. He came to luncheon one day, and as he shook hands with his host, he murmured confidentially:

"I have just brought off something very special for you. The Committee on Historical Researches have decided to entrust you with a mission. It involves investigations in various libraries all over France."

Such was Sacrement's emotion that he could neither eat nor drink. A week later he set out on his quest. He went from town to town, studying catalogues, rummaging in attics crammed with dusty tomes, and incurring the hatred of all the librarians. One evening he found himself in Rouen and was seized with a yearning to embrace his wife, whom he had not seen for a week. He caught the nine o'clock train, which enabled him to reach home by midnight. He had his latchkey with him, and slipped noiselessly into the house. He was quivering with joy, and chuckling to himself at the surprise in store for his wife. To his disgust he found her room locked. He called to her through the door:

"Jeanne, it's I."

He must have startled her, he reflected, for he could hear her jump out of bed, muttering to herself as if in a dream. First she darted into her dressing-room, opening the door and closing it again. Then he heard her pattering about her room in her bare feet, and stumbling against the furniture so that the glass knick-knacks jingled.

"Is it really you, Alexander?" she asked at last.

"Yes, of course. Hurry up and let me in."

The door flew open and his wife threw herself into his arms:

"What a fright you gave me!" she gasped. "What a surprise! What a lovely surprise!"

He began to undress in his usual methodical way. His overcoat, which he usually hung in the hall, was lying on a chair. He picked it up and was thunderstruck to see a red ribbon in the button-hole.

"What's this? What's this?" he stammered. "This overcoat . . has a ribbon in it."

His wife flew at him and tried to snatch the coat out of his hands.

"No . . no . . you're mistaken. Give it to me at once."

But he held on to the sleeve and refused to let go.

"I don't understand. I don't understand," he kept repeating, as in a dream. "Whose is it? It can't be mine . . It's got the Legion of Honour."

She made despairing efforts to wrest it away from him.

"Listen . . . listen"; she gasped in a panic. "Give it to me . . . I can't tell you . . . It's a secret . . . Listen . . ."

But his temper was rising, and his face was pale.

"I insist on knowing how this overcoat got here . . . It's not mine."

"Yes it is," she screamed at him. "Be quiet . . . you must swear . . . well, I'll tell you . . . They've . . . They've given you a decoration."

Overcome with emotion, he let the overcoat slip from his hands and collapsed into an armchair.

"What did you say? A decoration? Me?"

"Yes, but it's still a secret."

She locked the glorified garment away in a wardrobe and pale and trembling returned to her husband.

"It's a new overcoat," she continued. "I ordered it for you. But I had promised not to breathe a word to you about the decoration. It won't be officially gazetted for another month or six weeks. Not till your mission is finished. You weren't to know about it, until your return. It's Monsieur Rosselin you have to thank for it."

Sacrement was overwhelmed.

"Rosselin!" he gasped. "A decoration . . . He has got me a decoration . . . Rosselin!"

He had to drink a glass of water to steady his nerves.

A small white square of pasteboard had dropped from the overcoat on to the floor. Sacrement picked it up. It was a visiting card.

"Rosselin . . . Deputy," he read aloud.

"There you are," cried his wife and he burst into tears of joy.

A week later it was announced in the official gazette that Monsieur Sacrement had been created Chevalier of the Legion of Honour for exceptional services.

XII.

THE UMBRELLA

MADAME OREILLE was a frugal soul. She knew the precise value of a sou, and was armed with a whole quiverful of rigorous maxims relating to the multiplication of money. Her maid found it no easy matter to feather her nest, while Monsieur Oreille had great difficulty in squeezing pocket-money out of his wife. Although the pair were comfortably off and had no children, it was pain and grief to Madame Oreille to part with her shining silver. Each coin seemed to be wrung from her very heart, and whenever she had to meet some substantial, but unavoidable, expense, it cost her a sleepless night.

"You really might launch out a little," urged Monsieur Oreille again and again. "We never live up to our income."

"It is better to be on the safe side," was her invariable rejoinder. "One never knows what may happen."

She was a neat, wrinkled little woman of forty, with an uncertain temper. Her husband was continually fretting at the hardships she imposed on him, especially at certain galling incidents, which wounded his vanity.

He had a post as head clerk at the War Office, which he retained in deference to his wife's wishes, thereby increasing their already redundant revenues. For the last two years he had come to office with the same patched old gamp, which had become a standing joke with his brother clerks. At last he could stand their

chaff no longer, and insisted on Madame Oreille buying him a new one. She invested eight francs fifty in an umbrella, which was being sold for advertisting purposes by one of the big shops. There were thousands of these umbrellas scattered all over Paris. Recognising it at once, the other clerks laughed louder than ever and Oreille suffered agonies. But this purchase proved a bad bargain and within three months it was worn out, to the vast amusement of the entire Ministry. It actually became the subject of a song, which could be heard from morn till night, from basement to attic, throughout the whole building. In a fit of exasperation, Oreille ordered his wife to spend twenty francs on a new umbrella of the finest silk, and to produce the bill in evidence. She compromised on one at eighteen francs, and, crimson with mortification, handed it over to her spouse.

"There," she cried, "that has got to last you at least five years."

The exultant owner scored an immense success at the office. When he returned home that evening, his wife shot an uneasy glance at the umbrella.

"You shouldn't keep the rubber band fastened," she said, "that's the way to cut the silk. You had better take care of it. I shan't buy you another in a hurry."

She took it out of his hands, undid the button and shook out the folds. Then, petrified with horror, she stood and gazed at it. Right in the middle of the umbrella there was a round hole, the size of a farthing, which had evidently been burnt by a cigar end.

"Just look at that!" she gasped.

"What is the matter?" asked her husband placidly, without turning his head. "What are you talking about?"

Her indignation almost choked her.

"You . . . you . . ." she stammered. "You've gone

and burnt . . . a hole in your . . . in your new umbrella, . . . you must be crazy. Do you want to ruin us?"

He could feel the blood ebbing from his cheeks.

"What did you say?" he exclaimed, turning round with a start.

"I tell you, you've burnt a hole in your new umbrella. Just look at it."

With that she flew at him as if to strike him, violently thrusting the little round hole under his very nose. He stared at it in horror.

"How on earth did that happen?" he faltered. "I know nothing about it. It wasn't my doing, I swear it. I can't understand it at all."

"O, I know," she retorted, "I wager you were fooling about with it at the office, opening it and showing it off."

"Well I did open it once, but only to show them what a beauty it was. That was all, I assure you."

Stamping with rage, she treated him to one of those scenes of wedded life, which, to a man of peace, render the domestic hearth more formidable than a battlefield under a hail of bullets. She mended the hole with a scrap of silk from the old umbrella, which was of a different colour. The next morning, with chastened mien, Oreille set out for office with his patched up treasure. He put it away in his cupboard and relegated it, like any other painful memory, to his subconscious mind.

As soon as he returned home that evening, his wife snatched the umbrella out of his hands, and opened it to satisfy herself as to its condition. What was her horror at the lamentable spectacle that met her gaze! The whole cover was riddled with tiny holes, which were evidently burns. It was as if the glowing ashes of a pipe had been emptied all over the silken cover. The umbrella was a ruin, a hopeless ruin. Speechless with

rage, she stared at it, while her husband surveyed it, dazed with horror and consternation. Their glances met. Then his eyes fell. Right in his face she hurled the pitiful remains.

"You wretch!" she screamed, her powers of speech restored by a paroxysm of rage. "You wretch! You did it on purpose. But I'll pay you out. You shall never have another."

A fresh scene was enacted. After the tempest had raged for an hour, he at last obtained a hearing. He vowed he had no idea how this thing had come to pass. It must have been an act of jealousy or revenge. A ring at the door brought relief. It was a friend, who had been invited to dinner. Madame Oreille laid the matter before him. As for buying a new umbrella, that, she declared, was out of the question. Her husband should never have another.

"But then, Madame Oreille," her guest wisely objected, "his clothes will get spoilt, and that will be even more serious."

"Very well," exclaimed the little woman, still fuming with rage, "he can have a servant's umbrella. I'll never get him another silk one."

This pronouncement roused Oreille to rebellion.

"In that case I warn you I shall send in my resignation. Nothing will induce me to go to the office with a servant's umbrella."

"Why not have this one re-covered?" suggested their visitor. "It wouldn't be expensive."

"It would cost at least eight francs," snapped Madame Oreille. "Eight francs plus eighteen, that makes twenty-six. Twenty-six francs for an umbrella, why, it's outrageous. It's madness."

The friend, who was a poor man, had a sudden inspiration.

"Get it out of your Insurance Company. They always

pay compensation for anything burnt, provided that it happened on your own premises."

This suggestion worked like a charm. After a moment's reflection Madame Oreille turned to her husband.

"To-morrow, on your way to office, you can take the umbrella to the *Maternelle,* shew them the damage, and put in a claim for compensation."

Monsieur Oreille jumped.

"I should never have the face to do such a thing. After all, it's only a matter of eighteen francs. It won't ruin us."

Happily the next day was fine, and he went to office carrying a walking-stick.

All by herself at home, Madame Oreille could not cease from brooding over her vanished eighteen francs. The umbrella lay on the dining-room table and she kept hovering round it, unable to come to a decision. She was obsessed by the idea of the Insurance Company, yet she dreaded the mocking glances of the clerks at the office. She was timid in society, and had a habit of flushing at the merest trifles, while she never felt at ease in conversing with strangers. Yet her sorrow for her eighteen francs tormented her like an aching wound. In vain she tried to banish it from her mind. The memory of her loss rankled unceasingly. What was she to do? Hour followed hour, and she was still irresolute. Suddenly, like a coward screwing up his courage, she decided to take action.

"I'll go, and we'll see what happens."

First, however, the umbrella had to be dealt with, so that the disaster should appear irreparable and the case conclusive. From the mantel-piece she took a match, and between two ribs of the umbrella, she burnt a great hole the size of her hand. Then she dexterously rolled up the remains of the silk, fastened the elastic band

round it, put on shawl and hat, and hurried off to the Rue de Rivoli, where the Insurance Company had its office. The nearer she drew, the more her pace slackened. What was she to say? And what answer would she receive? She glanced at the numbers above the doorways. There were still another twenty-eight houses. Good! That gave her time to think. She walked ever more slowly, till, with a sudden jump, she saw a door, bearing in golden letters the inscription: *La Maternelle* Fire Insurance Company. She was there already! Confused and diffident, she paused a moment. Twice she walked past, and twice she retraced her steps.

"Well, it has to be done," she told herself. "The sooner it is over the better."

As she crossed the threshold and entered the office she could feel her heart beating wildly. A counter ran all round the immense room and at each little aperture in the grating a man's head was visible, while the rest of his person was screened by trellis work. She advanced towards a man, who was passing through the room, carrying some papers.

"Excuse me, sir," she murmured in low, trembling tones. "Could you tell me to whom to apply for compensation in the case of damage by fire?"

"The first floor on the left," he replied in a resonant voice, "the accident department."

More flustered than ever by his answer, she longed to run away without another word and sacrifice her eighteen francs. Then she drew fresh courage from the idea of all that money. Panting for breath, pausing at every step, she climbed the stairs. She knocked at a door on the first floor. A ringing voice bade her enter and she stepped into a spacious room, where three men, all with ribbons in their buttonholes, were standing in a group, immersed in a serious discussion.

One of the men turned to her.

"What can I do for you, Madam?"

She could hardly bring out the words.

"I've come," she stammered. "I've come . . . about an accident."

The man motioned her politely to a chair.

"Pray be seated, Madam. I shall be at your disposal in a minute or two."

The interrupted conversation was resumed.

"In your case, gentlemen," said the manager, "the Company does not hold itself liable for a sum exceeding four hundred thousand francs. We cannot admit your claim for a further hundred thousand. Besides, the valuation . . ."

"That will do, sir," broke in one of the others. "The court will decide. We need not prolong the interview."

After an exchange of ceremonious bows the two claimants left the room. Had she dared, she would have followed their example, joyfully sacrificing everything, if only she could escape. But it was too late. The manager rejoined her and said with a bow:

"I am at your service, Madam."

"I've come," she gasped with a painful effort, "I've come . . . about this."

In frank astonishment he looked down at the object she presented to his gaze. Her trembling fingers fumbled at the elastic band. After several attempts she succeeded in unfastening it, and hastily shook out the mutilated remains of the umbrella.

"It looks in a bad way," remarked the manager sympathetically.

"It cost me twenty francs," she said tentatively.

He seemed surprised.

"Really? as much as that?"

"Yes, it was a very good one. I wanted you to see for yourself what a state it's in."

"There's no doubt about it," he rejoined. "But I fail to understand what it has to do with me."

With a sinking heart she wondered whether the company refused to pay compensation for such trifling damages.

"You see," she stammered. "It has been burnt."

"Evidently," he replied, without attempting to refute her statement.

At this words failed her. She sat there gaping at him, until she suddenly realised that she had omitted to give her name.

"I am Madame Oreille," she hurriedly informed him. "We have taken out an insurance policy with the *Maternelle,* and I wish to put in a claim for compensation."

To forestall the possibility of an unqualified refusal on his part, she hastened to add:

"I am only asking you to have the umbrella recovered."

"But, Madam," he protested, greatly perplexed, "we do not deal in umbrellas. We cannot undertake repairs of this description."

The little woman felt her natural combativeness reviving. There was to be a tussle. Well, she was ready. She was no longer afraid.

"I am only asking you to pay for the repairs. I can get it re-covered myself."

The manager seemed taken aback.

"Really, Madam, it is such a small matter. We are never asked to pay compensation for such trifling accidents. You must admit that we cannot be expected to replace handkerchiefs, gloves, brooms, old slippers, and all the little odds and ends that are liable to be burnt at any moment of the day."

She felt her cheeks flushing with rising temper.

"Last December, sir, we had a chimney on fire and

it cost us quite five hundred francs to repair the damage. Monsieur Oreille never asked the Company for a farthing. So it is only fair that you should pay for my umbrella."

The manager smiled at the transparent fiction.

"You cannot deny, Madam, that it is very surprising of Monsieur Oreille, after making no claim for damages amounting to five hundred francs, to ask for five or six francs compensation for an umbrella."

"I beg your pardon," she said brazenly. "The five hundred francs were Monsieur Oreille's concern. The eighteen francs came out of Madame Oreille's purse, which is a very different matter."

Realising that he would never get rid of her without wasting his whole day, he said resignedly:

"Will you kindly tell me how the accident came about?"

Confident now of victory, she began her story.

"It was like this, sir. In the hall, we have a bronze receptacle for umbrellas and walking-sticks. I came in the other day and put my umbrella into the stand. Just above it, I must tell you, there is a little shelf for candles and matches. I stretched out my hand and took four matches. The first one would not strike. The second flared up and went out and so did the third."

"Government matches, I suppose?" broke in the manager facetiously.

"Possibly," she replied, without noticing his joke. "The point is that it was with the fourth match that I lighted my candle. Then I retired to my room and went to bed. A quarter of an hour later, I thought I could detect a smell of burning. I am always afraid of fire. If we ever have one, it certainly won't be my fault. Ever since that chimney I told you about, I live in mortal terror. So I got up, left the room and hunted high and low, sniffing about like a dog when it's hunting.

At last I discovered that it was my umbrella that was burning. No doubt one of the matches had fallen into the folds. You see what a state it is in . . ."

The manager bowed to the inevitable.

"What amount do you claim, Madam?"

She did not venture to name her figure and remained silent.

"I leave it to you," she said at last, anxious to appear magnanimous. "You can have it repaired for me."

"We cannot do that, Madam. Kindly fix your own figure."

"Why . . . I should think . . . No, sir, listen to me. I don't wish to make any profit out of you. This is the fairest way. I will take my umbrella to a shop, have it re-covered with good, hard-wearing silk and bring you the bill. Will that do?"

"Admirably. Then the matter is settled. Here is a note for the cashier who will refund to you the cost of the repairs."

He handed her a card. She clutched it, rose from her chair and muttering words of thanks, hurried from the room, for fear he should change his mind.

After this victory, she tripped gaily along the street, hunting for an umbrella shop of promising exterior. When she came to one that looked sufficiently expensive, she marched boldly in and said in authoritative tones:

"I wish to have this umbrella re-covered with the finest silk. Use the best material you have. I don't mind what it costs."

XIII.

RIDE-A-COCK-HORSE

THE unfortunate couple lived in penury on the husband's inadequate salary. After the birth of their two children, they were reduced, from the straitened circumstances of their early married life, into that state of sordid, humiliating, abject poverty, which is the common plight of aristocratic families, determined at all costs not to lose caste.

Hector de Gribelin had been brought up on his father's estate in the country, with an old abbé for tutor. His parents were poor, but managed to rub along and keep up appearances. When he was twenty, an opening had to be found for him and he entered the Admiralty as clerk on fifteen hundred francs a year. On this reef he foundered, like all unhappy mortals who have not been trained from infancy for the fierce battle of existence. Beholding life through a veil, they are ignorant of shifts and expedients. They have never learnt to handle gun or tool, nor to develop in childhood special aptitudes and faculties which would fit them for the strenuous struggle for survival.

His first three years in the office were a martyrdom. He had renewed his acquaintance with some venerable family friends, old-fashioned people, and, like himself, of limited means. They lived in the aristocratic, but depressing, suburb of St. Germain. These formed his

circle of acquaintances. Unable to adapt themselves to the conditions of modern life, humble yet proud, these poverty-stricken aristocrats occupied the upper storeys of moribund old houses. The tenant of every flat, from top to bottom, had a handle to his name, but money seemed as scarce on the first floor as on the sixth. These families, once so brilliant, and now reduced to poverty by the indolence of their own men, were obsessed by ineradicable prejudices, by insistence on rank, and dread of losing caste. In this backwater of society, Hector met a girl, with blood as blue as his own and prospects as poor. He married her. Within four years two children were born to them. During the next four years of grinding poverty, the family's sole recreations were Sunday walks in the Champs Elysées, and once or twice a year, a theatre, when a brother clerk presented them with free tickets. Early one spring, however, Hector's chief entrusted him with some special work, for which he received an unexpected gratuity of three hundred francs.

"My dear Henriette," he said to his wife, when he came home with this windfall, "we must have a little treat. What do you say to an excursion with the children?"

After a long discussion, they decided to have luncheon out in the country.

"I tell you what," cried Hector. "It's only once in a way. We will have a waggonette for you and the children and the maid, and I will get a horse from the riding school. The exercise will do me good."

All the week they talked of nothing but the picnic they had planned. In the evening, when he came home from office, Hector picked up his elder son, set him astride his knee, and jumped him violently up and down, exclaiming:

"That's how Daddy will gallop on Sunday."

The youngster spent his days bestriding the chairs and pushing them about the room, chanting:

"I'm Daddy on his gee-gee."

Even the maid gazed at her master with admiring eyes, as she pictured him escorting the carriage on horseback. At every meal she listened to him laying down the law about horsemanship and to his accounts of his own exploits in the old days at home. Oh! he had been well schooled, and once he felt his horse between his knees he was afraid of nothing, absolutely nothing.

Rubbing his hands, he remarked to his wife:

"I only wish they'd give me an animal with some spirit. You shall see how well I ride. What do you say to coming home by the Champs Elysées? People will be just returning from the Bois. We shall cut such a dash. I shouldn't mind meeting someone from the Admiralty. A little thing like that is quite enough to impress one's superiors."

On the appointed day, his mount arrived at the door at the same moment as the carriage. Hector had had straps sewn on to the bottom of his trousers, and he sported a riding crop, which he had bought the previous evening. He at once went down to examine his steed; he lifted and felt his legs, ran his hand over neck, ribs and hocks, dug his fingers into the back muscles, looked at his teeth and announced his age. At that moment the whole family emerged from the house and he improved the occasion with a little lecture, theoretical and practical, dealing with the horse in general and this specimen in particular, which, he was satisfied, was an excellent animal. When the rest of the party were comfortably packed into their carriage, Hector, after testing the girths, hoisted himself up by the stirrup and descended upon the saddle with such a flop that the horse kicked up his heels and nearly unseated his cavalier. Much

disconcerted, Hector endeavoured to calm him down:

"Gently, gently, old boy, gently."

When horse and rider had recovered their equanimity, Hector asked:

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then we'll be off."

And away went the cavalcade.

All eyes were upon him. He attempted to rise to the trot in grotesque imitation of the English style of riding. He landed on the saddle, only to bounce up again, as if he would soar into space. Sometimes he seemed about to throw himself on the horse's neck. With set face and pallid cheeks he kept his eyes fixed straight in front of him. His wife and the maid, each of whom held a child on her knee, kept exclaiming:

"Look at Papa! Look at Papa!"

The two youngsters were bubbling over with the excitement of the drive, the fresh air, and the fun. Their screams of joy startled the horse, which broke into a gallop. In his efforts to pull him up, the rider lost his hat, and the coachman had to get down from the box to retrieve it. As Hector took it from him, he called to his wife from a distance:

"Do stop those children shouting. You'll have the horse bolting with me."

They had brought luncheon with them and picnicked on the grass in the woods of Le Vesinet. Although the coachman had taken charge of all three horses, Hector kept jumping up to see that his steed lacked for nothing, and to feed him with bread, cake and sugar.

"He's full of beans," he remarked, patting the horse's neck. "Why, he actually shook me up a bit at first. But, as you saw, I soon got used to him. He knows his master now and he won't give any more trouble."

As they had arranged, they returned by way of the

Champs Elysées. The great avenue was thronged with carriages, while the crowds on the sidewalks looked like two long black strips of ribbon, stretching from the Arc de Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde. The sun poured down on the scene, glittering on the handles and varnished woodwork of the carriages and on the steel of the harness. An exultant energy, an intoxicating zest, seemed to actuate that concourse of men and women, horses and carriages. In the distance the Obelisque soared upwards in a golden haze.

Once past the Arc de Triomphe, and his head turned towards his stable, Hector's horse was seized with new spirit. He whisked in and out among the carriage wheels at a lively trot, which his rider tried in vain to control, while the waggonette was left far, far behind. Opposite the Palais de l'Industrie, the horse, seeing a clear space, swerved to the right and broke into a gallop. Just at that moment an old woman in an apron was sauntering across the street. She happened to be right in Hector's way as he came charging down the road. Unable to pull up, he roared at the top of his voice:

"Hi there! Hi there!"

She may have been deaf, for she quietly pursued her way, until she was struck by the horse's shoulder with the force of a locomotive, and sent spinning, her petticoats in the air, till she landed ten paces ahead, after three successive somersaults.

People shouted:

"Stop him!"

Distraught with terror and clinging to his horse's mane, Hector himself screamed:

"Help! Help!"

A violent jerk shot him like a cannonball over his charger's head, and he fell into the arms of a policeman, who dashed forward to catch him. Immediately he was the centre of an angry, indignant, gesticulating, clamour-

ing mob. One old gentleman, with an enormous medal and great white moustache, seemed particularly incensed.

"Upon my soul!" he exclaimed repeatedly, "a clumsy fool like that ought to stay at home. People have no business to go out and murder one in the streets, just because they can't ride."

Four men now came up carrying the old woman. She looked like a corpse; her face was yellow, her bonnet askew and covered with dust.

"Take her to the nearest chemist," ordered the old gentleman, "while we see this fellow to the Commissary of police."

Hector was marched off between two policeman. A third one led the horse and the crowd brought up the rear. At this juncture the waggonette arrived on the scene. His wife leapt out of the carriage; the maid lost her head completely, while the two little boys lifted up their voices. Hector assured his wife that he would be home shortly; he had knocked down an old woman, but it was nothing. His distraught family went off home. The interview with the Commissary was brief. The accused gave his name as Hector de Gribelin, a clerk in the Admiralty. They waited, while a policeman was sent to obtain information as to the old woman's condition. He returned with the news that she had regained consciousness but was complaining of violent internal pains. She was a charwoman, Madame Simon by name, and sixty-five years of age. When he heard that she was still alive, Hector plucked up courage. He assumed responsibility for the cost of her medical attendance. Then he hurried off to the chemist. A crowd had gathered outside the door. The old dame sat huddled in a chair, groaning. Her face wore a dazed expression and her hands hung limp. Two doctors were still busy examining her. No bones were broken, but there remained the possibility of internal injury.

"Are you in much pain?" Hector asked her.

"O, yes."

"Where does it hurt?"

"I feel as if my inside was on fire."

One of the doctors came up to him.

"Is it you, sir, who were responsible for the accident?"

"Yes, sir."

"The woman had better be sent to a private hospital. I can recommend one, where she will be taken in for six francs a day. Shall I arrange this for you?"

Hector was overjoyed and thankfully accepted his offer. Greatly relieved he returned home. He found his wife in tears.

"It's nothing," he assured her consolingly. "The old dame is better already. In two or three days she will be quite herself again. I have had her taken to a hospital. It's nothing."

Nothing, indeed!

The next day, after office, Hector went to enquire after Madame Simon. He found her complacently sipping a cup of broth.

"How goes it?" he asked.

"O, my poor gentleman," she replied, "there's no change. I feel as if I were all to pieces. I'm not any better."

The doctor declared that the case required watching; there was still the possibility of complications.

Hector waited three days before paying her another visit. The old woman's eyes were bright and her cheeks pink, but the moment she saw him she began to groan:

"I can't move an inch, my poor gentleman, not an inch. I shan't get over this till the end of my days."

Hector felt a cold shiver running down his spine. He questioned the doctor, who threw up his hands.

"My dear sir, what am I to say? She screams at

every attempt to lift her. You can't even move her armchair without her yelling blue murder. I have to take her word for it. I can't look inside her. Unless I actually see her walking, I have no right to assume that she is lying."

The old woman listened without moving a muscle. There was a knowing look in her eyes. The week became a fortnight, the fortnight a month. Madame Simon never left her chair, and she never stopped eating from morning till night. She put on flesh, she chatted gaily with the other patients and appeared to accept her disablement as a well-earned rest after fifty years of climbing stairs, turning mattresses, carrying coals, scrubbing and sweeping. Hector was frantic. Every day he came to see her and every day she assured him serenely:

"I can't stir an inch, my poor gentleman, not an inch."

Every evening Madame de Gribelin, tortured with anxiety, asked him:

"How is Madame Simon?"

Every evening she received the same despairing answer:

"There is no change, absolutely none."

They had had to dispense with the maid, as they could no longer afford her wages. Hector's gratuity was swallowed up and they were obliged to economise more rigorously than ever. At last Hector arranged for a consultation with four eminent doctors. They gathered around the old woman, who allowed them to examine her, sound her, feel her, while she watched them with a knowing leer.

"We must get her to walk," said one of the doctors.

"I can't, kind gentlemen, she wailed, "I can't."

Grasping her by the wrists, they hoisted her out of her chair and managed to drag her a few paces, but she

wriggled out of their hands, and rolled on the floor, uttering such excruciating screams, that they restored her to her chair with the utmost caution. They refused to commit themselves to a definite opinion, but ruled out all possibility of her return to work.

When Hector communicated their verdict to his wife, she sank into a chair.

"We had better have her here," she faltered. "It would cost us less."

He gave a jump.

"Have her here? How can you suggest such a thing?"

But she was too desperate to care. With tears in her eyes, she murmured:

"After all, my dear, it wasn't my fault."

XIV. DISOWNED

"I REALLY think you must be mad, my dear, to go roaming the country in this heat. I don't know what has come over you this last month or two. You drag me willy-nilly to the seaside, the first time in all the forty-five years of our married life that such an idea has entered your head. You insist on coming to this dull hole, Fécamp, and then you, who never take exercise, are suddenly seized with such feverish energy that you must needs rush about the fields, on the hottest day of the year. Get d'Apreval to take you. He humours all your whims and fancies. Personally I propose to go indoors and have a nap."

Madame de Cadour turned to her old friend.

"Will you come with me, Monsieur d'Apreval?"

He smiled and bowed with old-world courtesy:

"Whither you lead, I follow."

"Well, then, go and get sunstroke," said Monsieur de Cadour, and he returned to the Hotel des Bains to lie down for an hour or so.

As soon as he had left them, the old lady and her cavalier set out on their walk. Pressing his hand, she whispered:

"At last, at last!"

"You are crazy," he murmured, "you really are. Think what a risk you are running. If that man——"

She started.

"O, Henri, don't talk of him as 'that man'."

"Very well," he replied curtly. "If our son were to

suspect, if he had the slightest inkling of the truth, we should both be at his mercy. You got on perfectly well without seeing him for forty years. What is the matter with you now?"

They trudged along the weary road, from the sea to the town, turned to the right and began to toil up the Etretat hill. The path unwound itself before them, dazzling white in the blazing sunshine. They plodded slowly on through the burning heat. Madame de Cadour took her friend's arm. She was gazing straight in front of her with the fixed stare of one possessed.

"So you too have never seen him again?"

"Never."

"Is it possible?"

"My dear, don't let us have that interminable discussion over again. I have a wife and family. You have a husband. We have, both of us, everything to fear from a censorious world."

She made no reply. She was dreaming of her vanished youth, of the past, with all its sorrows. Like other girls, she had been married off to a man she hardly knew. He was in the Diplomatic Service, and her married life differed in no respect from that of other society women. After a time a young man, Monsieur d'Apreval, conventionally married like herself, came upon the scene and fell passionately in love with her. During Monsieur de Cadour's prolonged absence in the East Indies on some political mission, she surrendered to her lover. How could she resist, how could she deny him? Returning his love as she did, where was she to find the power, the courage to withstand him? It was impossible, impossible. The task was beyond her strength. She could never have endured the pain. How cruel and treacherous life can be! Who can escape the toils of fate, the machinations of destiny? How may a woman, lonely, forlorn, childless, and

unloved, shun the passion that is dawning upon her? As well shun the light of the sun, and live out one's life in the darkness of night! How vividly now she recalled each little circumstance; his kisses, his smiles, his way of pausing on the threshold to gaze at her! Ah, those happy days, the only happy days she had ever known, how soon they had come to an end! Presently she had found that she was about to become a mother. The misery of it all! That journey, that long journey to the South, her sufferings, her constant dread, her existence, hidden away in the little lonely châlet by the Mediterranean, in the depths of a garden, whose bounds she dared not pass. How well she remembered the endless days she spent, lying under the orange tree, her eyes fixed on the round golden fruit among the green leaves. How she longed to escape from the garden and wander down to the sea. Over the walls of her prison, its cool breezes were wafted to her, with the sound of the ripples lapping on the shore. She dreamed of its vast blue expanse gleaming in the sun, white sails upon its bosom and on the sky-line a mountain. But she dared not pass out through the gate for fear someone should recognise her in that condition, which at once disfigured her and published her shame. Then those days of suspense, those last weary days. And finally that dreadful night. How she had groaned and cried! She could still see the doctor's smooth-shaven cheeks, the nurse's white cap and the pale face of her lover, who kissed her hand incessantly. And the day that followed—the only day out of all her life on which she had beheld and embraced her son. How long and dreary the years had seemed, haunted forever by the thought of him. Never again had she caught so much as a glimpse of the tiny being, the son whom she had borne, never again. He had been reft from her, carried off and hidden away. All that she knew was that he had been

brought up by Norman peasants as one of themselves, and that he had been well provided for and married off by his father, whose name he had never known. How often, in the last forty years, she had hungered to see him, and fold him to her heart. She could not imagine him grown up. She still pictured him as the tiny atom of humanity, whom she had clasped in her arms, held close to her tortured body, for a single day. How often she had said to her lover:

"I can't bear it any longer. I must see him. I must and will."

But he had always dissuaded and restrained her. He felt that she would never be able to conceal her emotion and control herself. Their son would guess the truth and take advantage of it. She would be ruined.

"What is he like?" she would ask.

"I do not know. I have never seen him again either."

"Is it possible? To have a son and not to know him. To be afraid of him, to cast him off as a disgrace."

It was a horrible thought.

Exhausted by the blazing sun, they toiled along the road, which wound on and on, climbing the interminable hill.

"Does it not seem like a judgment?" she resumed. "I have never had another child. No, I could no longer resist the yearning to see him, which has haunted me all these years. Men cannot enter into these feelings. Remember that I am near the end of my days. Suppose I died without ever having seen him again! Without ever having seen him again! Is it possible? How could I wait all these years? I have been obsessed by him my whole life long. What a nightmare it has been! I have never once, never once I tell you, woken from sleep, without my first thought turning to my child. What is he like? O how I blame myself for my conduct towards him. In such a case should one not defy the

world? It was my duty to leave all, that I might go to him, bring him up, and lavish upon him a mother's love. I am sure I should have been happier. But I had not the courage. I was a coward. How I have suffered! O, those poor abandoned children, how they must hate their mothers!"

She broke off abruptly, half stifled by her sobs. The whole valley lay silent and deserted in the dazzling sunshine. Only the grasshoppers chirped away without ceasing in the scanty, yellow grass by the roadside.

"Sit down for a little," he said.

She let him lead her to the edge of the ditch, where she sank down, covering her face with her hands. The ringlets of white hair that framed her face were dishevelled, and she shed tears of uncontrollable grief. Distressed and at a loss for words, he stood before her.

"Come," he murmured at last. "Be brave."

"I shall be brave enough," she said as she rose to her feet.

Drying her eyes, she walked on with an old lady's mincing steps. Presently the road plunged into a copse, which sheltered a group of cottages. They heard the ringing, rhythmic clang of a sledge hammer on an anvil, and saw on their right, a cart standing outside a rambling building, and two men in an open shed shoeing a horse.

Monsieur d'Apreval approached them.

"Can you direct me to Pierre Benedict's farm?"

"Take the turning to the left by the little café," replied one of the men, "and go straight on. It's the third farm, next door to Poret's. There's a spruce by the gate. You can't miss it."

They followed his directions. She was walking very slowly now. Her legs were trembling; her heart was throbbing so violently that she could scarcely breathe. At every step, she gasped, as if in prayer:

"My God, my God!"

Her throat contracted with the anguish of her emotion, and she tottered as if the tendons of her ankles had been severed.

Ruffled and somewhat pale, Monsieur d'Apreval said to her sharply:

"If you don't control your feelings, you will give the secret away at once. Pull yourself together."

"How can I?" she faltered. "My child! When I think that I am about to see my child!"

They followed one of those sunken lanes, which lie between two farmyards, and are darkened by a double row of beech trees, planted alongside the ditches. Presently they came to a wooden gate in the shade of a spruce.

"Here we are," he said.

She stopped to look round.

A large courtyard, planted with apple trees, reached to the door of a little thatched cottage. On the far side, were the stable, barn, cattle-shed and hen-house, while the farm vehicles, a waggon, a dung cart and a chaise, were drawn up under a shelter with a slate roof. Four calves were cropping the lush grass in the shade of the trees. A few black hens were wandering about the yard. All was still. The door of the cottage stood open, but there was no one in sight. As they entered the yard, a black dog sprang out from a barrel lying at the foot of a great pear tree, and began to bark furiously. On planks, set against the front wall of the cottage, four beehives with rounded straw roofs were ranged in a row.

"Is anyone in?" called Monsieur d'Apreval, standing at the door.

A child appeared, a small girl of ten, wearing a chemise and a woollen skirt. She had dirty bare legs and a timid, underhand look. She stood in the doorway, as if to bar the entrance.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Is your father in?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

"And your mother?"

"With the cows."

"Will she be back soon?"

"Don't know."

"I won't go away without seeing him," declared the old lady impetuously, as if afraid of being dragged away by main force.

"We will wait for him, my dear."

They turned their heads, and saw a peasant woman approaching the house, carrying two heavy tin pails, which reflected the sunshine in flashes of dazzling white. She was lame in her right leg. The brown woollen wrap, bleached by the rain and rusted by the sun, which she had drawn across her chest, made her look like a poverty-stricken, slatternly servant.

"There's Mother," cried the child.

When she drew near her cottage, the woman glanced at the strangers with a surly, suspicious air, and then went indoors, as if she had not seen them. She looked old, and had a worn, hard, sallow face, with the wooden expression peculiar to women of her class.

Monsieur d'Apreval called her back.

"My good woman, could you let us have two glasses of milk?"

She put down her pails and came to the door.

"We do not sell milk," she muttered.

"We are extremely thirsty and this old lady is quite worn out. Could you not give us something to drink?"

The woman scanned them with suspicious, moody, eyes. At last, however, she relented.

"Well as you're here, I don't mind if I do," and she withdrew inside the cottage.

Presently the child emerged and placed two chairs under an apple tree, while her mother followed with two foaming bowls of milk which she handed to her visitors. Then she stood in front of them, as if to keep her eyes on them and pry into their business.

"You're from Fécamp?"

"Yes, we are spending the summer at Fécamp," replied Monsieur d'Apreval, adding after a pause:

"Could you supply us with poultry once a week?"

"I daresay we could," replied the woman after a moment's hesitation. "Would you be wanting young chickens?"

"Yes."

"What do they charge you for them in the market at Fécamp."

D'Apreval, who had no idea, turned to his companion:

"What do you pay for poultry, my dear—for young chickens?"

"Four francs, or four fifty," she faltered, her eyes brimming with tears.

The farmer's wife looked at her out of the corner of her eye, and asked inquisitively:

"Is the lady ill? What's she crying for?"

Taken aback he stammered:

"No . . . she's not ill . . . but she lost her watch on the way, a valuable watch, and she's upset about it. If anyone finds it, could you let us know?"

Madame Benedict received this explanation suspiciously and made no reply. Suddenly she cried:

"Here is my husband."

Her visitors were sitting with their backs to the gate, and she alone of the three had seen him enter. D'Apreval started, while Madame de Cadour turned round in such feverish haste that she almost fell off her chair.

Ten paces away from them, they saw a man, doubled

up, panting, and dragging a cow along by a rope. Without paying the slightest attention to the strangers, he growled:

"Curse this brute," and disappeared into the cowshed.

In a moment the old lady's tears were dry. She was too horrified to speak or think. So that was her son! Her son! D'Apreval, stung by the self-same reflection, asked in a troubled voice:

"Is that really Monsieur Benedict?"

"Who told you his name?" asked the farmer's wife suspiciously.

"The blacksmith at the corner of the road."

A silence ensued. All eyes were fixed on the door of the cowshed, a black gap in the wall of the building. They could not see inside, but heard vague sounds and movements and footsteps, deadened by the straw littering the ground. Mopping his brow, the farmer reappeared on the threshold, and turned towards the house with long, deliberate steps, heaving himself up at every stride. Again he passed the strangers, and again he ignored them.

"Get me a jug of cider," he said to his wife. "I'm thirsty."

He went indoors, while his wife descended to the cellar, leaving the folk from Paris alone.

"Let us go, Henri, let us go," pleaded Madame de Cadour despairingly.

D'Apreval took her arm and helped her to her feet. He had to exert his whole strength to keep her from falling. Throwing five francs down on a chair, he led her away.

As soon as they had passed through the gate she began to sob, in an agony of grief:

"Oh! Oh! So that is what you have made of him!"

He was very pale, but answered drily:

"I did what I could. His farm is worth eighty thousand francs. It's a larger fortune than most middle-class people can give their sons."

Slowly, without another word, they turned homewards. She wept unceasingly; the tears kept welling into her eyes and rolling down her cheeks. At last, however, she dried them, and they reached Fécamp. Monsieur de Cadour was waiting dinner for them. As soon as he saw them he exclaimed gleefully:

"Capital. My wife has gone and got sunstroke. Serves her right. Really she seems to have taken leave of her senses."

Neither answered.

"Never mind. I trust you had a pleasant walk," added her husband, rubbing his hands.

"Most enjoyable, my dear fellow," replied d'Apreval. "Most enjoyable."

XV.

A HOMECOMING

THE sea broke upon the shore in crisp, monotonous waves. Little white clouds scudded across the boundless blue sky, like birds blown along by the wind. In a fold of a valley running down to the sea, a village lay basking in the sun. The first house, standing solitary by the roadside, belonged to a family called Martin-Lévesque. It was a fisherman's hut with clay walls and a thatched roof, gay with tufts of blue iris. Before the door stretched a square patch of garden, no bigger than a pocket handkerchief, in which grew onions, a cabbage or two, parsley, and chervil. It was separated from the road by a hedge.

The goodman had gone fishing and his wife was sitting by the cottage door mending the meshes of a great brown net, spread out on the wall like a huge spider's web. On a straw-bottomed chair by the garden gate, leaning back against the fence, sat a girl of fourteen, mending such underwear as the poor possess, underwear, which has been darned and patched, over and over again.

Another child, a year younger, was nursing in her arms a tiny baby, not old enough to crawl or speak, while a couple of toddlers two or three years of age, were sitting close together on the ground, grubbing in the earth with clumsy little hands and throwing dust into each other's faces. No one said a word. Only the

baby, refusing to go to sleep, kept wailing in a shrill, weak voice. A cat was curled up on the window-sill. At the foot of the wall, a clump of flowering stocks made a fine show of white blossoms, which attracted a buzzing swarm of flies.

Suddenly the girl, who sat by the garden gate, called out:

"Mother."

"What is it?"

"There he is again."

All the morning they had been disturbed by an old man, looking like a beggar, who kept prowling round the house. They had first noticed him, when they went with the fisherman to see him aboard his boat. The stranger was then sitting by the ditch opposite the cottage door. When they returned they found him still on the same spot, staring at the house. He looked ill and very wretched. There he had sat without moving for more than an hour. Presently, seeing that they regarded him with suspicion, he had got up and hobbled away. But soon afterwards they saw him come limping slowly and wearily back and he sat down again, this time a little further away from the cottage, as if to resume his watch. They were all of them alarmed, the mother more than the girls, for she was of a timid disposition, and knew that the fisherman would not be home till nightfall.

Her present husband's name was Lévesque, but people still called her Martin after her first husband, who was a sailor and used to go every spring to Newfoundland for the cod fishing. So the family was always known as Martin-Lévesque. She had been married two years to Martin, and had borne him a daughter. A second child was six months on the way, when the *Two Sisters,* a barkantine from Dieppe, on which her husband had sailed, disappeared. Nothing was ever heard of her

again; none of her crew came back and she was given up for lost with all hands.

For ten years Madame Martin waited for her husband, and struggled hard to rear her two children. She was a steady, industrious woman, and at last Lévesque, a fisherman, who lived in the neighbourhood, a widower with one son, asked her to marry him. She consented, and within the next three years she brought three more children into the world. She and her husband led a hard and laborious existence. Bread was dear and they seldom tasted meat. Sometimes, in the stormy winter months, they were obliged to run into debt with the baker. Nonetheless, the children continued to thrive.

"They are decent folk, the Martin-Lévesques," said the neighbours. "Martin is a hard-working woman, and there is no better fisherman than Lévesque."

"It's almost as if he knew us," remarked the girl, sitting by the gate. "Perhaps he's a beggar from Epreville or Auzebosc."

But her mother was positive that he was not from this part of the country. He sat as still as a post, and kept his eyes obstinately fixed on the Martin-Lévesques' dwelling, till at last the woman flew into a rage, and with courage born of fear, caught up a spade and sallied forth into the road.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm taking the air," he answered in a hoarse voice. "Hoping no offence."

"Why do you keep sort of spying on my house?"

"I'm not doing anybody any harm. Can't a man sit down by the roadside?"

She could think of no reply and went indoors.

The hours dragged slowly along. Towards noon the man took himself off. He passed the cottage again towards five o'clock, but that was the last they saw of him that day.

When Lévesque returned at nightfall, he was told of the incident.

"A tramp," he conjectured. "Maybe a bad lot."

It did not worry him and he went to bed, but his wife could not stop thinking of the vagabond who had eyed her so strangely.

The next day there was a high wind, and as it was too rough to put to sea, the fisherman stayed at home and helped his wife to mend the nets. About nine o'clock, the eldest girl, who was one of Martin's daughters, set out to fetch the bread, but she came running back in alarm.

"Mother," she exclaimed, "there he is again."

The woman turned pale with apprehension and said to her husband:

"Go and talk to him, Lévesque. Tell him not to keep spying on us like that. It drives me crazy."

Lévesque was a stalwart seaman, with a brick-red complexion, a stiff auburn beard, blue eyes with pupils as small as pinheads, and a thick neck, always with a woollen comforter round it to keep out wind and rain when he was on the sea. He stepped quietly out of the house and went up to the tramp. The two men had a talk, while the children and their mother watched from a distance, in fear and trembling. Presently the stranger rose to his feet and turned with Lévesque towards the cottage. The woman drew back in horror, but her husband said:

"Give him a bit of bread and a glass of cider. He has had nothing to eat for two days."

The two men went indoors, the children and their mother bringing up the rear. The tramp sat down to his meal, hanging his head beneath the concentrated gaze of the entire family. The mother stood staring at him. The two eldest girls, Martin's children, one of them with the baby in her arms, leaned against the door, watching

him intently; while the two youngsters, sitting among the ashes on the hearth, stopped playing with the smoke-blackened saucepan, and likewise turned their attention to the stranger.

Lévesque sat down and began to question him.

"You've come a long way, then?"

"Yes, from Cette."

"Tramping all the way?"

"Yes. When you haven't a penny in your pocket what else can you do?"

"Where are you bound for?"

"I was coming here."

"Do you know anyone hereabouts?"

"That's as may be."

A silence ensued.

Famished though he was, he ate slowly, and took a gulp of cider after each mouthful of bread. His face was worn and gaunt and deeply lined, as if he had endured great hardships.

"What is your name?" asked Lévesque abruptly.

"Martin," he replied, without looking up.

A strange shudder crept over the woman. She took a step forward, as if to examine the stranger more closely, and stood gazing at him, her arms hanging limply down. All were silent, till at last Lévesque spoke again.

"Do you belong to these parts?"

"Yes," replied the stranger, suddenly lifting his head. As he did so, his eyes met hers in a set gaze, as if their glances were welded together. At last in a changed voice, low and quivering, she broke out:

"Is it you, my husband?"

"Yes," he answered with deliberation. "It's me."

He did not move from his chair, but went on munching his bread. More astonished than distressed, Lévesque gasped:

"What? Martin? It's you?"

"Yes, it's me," replied the other simply.

"Where have you come from?" asked his successor.

"From the coast of Africa. We grounded on a shoal and sank. There were only three of us saved, Picard, Vatinel and myself. The savages got us and kept us for twelve years. Picard and Vatinel are both dead. An English traveller came along and picked me up and took me back to Cette. And here I am."

Madame Martin had thrown her apron over her head and was weeping.

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Lévesque.

"Are you her husband now?" returned Martin.

"Yes."

They stared at each other in silence. Martin took a look at the children, who were clustered around him, and jerked his head towards the two eldest girls.

"Are those mine?"

"Yes, they're both yours."

He did not get up to embrace them, but merely remarked:

"Lord, what big girls they are!"

"But what are we going to do about it?" Lévesque repeated.

Martin was equally perplexed and could think of no solution. At last he declared:

"Well, I am ready to do as you say. I don't want to wrong anybody. But it's a regular fix all the same, because of the house. I've got two children; you've got three. Each man his own. But the mother now, is she yours or is she mine? It's just as you like. Only the house really does belong to me. My father left it to me, and I was born in it, and the lawyer has got the papers about it."

Madame Martin was still weeping, stifling her low

sobs in the folds of her blue cotton apron. The two eldest girls had come closer and were looking anxiously at their father.

He finished his meal and echoed Lévesque's question:

"Well, what are we going to do about it?"

Lévesque had a sudden flash of inspiration.

"We had better see the priest and let him decide."

Martin rose to his feet and as he drew near his wife, she flung herself on his breast, sobbing:

"My husband! Home at last! Martin, my poor Martin, home at last!"

She felt a breath from the past, and a wave of memories surged over her, bringing back to her their first embraces, when she was a girl of twenty. Martin himself was moved, and kissed the top of her cap. Hearing their mother crying the two toddlers on the hearth set up a howl, and the baby, in its half-sister's arms, joined in with a voice as piercing as a fife played out of tune.

Lévesque stood waiting.

"Come on," he said. "We must get this put right."

Martin released his wife and as he glanced at his two daughters, their mother exclaimed:

"You might at least kiss your father."

Surprised and shy, but with no sign of emotion, they went up to him together, and he gave them a sounding, countrified kiss on either cheek. At the stranger's approach, the baby screamed so violently that it nearly had convulsions.

The two men left the house together. As they were passing the Café du Commerce, Lévesque said:

"Come in and have a nip."

"Don't mind if I do," said Martin.

They entered the café and sat down in the tap room, which was deserted at that hour.

"Hi Chicot, two glasses of your best brandy. Here's Martin home again. Martin, my wife's husband, you know, the one who was lost in the *Two Sisters*."

The stout, red, puffy-faced landlord came in, with three glasses in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"So you're home again, Martin?" he asked calmly.

"Yes, I'm home again," Martin answered.

. . . . . .

XVI. BOITELLE

Old Antoine Boitelle had the monopoly of all the unsavoury work of the neighbourhood. Whenever there was a pit, a midden, a cesspool, a drain, or other deposit of filth to be cleaned out, he was always the one to be sent for. In clogs encrusted with dirt, he would come along with his scavenger's apparatus, and set to work, grumbling all the time at his occupation. When he was asked why he followed a calling so repulsive, he replied with resignation:

"Bless me, I've got my children to feed. It's better paid than most jobs."

He had actually fourteen children. If you asked him what had become of them all, he would answer with an air of indifference:

"I've eight of them at home. One is in service, the other five are married."

When questioned as to whether they had made good matches, he would reply with warmth:

"I didn't stand in their way. I have never stood in their way in anything. They married to please themselves. People oughtn't to be crossed when they take a fancy into their heads. It turns out badly. I shouldn't be the village scavenger now, if my parents hadn't crossed me. I should have had a trade like anybody else."

This is the story of how his parents crossed him. It was when he was stationed at Havre doing his military service. He was no brighter than other people, and no

duller, though perhaps a trifle simple-minded. When he was off duty, his great pleasure was to wander about on the quay, where the bird fanciers congregated. Sometimes alone, sometimes with a townee, he would stroll slowly along past the cages of green-backed, yellow-polled parrots from the Amazon; grey-backed, red-polled parrots from Senegal; enormous macaws, looking as if they had been reared in hot-houses, with their plumage gay as flowers, their crests, and their aigrettes; parakeets of all sizes, so brilliant that they seemed to have been painted, with infinite care, by a god turned miniaturist; and the tiniest, little birds hopping about, red, yellow, blue, and all the colours of the rainbow, all of them mingling their cries with the noises of the quay, and adding, to the hubbub of ships unloading, the crowds of people, and the traffic, a violent shrill, earsplitting, deafening clamour, as of some faraway and enchanted forest.

With open eyes and open mouth, his teeth flashing in an enraptured grin, Boitelle would linger by the captive cockatoos, who bobbed their white or yellow topknots at the sight of his bright red trousers and the metal fastenings on his belt. When he came across a talking parrot, he would ask it questions, and if the bird was so obliging as to answer him and converse, he was pleased and happy for the rest of the day. Watching the monkeys was yet another joy, and he could think of no greater bliss for a wealthy man than to own such pets, as ordinary mortals keep cats and dogs. This peculiar taste for the exotic was in his blood, like a taste for hunting, healing, or preaching in others. As soon as the barrack gates were open, he could not keep away from the quay. It was as if some irresistible attraction drew him thither.

One day he was watching, almost in ecstasy, a huge macaw, which was ruffling its plumage, and bowing and

straightening itself like a courtier performing his reverences in the presence of the king of the cockatoos, when the door of a small café, adjoining the bird-fancier's shop, opened, and he saw a young negress with a red bandana round her head, appear on the threshold, sweeping the dust and old corks out into the road. Boitelle's attention was instantly divided between the two, the woman and the bird, and he would have been puzzled to decide which of the two he regarded with more wonder and admiration. After she had cleared out the rubbish from the café, the negress looked up, and she, for her part, was dazzled by the soldier's uniform. She stood facing him with her broom in her hands, as if presenting arms, while the macaw continued its obeisances. After a few moments, the soldier felt embarrassed by these attentions and moved away, though slowly enough to avoid the appearance of beating a retreat.

But he came again. Nearly every day he passed in front of the Café des Colonies and often, through the window, he caught a glimpse of the little blackamoor, serving the sailors from the harbour with beer or spirits, and frequently, when she saw him, she would step outside. Soon, although they had never exchanged a word, they smiled at each other like old acquaintances. Boitelle's heart would leap at the sight of the dazzling row of teeth between the girl's dark lips. One day he entered the café and found to his surprise that she talked French like anybody else. The bottle of lemonade, of which she accepted a glass, lingered in the soldier's memory as something peculiarly delectable. He fell into the habit of dropping into the little café in the harbour and absorbing as many syrupy potions as his pocket permitted. To him there was a charm, a joy, which never left his thoughts, in the sight of the little waitress's black hand pouring the liquid into his tumbler, while

her teeth flashed a brighter smile than her eyes. After meeting for a couple of months, they became fast friends. At first he was surprised to discover that his negress had the same correct ideas as the girls at home, and a due respect for thrift, industry, religion, propriety. But he liked her all the better for it and became so much enamoured that he was anxious to marry her. When he told her of his project, she danced for joy. She happened to possess a little money, left to her by an oyster woman, who had taken pity on her, when, a child of six, she had been deposited on the quay at Havre by an American sea-captain. A few hours after leaving New York, the captain had found her huddled up on some bales of cotton in the hold of his ship. On his arrival at Havre he had handed her over to the oyster woman, who felt sorry for this little black creature, stowed away on the ship, for some unknown reason. After the death of her benefactress, the negro girl had taken a place as servant in the Café des Colonies.

"We'll get married," said Antoine, "that is if the parents don't object. I won't go against their wishes, you know, never. But I'll drop them a hint, next time I go home."

Accordingly, the following week he took twenty-four hours' leave and went to see his family, who worked a small farm at Tourteville near Yvetot. He waited, till the after-dinner coffee, laced with spirits, had produced its mellowing effect upon their hearts, and then informed his parents that he had met a girl who was so completely to his mind in every respect that there was no one else in the whole world to suit him so perfectly. At this avowal, the old people at once grew cautious and asked him for details. He kept nothing from them except the colour of her complexion. She was a servant he told them, without much fortune, but capable, thifty, clean,

well-conducted and sensible. All these virtues were more profitable than money, which a bad housewife would only fritter away. And then she was not quite penniless. She had a nest-egg, bequeathed to her by the woman who had brought her up, a tidy little sum, almost enough for a dowry, fifteen hundred francs in the savings bank. Impressed by his dissertation, and disposed moreover to trust his judgment, the old people were on the point of yielding, when he broached the delicate topic of her colour.

"There's only one thing you might object to," he began with a constrained smile, "she's not a white woman."

At first they did not grasp his meaning, and he had to explain, at great length and as tactfully as possible, for fear he should prejudice them, that she sprang from that dusky race, of which they had seen specimens only in Epinal colour prints. At this they were as much disconcerted, perplexed and alarmed as if he had suggested a union with the devil.

"Black!" gasped his mother. "How black do you mean? All over?"

"Yes. Of course. Just as you're white all over."

"Black!" chimed in his father. "As black as a cooking pot?"

"Well, perhaps not quite," replied his son. "She is black, but not black enough to put you off. The curé's cassock is black, but it looks no worse than a white surplice."

"Are there people blacker than she in her own country?"

"Why yes," he replied with conviction.

The worthy man, however, shook his head.

"It must be unpleasant."

"It's no more unpleasant than anything else. Why, you get used to it in no time."

"Doesn't a skin like that come off on the linen?" asked his mother.

"No more than your own. Don't you see, it's her proper colour."

They continued to ply him with questions, and finally it was agreed that the parents should see the girl before anything was settled. Their son, whose term of service expired the following month, was to bring her to the farm, and while they were talking they could have a good look at her and decide whether or no she was too black to be admitted into the Boitelle family. It was arranged that on Sunday, the twenty-second of May, the day on which he obtained his discharge, Antoine should take his beloved home to Tourteville. In honour of this visit to her lover's parents, she put on her best and most startling clothes, in which yellow, red, and blue predominated, making her look as if beflagged for a national holiday. On the departure platform at Havre many glances were directed at her, and Boitelle felt proud to be giving his arm to a person, who attracted so much attention. Seated beside him in the third-class railway carriage, she created such a sensation among the peasants that those in adjoining compartments stood up on their seats to stare at her over the wooden partitions. At the sight of her, a child began to cry with terror, while another hid its face in its mother's apron. All went well, however, till they reached Yvetot. As the train slowed down and steamed into the station, Antoine suddenly felt uneasy, as he used to do before an inspection, when he had omitted to study his drill book.

Leaning out of the window, he recognised his father in the distance, standing by the horse and trap, with the reins over his arm, while his mother had come right up to the trellis-work, which the station-master had put up to keep out trespassers. He was the first to alight,

and handed his friend out of the train. Then, as erect as if he were escorting a general, he advanced towards his family. When she saw this black and bedizened female coming towards her with her son, the mother was so overcome that she could not open her mouth, while the father could hardly hold the pony, which kept plunging with fright, either at the locomotive or at the negress. Antoine, however, seized with pure joy at the sight of his old parents, rushed at them with open arms, and saluted first his mother, then his father, with sounding kisses, regardless of the panic-stricken pony. Then turning to his companion, whom the passers-by stopped to stare at in amazement, he introduced her.

" Here she is. You know I told you she was not very taking at first sight, but really and truly you've only to know her, and you'll find that there's nobody in the world to beat her. Say ' how do you do ' to her, or she'll feel hurt."

Almost beside herself with embarrassment, Mother Boitelle dropped a kind of curtsey, while the father took off his cap and muttered :

" At your service, Miss."

Without further delay they all climbed into the trap, the two men sitting on the seat in front, the two women behind on chairs, which shot them up into the air at every bump in the road. No one uttered a word. Antoine nervously whistled a barrack-room tune; his father whipped up the pony, while his mother kept stealing furtive glances out of the corner of her eye at the negress, whose forehead and cheeks shone in the sun like well-polished shoes.

Anxious to break the ice, Antoine turned round.

" Aren't you two going to talk to each other? "

" Time enough for that," replied the old dame.

" Why don't you tell her the story about your hen and the eight eggs? "

This was a favourite joke in the family. But as his mother's emotions still kept her tongue-tied, Antoine made himself spokesman and, laughing heartily, related that singular incident. His father, who knew the story off by heart, brightened up at the first words; his wife soon followed his example, and when he came to the climax, the negress herself suddenly burst into such peals of ringing, resonant and torrential laughter that the pony, in its excitement, broke into a brief gallop. The barriers were down and they all talked freely. They reached home and scrambled out of the trap. Antoine at once took his friend up to the bedroom, where she removed her gown, so as not to spoil it while preparing a succulent dish of her own, in the hope of captivating the old people with an appeal to their appetites. In the meantime Antoine drew his parents outside the door and asked with beating heart:

"Well, what do you say to her?"

His father held his peace, but his mother declared:

"She's too black. No, really, it's too much. She gives me the creeps."

"You'll get used to her," said Antoine.

"I daresay, but not just at first."

They went indoors, and the good soul was touched when she saw the negress busying herself in the kitchen. An active woman still for her years, she turned up her skirts and lent a hand.

They sat long over an excellent meal and were all very merry. When the party was setting out for a stroll, Antoine took his father aside:

"Well, father, what do you say to her?"

But the old peasant was never one to commit himself.

"I haven't made up my mind. Ask your mother."

Antoine rejoined his mother and made her fall back with him.

"Well, mother, what do you say to her?"

"My poor boy, really she is too black. If only she were just a little less, I wouldn't stand in your way. But it's too much. She's like Satan."

He did not press her. He was aware that the old dame never gave in. But he felt a tempest of grief surging up within his heart. He wondered what he had better do, what inducements to attempt, and he marvelled that his negress had failed to captivate them as speedily as she had won his own heart. Slowly the four wandered through the cornfields, gradually lapsing again into silence. Whenever they skirted an enclosure, the farmers came to the gate, the youngsters scrambled up the banks, and everyone rushed into the road to see the blackamoor young Boitelle had brought home. From a distance, people could be seen racing across the fields, as if they had heard the beating of a drum advertising a freak show. Aghast at the sensation their appearance created throughout the neighbourhood, the old couple hurried on together, far ahead of their son and his companion, who was asking him what his parents thought of her. Hesitatingly he replied that they had not yet made up their minds. Their arrival in the village square was the signal for an excited rush from every house, and at the sight of the steadily increasing crowd, the two old people took to their heels and made for home, while Antoine, boiling with rage, his friend on his arm, strode majestically onwards under the wide-eyed gaze of the spectators. He felt that this was the end, that there was no hope, that he would never be married to his negress. She, too, realised the truth.

As they drew near the farm, both of them were dissolved in tears. They went indoors, and as before, she removed her gown and helped the mother in her household tasks. She followed her everywhere, into the dairy, the stable, the henhouse, and did most of the work herself.

"Let me do that, Madame Boitelle," she kept saying, till by the evening the old woman's heart was touched, though she still remained inexorable.

"She's a good girl, all the same," she remarked to her son. "What a pity she's so black. But really it is too much. I couldn't put up with her. She must go away again. She's too black."

Antoine had to break it to his friend:

"She won't have it. She thinks you're too black. You will have to go away again. I'll see you to the station. But never mind. Don't worry. I'll have a talk to them when you've gone."

He took her to the station, doing his best to cheer her. Then he kissed her and put her into the train, and with tear-swollen eyes watched till it was out of sight.

Plead as he might with the old people, he could not gain their consent. He never told this story, which was common property in the village, without adding:

"Ever since that day I haven't had the heart for anything. I couldn't get interested in any kind of work. And so I became what I am now, a scavenger."

"Still, you married," someone would remark.

"Yes, and I can't say I didn't care for my wife, considering I've had fourteen children by her, but she's not the same as the other one, not she, oh no. The other one, you see, my negress, she had only to look at me and I would feel a sort of thrill . . ."

XVII. THE DEVIL

Doctor and peasant stood facing each other, while the peasant's old mother, who lay in bed, dying, looked at the two men, and listened to their conversation. She was calm, clear-headed, resigned. She knew that she was going to die. But she accepted the fact. She was ninety-two. Her time was up.

The July sun poured in through the open windows and doorway. Its burning rays fell upon the brown, uneven, earthen floor, which the sabots of four generations of peasants had trodden. Grilling puffs of wind brought in with them the odours of the fields; of grass, of wheat, of leaves, burning under the noon-tide heat. The grasshoppers were shrilling themselves hoarse; the whole countryside was filled with their rapid chirping, not unlike the noise made by those wooden crickets, which are sold to children at fairs.

The doctor's voice became more emphatic.

"Honoré, you cannot leave your mother by herself in the condition she is in. She may die at any moment."

Honoré, very woe-begone, replied:

"All the same, I've got to get in my wheat. It has been lying on the ground too long already. It's just the weather for it. What do you think, mother?"

The old woman, though on the point of death, was still in the fierce grip of Norman avarice. She nodded a silent assent. Her son must go and get in his wheat, and leave her to die by herself.

The doctor stamped his foot with annoyance.

"You're nothing but a brute, I tell you, and I won't allow you to do any such thing, understand that. If you have got to get your wheat in to-day, you must send for the Rapet woman, and make her look after your mother. I insist upon it, and if you don't do as I tell you, I'll let you die like a dog when it is your turn to fall sick. Remember that!"

Honoré, a tall, lean, slow-moving rustic, was tortured by conflicting emotions. He was afraid of the doctor; on the other hand, he had a violent passion for economy. He hesitated; he made calculations. Finally he asked diffidently:

"How much does the Rapet woman ask for nursing?"

"How should I know?" the doctor said. "It depends on how long you keep her. Make your own arrangements with her, for goodness' sake. But understand that I must have her here within the hour."

"I'm going, I'm going," said Honoré, having made up his mind at last. "You can rest easy, doctor."

The doctor gave a parting admonition.

"Now you look out for yourself, my man. It's no joke when I get my back up, I tell you."

Left alone with his mother, Honoré turned to her and said in a tone of resignation:

"I'm going to fetch Mother Rapet, as that fellow insists on it. Keep easy till I come back."

Then he followed the doctor out of the house.

Mother Rapet was an old woman who did ironing. She also looked after people who were dying in the parish and its vicinity, and watched the bodies after death. The instant she had finished sewing up her customers in the sheet which they were never to cast off, she set about her other task of ironing sheets for the living. Her face was wrinkled like a last year's apple. She was spiteful, envious, and of an avarice, which was hardly human. She was bent double, as if she had

broken her back with eternally running the iron backwards and forwards over the linen. As for deathbeds, it was almost as if she had developed a hideous and morbid passion for them. Her only topics of conversation were the people whom she had seen die, and the different deathbeds at which she had been present. In great detail, and never varying by a single word, she would relate these occurrences, with the accuracy of a marksman describing each individual shot.

When Honoré Bontemps entered her house, he found her mixing blue in a tub for the village girls' collarettes.

"Well, how do you do, Mother Rapet," he said. "Is everything all right with you?"

Turning towards him, she replied:

"So so, so so. And you?"

"Oh, I'm all right. It's my mother who is not doing so well."

"Your mother?"

"Yes. My mother."

"What's wrong with your mother?"

"She's going to turn up her toes, that's what's wrong with her."

The old hag took her hands out of the water; the bluish, transparent drops trickled down to her fingertips and fell back again into the tub. With suddenly aroused interest, she exclaimed:

"Is she as low as that?"

"The doctor says she won't last out the afternoon."

"Ah, then, she must be far gone."

Honoré hesitated. He had a proposal to make, but he could hardly tackle the business without certain preambles. He searched for an opening, but finding none, came straight to the point.

"How much will you take for looking after her till the end? We are far from well-off, as you know. I can't so much as pay for a woman to do the work.

That's just what has done for my mother, my poor mother. Too much bustle, too much work. She was ninety-two, but she did the work of ten. They don't make women like that nowadays."

Mother Rapet replied gravely:

"I have two prices. For the rich, two francs a day and three francs a night. For the poor, one franc a day and two francs a night. I'll charge you one and two."

Honoré thought this over. He knew his mother well. He knew her tenacity, her vitality, her powers of resistance. She might last a whole week, whatever the doctor's opinion was. He replied firmly:

"No. I'd rather you made me a fixed price, to include the whole job. It's a risk whichever way you take it. The doctor says she is going to die immediately. If that happens, so much the better for you, so much the worse for me. On the other hand, if she lasts another day or even longer, so much the better for me, so much the worse for you."

Mother Rapet looked at him in surprise. She had never yet treated a death on a time-contract. Tempted by the speculative risk, she hesitated. Then a suspicion of trickery crossed her mind, and she replied:

"I can't say until I've seen your mother."

"Come and see her then."

She dried her hands and followed him forthwith. On the way to Honoré's house they were silent. She scuttled along, while he lengthened his stride, as if he had to cross a stream at each step. Overcome by the heat, the cows were lying in the fields. As the old woman and the peasant passed by, the cattle raised their heads and lowed gently, as though asking for fresh grass. When they were close to their destination, Honoré Bontemps murmured:

"Anyhow, suppose it's all over by this time?"

His unconscious desire that this should be the case, was perceptible in the tone of his remarks.

The old woman, however, was not dead. She was lying on her back, in her truckle-bed, with her hands resting on the purple coverlet of printed calico. They were hideously thin and gnarled; doubled up with rheumatism, over-work and the incessant tasks of well-nigh a century. They reminded one of uncanny animals such as crabs.

Mother Rapet went up to the bed and had a good look at the dying woman. She felt her pulse, passed her hand over her chest, listened to her breathing, asked her some questions in order to hear what her voice was like. After she had studied her again for a long time, she went outside, followed by Honoré. She had quite made up her mind that the old woman would not last till nightfall.

"Well," asked Honoré.

"Well," replied Mother Rapet. "She will last two days, perhaps three. My charge is six francs, inclusive."

"Six francs! Six francs!" he exclaimed. "Are you out of your wits? I give you my word she will last five or six hours, not a minute more."

The dispute was conducted on both sides with extreme ferocity and at great length. However, the nurse threatened to leave him, and realising that time was passing and that his wheat could not gather itself in without his assistance, he accepted her terms.

"Very well then, six francs. And that includes everything up to the lifting."

"Six francs it is."

He made off with great strides in the direction of his field, where the reaped wheat was lying under the oppressive harvest sun. Mother Rapet went back into Honoré's house. She had brought some work with her.

She always worked industriously by the bedside of the dead or the dying, sometimes for herself, sometimes for the family of the patient, if they would pay her a little extra for the double job. Suddenly she addressed the dying woman.

"Of course you've had your Sacraments, Madame Bontemps?"

Madame Bontemps shook her head. Mother Rapet, who was very pious, got up with alacrity.

"Lord God, is it possible? I'll go and fetch the priest."

She dashed off headlong to the curé's house, running so quickly that the small boys on the village square thought something serious had happened. The priest came along at once. In front of him went a choir boy ringing a bell to announce the passing of the Host. The landscape brooded under the burning sun. Some men, who were working at a little distance, took off their wide-brimmed hats and waited until the white surplice of the curé was lost to sight behind a farm. Women, who were lifting the sheaves, straightened themselves, and made the sign of the Cross. A few black hens, terrified by the procession, fluttered along the ditches, until they found some well-known gap in the hedge through which they disappeared. A colt, tethered in a meadow, took fright and started running round and round at the end of his tether, kicking up his heels. The choir-boy in his red cassock trotted along, and the priest, who was wearing a biretta, followed him, murmuring prayers with his eyes on the ground. Last of all came Mother Rapet, head down, bent double, as if in the act of worship. She had clasped her hands, as though she were in church.

Honoré caught sight of them from a distance and asked:

"Where is our curé going?"

His labourer, who was more intelligent than his master, replied:

"He is taking the Sacrament to your mother, of course."

Honoré expressed no astonishment.

"Like enough," he said, and went on with his work.

Mother Bontemps made her confession, received absolution, and communicated, and the priest took his departure, leaving the two women alone in the suffocating cottage. Mother Rapet presently began to take stock of her patient. She was wondering how long she would take in dying.

Daylight was waning. The air became cooler. It entered the room in brisker puffs. The cheap coloured print, that was fixed to the wall by two pins, fluttered in the breeze. The little window curtains, once white but now yellow and fly-blown, had the appearance of wanting to fly away, of struggling to free themselves, like the old woman's soul.

Mother Bontemps lay motionless, with her eyes open, seeming to await with indifference the death that was so imminent and yet so slow of coming. Her throat was a little constricted and her breath was drawn with a slight whistling sound. Soon it would cease altogether; there would be one woman less in the world, and no one would miss her.

Honoré came in at dusk. Approaching the bed, he saw that his mother was still alive.

"How goes it?" he asked, exactly as he used to do when she was a little out of sorts. Then he sent Mother Rapet away, bidding her come without fail at five o'clock on the following morning. The old nurse did in fact return at daybreak. Before going out to his fields, Honoré had some soup, which he had made himself.

"Is your mother dead yet?" the nurse asked, as he

left the house. There was a sly twinkle in his eyes as he replied:

"If anything, she is better."

Mother Rapet became uneasy. She went close up to the dying woman, who seemed in precisely the same state as the day before; listless, impassive, with her eyes open, and her hands doubled up on the coverlet. Mother Rapet saw that in this condition she might last for two days, four days, even a week. Her avaricious heart was wrung by apprehension, and she felt furiously angry with the sharper who had tricked her, and with this woman who refused to die. None the less she set about her work, but she kept a steady gaze fixed on the countenace of Mother Bontemps. Honoré came in for dinner. His face wore a satisfied, almost a bantering expression. Presently he went out again. He was certainly getting in his wheat under ideal conditions.

Mother Rapet was losing her temper. Every moment that slipped past seemed now to her like stolen time, stolen money. She had a desire, a mad desire, to seize her by the throat, the tiresome, pig-headed, stubborn old thing. Just a little squeeze and she would stop that short, quick breathing which was robbing her of her time and her money. She reflected, however, that this would be a risky thing to do. Other schemes occurred to her. She approached the dying woman and asked her:

"Have you seen the Devil yet?"

"No," replied Mother Bontemps.

The nurse then began to tell stories calculated to terrify the feeble intelligence of the expiring woman. She declared that the Devil always appeared to the dying just a few minutes before the end. He had a broom in his hand, a three-legged cooking-pot on his head, and he uttered loud yells. Once you had seen

him, you were through with everything. You had only a few moments to live. She gave the names of all the people to whom the Devil had already appeared that year: Joséphin Loisel, Eulalie Ratier, Sophie Padagnau, Séraphine Grospied. All this had its effect on Mother Bontemps. She grew nervous; fidgetted with her hands, and tried to turn her head so as to see into the far end of the room.

Mother Rapet suddenly disappeared behind the curtains at the foot of the bed. From the wardrobe she took a sheet and wrapped herself in it. On her head she placed an inverted cooking-pot, with three short curved legs, which stood out exactly like three horns. She seized in her right hand a broom and in her left a tin bucket, which she threw up in the air, letting it fall with a horrible clatter. Then she climbed up on a chair, raised the curtains again, and showed herself to the patient. She gesticulated, she uttered shrill cries inside the iron pot which hid her face, and, like the devil in a Punch and Judy show, she shook her broom at the old peasant woman, now on the verge of death. In horror, with the expression of one crazed with fear, Mother Bontemps made a superhuman effort to scramble out of bed and run away. She managed to raise her shoulders and chest. But after this effort she fell back with a great sigh. All was over.

With perfect tranquillity, Mother Rapet put all her properties back in their right places: the broom in the corner of the wardrobe, the sheet inside, the saucepan on the hearth, the tin bucket on the floor, and the chair against the wall. Then she proceeded to the actions which her profession demanded. She shut the wide-staring eyes of the dead woman; she placed a dish on the bed, filled it from the holy-water basin, and dipped into it the tuft of box, which was nailed above the chest of drawers. Then she fell on her knees and set herself

to a fervid repetition of the prayers for the dead. She knew them by heart, that being part of her trade.

When Honoré came back from the harvest field at dusk, he found Mother Rapet on her knees. He entered forthwith into calculations. She had been three days and one night nursing his mother. That made a total of five francs, whereas he now had to give her six.

"I lost one franc over that," he reflected.

XVIII. THE KEG OF BRANDY

MAITRE CHICOT, the inn-keeper from Epreville, drew up his tilbury in front of Mother Magloire's farm. He was a big hearty fellow of forty, red-faced and tending to corpulence, and had something of a reputation for sharp practice.

He tied up his horse to the gatepost and entered the farmyard. He had long coveted the old lady's fields, which adjoined some property of his own; he had made a score of efforts to purchase them, but Mother Magloire obstinately refused to negotiate.

"Here I was born," she said, "here I will die."

He found her peeling potatoes before the door. She was seventy-two years old, dried up, wrinkled, bent, but she worked as indefatigably as any young girl. Chicot gave her a friendly slap on the back, and sat down beside her on a stool.

"Well, mother, how are you keeping? All right?"

"Not too bad. And you, Maître Prosper?"

"Except for a twinge or two now and then, I'm first-rate."

"Well, that's good."

She said nothing more. Chicot watched her working at her task. Her crooked knotted fingers, as hard as the claws of a crab, closed like pincers upon the potatoes in the hamper. She turned them about briskly in one hand, paring off the long strips of peel with an old knife, which she held in the other. As each potato was

peeled, she threw it into a pail of water. Three fowls came up boldly, one after another, as far as her petticoats, and when they had seized their shed of potato skin, scuttled away at full speed, with their booty in their beaks.

Chicot seemed ill-at-ease and anxious. He had something on the tip of his tongue, but it would not get any further. He was obviously hesitating. At last, however, he made up his mind.

"I say, mother——"

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"That farm of yours. You're still determined not to let me have it?"

"You can't have it. You can make up your mind to that. It's no use your harping on the subject. It's settled. Settled."

"I think I've discovered a plan that might suit both of us."

"What is it?"

"This is my proposal. You sell me the property, but you keep it in your own hands all the same. You don't catch the idea? Well, just listen and I'll explain."

The old woman stopped peeling her potatoes and looked hard at the inn-keeper. Her eyes gleamed between her puckered eyelids.

"Let me make it clear to you," he resumed. "I give you a hundred and fifty francs a month. Get that into your head. Every month I drive across here in my tilbury and bring you thirty five-franc pieces. It doesn't affect your position in the slightest. Not in the slightest. You stay in your own house, you don't pay any attention to me, you owe me nothing. All you have to do is to take my money. How does that strike you?"

He looked at her with an appearance of jovial good-nature. The old woman reflected. She suspected a snare, and was trying to find where it lay. At last:

"That's what I get," she said. "But what about you? Do you take possession of the farm?"

"Don't you worry your head about that. You stay here as long as the good God leaves you alive. You remain in your own house. All you have to do is to draw up a little deed at the notary's, giving me the reversion after your death. You have no children. Only some nephews, whom you don't take much stock in. How does it strike you? You keep your property as long as you live, and I give you thirty five-franc pieces every month. It's all clear gain for you."

Alarmed, suspicious, but sorely tempted, the old woman after a pause, replied:

"I don't say no. But I want to think about it. Come back some time next week and talk it over. I'll let you know then how it strikes me."

When Maître Chicot took his departure, he was as pleased as a king, who has just conquered an empire. Mother Magloire, however, remained thoughtful. She had no sleep that night. For four days she lived in a fever of doubt. She scented unmistakable danger in the proposal, but the thought of those thirty five-franc pieces, those shining coins that would flow in a jingling stream into her apron, that would pour down upon her as from heaven, filled her with a frenzy of avarice. At last she went and consulted the notary, who advised her to accept Chicot's proposal. He told her, however, to demand two hundred and fifty francs a month, instead of one hundred and fifty, seeing that her farm was, on a moderate valuation, worth at least sixty thousand francs.

"Even if you live another fifteen years," said the notary, "that makes, at two hundred and fifty a month, only forty-five thousand that he will have paid."

The old woman was thrilled by the prospect of receiving fifty five-franc pieces every month, but her

suspicions clung to her obstinately. She feared a thousand unforeseen contingencies and lurking trickeries. She stayed on at the notary's until evening, putting question after question and unable to make up her mind to take her departure. At last, however, she instructed him to prepare the deed, and when she reached home her mind was as confused, as if she had drunk four pots of new cider. When Chicot came for her answer, she let him go on for a long time making his supplications. She declared she would never consent, but all the time she was gnawed by a fear that he would not consent to give the fifty five-franc pieces. He succeeded at last in bringing her to the point and she announced her terms, which, startled and disappointed, he refused to accept. In order to convince him, she set about calculating the probable duration of her life.

"I certainly shan't last more than another five or six years. I am just on seventy-three, and not too strong at that. The other night, I thought I was done for. I had a sort of feeling as if they had taken out my inside, and I had to be carried to my bed."

Chicot was not to be taken in by this.

"Come now, you old humbug, you're as solid as the church tower. You'll live to a hundred and ten at the least. It's you who will bury me, that's sure."

All the rest of the day was occupied in discussion, but Mother Magloire would not budge an inch, and finally Chicot consented to give the fifty five-franc pieces. On the following day the deed was signed, and Madame Magloire insisted on a further solatium of fifty francs.

Three years passed. Mother Magloire's health was perfect. She did not seem to have grown a day older. Chicot was in despair. It seemed to him as though these payments had been going on for half a century. He felt cheated, swindled, ruined. From time to time he paid a visit to Mother Magloire, in the frame of mind

of a man who goes to his fields about harvest time to see whether his wheat is ripe for the sickle. There was a malicious joy in the old woman's eyes; she seemed to be congratulating herself on the pretty trick she had played him. He never tarried long, and when he climbed back into his tilbury, he muttered:

"You old bag of bones, are you never going to die?"

The situation was beyond him. Whenever he saw her, he longed to strangle her. He hated her with a fierce, sullen hatred, the hatred of the peasant for the man who has robbed him. Presently he set his wits to work, and at last, one day when he came to see her, he was rubbing his hands together, just as he had done the first time he brought her his proposal to buy the reversion of her farm. After a few minutes' conversation, he said:

"I say, mother, why don't you come and have dinner at my house, when you are in Epreville? People are talking about it. They say we aren't friends any longer, and I don't like them saying that. You won't be asked to pay for anything at my house, you know. A dinner is nothing to me. Drop in whenever you feel inclined. Don't be shy. I'll always be glad to see you."

Mother Magloire did not need a second invitation. Two days later her man Célestin drove her in to market in her light covered cart, and she had no hesitation in putting up her horse in the stables of Chicot's inn. Then she claimed the dinner, which had been promised her. Chicot was full of geniality, and treated her like a lady. He served her with chicken, black pudding, pork sausages, leg of mutton, and cabbage and bacon. But she had been accustomed from childhood to a meagre diet of soup, with a slice of bread and butter, and she ate next to nothing. Chicot was disappointed and kept on pressing her. Nor would she take a glass of wine or even a cup of coffee.

"At any rate," he said, "you will have a nip of brandy."

"Ah, that's another thing. Yes. I won't say no to that."

He shouted at the top of his voice across the inn:

"Rosalie, bring brandy, the best brandy, the very best."

The maid fetched a long bottle, decorated with a paper vine-leaf, and Chicot filled two small glasses.

"Taste that, mother. It's first-rate stuff."

To make the pleasure last longer, Mother Magloire took her glass of brandy in cautious sips. When it was empty, she tilted it up so as to drain it to the last drop.

"Yes," she declared. "That's the stuff."

She had hardly spoken the words, when Chicot poured her out a second glass. She would have stopped him, but was too late. The second glass was sipped with the same deliberation and enjoyment as the first. He begged her to drink yet a third, and again she protested, but he would have his way.

"This stuff is like milk, I assure you. I can take ten or twelve glasses without its going to my head. It is as mild as sugar. Nothing in the stomach, nothing in the head; you would say it evaporated on the tongue. It is the best thing in the world for your health!"

She yielded to her inclination and took another glass, but only drank half of it.

Then Chicot exclaimed in a burst of generosity:

"Look here, as you like this, I'll give you a little keg of it, just to show that we are still friends."

Mother Magloire did not refuse his offer. When she left the inn, she was slightly intoxicated.

On the following day Chicot drove into Mother Magloire's farmyard and extracted from the bottom of his trap a small iron-hooped barrel. He insisted on her tasting the contents, to prove that it was the same as he

had given her at the inn. When they had each had three glasses, he got up to go.

"You know," he assured her, "as soon as this keg is empty, there is plenty more where it came from. Make your mind easy about that. There's no stinginess about me. The sooner it is finished, the better I shall be pleased."

He climbed into his tilbury. Four days later he came back again. Mother Magloire was busy in front of her door, cutting up bread for the soup. Chicot drew near to her, bade her good-day, and put his face close to hers when he spoke, so that he could smell her breath. When his nose recognised a whiff of alcohol, his face brightened up.

"You'll treat me to a glass, won't you," he asked, and they had two or three together.

Soon it began to be rumoured in the country that Mother Magloire had taken to solitary drinking. She was found helpless in her kitchen and in her farmyard, and occasionally she was picked up inert as a corpse on the roads in the neighbourhood, and had to be carried back to her house. Chicot never went near her now, and whenever the old woman was mentioned, replied, with a sad countenance:

"Isn't it a pity, at her age, to take up with that habit? When you grow old, you see, there is nothing to be done. Sooner or later she will come to a bad end."

His prophecy was fulfilled. Just before Christmas, the following winter, she got drunk and collapsed on the snow-covered ground, and there she died. Maître Chicot entered into possession of her farm.

"That old baggage," he would declare, "had ten good years of life left in her, if only she hadn't taken to drink."

XIX. A SON OF NORMANDY

SETTING out from Rouen in a light carriage, we took the Jumièges road, passing first through flat country which our horse covered at a brisk trot. He slowed down to a walk, as we breasted the ascent of Canteleu.

The view from the Canteleu hill is one of the most magnificent panoramas in the world. Behind us lay Rouen, that town of churches whose Gothic belfries are as elaborately wrought as carved ivories. In front lay Saint-Sever, the factory suburb, where a thousand chimneys pour forth their smoke into the firmament in challenge to the thousand sacred clock-towers of the ancient city. On this side is the cathedral spire, the tallest monument ever erected by man; opposite, and almost surpassing it in its fantastic height, is its rival, the steam-pump of the *Foudre,* which rears its head three feet higher than the most gigantic of the pyramids of Egypt.

Beneath us the rippling Seine, dotted with islets, unrolled itself like a ribbon. On the right bank rose white cliffs, covered by a forest; on the left a vast expanse of field and pasture reached out to another forest in the far far distance. Here and there, a great ship lay at anchor alongside the bank of the wide river. Three immense steamers were moving downstream, in single file, towards Havre, and a string of sailing craft,

consisting of a three-master, two schooners and a brig, was being towed upstream towards Rouen by a tug which belched forth a cloud of black smoke.

My fellow-traveller, who was a native of that part of the country, hardly so much as looked at the marvellous landscape. He kept on smiling to himself as though enjoying some secret source of amusement. Suddenly he broke out:

"Ah, I'm going to show you something funny. Père Mathieu's Chapel. It's a tit-bit, my dear fellow."

I looked at him in astonishment. He resumed:

"I propose to introduce you to a bit of Norman raciness that you won't lose the flavour of for a long time. Père Mathieu is the finest Norman in all Normandy, and his chapel is one of the wonders of the world, neither more nor less. However, I must first let you have a few words of explanation.

Père Mathieu has a nickname. He is called Father-Have-a-drink. He is a time-expired sergeant-major, who has come back to his native place. As an old soldier and a Norman he blends the good-natured bluff of the one and the sly roguery of the other in such admirable proportions that the combination is perfection. On his return home, thanks to friends in authority and his own inimitable adroitness, he became the guardian of a miraculous chapel, which is under the protection of the Virgin and is chiefly resorted to by young unmarried women, who are about to become mothers. He has christened his wonderful statue "Our Lady of Ease", and he treats it with a bantering familiarity, which by no means excludes sincere respect. He has composed and printed a special prayer to his "Good Virgin". This prayer is a masterpiece of unconscious irony and Norman wit. It is a blending of raillery and reverence; fear of things holy, with a superstitious dread of the influence of a vague something-or-other. His faith in

his patroness is not very profound; still, to a certain extent he believes in her and humours her, so as to be on the safe side. I quote here the exordium of Père Mathieu's remarkable invocation:

'Our good Lady and Holy Virgin Mary, natural Patroness of unmarried mothers in this land and throughout all the world, protect your servant who has erred in a moment of forgetfulness——.'

This supplication ends with the following words:

'Be specially mindful of me in the presence of your Holy Consort, and intercede for me with God the Father, so that he may grant me a good husband, just like yours.'

The prayer is banned by the neighbouring clergy, but is sold by him *sub rosâ*, and is reckoned helpful to those who repeat it with unction. To be brief, he speaks of his Good Virgin very much as the valet of a generally dreaded prince speaks of his master, who has confided to him all his small intimate secrets. He knows a hundred amusing tales about him and after he has had a glass or two is willing to pass them on, confidentially, among friends. However, you shall see for yourself.

Deeming the income provided by his patroness inadequate, he has, as a side line, added a small traffic in saints. He has images of all of them, or nearly all, and there being no room for them in the chapel, he has stored them in the wood-shed, whence he extracts them whenever a demand for them is made by one of the faithful. These wooden statuettes are his own handiwork and are inconceivably comical. One year when his house was being done up he took the opportunity of giving the entire collection a plenteous coat of green paint. Saints, as you know, are able to cure maladies, but each saint has his own specialty. You mustn't make mistakes and get them mixed up. They are as jealous of each other as so many barnstormers.

So that there may be no confusion about it, the good old women come and consult Mathieu.

'Which of the Saints is the best for bad ears?'

'Well, Saint Osymus is good. Saint Pamphilius isn't so bad either.'

However, that isn't all. Mathieu has plenty of spare time, so he drinks. And he drinks like an artist, like a true believer, and with such discretion that he is drunk every night, regularly. He is, however, always conscious of his condition. He is so well aware of it that he makes a daily note of the exact stage his intoxication has reached. That is his principal occupation; the chapel only takes second place. He has moreover invented—listen to this and bear it in mind—he has invented an intoxicometer. There is no actual instrument, but Mathieu takes his observations as accurately as any mathematician. You hear him saying: 'From Monday onwards, forty-five centimetres and over,' or, again: 'I was between fifty-two and fifty-eight,' or 'I was a good sixty-six or seventy,' or 'Preserve me, I thought I was fifty and now I see I must have been seventy-five.'

He is never far out. He declares he has never reached a hundred per cent., but one can't absolutely trust this, for he admits that his records are not exact after he passes ninety. And when Mathieu realizes that he has gone above ninety, you can depend upon it that he is properly drunk. On these occasions his wife Mélie, who is a remarkable person too, flies into a furious rage. She waits on the threshold for him and shouts at him:

'There you are again, you dirty pig, you drunken sot!'

Mathieu then stops laughing, plants himself in front of her, and says severely:

'Be quiet, Mélie. This is no time for talking. Wait till to-morrow."

If she doesn't leave off scolding him, he comes up to her and says angrily:

'Stop that howling. I'm in my nineties. I've lost count. I'll give you a drubbing if you don't look out.'

Whereupon Mélie beats a retreat. And if she wants to return to the subject next day, he laughs in her face and says:

'Come, come. Enough said. That's over and done with. There's no harm in it as long as I don't reach the hundred. Of course if I pass the hundred I swear you may make it as hot as you please for me.'"

My friend and I had reached the top of the Canteleu hill, where the road plunges into the magnificent forest of Roumare. Autumn, wonderful as always, shed its purple and gold upon such foliage as remained upon the trees. It was as though drops of molten sun had rained down from the heavens to illumine the darkness of the woods.

We passed through Duclair, but instead of keeping to the Jumièges road, my friend turned off to the left and took a cross track which led into the brushwood. Presently we reached the summit of a lofty hill, from which again we saw beneath us the River Seine winding its sinuous course along its magnificent valley.

To the right of us stood a tiny, slate-roofed building with a steeple no bigger than a parasol. It was built against a pretty, green-shuttered house embowered in honeysuckle and roses.

A great voice shouted:

"Here are some friends," and Mathieu appeared on the threshold. He was a man of sixty, spare of figure, with a goatee and a long white moustache. My friend shook hands with him and introduced me, and we were invited to enter a clean and airy kitchen, which served as living-room.

"I have none of your slap-up suites of rooms," he

said. "I've a fancy for not being too far away from my grub. There's worse company than a stew-pot, you know."

Then turning to my friend, he asked:

"Why have you come on a Thursday? You know quite well that Thursday is my Patroness's consulting day. I can't leave the place this afternoon."

He ran to the door. "Mélie," he roared in a fearful bellow, strong enough to reach the ears of the sailors on the ships that were passing up and down the river, away below there in the bottom of the valley. Mélie did not vouchsafe any reply and Mathieu winked at us roguishly.

"She's not pleased with me. You see, yesterday I was up in the nineties."

"In the nineties, Mathieu?" my friend laughed. "How did that come about?"

"I'll tell you," said Mathieu. "Last year I couldn't get more than thirty bushels of *pommes d'abricots.* That's all there was. But if you want real cider, that's the only sort. So I made cider of them and yesterday I broached the cask. It is nectar, genuine nectar. You'll have something to say about it. Polyte was here and we thought we would have a drink of it; and then we had another, and still we hadn't had enough. You could keep on drinking it all night long. We drank such a lot of it, one drink leading to another, that I began to feel a sort of a chill on my stomach.

"'Suppose,' said I, to Polyte, 'suppose we had a glass of brandy to warm us up.'

"'All right,' says Polyte. But that brandy set us on fire all over and we had to go back to the cider again to cool down. So there you are. From cold to hot and then from hot back to cold. I saw I was in my nineties and Polyte was close on his hundred per cent."

The door opened and Mélie appeared. She broke

out immediately, without even wishing us good morning:

"Liar! you were both of you well up to the hundred."

Mathieu took offence at this:

"No, no, Mélie. You mustn't say so. I've never been as far on as that."

They served us an exquisite luncheon, which we took in the open air, in the shade of two lime-trees which stood by the side of the little chapel of "Our Lady of Ease." We sat facing the sublime landscape, while Mathieu, whose mockery was mingled with curious streaks of superstition, narrated incredible tales of miracles.

We had indulged freely in the exquisite cider, piquant and yet sweet, cooling and yet heady, which we preferred to any other beverage, and seated astride of our chairs, we were smoking our pipes, when two decent-looking women made their appearance. They were old, withered, and bent with labour. After greeting us civilly they asked for Saint Blanc. Mathieu, with a wink in our direction, said:

"All right. I'll fetch him out for you."

He disappeared into his wood-shed, where he remained for a good five minutes. When he reappeared he threw up his arms with an air of consternation.

"I don't know where he is. I can't put my hand on him. All the same, I'm sure I had him."

Making a megaphone of his hands he bellowed: "Mélie-e-e."

Mélie shouted back from the end of the yard:

"What's the matter?"

"Where is Saint Blanc? I can't find him in the wood-shed."

"Isn't that the one you took last week to stop the hole in the rabbit run?" bawled Mélie.

"My God!" exclaimed Mathieu. "That's quite pos-

sible. You come along with me," he said to the two old women.

They went with him, and we followed, our sides aching with suppressed laughter. To cut it short, Saint Blanc had been planted into the ground like an ordinary stake. Begrimed with mud and filth, he was acting as corner-post to the rabbit-run. On catching sight of the effigy, the two honest women fell on their knees, crossed themselves, and began to mutter prayers.

" Wait a moment," cried Mathieu in sudden concern. " You're kneeling in the dirt. I'll fetch you an armful of straw."

Having procured the straw, he laid it down for them to kneel upon. Then, realising that his saint looked dirty, and doubtless fearing that this would reflect discredit on his traffic, he added :

" I must give him a bit of a clean-up."

Taking a pail of water and a brush, he set to, and washed the worthy saint vigorously. Meanwhile, the two old women continued their orisons. When he had finished scrubbing the saint, he exclaimed :

" Now he's all right."

Then he took us away for another draught of cider. As he lifted his own glass to his mouth, he stopped and said with a slight touch of confusion :

" It's all right, you know. When I used Saint Blanc for the rabbit run, I never guessed he would make any more money. He hasn't been wanted these two years. But saints, you know, saints never go out of date."

Finishing his glass, he resumed :

" Come, have another. Amongst friends one oughtn't to stop short of fifty centimetres, and I reckon we are only at thirty-eight."

XX. THE FARMER

"Won't you come with me to my farm at Marinville for the early shooting? You would be doing me a real favour by relieving my solitude. The shooting is so difficult to get at and the accommodation is so primitive that I can't invite anyone except my oldest friends."

I accepted the invitation which Baron René du Treilles gave me in these terms, and we set off on the following Saturday by the Normandy line. We left the train at Alvemare, and found a rustic waggonette in attendance. In the shafts stood a nervous horse, with a tall white-haired peasant standing at its head.

"That's our turn-out," said René.

The old peasant stretched out his hand to his master, and du Treilles shook it heartily.

"Well, how goes it, Maître Lebrument?" he asked.

"Much as usual, sir."

We got into the trap, which was rather like a hen-coop slung between two enormous wheels, and quite destitute of springs. After a violent start, the young horse set off at a gallop, and we were tossed up into the air like missiles. Every time I was jolted back on to the seat, it was agony. Lebrument spoke soothingly to the horse.

"There, there, easy, boy, easy, Moutard, easy now!"

But Moutard paid no attention to him and frisked like a kid. Our two dogs were stowed behind us in the empty part of the hen-coop. They were sitting up and sniffing the country air, in which they could discern the scent of game.

René's eyes had a touch of sadness, as he looked out over the far-stretching Norman landscape. It is an undulating country, and its spirit is one of melancholy. It resembles a tranquil English park, a park of limitless dimensions. Surrounded by rows of trees, two or three deep, and nestling amongst apple-trees, which conceal the buildings from view, the farms of Normandy fall, as far as the sight can reach, into those natural vistas of coppice, clump and wood, which serve as models to landscape gardeners, when they are laying out princely demesnes.

"I love this country," René suddenly ejaculated. "I have my roots here."

Of pure Norman blood, tall, stalwart, and inclining to stoutness, René du Treilles was a true scion of those early adventurers, who set forth to found kingdoms on the shores of every ocean. He was about fifty, ten years younger, perhaps, than the farmer who was driving us, who looked a typical peasant, with a gaunt, lean framework of skin and bone; one of those men who live to be a hundred.

We drove for two hours across that green, monotonous plain, by rough and stony roads. At last our old rattle-trap entered a courtyard planted with apple-trees, and drew up in front of a building in bad repair. An old servant was waiting to receive us. Beside her stood a boy, who went to the horse's head.

We entered the farm-house. The large and lofty kitchen was blackened with smoke. Bright reflections of firelight danced on crockery and copper pans. There was a cat asleep on a chair, and a dog asleep under the table. The kitchen was permeated by a smell of milk, of apples, of smoke; the indescribable odour of an ancient farm-house; an odour compounded of earth, walls, furniture; of soup ladled out long ago, of washing, of past generations; a mingled smell of men and beasts,

of things inanimate and things living; the smell of time, the smell of centuries that are no more.

I went outside to look at the courtyard. It was of great size, and was planted with old apple-trees, dwarfed and contorted, and laden with fruit. Apples lay on the grass beneath the trees. Here the characteristic Norman aroma of apples was as strong as that of the orange-trees of the Midi. The courtyard was surrounded by four rows of beech-trees. At this twilight hour they seemed lofty enough to reach the clouds. The evening breeze swayed their tops, and evoked from them a perpetual and melancholy murmur.

When I went in again my friend was warming his feet at the fire and listening to his tenant's gossip of rustic affairs; marriages, births, deaths, the fall in the price of corn, and the latest news about the live-stock. La Veularde (a cow bought at Veules) had had her calf half-way through June. Last year's cider had not been a great success. The *pommes d'abricots* were vanishing from the countryside.

Presently we had dinner. It was a good, countrified meal, simple but plentiful, leisurely and tranquil. Throughout the meal I observed the special tone of friendly familiarity which had at first sight struck me as existing between Baron du Treilles and his tenant.

Outside, the beech-trees continued to wail mournfully under the onset of the evening breeze, and our two dogs, which had been shut up in a stable, whined and howled dismally. The fire on the great hearth went out. The maid had gone to bed, and Maître Lebrument in his turn begged leave to retire.

"If you will excuse me, sir, I'll be off to bed. I haven't the habit of late hours."

Baron du Treilles shook hands with him and bade him good-night in such cordial tones, that as soon as the man had left the room, I remarked:

"Your tenant seems very devoted to you."

"There's more in it than that. We're linked to each other by a certain mournful experience. It's an old story now, simple and very touching. I may as well tell you about it.

. . . . . .

My father was, as you know, a colonel of cavalry. He had this old fellow, then a youngster, the son of one of his tenants, as orderly. When my father retired from the army, he took the man with him as his domestic servant. He was then about forty. I was thirty. We were living in our Château Valrenne, near Caudebec-en-Caux. At that time, my mother's maid was one of the prettiest girls you could see anywhere. She was fair-haired, bright, lively, slender, a true soubrette of the old type that you no longer see. Nowadays girls of that stamp go on the loose straight away. The railway leads to Paris, and the sprightly young women, who in a former generation would have remained in domestic service, as soon as they come into bloom, yield to the attraction and lure of Paris. Like sergeants in search of recruits, every passer-by has a try at enlisting these girls in the ranks of vice. The result is that our domestic servants are simply the refuse of the female sex; we get the heavy, unattractive, common, misshapen ones, who are too ill-favoured for a career of pleasure.

The girl I am speaking about was charming. I would sometimes kiss her in a dark corner. Nothing more than that, oh, nothing more, upon my honour. She was a good girl too, and for my part I respected my mother's house, which is more than these modern young scapegraces do.

It so happened, however, that my father's valet, the old farmer whom you have just seen, fell madly in love with this girl. The intensity of his love was incredible.

From the very first he was blind to everything else. He had not a thought except for her.

"Come now, Jean," my father was continually saying to him, "what's the matter with you? Are you ill?"

And Jean would reply:

"No, no, sir, not at all. I'm quite all right."

But for all that he grew thinner and thinner, and when he waited at table, he would break the wine-glasses and drop the plates. It was thought that there was something wrong with his nerves, and the doctor was sent for. The doctor thought he saw symptoms of an affection of the spinal marrow. At this, my father, who was full of solicitude for his servant, decided to send him to a hospital. On hearing the proposal, the poor fellow confessed all. One morning, when my father was shaving, Jean addressed him bashfully.

"Sir . . ."

"Yes, Jean."

"What I want, sir, isn't drugs . . ."

"Ah! What is it then?"

"What I want is to be married."

My father was taken aback.

"What's that you say?"

"To be married, sir."

"Married? Then you—you—are in love—you idiot?"

My father gave way to such an outrageous burst of laughter that my mother called through the wall:

"What is the matter with you, Gontran?"

"Come here, Catherine," he replied.

When she entered the room, he told her, with tears of laughter in his eyes, that his imbecile of a valet was dying of love.

My mother was far from laughing.

"Who is it that you are so much in love with, Jean?" she asked sympathetically.

He spoke out without hesitation:

"It is Louise, Madame."

My mother replied gravely:

"We must do our best to arrange things."

My mother sent for Louise and questioned her. She replied that she was quite aware of Jean's affection for her. Jean had already declared himself several times. But she did not want to marry him. Nor would she give any reason.

During the ensuing two months, my father and mother continued to press Louise to marry Jean. Having declared vehemently that she loved no other man, she was not in a position to give any serious reason for her refusal to accept her suitor. My father ultimately overcame her resistance with a handsome sum of money, and she and Jean were established as tenants of the farm we are now staying in. They left the Château and I never saw Louise again. Three years after her marriage she died, as I learnt, of a malady of the lungs. After that, my parents died. Two years more elapsed before I met Jean again. One autumn, towards the end of October, it occurred to me that I might come and shoot over this property, which had been carefully preserved, and was, as my tenant assured me, full of game. On my arrival here, one rainy evening, I was shocked to see that Jean's hair had turned completely white, although he was not more than forty-five or forty-six years old. I had him to dine with me at the same table at which we are now sitting. Outside, the rain was descending in torrents; it battered on the roof, walls and window-panes; the courtyard was flooded, and my dog was howling in the stable, just as our dogs are doing to-night. After the maid had left us and gone to bed, Jean, without any preliminaries, began:

"Sir."

"What is it, Jean?"

"I have something to tell you."

"Go on."

"It's—it's not easy."

"Never mind. Tell me."

"You won't have forgotten my wife, Louise?"

"I certainly haven't forgotten her."

"Well, Louise made me promise to tell you something."

"What was it?"

"It was—it was what you might call a confession."

"Indeed?"

"It was—it was—I had much rather not tell you—but I must—I must—well, it wasn't of her lungs that she died. It was—it was—of grief. I'll tell you the whole thing and get it over. As soon as she came here she began to waste away. She changed so that you wouldn't have known her. In six months. You wouldn't have known her. It was the same with her as it was with me before I married. Only it was just the other way. I called in the doctor. He said her liver was out of order—an—an—apatic. I bought medicines for her; medicines and medicines, more than three hundred francs worth. But she wouldn't take them. She simply couldn't. She said to me, 'My poor Jean, it isn't worth while. It's nothing.' Of course I could see easily enough that there was some trouble at the bottom of it. Then one day I found her crying, and I didn't know what to do. I bought bonnets and dresses and hair-pomade for her, and earrings. But it was all no good. I saw that she was going to die. Then one night at the end of November, when the snow was falling, and she had kept her bed all day, she asked me to go and fetch the priest. So I went, and as soon as he came, Louise said to me:

'Jean, I am going to make my confession. I owe it to you. Listen, Jean. I have always been true to you, always, both before marriage and after. Here is the

priest. He knows my soul. He will tell you the same thing. Well, Jean, listen. If I die, it is because I never got over my grief at leaving the château—because—my friendship for the Baron's son, René, was too strong. My friendship, you understand, nothing but friendship. That is what is killing me. When I couldn't see him any more, I felt that I would die. I could have lived if I had seen him, just seen him, nothing more. I want you to tell him, some day, later, when I'm gone. You must tell him. Swear it, Jean. Swear it before the priest. It will be a comfort to me to know that some day he will know that I died of that. Now, swear.' So I gave her my promise. And on the faith of a true man, I have kept my word."

He stopped, and his eyes looked into mine.

. . . . . .

By heaven! you cannot conceive my emotion when I heard this poor devil, whose wife's death I had unwittingly caused, tell me the whole story just like that, on that rainy night, in this very kitchen.

I could hardly speak.

"My poor Jean, my poor Jean," I said.

"That's the whole truth, sir," he murmured. "We couldn't do anything, either of us. It's all over."

I seized his hands across the table, and I burst into tears.

"Will you come with me to her tomb?" he asked.

I could not utter a word , but I nodded my assent.

He got up and lighted a lantern and we set out through the rain. I remember how the rays of the lantern glittered on the raindrops as they came slanting down like arrows. He opened a door and I caught sight of some crosses of black wood.

"There it is," he said suddenly, pointing to a marble slab. He held the lantern so that I could read the inscription.

TO LOUISE-HORTENSE MARINET

Wife of Jean-François Lebrument,
farmer.

SHE WAS A FAITHFUL WIFE. MAY GOD HAVE HER SOUL IN HIS KEEPING.

Jean and I were on our knees in the mud, with the lantern between us. I watched the rain beating upon the marble tombstone, rebounding in spray, and flowing over the edges of the chill, impervious stone. I thought of the heart of her who lay beneath. Poor heart! alas! poor heart!

Since then I have come back here every year. And I know not why it is, but when I am face to face with Jean, my mind is troubled with a sense of guilt, a feeling that I am begging his forgiveness, and receiving it.

XXI. THE MOURNING BRIDE

THE Château de Banneville had assembled its guests. The shooting season had begun, but it was a wet and dreary autumn. The red leaves, that should have crackled crisply under foot, lay dank and mouldering in every cart-rut. Almost completely stripped of its foliage, the forest steamed with moisture like a bath-room. As soon as you set foot beneath the tall, rain-beaten trees, you were enveloped in a clammy atmosphere, reeking of stagnant water, drenched grass, and sodden earth. Every evening the shooting party returned home worn out mentally and physically, the men depressed by the unceasing deluge, the women drenched to the skin in their close-fitting tailor-mades, and the wretched dogs with drooping tails and coats plastered to their ribs.

After dinner, in the big drawing-room, the guests sat down to a languid game of lotto, while squalls of wind set the shutters rattling and the ancient weathercocks spinning round and round like tops. Like people in books, they tried their hand at telling stories, but no one could think of anything amusing. The men served up old shooting anecdotes or tales of wholesale massacres of rabbits, while the ladies racked their heads in a vain attempt to emulate Scheherazade. They were giving it up in despair, when one of the girls, who was

idly fondling the hand of her aunt, an old maiden lady, noticed a little ring, woven of fair hair. She had often seen it before, but hitherto it had never aroused her curiosity. Slowly twisting it round her aunt's finger, she said:

"Do tell me about this ring, Auntie. The hair is like a child's."

The old lady flushed and then turned pale.

"It is such a sad, sad story," she quavered. "I can never bear to talk about it. It is bound up with the supreme sorrow of my life. I was very young at the time, but the memory is still so painful, that I can never think of it without tears."

The whole party implored her to tell the story. She began by refusing, but eventually yielded to their entreaties.

"You have often heard me speak of the Santèzes. The family is now extinct. I knew the last three male descendants. All of them perished in the self-same way. This lock of hair belonged to the youngest. He was only thirteen, when he killed himself for love of me. Strange, is it not?

Oh, they were an extraordinary race, those Santèzes —madmen, if you will, but enchanting madmen, driven distraught by love. Like father, like son. All of them were possessed by violent passions, by irresistible impulses, that inspired them with fanatical devotion and drove them to commit, not only the wildest follies, but even crimes. The passion of love was inborn in them, as religious devotion is inherent in certain souls. A man capable of becoming a Trappist monk is differently constituted from a squire of dames. To love like a Santèze was a saying in the family, and the truth of it was apparent at one glance. All the Santèze men had wavy hair, growing low on the forehead, curly beards, and enormous eyes with a look in them, which was pene-

trating and inexplicably disturbing. At the age of sixty-five, after a career thronged with romantic episodes, duels and elopements, the grandfather of this boy, of whom this ring is the only memento, fell desperately in love with the daughter of a farmer on his estate. I knew them both. She was pale and fair and slow of speech, with a soft voice, an air of distinction, and an expression so exquisitely gentle that she reminded one of a Madonna.

This aristocratic old gentleman installed her in his house and was soon so infatuated that he could hardly bear her out of his sight. Love was such a fetish in this family, that his daughter and daughter-in-law, who lived with him, considered the whole affair perfectly natural. When it was a question of passion, nothing surprised them. If they heard a story of thwarted affection, parted lovers, or vengeance for some betrayal, they would exclaim in the same compassionate tones:

'Oh how terribly he (or she) must have suffered to do such a thing!'

That was all. They yearned over these romantic tragedies, which never shocked them even when they amounted to crimes.

One autumn, a young man, Monsieur de Gradelle by name, who had been staying at the château for the shooting, eloped with the old gentleman's mistress.

Monsieur de Santèze betrayed no emotion. But one morning, his body was found hanging in the kennels, with the dogs all around it. His son made away with himself in the same way, while staying at a hotel in Paris, after he had been betrayed by a singer at the Opera.

He left a boy of twelve and a widow, who was my mother's sister. She and her son came to live with us at Bertillon, my father's estate. I was then seventeen.

You would hardly believe what a precocious and singular little fellow he was. It seemed as if all the tender emotions, all the stormy passion of his race had been handed down to this last of the Santèzes. His head was always in the clouds and he would wander by the hour, all by himself, up and down the broad avenue of elms leading from the château to the wood. From my window I used to watch this sentimental youngster pacing solemnly along, with downward brow, his hands behind his back. Now and then he would halt and raise his eyes, as if he could perceive and understand and feel things far beyond his years.

Often after dinner, on moonlight nights, he said to me:

'Come out and dream with me, cousin.'

And we would wander off into the park.

Suddenly he would stop to gaze at the silver, fleecy mist that hovered above the moonlit glades.

'Look, look,' he would exclaim, pressing my hand. 'But no, you don't understand. I can feel that you don't. If you did, how happy we should be. But you have to be in love to understand.'

I laughed and kissed the child, who was dying of love for me.

Sometimes of an evening he would perch himself on my mother's knee, and say:

'Auntie, tell us a love-story.'

And just for the fun of it, my mother would relate to him all the family legends, all the romantic episodes which were attributed to his forefathers, for there were hundreds of these stories, some true, some false. This reputation of the Santèzes was their undoing. It turned their heads and they prided themselves on not falling short of the traditions of their house.

The boy listened enraptured to these tales of love or horror.

'Just like me!' he would exclaim, clapping his hands. 'I, too, I, too, can love better than all the others.'

He paid court to me, so shyly, yet so tenderly that we could not help smiling at his quaintness. Every morning he gathered flowers for me, and every evening, before going to bed, he would kiss my hand, and murmur:

'I love you.'

I did wrong, terribly wrong. I still weep for it. My whole life has been one long penance. I have remained an old maid—or rather, the mourning bride, the widow—of this boy. At first I was amused by his childish passion and I did my best to encourage it. I flirted with him as archly, as caressingly, as beguilingly, as if he had been a man. I turned the child's head completely. To me it was only a game, while his mother and mine looked upon it as a delicious joke. Remember, he was only twelve. Who could have taken it seriously, the adoration of such a mite? I kissed him to his heart's content. I even wrote him little *billets doux*, which were read by both his mother and mine. He replied with letters, passionate letters, which I have kept. Deeming himself a man, he imagined that our love affair was a secret between himself and me. Alas! we had forgotten that he was a Santèze.

This went on for nearly a year. One evening in the park, he threw himself at my feet and kissed the hem of my gown in a passion of adoration.

'I love you, I love you,' he murmured, 'I am dying of love for you. If you ever betray me, if you ever abandon me for another, I shall do as my father did.' In a hollow voice, that made me shudder, he added:

'You know what that was.'

As I stood there speechless, he rose to his feet. I was taller than he, and he had to raise himself on tiptoe to reach my ear.

'Geneviève,' he whispered, in tones so gentle, so

winning, so tender, that I quivered from head to foot.

'Let us go in,' I faltered. He followed me in silence, but as we were climbing the steps of the perron, he stopped me.

'Remember,' he murmured, 'if you ever forsake me, I will kill myself.'

At last I realised that I had gone too far, and I began to keep him at a distance. One day when he reproached me for my coldness, I said to him:

'You are too old now for such nonsense, and you are too young for a serious love affair. I'll wait.'

And I thought that I was quit of him.

In the autumn he was sent to a boarding school. When he returned home the following summer, I was engaged to be married. He guessed it at once, and for a week he went about with such a brooding look that I felt very uneasy.

On the eighth day after his return, as I was dressing, I caught sight of a little note which had been pushed under the door. I picked it up, tore it open, and read as follows:

'You have forsaken me, and you know what I said. My death lies at your door. I do not want anyone but you to find me, so go into the park, just where, last year, I told you that I loved you, and look up into the air.'

Almost out of my mind, I threw on some clothes, and I ran, ran till I nearly dropped, to the place he meant. It had been raining all night. His little school cap was lying on the ground in the mud. I raised my eyes, and I saw something swaying backwards and forwards among the leaves, in the high wind that was blowing. I remember nothing more. I must have cried out. Then, it may be, I fell to the ground in a faint. Afterwards, I must have fled to the château. When

I came to myself I was in bed, and my mother was watching me.

I thought I had dreamed it all in a fit of frightful delirium.

'Gontran?' I faltered. 'Gontran?'

No one answered. It was only too true.

I lacked the courage to see him again, but I asked for a long lock of his fair hair. Here it is."

The old lady flung out her trembling hand in a gesture of despair. Then she took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes.

"I broke off my engagement," she continued, "without giving any reason. And ever since I have remained his widow . . . the widow of a child of thirteen."

Her head drooped on her bosom, and tears of wistful sorrow rolled down her cheeks.

On his way up to bed, a corpulent sportsman, whose feelings had been harrowed by her tale, murmured to a friend:

"What an affliction to be as sentimental as all that!"

XXII. CLOCHETTE

How strange are the old, haunting recollections that cleave to one so tenaciously through life.

The memory that I have in mind is old, so old, that I cannot understand how it has remained so vivid, nor why I can recall it so clearly. In later life, I saw so many incidents of a malign, disturbing or terrifying nature that I am amazed when I realise that not a day, not a single day, passes without the face of Mother Clochette rising before my sight, just as I knew it of old, ever so long ago, when I was a child of ten or twelve.

Clochette was an old sewing-woman who used to come to my parent's house every Tuesday to mend the linen. My father and mother lived in one of those country houses, which are described as châteaux, although they are simply old, steep-roofed dwellings with four or five dependent farms grouped round them. The village was a few hundred yards away from us. It was of a good size, almost a country town, and nestled closely round the church, which was a building of red brick, darkened with age.

Every Tuesday, then, Clochette arrived between half-past six and seven o'clock in the morning and at once went up to the linen-room and set to work. She was a tall lean woman, and had a beard, an extraordinary beard, which cropped up all over her face. It was amazing, incredible, growing in queer, curly tufts, which were planted grotesquely here and there on her broad

countenance, making her look like a petticoated gendarme. There were tufts on the nose, under the nose, around the nose, on the chin, on the cheeks; and her eyebrows were of such extravagant thickness and length, so grey, luxuriant and bristling, that they were like a pair of moustaches, accidently stuck on in the wrong place.

She was lame, but she was no ordinary cripple. She limped with the movement of a ship at anchor in a rough sea. When she put the weight of her great, bony, lopsided frame on to her good leg, she seemed to be on the point of making an upward spring in order to surmount a monstrous wave. The next moment she would lurch downwards, as into a bottomless gulf. She swayed and rocked so prodigiously that she made you think of a storm at sea; and her head, on which she wore an enormous white bonnet, with streamers hanging down her back, rose and fell against the horizon, from north to south, from south to north, at every movement she made.

I adored Mother Clochette. The moment I got out of bed, I would run up to the linen-room where I would find her at her sewing. She had a foot-warmer, but as soon as I arrived, she made me take it and sit on it, so that I should not catch cold in that great, bare room just under the roof.

"That will draw the blood away from your chest," she said.

All the time she was darning the linen with her long, crooked, yet active, fingers, she told me stories. Her sight had grown feeble with old age, and she wore spectacles with magnifying lenses, behind which her eyes loomed enormous, strangely deep, and reduplicated. As far as I can judge by my recollection of the tales, which stirred my childish heart, she had a magnanimous soul, although she was condemned to poverty. She

was of a plain and simple understanding, and the incidents she related to me were concerned with the life of our country-town.

Thus she would tell me of a cow, which had escaped from its byre, and when found again, was standing in front of Prosper Malet's windmill, watching the sails go round; or of a hen's egg found in the church spire, while no one ever discovered which fowl had laid it; or of Jean-Jean Pilas' dog, which went thirty miles to fetch back his master's trousers, stolen by a vagrant, as they were being dried in front of the door after a shower of rain. These homely events were narrated by her in such a way that in my mind they assumed the proportions of unforgettable dramas or of great and mysterious poems. In the evening, my mother used to tell me the ingenious stories invented by the poets, but they were far from possessing the savour, dignity and strength of the old peasant-woman's narrative.

On one of Clochette's Tuesdays, I had passed the whole morning listening to her, and later in the day, after returning from a nutting expedition with one of the servants to Hallets' Wood behind the farm of Noirpré, I thought I would join her in the attic-room again. It is all as clear to me as if it had happened yesterday. When I opened the door I saw the old woman lying on the floor, beside her chair.

She had fallen face downwards, with her arms straight out; in one hand she held a needle, and in the other, a shirt of mine. One of her legs, doubtless the longer one, in a blue stocking, was stretched out under the chair. Her spectacles had dropped off and lay close to the wall, where I could see their lenses glistening.

I fled away shrieking, and the household came running up. A few minutes later I was told that Clochette was dead.

I cannot express the profound, poignant and terrible emotion that wrung my childish heart. I crept down to the drawing-room and hid myself in an immense, old armchair which stood in a dark corner of the room, and knelt there, crying. Here I must have remained a long time, for night came upon me and I had not stirred. Suddenly someone entered with a lamp, but I stayed there undiscovered, and overheard my father and mother conversing with the doctor, whose voice I recognised. He had been sent for at once, and he explained the causes of the accident, which, however, I did not understand. Then he sat down and had a liqueur and a biscuit. He went on talking, and everything he said that evening will remain engraved on my heart until I die. I believe I can repeat his story almost word for word.

"Ah," he said, "poor soul. She was my first patient here. She broke her leg on the very day of my arrival. I hadn't time even to wash my hands after getting out of the diligence, they came for me in such a terrible hurry. It was a serious, a very serious case. She was then seventeen years old and a very beautiful girl. Very beautiful, indeed. You would hardly believe it. I have told her story to nobody. Except myself, and a man who has left this neighbourhood, no one has ever known it, but now that she is dead I need no longer be so discreet.

About that time a new assistant schoolmaster had just taken up his appointment in the town. He was good-looking and had a smart, soldierly figure, and all the girls ran after him. He affected, however, to despise them, but the fact was that he stood in mortal dread of his headmaster, old Grabu, who did not always get out of bed on the right side. Old Grabu used to employ the fair Hortense as sewing-maid. Hortense was the girl, who was afterwards nicknamed Clochette because

she limped; the same who has just died in your house. The assistant master picked her out from the others, and she was doubtless flattered at being chosen by a man, who had successfully resisted all other attacks. The fact remains that she fell in love with him, and he obtained a first assignation with her in the hay-loft of the school, one night, after she had finished her sewing for the day. She pretended that she was off home, but instead of going downstairs and leaving Grabu's house, she slipped up to the loft, hid herself in the hay, and awaited her lover, who presently joined her. He began making pretty speeches to her, when the granary door opened and the schoolmaster appeared.

"What are you doing up here, Sigisbert?" he asked.

The young schoolmaster lost his head in his fear of being found out.

"I came up here to rest awhile on the trusses of hay," he babbled idiotically.

The hay-loft was very large and pitch-dark; and Sigisbert pushed the frightened girl to the far end.

"Get back there and hide yourself," he said. "I'll lose my situation. Get back there and hide."

The schoolmaster overheard his whispers.

"So you are not alone then?" he queried.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur Grabu."

"Why no. Didn't I hear you speaking?"

"I give you my word there's nobody here except myself."

"I'll see for myself," was the reply, and the schoolmaster double-locked the door and went downstairs to fetch a candle. The young man, who was a coward of a common enough type, lost his head completely. He must have been mad with rage and terror.

"Hide yourself. Don't let him find you," he exclaimed. "You'll ruin my career. I shall starve

for the rest of my life. For heaven's sake hide yourself."

The key was again heard turning in the lock. Hortense ran to the window facing the street, and flung it open. Then, under her breath, she said firmly:

"You must come and pick me up when he has gone away."

Then she jumped from the window.

To his intense surprise, old Grabu found nobody but Sigisbert and went downstairs again. A quarter of an hour later Sigisbert came to my house and told me what had happened. The girl was still there, lying by the wall of the house. She had fallen from a height of two storeys and was unable to rise to her feet. Sigisbert guided me to the place. It was raining in torrents. I took her to my house. The poor girl's right leg was fractured in three places, and the bones had broken through the flesh. She made no complaint; the only words she uttered were spoken with admirable resignation:

"I have been punished. Properly punished."

I had to send for help, and I summoned the girl's father and mother, to whom I told some fantastic tale about a runaway cart and horse, which had knocked her down and disabled her in front of my door. My fable was believed, and the police tried for a whole month to find the person responsible for the supposed accident. That is Clochette's story. And in my opinion the woman was a heroine. She was of that breed of women, who perform the finest actions in history. She never loved another. She died unmarried. She was a martyr, a great soul, an instance of sublime self-sacrifice. If I had not had a whole-hearted admiration for her I should not have told you her history. During her life, for reasons that you will divine, I have confided it to no one."

The doctor finished his narrative. My mother was weeping. My father said some words, which I did not quite catch. Then they all left the room. I remained kneeling in my armchair. And then, while I was still sobbing bitterly, I heard strange noises from the staircase. There was the tramp of heavy footsteps, and the sound of something bumping against the walls.

It was Clochette's body being taken away.

XXIII.

THE PATERNAL INSTINCT

He was a clerk in the Ministry of Public Instruction. Living at Batignolles, he went every morning to office by omnibus. On his daily journey into the heart of Paris, he always sat opposite the same young woman, with whom he presently fell in love.

She was a small, dark-haired girl, one of those brunettes with eyes as black as ink and a skin with the tones of ivory. Every day, at her customary hour, she set out for the shop where she worked. He would watch for her to appear at the same street corner, hurrying to catch the lumbering vehicle. She ran with grace and suppleness and a pretty little air of haste, and she jumped on to the step, without waiting for the horses to draw up. Panting slightly, she would enter the omnibus, sit down and glance around her.

The first time he saw her, François Tessier was conscious of the intense attraction her face had for him. Now and then a man meets a woman, who inspires him with a longing to clasp her forthwith passionately in his arms, although she is a perfect stranger. This girl responded to his deepest desires, his most secret hopes, to that ideal of love, which every man unconsciously harbours in his heart of hearts. He could not help

looking at her fixedly, until she blushed beneath his scrutiny. Noticing her confusion, he endeavoured to avert his eyes, but in spite of his efforts they kept straying back to her. In the course of a few days, although they had not exchanged a word, the acquaintance began to ripen. If the omnibus happened to be crowded, he gave her his seat and went disconsolately on to the roof. She greeted him now with a little smile, and although her eyes still fell beneath a gaze that she considered too ardent, she was no longer vexed by it. At last they entered into conversation. A sudden intimacy sprang up between the two, an intimacy limited to one half-hour a day, but that half-hour was certainly the most enchanting in his whole existence. The rest of the time she was never out of his thoughts. Throughout his long office hours she flitted incessantly before his eyes. He was haunted, obsessed and permeated by that persistent and hovering image of herself, wherewith the woman we love encompasses us. He felt that to possess himself completely of this little creature would be such delirious bliss as almost to transcend the bounds of earthly reality. She shook hands with him every morning, and all day long, until the evening, he cherished the thrill of that contact, the memory of the faint pressure of her little fingers. It was as if they had left their imprint on his hand. He looked eagerly forward to that short journey in the omnibus, and his Sundays became a desolation. She evidently returned his affection, and one Saturday, in the spring, she agreed to lunch with him at Maisons-Laffitte the following day.

To his surprise he found her waiting for him at the railway station.

"Before we go," she explained, "I have something to say to you. We have another twenty minutes, which is more than enough."

She took his arm.

"You must not misjudge me," she continued, pale and trembling and with downcast eyes. "I am a respectable girl and cannot go with you unless you swear . . . that nothing shall happen . . . that isn't . . . that isn't quite proper . . ."

At this she blushed as red as a poppy and broke off. Disappointed, but at the same time pleased, he could think of no reply. Perhaps in his heart of hearts he rejoiced at her decision, yet the flattering dreams that had haunted him the previous night had kindled his blood. Doubtless he would have loved her less, had he found her of easy virtue. But on the other hand, how delicious, how enchanting it would have been for him! All the selfish considerations a man brings to his love affairs were working upon his mind. As he made no reply, she continued in a voice quivering with emotion, and wtih tears in her eyes:

"Unless you promise to respect me in every way, I shall go home."

He pressed her arm tenderly.

"I promise," he replied. "You shall do just as you like."

She seemed relieved.

"You really mean it? she asked with a smile.

He looked deep into her eyes.

"I swear it."

"Then let us take our tickets."

The compartment was crowded and they could not talk to each other on the journey. At Maisons-Laffitte they alighted and made their way down to the Seine. The mild air shed its enervating influence on mind and body. The sun streamed down on water, trees and lawns, permeating soul and frame with a thousand dancing rays. Hand in hand, they strolled along the river bank, and watched the shoals of tiny fish darting in and out among the eddies. Steeped in bliss, they

wandered on and on, as if rapt heavenward in a bewitching ecstasy.

"You must think me crazy!" she remarked at last.

"Crazy? Why?"

"To have come here all alone with you like this."

"Not at all. It was perfectly natural."

"No, no. It wasn't natural for me. You see, I don't want to go wrong, but it's just like this that it happens. But if you knew how dreary it was, the same thing day after day, month after month, year after year. I live all alone with my mother, and she has had so much trouble that she's not very cheerful. I make the best of it; I try to laugh, in spite of everything, but I don't always succeed. All the same, it was wrong of me to come. But you, at least, won't blame me for it."

In reply he dropped a swift kiss on her ear. But she broke away from him abruptly.

"O, Monsieur François," she protested resentfully, "after what you promised."

They turned back towards Maisons-Laffitte.

They lunched at Le Petit-Havre, a low-pitched building, standing on the river bank and screened by four great poplars. The open air, the warmth, the light white wine they had drunk and the distracting sense of propinquity, made them flushed, silent and self-conscious. But after their coffee, a sudden rush of happiness came over them. They crossed the Seine and set out for another walk along the bank, in the direction of the village of La Frette.

"What is your Christian name?" he asked presently.

"Louise."

"Louise," he echoed and relapsed again into silence.

At this point the river described a wide curve, and flowed away into the distance past a row of white houses, reflected in the water. Louise gathered a great sheaf

of marguerites and other wild flowers, while he sang at the top of his voice. He was as frisky as a colt turned out to grass. On their left rose a vine-clad hill, following the bend of the river. François stopped short in sudden amazement.

"Look there!" he cried.

The vines had ceased, and the entire slope was mantled with flowering lilac, which formed a copse of purple. It spread over the earth like a vast carpet, reaching as far as the next village, which lay a couple of miles beyond.

"O, how lovely!" she cried.

They ran across an intervening field till they reached this wonderful hill, which, spring after spring, supplies the flower-girls with the lilac they bring into Paris on their little hand-carts. A narrow path led into the heart of the thicket. They followed its windings, till it brought them out in a patch of open ground. Here they sat down. Swarms of flies hovered buzzing above them, burdening the air with their soft continuous drone. The sun, the fierce sun of a breathless afternoon, beat down upon the long expanse of hillside, drawing from that grove of blossom the heady perfume, the pungent waves of scent that flowers distil.

A church clock chimed in the distance. Their lips met in a tranquil kiss. Lying in the grass, they embraced and clasped each other, oblivious of everything except their caresses. She had closed her eyes and was clinging to him wildly with both arms round him. She was lost to thought, lost to reason, swooning in passionate yearning. Unconscious of what she was doing, unaware of her own surrender, she at last gave herself to him.

She awoke to a crushing consciousness of disaster. Hiding her face in her hands, she sobbed and moaned with anguish. He tried to comfort her. But her one desire was to go away, to make at once for home.

She hurried along, muttering as she went:

"My God! my God!"

"Louise, Louise," he pleaded, "do stay a little longer."

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes hollow. As soon as their train reached Paris, she left him without so much as a parting word.

When he saw her in the omnibus the following day, she seemed to him thin and changed.

"I must speak to you," she murmured, "let us get out at the boulevard.'

As soon as they were on the pavement alone, she broke out:

"We must say good-bye. I cannot meet you again after what happened yesterday."

"Why not?" he faltered.

"I simply can't. I did wrong. But I never will again."

Tortured with desire, aching for entire possession in the intimacy of nights of love, he pleaded and implored.

"No, I can't," she repeated firmly, "I can't and won't."

He became ever more ardent and impassioned, and even promised to marry her. But she persisted in her refusal and left him.

He did not set eyes on her for a week. He could never contrive to meet her, and as he did not know her address, he thought he had lost her forever. On the evening of the ninth day there was a ring at his bell. He went to the door. It was she. Her resistance was at an end. She flung herself into his arms. For three months she was his mistress. Just as his passion was beginning to cool, she told him that she was with child. On learning this, his one thought was to break with her at all costs. He had no idea how to set about

it, or what to say and do. At last, frantic with worry and anxiety at the prospect of a child, he took a desperate step. He made a midnight flitting and disappeared.

It was so cruel a blow, that she made no attempt to trace the man, who had thus abandoned her. She threw herself at her mother's feet, and confessed her plight. A few months later she gave birth to a boy.

The years slipped away. François Tessier was getting on in life. But time had brought no change into his mode of existence. His was the dreary routine of a clerk in the civil service, without hopes, without prospects. Day after day he rose at the same hour, traversed the same streets, entered the same door, passed the same hall porter, reached the same office, occupied the same chair, discharged the same duties. He was alone in the world, alone by day amongst his uncaring fellow clerks, alone by night in his bachelor quarters. Each month he put aside a hundred francs as a nest-egg for his old age. Every Sunday he took a stroll in the Champs Elysées to gaze at the fashionable throngs with their carriages and pretty women. The following day he always remarked to his fellow drudge:

"There was a very smart crowd in the Bois yesterday."

One Sunday he happened to set out in a different direction, and entered the Parc Monceau. It was a bright summer morning. Mothers and nursemaids were seated on the benches alongside the paths, watching the children at play.

Suddenly François Tessier trembled all over. A woman passed him, leading two children by the hand, the one a boy of ten, the other a little girl of four. He knew her for Louise. He walked on a few paces. Then, half stifled with emotion, sank into a chair. She had not recognised him. Anxious for another glance at

her, he retraced his steps. She was now seated, the boy standing quietly by her side, while the little girl was engaged in making mud pies. It was Louise; there was no doubt about it. She had a ladylike dignity, a placid air of self-possession, which harmonised with the simplicity of her dress. Not daring to approach her, he gazed at her from a distance. The small boy raised his head, and François Tessier could feel himself trembling. The child was undoubtedly his son. As he scanned the boy's face, he believed he could trace a likeness to an early photograph of himself. He hid behind a tree, with the intention of following her when she went home.

He had no sleep that night. It was the thought of the boy that chiefly tortured him. His son! If only he were sure, quite sure! Yet, what good would that do him? He had tracked her to her house, and made some enquiries. He heard that she had married a neighbour, a respectable man of settled habits, who had been touched by her distress. Aware of her lapse he had not only pardoned it, but adopted the child,—his child, François Tessier's child.

Every Sunday François returned to the Parc Monceau. Every Sunday he saw her there, and each time he was seized with a wild overpowering yearning to catch the boy in his arms, cover him with kisses, steal him, carry him off. Forlorn old bachelor that he was, without any ties of affection, he was utterly miserable. Racked by a passion of paternal tenderness, he suffered agonies. Remorse, desire and jealousy were mingled with that instinct which is grafted by nature in the hearts of all living creatures, love for their young.

At last he resolved to make a despairing effort. One day, as she entered the park he confronted her, standing before her in the middle of the path.

"Do you not recognise me?" he asked with livid and quivering lips.

She raised her eyes, glanced at him with a cry of horror, clutched the two children by the hand and fled, dragging them after her.

He returned home and burst into tears.

Month followed month and he never saw her again. But he knew no peace, by day or night, so cruelly was he tortured and consumed by his love for his child. He would have given his life, he would have committed murder, accomplished every task, dared every danger, encountered every risk, if only he might embrace his son. He wrote to her, but received no reply. After a score of letters he realised that he could never hope to persuade her. In the end he took a desperate step. He did not care if it meant a bullet in his heart. He wrote a brief note to her husband.

"Sir," ran the letter.

"My very name must be hateful to you. But in my utter wretchedness and misery I see in you my one hope.

All I would ask of you is a short interview of ten minutes . . ."

The next day he received the following reply:

"Sir,

I shall expect you at five o'clock on Tuesday . . ."

As François climbed the stairs, his heart beat so wildly that he had to pause on every step. The rapid throbs, the muffled thuds within his breast, were like the sound of galloping hoofs. He could hardly breathe and had to cling to the banisters to keep himself from falling.

He reached the third floor, and rang the bell, which was answered by a maid.

"Monsieur Flamel?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Will you come in, please?"

He was shown into a conventional, middle-class drawing-room. Here he waited, alone and bewildered, as if overtaken by some sudden catastrophe. The door opened and a tall, grave, rather portly gentleman in a black frockcoat entered the room. He motioned his visitor to a chair.

"Sir," François began haltingly, as he seated himself. "Sir . . . I do not know . . . if you are aware of my name . . . if you know . . . "

Monsieur Flamel broke in upon him.

"Don't trouble, sir. I know. My wife has told me about you."

He spoke in the austere tones of a kindly man endeavouring to be stern, and with the characteristic pompousness of the respectable citizen.

"Well, sir, that is how it is with me," François resumed. "I am dying of grief, shame and remorse. All I want is to clasp the child once, just once, to my heart."

Monsieur Flamel rose, went over to the fireplace and rang the bell. The maid appeared.

"Send Louis to me," he said.

She left the room and the two men, having nothing more to say to each other, waited in silence, face to face.

A little boy of ten burst into the room and went running to the man whom he regarded as his father. But when he caught sight of the visitor he hesitated shyly. Monsieur Flamel kissed him on the forehead.

"Now, my dear, go and give that gentleman a kiss."

With his eyes on the stranger, the boy went up to him with engaging docility. François had risen to his feet. He let his hat fall on the floor and he himself felt ready to follow its example. He gazed at his son.

Monsieur Flamel had tactfully turned away, and was looking out of the window. The child waited in perplexity. Then he picked up the hat and handed it to its owner. At this François caught the boy in his arms and began frantically kissing his whole face, his eyes, cheeks, mouth and hair. Startled by this storm of caresses the youngster tried to avoid them. He turned away his head and with his small hands pushed away the man's eager lips.

François Tessier released him abruptly.

"Good-bye," he cried, "good-bye," and he fled from the house like a thief.

XXIV. LETTER

TAKEN FROM THE PERSON OF A MAN FOUND DROWNED

You suggest, Madam, that I am not serious. You cannot believe that there exists a man who has never been stricken by love. Well, for my part, I have never been in love, never in all my life. How to account for this? I have no idea. My heart has never succumbed to that strange intoxication which we call love. I have never known the dream, the rapture, the madness into which a woman's image can plunge us. I have never been pursued, haunted, kindled, beatified by the expectation or reality of winning a being who, in a flash of time, has become more desirable in my eyes than all the joys, more lovely than all living things, more important than all created worlds.

Not one of your sex has ever cost me a tear, a pang. Never have I spent my nights, open-eyed, dreaming of the beloved. Never have my dawns been glorified by thoughts and memories of her beauty. I have never known the distracting languor, wherewith the lover awaits her coming, nor his divine melancholy and regret when she departs, leaving behind her a lingering fragrance of violets and femininity. No, I have never loved. I have often, myself, wondered why. And really I hardly know. I have, it is true, found various reasons,

but they verge perhaps too much on the metaphysical to appeal to you. I feel that I am too critical with regard to women to be very susceptible to their charm. I ask your pardon for this confession. Let me explain. Every human being has a physical and a spiritual self. I shall never love until I meet a woman in whom these elements are blended in a harmony, which I have never yet discerned. One or the other always predominates, sometimes the physical nature, sometimes the spiritual. The intelligence we are entitled to look for in a woman, if we are to love her, has nothing in common with the masculine intellect. It is at once superior and inferior. A woman's mind should be receptive, delicate, sensitive, subtle, impressionable. She may dispense with strength and originality of thought, provided she possess kindness, graciousness, tenderness, charm, and that adaptability, which enables her speedily to accommodate herself to him, who shares her life. Her supreme endowment should be tact, that exquisite faculty which is to the mind what the sense of touch is to the body. It renders her aware of a thousand minute circumstances, of the aspects, angles, forms of things in the intellectual sphere. As a general rule, pretty women seldom possess a soul that corresponds to their exterior. Now the least little discrepancy immediately strikes me and causes me pain. In friendship this flaw is of no consequence. Friendship is a pact, in which one can set off defects against qualities. You can criticise your friend, whether man or woman, appreciate the good in him, condone the bad, appraise him at his proper value and at the same time yield to the deep delights of a sympathetic intimacy.

But the lover must needs be blind if he is to surrender himself utterly, if he is to relinquish his right to see, to reason, to understand. He must be capable of worshipping frailties as well as beauties, and must sacrifice

every particle of judgment, reflection, insight. I am incapable of such infatuation. I revolt against a fascination so contrary to common sense. Nor is this all. I have of that harmony, so lofty, so subtle a conception, that my ideal can never be attained. You will say that I am crazy. Do but listen. In my opinion, a woman may possess an exquisite soul, an enchanting body, yet that soul, that body may lack the perfect concord. By this I mean that a particular type of nose does not suit a particular mode of thought. Fat people have no right to use the same words and phrases as thin people. You yourself with your blue eyes, cannot take the same view of things and events, as you would, if your eyes were black. The lights and shades within your eyes should correspond inevitably to the lights and shades within your mind. In these matters I have the unerring instinct of a bloodhound. Laugh if you like. It does not alter the fact.

Yet once, for an hour, for a day, I believed I was in love. I had foolishly succumbed to the influence of environment. I had allowed myself to be seduced by a mirage of the dawn. Would you care to hear the story? It is very short.

One evening I made the acquaintance of a pretty little person with a poetic turn of mind, who was seized with a fanciful desire to spend a night with me in a boat on the river. Personally I should have preferred a room and a bed. I agreed, however, to the river and the boat. It was the month of June. My friend chose a moonlight night for its exciting effect on her romantic propensities. We dined at an inn on the bank and about ten o'clock, we embarked. I thought it a very silly business, but my companion was sufficiently attractive to soothe my ruffled feelings. I sat down on the thwart facing her, seized the oars and we pushed off. I cannot

deny that it was a charming scene. We were skirting a wooded island, full of nightingales. The current bore us swiftly onwards over a river of shimmering silver. Toads were uttering their clear, monotonous cry; frogs in the grass by the water were croaking themselves hoarse. The stream glided by, with a confused, disturbing, almost inaudible murmur, which stirred in us a vague feeling of eerieness. Over us stole the soft enchantment of balmy evenings, of rivers gleaming in the moonlight. It was good to be alive, good to drift and dream, conscious of the propinquity of a young and languishing and lovely woman. I was somewhat moved, somewhat troubled, somewhat elated, by the pearly radiance of the evening and by the thought of my fair friend.

"Come and sit beside me," she said.

I obeyed.

"And now recite some verses."

This, however, was more than I had bargained for. I refused. She insisted. Evidently she was bent upon a full-dress performance, with the whole orchestra of emotion, ranging from rhymes to moonlight. In the end I yielded, and to tease her, recited a delightful poem by Louis Bouilhet. The last verses are as follows:

"I loathe above all men the humid-eyed bard,
Who christens a star with the name of a girl.
The beauty of Nature in his eyes is marred
If he can't find a wench in each nebular whirl.

It is charming to see how these painstaking folk,
For fear the poor world our attention escape,
Stick a petticoat on to the elm and the oak
And deck each hillside with a woman's mobcap.

They never will learn Nature's music divine,
  Till alone in the gorge's dark splendour they've brooded;
Till from tremulous harpings of birch and of pine
  All dreams of a woman are sternly excluded."

I expected reproaches. But not at all.

"That's just how I feel," she murmured.

I was amazed. Could she have understood?

Our skiff, which had been slowly drifting towards the bank, was caught in the trailing boughs of a willow. I slipped my arm round my companion's waist and very gently touched her neck with my lips. She pushed me indignantly away.

"Don't do that! How can you be so coarse!"

I tried to draw her closer, but she resisted, caught at a branch of the tree and very nearly capsized us. I deemed it wiser to desist.

"I'd rather upset the boat," she declared. "I am so happy. It's lovely dreaming like this."

Then with a hint of mockery in her voice, she added:

"Have you already forgotten those verses you quoted to me just now?"

I deserved her rebuke, and was silent.

"Go on rowing," she said.

I took the oars again. I was beginning to feel that it was a long night, and that my position was absurd.

"Will you promise me something?" she asked presently.

"Certainly. Tell me what it is."

"Well, I want to lie on my back in the bottom of the boat, with you beside me, and to gaze up at the stars."

"Delighted," I cried.

"You don't understand," she returned. "We will lie

side by side. But I forbid you to touch me, or kiss me . . . or . . . or . . . caress me."

I promised.

"If you move a finger," she warned me, "I shall upset the boat."

So, with our eyes on the sky, there we lay, side by side, drifting with the stream and lulled by the gentle rocking of the ripples. Down in the bottom of the boat, the whispering sounds of the night came to us more clearly than before, and sent now and again a shudder through us. I was conscious of some strange and poignant emotion surging within me, of an infinite yearning, a vague longing, to open my arms and embrace, to open my heart and love, to give myself, my mind, my body, my life, my whole being, to another.

As in a dream she murmured:

"Where are we? Where are we going to? I feel as if I were leaving the earth. How delicious it is. O, if only you loved me . . . a little!"

My heart throbbed violently. I could not answer. I felt that indeed I loved her. I was purged of all violent desire. All was well with me. It was enough to be lying there by her side. We remained thus without stirring a long, long time. We had clasped hands. Some exquisite influence held us spellbound, some unknown, overmastering power, some union pure, intimate, absolute, of our two personalities, drawn close together, each possessing the other without contact. What was this mystery? Could it have been love?

Day began to break. It was three in the morning. Little by little, a brilliant radiance suffused the sky. The boat bumped against something. I started up: we had run into the bank of a little islet. I gazed in rapture and delight. Before our eyes, the whole expanse of firmament burned crimson, violet, pink, dotted with fiery cloudlets like puffs of golden smoke. The river was

ruddy gold, and three houses grouped upon the bank seemed lapped in flames. I leaned towards my companion and was on the point of saying to her:

"Look. Do look."

But I was struck dumb with amazement. I had eyes only for her. She, too, was rosy red. It was as if the rose of the sky were mingled with the rose of her skin. Her hair, her eyes, her teeth, her gown, her lace, her smile, were all incarnadined. In my rapture I verily believed that the goddess of Dawn had appeared to me.

Slowly she raised herself, and offered me her lips. Trembling with ecstasy I leaned towards her, in the sure belief that I was about to salute heaven and happiness, the dream woman, the ideal in human form.

She said to me:

"There's a caterpillar in your hair."

That was why she was smiling!

I felt as if I had been hit on the head with a club. I was overwhelmed with misery. It was as if I had suddenly lost all hope in life.

That is the whole story, Madam, childish, inane, absurd. But ever since that day I have felt convinced that I should never love. And yet . . . who knows?

. . . . . .

The body of the young man, on whom this letter was found, was yesterday recovered from the Seine between Bougival and Marly. An obliging water-man, who went through his pockets to discover his identity, brought me this document.

XXV. NIGHT

A NIGHTMARE

I HAVE a passionate love for the night. I love it, as a man loves his country or his mistress, with a deep, instinctive, ineradicable love. I love it with all my senses, with my eyes that behold it, my nostrils that breathe it, my ears that listen to its silence, my whole body which feels the caress of the darkness.

The larks sing in the sunshine, in the azure air, the warm, balmy air of radiant mornings. The owl wings its way through the night, a black blot flitting through the black void; rejoicing and exulting in that ebon infinity, it utters its quivering and boding cry. The day harasses and wearies me with its clamour and violence. I rise reluctantly, languidly clothe myself, and regretfully go forth. Every step, every movement, every gesture, every word, every thought, exhausts me, as if I were sustaining a crushing burden. But when the sun goes down, there steals over me a vague joy, which pervades my whole frame. I rouse myself. I am alive again. In proportion as the shadows thicken, I feel myself changing into another being, younger, stronger, happier, more alert. I watch the darkness deepen, the vast soft dusk descending from the sky. It drowns the city like an impalpable yet impenetrable wave. It hides, obliterates, destroys all colour and all form. It envelopes houses and people and monuments in its intangible embrace. And I feel ready to utter cries of delight like the bats, and run like a cat over the roofs. An impetu-

ous, an irresistible longing for love is kindled within my veins. I roam on foot, now through the gloomy suburbs, now in the woods in the neighbourhood of Paris, where I can hear my sisters the beasts, and my brothers the poachers, as they prowl around.

That which we love with violence always destroys us in the end. But how can I explain this thing that has come upon me? How can I express even so much of it as to make the mere facts clear? I cannot account for it. All that I know is, that it is so.

Yesterday then . . . but was it yesterday? . . . yes, it must have been . . . unless it was earlier, some other day, some other month, some other year . . . I cannot tell. And yet it must surely have been yesterday, since the morning has never dawned again, nor the sun risen. But how long has the night endured? How long? Who can say? Who will ever know?

Yesterday evening, then, I went out after dinner, as is my custom. It was very fine, very warm and mild. Turning towards the boulevards I looked up at that black, star-strewn flood above my head, patterned in the sky by the roofs of the houses lining the street, till that rolling astral stream seemed to twist and wind like a real river. In that limpid air, everything glittered, from the stars to the gas-jets. So many lights were twinkling overhead and in the city, that the gloom seemed luminous with them. These radiant nights are more exhilarating than days of brilliant sunshine. On the boulevards the cafés were a blaze of light; and people sat drinking or strolled laughing along. I dropped into a theatre for a few moments. Which theatre? I cannot remember. It was so dazzling that it depressed me, and I went out again, my heart a little saddened by the shock of that violent glare, playing upon the gilding of the balconies, by the meretricious glitter of the huge crystal chandelier, by the

footlights, by the dreariness of that crude and artificial brilliance. I reached the Champs Elysées, where the open air concerts were like centres of conflagration among the verdure. Bathed in yellow light, the chestnut trees looked as if they were painted, as if they were phosphorescent. The electric globes, like pallid, lustrous moons, lunar eggs dropped from the sky, or great, live pearls, eclipsed with their nacreous lustre, mysterious and regal, the jets of gas, of vulgar, squalid gas and the festoons of coloured lamps. Under the Arc de Triomphe, I stopped to admire that long and magnificent avenue, extending towards Paris between two rows of lights, and to gaze at the stars, the stars up yonder, the unknown stars, scattered haphazard through space, where they form those fantastic constellations which inspire such thoughts, such dreams.

I entered the Bois de Boulogne, and lingered there a long, long time. A strange shudder crept over me; I was seized with unexpected and violent emotion, with a fever of the mind, verging on madness. I walked on and on. Then I retraced my steps. What time was it when I passed once more under the Arc de Triomphe? I cannot say. The city was wrapped in sleep, and clouds, heavy, black clouds, were slowly spreading across the sky.

For the first time in my life, I felt that something strange and new was impending. It seemed to me that it had turned cold, that the air was growing denser and that the night, my beloved night, was weighing heavily upon my heart. The avenue was now deserted, except for two police constables, who were walking up and down near the cab-stand, while on the roadway, dimly lighted by gas-jets which seemed to be expiring, moved a string of carts with garden-produce for the market. Laden with carrots, turnips and cabbages, they crept slowly along. The drivers were asleep and

invisible; the horses plodded steadily on, each following the cart in front of it, and their hoofs made no sound on the wooden pavement. Under every street lamp, the carrots showed up red, the turnips white and the cabbages green. The carts moved on in single file, now red with the red of fire, now white with the white of silver, now green with the green of emerald. I followed them; then turning down the rue Royal I made my way back to the boulevards. The cafés were in darkness; there was no one about, except now and then some belated person hurrying by. I had never seen Paris so dead and deserted. I took out my watch. It was two o'clock. Some impulse drove me onwards; I had to go on walking. So I wandered as far as the Bastille. There I realised that I had never known so black a night. I could not even make out the July column, and its gilded Genius was lost in the impenetrable darkness. A vault of clouds, deep as infinity, had hidden the stars and seemed about to descend upon the earth to destroy it utterly. I turned back. Not a soul was near me. On the Place du Château d'Eau, however, a drunk man almost collided with me; then he, too, disappeared. I could hear for some time his irregular, and echoing footsteps. I went on. At the top of Montmartre, a cab passed me, proceeding downhill in the direction of the Seine. I hailed it. The coachman made no reply. Near the Rue Drouot I saw a woman prowling about.

"Listen to me, sir," she said.

I hurried on to avoid her outstretched hand. After that nothing. Outside the Vaudeville, a ragpicker was searching the gutter.

"Can you tell me the time, my man?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he answered gruffly. "I haven't got a watch."

Suddenly I noticed that all the street lamps were out.

I am aware that at this time of the year they are extinguished early, before dawn, from motives of economy. But day was still remote, still so remote.

"I will go to the market," I thought to myself, "at least I shall find some life there."

I set out, but it was too dark for me to see my way. I advanced slowly as in a wood, and I could tell the streets only by counting them. Outside the Crédit Lyonnais a dog growled at me. I turned down the rue Grammont and missed my way. I was at a loss, until I recognised the Bourse by the iron railings round it. All Paris was lapped in deep and terrifying slumber.

In the distance, however, I could hear the wheels of a cab, a solitary cab, possibly the same one which had passed me a little while ago. I tried to track it down, making towards the sound of the wheels through the black and empty streets, streets as black . . . as black as death. Again I lost my way. Where was I? What lunacy to put out the lights so early! Not a soul, not one belated passer-by, not one vagrant, not even a cat mewing to its mate. Nothing.

What could have become of all the policemen?

"I'll give a shout and they'll appear," I said to myself.

I shouted. There was no reply. I shouted more loudly. My voice died away without an echo, faint, stifled, smothered, by the night, the impenetrable night.

"Help, help!" I screamed. "Help, help!"

My despairing appeal elicited no response. What time could it be? I took out my watch, but I had no matches. I listened to the soft ticking of the little piece of mechanism with a new and curious satisfaction. It seemed to be alive. I felt less lonely. The mystery of it all! I went on walking like a blind man,

feeling the walls with my stick, and I kept raising my eyes to the sky, hoping that at last the day would dawn. But the firmament was black, all black, more deeply black than the city. What time could it be? I felt as if I had been walking for an eternity. My legs were yielding under me, my chest was heaving and I was suffering tortures of hunger.

I resolved to ring at the first door I came to. I pulled the brass handle, and the bell echoed through the reverberating house with a strange clamour, as if its vibrating peal were all that existed within those walls. I waited. No one answered, no one opened the door. Again I rang. Again I waited. Nothing. Fear seized upon me. I ran to the next house, and twenty times in succession I set the bell ringing in the dark passage, where the concierge, no doubt, was sleeping. But he did not wake, and I went on, tugging at every bell with all my might, kicking the panels, hammering with my stick or my fists on doors that remained obstinately closed.

Suddenly I found that I had reached the market. The market was deserted: not a sound, not a movement, not a cart, not a human soul, not a bunch of flowers, nor a bundle of vegetables. It was empty, still, abandoned, dead.

Panic seized me—horror. What was happening? Good God, what did it all mean? On I went. What time was it? What time? Would no one tell me? No clock chimed on any church or public building.

"I will open my watch case," I thought to myself, "and feel the hands with my finger."

I took out my watch. It was no longer ticking; it had stopped. There was nothing, nothing, not a tremor in all the city, not a light, not a whisper in the air. Nothing. Nothing. Not even the distant wheels of that cab. Nothing.

I had reached the quays. An icy chill rose from the river. Was the Seine still flowing? I felt that I must know; I found the embankment steps; I descended . . . I could not hear the current swirling beneath the arches of the bridge . . . a few more paces . . . then sand . . . then mud . . . then the water . . . I plunged my arm into it . . . it was flowing . . . it was flowing . . . cold . . . cold . . . cold . . . almost frozen . . . almost stagnant . . . almost dead.

And I knew full well that I should never have the strength to climb those steps again . . . and that I should die there . . . I, too . . . of hunger, weariness and cold.

XXVI. GOOD-BYE

Henri Simon and Pierre Carnier were nearing the end of dinner. From the restaurant window they looked out upon the crowded boulevard. They could feel the waftings of those mild breezes that stir the air of Paris on balmy summer evenings. At the touch of these puffs of air the passer-by looks up and is inspired with a longing to be far away, to wander to some glade, he knows not where, among the trees. He dreams of moonlit rivers, glow-worms, and nightingales.

Henri Simon heaved a deep sigh.

"Ah, I am growing old. How sad it is! When I was young, an evening like this would put the devil into me, but at my present age it inspires me with nothing but regrets. It's amazing how life slips by."

Simon, a man of about forty-five, was already inclining to stoutness, and was almost bald. His friend Carnier was a trifle older, but less corpulent and more vivacious.

"As for me," he rejoined, "I grew old without being in the least aware of it. I always kept cheerful and jolly and in good condition, and you see, a man who looks at himself every day in his mirror, never notices

how the years are leaving their mark upon him. They work slowly and steadily. They change the face so gradually, that the transitions are imperceptible. That is the sole reason why we don't die of disgust after a mere two or three years of time's ravages. We never realise that they are occurring. If a man wants to take stock of them, he must avoid his looking-glass for six months, and then he will get a shock. And as for women! Poor creatures, how I do pity them. All their happiness, their power, their very life, lie in their beauty. And their beauty lasts ten years.

So you see, I grew old without suspecting it. I still fancied myself a youth, when I was getting on for fifty. Not having any physical infirmities, I marched along gay and contented. My deterioration was revealed to me in the directest and most startling manner, which knocked me out for nearly six months. After that, I accepted the situation.

Like most men, I have frequently been in love, but one of my affairs stands out above all the others. It was about twelve years ago, shortly after the close of the war, that I met her at the seaside, at Etretat. In the morning, at the bathing hour, Etretat is the most charming of beaches. It is small, crescent shaped, and has for background high, white cliffs, which are pierced by two singular openings called the Gates, one of which strides out into the sea like a giant, while the other, opposite to it, is round and squat. When the women gather together on the narrow tongue of shingle, the beach is like a brilliant flower-bed of bright dresses, showing up against those lofty, white cliffs. The sun falls full on sloping strand, on sunshades of all colours, on blue-green sea. The whole effect is one of gaiety, charm and smiling happiness. Seated by the water's edge, you watch the women bathing. They

trip down to the sea, and throw off their bathing wraps with a pretty movement, when they reach the wavelets that run up the beach in a fringe of surf. Then, with short, quick steps, they enter the water. Sometimes the sudden coldness checks them, with a delicious shudder, a brief catching of the breath. There are very few who emerge successfully from this ordeal of the bath. From neck to ankle, they are under a perpetual fire of criticism. And although the briny water is a tonic for enervated limbs, on coming out of the sea, all their weak points are shown up.

But as for that enchantress of mine, the first time I saw her bathing I was completely carried away. Her physique was a model of grace and vigour. Some women have a charm of countenance, which takes effect at once, and enthralls us in a flash. You feel that you have found the one woman, who has been allotted to you by fate. Such were my fervid emotions, when I first set eyes on Julie Lefèvre.

Having secured an introduction, I was soon more completely enchanted than I had ever been in my life. She was a destroying angel. It is a terrifying and delicious experience to come thus under a woman's dominion. It is almost agony and at the same time incredible bliss. Julie's glances, her smiles, the curls on the nape of her neck, when the breeze ruffled them, the tiniest curves, the slightest play of her features, ravished me, swept me off my feet, charmed me to distraction. She took the completest possession of me, not only by her gestures and attitudes; even the trifling accessories of her gown acquired something of her witchery. Her veil lying on a table, her gloves thrown carelessly on an armchair, filled me with rapture. Her dresses seemed to me the most perfect things in the world, and her hats were incomparable.

She was married, but her husband was only with her

from Saturday to Monday. In any case his personality left me indifferent. I was not in the least jealous of him. I can't explain it, but no human being ever appeared to me to have so little importance in life, or to be so totally insignificant as that man. But Julie! How I loved her! How exquisite and graceful and young she was! She was youth and charm and freshness personified. I had never before felt so intensely that woman is all loveliness, subtlety, distinction and daintiness, that she is compact of fascination and grace. Never before had I understood the seductive beauty that lies in the curve of a cheek, in the movement of lips, in the rounded convolutions of a shell-like ear, or even in the form of that rather ridiculous organ, which we call the nose.

Our friendship lasted for three months. Then, with a despairing heart, I had to leave for America. But the thought of her still maintained its triumphant sway over me. Her dominion was as complete at a distance, as it had been when she was near me. Year succeeded year but I never forgot her. Her charming image hovered before my eyes, and was cherished in my heart. Only my love for her changed its character. It became less feverish; it resembled rather a cherished memory of the loveliest, most exquisite thing that life had revealed to me. She, and she alone, remained the object of my devotion.

. . . . . .

Twelve years are no great matter in a man's existence. They pass imperceptibly, year succeeding year, gently yet swiftly, slowly yet speedily; each seems long in passing, yet vanishes in a moment. It is the accumulated total of them that startles us. Each single year leaves so little trace; it vanishes so completely; one turns to take the measure of the time that has flown, and there

is nothing to mark it. Meanwhile one has grown old. How has it happened? Who can say?

I assure you, that, although twelve years had gone by, it seemed to me as if only a few months had elapsed since the delightful season I had spent on the beach at Etretat.

One evening last spring, I was on my way to dine with some friends at Maisons-Laffitte. Just as my train was leaving, a stout lady, accompanied by four little girls, climbed into my compartment. I hardly troubled to cast a glance at this mother hen with her brood of chickens. She was a bulky woman, of very ample curves, with a face like a full moon, and a hat, which was a mass of ribbons. She had had to hurry to catch the train and was breathing heavily. The children began to prattle, and I opened and read my paper. We had just passed Asnières, when the lady addressed me abruptly:

"Excuse me, but aren't you Monsieur Carnier?"

I assented, and she burst out laughing. It was a good honest laugh of pleasure; yet there was a hint of regret in it.

"Don't you recognise me?"

I felt almost positive that I had seen her face somewhere. But where and when?

"Yes, and no," I replied hesitatingly. "I am sure I know you, but your name escapes me."

She blushed faintly.

"I am Julie Lefèvre."

Never in my life have I had such a shock. In that instant it suddenly seemed to me that life could have no more to offer me. My only feeling was that a veil had suddenly been torn from my eyes, and that I was on the point of receiving the most terrible and harrowing revelations.

So that was Julie! That fat, vulgar woman! And

she had hatched all those daughters, since I last saw her. The four little creatures amazed me no less than their mother. They were her offspring; they were growing up; they had taken their definite place as human beings. Whereas Julie, on the other hand, had simply dropped out. Julie, that marvel of attraction and exquisite grace! It was only yesterday, so to speak, that I had last seen her, and to-day! look at her. Could such things be? It was not only the desperate sadness of it that wrung my heart, but I had an impulse to rebel against nature herself; I was seized by an irrational fury at this brutal and scandalous work of destruction.

I gazed at her in consternation. Then I took her hand. I felt the tears rising to my eyes; tears for her youth, tears for her death. Her death, I say; for this gross creature was not the Julie I had known.

She too was moved.

"I have changed a good deal, haven't I? But what can you expect? Everything passes. You can see that I have developed into a mother, just a mother, a devoted mother. It is good-bye to old times. That is all over. Oh, I knew you would never recognise me, if we happened some day to meet. You have changed, too, you know. It took me some time to make sure that I wasn't mistaken. Your hair is quite grey. But twelve years! Only consider! My eldest girl is ten."

I looked at the child, and I discovered in her a hint of her mother's former charm; but the promise was as yet indefinite, undeveloped; a mere indication of future graces. And I suddenly saw life as a thing that dashes by as quickly as a passing train.

We arrived at Maisons-Laffitte. I kissed the hand of my old love. I had found nothing to say to her, except the most terrible commonplaces. I was too greatly upset for conversation.

That evening, as soon as I was alone in my own house, I looked at myself in my mirror. I looked long and searchingly. Ultimately I succeeded in recalling to my memory the man I had once been. I was able in retrospect to see my brown moustache, my dark hair, the youthful contours of my face. And I realised that I was old. I saw that it was indeed Good-bye."