



THE CLIQUE OF GOLD

ÉMILE GABORIAU

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BY
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The Clique of Gold By Émile Gaboriau.

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CHAPTER 1

There is not in all Paris a house better kept or more inviting-looking than No. 23 in Grange Street. As soon as you enter, you are struck by a minute, extreme neatness, which reminds you of Holland, and almost sets you a-laughing. The neighbors might use the brass plate on the door as a mirror to shave in; the stone floor is polished till it shines; and the woodwork of the staircase is varnished to perfection.

In the entrance-hall a number of notices, written in the peculiar style which owners of houses affect, request the tenants to respect the property of others, without regard to the high price they pay for their share. "Clean your feet, if you please," they say to all who come in or go out. "No spitting allowed on the stairs." "Dogs are not allowed in the house."

Nevertheless, this admirably-kept house "enjoyed" but a sorry reputation in the neighborhood. Was it worse than other houses,—No. 21, for instance, or No. 25? Probably not; but there is a fate for houses as well as for men.

The first story was occupied by the families of two independent gentlemen, whose simplicity of mind was only equalled by that of their mode of life. A collector, who occasionally acted as broker, lived in the second story, and had his offices there. The third story was rented to a very rich man, a baron as people said, who only appeared there at long intervals, preferring, according to his own account, to live on his estates near Saintonge. The whole fourth story was occupied by a man familiarly known as Papa Ravinet, although he was barely fifty years old. He dealt in second-hand merchandise, furniture, curiosities, and toilet articles; and his rooms were filled to overflowing with a medley collection of things which he was in the habit of buying at auctions. The fifth story, finally, was cut up in numerous small rooms and closets, which were occupied by poor families or clerks, who, almost without exception, disappeared early in the morning, and returned only as late as possible at night.

An addition to the house in the rear had its own staircase, and was probably in the hands of still humbler tenants; but then it is so difficult to rent out small lodgings!

However this may have been, the house had a bad reputation; and the lodgers had to bear the consequences. Not one of them would have been trusted with a dollar's worth of goods in any of the neighboring shops. No one, however, stood, rightly or wrongly, in as bad repute as the doorkeeper, or concierge, who lived in a little hole near the great double entrance-door, and watched over the safety of the whole house. Master Chevassat and his wife were severely "cut" by their colleagues of adjoining houses; and the most atrocious stories were told of both husband and wife.

Master Chevassat was reputed to be well off; but the story went that he lent out money, and did not hesitate to charge a hundred per cent a month. He acted, besides, it was said, as agent for two of his tenants,—the broker, and the dealer in second-hand goods, and undertook the executions, when poor debtors were unable to pay. Mrs. Chevassat, however, had even graver charges to bear. People said she would do anything for money, and had aided and encouraged many a poor girl in the house in her evil career.

It was also asserted that the estimable couple had formerly lived in the fashionable Faubourg St. Honore, but had been compelled to leave there on account of several ugly occurrences. They were, finally, reported to have a son called Justin, a handsome fellow, thirty-five years old, who lived in the best society, and whom they nearly worshipped; while he was ashamed of them, and despised them, although he came often at night to ask them for money. No one, it must, however, be confessed, had ever seen this son; and no one knew him.

The two Chevassats shrugged their shoulders, and said it would be absurd if they should trouble themselves about public opinion, as long as their consciences were clear, and they owed nobody anything.

Towards the end of last December, however, on a Saturday afternoon, towards five o'clock, husband and wife were just sitting down to dinner, when the dealer in old clothes, Papa Ravinet, rushed like a tempest into their room.

He was a man of middle size, clean shaven, with small, bright, yellowish eyes, which shone with restless eagerness from under thick, bushy brows. Although he had lived for years in Paris, he was dressed like a man from the country, wearing a flowered silk vest, and a long frock-coat with an immense collar.

“Quick, Chevassat!” he cried, with a voice full of trouble. “Take your lamp, and follow me; an accident has happened upstairs.”

He was so seriously disturbed, although generally very calm and cool, that the two Chevassats were thoroughly frightened.

“An accident!” exclaimed the woman; “that was all that was wanting. But pray, what has happened, dear M. Ravinet?”

“How do I know? This very moment, as I was just coming out of my room, I thought I heard the death-rattle of a dying person. It was in the fifth story. Of course I ran up a few steps, I listened. All was silent. I went down again, thinking I had been mistaken; and at once I heard again a sighing, a sobbing—I can’t tell you exactly what; but it sounded exactly like the last sigh of a person in agony, and at the point of death.”

“And then?”

“Then I ran down to tell you, and ask you to come up. I am not sure, you understand; but I think I could swear it was the voice of Miss Henrietta,—that pretty young girl who lives up there. Well, are you coming?”

But they did not stir.

“Miss Henrietta is not in her room,” said Mrs. Chevassat coldly. “She went out just now, and told me she would not be back till nine o’clock. My dear M. Ravinet, you must have been mistaken; you had a ringing in your ears, or”—

“No, I am sure I was not mistaken! But never mind; we must see what it is.”

During this conversation, the door of the room had been open; and several of the lodgers, hearing the voice of the merchant and the exclamations of the woman as they crossed the hall, had stopped and listened.

“Yes, we must see what it is,” they repeated.

Master Chevassat dared no longer oppose the general desire so peremptorily expressed,—

“Let us go then, since you will have it so,” he sighed.

And, taking up his lamp, he began to ascend the stairs, followed by the merchant, his wife, and five or six other persons.

The steps of all these people were heard all over the house; and from story to story the lodgers opened their doors to see what was going on. And, when they heard that something was likely to happen, they almost all left their rooms, and followed the others.

So that Master Chevassat had nearly a dozen curious persons behind him, when he stopped on the fifth floor to take breath.

The door to Miss Henrietta’s room was the first on the left in the passage. He knocked at first gently, then harder, and at last with all his energy, till his heavy fists shook the thin partition-walls of all the rooms.

Between each blow he cried,—

“Miss Henrietta, Miss Henrietta, they want you!”

No reply came.

“Well!” he said triumphantly, “you see!”

But, whilst the man was knocking at the door, M. Ravinet had knelt down, and tried to open the door a little, putting now his eye, and now his ear, to the keyhole and to the slight opening between the door and the frame.

Suddenly he rose deadly pale.

“It is all over; we are too late!”

And, as the neighbors expressed some doubts, he cried furiously,—

“Have you no noses? Don’t you smell that abominable charcoal?”

Everybody tried to perceive the odor; and soon all agreed that he was right. As the door had given way a little, the passage had gradually become filled with a sickening vapor.

The people shuddered; and a woman's voice exclaimed,—

“She has killed herself!”

As it happens strangely enough, but too frequently, in such cases, all hesitated.

“I am going for the police,” said at last Master Chevassat.

“That's right!” replied the merchant. “Now there is, perhaps, a chance yet to save the poor girl; and, when you come back, it will of course be too late.”

“What's to be done, then?”

“Break in the door.”

“I dare not.”

“Well, I will.”

The kind-hearted man put his shoulder to the worm-eaten door, and in a moment the lock gave way. The bystanders shrank instinctively back; they were frightened. The door was wide open, and masses of vapors rolled out. Soon, however, curiosity triumphed over fear. No one doubted any longer that the poor girl was lying in there dead; and each one tried his best to see where she was.

In vain. The feeble light of the lamp had gone out in the foul air; and the darkness was frightful.

Nothing could be seen but the reddish glow of the charcoal, which was slowly going out under a little heap of white ashes in two small stoves. No one ventured to enter.

But Papa Ravinet had not gone so far to stop now, and remain in the passage.

“Where is the window?” he asked the concierge.

“On the right there.”

“Very well; I'll open it.”

And boldly the strange man plunged into the dark room; and almost instantly the noise of breaking glass was heard. A moment later, and the air in the room had become once more fit for breathing, and everybody rushed in.

Alas! it was the death-rattle which M. Ravinet had heard.

On the bed, on a thin mattress, without blankets or bedclothes, lay a young girl about twenty years old, dressed in a wretched black merino dress, stretched out at full-length, stiff, lifeless.

The women sobbed aloud.

“To die so young!” they said over and over again, “and to die thus.”

In the meantime the merchant had gone up to the bed, and examined the poor girl.

“She is not dead yet!” he cried. “No, she cannot be dead! Come, ladies, come here and help the poor child, till the doctor comes.”

And then, with strange self-possession, he told them what to do for the purpose of recalling her to life.

“Give her air,” he said, “plenty of air; try to get some air into her lungs. Cut open her dress; pour some vinegar on her face; rub her with some woollen stuff.”

He issued his orders, and they obeyed him readily, although they had no hope of success.

“Poor child!” said one of the women. “No doubt she was crossed in love.”

“Or she was starving,” whispered another.

There was no doubt that poverty, extreme poverty, had ruled in that miserable chamber: the traces were easily seen all around. The whole furniture consisted of a bed, a chest of drawers, and two chairs. There were no curtains at the window, no dresses in the trunk, not a ribbon in the drawers. Evidently everything that could be sold had been sold, piece by

piece, little by little. The mattresses had followed the dresses,—first the wool, handful by handful, then the covering.

Too proud to complain, and cut off from society by bashfulness, the poor girl who was lying there had evidently gone through all the stages of suffering which the shipwrecked mariner endures, who floats, resting on a stray spar in the great ocean.

Papa Ravinet was thinking of all this, when a paper lying on the bureau attracted his eye. He took it up. It was the last will of the poor girl, and ran thus:—

“Let no one be accused; I die voluntarily. I beg Mrs. Chevassat will carry the two letters which I enclose to their addresses. She will be paid whatever I may owe her. Henrietta.”

There were the two letters. On the first he read,—

Count Ville-Handry, Rue de Varennest 115. And, on the other,—

M. Maxime de Brevan, 62 Rue Laffitte.

A sudden light seemed to brighten up the small yellowish eye of the dealer in old clothes; a wicked smile played on his lips; and he uttered a very peculiar, “Ah!”

But all this passed away in a moment.

His brow grew as dark as ever; and he looked around anxiously and suspiciously to see if anybody had caught the impression produced upon him by the letters.

No, nobody had noticed him, nobody was thinking of him; for everybody was occupied with Miss Henrietta.

Thereupon he slipped the paper and the two letters into the vast pocket of his huge frock-coat with a dexterity and a rapidity which would have excited the envy of an accomplished pickpocket. It was high time; for the women who were bending over the bed of the young girl were exhibiting signs of intense excitement. One of them said she was sure the body had trembled

under her hand, and the others insisted upon it that she was mistaken. The matter was soon to be decided, however.

After, perhaps, twenty seconds of unspeakable anguish, during which all held their breath, and solemn stillness reigned in the room, a cry of hope and joy broke forth suddenly.

“She has trembled, she has moved!”

This time there was no doubt, no denial possible. The unfortunate girl had certainly moved, very faintly and feebly; but still she had stirred.

A slight color returned to her pallid cheeks; her bosom rose painfully, and sank again; her teeth, closely shut, opened; and with parted lips she stretched forth her neck as if to draw in the fresh air instinctively.

“She is alive!” exclaimed the women, almost frightened, and as if they had seen a miracle performed,—*“she is alive!”*

In an instant, M. Ravinet was by her side.

One of the women, the wife of the gentleman in the first story, held the head of the girl on her arm, and the poor child looked around with that blank, unmeaning eye which we see in mad-houses. They spoke to her; but she did not answer; evidently she did not hear.

“Never mind!” said the merchant, *“she is saved; and, when the doctor comes, he will have little else to do. But she must be attended to, the poor child, and we cannot leave her here alone.”*

The bystanders knew very well what that meant; and yet hardly any one ventured timidly to assent, and say, *“Oh, of course!”*

This reluctance did not deter the good man.

“We must put her to bed,” he went on; *“and, of course, she must have a mattress, bedclothes and blankets. We want wood also (for it is terribly cold here), and sugar for her tea, and a candle.”*

He did not mention all that was needed, but nearly so, and a great deal too much for the people who stood by. As a proof of this, the wife of the broker

put grandly a five-franc piece on the mantelpiece, and quietly slipped out. Some of the others followed her example; but they left nothing. When Papa Ravinet had finished his little speech, there was nobody left but the two ladies who lived on the first floor, and the concierge and his wife. The two ladies, moreover, looked at each other in great embarrassment, as if they did not know what their curiosity might cost them. Had the shrewd man foreseen this noble abandonment of the poor girl? One would have fancied so; for he smiled bitterly, and said,—

“Excellent hearts—pshaw!”

Then, shrugging his shoulders, he added,—

“Luckily, I deal in all possible things. Wait a minute. I’ll run down stairs, and I’ll be back in a moment with all that is needed. After that, we shall see what can be done.”

The face of the concierge’s wife was a picture. Never in her life had she been so much astonished.

“They have changed Papa Ravinet, or I am mad.”

The fact is, that the man was not exactly considered a benevolent and generous mortal. They told stories of him that would have made Harpagon envious, and touched the heart of a constable.

Nevertheless, he re-appeared soon after, almost succumbing under the weight of two excellent mattresses; and, when he came back a second time, he brought much more than he had mentioned.

Miss Henrietta was breathing more freely, but her face was still painfully rigid. Life had come back before the mind had recovered; and it was evident that she was utterly unconscious of her situation, and of what was going on around her. This troubled the two ladies not a little, although they felt very much relieved, and disposed to do everything, now that they were no longer expected to open their purses.

“Well, that is always the way,” said Papa Ravinet boldly. “However, the doctor will bleed her, if there is any necessity.”

And, turning to Master Chevassat, he added,—

“But we are in the way of these ladies; suppose we go down and take something? We can come back when the child is comfortably put to bed.”

The good man lived, to tell the truth, in the same rooms in which the thousand and one things he was continually buying were piled up in vast heaps. There was no fixed place for his bed even. He slept where he could, or, rather, wherever an accidental sale had cleared a space for the time,—one night in a costly bed of the days of Louis XIV., and the next night on a lounge that he would have sold for a few francs. Just now he occupied a little closet not more than three-quarters full; and here he asked the concierge to enter.

He poured some brandy into two small wineglasses, put a teakettle on the fire, and sank into an arm-chair; then he said,—

“Well, M. Chevassat, what a terrible thing this is!”

His visitor had been well drilled by his wife, and said neither yes nor no; but the old merchant was a man of experience, and knew how to loosen his tongue.

“The most disagreeable thing about it,” he said with an absent air, “is, that the doctor will report the matter to the police, and there will be an investigation.”

Master Chevassat nearly dropped his glass.

“What? The police in the house? Well, good-by, then, to our lodgers; we are lost. Why did that stupid girl want to die, I wonder! But no doubt you are mistaken, my dear sir.”

“No, I am not. But you go too fast. They will simply ask you who that girl is, how she supports herself, and where she lived before she came here.”

“That is exactly what I cannot tell.”

The dealer in old clothes seemed to be amazed; he frowned and said,—

“Halloo! that makes matters worse. How came it about that Miss Henrietta had rooms in your house?”

The concierge was evidently ill at ease; something was troubling him sorely.

“Oh! that is as clear as sunlight,” he replied; “and, if you wish it, I’ll tell you the story; you will see there is no harm done.”

“Well, let us hear.”

“Well, then, it was about a year ago this very day, when a gentleman came in, well dressed, an eyeglass stuck in his eye, impudent like a hangman’s assistant, in fact a thoroughly fashionable young man. He said he had seen the notice that there was a room for rent up stairs, and wanted to see it. Of course I told him it was a wretched garret, unfit for people like him; but he insisted, and I took him up.”

“To the room in which Miss Henrietta is now staying?”

“Exactly. I thought he would be disgusted; but no. He looked out of the window, tried the door if it would shut, examined the partition-wall, and at last he said, ‘This suits me; I take the room.’ And thereupon he hands me a twenty-franc piece to make it a bargain. I was amazed.”

If M. Ravinet felt any interest in the story, he took pains not to show it; for his eyes wandered to and fro as if his thoughts were elsewhere, and he was heartily tired of the tedious account.

“And who is that fashionable young man?” he asked.

“Ah! that is more than I know, except that his name is Maxime.”

That name made the old merchant jump as if a shower-bath had suddenly fallen upon his head. He changed color; and his small yellowish eyes had a strange look in them.

But he recovered promptly, so promptly, that his visitor saw nothing; and then he said in a tone of indifference,—

“The young man did not give you his family name?”

“No.”

“But ought you not to have inquired?”

“Ah, there is the trouble! I did not do it.”

Gradually, and by a great effort, Master Chevassat began to master his embarrassment. It looked as if he were preparing himself for the assault, and to get ready for the police-officer.

“I know it was wrong,” he continued; “but you would not have acted differently in my place, my dear sir, I am sure. Just think! My room belonged to M. Maxime, for I had his money in my pocket. I asked him politely where he lived, and if there was any furniture to come. I caught it nicely. He laughed me in the face, and did not even let me finish my question. ‘Do I look,’ he said, ‘like a man who lives in a place like this?’ And when he saw I was puzzled, he went on to tell me that he took the room for a young person from the country, in whom he took an interest, and that the contract and the receipts for rent must all be made out in the name of Miss Henrietta. That was clear enough, wasn’t it? Still it was my duty to know who Miss Henrietta was; so I asked him civilly. But he got angry, and told me that was none of my business, and that some furniture would be sent presently.”

He stopped, waiting for his host to express his approbation by a word or a sign; but, as nothing came, he went on,—

“In fine, I did not dare to insist, and all was done as he wanted it done. That very day a dealer in second-hand furniture brought the pieces you have seen up stairs; and the day after, about eleven o’clock, Miss Henrietta herself appeared. She had not much baggage, I tell you; she brought every thing she owned in a little carpet-bag in her hand.”

The old merchant was stooping over the fire as if his whole attention was given to the teakettle, in which the water was beginning to boil.

“It seems to me, my good friend,” he said, “that you did not act very wisely. Still, if that is really all, I don’t think they are likely to trouble you.”

“What else could there be?”

“How do I know? But if that young damsel had been carried off by M. Maxime, if you were lending a hand in an elopement, I think you would be in a bad box. The law is pretty strict about it, in the case of a minor.”

The concierge protested with a solemn air.

“I have told you the whole truth,” he declared.

But Papa Ravinet did not by any means seem so sure of that.

“That is your lookout,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Still, you may be sure they will ask you how it could happen that one of your tenants should fall into such a state of abject poverty without your giving notice to anybody.”

“Why, in the first place, I do not wait upon my lodgers. They are free to do what they choose in their rooms.”

“Quite right, Master Chevassat! quite right! So you did not know that M. Maxime no longer came to see Miss Henrietta?”

“He still came to see her.”

In the most natural manner in the world, Papa Ravinet raised his arms to heaven, and exclaimed as if horror-struck,—

“What! is it possible? That handsome young man knew how the poor girl suffered? he knew that she was dying of hunger?”

Master Chevassat became more and more troubled. He began to see what the old merchant meant by his questions, and how unsatisfactory his answers were.

“Ah! you ask too many questions,” he said at last. “It was not my duty to watch over M. Maxime. As for Miss Henrietta, as soon as she is able to move, the serpent! I tell you I’ll send her off pretty quickly!”

The old merchant shook his head, and said in his softest voice,—

“My dear sir, you won’t do that, because from today I’ll pay the rent for her room. And, more than that, if you wish to oblige me, you will be very kind to the poor girl, you hear, and even respectful, if you please.”

There was no misunderstanding the meaning of the word “oblige,” from the manner in which he pronounced it; and yet he was about to enforce the recommendation, when a fretting voice exclaimed on the stairs,—

“Chevassat! where are you, Chevassat?”

“It’s my wife,” said the concierge.

And, delighted to get away, he said to Papa Ravinet—

“I understand; she shall be treated as politely as if she were the daughter of the owner of the house. But excuse me, I must attend to the door; they call me, and I must go down stairs.”

He slipped out without waiting for an answer, and utterly unable to guess why the old merchant should take such a sudden interest in the lodger on the fifth floor.

“The rascal!” said Papa Ravinet to himself,—“the rascal!”

But he had found out what he wanted to know. He was alone, and he knew he had no time to lose.

Quickly he drew the teakettle from the fire; and, pulling out Miss Henrietta’s two letters, he held the one that was addressed to M. Maxime de Brevan over the steam of the boiling water. In a moment the mucilage of the envelope was dissolved, and the letter could easily be opened without showing in any way that it had ever been broken open. And now the old man read the following words:—

“You are victorious, M. de Brevan. When you read this, I shall be no longer alive.

“You may raise your head again; you are relieved of all fears. Daniel can come back. I shall carry the secret of your infamy and your cowardice into the grave with me.

“And yet, no!

“I can pardon you, having but a few moments longer to live; but God will not pardon you. I—I shall be avenged. And, if it should require a miracle, that

miracle will be done, so as to inform that honorable man who thought you were his friend, how and why the poor girl died whom he had intrusted to your honor. H.”

The old man was furious.

“The honor of Maxime de Brevan!” he growled with a voice of intense hatred,—“the honor of Maxime de Brevan!”

But his terrible excitement did not keep him from manipulating the other letter, addressed to Count Ville-Handry, in the same manner. The operation was successful; and, without the slightest hesitation, he read:—

“Dear father,—Broken down with anxiety, and faint from exhaustion, I have waited till this morning for an answer to my humble letter, which I had written to you on my knees.

“You have never replied to it; you are inexorable. I see I must die. I shall die. Alas! I can hardly say I die willingly.

“I must appear very guilty in your eyes, father, that you should abandon me thus to the hatred of Sarah Brandon and her people. And yet—ah! I have suffered terribly. I have struggled hard before I could make up my mind to leave your house,—the house where my mother had died, where I had been so happy, and so tenderly beloved as a child by both of you. Ah, if you but knew!

“And yet it was so little I asked of you!—barely enough to bury my undeserved disgrace in a convent.

“Yes, undeserved, father; for I tell you at this hour, when no one utters a falsehood, if my reputation was lost, my honor was not lost.”

Big tears rolled down the cheeks of the old man; and he said in a half-stifled voice,—

“Poor, poor child! And to think that for a whole year I have lived under the same roof with her, without knowing it. But I am here. I am still in time. Oh, what a friend *chance* can be when it chooses!”

Most assuredly not one of the inmates of the house would have recognized Papa Ravinet at this moment; he was literally transfigured. He was no longer the cunning dealer in second-hand articles, the old scamp with the sharp, vulgar face, so well known at all public sales, where he sat in the front rank, watching for good bargains, and keeping cool when all around him were in a state of fervent excitement.

The two letters he had just read had opened anew in his heart more than one badly-healed and badly-scarred wound. He was suffering intensely; and his pain, his wrath, and his hope of vengeance long delayed, gave to his features a strange expression of energy and nobility. With his elbows on the table, holding his head in his hands, and looking apparently into the far past, he seemed to call up the miseries of the past, and to trace out in the future the vague outlines of some great scheme. And as his thoughts began to overflow, so to say, he broke out in a strange, spasmodic monologue,—

“Yes,” he murmured, “yes, I recognize you, Sarah Brandon! Poor child, poor child! Overcome by such horrible intrigues! And that Daniel, who intrusted her to the care of Maxime de Breven—who is he? Why did she not write to him when she suffered thus? Ah, if she had trusted me! What a sad fate! And how can I ever hope to make her confide in *me*?”

An old clock struck seven, and the merchant was suddenly recalled to the present; he trembled in all his limbs.

“Nonsense!” he growled. “I was falling asleep; and that is what I cannot afford to do. I must go up stairs, and hear the child’s confession.”

Instantly, and with amazing dexterity, he replaced the letters in their envelopes, dried them, pasted them up again, and smoothed them down, till every trace of the steam had entirely disappeared. Then looking at his work with an air of satisfaction, he said,—

“That was not so badly done. An expert in the post-office would not suspect it. I may risk it.”

And, thus re-assured, he rapidly mounted up to the fifth story; but there Mrs. Chevassat suddenly barred his way, coming down stairs in a manner which showed clearly that she had lain in wait for him.

“Well, my dear sir,” she said with her sweetest manner: “so you have become Miss Henrietta’s banker?”

“Yes; do you object to it?”

“Oh, not at all! It is none of my business, only”—

She stopped, smiling wickedly, and then added,—

“Only she is a prodigiously pretty girl; and I was just saying to myself, ‘Upon my word, M. Ravinet’s taste is not bad.’”

The merchant was on the point of giving her a pretty sharp, indignant reply; but he controlled himself, because he knew how important it was to mislead the woman; and, forcing himself to smile, he said,—

“You know I count upon your being discreet.”

When he got up, he found that he ought, at least, to give credit to Mamma Chevassat and the two ladies from the first floor, for having employed their time well, and for having skilfully made use of the articles he had contributed. The room, a short time ago cold and bare, had an air of comfort about it now, which was delightful. On the bureau stood a lamp with a shade to prevent the light from hurting the patient’s eyes; a bright fire blazed on the hearth; several old curtains had been hung before the window, one before the other, to replace for the time the missing panes; and on the table stood a teakettle, a china cup, and two small medicine-bottles.

Evidently the doctor had been here during Ravinet’s absence. He had bled the poor girl, prescribed some medicines, and left again, with the assurance that nothing more was needed but perfect quiet.

In fact, there was no trace left of the sufferings and the terrible danger from which the patient had so marvellously escaped, except the deep pallor of her face. Stretched out at full-length on her comfortable bed with its thick mattresses and snow-white sheets, her head propped up high on a couple of pillows, she was breathing freely, as was easily seen by the steady, regular rising and falling of her bosom under the cover.

But life and consciousness had also brought back to her a sense of the horror of her position, and of her capacity for suffering.

Her brow resting on her arm, which was almost concealed by masses of golden hair, immovable, and her eyes fixed steadily upon infinite space, as if trying to pierce the darkness of the future, she would have looked like a statue of sorrow rather than of resignation, but for the big tears which were slowly dropping down her cheeks.

Her exquisite beauty looked almost ethereal under the circumstances; and Papa Ravinet, when he saw her, remained fixed by admiration, standing upon the threshold of the open door. But it occurred to him at once that he might be looked upon as a spy, and that his feelings would be sure to be misinterpreted. He coughed, therefore, to give warning, and then stepped in.

At the noise he made, Henrietta roused herself. When she saw the old merchant, she said in a faint, feeble voice,—

“Ah! it is you, sir. These kind ladies have told me all. You have saved my life.” Then, shaking her head, she added,—

“You have rendered me a sad service, sir.”

She uttered these words so simply, but in a tone of such harrowing grief, that Papa Ravinet was overcome.

“Unhappy child!” he exclaimed, “you do not think of trying it over again?”

She made no answer. It was as good as if she had said, Yes.

“Why, you must be mad!” said the old man, excited almost beyond control. “Only twenty years old, and give up life! That has never been done before. You are suffering now; but you can hardly imagine what compensation Providence may have in store for you hereafter”—

She interrupted him by a gesture, and said,—

“There was no future for me, sir, when I sought refuge in death.”

“But”—

“Oh, don’t try to convince me, sir! What I did, I had to do. I felt how life was leaving me, and I only wished to shorten the agony. I had not eaten any thing for three days when I lit that charcoal. Even to get the charcoal, I had to risk a falsehood, and cheat the woman who let me have it in credit. And yet God knows I was not wanting in courage. I would have done the coarsest, hardest work cheerfully, joyously. But how did I know how to get work? I asked Mrs. Chevassat a hundred times to obtain employment for me; but she always laughed at me; and, when I begged hard, she said”—

She stopped; and her face became crimson with shame. She dared not repeat what the wife of the concierge had said. But she added in a voice trembling with womanly shame and deep indignation,—

“Ah, that woman is a wicked creature!”

The old merchant was probably fully aware of the character of Mrs. Chevassat. He guessed only too readily what kind of advice she had given this poor girl of twenty, who had turned to her for help in her great suffering. He uttered an oath which would have startled even that estimable woman, and then said warmly,—

“I understand, Miss Henrietta, I understand. Do you think I don’t know what you must have suffered? I know poverty, as well as you. I can understand your purpose but too well. Who would not give up life itself when everybody abandons us? But I do not understand your despair, now that circumstances have changed.”

“Alas, sir, how have they changed?”

“How? What do you mean? Don’t you see me? Do you think I would leave you, after having been just in time to save your life? That would be nice! No, my dear child, compose yourself; poverty shall not come near you again, I’ll see to that. You want somebody to advise you, to defend you; and here I am; if you have enemies, let them beware! Come, smile again, and think of the good times a-coming.”

But she did not smile; she looked frightened, almost stupefied. Making a supreme effort, she looked fixedly at the old man to see if she could read in

his face what were his real thoughts. He, on his part, was seriously troubled by his failure to inspire her with confidence.

“Do you doubt my promises?” he asked her.

She shook her head; and uttering her words one by one, as if to give them greater weight, she said,—

“I beg your pardon, sir. I do not doubt you. But I cannot understand why you should offer me your kind protection.”

Papa Ravinet affected a greater surprise than he really felt, and said, raising his hands to heaven,—

“Great God! she mistrusts my good will.”

“Sir!”

“Pray what can you have to fear from me? I am an old man; you are almost a child. I come to help you. Is not that perfectly natural, and quite simple?”

She said nothing; and he remained a few moments buried in thought, as if trying to find out her motive for refusing his help. Suddenly he cried out, beating his forehead,—

“Ah, I have it. That woman Chevassat has talked to you about me, no doubt. Ah, the viper! I’ll crush her one of these days! Come, let us be frank; what has she told you?”

He hoped she would say a word at least. He waited; but nothing came.

Then he broke forth, with a vehemence scarcely controlled, and in words very unexpected from a man like him,—

“Well, I will tell you what the old thief has told you. She told you Papa Ravinet was a dangerous, ill-reputed man, who carried on in the dark all kind of suspicious trades. She told you the old scamp was a usurer, who knew no law, and kept no promise; whose only principle was profit; who dealt in every thing with everybody, selling to-day old iron in junk-shops, and to-morrow cashmere shawls to fashionable ladies; and who lent money on imaginary securities—the talent of men and the beauty of women. In fine,

she told you that it was a piece of good-fortune for a woman to be under my protection, and you knew it was a disgrace.”

He stopped, as if to give the poor girl time to form her judgment, and then went on more calmly,—

“Let us suppose there is such a Papa Ravinet as she has described. But there is another one, whom but few people know, who has been sorely tried by misfortune; and he is the one who now offers his aid to you.”

There is no surer way to make people believe in any virtue we have, or wish to appear to have, than to accuse ourselves of bad qualities, or even vices, which we do not have. But, if the old man had calculated upon this policy, he failed signally. Henrietta remained as icy as ever, and said,—

“Believe me, sir, I am exceedingly obliged to you for all you have done for me, and for your effort to convince me.”

The poor man looked disappointed.

“In fact, you reject my offers, because I do not explain them to you by any of the usual motives. But what can I tell you? Suppose I should say to you that I have a daughter who has secretly left me, so that I do not know what has become of her, and that her memory makes me anxious to serve you. May I not have said to myself, that perhaps she is struggling, just as you have done, with poverty; that she also has been abandoned by her lover?”

The poor girl turned deadly pale as he spoke thus, and interrupted him eagerly, raising herself on her pillows,—

“You are mistaken, sir. My position here may justify such suspicions, I know; but I have no lover.”

He replied,—

“I believe you; I swear I believe you. But, if that is so, how did you get here? and how were you reduced to such extreme suffering?”

At last Papa Ravinet had touched the right chord. The poor girl was deeply moved; and the tears started in her eyes. She said in a low voice,—

“There are secrets which cannot be revealed.”

“Not even when life and honor depend on them?”

“Yes.”

“But”—

“Oh, pray do not insist!”

If Henrietta had known the old merchant, she would have read in his eyes the satisfaction which he felt. A moment before he had despaired of ever gaining her confidence; now he felt almost sure of success. The time seemed to him to have come to strike a decisive blow.

“I have tried my best to win your confidence, I confess; but it was solely in your own interest. If it had been otherwise, do you think I should have asked you these questions, instead of finding out every thing by simply tearing a piece of paper?”

The poor girl could not retain a cry of terror.

“You mean my letters?”

“I have both.”

“Ah! That is why the ladies who nursed me looked for them everywhere in vain.”

Instead of any other answer, he drew them from his pocket, and laid them on the bed with an air of injured innocence. To all appearances, the envelopes had not been touched. Henrietta glanced at them, and then, holding out her hand to the old man, she said,—

“I thank you, sir!”

He did not stir; but he felt that this false evidence of honesty had helped him more than all his eloquence. He hastily added,—

“After all, I could not resist the temptation to read the directions, and to draw my own conclusions. Who is Count Ville-Handry? I suppose he is your father. And M. Maxime de Brevan? No doubt he is the young man who called

to see you so often. Ah, if you would but trust me! If you but knew how a little experience of the world often helps us to overcome the greatest difficulties!”

He was evidently deeply moved.

“However, wait till you are perfectly well again before you come to any decision. Consider the matter carefully. You need not tell me any thing else but what is absolutely necessary for me to know in order to advise you.”

“Yes, indeed! In that way I may”—

“Well, I’ll wait, why, as long as you want me to wait,—two days, ten days.”

“Very well.”

“Only, I pray you, promise me solemnly that you will give up all idea of suicide.”

“I promise you solemnly I will.”

Papa Ravinet’s eyes shone with delight; and he exclaimed joyously,—

“Done! I’ll come up again to-morrow; for, to tell the truth, I am tired to death, and must go and lie down.”

But he told a fib; for he did not go back to his rooms. In spite of the wretched weather, he left the house; and, as soon as he was in the street, he hid himself in a dark corner, from which he could watch the front-door of the house. He remained there a long time, exposed to wind and rain, uttering now and then a low oath, and stamping with his feet to keep himself warm. At last, just as it struck eleven, a hack stopped at No. 23. A young man got out, rang the bell, and entered.

“He is Maxime de Brevan,” murmured the old man. Then he added in a savage voice,—

“I knew he would come, the scoundrel! to see if the charcoal had done its work.”

But the same moment the young man came out again, and jumped into the carriage, which quickly drove off.

“Aha!” laughed the merchant. “No chance for you, my fine fellow! You have lost your game, and you’ll have to try your luck elsewhere; and this time I am on hand. I hold you fast; and, instead of one bill to pay, there will be two now.”

CHAPTER 2

Generally it is in novels only that unknown people suddenly take it into their heads to tell their whole private history, and to confide to their neighbors even their most important and most jealously-guarded secrets. In real life things do not go quite so fast.

Long after the old merchant had left Henrietta, she lay pondering, and undecided as to what she should do on the next day. In the first place, she asked herself who this odd man could be, who had spoken of himself as a dangerous and suspicious person. Was he really what he appeared to be? The girl almost doubted it. Although wholly inexperienced, she still had been struck by certain astounding changes in Papa Ravinet. Thus, whenever he became animated, his carriage, his gestures, and his manners, contrasted with his country-fashioned costume, as if he had for the moment forgotten his lesson. At the same time his language, usually careless and incorrect, and full of slang terms belonging to his trade, became pure and almost elegant.

What was his business? Had he been a dealer in second-hand articles before he became a tenant in No. 23 Grange Street, three years ago? One might very easily have imagined that Papa Ravinet (was that his real name?) had before that been in a very different position. And why not? Is not Paris the haven in which all shipwrecked sailors of society seek a refuge? Does not Paris alone offer to all wretched and guilty people a hiding-place, where they can begin a new life, lost and unknown in the vast multitude? What discoveries might be made there? How many persons, once brilliant lights in the great world, and then, of a sudden, sought for in vain by friend and foe, might be found there again, disguised in strange costumes, and earning a livelihood in most curious ways! Why should not the old merchant be one of this class?

But, even if this were so, it would not have satisfactorily explained to Henrietta the eagerness of Papa Ravinet to serve her, nor his perseverance in offering her his advice. Was it merely from charity that he did all this? Alas! Christian charity is not often so pressing.

Did he know who Henrietta was? Had he at any period of her life come in contact with her? or had his interests ever been mixed up with hers? Was he anxious to make a return for some kindness shown to him? or did he count upon some reward in the future? Who could tell?

“Would it not be the height of imprudence to put myself in the power of this man?” thought the poor girl.

If, on the other hand, she rejected his offers, she fell back into that state of forlorn wretchedness, from which she had only been able to save herself by suicide.

This view was all the more urgent, as the poor child, like all persons who have been rescued from death only after having exhausted their sufferings, now began to cling to life with an almost desperate affection. It seemed as if the contact with death had wiped out at once all the memory of the past, and all the threats of the future.

“O Daniel!” she said to herself, trembling all over,—“O Daniel! my only friend upon earth, what would you suffer if you knew that you lost me forever by the very means you chose to secure my safety!”

To refuse the assistance offered her by Papa Ravinet would have required an amount of energy which she did not possess. The voice of reflection continually said to her,—

“The old man is your only hope.”

It never occurred to her to conceal the truth from Papa Ravinet, or to deceive him by a fictitious story. She only thought how she could tell him the truth without telling him all; how she could confess enough to enable him to serve her, and yet not to betray a secret which she held more dear than her happiness, her reputation, and life itself.

Unfortunately, she was the victim of one of those intrigues which are formed and carried out within the narrow circle of a family,—intrigues of the most abominable character, which people suspect, and often even know perfectly well, and which yet remain unpunished, because they cannot be reached by the law.

Henrietta's father, Count Ville-Handry, was in 1845 one of the wealthiest land-owners of the province of Anjou. The good people near Rosiers and Saint Mathurin were fond of pointing out to strangers the massive towers of Ville-Handry, a magnificent castle half hid among noble old woods on the beautiful slopes of the bluffs which line the Loire.

"There," they said, "lives a true gentleman, a little too proud, perhaps, but, nevertheless, a true gentleman."

For contrary to the usual state of things in the country, where envy is apt to engender hatred, the count was quite popular, in spite of his title and his large fortune. He was at that time about forty years old, quite tall and good-looking, solemn and courteous, obliging, although reserved, and very good-natured as long as no one spoke in his presence of the church or the reigning family, the nobility or the clergy, of his hounds or the wines of his vineyards, or of various other subjects on which he had what he chose to consider his "own opinions."

As he spoke but rarely, and said little at the time, he said fewer foolish things than most people, and thus obtained the reputation of being clever and well-informed, of which he was very proud and very careful. He lived freely, almost profusely, and thus put aside every year but little more than about half his income. He had all his clothes made in Paris, was proud of his foot, and always wore gloves.

His house was kept handsomely; and his gardens cost him a good deal of money. He kept a pack of hounds, and six hunters. Finally, he kept half a dozen lazy servants in the house, whose gorgeous liveries, with the family coat-of-arms, were a source of perpetual wonder at Saint Mathurin.

He would have been perfect, but for his passion for hunting.

As soon as the season opened, he was sure to be found, on foot or on horseback, crossing the stubblefields, jumping over hedges, or floundering in the swamps. This he carried so far, that the ladies of the neighborhood, who had daughters, blamed him to his face for his imprudence, and scolded him for risking his precious health so recklessly.

This nobleman, forty years old, and enjoying all that heart could desire, was unmarried. And yet he had not lacked opportunities to remedy the evil. There was not a good mother for twenty miles around who did not covet this prize for her daughter,—thirty thousand dollars a year, and a great man.

He had only to appear at a ball in the provincial towns, and he was the hero. Mothers and daughters kept their sweetest smiles for him; and kind welcomes were offered on all sides. But all these manoeuvres had been fruitless; he had escaped from all snares, and resisted the most cunning devices.

Why was he so much opposed to marriage? His friends found the explanation in a certain person, half housekeeper, half companion, who lived in the castle, and was very pretty and very designing. But there are malicious tongues everywhere.

The next year, however, an event occurred which was calculated to give some ground to these idle, gossiping tales. One fine morning in the month of July, 1847, the lady died suddenly of apoplexy. Six weeks later, a report began to spread that Count Ville-Handry was going to be married.

The report was well founded. The count did marry. The fact could not be doubted any longer, when the banns were read, and the announcement appeared in the official journal. And whom do you think he married? The daughter of a poor widow, the Baroness Rupert, who lived in great poverty at a place called Rosiers, having nothing but a small pension derived from her husband, who had been a colonel of artillery.

If she had, at least, been of good and ancient family; if she had been, at least, a native of the province!

But no. No one knew exactly who she was, or where she came from. Some people said the colonel had married her in Austria; others, in Sweden. Her husband, they added, had been made a baron after the fashion of others, who dubbed themselves such during the first empire, and had no right to call himself noble.

On the other hand, Pauline de Rupert, then twenty-three years old, was in the full bloom of youth, and marvellously beautiful. Moreover, she had, up

to this time, been looked upon as a sensible, modest girl, very bright and very sweet withal; in fact, possessed of every quality and virtue that can make life happy, and add to the fame of a great house.

But now, not a cent, no dower, not even a trousseau!

Everybody was amazed; and a perfect storm of indignation arose in the neighborhood. Was it possible, was it natural, that a great nobleman like the count should end thus miserably, ridiculously? that he should marry a penniless girl, an adventuress,—he who had had the pick and choice of the richest and greatest ladies of the land?

Was Count Ville-Handry a fool? or was he only insane about Miss Rupert? Was she not perhaps, after all, a designing hypocrite, who had very quietly, in her retired home, woven the net in which the lion of Anjou was now held captive?

People would have been less astonished, if they had known, that, for years, a great intimacy had existed between the mother of the bride and the housekeeper at the castle. But, on the other hand, this fact might have led to very different surmises still.

However that might be, the count was not suffered long to remain in doubt as to the entire change of opinion in the neighborhood. He saw it as soon as he paid the usual visits in the town of Angers, and at the houses of the nobility near him. No more affectionate smiles, no tender welcomes, no little white hands stealthily seeking his. The doors that formerly seemed to fly open at his mere approach now turned but slowly on their hinges; some remained even closed, the owners being reported not at home, although the count knew perfectly well that they were in.

One very noble and very pious old lady, who gave the keynote to society, had said in the most decided manner,—

“For my part, I shall never receive at my house a damsel who used to give music-lessons to my nieces, even if she had caught and entrapped a Bourbon!”

The charge was true. Pauline, in order to provide her mother with some of the comforts which are almost indispensable to old people, had given lessons on the piano in the neighborhood. Her terms had been low enough; now they blamed her for the sacrifice. They would have blamed her for the noblest of virtues; for all the blame was laid upon her. When people met her, they looked away, so as not to have to bow to her. Even when she was leaning on the count's arm, there were persons who spoke very kindly to him, and did not say a word to his wife, as if they had not seen her, or she had not existed at all. This impertinence went so far, that at last Count Ville-Handry, one day, almost beside himself with anger, seized one of his neighbors by the collar of his coat, shook him violently, and shouted out to him,—

“Do you see the countess, my wife, sir? How shall I chastise you to cure you of your near-sightedness?”

Foreseeing a duel, the impertinent man made his excuses; and his experience put the rest of them on their guard. But their opinions remained unchanged; open war only changed into secret opposition, that was all.

Fate, however, always more kind than man, held a reward in store for Count Ville-Handry, which amply repaid him for his heroism in marrying a poor girl. An uncle of his wife's, a banker at Dresden, died, and left his “beloved niece Pauline” half a million dollars. This immensely wealthy man, who had never assisted his sister in her troubles, and who would have disinherited the daughter of a soldier of fortune, had been flattered by the idea of writing in his last will the name of his niece, the “high and mighty Countess Ville-Handry.”

This unexpected piece of good-fortune ought to have delighted the young wife. She might now have had her vengeance on all her miserable slanderers, and enjoyed a boundless popularity. But far from it. She had never appeared more sad than on the day when the great news reached her.

For on that very day she for the first time cursed her marriage. A voice within her warned her that she ought never to have yielded to the entreaties and the orders of her mother. An excellent daughter, as she was

to become the best of mothers, and the most faithful of wives, she had sacrificed herself. And now an accident made all her sacrifices useless, and punished her for having done her duty.

Ah, why had she not resisted, at least for the purpose of gaining time?

For when she was a girl she had dreamed of a very different future. Long before giving herself to the count, she had, of her own free will, given her heart to another. She had bestowed her first and warmest affections upon a young man who was only two or three years older than she,—Peter Champcey, the son of one of those marvellously rich farmers who live in the valley of the Loire.

He worshipped her. Unfortunately one obstacle had risen between them from the beginning,—Pauline's poverty. It could not be expected that those keen, thrifty peasants, Champcey's father and mother, would ever permit one of their sons—they had two—to commit the folly of making a love-match.

They had worked hard for their children. The oldest, Peter, was to be a lawyer; the other, Daniel, who wanted to become a sailor, was studying day and night to prepare for his examination. And the old couple were not a little proud of these "gentlemen," their sons. They told everybody who would listen, that, in return for the costly education they were giving them, they expected them to marry large fortunes.

Peter knew his parents so well, that he never mentioned Pauline to them.

"When I am of age," he said to himself, "it will be a different matter."

Alas! Why had not Pauline's mother waited at least till then?

Poor young girl! On the day on which she entered the castle of Ville-Handry, she had sworn she would bury this love of hers so deep in the innermost recesses of her heart, that it should never come up and trouble her thoughts. And she had kept her word.

But now it suddenly broke forth, more ardent, more powerful, than ever, till it well-nigh overcame her, and crushed her—sweetly and sadly, like the

memory of lost days, and at the same time cruel and heart-rending, like bitter remorse.

What had become of him? When he had heard that she was going to marry the count, he had written to her a letter full of despair, in which he overwhelmed her with irony and contempt. Later, whether he had forgotten her or not, he also had married; and the two lovers who had once hoped to pursue their way through life leaning one upon the other now went each their own way.

For long hours the poor young wife struggled in the solitude of her chamber against these ghosts of the past which crowded around her. But, if ever a guilty thought called up a blush on her brow, she quickly triumphed over it. Like a brave, loyal woman, she renewed her oath, and swore to devote herself entirely to her husband. He had rescued her from abject poverty, and bestowed upon her his fortune and his name; and she owed it to him in return to make him happy.

She needed all her courage, all her energy, to fulfil her vows; for the count's character lay fully open before her now, after two years of married life. She knew precisely how narrow his mind was, how empty his thoughts, and how cold his heart. She had long since found out that the brilliant man of the world, whom everybody considered so clever, was in reality an absolute nullity, incapable of any thought that was not suggested to him by others, and at the same time full of overweening self-esteem, and absurdly obstinate.

The worst, however, was, that the count was very near hating his wife. He had heard so many people say that she was not his equal, that he finally believed it himself. Besides, he blamed her for the prestige which he had lost.

An ordinary woman would have shrunk from the difficult task which Pauline had assumed, and would have thought that nothing more could be expected of her than to keep sacred her marriage-vows. But the countess was not an ordinary woman. Full of resignation, she meant to do more than her duty.

Fortunately, a cradle standing by her bedside made the task somewhat easier. She had a daughter, her Henrietta; and upon that darling curly head she built a thousand castles in the air. From that moment she roused herself from the languor to which she had given way for nearly two years, and set to work to study the count with that amazing sagacity which a high stake is apt to give.

A remark accidentally made by her husband cast a new light upon her fate. One morning, when they had finished breakfast, he said,—

“Ah! Nancy was very fond of you. The day before she died, when she knew she was going, she made me promise her to marry you.”

This Nancy was the count’s former housekeeper.

After this awkward speech, the poor countess saw clearly enough what position that woman had really held at the castle. She understood how, modestly keeping in the background, and sheltering herself under the very humility of her position, she had been in truth the intellect, the energy, and the strong will, of her master. Her influence over him had, besides, been so powerful, that it had survived her, and that she had been obeyed even in the grave.

Although cruelly humiliated by this confession of her husband’s, the countess had sufficient self-control not to blame him for his weakness. She said to herself,—

“Well, be it so. For his happiness and for our peace, I will stoop to play the part Nancy played.”

This was more easily said than done; for the count was not the man to be led openly, nor was he willing to listen to good advice, simply because it was good. Irritable, jealous, and despotic, like all weak men, he dreaded nothing so much as what he called an insult to his authority. He meant to be master everywhere, in every thing, and forever. He was so sensitive on this point, that his wife had only to show the shadow of a purpose of her own, and he went instantly to work to oppose and prohibit it.

“I am not a weather-cock!” was one of his favorite sayings.

Poor fellow! He did not know that those who turn to the opposite side of the wind, nevertheless turn, as well as those who go with the wind. The countess knew it; and this knowledge made her strong. After working for many months patiently and cautiously, she thought she had learnt the secret of managing him, and that henceforth she would be able to control his will whenever she was in earnest.

The opportunity to make the experiment came very soon. Although the great people of the neighborhood had generally come round and treated her quite fairly now, especially since she had become an heiress, the countess found her position unpleasant, and was anxious to leave the country. It recalled to her, besides, too many painful memories. There were certain roads and lanes which she could never pass without a pang at her heart. On the other hand, it was well known that the count had sworn he would end his life in the province. He hated large cities; and the mere idea of leaving his castle, where every thing was arranged to suit his habits, made him seriously angry.

People would not believe it, therefore, when report first arose that he was going to leave Ville-Handry, that he had bought a town-house in Paris and that he would shortly go there to establish himself permanently in the capital.

“It was much against the will of the countess,” he said, full of delight at her disappointment. “She would not agree to it at all; but I am not a weather-cock. I insisted on having my way, and she yielded at last.”

So that in the latter part of October, in 1851, the Count and the Countess Ville-Handry moved into the magnificent house in Varennes Street, a princely mansion, which, however, did not cost them more than a third of its actual value, as they happened to buy at a time when real estate was very low.

But it had been comparatively child’s play to bring the count to Paris; the real difficulty was to keep him there. Nothing was more likely than that, deprived of the active exercise and the fresh air he enjoyed in the country, he should miss his many occupations and duties, and either succumb to weariness, or seek refuge in dissipation. His wife foresaw this difficulty, and

looked for an object that might give the count abundant employment and amusement.

Already before leaving home she had dropped in his mind the seed of that passion, which, in a man of fifty, can take the place of all others,—ambition. Thus he came to Paris with the secret desire and the hope of becoming a leader in politics, and making his mark in some great affair of state.

The countess however, aware of the dangers which beset a man who ventures upon such slippery ground, determined first to examine the condition of things so as to be able to warn him in time. Fortunately her fortune and her name were of great service to her in this enterprise. She managed to assemble at her house all the celebrities of the day. Her relations helped her; and soon her Wednesdays and Saturdays became famous in Paris. People exerted themselves to the utmost to obtain an invitation to her state dinners, or her smaller parties on Sundays. Her house in Varennes Street was looked upon as neutral ground, where political intrigues and party strife were alike tabooed. The countess spent a whole winter in making her observations.

The world, seeing her sit modestly by her fireside, thought she was wholly occupied with her pretty daughter, Henrietta, who was always playing or reading by her side. But she was all the time listening, and trying, with all her mental powers, to understand the great questions of the day. She studied characters; watched the passions of some, and discovered the cunning tricks of others, ever anxious to find out what enemies she would have to fear, and what allies to conciliate. Like one of those ill-taught professors who study in the morning what they mean to teach in the afternoon, she prepared herself for the lessons which she soon meant to give. Fortunately her apprenticeship was short, thanks to her superior intellect, her womanly cleverness, and rare talents which no one suspected.

She soon reaped the fruit of her labors.

The next winter the count, who had so far kept aloof from politics, came out with his opinions. He soon made his mark, aided by his fine appearance, his elegant manners, and imperturbable self-possession. He spoke in public, and made an impression by his good common-sense. He advised others, and

they were struck by his sagacity. He had soon enthusiastic partisans, and, of course, as violent adversaries. His friends encouraged him to become the leader of his party; and he worked day and night to achieve that end.

“Unfortunately I have to pay for it at home,” he said to his intimate friends; “for my wife is one of those timid women who cannot understand that men are made for the excitement of public life. I should be still in the province, if I had listened to her.”

She enjoyed her work in quiet delight. The greater the success of her husband in the world, the prouder she became of her own usefulness to him. Her feelings were very much those of a dramatic poet who hears the applause given to the characters which he has created.

But there was this wonderful feature in her work,—that nobody suspected her; no one, not even her own child. She wanted Henrietta, as little as the world, to know what she was to her husband; and she taught her not only to love him as her father, but to respect and admire him as a man of eminence. Of course, the count was the very last man to suspect any thing. He might have been told all, and he would have believed nothing.

He fancied he had discovered himself the whole line of proceeding which his wife had so carefully traced out for him. In the full sincerity of his heart, he believed he had composed and written out the speeches which she drew up for him; and the articles for the newspapers, and the letters, which she dictated, appeared to him all to have sprung from his own fertile brains. He was even sometimes surprised at the want of good sense in his wife, and pointed out to her, quite ironically, that the steps from which she tried hardest to dissuade him were the most successful he took. But no irony could turn the countess from the path which she had traced out for herself; nor did she ever allow a word or even a smile to escape her, that might have betrayed her secret. When her husband became sarcastic, she bowed her head, and said nothing. But, the more he gloried in his utter nullity, the more she delighted in her work, and found ample compensation in the approval of her own conscience.

The count had been so exceedingly good as to take her when she was penniless; she owed him the historic name she bore and a large fortune; but,

in return, she had given him, and without his being aware of it, a position of some eminence. She had made him happy in the only way in which a small and ordinary man could be made happy,—by gratifying his vanity.

Now she was no longer under obligations to him.

“Yes,” she said to herself, “we are quits, fairly quits!”

Now also, she reproached herself no longer for the long hours during which her thoughts, escaping from the control of her will, had turned to the man of her early choice.

Poor fellow! She had been his evil star.

His life had been embittered from the day on which he found himself forsaken by her whom he loved better than life itself. He had given up every thing.

His parents had “hunted up” an heiress, as they called it, and he had married her dutifully. But the good old people had been unlucky. The bride, chosen among a thousand, had brought their son a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars; but she was a bad woman. And after eight years of wretched, intolerable married life, Peter Champcey had shot himself, unable to bear any longer his domestic misfortunes, and the infidelity of his wife.

He had, however, avoided committing this crime at Angers, where he held a high official position. He had gone to Rosiers, the house formerly occupied by Pauline’s mother; and there, in a narrow lane, his body was found by some peasants coming home from market. The ball had so fearfully disfigured his face, that at first no one recognized him; and the accident made a terrible sensation.

The countess heard of it first through her husband. He could not understand, he said, how a man in good position, with a bright future before him, and a large income to support him, could thus kill himself.

“And to choose such a strange place for his suicide!” he added. “It is evident the man was insane.”

But the countess did not hear this. She had fainted. She understood but too well why Peter had wished to die in that lane overshadowed by old elm-trees.

“I killed him,” she thought, “I killed him!”

The blow was so sudden and so severe, that she came near dying. Fortunately her mother died nearly at the same time; and this misfortune helped to explain her utter prostration and deep grief.

Her mother had been gradually fading away, after having had all she desired, and living in real luxury during her last years. Her selfishness was so intense, that she never became aware of the cruelty with which she had sacrificed her daughter.

Sacrificed, however, she really had been; for never did woman suffer what the countess endured from the day on which her lover’s suicide added bitter remorse to all her former grief. What would have become of her, if her child had not bound her to life! But she resolved to live; she felt that she was bound to live for Henrietta’s sake.

Thus she struggled on quite alone, for she had not a soul in whom she could confide, when one afternoon, as she was going down stairs, a servant came to tell her that there was a young man in naval uniform below, who desired to have the honor of waiting upon her.

The servant handed her his card; she took it, and read,—

“Daniel Champcey.”

It was Daniel, Peter’s brother. Pale as death, the countess turned as if to escape.

“What must I say?” asked the servant, rather surprised at the emotion shown by his mistress.

The poor woman felt as if she was going to faint.

“Show him up,” she replied in a scarcely audible voice,—“show him up.”

When she looked up again, there stood before her a young man, twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with a frank and open face, and clear, bright eyes, beaming with intelligence and energy.

The countess pointed at a chair near her; for she could not have uttered a word to save her daughter's life.

He could not help noticing her embarrassment; but he did not guess the cause. Peter had never mentioned Pauline's name in his father's house.

So he sat down, and explained why he came, showing neither embarrassment nor forwardness.

As soon as he had graduated at the Naval Academy, he had been made a midshipman on board "The Formidable," and there he was still. A younger man had recently been wrongly promoted over him; and he had asked for leave of absence to appeal to the secretary of the navy. He felt quite sure of the justice of his claims; but he also knew that strong recommendations never spoil a good cause. In fact, he hoped that Count Ville-Handry, of whose kindness and great influence he had heard much, would consent to indorse his claims.

Gradually, and while listening to him, the countess recovered her calmness.

"My husband will be happy to serve a countryman of his," she replied; "and he will tell you so himself, if you will be kind enough to wait for him, and stay to dinner."

Daniel did stay. At table he was placed by the side of Henrietta, who was then fifteen years old; and the countess, seeing these two young and handsome people side by side, was suddenly struck with an idea which seemed to her nothing less than inspiration from on high. Why might she not intrust the future happiness of her daughter to the brother of the poor man who had loved her so dearly? Thus she might make some amends for her own conduct, and show some respect to his memory.

"Yes," she said to herself that night, before falling asleep, "it must be so. Daniel shall be Henrietta's husband."

Thus it came about, that, only a fortnight later, Count Ville-Handry said to one of his intimate friends, pointing out Daniel,—

“That young Champcey is a very remarkable young man; he has a great future before him. And one of these days, when he is a lieutenant, and a few years older, if it should so happen that he liked Henrietta, and asked me for my consent, I should not say no. The countess might think and say of it what she chooses, I am master.”

After that time Daniel became, unfortunately, a constant visitor at the house in Varennes Street.

He had not only obtained ample satisfaction at headquarters, but, by the powerful influence of certain high personages, he had been temporarily assigned to duty in the bureau of the navy department, with the promise of a better position in active service hereafter.

Thus Daniel and Henrietta saw a great deal of each other, and, to all appearances, began to love each other.

“O God!” thought the countess, “why are they not a few years older?”

The poor lady had for some months been troubled by dismal presentiments. She felt as if she would not live long; and she trembled at the idea of leaving her child without any other protector but the count.

If Henrietta had at least known the truth, and, instead of admiring her father as a man of superior ability, learned to mistrust his judgment! A hundred times the countess was on the point of revealing her secret. Alas! her great delicacy always kept her from doing so.

One night, as she returned from a great ball, she suddenly was seized with vertigo. She did not think much of it, but sent for a cup of tea.

When it came, she was standing before the fireplace, undoing her hair; but, instead of taking it, she suddenly raised her hand to her throat, uttered a hoarse sound, and fell back.

They raised her up. In an instant the whole house was alive. They sent for the doctors. All was in vain.

The Countess Ville-Handry had died from disease of the heart.

CHAPTER 3

Henrietta, roused by the noise all over the house, the voices in the passages, and the steps on the staircase, and suspecting that some accident had happened, had rushed at once into her mother's room.

There she had heard the doctors utter the fatal words,—

“All is over!”

There were five or six of them in the room; and one of them, his eyes swollen from sleeplessness, and overcome with fatigue, had drawn the count into a corner, and, pressing his hands, repeated over and over again,—

“Courage, my dear sir, courage!”

He, overcome, with downcast eye, and cold perspiration on his pallid brow, did not understand him; for he continued to stammer incessantly,—

“It is nothing, I hope. Did you not say it was nothing?”

There are misfortunes so terrible, so overwhelming in their suddenness, that the stunned mind refuses to believe them, and denies their genuineness in spite of their actual presence.

How could any one imagine or comprehend that the countess, who but a moment ago was standing there full of life, in perfect health, and the whole vigor of her years, apparently perfectly happy, smiling, and beloved by all,—how could one conceive that she had all at once ceased to exist?

They had laid her on her bed in her ball costume,—a blue satin dress trimmed with lace. The flowers were still in her hair; and the blow had come with such suddenness, that, even in death, she retained the appearance of life; she was still warm, her skin transparent, and her limbs supple. Even her eyes, still wide open, retained their expression, and betrayed the last sensation that had filled her heart,—terror. It looked as if she had had at

that last moment a revelation of the future which her too great cautiousness had prepared for her daughter.

“My mother is not dead; oh, no! she cannot be dead!” exclaimed Henrietta. And she went from one doctor to the other, urging them, beseeching them, to find some means—

What were they doing there, looking so blank, instead of acting? Were they not going to restore her,—they whose business it was to cure people, and who surely had saved a number of people? They turned away from her, distressed by her terrible grief, expressing their inability to help by a gesture; and then the poor girl went back to the bed, and, bending over her mother, watched with a painfully bewildered air for her return to life. It seemed to her as if she felt that noble heart still beat under her hand, and as if those lips, sealed forever by death, must speak again to re-assure her.

They attempted to take her away from that heartrending sight; they begged her to go to her room; but she insisted upon staying. They tried to remove her by force; but she clung to the bed, and vowed that they should tear her to pieces sooner than make her leave her mother.

At last, however, the truth broke upon her. She sank down upon her knees by the side of the bed, hiding her face in the drapery, and repeating with fierce sobs,—

“My mother, my darling mother!”

It was nearly morning, and the pale dawn was stealing into the room, when at last some sisters of charity came, who had been sent for; and then a couple of priests; a little later (it was towards the end of January) one of the count’s friends appeared, who undertook all those sickening preparations which our civilization demands in such cases. On the next day the funeral took place.

More than two hundred persons called to condole with the count, twenty-five or thirty ladies came and kissed Henrietta, calling her their poor dear child.

Then horses were heard in the court-yard, coachmen quarrelling; orders were given; and at last the hearse rolled away solemnly—and that was all.

Henrietta wept and prayed in her chamber.

Late in the day, the count and Henrietta sat down at table alone for the first time in their lives; but they did not eat a morsel. How could they do it, seeing before them the empty seat, once occupied by her who was the life of the whole house, and now never to be filled again?

And thus, for a long time, their meals were a steady reminder of their loss. During the day they were seen wandering about the house, without any apparent purpose, as if looking or hoping for something to happen.

But there was another true and warm heart, far from that house, which had been sorely wounded by the death of the countess. Daniel had loved her like a mother; and in his heart a mysterious voice warned him, that, in losing her, he had well-nigh lost Henrietta.

He had called several times at the house of mourning; but it was only a fortnight later that he was admitted. When Henrietta saw him, she felt sorry she had not let him come in before. He had apparently suffered as much as she; he looked pale; and his eyes were red.

They remained for some time seated opposite each other, without saying a word, but deeply moved, and feeling instinctively that their common grief bound them more firmly than ever to each other.

The count, in the meantime, walked up and down in the large room. He was so much changed, that one might have failed to recognize him. There was a strange want of steadiness in his movements; he looked almost like a paralytic, whose crutches had suddenly broken down. Was he conscious of the immense loss which he had suffered? His vanity was too great to render that very probable.

“I shall master my grief as soon as I go back to work,” he said.

He ought not to have done it; but he resumed his duties as a politician at a time when they had become unusually difficult, and when great things were expected of him. Two or three absurd, ridiculous, in fact unpardonable

blunders, ruined him forever. He lost his reputation as a statesman, and with it his influence.

As yet, however, his reputation remained uninjured. No one suspected the truth. They attributed the sudden failure of his faculties to the great sorrow that had befallen him in the death of his wife.

“Who would have thought that he had loved her so deeply?” they asked one another.

Henrietta was as much misled as the others, and perhaps even more. Her respect and her admiration, so far from being diminished, only increased day by day. She loved him all the more dearly as she watched the apparent effect of his incurable grief.

He was really deeply grieved, but only by his fall. How had it come about? He tortured his mind in vain; he could not find a plausible explanation, and said over and over again,—

“It is perfectly inexplicable.”

He talked of regular plots, of a coalition of his enemies, of the black ingratitude of men, and their fickleness. At first he had thought of going back to the country. But gradually, as day followed day, and weeks grew into months, his wounded vanity began to heal; he forgot his misfortunes, and adopted new habits of life.

He was a great deal at his club now, rode much on horseback, went to the theatres, and dined with his friends. Henrietta was delighted; for she had at one time begun to be seriously concerned for her father’s health. But she was not a little amazed when she saw him lay aside his mourning, and exchange his simple costumes, suitable to his age, for the eccentric fashions of the day, wearing brilliant waistcoats and fancy-colored trousers.

Some days later matters grew worse.

One morning Count Ville-Handry, who was quite gray, appeared at breakfast with jet black beard and hair. Henrietta could not restrain an expression of amazement. But he smiled, and said with considerable embarrassment,—

“My servant is making an experiment; he thinks this goes better with my complexion, and makes me look younger.”

Evidently something strange had occurred in the count's life. But what was it?

Henrietta, although ignorant of the world, and at that time innocence personified, was, nevertheless, a woman, and hence had the keen instinct of her sex, which is better than all experience. She reflected, and she thought she could guess what had happened.

After hesitating for three days, the poor girl, saddened rather than frightened, confided her troubles to Daniel. But she had only spoken a few words when he interrupted her, and, blushing deeply, said,—

“Do not trouble yourself about that, Miss Henrietta; and, whatever your father may do, do not mind it.”

That advice was more easily given than followed; for the count's ways became daily more extraordinary. He had gradually drifted away from his old friends and his wife's friends, and seemed to prefer to their high-bred society the company of very curious people of all kinds. A number of young men came in the forenoon on horseback, and in the most unceremonious costumes. They came in smoking their cigars, and asked at once for liquors and absinthe. In the afternoon, another set of men made their appearance,—vulgar and arrogant people, with huge whiskers and enormous watch-chains, who gesticulated vehemently, and were on most excellent terms with the servants. They were closeted with the count; and their discussions were so loud, they could be heard all over the house.

What were the grave discussions that made so much noise? The count undertook to enlighten his daughter. He told her, that, having been ill-treated in politics, he intended to devote himself henceforth to grand enterprises, and hoped confidently to realize an enormous fortune, while, at the same time, rendering great service to certain branches of industry.

A fortune? Why should he want money? What with his own estate, and what with his wife's fortune, he had already an income of a hundred thousand

dollars. Was that not quite enough for a man of sixty-five and for a young girl who did not spend a thousand a year on her toilet?

Henrietta asked him timidly, for she was afraid of hurting her father's feelings, why he wanted more money.

He laughed heartily, tapped her cheek playfully, and said,—

“Ah, you would like to rule your papa, would you?”

Then he added more seriously,—

“Am I so old, my little lady, that I ought to go into retirement? Have you, also, gone over to my enemies?”

“Oh, dear papa!”

“Well, my child, then you ought to know that a man such as I am cannot condemn himself to inactivity, unless he wants to die. I do not want any more money; what I want is an outlet for my energy and my talents.”

This was so sensible a reply, that both Henrietta and Daniel felt quite reassured.

Both had been taught by the countess to look upon her husband as a man of genius; hence they felt sure that he had only to undertake a thing, and he was sure to succeed. Besides, Daniel hoped that such grave matters of business would keep the count from playing the fashionable young man.

But it seemed as if nothing could turn him from this folly; he became daily younger and faster. He wore the most eccentric hats on one ear. He ordered his coats to be made in the very last fashion; and never went out without a camellia or a rosebud in his buttonhole. He no longer contented himself with dyeing his hair, but actually began to rouge, and used such strong perfumes, that one might have followed his track through the streets by the odors he diffused around him.

At times he would sit for hours in an arm-chair, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his brow knit, and his thoughts apparently bent upon some grave question. If he was spoken to, he started like a criminal caught in the act. He who formerly prided himself on his magnificent appetite (he saw in it a

resemblance to Louis XIV.) now hardly ate any thing. On the other hand, he was forever complaining of oppression in the chest, and of palpitation of the heart.

His daughter repeatedly found him with tears in his eyes,—big tears, which passed through his dyed beard, and fell like drops of ink on his white shirt-front. Then, again, these attacks of melancholy would be followed by sudden outbursts of joy. He would rub his hands till they pained him; he would sing and almost dance with delight.

Now and then a commissionaire (it was always the same man) came and brought him a letter. The count tore it from his hands, threw him a gold-piece, and went to shut himself up in his study.

“Poor papa!” said Henrietta to Daniel. “There are moments when I tremble for his mind.”

At last, one evening after dinner, when he had drunk more than usually, perhaps in order to gain courage, he drew his daughter on his knee, and said in his softest voice,—

“Confess, my dear child, that in your innermost heart you have more than once called me a very bad father. I dare say you blame me for leaving you so constantly alone here in this large house, where you must die from sheer weariness.”

Such a charge would have been but too well founded. Henrietta was left more completely to herself than the daughter of a workman, whose business keeps him from home all day long. The workman, however, takes his child out, at least on Sundays.

“I am never weary, papa,” replied Henrietta.

“Really? Why, how do you occupy yourself?”

“Oh! in the first place I attend to the housekeeping, and try my best to make home pleasant to you. Then I embroider, I sew, I study. In the afternoon my music-teacher comes, and my English master. At night I read.”

The count smiled; but it was a forced smile.

“Never mind!” he broke in; “such a lonely life cannot go on. A girl of your age stands in need of some one to advise her, to pet her,—an affectionate and devoted friend. That is why I have been thinking of giving you another mother.”

Henrietta drew back her arm, which she had wound round her father’s neck; and, rising suddenly, she said,—

“You think of marrying again?”

He turned his head aside, hesitated moment, and then replied,—

“Yes.”

At first the poor girl could not utter a word, so great were her stupor, her indignation, her bitter grief; then she made an effort, and said in a pained voice,—

“Do you really tell me so, papa? What! you would bring another wife to this house, which is still alive with the voice of her whom we have lost? You would make her sit down in the chair in which she used to sit, and let her rest her feet on the cushion which she embroidered? Perhaps you would even want me to call her mamma? Oh, dear papa! surely you do not think of such profanation!”

The count’s trouble was pitiful to behold. And yet, if Henrietta had been less excited, she would have read in his eye that his mind was made up.

“What I mean to do is done in your behalf, my dear child,” he stammered out at last. “I am old; I may die; we have no near relations; what would become of you without a friend?”

She blushed crimson; but she said timidly,—

“But, papa, there is M. Daniel Champcey.”

“Well?”

The count’s eyes shone with delight as he saw that she was falling into the pit he had dug for her. The poor girl went on,—

“I thought—I had hoped—poor mamma had told me—in fact, since you had allowed M. Daniel to come here”—

“You thought I intended to make him my son-in-law?”

She made no answer.

“That was in fact the idea your mother had. She had certainly very odd notions, against which I had to use the whole strength of my firm will. A sailor is a sorry kind of husband, my dear child; a word from his minister may part him for years from his wife.”

Henrietta remained silent. She began to understand the nature of the bargain which her father proposed to her, and it made her indignant. He thought he had said enough for this time, and left her with these words,—

“Consider, my child; for my part, I will also think of it.”

What should she do? There were a hundred ways; but which to choose? Finding herself alone, she took a pen, and for the first time in her life she wrote to Daniel:—

“I must speak to you *instantly*. Pray come.

“Henrietta.”

She gave the letter to a servant, ordering him to carry it at once to its address; and then she waited in a state of feverish anxiety, counting the minutes.

Daniel Champcey had, in a house not far from the university, three rooms, the windows of which looked out upon the gardens of an adjoining mansion, where the flowers bloomed brilliantly, and the birds sang joyously. There he spent almost all the time which was not required by his official duties. A walk in company with his friend, Maxime de Brevan; a visit to the theatre, when a particularly fine piece was to be given; and two or three calls a week at Count Ville-Handry’s house,—these were his sole and certainly very harmless amusements.

“A genuine old maid, that sailor is,” said the concierge of the house.

The truth is, that, if Daniel's natural refinement had not kept him from contact with what Parisians call "pleasure," his ardent love for Henrietta would have prevented his falling into bad company. A pure, noble love, such as his, based upon perfect confidence in her to whom it is given, is quite sufficient to fill up a life; for it makes the present delightful, and paints the distant horizon of the future in all the bright colors of the rainbow.

But, the more he loved Henrietta, the more he felt bound to be worthy of her, and to deserve her affections. He was not ambitious. He had chosen a profession which he loved. He had a considerable fortune of his own, and was thus, by his private income and his pay as an officer, secured against want. What more could he desire? Nothing for himself.

But Henrietta belonged to a great house; she was the daughter of a man who had filled a high position; she was immensely rich; and, even if he had married her only with her own fortune, she would have brought him ten times as much as he had. Daniel did not want Henrietta, on the blessed day when she should become his own, to have any thing to wish for or to regret. Hence he worked incessantly, indefatigably, waking up every morning anew with the determination to make himself one of those names which weigh more than the oldest parchments, and to win one of those positions which make a wife as proud as she is fond of her husband. Fortunately, the times were favorable to his ambition. The French navy was in a state of transformation; but the marine was as yet unreformed, waiting, apparently, for the hand of a man of genius.

And why might not he be that man? Supported by his love, he saw nothing impossible in that thought, and fancied he could overcome all obstacles.

"Do you see that d—— little fellow, there, with his quiet ways?" said Admiral Penhoel to his young officers. "Well, look at him; he'll checkmate you all."

Daniel was busy in his study, finishing a paper for the minister, when the count's servant came and brought him Henrietta's letter. He knew that something extraordinary must have happened to induce Henrietta, with her usual reserve, to take such a step, and, above all, to write to him in such brief but urgent terms.

"Has any thing happened at the house?" he asked the servant.

"No, sir, not that I know."

"The count is not sick?"

"No, sir."

"And Miss Henrietta?"

"My mistress is perfectly well."

Daniel breathed more freely.

"Tell Miss Henrietta I am coming at once; and make haste, or I shall be there before you."

As soon as the servant had left, Daniel dressed, and a moment later he was out of the house. As he walked rapidly up the street in which the count lived, he thought,—

"I have no doubt taken the alarm too soon; perhaps she has only some commission for me."

But he was beset with dark presentiments, and had to tell himself that that was not likely to be the case. He felt worse than ever, when, upon being shown into the drawing-room, he saw Henrietta sitting by the fire, deadly pale, with her eyes all red and inflamed from weeping.

"What is the matter with you?" he cried, without waiting for the door to be closed behind him. "What has happened?"

"Something terrible, M. Daniel."

"Tell me, pray, what. You frighten me."

"My father is going to marry again."

At first Daniel was amazed. Then, recalling at once the gradual transformation of the count, he said,—

"Oh, oh, oh! That explains every thing."

But Henrietta interrupted him; and, making a great effort, she repeated to him in a half-stifled voice almost literally her conversation with her father. When she had ended, Daniel said,—

“You have guessed right, Miss Henrietta. Your father evidently does propose to you a bargain.”

“Ah! but that is horrible.”

“He wanted you to understand, that, if you would consent to his marriage, he would consent”—

Shocked at what he was going to add, he stopped; but Henrietta said boldly,—

“To ours, you mean,—to ours? Yes, so I understood it; and that was my reason for sending for you to advise me.”

Poor fellow! She was asking him to seal his fate.

“I think you ought to consent!” he stammered out.

She rose, trembling with indignation, and replied,—

“Never, never!”

Daniel was overcome by this sudden shock. Never. He saw all his hopes dashed in an instant, his life’s happiness destroyed forever, Henrietta lost to him. But the very imminence of the danger restored to him his energy. He mastered his grief, and said in an almost calm voice,—

“I beseech you, let me explain to you why I advised you so. Believe me, your father does not want your consent at all. You cannot do without his consent; but he can marry without asking you for yours. There is no law which authorizes children to oppose the follies of their parents. What your father wants is your silent approval, the certainty that his new wife will be kindly received. If you refuse, he will go on, nevertheless, and not mind your objections.”

“Oh!”

“I am, unfortunately, but too sure of that. If he spoke to you of his plans, you may be sure he had made up his mind. Your resistance will lead only to our separation. He might possibly forgive you; but she—Don’t you think she should avail herself to the utmost of her influence over him? Who can foresee to what extremities she might be led by her hatred against you? And she must be a dangerous woman, Henrietta, a woman who is capable of any thing.”

“Why?”

He hesitated for a moment, not daring to speak out fully what he thought; and at last he said slowly, as if weighing his words,—

“Because, because this marriage cannot be any thing else but a barefaced speculation. Your father is immensely rich; she wants his fortune.”

Daniel’s reasoning was so sensible, and he pleaded his cause with such eagerness, that Henrietta’s resolution was evidently shaken.

“You want me to yield?” she asked.

“I beseech you to do it.”

She shook her head sadly, and said in a tone of utter dejection,—

“Very well. It shall be done as you wish it. I shall not object to this profanation. But you may be sure, my weakness will do us no good.”

It struck ten. She rose, offered her hand to Daniel, and said,—

“I will see you to-morrow evening. By that time I shall know, and I will tell you, the name of the woman whom father is going to marry; for I shall ask him who she is.”

She was spared that trouble. Next morning, the first words of the count were,—

“Well, have you thought it over?”

She looked at him till he felt compelled to turn his head away; and then she replied in a tone of resignation,—

“Father, you are master here. I should not tell you the truth, if I said I was not going to suffer cruelly at the idea of a stranger coming here to—But I shall receive her with all due respect.”

Ah! The count was not prepared for such a speedy consent.

“Do not speak of respect,” he said. “Tell me that you will be tender, affectionate, and kind. Ah, if you knew her, Henrietta! She is an angel.”

“What is her age?”

“Twenty-five.”

The count read in his daughter’s face that she thought his new wife much too young for him; and therefore he added, quickly,—

“Your mother was two years younger when I married her.”

That was so; but he forgot that that was twenty years ago.

“However,” he added, “you will see her; I shall ask her to let me present you to her. She is a foreigner, of excellent family, very rich, marvellously clever and beautiful; and her name is Sarah Brandon.”

That evening, when Henrietta told Daniel the name of her future mother-in-law, he started with an air of utter despair, and said,—

“Great God! If Maxime de Brevan is not mistaken, that is worse than any thing we could possibly anticipate.”

CHAPTER 4

When Henrietta saw how the young officer was overcome by the mere mention of that name, Sarah Brandon, she felt the blood turn to ice in her veins. She knew perfectly well that a man like Daniel was not likely to be so utterly overwhelmed unless there was something fearful, unheard of, in the matter.

“Do you know the woman, Daniel?”

But he, regretting his want of self-possession, was already thinking how he could make amends for his imprudence.

“I swear to you,” he began.

“Oh, don’t swear! I see you know who she is.”

“I know nothing about her.”

“But”—

“It is true I have heard people talk of her once, a *long time ago*.”

“Whom?”

“One of my friends, Maxime de Brevan, a fine, noble fellow.”

“What sort of a woman is she?”

“Ah, me! that I cannot tell you. Maxime happened to mention her just in passing; and I never thought that one of these days I should—If I seemed to be so very much surprised just now, it was because I remembered, all of a sudden, a very ugly story in which Maxime said she had been involved, and then”—

He was ridiculous in his inability to tell a fib; so, when he found that he was talking nonsense, he turned his head away to avoid Henrietta’s eyes. She interrupted him, and said reproachfully,—

“Do you really think I am not strong enough to hear the truth?”

At first he did not reply. Overcome by the strange position in which he found himself, he looked for a way to escape, and found none. At last he said,—

“Miss Henrietta, you must give me time before I tell you any more. I know nothing positive; and I dare say I am unnecessarily alarmed. I will tell you all as soon as I am better informed.”

“When will that be?”

“To-night, if I can find Maxime de Brevan at home, as I hope I shall do; if I miss him, you must wait till to-morrow.”

“And if your suspicions turn out to be well founded; if what you fear, and hide from me now, is really so,—what must I do then?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he rose and said in a solemn voice,—

“I am not going to tell you again how I love you, Henrietta; I am not going to tell you that to lose you would be death to me, and that in our family we do not value life very highly; you know that, don’t you? But, in spite of all that, if my fears should be well founded, as I apprehend they are, I should not hesitate to say to you, whatever might be the consequences, Henrietta, and even if we should have to part forever, we must try our utmost, we must employ all possible means in our power, to prevent a marriage between Count Ville-Handry and Sarah Brandon.”

In spite of all her sufferings, Henrietta felt her heart bounding with unspeakable happiness and joy. Ah! he deserved to be loved,—this man whom her heart had freely chosen among them all,—this man who gave her such an overwhelming proof of his love. She offered him her hand; and, with her eyes beaming with enthusiasm and tenderness, she said,—

“And I, I swear by the sacred memory of my mother, that whatever may happen, and whatever force they may choose to employ, I shall never belong to any one but to you.”

Daniel had seized her hand, and held it for some time pressed to his lips. At last, when his rapture gave way to calmer thoughts, he said,—

“I must leave you at once, Henrietta, if I want to catch Maxime.”

As he left, his head was in a whirl, his thoughts in a maze. His life and his happiness were at stake; and a single word would decide his fate in spite of all he could do.

A cab was passing; he hailed it, jumped in, and cried to the driver,—

“Go quick, I say! You shall have five francs! No. 61 Rue Laffitte!”

That was the house where Maxime de Brevan lived.

He was a man of thirty or thirty-five years, remarkably well made, light-haired, wearing a full beard, with a bright eye, and pleasing face. Mixing on intimate terms with the men who make up what is called high life, and with whom pleasure is the only occupation, he was very popular with them all. They said he was a man that could always be relied upon, at all times ready to render you a service when it was in his power, a pleasant companion, and an excellent second whenever a friend had to fight a duel.

In fine, neither slander nor calumny had ever attacked his reputation. And yet, far from following the advice of the philosopher, who tells us to keep our life from the eye of the public, Maxime de Brevan seemed to take pains to let everybody into his secrets. He was so anxious to tell everybody where he had been, and what he had been doing, that you might have imagined he was always preparing to prove an alibi.

Thus he told the whole world that the Brevans came originally from the province of Maine, and that he was the last, the sole representative, of that old family. Not that he prided himself particularly on his ancestors; he acknowledged frankly that there was very little left of their ancient splendor; in fact, nothing but a bare support. But he never said what this “support” amounted to; his most intimate friends could not tell whether he had one thousand or ten thousand a year. So much only was certain, that, to his great honor and glory, he had solved the great problem of preserving his independence and his dignity while associating, a comparatively poor man, with the richest young men of Paris.

His rooms were simple and unpretending; and he kept but a single servant—his carriage he hired by the month.

How had Maxime Brevan become Daniel's friend? In the simplest possible way. They had been introduced to each other at a great ball by a common friend of theirs, a lieutenant in the navy. About one o'clock in the morning they had gone home together; and as the moon was shining brightly, the weather was mild, and the walking excellent, they had loitered about the Place de la Concorde while smoking their cigars.

Had Maxime really felt such warm sympathy for his friend? Perhaps so. At all events, Daniel had been irresistibly attracted by the peculiar ways of Maxime, and especially by the cool stoicism with which he spoke of his genteel poverty. Then they had met again, and finally became intimate.

Brevan was just dressing for the opera when Daniel entered his room. He uttered a cry of delight when he saw him, as he always did.

"What!" he said, "the hermit student from the other side of the river in this worldly region, and at this hour? What good wind blows you over here?"

Then, suddenly noticing Daniel's terrified appearance, he added,—

"But what am I talking about? You look frightened out of your wits. What's the matter?"

"A great misfortune, I fear," replied Daniel.

"How so? What is it?"

"And I want you to help me."

"Don't you know that I am at your service?"

Daniel certainly thought so.

"I thank you in advance, my dear Maxime; but I do not wish to give you too much trouble. I have a long story to tell you, and you are just going out"—

But Brevan interrupted him, shaking his head kindly, and saying,—

"I was only going out for want of something better to do, upon my word! So sit down, and tell me all."

Daniel had been so overcome by terror, and the fear that he might possibly lose Henrietta, that he had run to his friend without considering what he was going to tell him. Now, when the moment came to speak, he was silent. The thought had just occurred to him, that Count Ville-Handry's secret was not his own, and that he was in duty bound not to betray it, if possible, even if he could have absolutely relied upon his friend's discretion.

He did not reply, therefore, but walked up and down the room, seeking in vain some plausible excuse, and suffering perfect agony. This continued so long, that Maxime, who had of late heard much of diseases of the brain, asked himself if Daniel could possibly have lost his mind.

No; for suddenly his friend stopped before him, and said in a short, sharp tone,—

“First of all, Maxime, swear that you will never, under any circumstances, say to any human being a word of what I am going to tell you.”

Thoroughly mystified, Brevan raised his hand, and said,—

“I pledge my word of honor!”

This promise seemed to re-assure Daniel; and, when he thought he had recovered sufficient control over himself, he said,—

“Some months ago, my dear friend, I heard you telling somebody a horrible story concerning a certain Mrs. Sarah Brandon”—

“Miss, if you please, not Mrs.”

“Well, it does not matter. You know her?”

“Certainly. Everybody knows her.”

Daniel did not notice the extreme self-conceit with which these words were uttered.

“All right, then. Now, Maxime, I conjure you, by our friendship, tell me frankly what you think of her. What kind of a woman is this Miss Brandon?”

His features, as well as his voice, betrayed such extreme excitement, that Brevan was almost stunned. At last he said,—

“But, my dear fellow, you ask me that in a manner”—

“I must know the truth, I tell you. It is of the utmost importance to me.”

Brevan, struck by a sudden thought, touched his forehead, and exclaimed,—

“Oh, I see! You are in love with Sarah!”

Daniel would never have thought of such a subterfuge in order to avoid mentioning the name of Count Ville-Handry; but, seeing it thus offered to him, he determined to profit by the opportunity.

“Well, yes, suppose it is so,” he said with a sigh.

Maxime raised his hands to heaven, and said in a tone of painful conviction,—

“In that case you are right. You ought to inquire; for you may be close upon a terrible misfortune.”

“Ah, is she really so formidable?”

Maxime shrugged his shoulders, as if he were impatient at being called upon to prove a well-known fact, and said,—

“I should think so.”

There seemed to be no reason why Daniel should persist in his questions after that. Those words ought to have been explanation enough. Nevertheless he said in a subdued voice,—

“Pray explain, Maxime! Don’t you know, that, as I lead a very quiet life, I know nothing?”

Brevan, looking more serious than he had ever done, rose and replied, leaning against the mantelpiece,—

“What would you have me tell you? It is only fools who call out to lovers to beware; and to warn a man who will not be warned, is useless. Are you really in love with Miss Sarah, or are you not? If you are, nothing that I could say would change your mind. Suppose I were to tell you that this Sarah is a wretched creature, an infamous forger, who has already the death of three

poor devils on her conscience, who loved her as you do? Suppose I told you worse things than these, and could prove them? Do you know what would happen? You would press my hand with effusion. You would overwhelm me with thanks, tears in your eye. You would vow, in the candor of your heart, that you are forever cured, and, when you leave me”—

“Well?”

“You would rush to your beloved, tell her all I said, and beseech her to clear herself of all these charges.”

“I beg your pardon; I am not one of those men who”—

But Brevan was getting more and more excited. He interrupted his friend, and said,—

“Nonsense! You are a man like all other men. Passion does not reason, does not calculate; and that is the secret of its strength. As long as we have a spark of commonsense left, we are not really in love. That is so, I tell you; and no will, no amount of energy, can do any thing with it. There are people who tell you soberly that they have been in love without losing their senses, and reproach you for not keeping cool. Bosh! Those people remind me of still champagne blaming sparkling champagne for popping off the cork. And now, my dear fellow, have the kindness to accept this cigar, and let us take a walk.”

Was that really so as Brevan said? Was it true that real love destroys in us the faculty of reasoning, and of distinguishing truth from falsehood? Did he really not love Henrietta truly, because he was on the point of giving her up for the sake of doing his duty?

Oh, no, no! Brevan had been speaking of another kind of love,—a love neither pure nor chaste. He spoke of those passions which suddenly strike us down like lightning; which confound our senses, and mislead our judgment; which destroy every thing, as fire does, and leave nothing behind but disaster and disgrace and remorse.

But all the more painful became Daniel's thoughts as he remembered that Count Ville-Handry was overcome by one of these terrible passions for a worthless creature. He could not accept Maxime's offer.

"One word, I pray you," he said. "Suppose I lose my free will, and surrender absolutely; what will become of me?"

Brevan looked at him with an air of pity, and said,—

"Not much will happen to you; only"—

And then he added with almost sternness, mixed with bitter sarcasm,—

"You ask me for your horoscope? Be it so. Have you a large fortune?"

"About fifty thousand dollars."

"Well, in six months they will be gone; in a year you will be overwhelmed with debts, and at your wits' end; in less than a year and a half, you will have become a forger."

"Maxime!"

"Ah! You asked me to tell you the truth. Then, as to your social position. Now it is excellent; you have been promoted as rapidly as merit could claim, everybody says. You will be an admiral one of these days. But in six months you will be nothing at all; you will have resigned your commission, or you will have been dismissed."

"Allow me"—

"No. You are an honest man, the most honorable man I know; after six months' acquaintance with Sarah Brandon, you will have lost your self-respect so completely, that you will have become a drunkard. There is your picture. 'It's not flattered!' you will say. But you wanted to have it. And now let us go."

This time he was determined; and Daniel saw that he would not obtain another word from him, unless he changed his tactics. He held him back, therefore, a moment; and, as he opened the door, he said,—

“Maxime, you must pardon me a very innocent deception, which was suggested by your own words. It is not I who am in love with Miss Sarah Brandon.”

Brevan was so much surprised, he could not stir.

“Who is it, then?” he asked.

“One of my friends.”

“What name?”

“I wish you would render the service I ask of you doubly valuable by not asking me that question,—at least, not to-day.”

Daniel spoke with such an accent of truth, that not a shadow of doubt remained on Maxime’s mind. It was not Daniel who had fallen in love with Sarah Brandon. Brevan did not doubt that for a moment. But he could not conceal his trouble, and his disappointment even, as he exclaimed,—

“Well done, Daniel! Tell me that your ingenuous people cannot deceive anybody!”

However, he said nothing more about it; and, while Daniel was pouring out his excuses, he quietly went back to the fire, and sat down. After a moment’s silence, he began again,—

“Let us assume, then, that it is one of your friends who is bewitched?”

“Yes.”

“And the matter is—serious?”

“Alas! He talks of marrying that woman.”

Maxime shrugged his shoulders contemptuously, and said,—

“As to that, console yourself. Sarah will never consent.”

“So far from that, she herself has made the suggestion.”

This time, Maxime raised his head suddenly, and looked stupefied.

“Then your friend must be very rich.”

“He is immensely rich.”

“He bears a great name, and holds a high position?”

“His name is one of the oldest and noblest in the province of Anjou.”

“And he is a very old man?”

“He is sixty-five.”

Brevan struck the marble slab of the mantelpiece with his fist so that it shook, and exclaimed,—

“Ah, she told me she would succeed!”

And then he added in a very low tone of voice, as if speaking to himself with an indescribable accent of mingled admiration and hatred,—

“What a woman! Oh, what a woman!”

Daniel, who was himself greatly excited, and far too busy with his own thoughts to observe what was going on, did not notice the excitement of his friend; he continued quietly,—

“Now you will understand my great curiosity. In order to prevent the scandal of such a marriage, my friend’s family would do every thing in the world. But how can you attack a woman of whose antecedents and mode of life nothing is known?”

“Yes, I understand,” said Brevan,—“I understand.”

His features betrayed that he was making a great mental effort. He remained for some time absorbed in his thoughts; and at last he said, as if coming to a decision,—

“No, I do not see any way to prevent this marriage; none at all.”

“Still, from what you told me”—

“What!”

“About the cupidity of this woman.”

“Well?”

“If she were offered a large sum, some eighty or a hundred thousand dollars?”

Maxime laughed out loud; but there was not the true ring in his laughter.

“You might offer her two hundred thousand, and she would laugh at you. Do you think she would be fool enough to content herself with a fraction of a fortune, if she can have the whole, with a great name and a high position into the bargain?”

Daniel opened his lips to present another suggestion; but Maxime, laying aside his usual half-dreamy, mocking manner, said, as if roused by a matter of great personal interest,—

“You do not understand me, my dear friend. Miss Brandon is not one of those vulgar hawks, who, in broad daylight, seize upon a poor pigeon, pluck it alive, and cast it aside, still living, and bleeding all over.”

“Then, Maxime, she must be”—

“Well, I tell you you misapprehend her. Miss Brandon”—

He stopped suddenly, and looking at Daniel with a glance with which a judge examines the features of a criminal, he added in an almost threatening voice,—

“By telling you what little I know about her, Daniel, I give you the highest proof of confidence which one man can give to another. I love you too dearly to exact your promise to be discreet. If you ever mention my name in connection with this affair, if you ever let any one suspect that you learned what I am going to tell you from me, you will dishonor yourself.”

Daniel, deeply moved, seized his friend’s hand, and, pressing it most affectionately, said,—

“Ah, you know Daniel Champcey is to be relied upon.”

Maxime knew it; for he continued,—

“Miss Sarah Brandon is one of those female cosmopolitan adventurers, whom steam brings nowadays to us from all the four quarters of the world. Like so many others, she, also, has come to Paris to spread her net, and catch her birds, But she is made of finer stuff than most of them, and more clever. Her ambition soars higher; and she possesses a real genius for intrigues. She means to have a fortune, and is willing to pay any price for it; but she is also desirous to be respected in the world.

“I should not be surprised if anybody told me Miss Sarah was born within ten miles of Paris; but she calls herself an American. The fact is, she speaks English like an Englishwoman, and knows a great deal more of America than you know of Paris. I have heard her tell the story of her family to a large and attentive audience; but I do not say that I believed it.

“According to her own account, M. Brandon, her father, a thoroughbred Yankee, was a man of great enterprise and energy, who was ten times rich, and as often wretchedly poor again in his life, but died leaving several millions. This Brandon, she says, was a banker and broker in New York when the civil war broke out. He entered the army, and in less than six months, thanks to his marvellous energy, he rose to be a general. When peace came, he was without occupation, and did not know what on earth to do with himself. Fortunately, his good star led him into a region where large tracts of land happened to be for sale. He bought them for a few thousand dollars, and soon after discovered on his purchase the most productive oil-wells in all America. He was just about to be another Peabody when a fearful accident suddenly ended his life; he was burnt in an enormous fire that destroyed one of his establishments.

“As to her mother, Miss Sarah says she lost her when she was quite young, in a most romantic, though horrible manner”—

“What!” broke in Daniel, “has nobody taken the trouble to ascertain if all these statements are true?”

“I am sure I do not know. This much is certain, that sometimes curious facts leak out. For instance, I have fallen in with Americans who have known a broker Brandon, a Gen. Brandon, a Petroleum Brandon.”

“He may have borrowed the name.”

“Certainly, especially when the original man is said to have died in America. However, Miss Brandon has been living now for five years in Paris. She came here accompanied by a Mrs. Brian, a relative of hers, who is the driest, boniest person you can imagine, but at the same time the slyest woman I have ever seen. She also brought with her a kind of protector, a Mr. Thomas Elgin, also a relation of hers, a most extraordinary man, stiff like a poker, but evidently a dangerous man, who never opens his mouth except when he eats. He is a famous hand at small-swords, however, and snuffs his candle, nine times out of ten, at a distance of thirty yards. This Mr. Thomas Elgin, whom the world calls familiarly Sir Thorn, and Mrs. Brian, always stay with Miss Sarah.

“When she first arrived, Miss Sarah established herself in a house near the Champs Elysees, which she furnished most sumptuously. Sir Thorn, who is a jockey of the first water, had discovered a pair of gray horses for her which made a sensation at the Bois de Boulogne, and drew everybody’s attention to their fair owner. Heaven knows how she had managed to get a number of letters of introduction. But certainly two or three of the most influential members of the American colony here received her at their houses. After that, all was made easy. Gradually she crept into society; and now she is welcome almost everywhere, and visits, not only at the best houses, but even in certain families which have a reputation of being quite exclusive.

“In fine, if she has enemies, she has also fanatic partisans. If some people say she is a wretch, others—and they are by no means the least clever—tell you that she is an angel, only wanting wings to fly away from this wicked world. They talk of her as of a poor little orphan- girl, whom people slander atrociously because they envy her youth, her beauty, her splendor.”

“Ah, is she so rich?”

“Miss Brandon spends at least twenty thousand dollars a year.”

“And no one inquires where they come from?”

“From her sainted father’s petroleum-wells, my dear fellow. Petroleum explains everything.”

Brevan seemed to feel a kind of savage delight in seeing Daniel's despair, and in explaining to him most minutely how solidly, and how skilfully Miss Sarah Brandon's position in the world had been established. Had he any expectation to prevent a struggle with her by exaggerating her strength? Or rather, knowing Daniel as he did,—far better, unfortunately, than he was known by him,—was he trying to irritate him more and more against this formidable adversary?

At all events, he continued in that icy tone which gives to sarcasm its greatest bitterness,—

“Besides, my dear Daniel, if you are ever introduced at Miss Brandon's,—and I pray you will believe me, people are not so easily introduced there,—you will be dumfounded at first by the tone that prevails in that house. The air is filled with a perfume of hypocrisy which would rejoice the stiffest of Quakers. Cant rules supreme there, putting a lock to the mouth, and a check to the eyes.”

Daniel began evidently to be utterly bewildered.

“But how, how can you reconcile that,” he said, “with the thoroughly worldly life of Miss Brandon?”

“Oh, very easily, my dear fellow! and there you see the sublime policy of the three rogues. To the outer world, Miss Brandon is all levity, indiscretion, coquettishness, and even worse. She drives herself, shortens her petticoats, and cuts down her dress-bodies atrociously. She says she has a right to do as she pleases, according to the code of laws which govern American young ladies. But at home she bows to the taste and the wishes of her relative, Mrs. Brian, who displays all the extreme prudishness of the austere Puritan. Then she has that stiff, tall Sir Thorn ever at her side, who never jokes. Oh! they understand each other perfectly; the parts are carefully distributed, and”—

Daniel showed that he was utterly discouraged.

“There is no way, then, of getting hold of this woman?” he asked.

“I think not.”

“But that adventure of which you spoke some time ago?”

“Which? That with poor Kergrist?”

“How do I know which? It was a fearful story; that is all I remember. What did I, at that time, care for Miss Brandon? Now, to be sure”—

Brevan shook his head, and said,—

“Now, you think that story might become a weapon in your hands? No, Daniel. Still it is not a very long one; and I can now tell it to you more in detail than I could before.

“About fifteen months ago, there arrived in Paris a nice young man called Charles de Kergrist. He had lost as yet none of his illusions, being barely twenty-five years old, and having something like a hundred thousand dollars of his own. He saw Miss Brandon, and instantly ‘took fire.’ He fell desperately in love with her. What his relations were with her, no one can tell positively,—I mean with sufficient evidence to carry conviction to others,—for the young man was a model of discretion. But what became only too well known was the fact, that, about eight months later, the people living near Miss Brandon’s house saw one morning, when the shutters were opened, a corpse dangling at a distance of a few feet above the ground from the iron fastenings of the lady’s window. Upon inspection, the dead man proved to be that unlucky Kergrist. In the pocket of his overcoat a letter was found, in which he declared that he committed suicide because an unreturned affection had made life unbearable to him. Now, this letter—mark the fact—was open; that is to say, it had been sealed, and the seal was broken.”

“By whom?”

“Let me finish. The accident, as you may imagine, made a tremendous noise. The family took it up. An inquest was held; and it was found that the hundred thousand dollars which Kergrist had brought with him had utterly disappeared.”

“And Miss Brandon’s reputation was not ruined?”

Maxime replied with a bitter, ironical smile,—

“You know very well that she was not. On the contrary, the hanging was turned by her partisans into an occasion for praising her marvellous virtuousness. ‘If she had been weak,’ they said, ‘Kergrist would not have hanged himself. Besides,’ they added, ‘how can a girl, be she ever so pure and innocent, prevent her lovers from hanging themselves at her windows? As to the money,’ they said, ‘it had been lost at the gaming-table.’ Kergrist was reported to have been seen at Baden-Baden and at Homburg; no doubt he played.”

“And the world was content with such an explanation?”

“Yes; why not? To be sure, some sceptical persons told the whole story very differently. According, to their account, Miss Sarah had been the mistress of M. de Kergrist, and, seeing him utterly ruined, had sent him off one fine morning. They stated, that, the evening before the accident, he had come to the house at the usual hour, and, finding it closed, had begged, and even wept, and finally threatened to kill himself; that, thereupon, he had really killed himself; (poor fool that he was!) that Miss Brandon, concealed behind the blinds, had watched all his preparations for the fearful act; that she had seen him fasten the rope to the outside hinges of her window, put the noose around his neck, and then swing off into eternity; that she had watched him closely during his agony, and stood there till the last convulsions had passed away.”

“Horrible!” whispered Daniel,—“too horrible!”

But Maxime seized him by the arm, and pressing it so as almost to hurt him, said in a low, hoarse voice,—

“That is not the worst yet. As soon as she saw that Kergrist was surely dead, she slipped down stairs like a cat, opened the house-door noiselessly, and, gliding stealthily along the wall till she reached the body, she actually searched the still quivering corpse to assure herself that there was nothing in the pockets that could possibly compromise her. Finding the last letter of Kergrist, she took it away with her, broke the seal, and read it; and, having found that her name was not mentioned in it, she had the amazing audacity to return to the body, and to put the letter back where she had found it.

Then only she breathed freely. She had gotten rid of a man whom she feared. She went to bed, and slept soundly.”

Daniel had become livid.

“That woman is a monster!” he exclaimed.

Brevan said nothing. His eyes shone with intense hatred; his lips were quivering with indignation. He no longer thought of discretion, of caution. He forgot himself, and gave himself up to his feelings.

“But I have not done yet, Daniel,” he said, after a pause. “There is another crime on record, of older date. The first appearance of Miss Brandon in Paris society. You ought to know that also.

“One evening, about four years ago, the president of the Mutual Discount Society came into the cashier’s room to tell him, that, on the following day, the board of directors would examine his books. The cashier, an unfortunate man by the name of Malgat, replied that every thing was ready; but, the moment the president had turned his back, he took a sheet of paper, and wrote something like this:—

“‘Forgive me, I have been an honest man forty years long; now a fatal passion has made me mad. I have drawn money from the bank which was intrusted to my care; and, in order to screen my defalcations, I have forged several notes. I cannot conceal my crime any longer. The first defalcation is only six months old. The whole amount is about four hundred thousand francs. I cannot bear the disgrace which I have incurred; in an hour I shall have ceased to live.’

“Malgat put this letter in a prominent place on his desk, and then rushed out, without a cent in his pocket, to throw himself into the canal. But when he reached the bank, and saw the foul, black water, he was frightened. For hours and hours he walked up and down, asking God in his madness for courage. He never found that courage.

“But what was he to do? He could not flee, having no money; and where should he hide? He could not return to his bank; for there, by this time, his crime must have become known. In his despair he ran as far as the Champs

Elysees, and late in the night he knocked at the door of Miss Brandon's house.

"They did not know yet what had happened, and he was admitted. Then, in his wild despair, he told them all, begging them to give him a couple of hundreds only of the four hundred thousand which he had stolen in order to give them to Miss Brandon,—a hundred only, to enable him to escape to Belgium.

"They refused. And when he begged and prayed, falling on his knees before Miss Sarah, Sir Thorn seized him by the shoulders, and turned him out of the house."

Maxime, overcome by his intense excitement, fell into an easy-chair, and remained there for a considerable time, his eyes fixed, his brow darkened, repenting himself, no doubt, of his candor, his wrath, and his forgetfulness of all he owed to himself and to others.

But, when he rose again, his rare strength of will enabled him to assume his usual phlegmatic manner; and he continued in a mocking tone,—

"I see in your face, Daniel, that you think the story is monstrous, improbable, almost impossible. Nevertheless, four years ago, it was believed all over Paris, and set off by a number of hideous details which I will spare you. If you care to look at the papers of that year, you will find it everywhere. But four years are four centuries in Paris. To say nothing of the many similar stories that have happened since."

Daniel said nothing, he only bowed his head sadly. He felt a kind of painful emotion, such as he had never before experienced in his life.

"It is not so much the story itself," he said at last, "that overcomes me so completely. What I cannot comprehend is, how this woman could refuse the man whose accomplice she had been the small pittance he required in order to evade justice, and to escape to Belgium."

"Nevertheless, that was so," repeated M. de Brevan; and then he added emphatically, "at least, they say so."

Daniel did not notice this attempt to become more cautious again. He continued pensively,—

“Is it not very improbable that Miss Brandon should not have been afraid to exasperate the unfortunate man, and to drive him to desperate measures? In his furious rage, he might have left the house, rushed to a police-officer, and confessed to him every thing, laying the evidence he had in his hands before a magistrate, and”—

“You say,” replied Brevan, interrupting him with a dry, sardonic laugh, “precisely what all the advocates of the fair American said at that time. But I tell you, that her peculiarity is exactly the daring with which she ventures upon the most dangerous steps. She does not pretend to avoid difficulties; she crushes them. Her prudence consists in carrying imprudence to the farthest limits.”

“But”—

“You ought to credit her, besides, with sufficient astuteness and experience to know that she had taken the most careful precautions, having destroyed every evidence of her own complicity, and feeling quite safe in that direction. Moreover, she had studied Malgat’s character, as she studied afterwards Kergrist’s. She was quite sure that neither of them would accuse her, even at the moment of death. And yet, in the case of this Mutual Discount Society, her calculations did not prove absolutely correct.”

“How so?”

“It became known that she had received Malgat two or three times secretly, for he did not openly enter her house; and the penny papers had it, that ‘the fair stranger was no stranger to small peculations.’ Public opinion was veering around, when it was reported that she had been summoned to appear before a magistrate. That, however, was fortunate for her; she came out from the trial whiter and purer than Alpine snow.”

“Oh!”

“And so perfectly cleared, that, when the whole matter was brought up in court, she was not even summoned as a witness.”

Daniel started up, and exclaimed,—

“What! Malgat had the sublime self-abnegation to undergo the agonies of a trial, and the infamy of a condemnation, without allowing a word to escape?”

“No. For the simple reason that Malgat was sentenced *in contumaciam* to ten years in the penitentiary.”

“And what has become of the poor wretch?”

“Who knows? They say he killed himself. Two months later, a half decomposed body was found in the forest of Saint Germain, which people declared to be Malgat. However”—

He had become livid, in his turn; but he continued in an almost inaudible voice, as if to meet Daniel’s objections before they were expressed,—

“However, somebody who used to be intimate with Malgat has assured me that he met him one day in Dronot Street, before the great auction- mart. The man said he recognized him, although he seemed to be most artistically disguised. This is what has set me thinking more than once, that, if people were not mistaken, a day might, after all, yet come, when Miss Sarah would have a terrible bill to settle with her implacable creditor.”

He passed his hand across his brow as if to drive away such uncomfortable thoughts, and then said with a forced laugh,—

“Now, my dear fellow, I have come to the end of my budget. The details were all given me by Miss Sarah’s friends as well as by her enemies. Some you may read of in the papers; but most I know from my own long and patient observation. And, if you ask me what interest I could have in knowing such a woman, I will tell you frankly, that you see before you one of her victims; for my dear Daniel, I have to confess it, I also have been in love with her; and how! But I was too small a personage, and too poor a devil, to be worth a serious thought of Miss Brandon. As soon as she felt sure that her abominable tricks had set my head on fire, and that I had become an idiot, a madman, a stupid fool—on that very day she laughed in my face. Ah! I tell you, she played with me as if I had been a child, and then she sent me

off as if I had been a lackey. And now I hate her mortally, as I loved her almost criminally. Therefore, if I can help you, in secret, without becoming known, you may count upon me.”

Why should Daniel have doubted the truthfulness of his friend’s statements? Had he not himself, and quite voluntarily, confessed his own folly, his own love, anticipating all questions, and making a clean breast of the whole matter?

Not a doubt, therefore, arose in Daniel’s mind. On the contrary, he thanked God for having sent him such an ally, such a friend, who had lived long enough amid all these intrigues of Parisian high life to know all its secret springs, and to guide him safely. He took Maxime’s hand in his own, and said with deep feeling,—

“Now, my friend, we are bound to each other for life.”

Brevan seemed deeply touched; he raised his hand as if to wipe a tear from his eyes. But he was not a man to give way to tender feelings. He said,—

“But how about your friend? How can we prevent his marrying Miss Sarah? Does any way occur to you? No? Ah! you see, it will be hard work.”

He seemed to meditate deeply for a few moments; then uttering his words slowly and emphatically, as if to lend them their full weight, and impress them forcibly on Daniel’s mind, he resumed,—

“We must attack Miss Brandon herself, if we want to master the situation. If we could once know who she really is, all would be safe. Fortunately there is no difficulty in Paris in finding spies, if you have money enough.”

As the clock on the mantelpiece struck half-past ten, he started and stopped. He jumped up as if suddenly inspired by a bright idea, and said hurriedly,—

“But now I think of it, Daniel, you do not know Miss Brandon; you have never even seen her!”

“No, indeed!”

“Well, that’s a pity. We must know our enemies; how else can we even smile at them? I want you to see Miss Sarah.”

“But who will point her out to me? where? when?”

“I will do it to-night, at the opera. I bet she will be there!”

Daniel was in evening costume, having called upon Henrietta, and then he was all ready.

“Very well,” he said, “I am willing.”

Without losing a moment, they went out, and reached the theatre just as the curtain rose on the fourth act of Don Giovanni. They were, fortunately, able to secure two orchestra-chairs. The stage was gorgeous; but what did they care for the singer on the boards, or the divine music of Mozart?

Brevan took his opera-glasses out, and rapidly surveying the house, he had soon found what he was looking for. He touched Daniel with his elbow, and, handing him the glasses, whispered in his ear,—

“Look there, in the third box from the stage; look, there she is!”

CHAPTER 5

Daniel looked up. In the box which Maxime had pointed out to him he saw a girl of such rare and dazzling beauty, that he could hardly retain a cry of admiration. She was leaning forward, resting on the velvet cushion of her box, in order to hear better.

Her hair, perfectly overwhelming in its richness, was so carelessly arranged, that no one could doubt it was all her own; it was almost golden, but with such a bright sheen, that at every motion sparks seemed to start from its dark masses. Her large, soft eyes were overshadowed by long lashes; and as she now opened them wide, and now half closed them again, they changed from the darkest to the lightest blue.

Her lips smiled in all the freshness and innocence of merry youth, displaying now and then two rows of teeth, matchless in their beauty and regularity.

“Can that be,” said Daniel to himself, “the wretched creature whose portrait Maxime has just given me?”

A little behind her, and half-hid in the shade of the box, appeared a large bony head, adorned with an absurd bunch of feathers. Her eyes flashed indignation; and her narrow lips seemed to say perpetually, “Shocking!” That was Mrs. Brian.

Still farther back, barely discernible after long examination, arose a tall, stiff figure, a bald, shining head, two dark, deep-sunk eyes, a hooked nose, and a pair of immense streaming whiskers. That was the Hon. Thomas Elgin, commonly known as Sir Thorn.

As Daniel was persistently examining the box, with the smiling girl, the stern old woman, and the placid old man in the background, he felt doubts of all kinds creeping into his mind.

Might not Maxime be mistaken? Did he not merely repeat the atrocious slanders of the envious world?

These thoughts troubled Daniel; and he would have mentioned his doubts to Maxime; but his neighbors were enthusiasts about music, and, as soon as he bent over to whisper into his friend's ear, they growled, and, if he ventured to utter a word, they forced him to be silent. At last the curtain fell. Many left the house; others simply rose to look around; but Maxime and Daniel remained in their seats. Their whole attention was concentrated upon Miss Brandon's box, when they saw the door open, and a gentleman enter, who, at the distance at which they sat, looked like a very young man. His complexion was brilliantly fair, his beard jet black, and his curly hair most carefully arranged. He had his opera-hat under his arm, a camellia in his button-hole; and his light-yellow kid gloves were so tight, that it looked as if they must inevitably burst the instant he used his hands.

"Count Ville-Handry!" said Daniel to himself.

Somebody touched his shoulder slightly; and, as he turned round, he found it was Maxime, who said with friendly irony,—

"Your old friend, is it not? The happy lover of Miss Brandon?"

"Yes, it is so. I have to confess it."

He was just in the act of explaining the reasons for his silence, when M. de Brevan interrupted him, saying,—

"Just look, Daniel; just look!"

The count had taken a seat in the front part of the box, by Miss Brandon's side, and was talking to her with studied affectation, bending over her, gesticulating violently, and laughing till he showed every one of the long yellow teeth which were left him. He was evidently on exhibition, and desired to be seen by everybody. Suddenly, however, after Miss Brandon had said a few words to him, he rose, and went out.

The bell behind the scenes was ringing, and the curtain was about to rise again.

"Let us go," said Daniel to M. de Brevan: "I am suffering."

He was really suffering, mortified by the ridiculous scene which Henrietta's father was playing. But he entertained no longer any doubts; he had clearly seen how the adventuress was spurring on the old man, and fanning his feeble flame.

"Ah! it will be hard work to rescue the count from the wiles of this witch," said Maxime.

Having left the house, they were just turning into the narrow street which leads to the boulevards, when they saw a tall man, wrapped up in a huge cloak, coming towards them, and behind him a servant with a whole armful of magnificent roses. It was Count Ville-Handry. Coming suddenly face to face upon Daniel, he seemed at first very much embarrassed; then, recovering himself, he said,—

"Why, is this you? Where on earth do you come from?"

"From the theatre."

"And you run away before the fifth act? That is a crime against the majesty of Mozart. Come, go back with me, and I promise you a pleasant surprise."

Brevan came up close to Daniel, and whispered to him,—

"Go; here is the opportunity I was wishing for."

Then he lifted his hat and went his way. Daniel, taken rather by surprise, accompanied the count till he saw him stop near a huge landau, open in spite of the cold weather, but guarded by three servants in gorgeous livery. When they saw the count, they all three uncovered respectfully; but he, without taking any notice of them, turned to the porter who had the flowers, and said,—

"Scatter all these roses in this carriage."

The man hesitated. He was the servant of a famous florist, and had often seen people pay forty or fifty dollars for such bouquets. He thought the joke was carried too far. However, the count insisted. The roses were piled up in the bottom of the carriage; and, when he had done, he received a handsome fee for his trouble.

Then the count returned to the opera-house, Daniel following him, filled with amazement. Evidently love had made the count young again, and now gave wings to his steps. He ran up the steps of the great porch of the opera-house, and in a few moments he was once more in Miss Brandon's box. At once he took Daniel by the hand; and, drawing him into the box close to the lady, he said to the young girl,—

“Permit me to present to you M. Daniel Champcey, one of our most distinguished naval officers.”

Daniel bowed, first to her, and then solemnly to Mrs. Brian, and long, stiff Sir Thorn.

“I need not tell you, my dear count,” said Miss Sarah, “that your friends are always welcome here.”

Then, turning to Daniel, she added,—

“Besides, I have long since known you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, sir. And I even know that you are one of the most frequent visitors at Count Ville-Handry's house.”

She looked at Daniel with a kind of malicious simplicity, and then added,

“I do not mean to say that the count would not be wrong if he attributed your frequent visits exclusively to his own merits. I have heard something of a certain young lady”—

“Sarah,” here broke in Mrs. Brian, “what you say there is highly improper.” This reproof, so far from checking Miss Sarah's merriment, only seemed to increase it. Without losing sight of Daniel, she turned to her aunt, and said,—

“Since the count is not opposed to this gentleman's paying his attentions to his daughter, I think I may safely speak of them. It would be such an extraordinary thing, if any thing should happen to interfere with his hopes!”

Daniel, who had blushed all over, suddenly became deadly pale. After all that he had been told, these words sounded to him, in spite of the loud laugh that accompanied them, like a warning and a threat. But he was not allowed the time to reflect. The piece was coming to an end; Miss Brandon was drawing a fur cloak over her shoulders, and left on the count's arm; while he had to escort Mrs. Brian, being closely followed by tall, stiff Sir Thorn. The landau was at the door. The servants had let down the steps; and Miss Sarah was just getting in. Suddenly, as her foot touched the bottom of the carriage, she drew back, and cried out,—

“What is that? What is in there?”

The count came forward, looking visibly embarrassed.

“You are fond of roses,” he said, “and I have ordered a few.”

With these words he took up some of the leaves, and showed them to her. But immediately Miss Brandon's terror was changed into wrath.

“You certainly are bent upon making me angry,” she said. “You want people to say everywhere that I make you commit all kinds of follies. What a glorious thing to waste fifty dollars on flowers, when one has I know not how many millions!”

Then, seeing by the light of the street-lamp that the count's face showed deep disappointment, she said in a tone to make him lose the little reason that was left him,—

“You would have been more welcome if you had brought me a cent's worth of violets.”

In the mean time Mrs. Brian had taken her seat by Miss Brandon's side; Sir Thorn had gotten in; and it was now the count's turn. At the moment when the servant was closing the door, Miss Sarah bent forward toward Daniel, and said,—

“I hope I shall have the pleasure of soon seeing you again. Our dear count will give you my address, and tell you my reception-days. I must tell you that we American girls dote upon naval officers, and that I”—

The remainder was lost in the noise of the wheels. The carriage which took Miss Brandon and Count Ville-Handry away was already at some distance, before Daniel could recover from his amazement, his utter consternation.

All these strange events, coming upon him one by one, in the course of a few hours, and breaking suddenly in upon so calm and quiet a life, overwhelmed him to such a degree, that he was not quite sure whether he was dreaming or awake.

Alas! he was not dreaming. This Miss Sarah Brandon, who had just passed away from him like a glorious vision from on high, was only too real; and there, on the muddy pavement, a handful of rose-leaves bore witness of the power of her charms, and the folly of her aged lover.

“Ah, we are lost!” exclaimed Daniel, in so loud a voice, that some of the passers-by stopped, expecting one of those street-dramas which read so strikingly in the local columns of our papers. They were disappointed, however. Noticing that he attracted attention, Daniel shrugged his shoulders, and quickly walked off towards the boulevards.

He had promised Henrietta to be sure to tell her that very evening, if possible, what he had found out; but it was too late now; midnight was striking.

“I’ll go to-morrow,” he said to himself.

Whilst lounging leisurely down the boulevards, still brilliantly lighted up, and crowded with people, he strained all his faculties for the purpose of examining his situation coolly and calmly. At first he had imagined he should only have to do with one of those common *intriguantes* who want to secure themselves a quiet old age, and clumsily spread their nets to catch an old or a young man; and who can always easily be gotten rid of by paying them a more or less considerable sum of money, provided the police does not get hold of them. In such a case he would have had some hope.

But here he saw himself suddenly confronted by one of those formidable adventuresses in high life, who either save appearances altogether, or, at worst, are only compromised far enough to give additional zest and an air of mystery to their relations. How could he hope to compete with such a

woman? and with what weapons could he attack her? How should he reach her? and how attack her?

Was it not pure folly to think even of making her give up the magnificent fortune which she seemed already to have in her hands, Heaven knows by what means? She evidently looked upon it as her own already, and enjoyed its charms in anticipation.

“Great God!” said Daniel, “send me some inspiration.”

But no inspiration came; and in vain did he torture his mind; he was unable to think.

When he reached home, he went to bed as usual; but the consciousness of his misfortunes kept him awake. At nine o’clock in the morning, having never closed his eyes, and feeling utterly overcome by sleeplessness and fatigue, he was just about to get up, when some one knocked at his door. He rose hastily, put on his clothes, and went to open the door. It was M. de Brevan, who came to hear all about his new acquaintance of last night, and whose first word was,—

“Well?”

“Alas!” replied Daniel, “I think the wisest plan would be to give it up.”

“Upon my word, you are in great haste to surrender.”

“And what would you do in my place, eh? That woman has beauty enough to drive any one mad; and the count is a lost man.”

And, before Maxime had time to reply, Daniel told him simply and frankly all about his love for Miss Ville-Handry, the hopes he had been encouraged to cherish, and the dangers that threatened his happiness in life.

“For I can no longer deceive myself, Maxime,” he concluded with a tone of utter despair. “I foresee, I know, what is going to happen. Henrietta will obstinately, and at any risk, do every thing in the world to prevent her father’s marriage with Miss Brandon; she will struggle to the bitter end. Ought I, or ought I not, to help her? Certainly. Can we succeed? No! But we shall have a mortal enemy in Miss Brandon; and, on the morning after her

wedding, her first thought will be how to avenge herself, and how to separate Henrietta and myself forever.”

Little as Brevan was generally given to show his feelings, he was evidently deeply touched by his friend’s despair.

“In short, my dear fellow, you have reached the point at which we no longer know what to do. All the more reason, then, that you should listen to the calm advice of a friend. You must have yourself presented at Miss Brandon’s house.”

“She has invited me.”

“Well, then, do not hesitate, but go there.”

“What for?”

“Not for much. You will pay some compliments to Miss Sarah; you will be all attention to Mrs. Brian; and you will try to win over the Hon. Thomas Elgin. Finally, and above all, you will be all ears and all eyes.”

“I am sorry to say I do not understand you yet.”

“What? Don’t you see that the position of these daring adventurers, however secure it may appear, may, after all, hang on a single thread? and that nothing is wanting in order to cut that thread but an opportunity? And when you may expect, at any moment, any thing and every thing, what is to be done but to wait and watch?”

Daniel did not seem to be convinced. He added,—

“Miss Sarah will talk to me about her marriage.”

“Certainly she will.”

“What can I say?”

“Nothing,—neither yes nor no,—but smile, or run away; at all events, you gain time.”

He was interrupted by Daniel’s servant, who came in, holding a card in his hand, and said,—

“Sir, there is a gentleman down stairs in a carriage, who wants to know if he would interrupt you if he came up to see you.”

“What is the gentleman’s name?”

“Count Ville-Handry. Here is his card.”

“Be quick!” said Daniel, “run down and ask him, would he please come up.”

M. de Brevan had started up, and was standing, with his hat on, near the door. As the servant left, he said,—

“I am running away.”

“Why?”

“Because the count must not find me here. You would be compelled to introduce me to him; he might remember my name; and, if he were to tell Miss Sarah that I am your friend, all would be lost.”

Thereupon he turned to go; but at the same moment the outer door was opened, and he said,—

“There is the count! I am caught.”

But Daniel opened promptly the door to his bedroom, pushed him in, and shut the door. It was high time; the same moment the count entered.

CHAPTER 6

The count must have risen early that day. Although it was not yet ten o'clock, he was already brilliant, rouged, dyed, and frizzed. Of course all these results had not been the work of an hour. As he entered, he drew a long breath, and said,—

“Ah! You live pretty high up, my dear Daniel.”

Poor fellow! He forgot that he was playing the young man. But he recalled himself at once, and added, full of vivacity,—

“Not that I complain of it; oh, no! A few stories to climb—what is that to me?”

At the same time he stretched out his leg, and caressed his calf, as if to exhibit its vigor and its suppleness. In the meantime, Daniel, full of respect for his future father-in-law, had drawn forward his easiest arm-chair. The count took it, and in an airy manner, which contrasted ill with his evident embarrassment, he said,—

“I am sure, my dear Daniel, you must be very much surprised and puzzled to see me here; are you not?”

“I confess, sir, I am. If you wished to speak to me, you had only to drop me a line, and I should have waited upon you at once.”

“I am sure you would! But that is not necessary. In fact, I have nothing to say to you. I should not have come to see you, if I had not missed an appointment. I was to meet one of my fellow members of the assembly, and he did not come to the place where we were to meet. On my return home, I happened to pass your house; and I said to myself, ‘Why not go up and see my sailor friend? I might ask him what he thinks of a certain young lady to whom he had, last night, the honor of being presented.’”

Now or never was the favorable moment for following Maxime’s advice; hence Daniel, instead of replying, simply smiled as pleasantly as he could.

But that did not satisfy the count; so he repeated the question more directly, and said,—

“Come, tell us frankly, what do you think of Miss Brandon?”

“She is one of the greatest beauties I have ever seen in my life.”

Count Ville-Handry’s eyes beamed with delight and with pride as he heard these words. He exclaimed,—

“Say she is the greatest beauty, the most marvellous and transcendent beauty, you ever saw. And that, M. Daniel Champcey, is her smallest attraction. When she opens her lips, the charms of her mind, beauty and her mind, and remember her admirable ingenuousness, her naive freshness, and all the treasures of her chaste and pure soul.”

This excessive, almost idiotic admiration, this implicit, absurd faith in his beloved, gave the painted face of the count a strange, almost ecstatic expression. He said to himself, but loud enough to be heard,—

“And to think that chance alone has led me to meet this angel!”

A sudden start, involuntary on the part of Daniel, seemed to disturb him; for he resumed his speech, laying great stress upon his words,—

“Yes, chance alone; and I can prove it to you.”

He settled down in his chair like a man who is going to speak for some length of time; and, in that emphatic manner which so well expressed the high opinion he had of himself, he continued,—

“You know, my friend, how deeply I was affected by the death of the Countess Ville-Handry. It is true she was not exactly the companion a statesman of my rank would have chosen. Her whole capacity rarely rose beyond the effort to distinguish a ball-dress from a dinner-dress. But she was a good woman, attentive, discreet, and devoted to me; an excellent manager, economical, and yet always sure to do honor to the high reputation of my house.”

Thus, in all sincerity, the count spoke of her who had literally made him, and who, for sixteen long years, had galvanized his empty head.

“In short,” he continued, “the loss of my wife so completely upset me, that I lost all taste for the occupations which had so far been dear to me; and I set about to find distractions elsewhere. Soon after I had gotten into the habit of going frequently to my club, I fell in with M. Thomas Elgin, and, although we never became intimate, we always exchanged a friendly greeting, and occasionally a cigar.

“Sir Thorn, as they call him, is an excellent horseman, you know, and used to ride out every morning at an early hour; and as the physicians had recommended to me horseback exercise, and as I like it, because I excel in riding, as in every thing else, we often met in the Bois de Boulogne. We wished each other good-day; and sometimes we galloped a little while side by side. I am rather reserved; but Sir Thorn is even more so, and thus it did not seem that our acquaintance was ever to ripen into any thing better, till an accident brought us together.

“One morning we were returning slowly from a long ride, when Sir Thorn’s mare, a foolish brute, suddenly shied, and jumped so high, that he was thrown. I jumped down instantly to help him up again; but he could not rise. You know nothing ordinarily hurts these Americans. But it seems, as we found out afterwards, that he had sprained an ankle, and dislocated a knee. There was no one near the place; and I began to be seriously embarrassed, when fortunately two soldiers appeared. I called to them, and sent one on my horse to the nearest hack-stand to bring a carriage. As soon as it came, we raised the invalid, and put him in as well as we could; I got on the box to show the man the way to Sir Thorn’s house. When we arrived there, I rang the bell, and told the servants to come down to their master. They got him, with some difficulty, out of the hack; and there they were, carrying him painfully up the stairs, and he groaning feebly, for he suffered terribly.

“I was going up before them; and, as I reached the second story, a door suddenly opened, and a young girl was standing right before me.

“She was evidently dressing, when the noise which we made startled her; and she came running out. She had only taken time to throw a loose wrapper around her shoulders; and her dishevelled hair streamed out from under a kind of coquettish morning-cap.

“When she saw her kinsman in the arms of the servants, she imagined he was dangerously wounded, perhaps even—She turned as pale as death, and, uttering a loud cry, she tottered.

“She would have fallen down the steps, head foremost, if I had not caught her in my arms. She had fainted. And there I held her, leaning on my shoulder, so close that I became aware of the warmth of her lovely body, and actually felt her heart beat against mine. Her cap had become unfastened; and her hair fell in golden floods all over me, and down to the floor. But all this lasted only a few seconds.

“When she recovered, and found herself in the arms of a man, she rose with an air of extreme distress, and, slipping away, disappeared in her room.”

At the mere description of this scene, the count turned pale under his rouge; and his voice forsook him. Nor did he in any way attempt to conceal his emotion.

“I am a poor old fellow,” he said; “and between you and me, my dear Daniel, I will tell you that the women—well—the women have not been—exactly cruel to me. In fact, I thought I had outlived all the emotions which they can possibly give us.

“Well, I was mistaken. Never in my life, I assure you, have I felt such a deep sensation as when Miss Brandon was lying in my arms.”

While saying this, he had pulled out his handkerchief, saturated with a strong perfume, and was wiping his forehead, though very gently, and with infinite precautions, so as not to spoil the artistic work of his valet.

“You will know Miss Brandon,” he went on, “I hope soon. Once having seen her, one wants to see her again. I was lucky enough to have a pretext for coming again; and the very next day I was at her door, inquiring after M. Thomas Elgin. They showed me into the room of that excellent gentleman, where I found him stretched out on an invalid’s chair, with his legs all bandaged up. By his side sat a venerable lady, to whom he presented me, and who was no other than Mrs. Brian.

“They received me very kindly, although with some little reserve under all their politeness; but I staid and staid in vain beyond the proper time; Miss Sarah did not appear.

“Nor did I see her upon subsequent occasions, when I repeated my visits, until at last I came to the conclusion that she avoided me purposely.

“Upon my word, I believed it. But one day Sir Thorn, who was improving very rapidly, expressed a desire to walk out a few steps in the Champs Elysees. I offered him my arm; he accepted it; and, when we came back, he asked me if I would be kind enough to take pot-luck with him.”

However important these communications were for Daniel, he was for some time already listening but very inattentively to the count’s recital, for he had heard a strange, faint noise, which he could not by any means explain to himself. At last, looking all around, he discovered the cause.

The door to his bedroom, which he was sure he had closed himself, was now standing partly open. No doubt M. de Brevan, weary of his confinement and excited by curiosity, had chosen this way to see and to listen. Of all this, however, Count Ville-Handry saw nothing, and suspected nothing.

“Thus,” he continued, “I was at last to see Miss Sarah again. Upon my word, I was less excited, I think, the day I made my first speech. But you know I have some power over myself; and I had recovered my calmness, when Sir Thorn confessed to me that he would have invited me long since, but for the fear of offending his young relative, who had declared she would never meet me again. I was grieved, and asked how I had offended her. And then Sir Thorn, with that marvellous composure which never leaves him, said, ‘It is not you she blames, but herself, on account of that ridiculous scene the other day.’

“Do you hear, Daniel, he called that adorable scene which I have just described to you, ridiculous! It is only Americans who can commit such absurdities.

“I have since found out that they had almost to force Miss Brandon to receive me; but she had tact enough not to let me see it, when I was formally presented to her, just before going to dinner. It is true, she blushed

deeply; but she took my hand with the utmost cordiality, and cut me short when I was trying to pay her some compliment, saying,—

“‘You are Thorn’s friend; I am sure we shall be friends also.’

“‘Ah, Daniel! you admired Miss Brandon at the theatre; but you ought to see her at her house. Abroad she sacrifices herself in order to pay proper regard to the world; but at home she can venture to be herself.

“‘We soon became friends, as she had foretold, so soon, in fact, that I was quite surprised when I found her addressing me like an old acquaintance. I soon discovered how that came about.

“‘Our young girls here in France, my dear Daniel, are charming, no doubt, but generally ill taught, frivolous, and caring for nothing but balls, novels, or dress. The Americans are very different. Their serious minds are occupied with the same subjects which fill their parents’ minds,—with politics, industry, discussions in the assembly, discoveries in science, &c. A man like myself, known abroad and at home during a long political career of some distinction, could not be a stranger to Miss Brandon. My earnestness in defending those causes which I considered just had often filled her with enthusiasm. Deeply moved by my speeches, which she was in the habit of reading, she had often thought of the speaker. I think I can hear her now say with that beautiful voice of hers, which has the clear ring of pure crystal,—

“‘Oh, yes! I knew you, count; I knew you long ago. And there was many a day when I wished I were a friend of yours, so that I might say to you, “Well done, sir! what you are doing is grand, is noble!”’

“‘And that was true; for she remembered a number of passages from my speeches, even from such as I had forgotten myself; and she always quoted them literally. At times, I was amazed at some peculiarly bold thoughts which she uttered; and, when I complimented her upon them, she broke out in loud laughter, and said,—

“‘Why, count, these are your own ideas; I got them from you. You said so on such and such an occasion.’

“And when I looked at night, after my return, into my papers, to ascertain the fact, I found almost always that Miss Brandon had been right. Need I tell you after that, that I soon became an almost daily visitor at the house in Circus Street? Surely you take it for granted.

“But what I must tell you is, that I found there the most perfect happiness, and the purest that I have ever known upon earth. I was filled with respect and with admiration, when I looked at their rigid morality, united with the heartiest cheerfulness. There I enjoyed my happiest hours, between Mrs. Brian, the Puritan lady, so strict for herself, so indulgent for others; and Thomas Elgin, the noblest and best of men, who conceals under an appearance of icy coldness the warmest and kindest of hearts.”

What was Count Ville-Handry aiming at? or had he no aim at all?

Had he come merely to confide to Daniel the amazing romance of his love? Or did he simply yield to the natural desire of all lovers, to pour out the exuberance of their feelings, and to talk of their love, even when they know that their indiscretion may be fatal to their success?

Daniel put these questions to himself; but the count did not leave him time to reflect, and to answer them.

After a short pause, he seemed to rouse himself, and said, suddenly changing his tone,—

“I guess what you think, my dear Daniel. You say to yourself, ‘Count Ville-Handry was in love.’ Well, I assure you you are mistaken.”

Daniel started from his chair; and, overcome by amazement, he exclaimed,—

“Can it be possible?”

“Exactly so; I give you my word of honor. The feelings which attracted me toward Miss Brandon were the same that bound me to my daughter. But as I am a shrewd observer, and have some knowledge of the human heart, I could not help being struck by a change in Miss Brandon’s face, and especially in her manner. After having treated me with the greatest freedom and familiarity, she had suddenly become reserved, and almost cold. It was

evident to me that she was embarrassed in my presence. Our constant intercourse, so far from reassuring her, seemed to frighten her. You may guess how I interpreted this change, my dear Daniel.

“But, as I have never been a conceited man, I thought I might be mistaken. I devoted myself, therefore, to more careful observation; and I soon became aware, that, if I loved Miss Brandon only with the affection of a father, I had succeeded in inspiring her with a more tender sentiment.”

In any other person, this senile self-conceit would have appeared intensely absurd to Daniel; in his Henrietta’s father, it pained him deeply. The count actually noticed his downcast look, and, misinterpreting it, asked him,—

“Could you doubt what I say?”

“Oh, no, sir!”

“Very well, then. I can assure you, at all events, that this discovery troubled me not a little. I was so surprised by it, that for three days I could neither think of it coolly, nor decide on what I ought to do. Still it was necessary I should make up my mind. I did not for a moment think of abusing the confidence of this innocent child; and yet I knew, I felt it, she was absolutely in my power. But no! It would have been infamous in me to repay the hospitality of excellent Mrs. Brian, and the kindness of noble M. Elgin, with such ingratitude. On the other hand, must I necessarily deny myself my pleasant visits at the house in Circus Street, and break with friends who were so dear to me? I thought of that, also; but I had not the courage to do so.”

He hesitated for a moment, trying to read in Daniel’s eyes his real opinion. After a while, he said very gravely,—

“It was then only, that the idea of marrying her occurred to me.”

Daniel had been expecting the fatal word; thus, however heavy the blow was, it found him prepared. He remained immovable.

This indifference seemed to surprise the count; for he uttered an expression of discontent, and curtly repeated,—

“Yes, I thought of marrying her. You will say, ‘That was a serious matter.’ I know that only too well; and therefore I did not decide the question in a hurry, but weighed the reasons for and against very carefully. I am not one of those weak men, you know, I am sure, who can easily be hoodwinked, and who fancy they alone possess the secret of perennial youth. No, no, I know myself, and am fully aware, better than anybody else, that I am approaching maturer years.

“This was, in fact, the first objection that arose in my mind. But then I answered it triumphantly by the fact that age is not a matter to be decided by the certificate of baptism, but that we are just as old as we appear to be. Now, thanks to an exceptionally sober and peaceful life, of which forty years were spent in the country, to an iron constitution, and to the extreme care I have always taken of my health, I possess a—what shall I say?—a vigor which many young men might envy, who can hardly drag one foot after the other.”

He rose as he said this, threw out his chest, straightened his back, and stretched out his well-shaped leg. Then, when he thought Daniel had sufficiently admired him, he continued,—

“Now, what of Miss Brandon? You think, perhaps, she is still in her teens? Far from that! She is at least twenty-five, my dear friend; and, for a woman, twenty-five years are—ah, ah!”

He smiled ironically, as if to say that to him a woman of twenty-five appeared an old, a very old woman. Then he went on,—

“Besides, I know how serious her disposition is, and her eminent good sense. You may rely upon me, when I tell you I have studied her. A thousand trifles, of no weight in appearance, and unnoticed by herself in all probability, have told me that she abhors very young men. She has learnt to appreciate the value of young husbands of thirty, who are all fire and flame in the honeymoon, and who, six months later, wearied with pure and tranquil happiness, seek their delights elsewhere. It is not only of late that I have found out how truly she values what is, after all, most desirable in this world,—a great name worthily borne by a true man, and a reputation that would shed new radiance upon her. How often have I heard her say to Mrs.

Brian, 'Above all, aunt, I want to be proud of my husband; I want to see everybody's eye sparkle with admiration and envy as soon as I mention his name, which will have become mine also; I want people to whisper around me, "Ah, how happy she is to be loved by such a man!"'"

He shook his head gravely, and said in a solemn tone,—

"I examined myself, Daniel, and found that I answered all of Miss Brandon's expectations; and the result of my meditations was, that I would be a madman to allow such happiness to escape me, and that I was bound to risk every thing. I made up my mind, therefore, firmly, and went to M. Elgin in order to make him aware of my intentions. I cannot describe to you the amazement of that worthy gentleman.

"You are joking,' he said at first, 'and that pains me deeply.'

"But, when he saw that I had never in my life spoken more seriously, he, who is usually so phlegmatic, became perfectly furious. As if I would have come to him, if, by some impossible accident, I should have been unhappy in my choice! But I fell from the clouds when he told me outright that he meant to do all he could do to prevent such a match. Nor would he give up his purpose, say what I could; and I had to use all my skill to make him change his mind. At last, after more than two hours' discussion, all that I could obtain from him was the promise that he would remain neutral, and that he would leave to Mrs. Brian the responsibility of refusing or accepting my offer."

He laughed, this good Count Ville-Handry, he laughed heartily, no doubt recalling his discussion with Sir Thorn, and his triumphant skill.

"So," he resumed, "I went to Mrs. Brian. Ah! she did not mince matters. At the first word, she called me—God forgive her!—an old fool, and plainly told me that I must never show myself again in Circus Street.

"I insisted; but in vain. She would not even listen to me, the old Puritan; and, when I became pressing, she dropped me a solemn curtsey, and left me alone in the room, looking foolish enough, I am sure.

“For the time, I had nothing to do but to go away. I did so, hoping that her interview with her niece might induce her to change her mind. Not at all. The next morning, when I called at the house, the servants said Sir Thorn was out, and Mrs. Brian and Miss Brandon had just left for Fontainebleau. The day after, the same result; and for a whole week the doors remained closed.

“I was becoming restless, when a commissionaire, one morning, brought me a letter. It was Miss Brandon who wrote. She asked me to be that very day, at four o’clock, in the Bois de Boulogne, near the waterfalls; that she would ride out in the afternoon with Sir Thorn; that she would escape from him, and meet me.

“As a matter of course, I was punctual; and it was well I was so, for, a few minutes after I got there, I saw her—or rather I felt her—coming towards me, riding at full speed. When she reached me, she stopped suddenly, and, jumping from her horse, said to me,—

““They watch me so jealously, that I could not write to you till to-day. I am deeply wounded by this want of confidence, and I do not think I can endure it any longer. Here I am, carry me off, let us go!”

“Never, O Daniel! never have I seen her look more marvellously beautiful than she looked at that moment. She was flushed with excitement and the rapid ride; her eyes shone with courage and passion; her lips trembled; and then she said again,—

““I know I am ruining myself; and you yourself—you will probably despise me. But never mind! Let us be gone!””

He paused, overcome with excitement; but, soon recovering, he continued,—

“To hear a beautiful woman tell you that! Ah, Daniel! that is an experience which alone is worth a man’s whole life. And yet I had the courage, mad as I felt I was becoming, to speak to her words of calm reason. Yes, I had the sublime courage, and the almost fortuitous control over myself, to conjure her to retreat into her house.

“She began to weep, and accused me of indifference.

“But I had discovered a way out of the difficulty, and said to her,—

“‘Sarah, go home. Write to me what you have just told me, and I am sure I shall compel your friends to grant me your hand.’

“This she did.

“And what I had foreseen came to pass. In the face of such evidence of what they called our madness, Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian dared not oppose our plans any longer. After some little hesitations, and imposing certain honorable conditions, they said to Sarah and myself,—

“‘You will have it so. Go, then, and get married.’”

This is what Count Ville-Handry called chance, a “blessed chance,” as he said, utterly unmindful of the whole chain of circumstances which he himself related. From the accident that had befallen M. Elgin, and the fainting-fit of Miss Brandon, to the meeting in the Bois de Boulogne and the proposed runaway-match, all seemed to him perfectly natural and simple,—even the sudden enthusiasm of a young, frivolous woman for his political opinions, and the learning by heart of his speeches.

Daniel was amazed. That a man like the count should be so perfectly blind to the intrigue that was going on around him, seemed to him incomprehensible. The count, however, was not so blind, that he should not have at least suspected the nature of Daniel’s feelings.

“What are you thinking of?” he asked. “Come, let us hear your opinion. Tell us frankly that you suspect Miss Brandon, and accuse her of trying to catch me in her snares, or, at least, of having selfish views.”

“I do not say so,” stammered Daniel.

“No, but you think so; and that is worse. Well, come; I think I can convince you of your mistake. What do you think Miss Brandon would gain by marrying me? A fortune, you say. I have only one word in reply; but that is sufficient; Miss Brandon is richer than I am.”

How, and at what price, Miss Brandon had managed to possess herself of such a fortune, Daniel knew but too well from Maxime’s account; hence he

could not suppress a nervous shudder, which the count noticed, and which irritated him.

“Yes, richer than I am,” he repeated. “The oil-wells which she has inherited from her father bring her in, bad years and good years, from thirty to forty thousand dollars a year, and that in spite of their being sadly mismanaged. If they were well managed, they would produce, three, four, or five times as much, or even more. Sir Thorn has proved to me that they are an almost inexhaustible mine of wealth. If petroleum was not fabulously profitable, how would you account for the oil-fever with which these cool, calculating Americans have suddenly been seized, and which has made more millionaires than the gold-fever in California and the Territories? Ah! there is something to be made there yet, and something grand, if one could dispose of a large capital.”

He became excited, and forgot himself; but he soon checked himself. He had evidently been on the point of letting a secret leak out. After a few moments, he continued more calmly,—

“But enough of that. I trust your suspicions are removed. Next you may tell me that Miss Brandon takes me because she can do no better. Mistaken again, my friend. At this very moment she is called upon to choose between me and a much younger man than I am, whose fortune, moreover, is larger than mine,—Mr. Wilkie Gordon.”

How did it come about that Count Ville-Handry seemed to appeal to Daniel, and to plead his cause before him?

Daniel did not even think of asking himself that question; his mind was in a state of utter confusion.

Still, as the count insisted on having his opinion, as he urged him, and repeatedly asked, “Well, do you see any other objection?” he forgot at last his friend’s prudent warning, and said in a troubled voice,—

“No doubt, count, you know Miss Brandon’s family?”

“Certainly! Do you think I would buy a cat in a bag? Her excellent father was a model of honesty.”

“And—her previous life?”

The count started from his chair, and, casting a savage glance at Daniel, said,—

“Oh, oh! I see one of those rascally slanderers, who have tried to tarnish the honor of the noblest and chastest of all women, has already been at work here, anticipating my communication to you, and repeating those infamous calumnies. You must give me the name of the scoundrel.”

Unconsciously, almost, Daniel turned towards the door, behind which M. de Brevan was listening.

Perhaps he expected him to come forth; but Maxime did not stir.

“Sarah’s previous life!” continued the count. “I know every hour of it; and I can answer for it as for my own. The darling! Before consenting to be mine, she insisted upon my knowing every thing, yes, every thing, without reserve or boastfulness; and I know what she has suffered. Did they not actually say she had been the accomplice of a wretched thief, a cashier of some bank, who had become a defaulter? Did they not say that she had driven a foolish young man, a gambler, to commit suicide; and that she had watched, unmoved, the tortures of his agony? Ah! you have only to look at Miss Brandon to know that these vile stories are wretched inventions of malicious enemies and rivals. And look here, Daniel; you may believe me; whenever you see people calumniate a man or a woman, you may rest assured that that man or woman has, somehow or other, wounded or humiliated some vulgar person, some mean, envious fool, who cannot endure his or her superiority in point of fortune, rank, or beauty and talent.”

He had actually recovered his youthful energy in thus defending his beloved. His eye brightened up; his voice became strong, and his gestures animated.

“But no more of that painful topic,” he said: “let us talk seriously.”

He rose, and leaning on the mantelpiece, so as to face Daniel, he said,—

“I told you, my dear Daniel, that Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian insisted upon certain conditions before they consented to our marriage. One is, that Miss Brandon is to be received by my relations as she deserves to be, not only

respectfully, but affectionately, even tenderly. As to relations, there is not any. I have some remote cousins, who, having nothing to expect from me when I die, do not trouble themselves any more about me than I trouble myself about them. But I have a daughter; and there is the danger. I know she is distressed at the idea of my marrying again. She cannot bear the mere idea that another woman is to take the place of her mother, to bear her name, and to rule in my house."

Daniel began at last to know what he had to understand by that unsuccessful appointment which had procured him the pleasure of a visit from Count Ville-Handry.

"Now," continued the latter, "I know my daughter. She is her mother over again, weak, but obstinate beyond endurance. If she has taken it into her head to receive Miss Brandon uncivilly, she will do so, in spite of all she has promised me, and she will make a terrible scene of it. And if Miss Brandon consents, in spite of all, to go on, my house will become a hell to me, and my wife will suffer terribly. Now the question is, whether I have sufficient influence over Henrietta to bring her to reason. I think not. But this influence which I have not—a very nice young man may have it; and that man is you."

Daniel had turned red. It was for the first time that the count spoke so clearly. He went on,—

"I have never disapproved of my poor wife's plans; and the proof is, that I have allowed you to pay your attentions to my daughter. But now I make this condition: if my daughter is to Miss Brandon what she ought to be to her, a tender and devoted sister, then, six months after my wedding, there shall be another wedding at my house."

Daniel was about to speak; but he stopped him, saying,—

"No, not a word! I have shown you the wisdom of my decision, and you may act accordingly."

He had already put on his hat and opened the door, when he added,—

"Ah! one word more. Miss Brandon has asked me to present you to her to-night. She wants to speak to you. Come and dine with me; and after dinner

we will go to Circus Street. Now, pray think of what I have told you, and good-by!”

CHAPTER 7

Count Ville-Handry had hardly closed the door, when M. de Brevan rushed out of the bedroom in which he had been concealed.

“Was I right?” he exclaimed.

But Daniel did not hear him. He had forgotten his very presence. Overcome by the great effort he had made to conceal his emotions, he had sunk into a chair, hiding his face in his hands, and said to himself in a mournful voice, and as if trying to convince himself of an overwhelming fact,—

“The count has lost his mind altogether, and we are lost.”

The grief of this excellent young man was so great and so bitter, that M. de Brevan seemed to be deeply moved. He looked at him for some time with an air of pity, and then suddenly, as if yielding to a good impulse, he touched his shoulder, and said,—

“Daniel!”

The unhappy man started like one who has suddenly been roused from deep slumber; and, as he recalled what had just happened, he said,—

“You have heard all, Maxime?”

“All! I have not lost a word nor a gesture. But do not blame me for my indiscretion. It enables me to give you some friendly advice. You know I have paid dear for my experience.”

He hesitated, being at a loss how to express his ideas; then he continued in a short, sharp tone,—

“You love Miss Ville-Handry?”

“More than my life, don’t you know?”

“Well, if that is so, abandon all thoughts of useless resistance; induce Miss Henrietta to do as her father wishes; and persuade Miss Brandon to let your

wedding take place a month after her own. But ask for special pledges. Miss Ville-Handry may suffer somewhat during that month; but the day after your wedding you will carry her off to your own home, and leave the poor old man to his amorous folly.”

Daniel showed in his face that this suggestion opened a new prospect before him.

“I had not thought of that,” he said.

“It is all you can do.”

“Yes, it is what prudence would advise me to do. But can I do so in honor?”

“Oh, honor, honor!”

“Would it not be wrong in me to abandon the poor old man to the mercy of Miss Brandon and her accomplices?”

“You will never be able to rescue him, my dear fellow.”

“I ought at least to try. You thought so yesterday, and even this morning, not two hours ago.”

Maxime could scarcely hide his impatience.

“I did not know then what I know now,” he said.

Daniel had risen, and was walking up and down the small room, replying to his own objections, rather than to those raised by Brevan.

“If I were alone master,” he said, “I might, perhaps, agree to a capitulation. But could Henrietta accept it? Never, never! Her father knows her well. She is as weak as a child; but at the proper moment she can develop a masculine energy and an iron will.”

“Why should you tell her at all who Miss Brandon is?”

“I have pledged my word of honor to tell her every thing.”

Brevan again shrugged his shoulders, and there was no mistaking what he meant by that gesture. He might just as well have said aloud, “Can one conceive such stupidity?”

“Then you had better give up your Henrietta, my poor fellow,” he said.

But Daniel’s despair had been overcome. He ground his teeth with anger, and said,—

“Not yet, my friend, not yet! An honest man who defends his honor and his life is pretty strong. I have no experience, that is true; but I have you, Maxime; and I know I can always count upon you.”

Daniel did not seem to have noticed that M. de Brevan, at first all fire and energy, had rapidly cooled off, like a man, who, having ventured too far, thinks he has made a mistake, and tries to retrace his steps.

“Certainly you may count upon me,” he replied; “but what can be done?”

“Well, what you said yourself. I shall call upon Miss Brandon, and watch her. I shall dissemble, and gain time. If necessary, I shall employ detectives, and find out her antecedents. I shall try to interest some high personage in my behalf,—my minister, for instance, who is very kind to me. Besides, I have an idea.”

“Ah!”

“That unlucky cashier, whose story you told me, and who, you think, is not dead—if we could find him. How did you call him? Oh, Malgat! An advertisement inserted in all the leading newspapers of Europe would, no doubt, reach him; and the hope of seeing himself avenged”—

M. de Brevan’s cheeks began to redden perceptibly. He broke out with strange vehemence,—

“What nonsense!”

Then he added, more collectedly,—

“You forget that Malgat has been sentenced to I know not how many years’ penal servitude, and that he will see in your advertisement a trick of the police; so that he will only conceal himself more carefully than ever.”

But Daniel was not so easily shaken. He said,—

“I will think it over. I will see. Perhaps something might be done with that young man whom the count mentioned, that M. Wilkie Gordon. If I thought he was really anxious for Miss Brandon’s hand”—

“I have heard it said, and I am sure it is so, the young man is one of those idiots whom vanity renders insane, and who do not know what to do in order to make themselves notorious. Miss Brandon being very famous, he would marry her, just as he would pay a hundred thousand dollars for a famous racer.”

“And how do you account for Miss Brandon’s refusal?”

“By the character of the man, whom I know very well, and whom she knows as well. She is quite aware that, three months after the wedding, he would decamp, and in less than a year she would be divorced. Then there is another thing: Wilkie is only twenty-five years old; and you know a fellow at that age is likely to live a good deal longer than a lover who is beyond the sixties.”

The way in which he said this lent to his words a terrible significance; and Daniel, turning pale, stammered out,—

“Great God! Do you think Miss Brandon could”—

“Could do anything, most assuredly,—except, perhaps, get into trouble with the police. I have heard her say that only fools employ poison or the dagger.”

A strange smile passed over his lips; and he added in a tone of horrible irony,—

“It is true there are other means, less prompt, perhaps, but much safer, by which people may be removed when they become inconvenient.

“What means? The same, no doubt, which she had employed to get rid of poor Kergrist, and that unlucky Malgat, the cashier of the Mutual Discount Society. Purely moral means, based upon her thorough knowledge of the character of her victims, and her own infernal power over them.”

But Daniel tried in vain to obtain more light from his friend. Brevan answered evasively; perhaps because he did not dare to speak out freely, and reveal his real thoughts; or because it lay in his plans to be content with having added this horrible fear to all the other apprehensions of his friend.

His embarrassment, just now unmistakable, had entirely disappeared, as if he had come to a final decision after long hesitation. He who had first advised all kinds of concessions now suggested the most energetic resistance, and seemed to be confident of success.

When he at last left Daniel, he had made him promise to keep him hour by hour informed of all that might happen, and, above all, to try every means in his power to unmask Miss Brandon.

“How he hates her!” said Daniel to himself when he was alone,—“how he hates her!”

But this very hatred, which had already troubled him the night before, now disturbed him more and more, and kept him from coming to any decision. The more he reflected, the more it seemed to him that Maxime had allowed himself to be carried away beyond what was probable, or even possible. The last accusation, especially, seemed to him perfectly monstrous.

A young and beautiful woman, consumed by ambition and covetousness, might possibly play a comedy of pure love while she was disgusted in her heart. She might catch by vile tricks a foolish old man, and make him marry her, openly and avowedly selling her beauty and her youth. Such things happen, and are excused by the morality of our day. The same wicked, heartless woman might speculate upon becoming speedily a widow, and thus regaining her liberty, together with a large fortune. This also happens, however horrible it may appear. But that she should marry a poor old fool, with the preconceived purpose of hastening his end by a deliberate crime, there was a depth in that wickedness which terrified Daniel’s imagination.

Deeply ensconced in his chair, he was losing himself in conjectures, forgetting how time passed, and how his work was waiting for him, even the invitation to dinner which the count had given to him, and the prospect of being introduced that very evening to Miss Brandon. Night came; and

then only his concierge, who came in to see what had become of him all day long, aroused him from his torpor.

“Ah, I am losing my senses!” he exclaimed, rising suddenly. “And Henrietta, who has been waiting for me—what must she think of me?”

Miss Ville-Handry, at that very moment, had reached that degree of anxiety which becomes well-nigh intolerable. After having waited for Daniel all the evening of the day before, and after having spent a sleepless night, she had surely expected him to-day, counting the seconds by the beating of her heart, and starting at the noise of every carriage in the street. In her despair, knowing hardly what she was doing, she was thinking of running herself to University Street, to Daniel’s house, when the door opened.

In the same indifferent tone in which he announced friends and enemies, the servant said,—

“M. Daniel Champcey.”

Henrietta was up in a moment. She was about to exclaim,—

“What has kept you? What has happened?” But the words died away on her lips.

It had been sufficient for her to look at Daniel’s sad face to feel that a great misfortune had befallen her.

“Ah! you had been right in your fears,” she said, sinking into a chair.

“Alas!”

“Speak: let me know all.”

“Your father has come to me, and offered me your hand, Henrietta, provided I can obtain your consent to his marriage with Miss Brandon. Now, listen to me; and then you can decide.”

Faithful to his promise, he thereupon told her every thing he had learned from Maxime and the count, suppressing only those details which would have made the poor girl blush, and also that terrible charge which he was unwilling to believe.

When he had ended, Henrietta said warmly,—

“What! I should allow my father to marry such a creature? I should sit still and smile when such dishonor and such ruin are coming to a house over which my mother has presided! No; far be it from me ever to be so selfish! I shall oppose Miss Brandon’s plans with all my strength and all my energy.”

“She may triumph, after all.”

“She shall not triumph over my resistance and my contempt. Never—do you hear me, Daniel?—never will I bow down before her. Never shall my hand touch hers. And, if my father persists, I shall ask him, the day before his wedding, to allow me to bury myself in a convent.”

“He will not let you go.”

“Then I shall shut myself up in my room, and never leave it again. I do not think they will drag me out by force.”

There was no mistaking it; she spoke with an earnestness and a determination which nothing could shake or break. And yet the very saddest presentiments oppressed Daniel’s heart. He said,—

“But Miss Brandon will certainly not come alone to this house.”

“Whom will she bring with her?”

“Her relatives, M. Thomas Elgin and Mrs. Brian. Oh Henrietta, dearest Henrietta! to think that you should be exposed to the spite and the persecution of these wretches!”

She raised her head proudly, and replied,—

“I am not afraid of them.” Then she added in a gentler tone,—

“Besides, won’t you always be near me, to advise me, and to protect me in case of danger?”

“I? Don’t you think they will try to part us soon enough?”

“No, Daniel, I know very well that the house will no longer be open to you.”

“Well?”

The poor girl blushed up to the roots of her hair, and, turning her eyes away from him to avoid his looks, she said,—

“Since they force us to do so, I must needs do a thing a girl, properly speaking, ought not to do. We will meet secretly. I shall have to stoop to win over one of my waiting-women, who may be discreet and obliging enough to aid me, and, through her, I will write to you, and receive your letters.”

But this arrangement did not relieve Daniel from his terrible apprehensions. There was a question which constantly rose to his lips, and which still he did not dare to utter. At last, making a great effort, he asked,—

“And then?”

Henrietta understood perfectly what he meant. She answered,—

“I thought you would be able to wait until the day should come when the law would authorize me to make my own choice.”

“Henrietta!”

She offered him her hand, and said solemnly,—

“And on that day, Daniel, I promise you, if my father still withholds his consent, I will ask you openly for your arm; and then, in broad daylight, before all the world, I shall leave this house never to re-enter it again.”

As quick as thought, Daniel had seized her hand, and, carrying it to his lips, he said,—“Thanks! A thousand thanks! You restore me to hope.”

Still, before abandoning the effort, he thought he would try one more measure; and for that purpose it was necessary that Henrietta should be induced to conceal her intentions as long as possible. It was only with great difficulty that he succeeded in obtaining her consent.

“I will do what you desire; but believe me, all your efforts will be in vain.”

She was interrupted by the arrival of Count Ville-Handry. He kissed his daughter, said a few words about rain and fine weather; and then, drawing Daniel into one of the windows, he asked—

“Have you spoken to her?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Miss Henrietta wants a few days to consider.”

The count looked displeased, and said,—

“That is absurd. Nothing can be more ridiculous. But, after all, it is your business, my dear Daniel. And, if you want any additional motive, I will tell you that my daughter is very rich. She has a quarter of a million of her own.”

“Sir!” exclaimed Daniel indignantly.

But Count Ville-Handry had already turned upon his heels; and the butler came to announce that dinner was on the table.

The meal, though excellent in itself, was necessarily very dull and sad. It was promptly despatched; for the count seemed to be sitting on needles, and every minute looked at his watch.

They had but just handed the coffee around, when he turned to Daniel, saying,—

“Let us make haste. Miss Brandon expects us.”

Daniel was instantly ready. But the count did not even give him time to take leave of Henrietta; he carried him off to his carriage, pushed him in, jumped in after him, and called out to the servant,—“Circus Street! Miss Brandon! Drive fast!”

CHAPTER 8

The servants knew very well what the count meant when he said, "Drive fast!" The coachman, on such occasions, made his horses literally go as fast as they could; and, but for his great skill, the foot-passengers would have been in considerable danger. Nevertheless, on this evening Count Ville-Handry twice lowered the window to call out,—

"Don't drive at a walk!"

The fact is, that, in spite of his efforts to assume the air of a grave statesman, he was as impatient, and as vain of his love, as a young collegian hurrying to his first rendezvous with his beloved. During dinner he had been sullen and silent; now he became talkative, and chatted away, without troubling himself about the silence of his companion.

To be sure, Daniel did not even listen. Half-buried in the corner of the well-padded carriage, he tried his best to control his emotions; for he was excited, more excited than ever in his life, by the thought that he was to see, face to face, this formidable adventuress, Miss Brandon. And like the wrestler, who, before making a decisive assault, gathers up all his strength, he summoned to his aid his composure and his energy. It took them not more than ten minutes to drive the whole distance to Circus Street.

"Here we are!" cried the count.

And, without waiting for the steps to be let down, he jumped on the sidewalk, and, running ahead of his servants, knocked at the door of Miss Brandon's house. It was by no means one of those modern structures which attract the eye of the passer-by by a ridiculous and conspicuous splendor. Looking at it from the street, you would have taken it for the modest house of a retired grocer, who was living in it upon his savings at the rate of two or three thousand a year. It is true, that from the street, you could see neither the garden, nor the stables and the carriage-houses.

In the meantime a servant had appeared, who took the count's and Daniel's coats, and showed them up stairs. When they reached the upper landing, the count stopped, as if his breath had been giving out of a sudden.

"There," he stammered, "there!"

"Where? What?" Daniel did not know what he meant. The count only wished to say that "there" was the place where he had held Miss Brandon in his arms the day she had fainted. But Daniel had no time to ask any questions. Another servant appeared, coming out of the rooms, and, bowing low before Count Ville-Handry, he said,—

"The ladies have but just risen from table, and are still dressing."

"Ah!"

"If the gentlemen will please sit down in the parlor, I will tell M. Elgin."

"Very well," said the count, speaking in a tone which showed that he considered himself perfectly at home in Miss Brandon's house. He entered the parlor, followed by Daniel. It was a magnificent room; but every thing in it, from the carpet on the floor to the chandelier on the ceiling, betrayed the Puritanic taste of Mrs. Brian. It was splendid; but the splendor was cold, stiff, and mournful. The furniture had sharp angles, and suggested any thing but comfort. The bronze figures on the mantelpiece-clock were biblical personages; and the other bronzes were simply hideous. Except these, there was no ornament visible, not a painting, nor a statuette.

Yes, one. Opposite the fireplace, in the place of honor, there stared at you a painting in a most costly gilt frame,—a horrible daub, representing a man of about fifty years, who wore a fancy uniform with enormous epaulets, a huge sword, a plumed hat, and a blue sash, into which two revolvers were thrust.

"Gen. Brandon, Miss Sarah's father," said Count Ville-Handry, in a tone of deep respect, which unnerved Daniel. "As a work of art, this portrait leaves, no doubt, much to be wished for; but they say the likeness is excellent."

Certainly, though that might be so, there was no resemblance to be discovered between the tanned face of this American general and the blooming features of Miss Brandon. But there was something more. As

Daniel examined this picture nearer by, and more closely, he thought he discovered a studied and intentional coarseness of execution. It looked to him like the work of an artist who had endeavored to imitate those wretched painters who live upon the vanity of weak men and little children. He thought he discovered by the side of gross inaccuracies unmistakable traces of a master's hand; and especially one of the ears, half hid behind the hair, seemed to him admirably done.

But, before he could draw his conclusions from this strange discovery, M. Thomas Elgin appeared in the room. He was in evening costume, looking taller and stiffer than ever in his white cravat; and, as he came forward, he halted a little on one foot, though leaning upon a big cane.

"What, my dear Sir Thorn!" exclaimed the count, "your leg still gives you trouble?"

"Oh, a great deal!" replied the honorable gentleman, with a very marked English accent,— "a great deal since this morning. The doctor thinks there must be something the matter with the bone."

At the same time, obeying the tendency which we all have to display our ailments, he slightly drew up his trousers, so that the bandages became visible which he wore around his leg. Count Ville-Handry looked at it with pity; then, forgetting that he had introduced Daniel already the night before at the opera, he presented him once more; and, when the ceremony was over, he said to Sir Thorn,—

"Upon my word, I am almost ashamed to appear so early; but I knew you expected company to-night."

"Oh, only a few persons!"

"And I desired to see you for a few moments alone."

A strange grimace represented the only smile of which the honorable gentleman was capable. He made it twice, and then said, caressing his primly-cut whiskers,—

“They have told Miss Sarah that you are here, my dear count; and I heard her tell Mrs. Brian that she was nearly ready. I cannot imagine how she can spend so much time at her toilet.”

They were thus chatting away before the fireplace, Sir Thorn stretched out in an easy-chair, and the count leaning against the mantelpiece, while Daniel had withdrawn into the embrasure of a window which looked upon the court-yard and the garden behind the house. There, his brow pressed against the cool window-panes, he was meditating. He could not understand this wound of M. Elgin’s.

“Is it possible that his fall was an intentional fall?” he thought, “or did he really break his leg? If he did so, that fainting-fit might have been natural, and not prearranged; but”—

He was just plunging into these doubts and speculations, when the noise of a carriage entering the court-yard, aroused him from his thoughts.

He looked out. A coupe had driven up to the back porch of the house. A lady stepped out; and he was on the point of uttering a cry of surprise, for he thought he recognized Miss Sarah in that woman. But could that be so? He was unwilling to believe it, when she suddenly raised her head in order to speak to the coachman, and the light from the lamps fell full upon her face.

There was no doubt now on his mind. It was Miss Brandon.

She flew up the steps, and entered the house. He heard distinctly the heavy door close behind her.

At the opera, the night before, a single word uttered by Miss Brandon had sufficed to enlighten Daniel. But now this was a very different matter. It was a potent fact, unmistakable and tangible, which came to him in support of his suspicions.

In order to increase the passionate impatience of the count, they had told him that Miss Brandon was still dressing, but that she was making all haste to come down to him. Not a word had been said of her being out, and of her return at that very moment. Where had she been? What new intrigues had compelled her to leave the house just then? It must have evidently been

something of great importance to have kept her out till so late an hour, and when she knew, moreover, that the count was waiting for her.

This incident threw a flood of light on the cunning policy pursued in this house, and on the clever and active complicity of M. Thomas Elgin and Mrs. Brian. What their game really was, and how Count Ville-Handry had been caught in the trap, he now understood well enough; he would have been caught in it himself.

How clever these actors were! how perfect all the arrangements! and how scientifically the smallest details were prepared! How marvellously well even the parlor was arranged to serve the purposes of the owners! This simple elegance could not but banish all doubts; and this horrible portrait of the so-called Gen. Brandon—what a stroke of genius!

As to the lame leg of Sir Thorn, Daniel no longer believed in it.

“His leg is no more broken than mine,” he thought.

But at the same time he marvelled at the self-denial of this gentleman, who, in order to prove a falsehood, consented to wear his leg bandaged up for months, as if it really had been severely injured.

“And to-night,” said Daniel to himself, “the performance, no doubt, is to be specially artistic, as they expected me.”

Still, like a duellist, who tries to regain all his strength after a sleepless night, Daniel was now fully prepared for the battle. He even returned to the fireplace, for fear that his standing alone, and his preoccupation, might betray his thoughts.

The conversation between Count Ville-Handry and M. Elgin had in the meantime become very familiar; and the count was just detailing all his arrangements for the approaching wedding. He would live, he said, with his wife in the second story of his palace. The first story was to be divided into two suites of apartments,—one for M. Thomas Elgin, and the other for Mrs. Brian; for he knew very well that his adored Sarah would never consent to part with her dear relatives, who had been father and mother to her.

The last words remained in his throat; he stood as if he were petrified, his eyes starting from their sockets, his mouth wide open.

Mrs. Brian had entered the room, followed by Miss Brandon. Daniel was even more struck by her strange beauty to-day than at the opera; it was literally dazzling. She wore on that night a dress of tea-color embroidered with tiny bouquets in Chinese silk, and trimmed below with an immense flounce of plaited muslin. In her hair, which looked even more carelessly put up than usually, she had nothing but a branch of fuschia, the crimson bells falling gracefully down upon her neck, where they mingled with her golden curls.

She came smilingly up to Count Ville-Handry, and, offering him her brow to kiss, she said,—

“Do I look well, dear count?”

He trembled from head to foot; and all he could do was to stretch out his lips, and to stammer in an almost ecstatic tone of voice,—

“Oh, beautiful! too beautiful!”

“It has taken you long enough, I am sure,” said Sir Thorn severely,—“too long!”

He might have known that Miss Brandon had accomplished a miracle of expeditiousness; for it was not a quarter of an hour since she returned to the house.

“You are an impertinent villain, Thorn,” she said, laughing in the fresh and hearty manner of a child; “and I am very happy that the presence of the count relieves me from your eternal sermons.”

“Sarah!” exclaimed Mrs. Brian reprovingly.

But she had already turned round, with her hand outstretched towards Daniel,—

“I am so glad you have come, sir!” she said. “I am sure we shall understand each other admirably.”

She told him this with the softest possible voice; but, if he had known her better, he would have read in the way in which she looked at him, that her disposition towards him had entirely changed since yesterday; then she wished him well; now she hated him savagely.

“Understand each other?” he repeated as he bowed; “in what?”

She made no answer.

The servant announced some of the usual visitors; and she went to receive them. Ten o'clock struck; and from that moment the invited guests did not cease to arrive. At eleven o'clock there were perhaps a hundred persons in the room; and in the two adjoining rooms card-tables had been arranged.

It appeared that the gentlemen who showed themselves there—old men mostly, amply decorated with foreign orders, and young men in extravagantly fashionable costumes—were not free from suspicion; but they all belonged to Paris high-life, to that society, which, under a dazzlingly brilliant outside, conceals hideous crimes, and allows now and then traces of real misery to be seen through the rents in the splendid livery worn by its members.

Some of these men stood, by the name they bore or the position they filled, high above the rest of the company; they were easily recognized by their haughty manner, and the intense deference with which their slightest remarks were received. And to this crowd Count Ville-Handry displayed his good-fortune. He assumed all the airs of the master of the house; as if he had been in his own house, gave orders to the servants, and then, with mock modesty, went from group to group, eagerly picking up all the compliments he could gather on Miss Brandon's beauty, and his own good luck.

Gracefully reclining in an easy-chair near the fireplace, Miss Sarah looked a young queen surrounded by her court. But in spite of the multitude of her admirers, and the number of compliments she received at every moment, she never for a moment lost sight of Daniel, watching him all the time stealthily, to read his thoughts in his features.

Once she even shocked the crowd of her worshippers by suddenly leaving her place in order to ask him why he held himself so aloof, and whether he felt indisposed. Then, seeing that he was a perfect stranger here, she was good enough to point out to him some of the most remarkable men in the crowd. In doing this, she was so anxious to make him aware of her distinguished friends, that Daniel began to think she must have divined his intentions, and thus indirectly defied him, as if she had said in so many words,—

“You see what friends I have, and how they would defend me if you should dare to attack me.”

Nevertheless, he was not discouraged, being fully aware of all the difficulties of his undertaking, and having long since counted up all the obstacles in his way. While the conversation was going on around him, he arranged in his head a plan, which, he hoped, would enable him to find out the antecedents of this dangerous adventuress.

These thoughts preoccupied him to such a degree, that he did not become aware how the rooms became gradually empty. It was so, nevertheless; and there were finally only a few intimate friends left, and four players at a card-table.

Then Miss Brandon arose, and, coming up to Daniel, said to him,—

“Will you grant me ten minutes’ conversation, sir?”

He prepared to follow her, when Mrs. Brian interposed, saying a few words in a tone of reproach to her niece. Daniel knew enough English to understand that she said,—

“What you are doing is highly improper, Sarah.”

“Shocking!” added M. Thomas Elgin.

But she shrugged her shoulders slightly, and replied in English,—

“My dear count alone would have a right to judge my conduct; and he has authorized me to do what I am doing.”

Then turning to Daniel, she said to him in French,—

“Come with me, sir.”

CHAPTER 9

Miss Sarah led Daniel to a small boudoir adjoining her own room. Nothing could be fresher and more coquettish than this little room, which looked almost like a greenhouse, so completely was it filled with rare and fragrant flowers, while the door and window-frames were overgrown with luxuriant creepers. In the windows stood large vases filled with flowers; and the light bamboo chairs were covered with the same bright silk with which the walls were hung. If the great reception-room reflected the character of Mrs. Brian, this charming boudoir represented Miss Brandon's own exquisite taste.

She sat down on a small sofa and began, after a short pause,—

“My aunt was right; it would have been more proper for me to convey to you through M. Elgin what I want to say. But I have the independence of all the girls of my country; and, when my interests are at stake, I trust no one but myself.”

She was bewitching in her ingenuousness as she uttered these words with the air of a little child who looks cunning, and determined to undertake something that appears quite formidable.

“I am told that my dear count has been to see you this afternoon,” she continued, “and you have heard that in less than a month I shall be the Countess Ville-Handry?”

Daniel was surprised. In less than a month! What could be done in so little time?

“Now, sir,” continued Miss Brandon, “I wish to hear from your own lips whether you see—any—objections to this match.”

She spoke so frankly, that it was evident she was utterly unconscious of that article in the code of social laws which prescribes that a French girl must never mention the word “marriage” without blushing to the roots of her hair. Daniel, on the contrary, was terribly embarrassed.

"I confess," he replied with much hesitation, "that I do not understand, that I cannot possibly explain to myself, why you do me the honor"—

"To consult you? Pardon me; I think you understand me perfectly well. Have they not promised you Miss Ville-Handry's hand?"

"The count has permitted me to hope"—

"He has pledged his word, sir, under certain conditions. My dear count has told me every thing. I speak, therefore, to Count Ville-Handry's son-in-law, and I repeat, Do you see any objections to this match?"

The question was too precisely put to allow of any prevarication. And still Daniel was bent upon gaining time, and avoiding any positive answer. For the first time in his life he said a falsehood; and, turning crimson all over, he stammered out,—

"I see no objection."

"Really?"

"Really."

She shook her head, and then said very slowly,—

"If that is so, you will not refuse me a great favor. Carried away by her grief at seeing her father marry again, Miss Ville-Handry hates me. Will you promise me to use your influence in trying to persuade her to change her disposition towards me?"

Never had honest Daniel Champcey been tried so hard. He answered diplomatically,—

"I am afraid you overestimate my influence."

She looked at him suddenly with such a sharp and penetrating glance that he felt almost startled, and then said,—

"I do not ask of you to succeed, only promise me upon your honor that you will do your best, and I shall be very much obliged to you. Will you give me that promise?"

Could he do so? The situation was so exceptional, Daniel had at all cost to lull the enemy into security for a time, and for a moment he was inclined to pledge his honor. Nay, more than that, he made an effort to do it. But his lips refused to utter a false oath.

“You see,” resumed Miss Brandon very coldly, “you see you were deceiving me.”

And, turning away from him, she hid her face in her hands, apparently overcome by grief, and repeated in a tone of deep sorrow,—

“What a disgrace! Great God! What a humiliation!”

But suddenly she started up again, her face bright with a glow of hope, and cried out,—

“Well, be it so. I like it all the better so. A mean man would not have hesitated at an oath, however determined he might have been not to keep it. Whilst you—I can trust you; you are a man of honor, and all is not lost yet. Whence comes your aversion? Is it a question of money, the count’s fortune?”

“Miss Brandon!”

“No, it is not that, I see. I was quite sure of it. What, then, can it be? Tell me, sir, I beseech you! tell me something.”

What could he tell her? Daniel remained silent.

“Very well,” said Sarah, clinching her teeth convulsively. “I understand.”

She made a supreme effort not to break out in sobs; and big tears, resembling diamonds of matchless beauty, rolled slowly down from between her long, trembling eyelashes.

“Yes,” she said, “I understand. The atrocious calumnies which my enemies have invented have reached you; and you have believed them. They have, no doubt, told you that I am an adventuress, come from nowhere; that my father, the brave defender of the Union, exists only in the painting in my parlor; that no one knows where my income comes from; that Thorn, that

noble soul, and Mrs. Brian, a saint upon earth, are vile accomplices of mine. Confess, you have been told all that, and you have believed it.”

Grand in her wrath, her cheeks burning, her lips trembling, she rose, and added in a tone of bitter sarcasm,—

“Ah! When people are called upon to admire a noble deed, they refuse to believe, they insist upon inquiring before they admire, they examine carefully. But, if they are told something bad, they dispense with that ceremony; however monstrous the thing may appear, however improbable it may sound, they believe it instantly. They would not touch a child; but they do not hesitate to repeat a slander which dishonors a woman, and kills her as surely as a dagger. If I were a man, and had been told that Miss Brandon was an adventuress, I would have been bent upon ascertaining the matter. America is not so far off. I should have soon found the ten thousand men who had served under Gen. Brandon, and they would have told me what sort of a man their chief had been. I should have examined the oil-regions of Pennsylvania; and I would have learned there that the petroleum-wells belonging to M. Elgin, Mrs. Brian, and Miss Brandon produce more than many a principality.”

Daniel was amazed at the candor and the boldness with which this young girl approached the terrible subject. To enable her to speak with such energy and in such a tone, she must either be possessed of unsurpassed impudence, or—he had to confess it—be innocent.

Overcome by the effort she had made, she had sunk back upon the sofa, and continued in a lower tone of voice, as if speaking to herself,—

“But have I a right to complain? I reap as I have sown. Alas! Thorn has told me so often enough, and I would not believe him. I was not twenty years old when I came to Paris, after my poor father’s death. I had been brought up in America, where young girls know no other law but that of their own consciences. They tell us at home, all the time, that it is our first duty to be truthful. In France, young girls are taught that hypocrisy is their first duty. We are taught not to blush, except when we have done wrong; they are taught all the appearances of false prudishness. In France, they work hard to save appearances; with us, we aim at reality. In Philadelphia, I did every

thing I chose to do, provided I did not think it was wrong. I thought I could do the same here. Poor me! I did not count upon the wickedness of the world. I went out alone, on horseback, in the morning. I went alone to church, to pray to God. If I wanted any thing for my toilet, I sent for the carriage, and drove out, alone, to buy it. When a man spoke to me, I did not feel bound to cast down my eyes; and, if he was amusing and witty, I laughed. If a new fashion pleased me, I adopted it. I committed all these crimes. I was young, rich, popular. These were as many more crimes. And after I had been here a year, they said that Malgat, that wretch”—

She jumped up as she said this, ran up to Daniel, and, seizing him by the hands, she said,—

“Malgat! Have they talked to you about Malgat?”

And, as he hesitated to answer, she added:—

“Ah, answer me! Don’t you see that your hesitation is an insult?”

“Well—yes.”

As if in utter despair, she raised her hands to heaven, calling God, as it were, to witness, and asking for inspiration from on high. Then she added suddenly,—

“But I have proofs, irrefutable proofs of Malgat’s rascality.”

And, without waiting for another word, she hurried into the adjoining room. Daniel, moved to the bottom of his heart, remained standing where he was, immovable, like a statue.

He was utterly confounded and overcome by the charm of that marvellous voice, which passed through the whole gamut of passion with such a sonorous ring, and yet with such sweet languor, that it seemed by turns to sob and to threaten, to sigh with sadness and to thunder with wrath.

“What a woman!” he said to himself, repeating thus unconsciously the words uttered by M. de Brevan.

“What a woman! And how well she defends herself.”

But Miss Brandon was already back again, carrying in her arms a small box of costly wood inlaid with jewels. She resumed her seat on the sofa; and in that brief, sharp tone which betrays terrible passions restrained with a great effort, she said,—

“Before all, I must thank you, M. Champcey, for your frankness, since it enables me to defend myself. I knew that slander had attacked me; I felt it, so to say, in the air I was breathing; but I had never been able yet to take hold of it. Now, for the first time, I can face it; and I owe it to you that I am able to defy it. Listen, therefore; for I swear to you by all that is most sacred to me, by the memory of my sainted mother, I swear to you solemnly, that you shall hear the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

She had opened the box, and was eagerly searching something among the papers inside. She then continued, in feverish haste,—

“M. Malgat was the cashier and confidential clerk of the Mutual Discount Society, a large and powerful company. M. Elgin had some business with him, a few weeks after our arrival here, for the purpose of drawing funds which he had in Philadelphia. He found him an exceedingly obliging man, and, to show his appreciation, invited him to dine here. Thus he became acquainted with Mrs. Brian and myself. He was a man of about forty, of medium height, ordinary looking, very polite, but not refined in his manners. The first time I looked at his light yellow eyes, I felt disgusted and frightened. I read in his face an expression of base vice. The impression was so strong, that I could not help telling M. Elgin how sure I was this man would turn out a bad man, and that he ought not to trust him in money-matters.”

Daniel listened with breathless attention. This description of Malgat impressed his portrait so deeply on his mind, that he thought he saw him before his eyes, and would certainly recognize him if he should ever meet him.

“M. Elgin,” continued Miss Brandon, “only laughed at my presentiments; and even Mrs. Brian, I remember distinctly, scolded me, saying it was very wrong to judge a man by his appearance, and that there were very honest men in the world who had yellow eyes. I must acknowledge, moreover, that

M. Malgat behaved perfectly well whenever he was here. As M. Elgin did not know Paris, and had money to invest, he advised him what to do. When we had drafts upon the Mutual Discount Society, he always saved M. Elgin the trouble, and brought the money himself. After a while, when M. Elgin took it into his head to try some small speculations on 'change, M. Malgat offered him his assistance, although they never had any luck, in fact."

By this time Miss Brandon had found the papers she was looking for. She handed them to Daniel, saying,—

"And, if you do not believe what I say, look at this."

There were a dozen square bits of paper, on which Malgat had reported the result of his operations on 'change, which he carried on on account of, and with the money of, M. Elgin. All ended with these words:—

"We have lost considerably; but we may be more fortunate next time. There is a capital chance on such and such funds; send me all the money you can spare."

The words were always the same; the name of the funds alone varied in each.

"That is strange," said Daniel.

Miss Sarah shook her head.

"Strange? Yes, indeed!" she replied. "But it does not help me in any way. This letter, however, will tell you more. Read it, sir, and read it aloud."

Daniel took the letter, and read,—

"Paris, Dec. 5, 1865.

"M. Thomas Elgin. *Dear Sir*,—It is to you alone, the most honorable among men, that I can make the terrible confession that I have committed a crime.

"I am wretched. Employed by you in your speculations, I have given way to temptation, and have speculated on my own account. One loss brought about another, I lost my head; I hoped to recover my money; and now, at

this hour, I owe more than ten thousand dollars, which I have taken from the safe of the society.

“Will you have pity on me? Will you be so generous as to lend me that sum? I may not be able to return it in less than six or seven years; but I will repay you, I swear it, with interest.

“I await your answer, like a criminal, who waits for the verdict. It is a matter of life and death with me; and as you decide, so I may be saved, or disgraced forever. A. Malgat.”

On the margin, methodical M. Elgin had written in his angular handwriting,—

“Answered immediately. Sent to M. M. ten thousand dollars, to be drawn from funds deposited with the Mutual Discount Society. No interest to be paid.”

“And that,” stammered Daniel, “that is the man”—

“Whom they charge me with having turned aside from the paths of honesty; yes, sir! Now you learn to know him. But wait. You see, he was saved. It was not long before he appeared here, his false face bathed in tears. I can find no words to convey to you the exaggerated expressions of his gratitude. He refused to shake hands with M. Elgin, he said, because he was no longer worthy of such honor. He spoke of nothing but of his devotion unto death. It is true M. Elgin carried his generosity to an extreme. He, a model of honesty, who would have starved to death rather than touch the gold intrusted to his care,—he consoled Malgat, finding all kinds of apology for him, telling him, that, after all, he was not so very much to blame, that there were temptations too strong to be resisted, and repeating even those paradoxical principles which have been specially invented as an apology for thieves. Malgat had still some money of his own; but M. Elgin did not ask him for it, for fear of hurting his feelings. He continued to invite him, and urged him to come and dine with us as heretofore.”

She stopped, laughing in a nervous manner, which was painful to hear, and then continued, in a hoarse voice,—

“Do you know, M. Champcey, how Malgat repaid all this kindness? Read this note; it will restore me in your esteem, I trust.”

It was another letter written by Malgat to M. Elgin, and ran thus,—

“M. Elgin,—I have deceived you. It was not ten thousand dollars I had taken, but sixty thousand five hundred dollars.

“Thanks to false entries, I have been able to conceal my defalcations until now; but I can do so no longer. The board of directors have begun to suspect me; and the president has just told me that tomorrow the books will be examined. I am lost.

“I ought to kill myself, I know; but I have not the courage to do so. I venture to ask you to furnish me the means of escaping from this country. I beseech you on my knees, in the name of all that is dear to you, for mercy’s sake; for I am penniless, and cannot even pay the fare on the railway as far as the frontier. Nor can I return to my house; for I am watched.

“Once more, M. Elgin, have pity on a poor man, and leave the answer with the concierge. I will come by about nine o’clock. A. Malgat.”

Not on the margin, as before, but across the lines, M. Elgin had written these laconic words:—

“Answered immediately. No! The scamp!”

Daniel could not have uttered a word to save his life; he was too fearfully excited. Miss Brandon continued,—

“We were dining alone that day; and M. Elgin was so indignant, that he forgot his usual reserve, and told us everything. Ah! I felt only pity for the poor man; and I besought him to give the wretch the means to escape. But he was inflexible. Seeing, however, how excited I was, he tried to reassure me by telling me that Malgat would certainly not come, that he would not dare to expect an answer to such a letter.”

She pressed both her hands on her heart, as if to still its beating; and then continued, in a weak voice,—

“Nevertheless, he came, and, seeing his hopes disappointed, he insisted upon speaking to us. The servants let him go up, and he entered. Ah! if I lived a thousand years, I should never forget that fearful scene. Feeling that all was lost, this thief, this defaulter, had become enraged; he demanded money. At first he asked for it on his knees in humble words; but, when he found that this did not answer, he suddenly rose in a perfect fury, his mouth foaming, his eyes bloodshot, and overwhelmed us with the coarsest insults. At last M. Elgin’s patience gave out, and he rang for the servants. They had to employ force to drag him out; and, as they pushed him down stairs, he threatened us with his fist, and swore that he would be avenged.”

Miss Brandon shuddered till she appeared to be all in a quiver; and, for a moment, Daniel thought she was going to be ill. But she made an effort to overcome her weakness; and, in a more decided tone, she continued,—

“Forty-eight hours passed; and the impression of this horrible scene began to fade from our minds, till it appeared like a bad dream. If we mentioned Malgat at all, it was with pity and contempt; for what could he do to us? Nothing, you will say. Even if he should dare to accuse us of some great crime, we thought no one would listen to him, and we should never hear of it. How could we imagine that the world would set to work doubting our honor upon the mere word of a wretch like him?

“His crime had, in the meantime, become known; and all the papers were full of it, adding a number of more or less reliable stories. They exaggerated the sums he had stolen; and they said he had succeeded in escaping to England, and that the police had lost his traces in London.

“I, poor girl, had nearly forgotten the whole matter.

“He had really fled; but, before leaving Paris, he had succeeded in preparing everything for the vengeance which he had threatened. Where could he have found people mean enough to serve his purposes? and who were they? I do not know. Perhaps he did nothing more, as Mrs. Brian suggested, than to address two or three anonymous letters to some of our acquaintances, who he knew did not like us, or envied us.

“At all events, in less than a week after his disappearance, it was reported everywhere, that I, Sarah Brandon, had been an accomplice of this defaulter, and, worse than that, that the sums he had stolen might easily be found, if a certain bureau in my bedchamber could be searched.

“Yes, that is what they said, at first in a whisper and most cautiously, then louder, and finally openly, and before all the world.

“Soon the papers took it up. They repeated the facts, arranging them to suit their purpose, and alluding to me in a thousand infamous innuendoes. They said that Malgat’s defalcation was after the American style, and that it was perfectly natural he should go to a foreign country, after having been associated with a certain foreign lady.”

She had become crimson all over; her bosom rose; and shame, indignation, and resentment alternately appeared on her face, changing finally into an ardent desire of vengeance.

“We, in the meantime,” she continued, “quiet and safe in our honesty, did not even suspect these infamous proceedings. It is true, I had been struck by some strange whisperings, by curious looks and singular smiles, when I passed some of my friends; but I had not noticed them specially.

“A paper which had been left at the house one afternoon, when we were out, showed us the true state of things. It was a summons. I was ordered to appear before a magistrate.

“It was a thunderbolt. Mad with wrath and grief, M. Elgin swore I should not go, that he would most assuredly find out the authors of this infamous libel, and that, in the meantime, he would challenge and kill every one who dared repeat it.

“In vain did Mrs. Brian and myself beseech him, on our knees, not to leave the house until he had grown cooler. He pushed us aside almost with brutality, and rushed out, taking with him the papers and letters written by Malgat.

“We were at the end of our endurance, having suffered all the tortures of anxiety, when, at last, near midnight, M. Elgin returned, pale, exhausted,

and distressed. He had found no one willing even to listen to him; everybody telling him that he was much too good to give a thought to such infamous reports; that they were too absurd to be believed.”

She nearly gave way, sobs intercepting her words; but she mastered her emotion, and continued,—

“The next day I went to the court-house; and, after being kept waiting for a long time in a dark passage, I was brought before the magistrate. He was an elderly man, with hard features and piercing eyes, who received me almost brutally, as if I had been a criminal. But, when I had shown him the letters which you have just read, his manner suddenly changed, pity got the better of him; and I thought I saw a tear in his eye. Ah! I shall be eternally grateful to him for the words he said when I left his office,—

““Poor, poor young girl! Justice bows reverently before your innocence. Would to God that the world could be made to do the same!””

She fixed her eyes, trembling with fear and hope, upon Daniel, and added, in a voice of supplication and touching humility,—

“The world has been more cruel than justice itself but you, sir, will you be harder than the magistrate?”

Alas! Daniel was sorely embarrassed what to answer. He felt as if all his senses were in an uproar and in utter confusion.

“Sir!” begged Miss Brandon again. “M. Champcey!”

She continued to fix her eyes upon him. He turned his head aside, feeling as if, under her obstinate gaze, his mind left him, his energy evaporated, and all the fibres of his strong will were breaking.

“Great God!” exclaimed Miss Brandon, with grieved surprise; “he still doubts me. Sir, I pray you, speak! Do you doubt the authenticity of these letters? Ah, if you do, take them; for I do not hesitate to confide them, the only proofs of my innocence, to your honor. Take them and show them to the other clerks who have been sitting for twenty years in the same office with Malgat; and they will tell you that it is his handwriting; that he has signed his

own condemnation. And, if that is not enough for you, go to the magistrate who examined me; his name is Patrigent."

And she waited, waited, but not a word came forth.

Daniel had sunk, undone, into a chair; and his elbow resting on a small stand, his brow in his hands, he endeavored to think, to reason. Then Miss Brandon rose, came gently up to him, and taking his hand, said softly,—

"I beseech you!"

But as if suddenly electrified by the touch of this soft, warm hand, Daniel rose so hastily, that he upset the chair; and, trembling with mysterious terror, he cried out,—

"Kergrist!"

It was as if a fearful insult had set Miss Brandon on fire. Her face turned crimson, and then, almost instantly, livid; and, stepping back a little, she darted at Daniel a look of burning hatred.

"Oh!" she murmured, "oh!" finding, apparently, no words to express all she felt.

Was she going away? It looked as if she thought of it, for she walked to the door; but, suddenly changing her mind, she came back to where she had stood, facing Daniel.

"This is the first time in my life," she said, trembling with rage, "that I condescend to justify myself against such infamous charges; and you abuse my patience by heaping insult after insult upon me. But never mind. I look upon you as upon Henrietta's husband; and, since I have commenced, I mean to finish."

Daniel tried to say a few words of apology; but she interrupted him,—

"Well, yes; one night a young man, Charles de Kergrist,—a profligate, a gambler, crowning his scandalous life with the vilest and meanest act,—did come and kill himself under my window. The next day a great outcry arose against me. Three days later the brother of that wretched madman, a M. Rene de Kergrist, came and held M. Elgin to account. But do you know what

came of these explanations? Charles de Kergrist, it appears, killed himself after a supper, which he left in a state of drunkenness. He committed suicide because he had lost his fortune at Homburg and at Baden; because he had exhausted his last resources; because his family, ashamed at his disgrace, refused to acknowledge him any longer. And, if he chose my window for his self-murder, it was because he wanted to satisfy a petty grievance. Looking upon me as an heiress, whose fortune would enable him to continue his extravagant life, he had courted me, and been refused by M. Elgin. Finally, at the time when the catastrophe occurred, I was sixty miles away from here, in Tours, staying at the house of one of M. Elgin's friends, M. Palmer, who deposed"—

And, as Daniel looked at her with an air of utter bewilderment, she added,—

"Perhaps you will ask me for proofs of what I state. I have none to give you. But I know a man who can give you what you want, and that man is M. de Kergrist's brother; for, after those explanations, he has continued to be our friend, sir, one of our best friends. And he was here to-night, and you have seen him; for he came and spoke to me while you were standing by me. M. de Kergrist lives here in Paris; and M. Elgin will give you his address."

She looked at Daniel with a glance in which pity and contempt were strangely mixed, and then added, in her proudest tone,—

"And now, sir, since *I* have deigned to stand here like a criminal, do you sit in judgment on me. Question me, and I will answer. What else are you going to charge me with?"

A judge, however, ought to be calm; and Daniel was but too conscious of his deep excitement; he knew he could not even prevent his features from expressing his utter bewilderment. He gave up all discussion therefore, and simply said,—

"I believe you, Miss Brandon, I believe you."

Miss Brandon's beautiful eyes lighted up for a moment with joy; and in a tone of voice which sounded like the echo of her heart, she said,—

“Oh, thank you, sir! now I am sure you will grant me Miss Henrietta’s friendship.”

Why did she mention that name? It broke the charm which had overcome Daniel. He saw how weak he had been, and was ashamed of himself.

He said sternly, thus proving his anger at himself, and the failure of his judgment,—

“Permit me not to reply to that to-night. I should like to consider.”

She looked at him half stupefied.

“What do you mean?” she said. “Have I, or have I not, removed your doubts, your insulting suspicions? Perhaps you wish to consult one of my enemies?”

She spoke in a tone of such profound disdain, that Daniel, stung to the quick, forgot the discretion which he had intended to observe, and said,—

“Since you insist upon it, Miss Brandon, I must confess that there is one doubt which you have not removed.”

“Which?”

Daniel hesitated, regretting the words he had allowed to escape him. But he had gone too far now to retract. He replied,—

“I do not understand, Miss Brandon, how you can marry Count Ville-Handry.”

“Why not?”

“You are young. You are immensely rich, you say. The count is sixty-six years old.”

She, who had been so daring that nothing seemed to be able to disconcert her, now lowered her head like a timid boarding-school girl who has been caught acting contrary to rules; and a flood of crimson spread over her face, and every part of her figure which was not concealed by her dress.

“You are cruel, sir!” she stammered; “the secret into which you pry is one of those which a girl hardly dares to confide to her mother.”

He was triumphant, thinking he had caught her at last.

“Ah, indeed!” he said ironically.

But the proud young lady did not waver, and replied with bitter sadness,—

“You will have it so; be it so. For your sake, I will lay aside that veil of proud reserve which conceals the mysteries of a young girl’s heart. I do not love Count Ville-Handry.”

Daniel was startled. This confession seemed to him the height of imprudence.

“I do not love him,—at least not with real love; and I have never allowed him to hope for such a feeling. Still I shall be most happy to become his wife. Do not expect me to explain to you what is going on within me. I myself hardly understand it as yet. I can give no precise name to that feeling of sympathy which attracts me towards him. I have been captivated by his wit and his kindness; his words have an indescribable charm for me. That is all I can tell you.”

Daniel could not believe his ears.

“And,” she continued, “if you must have motives of more ordinary character, I will confess to you that I can no longer endure this life, harassed as I am by vile calumnies. The palace of Count Ville-Handry appears to me an asylum, where I shall bury my disappointments and my sorrows, and where I shall find peace and a position which commands respect. Ah! you need not be afraid for that great and noble name. I shall bear it worthily and nobly, and shrink from no sacrifice to enhance its splendor. You may say that I am a calculating woman. I dare say I am; but I see nothing mean or disgraceful in my hopes.”

Daniel had thought he had confounded her, and it was she who crushed him by her bold frankness; for there was nothing to say, no reasonable objection to make. Fifty marriages out of every hundred are made upon less high ground. Miss Brandon, however, was not a woman to be easily overcome. She rose as she spoke, to her former haughtiness, and inspired herself with the sound of her voice.

“During the last two years,” she said, “I have had twenty offers; and among them three or four that would have been acceptable to a duchess. I have refused them, in spite of M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian. Only yesterday, a man of twenty-five, a Gordon Chalusse, was here at my feet. I have sent him off like the others, preferring my dear count. And why?”

She remained a moment buried in thought, her eyes swimming in tears; and, answering apparently her own questions, rather than Daniel’s, she went on,—

“Thanks to my beauty, as the world calls it, a fatal beauty, alas! I have been admired, courted, filled to satiety with compliments. They say I am in the most elegant and most polished society in Europe; and yet I have looked in vain for the man whose eye could for a moment even break the peace of my heart. I have seen everywhere only persons of like perfection, whose characters had no more wrinkles than the coat made by the first of tailors, all equally eager and gallant, playing well, talking well, dancing well, riding well.”

She shook her head with a movement full of energy; and, beaming with enthusiasm, she exclaimed,—

“Ah! I had dreamed of better things to come. What I dreamed of was a man of noble heart, with an inflexible will, capable of attempting what others dared not,—what, I do not know, but something grand, perilous, impossible. I dreamed of one of those ambitious men with a pale brow, a longing look, whose eyes sparkle with genius,—one of those strong men who impose their will upon the multitude, and who remove mountains by the force of their will.

“Alas! to repay the love of such a man, I would have found treasures in my heart, which now remain useless, like all the wealth that is buried at the bottom of the sea. I would have drunk deep from the cup of my hopes; my pulse would have kept time with the fever of his excitement. For his sake, I would have made myself small, humble, useful; I would have watched in his looks for the shadow of a desire.

“But how proud I would have been, I, his wife, of his success and of his glories, of the reverence paid him by his admirers, and the hatred of his enemies!”

Her voice had vibrations in it that might have stirred up the heart of a stoic. The splendor of her exalted beauty illumined the room.

And gradually, one by one, Daniel’s suspicions vanished, or fell to pieces like the ill-jointed pieces of an ancient armor. But Miss Brandon paused, ashamed of her vehemence, and continued more slowly,—

“Now, sir, you know me better than any other person in this world. You alone have read the innermost heart of Sarah Brandon. And yet I see you today for the first time in my life. And yet you are the first man who has ever dared to speak harshly to me, harsh unto insult. Will you make me repent of my frankness? Oh, no, no! surely you will not be so cruel. I know you to be a man of honor and of high principles; I know how, in order to save a name which you revere, you have risked your prospects in life, the girl you love, and an enormous fortune. Yes, Miss Ville-Handry has made no ordinary choice.”

She looked as if she were utterly despondent, and added, in a tone of concentrated rage,—

“And I, I know my fate.”

Then followed a pause, a terrible pause. They were standing face to face, pale, troubled, trembling with excitement, their teeth firmly set, their eyes eloquent with deep feeling.

Daniel, as he felt the hot breath of this terrible passion, became almost unconscious of the surroundings; his mind was shaken; a mysterious delirium took possession of his senses; the blood rushed to his head; and he felt as if the beating at his temples was ringing in the whole house.

“Yes,” began at last Miss Brandon once more, “my fate is sealed. I must become the Countess of Ville-Handry, or I am lost. And once more, sir, I beseech you induce Miss Henrietta to receive me like an elder sister. Ah! if I were the woman you think I am, what would I care for Miss Henrietta and

her enmity? You know very well that the count will go on at any hazard. And yet I beg,—I who am accustomed to command everywhere. What more can I do? Do you want to see me at your feet? Here I am.”

And really, as she said this, she sank down so suddenly, that her knees struck the floor with a noise; and, seizing Daniel’s hands, she pressed them upon her burning brow.

“Great God!” she sighed, “to be rejected, by him!”

Her hair had become partially loosened, and fell in masses on Daniel’s hands. He trembled from head to foot; and, bending over Miss Brandon, he raised her, and held her, half lifeless, while her head rested on his shoulder.

“Miss Sarah,” he said in a hoarse, low voice.

They were so near to each other, that their breaths mingled, and Daniel felt Miss Brandon’s sobs on his heart, burning him like fiery flames. Then, half drunk with excitement, forgetting every thing, he pressed his lips upon the lips of this strange girl.

But she, starting up instantly, drew back, and cried,—

“Daniel! unhappy man!”

Then breaking out in sobs, she stammered,—

“Go! I pray you go! I ask for nothing now. If I must be lost, I must.”

And he replied with terrible vehemence,—

“Your will shall be done, Sarah; I am yours. You may count upon me.”

And he rushed out like a madman, down the staircase, taking three steps at once, and, finding the house-door open, out into the street.

CHAPTER 10

It was a dark, freezing night; the sky was laden with clouds which hung so low, that they nearly touched the roofs of the houses; and a furious wind was shaking the black branches of the trees in the Champs Elysees, passing through the air like a fine dust of snow.

Daniel rushed in feverish haste, like an escaped convict, headlong on, without aim or purpose, solely bent upon escaping. But, when he had gone some distance, the motion, the cold night-air, and the keen wind playing in his hair, restored him to consciousness. Then he became aware that he was still in evening costume, bareheaded, and that he had left his hat and his overcoat in Miss Brandon's house. Then he remembered that Count Ville-Handry was waiting for him in the great reception-room, together with M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian. What would they say and think? Unhappy man, in what a sad predicament he found himself!

There might have been a way to escape from that hell; and he himself, in his madness, had closed it forever.

Like one of those dissipated men who awake from the heavy sleep after a debauch, with dry mouth and weary head, he felt as if he had just been aroused from a singular and terrible dream. Like the drunkard, who, when he is sobered, tries to recall the foolish things he may have done under the guidance of King Alcohol, Daniel conjured up one by one all his emotions during the hour which he had just spent by Miss Brandon's side,—an hour of madness which would weigh heavily upon his future fate, and which alone contained in its sixty minutes more experiences than his whole life so far.

At no time had he been so near despair.

What! He had been warned, put on his guard, made fully aware of all of Miss Brandon's tricks; they had told him of the weird charm of her eyes; he himself had caught her that very evening in the open act of deceiving others.

And in spite of all this, feeble and helpless as he was, he had let himself be caught by the fascinations of this strange girl. Her voice had made him forget every thing, every thing—even his dear and beloved Henrietta, his sole thought for so many years.

“Fool!” he said to himself, “what have I done?”

Unmindful of the blast of the tempest, and of the snow which had begun to fall, he had sat down on the steps of one of the grandest houses in Circus Street, and, with his elbows on his knees, he pressed his brow with his hands, as if hoping that he might thus cause it to suggest to him some plan of salvation. Conjuring up the whole energy of his will, he tried to retrace his interview with Miss Brandon in order to find out by what marvellous transformation it had begun as a terrible combat, and ended as a love-scene. And recalling thus to his memory all she had told him in her soft, sweet voice, he asked himself if she had not really been slandered; and, if there was actually something amiss in her past life, why should it not rather be laid at the door of those two equivocal personages who watched over her, M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian.

What boldness this strange girl had displayed in her defence! but also what lofty nobility! How well she had said that she did not love Count Ville-Handry with real love, and that, until now, no man had even succeeded in quickening her pulse! Was she of marble, and susceptible only of delight in foolish vanity?

Oh, no! a thousand times no! The most refined coquetry never achieved that passionate violence; the most accomplished artist never possessed that marvellous contagion which is the sublime gift of truth alone. And, whatever he could do, his head and heart remained still filled with Miss Brandon; and Daniel trembled as he remembered certain words in which, under almost transparent illusions, the secret of her heart had betrayed itself. Could she have told Daniel more pointedly than she had actually done, “He whom I could love is none other but you”? Certainly not! And as he thought of it his heart was filled with a sense of eager and unwholesome desires; for he was a man, no better, no worse, than other men; and there are but too many men nowadays, who would value a few hours of happiness with a woman

like Miss Brandon more highly than a whole life of chaste love by the side of a pure and noble woman.

“But what is that to me?” he repeated. “Can I love her, I?”

Then he began again to revolve in his mind what might have happened after his flight from the house.

How had Miss Brandon explained his escape? How had she accounted for her own excitement?

And, drawn by an invincible power, Daniel had risen to return to the house; and there, half-hid under the shadow of the opposite side, in a deep doorway, he watched anxiously the windows, as if they could have told him any thing of what was going on inside. The reception-room was still brilliantly lighted, and people came and went, casting their shadows upon the white curtains. A man came and leaned his face against the window, then suddenly he drew back; and Daniel distinctly recognized Count Ville-Handry.

What did that mean? Did it not imply that Miss Brandon had been taken suddenly ill, and that people were anxious about her? These were Daniel’s thoughts when he heard the noise of bolts withdrawn, and doors opened. It was the great entrance-gate of Miss Brandon’s house, which was thrown open by some of the servants. A low *coupe* with a single horse left the house, and drove rapidly towards the Champs Elysees.

But, at the moment when the *coupe* turned, the light of the lamp fell full upon the inside, and Daniel thought he recognized, nay, he did recognize, Miss Brandon. He felt as if he had received a stunning blow on the head.

“She has deceived me!” he exclaimed, grinding his teeth in his rage; “she has treated me like an imbecile, like an idiot!”

Then, suddenly conceiving a strange plan, he added,—

“I must know where she is going at four o’clock in the morning. I will follow her.”

Unfortunately, Miss Brandon's coachman had, no doubt, received special orders; for he drove down the avenue as fast as the horse could go, and the animal was a famous trotter, carefully chosen by Sir Thorn, who understood horse-flesh better than any one else in Paris. But Daniel was agile; and the hope of being able to avenge himself at once gave him unheard-of strength.

"If I could only catch a cab!" he thought.

But no carriage was to be seen. His elbows close to the body, managing his breath, and steadily measuring his steps, he succeeded in not only following the *coupe*, but in actually gaining ground. When Miss Brandon reached Concord Square, he was only a few yards behind the carriage. But there the coachman touched the horse, which suddenly increased its pace, crossed the square, and trotted down Royal Street.

Daniel felt his breath giving out, and a shooting pain, first trifling, but gradually increasing, in his side. He was on the point of giving up the pursuit, when he saw a cab coming down towards him from the Madeleine, the driver fast asleep on the box. He threw himself before the horses, and cried out as well as he could,—

"Driver, a hundred francs for you, if you follow that *coupe* down there!"

But the driver, suddenly aroused by a man who stood in the middle of the street, bareheaded, and in evening costume, and who offered him such an enormous sum, thought it was a practical joke attempted by a drunken man, and replied furiously,—

"Look out, rascal! Get out of the way, or I drive over you!"

And therewith he whipped his horses; and Daniel would have been driven over, if he had not promptly jumped aside. But all this had taken time; and, when he looked up, the *coupe* was far off, nearly at the boulevard. To attempt overtaking it now would have been folly indeed; and Daniel remained there, overwhelmed and defeated.

What could he do? It occurred to him that he might hasten to Maxime, and ask him for advice. But fate was against him; he gave up that idea. He went slowly back to his lodgings, and threw himself into an arm-chair, determined

not to go to bed till he had found a way to extricate himself from the effects of his egregious folly.

But he had now been for two days agitated by the extremest alternatives, like a man out at sea, whom the waves buffet, and throw—now up to the shore, and now back again into open water. He had not closed an eye for forty-eight hours; and, if the heart seems to be able to suffer almost indefinitely, our physical strength is strictly limited. Thus he fell asleep, dreaming even in his sleep that he was hard at work, and just about to discover the means by which he could penetrate the mystery of Miss Brandon.

It was bright day when Daniel awoke, chilled and stiffened; for he had not changed his clothes when he came home, and his fire had gone out. His first impulse was one of wrath against himself. What! he succumbed so easily?—he, the sailor, who remembered very well having remained more than once for forty, and even once for sixty hours on deck, when his vessel was threatened by a hurricane? Had his peaceful and monotonous life in his office during the last two years weakened him to such a point, that all the springs of his system had lost their power?

Poor fellow! he knew not that the direst fatigue *is* trifling in comparison with that deep moral excitement which shakes the human system to its most mysterious depths. Nevertheless, while he hastened to kindle a large fire, in order to warm himself, he felt that the rest had done him good. The last evil effects of his excitement last night had passed away; the charm by which he had been fascinated was broken; and he felt once more master of all his faculties.

Now his folly appeared to him so utterly inexplicable, that, if he had but tasted a glass of lemonade at Miss Brandon's house, he should have been inclined to believe that they had given him one of those drugs which set the brains on fire, and produce a kind of delirium. But he had taken nothing, and, even if he had, was the foolish act less real for that? The consequences would be fatal, he had no doubt.

He was thus busy trying to analyze the future, when his servant entered, as he did every morning, bringing his hat and overcoat on his arm.

“Sir,” he said, with a smile which he tried to render malicious, “you have forgotten these things at the house where you spent the evening yesterday. A servant—on horseback too—brought them. He handed me at the same time this letter, and is waiting for an answer.”

Daniel took the letter, and for a minute or more examined the direction. The handwriting was a woman’s, small and delicate, but in no ways like the long, angular hand of an American lady. At last he tore the envelope; and at once a penetrating but delicate perfume arose, which he had inhaled, he knew but too well, in Miss Brandon’s rooms.

The letter was indeed from her, and on the top of the page bore her name, Sarah, in small blue Gothic letters. She wrote,—

“Is it really so, O Daniel! that you are entirely mine, and that I can count upon you? You told me so tonight. Do you still remember your promises?”

Daniel was petrified. Miss Brandon had told him that she was imprudence personified; and here she gave him a positive proof of it.

Could not these few lines become a terrible weapon against her? Did they not admit the most extraordinary interpretation? Still, as the bearer might be impatient, the servant asked,—

“What must I tell the man?”

“Ah, wait!” answered Daniel angrily.

And, sitting down at his bureau, he wrote to Miss Brandon,—

“Certainly, Miss Brandon, I remember the promises you extorted from me when I was not master of myself; I remember them but too well.”

Suddenly an idea struck him; and he paused. What! Having been caught already in the very first trap she had prepared for his inexperience, was he to risk falling into a second? He tore the letter he had commenced into small pieces, and, turning to his servant, said,—

“Tell the man that I am out; and make haste and get me a carriage!”

Then, when he was once more alone, he murmured,—

“Yes, it is better so. It is much better to leave Miss Brandon in uncertainty. She cannot even suspect that her driving out this morning has enlightened me. She thinks I am still in the dark; let her believe it.”

Still this letter of hers seemed to prepare some new intrigue, which troubled Daniel excessively. Miss Brandon was certain of achieving her end; what more did she want? What other mysterious aim could she have in view?

“Ah! I cannot make it out,” sighed Daniel. “I must consult Brevan.”

On his writing-table he found that important and urgent work which the minister had intrusted to his hands still unfinished. But the minister, the department, his position, his preferment,—all these considerations weighed as nothing in comparison with his passion.

He went down, therefore; and, while his carriage drove to his friend’s house, he thought of the surprise he would cause Maxime.

When he arrived there, he found M. de Brevan standing in his shirt- sleeves before an immense marble table, covered all over with pots and bottles, with brushes, combs, and sponges, with pincers, polishers, and files, making his toilet.

If he expected Daniel, he had not expected him so soon; for his features assumed an expression which seemed to prohibit all confidential talk. But Daniel saw nothing. He shook hands with his friend, and, sinking heavily into a chair, he said,—

“I went to Miss Brandon. She has made me promise all she wanted. I cannot imagine how it came about!”

“Let us hear,” said M. de Brevan.

Then, without hesitation, and with all the minutest details, Daniel told him how Miss Brandon had taken him into her little boudoir, and how she had exculpated herself from all complicity with Malgat by showing him the letters written by that wretched man.

“Strange letters!” he said, “which, if they are authentic”—

M. de Brevan shrugged his shoulders.

“You were forewarned,” he said, “and you have promised all she wanted! Do you not think she might have made you sign your own death-sentence?”

“But Kergrist?” said Daniel. “Kergrist’s brother is her friend.”

“I dare say. But do you imagine that brother is any cleverer than you are?”

Although he was by no means fully satisfied, Daniel went on, describing his amazement when Miss Brandon told him that she did not love Count Ville-Handry.

But Maxime burst out laughing, and interrupted him, saying with bitter irony,—

“Of course! And then she went on, telling you that she had never yet loved anybody, having vainly looked in the world for the man of whom she dreamed. She painted to you the phoenix in such colors, that you had to say to yourself, ‘What does she mean? That phoenix! Why, she means me!’ That has tickled you prodigiously. She has thrown herself at your feet; you have raised her up; she has fainted; she has sobbed like a distressed dove in your arms; you have lost your head.”

Daniel was overcome. He stammered,—

“How did you know?”

Maxime could not look him in the face; but his voice was as steady as ever when he replied, in a tone of bitterest sarcasm,—

“I guess it. Did I not tell you I knew Miss Brandon? She has only one card in her hand; but that is enough; it always makes a trick.”

To have been deceived, and even to have been rendered ridiculous, is one of those misfortunes which we confess to ourselves, however painful the process may be; but to hear another person laugh at us after such a thing has happened is more than we can readily bear. Daniel, therefore, did not conceal his impatience, and said rather dryly,—

“If I have been the dupe of Miss Brandon, my dear Maxime, you see, at last, that I am so no longer.”

“Ah, ah!”

“No, not in the least. And that, thanks to her; for she herself has destroyed my illusions.”

“Pshaw!”

“Unconsciously, of course, having ran away from her like a fool, I was wandering about in the streets near her house, when I saw her come out in her *coupe*.”

“Oh, come!”

“I saw her as distinctly as I see you. It was four o’clock in the morning, mind!”

“Is it possible? And what did you do?”

“I followed her.”

M. de Brevan nearly let the brush fall, with which he was polishing his fingernails; but he mastered his confusion so promptly, that Daniel did not perceive it.

“Ah! you followed her,” he said in a voice which all his efforts could not steady entirely. “Then, of course, you know where she went.”

“Alas, no! She drove so fast, that, quick as I am, I could not follow her, and lost sight of her.”

Certainly M. de Brevan was breathing more freely, and said in an easy tone,—

“That is provoking, and you have lost a fine opportunity. I am, however, by no means astonished that you are at last enlightened.”

“Oh! I am so; you may believe me. And yet”—

“Well, yet?”

Daniel hesitated, for fear of seeing another sardonic smile appear on Maxime’s lips. Still making an effort, he replied,—

“Well, I am asking myself whether all that Miss Brandon states about her childhood, her family, and her fortune, might not, after all, be true.”

Maxime looked like a sensible man who is forced to listen to the absurd nonsense of an insane person.

“You think I am absurd,” said Daniel. “Perhaps I am; but, then, do me the favor to explain to me how Miss Brandon, anxious as she must be to conceal her past, could herself point out to me the means to ascertain every thing about her, and even to learn the precise amount of her income? America is not so far off!”

M. de Brevan’s face no longer expressed astonishment; he looked absolutely bewildered.

“What!” he cried out, “could you seriously think of undertaking a trip to America?”

“Why not?”

“To be sure, my dear friend, you are, in all sincerity, too naive for our age. What! have you not yet been able to divine Miss Brandon’s plan? And yet it is patent enough. When she saw you, and had taken your measure, she said to herself, ‘Here is an excellent young man who is in my way, excessively in my way; he must go and breathe a better air a few thousand miles off.’ And thereupon she suggested to you that pleasant trip to America.”

After what Daniel had learned about Miss Brandon’s character, this explanation sounded by no means improbable. Nevertheless, he was not quite satisfied. He objected to it thus:—

“Whether I go or stay, the wedding will still take place. Consequently, she has no interest in my being abroad. Believe me, Maxime, there is something else underneath. Outside of this marriage, Miss Brandon must be pursuing some other plan.”

“What plan?”

“Ah! That is what I cannot find out, to save my life. But you may be sure that I am not mistaken. I want no better evidence of it than the fact that she wrote to me this morning.”

M. de Brevan jumped up, and said,—

“What! She has written to you?”

“Yes; it is that accursed letter, more than any thing else, that brings me here. Here it is, just read it; and, if you can understand it, you are more fortunate than I am.”

At one glance M. de Brevan had read the five lines which Miss Brandon had written; and, turning deadly pale, he said,—

“This is incomprehensible. A note, and such an indiscreet note, from her who never writes!”

He looked upon Daniel as if he wished to penetrate his innermost thoughts, and then asked him, weighing his words with the utmost care,—

“If she should really love you, what would you say?”

Daniel looked disgusted. He replied,—“It is hardly generous in you to make sport of me, Maxime. I may be a fool; but I am not an idiot, to be conceited to that degree.”

“That is no answer to my question,” said Brevan; “and I repeat my question. What would you say?”

“I would say that I execrate her!”

“Oh! if you hate her so bitterly, you are very near loving her.”

“I despise her; and without esteem”—

“That is an old story. That is no impediment.”

“Finally, you know how dearly, how ardently, I love Miss Ville-Handry.”

“Of course; but that is not the same thing.”

M. de Brevan had at last finished his careful toilet. He put on a dressing-gown; and, carrying Daniel with him into the small room which he used as a dressing-room, he asked,—

“And what have you said in reply to that note?”

“Nothing.”

M. de Brevan had thrown himself into a comfortable chair, and assumed the careful air of a physician who has been consulted. He nodded, and said,—

“You have done well, and for the future I advise you to pursue the same plan. Don’t say a word. Can you do any thing to prevent Miss Brandon from carrying out her purposes? No! Let her go on, then.”

“But”—

“Let me finish. It is not only your own interest to act thus, but also Miss Henrietta’s interest. The day on which they part you, you will be inconsolable; but you will also be free to act. She, on the other hand, will be forced to live under the same roof with Miss Brandon; and you do not know what a stepmother can do to torture the child of her husband!”

Daniel trembled. He had already thought of that; and the idea had made him shudder. Brevan continued,—

“For the present, the most important thing is to find out how your flight has been explained. We may be able to draw our conclusions from what has been said on the subject.”

“I’ll go at once and try to find out,” said Daniel.

And, after having affectionately shaken hands with Maxime, he hurried down to his carriage and drove as fast as he could to Count Ville-Handry’s palace. The count was at home and alone, walking up and down in the most excited manner. And certainly he had enough to excite and preoccupy him just now. It was nearly noon; and he had not yet been in the hands of his valet. When he saw Daniel, he paused for a moment, and, crossing his arms on his breast, he said, in a terrible tone,—

“Ah! here you are, M. Champcey. Well, you are doing nice things!”

“I, count? How so?”

“How so? Who else has overwhelmed poor Miss Sarah with insults at the very time when she was trying to explain every thing to you? Who else, ashamed of his scandalous conduct, has run away, never daring to reappear at her house?”

What had the count been told? Certainly not the truth. He went on,—

“And do you know, M. Champcey, what has been the effect of your brutality? Miss Brandon has been seized with such a terrible nervous attack, that they had to send the carriage for a doctor. You unlucky man, you might have killed her! They would, of course, never have allowed me to enter her own room; but from the reception-room I could at times hear her painful cries and sobs. It was only after eight o’clock this morning that she could get any rest; and then Mrs. Brian, taking pity on my great grief, granted me the favor to see her, sleeping like an infant.”

Daniel listened, stupefied by amazement, utterly confounded by the impudence of Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian, and hardly able to understand the count’s astonishing credulity. He thought to himself,—

“This is abominable! Here I am an accomplice of this Miss Brandon. Must I actually aid her in obtaining possession of this unlucky man?”

But what could he do? Should he speak? Should he tell Count Ville- Handry, that if he really heard cries of pain, and sobs, they were certainly not uttered by Miss Brandon? Should he tell him, that, while he was dying with anxiety, his beloved was driving about Paris, Heaven knows where and with whom.

The thought of doing so occurred to Daniel. But what would have been the good of it? Would the count believe him? Most probably not. And thus he would only add new difficulties to his position, which was already complicated enough. Finally, he saw very, clearly that he would never dare tell the whole truth, or show that letter which he had in his pocket. Still he tried to excuse himself, and began,—

“I am too much of a gentleman to insult a woman.”

The count interrupted him rudely, saying,—

“Spare me, I pray, a rigmarole which cannot affect me. Besides, I do not blame you particularly. I know the heart of man too well not to be sure, that, in acting thus, you have followed much less the inspirations of your own heart than the suggestions made by my daughter.”

It might have been very dangerous for Henrietta to allow the count to cherish such thoughts. Daniel, therefore, tried once more to explain.

“I assure you, count”—

But the count interrupted him fiercely, stamping with his foot.

“No more! I mean to make an end to this absurd opposition, and to break it forever. Do they not know that I am master in my own house? and do they propose to treat me like a servant, and to laugh at me, into the bargain? I shall make you aware who is master.”

He checked himself for an instant, and then continued,—

“Ah, M. Champcey! I did not expect that from you. Poor Sarah! To think that I could not spare her such a humiliation! But it is the last; and this very morning, as soon as she wakes, she shall know that all is ended. I have just sent for my daughter to tell her that the day for the wedding is fixed. All the formalities are fulfilled. We have the necessary papers”—

He paused, for Henrietta came in.

“You wish to speak to me, papa?” she said as she entered the room.

“Yes.”

Greeting Daniel with a sweet glance of her eyes, Henrietta walked up to the count, and offered him her forehead to kiss; but he pushed her back rudely, and said, assuming an air of supreme solemnity,—

“I have sent for you, my daughter, to inform you that to-morrow fortnight I shall marry Miss Brandon.”

Henrietta must have been prepared for something of the kind, for she did not move. She turned slightly pale; and a ray of wrath shot from her eyes. The count went on,—

“Under these circumstances, it is not proper, it is hardly decent, that you should not know her who is to be your mother hereafter. I shall therefore present you to her this very day, in the afternoon.”

The young girl shook her head gently, and then she said,—

“No!”

Count Ville-Handry had become very red. He exclaimed,—

“What! You dare! What would you say if I threatened to carry you forcibly to Miss Brandon’s house?”

“I, should say, father, that that is the only way to make me go there.”

Her attitude was firm, though not defiant. She spoke in a calm, gentle voice, but betrayed in every thing a resolution firmly formed, and not to be shaken by any thing. The count seemed to be perfectly amazed at this audacity shown by a girl who was usually so timid. He said,—

“Then you detest, you envy, this Miss Brandon?”

“I, father? Why should I? Great God! I only know that she cannot become the Countess Ville-Handry,—she who has filled all Paris with evil reports.”

“Who has told you so? No doubt, M. Champcey.”

“Everybody has told me, father.”

“So, because she has been slandered, the poor girl”—

“I am willing to think she is innocent; but the Countess Ville-Handry must not be a slandered woman.”

She raised herself to her full height, and added in a higher voice,—

“You are master here, father; you can do as you choose. But I—I owe it to myself and to the sacred memory of my mother, to protest by all the means in my power; and I shall protest.”

The count stammered and stared. The blood rose to his head. He cried out,—

“At last I know you, Henrietta, and I understand you. *I* was not mistaken. It was you who sent M. Daniel Champcey to Miss Brandon, to insult her at her own house.”

“Sir!” interrupted M. Daniel in a threatening tone.

But the count could not be restrained; and, with his eyes almost starting from their sockets, he continued,—

“Yes, I read your innermost heart, Henrietta. You are afraid of losing a part of your inheritance.”

Stung by this insult, Henrietta had stepped up close to her father,—

“But don’t you see, father, that it is this woman who wants your fortune, and that she does not like us, and cannot like us?”

“Why, if you please?”

Once before, Count Ville-Handry had asked this question of his daughter in almost the same words. Then she had not dared answer him; but now, carried away by her bitterness at being insulted by a woman whom she despised, she forgot every thing. She seized her father’s hand, and, carrying him to a mirror, she said in a hoarse voice,—

“‘Why?’—you ask. Well, look there! look at yourself!”

If Count Ville-Handry had trusted nature, he would have looked like a man of barely sixty, still quite robust and active. But he had allowed art to spoil every thing. And this morning, with his few hairs, half white, half dyed, with the rouge and the white paint of yesterday cracked, and fallen away in places, he looked as if he had lived a few thousand years.

Did he see himself as he really was,—hideous?

He certainly became livid; and coldly, for his excessive rage gave him the appearance of composure, he said,—

“You are a wretch, Henrietta!”

And as she broke out in sobs, terrified by his words, he said,—

“Oh, don’t play comedy! Presently, at four o’clock precisely, I shall call for you. If I find you dressed, and ready to accompany me to Miss Brandon’s house, all right. If not M. Champcey has been here for the last time in his life; and you will never—do you hear?—never be his wife. Now I leave you alone; you can reflect!”

And he went out, closing the door so violently, that the whole house seemed to shake.

“All is over!”

Both Henrietta and Daniel were crushed by this certain conviction.

The crisis could no longer be postponed. A few hours more, and the mischief would be done. Daniel was the first to shake off the stupor of despair; and, taking Henrietta’s hand, he asked her,—

“You have heard what your father said. What will you do?”

“What I said I would do, whatever it may cost me.”

“But could you yield?”

“Yield?” exclaimed the young girl.

And, looking at Daniel with grieved surprise, she added,—

“Would you really dare give me that advice,—you who had only to look at Miss Brandon to lose your self-control so far as to overwhelm her with insults?”

“Henrietta, I swear”—

“And this to such an extent, that father accused you of having done so at my bidding. Ah, you have been very imprudent, Daniel!”

The unhappy man wrung his hands with despair. What punishment he had to endure for a moment’s forgetfulness! He felt as if he had rendered himself guilty already by not revealing the mean conduct of M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian while Miss Brandon was driving about Paris. And now, at this very hour, he was put into a still more difficult position, because he could not even give a glimpse of the true state of things.

He said nothing; and Henrietta gloried in his silence.

“You see,” she said, “that if your heart condemns me, your reason and your conscience approve of my decision.”

He made no reply, but, rising suddenly, he began to walk up and down in the room like a wild beast searching for some outlet from the cage in which it has been imprisoned. He felt he was caught, hemmed in on all sides, and he could do nothing, nothing at all.

“Ah, we must surrender!” he exclaimed at last, overcome with grief; “we must do it; we are almost helpless. Let us give up the struggle; reason demands it. We have done enough; we have done our duty.”

All trembling with passion, he spoke on for some time, bringing up the most conclusive arguments, one by one; while his love lent him all its persuasive power. And at last it looked as if Henrietta’s determination were giving way, and she began to hesitate. It was so; but she was still struggling against her own emotion, and said in a half-suppressed tone,—

“No doubt, Daniel, you think I am not yet wretched enough.”

And then, fixing upon him a long, anxious glance, she added,—

“Say no more, or I shall begin to fear that you are dreading the time which has still to elapse till we can be united, and that you doubt me—or yourself.”

He blushed, finding himself thus half detected; but, given up entirely to sinister presentiments, he insisted,—

“No, I do not doubt; but I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that you are going to live under the same roof with Miss Brandon, M. Elgin, and Mrs. Brian. Since this abominable adventuress must triumph, let us flee. I have in Anjou an old respectable kinswoman, who will be very proud to offer you her hospitality.”

Henrietta stopped him by a gesture. Then she said,—

“In other words, I who risk my happiness in order to avoid a blot upon the name of Ville-Handry, I should tarnish it in an almost ineffaceable manner. That cannot be.”

“Henrietta!”

“No more. I stand upon a post of honor which I shall not abandon. The more formidable Miss Brandon is, the more it becomes my duty to remain here in order to watch over my father.”

Daniel trembled.

He remembered suddenly what M. de Brevan had told him of the means employed by Miss Brandon for the purpose of getting rid of troublesome people. Did Henrietta’s instincts make her anticipate a crime? No, not such a crime, at least.

“You will understand my decision all the better,” she continued, “if I tell you what a strange discovery I have made. This morning a gentleman called here, who said he was a business-man, and had an appointment with Count Ville-Handry which was of the utmost importance.

“The servants had told him that their master was out. He became angry, and began to talk so loud, that I came to see what was the matter. When he saw me, and found out who I was, he at once became very quiet, and begged me to take charge of a rough copy of a legal paper, which he had been directed to prepare secretly, and which he desired me to hand to my father.

“I promised to do so; but, as I was carrying the paper up stairs to put it upon my father’s bureau, I happened to look at it. Do you know what it was? The statutes of a new society, of which father was to be president.”

“Great God! Is it possible?”

“Most assuredly, unfortunately. I saw on the top of the paper, ‘Count Ville-Handry, director in chief’ and after the name followed all his titles, the high offices he has filled, and the French and foreign decorations which he has received.”

Daniel could no longer doubt. He said,—

“We knew that they would try to obtain possession of your father’s fortune, and now we have the proof of it. But what can we ever do, Henrietta, against the cunning manoeuvres of people like these?”

She bowed her head, and answered in a tone of resignation,—

“I have heard it said that often the mere presence of an inoffensive child is sufficient to intimidate and frighten away the boldest criminals. If God wills it so, I will be that child.”

Daniel tried once more to insist; but she cut him short, saying,—

“You forget, my dear friend, that this is, perhaps for many years, the last time we shall ever be alone together. Let us think of the future. I have secured the confidence of one of my waiting-women, and to her you must direct your letters. Her name is Clarissa Pontois. If any grave and unforeseen necessity should arise, and it becomes absolutely necessary for me to see you, Clarissa will bring you the key of the little garden-gate, and you will come.”

Both of them had their eyes filled with tears; and their hearts felt increasing anguish as the hand on the dial advanced. They knew they would have to part. Could they hope ever to meet again?

It struck four o’clock. Count Ville-Handry reappeared. Stung to the quick by what he called the insulting remarks of his daughter, he had stimulated the zeal of his valet; and that artist had evidently surpassed himself in the arrangement of the hair, and especially in the complexion.

“Well, Henrietta?” he asked.

“My decision remains unchanged, father.”

The count was probably prepared for this answer; for he succeeded in controlling his fury.

“Once more, Henrietta,” he said, “consider! Do not decide rashly, relying simply upon odious slanders.”

He drew from his pocket a photograph, looked at it lovingly, and, handing it to his daughter, he added,—

“Here is Miss Brandon’s portrait. Look at it, and see if she to whom God has given such a charming face, such sublime eyes, can have a bad heart.”

For more than a minute Henrietta examined the likeness; and then, returning it to her father, she said coldly,—

“This woman is beautiful beyond all conception. Now I can explain to myself that new society of which you are going to be director-general.”

Count Ville-Handry turned pale under this “juncture,” and cried in a terrible voice,—

“Unhappy child! Unhappy child! You dare insult an angel?”

Maddened with rage, he had lifted up his hand, and was about to strike his daughter, when Daniel seized his wrist in his iron grasp, and threateningly, as if he himself was about to strike, he said,—

“Ah, sir, have a care! have a care!”

The count cast upon him a look of concentrated hatred; but, regaining his self-control, he freed himself, and, pointing at the door, he said slowly,—

“M. Champcey, I order you to leave this house instantly; and I forbid your ever coming back to it again. My servants will be informed, that, if any one of them ever allows you to cross the threshold of this house, he will be instantly dismissed. Go, sir!”

CHAPTER 11

Twenty-four hours after Daniel had thus left Count Ville-Handry's palace, pale and staggering, he had not yet entirely recovered from this last blow. He had made a mortal enemy of the man whom it was his greatest interest to manage; and this man, who of his own accord would have parted with him only regretfully, had now turned him disgracefully out of his house.

He could hardly account to himself for the way in which this had come about. Nay, more; retracing step by step, his conduct during the last few days, it appeared to him pitiful, absurd. And then all that had happened seemed to have turned against him.

He accused Fate, that blind goddess, who is always blamed by those who have not the courage to blame themselves. He was in this state of mind when there came to him, to his great surprise, a letter from Henrietta. Thus it was she who anticipated him, and who, sure that he would be desperate, had the feminine delicacy to write to him almost cheerfully.

"Immediately after your departure, my dear Daniel, father ordered me up stairs, and decided that I should stay there till I should become more reasonable. I know I shall stay here a long time."

She concluded thus,—

"What we want most of all, oh, my only friend! is courage. Will you have as much as your Henrietta?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly! I shall have all that is needed," exclaimed Daniel, moved to tears.

And he vowed to himself that he would devote himself, heart and soul, to his work, and there find, if not forgetfulness, at least peace. He found, however, that to swear was easier than to do. In spite of all his efforts, he could not fix his thoughts upon any thing else but his misfortunes. The studies which he had formerly pursued with delight now filled him with

disgust. The balance of his whole life was so completely destroyed, that he was not able to restore it.

The existence which he now led was that of a desperate man. As soon as he had risen, he hurried to M. de Brevan, and remained in his company as long as he could. Left alone, he wandered at haphazard along the Boulevards, or up the Champs Elysees. He dined early, hurried home again, and, putting on a rough overcoat which he had worn on board ship, he went to roam around the palace of his beloved.

There, behind those heavy, beautifully carved gates, which were open to all comers but to him, lived she who was more to him than his life. If he had struck the flagstones of the sidewalk with the heel of his boots, she would have heard the sound. He could hear the music of her piano; and yet the will of one man placed an abyss between them.

He was dying of inaction. It seemed to him atrocious, humiliating, intolerable, to be thus reduced to expecting good or evil fortune from fate, passively, without making an effort, like a man, who having taken a ticket in a lottery, and is all anxiety to obtain a large fortune, crosses his arms and waits for the drawing.

He was suffering thus for six days, and saw no end of it; when one morning, just as he was going out, his bell rang. He went to open the door.

It was a lady, who, without saying a word, swiftly walked in, and as promptly shut the door behind her.

Although she was wrapped up in a huge cloak which completely hid her figure, in spite of the very thick veil before her face, Daniel recognized her at once.

“Miss Brandon!” he exclaimed.

In the meantime she had raised her veil, “Yes, it is I,” she replied, “risking another calumny in addition to all the others that have been raised against me, Daniel.”

Amazed at a step which seemed to him the height of imprudence, he remained standing in the anteroom, and did not even think of inviting Miss Brandon to go into the next room, his study.

She went in of her own accord, quite aloof; and, when he had followed her, she said to him,—

“I came, sir, to ask you what you have done with that promise you gave me the other night at my house?”

She waited a moment; and, as he did not reply, she went on,—

“Come, I see you are like all men, if they pledge their word to another man, who is a match for them, they consider it a point of honor to keep it, but if it is a woman, then they do not keep it, and boast of it!”

Daniel was furious; but she pretended not to see it, and said more coldly,—

“I—I have a better memory than you, sir; and I mean to prove it to you. I know what has happened at Count Ville-Handry’s house; he has told me all. You have allowed yourself to be carried away so far as to threaten him, to raise your hand against him.”

“He was going to strike his daughter, and I held his arm.”

“No, sir! my dear count is incapable of such violence; and yet his own daughter had dared to taunt him with his weakness, pretending that he had been induced by me to establish a new industrial company.”

Daniel said nothing.

“And you,” continued Miss Brandon,—“you allowed Miss Henrietta to say all these offensive and absurd things. I should induce the count to engage in an enterprise where money might be lost! Why? What interest could I have?”

Her voice began to tremble; and her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

“Interest!” she went on to say, “money! The world can think of no other motive nowadays. Money! I have enough of it. If I marry the count, you know why I do it,—you! And you also know that it depended, and perhaps,

at this moment, still depends upon one single man, whether I shall break off that match this very day, now.”

As she said this, she looked at him in a manner which would have caused a statue to tremble on its marble pedestal.

But he, with his heart full of hatred, remained icy, enjoying the revenge which was thus presented to him.

“I will believe whatever you wish to say,” he answered in a mocking tone, “if you will answer me a single question.”

“Ask, sir.”

“The other night, when I had left you, where did you go in your carriage?”

He expected to see her confused, turning pale, stammer. Not at all.

“What, you know that?” she said, with an accent of admirable candor. “Ah! I committed an act of almost as great imprudence as I now do. If some fool should see me leave your rooms?”

“Pardon me, Miss Brandon, that is no answer to my question. Where did you go?”

And as she kept silent, surprised by Daniel’s firmness, he said sneeringly,—

“Then you confess that it would be madness to believe you? Let us break off here, and pray to God that I may be able to forget all the wrong you have done me.”

Miss Brandon’s beautiful eyes filled with tears of grief or of rage. She folded her hands, and said in a suppliant tone,—

“I conjure you, M. Champcey, grant me only five minutes. I must speak to you. If you knew”—

He could not turn her out; he bowed profoundly before her, and withdrew into his bedroom, closing the door behind him. But he immediately applied his eye to the keyhole, and saw Miss Brandon, her features convulsed with rage, threaten him with her closed hand, and leave the room hastily.

“She was going to dig another pit for me,” thought Daniel.

And the idea that he had avoided it made him, for a part of that day at least, forget his sorrow. But on the following day he found, when he returned home, a formidable document from the navy department, and inside two letters.

One informed him that he had been promoted to be a lieutenant.

The other ordered him to report four days hence at Rochefort, on board the frigate “Conquest,” which was lying in the roadstead waiting for two battalions of marines to be transferred to Cochin China.

Daniel had for long years, and with all the eager ambition of a young man, desired the promotion which he now obtained. That rank had been the supreme goal of all his dreams since the day on which he learned at the navy school the rudiments of his perilous vocation. How often, as he stood leaning against the monkey-railing, and saw boats passing by which carried officers, had he said to himself,—

“When I am a navy lieutenant!”

Well, now he was a lieutenant. But alas! his wishes, thus realized, filled him only with disgust and bitterness, like those golden apples, which, at a distance, shine brightly in the branches of magic trees, and under the touch of the hand turn into dust and ashes.

For with the news of his promotion came also the fatal order to a distant shore. Why did they send such an order to him, who had at the department an office in which he could render valuable services, while so many of his comrades, waiting idly in port, watched anxiously, and with almost feverish impatience, for a chance to go into active service?

“Ah!” he said to himself, his heart filled with rage, “how could I fail to recognize in this abominable treachery Miss Brandon’s cunning hand?”

First she had closed against him the gates of Count Ville-Handry’s palace, and thus separated him from his beloved Henrietta, so that they could not meet nor speak to each other.

But this was not enough for the accursed adventuress. She wanted to raise a barrier between them which should be more than a mere moral and social obstacle, one of those difficulties which no human power, no lover's ingenuity, could overcome,—the ocean and thousands of miles.

"Oh, no!" he cried in his anguish, "a thousand times no! Rather give up my career, rather send in my resignation."

Hence, the very next day, he put on his uniform, determined to lay the matter, first before that officer who was his immediate superior, but resolved, if he should not succeed there, to go up to the minister himself.

He had never worn that uniform since the night of a large court-ball, where he had danced with Henrietta. It was nearly a year ago, a few weeks before the death of the Countess Ville-Handry. As he compared his happiness in those days with his present desperate condition, he was deeply moved; and his eyes were still brimful of tears when he reached the navy department, towards ten o'clock in the morning.

The officer whom he called upon was an old captain, an excellent man, who had practised the appearance of a grim, stern official so long, that he had finally become in reality what he only wished to appear.

Seeing Daniel enter his office, he thought he came to inform him of his promotion, and made a great effort to smile as he hailed him with the words,—

"Well, Lieut. Champcey, we are satisfied, I hope?"

And, perceiving that Daniel did not wear the epaulets of his new rank, he added,—

"But how is that, lieutenant? Perhaps you have not heard yet?"

"I beg your pardon, captain."

"Why on earth, then, have you no epaulets?"

And he began to frown terribly, considering that such carelessness augured ill for the service. Daniel excused himself as well as he could, which was very little, and then boldly approached the purpose of his call.

“I have received an order for active service.”

“I know,—on board ‘The Conquest,’ in the roadstead at Rochefort, for Cochin China.”

“I have to be at my post in four days.”

“And you think the time too short? It is short. But impossible to grant you ten minutes more.”

“I do not ask for leave of absence, captain; I want the favor—to be allowed to keep my place here.”

The old officer could hardly keep his seat.

“You would prefer not going on board ship,” he exclaimed, “the very day after your promotion? Ah, come, you are mad!”

Daniel shook his head sadly.

“Believe me, captain,” he replied, “I obey the most imperative duty.”

Leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, the captain seemed to look for such a duty; then he asked suddenly,—

“Is it your family that keeps you?”

“If my place can really not be filled by one of my comrades, I shall be compelled to send in my resignation.”

The old sailor bounded as he heard that word, and said furiously,—

“I told you you were a fool!”

In spite of his determination, Daniel was too much troubled not to commit a blunder. He insisted,—

“It is a matter of life and death with me, captain. And if you only knew my reasons; if I could tell them”—

“Reasons which cannot be told are always bad reasons, sir. I insist upon what I have told you.”

“Then, captain, I shall be compelled, to my infinite sorrow, to insist upon offering my resignation.”

The old sailor’s brow became darker and darker. He growled.

“Your resignation, your resignation! You talk of it very lightly. It remains to be seen whether it will be accepted. ‘The Conquest’ does not sail on a pleasure-party; she is sent out on a serious campaign, and will probably be absent for some time. We have unpleasant complications down there and are sending out reinforcements. You are still in France; but you are actually under orders to meet the enemy; Men do not resign in the face of the enemy, Lieut. Champcey!”

Daniel had turned very pale.

“You are severe, captain,” he said.

“I have no idea, I assure you, of being gentle; and, if that can induce you to change your mind”—

“Unfortunately, I cannot alter my decision.”

The old sailor rose violently, and walked up and down the room several times, giving vent to his anger in oaths of various kinds; then he returned to Daniel, and said in his driest tone,—

“If that is so, the case is serious; I must report it to the secretary of the navy. What time is it? Eleven o’clock. Come here again at half- past twelve. I shall have settled the matter then.”

Quite certain that his superior would say nothing in his favor, Daniel retired, walking hurriedly through the narrow passages, when a joyous voice hailed him, calling out, “Champcey!”

He turned, and found himself face to face with two of his comrades, with whom he had been most intimate at school. They said eagerly,—

“So you are our superior now?”

And, with the utmost sincerity, they began to congratulate him, delighted, as they said, that such good luck should have fallen upon a man like him,

whom everybody thought worthy of the distinction, and who reflected honor upon the service. No enemy could have inflicted such suffering upon Daniel as these two friends did. There was not one of their good wishes which did not amount to a bitter sarcasm; every word they said told upon him.

“You must confess, however,” they continued, “that you are a lucky man, like no other. One day you are made a lieutenant; and the next day they offer you active service. The next time we meet, you will be a captain in command of a frigate.”

“I am not going out,” replied Daniel, fiercely. “I have handed in my resignation.”

And, leaving his two friends looking utterly amazed, he went away at a rapid pace.

Certainly, he had not foreseen all these difficulties; and in his blind wrath he charged his chief with injustice and tyranny. He said,—

“I must stay in Paris; and I will stay.”

Reflection, far from calming him, only excited him the more. Having left home with the intention of offering his resignation only in an extreme case, he was now determined to adhere to his plan, even if they should offer him full satisfaction. Had he not an ample income of his own? and could he not always find an honorable occupation? That would be far better than to continue in a profession where one is never his own master, but lives eternally under the dread of some order that may send him, at a moment’s warning, to heaven knows what part of the world.

That was the way he reasoned with himself while breakfasting at a tavern not far off; and when he returned to the department, a little after twelve, he looked upon himself as already no longer belonging to the navy, and in his imagination caring little for the final decision.

It was the hour for receptions, when everybody who had any business at the department came to look after his interests; and the anteroom was filled with officers of every grade, some in uniform, others in citizen’s dress.

The conversation was very animated; for Daniel heard the sounds from the outer passage.

He entered; and there was silence,—sudden, deep, chilling silence.

Evidently they had been talking about him.

Even if he could have doubted it for a moment, he read it in the faces turned aside, the forced smiles, and the cautious glances with which he was received. He thought, very much troubled,—

“What can this mean?”

In the meantime a young man in citizen’s dress, whom he did not know, called out from one side of the room to the other, to an old officer in a seedy uniform, with blackened epaulets (a real sea-dog), lean, bronzed, wrinkled, and with eyes bearing the traces of recent ophthalmia,—

“Why do you stop, lieutenant? We were much interested, I assure you.”

The lieutenant seemed to hesitate, as if he were making up his mind to do a disagreeable thing, which still did not depend on his choice; and then he resumed his account,—

“Well, we got there, convinced that we had taken all the necessary precautions, and that there was, consequently, nothing to fear,—fine precautions they turned out to be! In the course of a week the whole crew was laid up; and as to the staff, little Bertram and I were the only officers able to appear on deck. Moreover, my eyes were in a state. You see what they say now. The captain was the first to die; the same evening five sailors followed suit, and seven the next day; the day after the first lieutenant and two of the noncommissioned officers. The like was never seen before.”

Daniel turned to his neighbor.

“Who is that officer?” he asked.

“Lieut. Dutac of ‘The Valorous,’ just returned from Cochin China.”

Light broke upon Daniel’s mind; it was a painful light.

“When did ‘The Valorous’ come in?” he asked again.

“Six days ago she made the harbor of Brest.”

The other man went on,—

“And thus, you see, we left a goodly portion of our crew out there. That is a campaign! As to my own notions, this is what I think,—a nasty country, a wretched climate, a people fit for the gallows.”

“Certainly,” said the young man in citizen’s dress, “things are not pleasant in Cochin China.”

“Ah, but still”—

“What if you were ordered back?”

“I would go, of course. Somebody must go, you know, and carry reinforcements there; but I should not care if somebody else”—

He shrugged his shoulders, and said stoically,—

“And besides, since we navy men must be eaten by the fish some time or other, it does not matter very much when that takes place.”

Was not that, in a trivial, but terribly impressive manner, precisely the same thing that Daniel had been told by his captain? People do not resign when they face the enemy.

It was very evident that the officers who were there assembled doubted his courage, and were discussing the fact when he entered. It was clear that they attributed his resignation to fear.

At this idea, that he might be suspected of cowardice, Daniel trembled all over. What could he do to prove that he was not a coward? Should he challenge every one of these men, and fight one, two, ten duels? Would that prove that he had not shrunk from the unknown perils of a new country, from the dangers of an armed invasion, and a fatal climate? No; unless he was willing to remain a marked man for life, he must go; yes, go, since out there dangers awaited him of which he was held to be afraid.

He went up, therefore, to the old lieutenant, and said, in a voice loud enough to be heard by every one in the room,—

“My good comrade, I had just been ordered to the place you come from, and I had sent in my resignation; but after what you have said,—things I knew nothing of,—I shall go.”

There was a murmur of approbation. And one voice said, “Ah! I was sure of it!” and that was all. But it was quite enough to prove to Daniel that he had chosen the only way to save his honor, which had been in imminent peril. But, simple as the whole scene was in itself, it was very extraordinary, in view of the usual reserve which prevails among sailors. And, besides, does it not happen almost every day, that an officer ordered to some station requests and obtains leave to exchange with some one else, and nothing is said?

Daniel felt that underneath the whole affair there was some diabolic intrigue. If Miss Brandon had really procured this order to active service, was it not likely that she would have taken her measures, so that he could not possibly avoid going? Were all these men in citizen’s dress whom he saw there really navy officers? The young man who had asked Lieut. Dutac to go on in his story had disappeared. Daniel went from one to the other, inquiring who that clever young man was, but in vain. Soon a summons came for him to appear in the superior’s office. He hastened there; and, as he opened the door, he said,—

“I’ll follow your advice, captain. In three days I shall be on board ‘The Conquest.’”

The captain’s stern face cleared up, and he said approvingly,—

“All right! You did well to change your mind; for your business began to look very ugly. The minister is very angry with you.”

“The minister? And why?”

“*Primo*, he had charged you with a very important duty.”

“To be sure,” stammered Daniel, hanging his head; “but I have been so severely suffering!”

The fact is, he had totally forgotten that unlucky work.

“*Secundo*,” continued the old officer, “he was doubtful whether you were in your right senses, and I agree with him, since he has told me that you yourself have solicited this appointment on foreign service in the most urgent terms.”

Daniel was stunned, and stammered out,—

“His Excellency is mistaken.”

“Ah! I beg your pardon, M. Champcey; I have myself seen your letter.”

But already a sudden inspiration had, like a flash of lightning, cleared up the mystery in Daniel’s mind.

“Ah! I wish I could see it too! Captain, I beseech you show me that letter!”

The old officer began almost to think that Champcey was really not in his right mind. He answered,—

“I do not have it; but it is among your papers in the bureau for Personal Affairs.”

In a minute Daniel was in the office where those papers were kept, and obtained, not without much trouble, and under certain conditions only, leave to look at his papers. He opened the parcel with feverish haste; and the very first paper that fell in his hands was a letter, dated the day before, in which he urgently requested the minister to grant him the special favor of being sent out with the expedition to Cochin China on board the frigate “Conquest.”

Daniel was, of course, perfectly sure that he had written no such letter.

But the handwriting was so precisely like his own, letter for letter, and even his signature was so admirably imitated, that he felt for a moment utterly bewildered, mistrusting, for a second, his own eyes, his own reason. The whole was done so exceedingly well, that if the matter had been one of ordinary importance, and the date of the letter had gone back to a fortnight or so ago, he would certainly have suspected his memory rather than the letter before him.

Overcome by the atrocity of such a trick, he exclaimed,—

“It is almost incredible!”

It was, however, only too certain, too indisputable, that the letter could not have been dictated by any one but Miss Brandon. No doubt, one of her accomplices, perhaps the great Sir Thorn himself, had written it. Ah! now Daniel understood the insolent assurance of Miss Brandon, when she insisted upon his taking poor Malgat’s letters, and repeatedly said, “Go and show them to the clerks who have known that unhappy man for long years, and they will tell you if they are his own.” Most assuredly he would have met with no one bold enough to say the contrary, if Malgat’s handwriting had been copied with the same distressing perfection as his own.

Still he might, perhaps, profit by this strange event; but how?

Ought he to mention his discovery? What would have been the use? Would they believe him, if he accused her of forgery, of a trick unsurpassed in boldness and wickedness? Would they even consent to an investigation; and, if they instituted one, what would be the result? Where would they find an expert ready to swear that this letter was not written by him, when he himself, if each line had been presented to him separately, would have felt bound to acknowledge it as his own?

Was it not far more probable, on the contrary, that, after what he had done in the morning, they would have ascribed his charges to a mistake, or seen in them a weak invention in order to cover his retreat? Therefore it was a thousand times better to keep silence, to be resigned to postpone to another day every attempt to avenge himself in a manner corresponding to the injury he had suffered, and all the more effectively, as his vengeance would have been carefully matured.

But he did not wish that false letter, which might become a formidable piece of evidence against him, to remain among his papers; no doubt Miss Brandon would soon find an opportunity of having it withdrawn. He asked, therefore, for leave to copy it, obtained permission, went to work, and succeeded, without being seen by anybody, in substituting his copy for the original.

When this was done, knowing that he had not a minute to lose, he instantly left the department, and, jumping into a carriage, drove to M. de Brevan.

CHAPTER 12

Like all energetic natures, Daniel felt a wonderful relief as soon as he had formed an irrevocable decision. He would even have enjoyed the peace that had once more returned to his mind, but for the savage hatred which had accumulated in his heart, and which confused his thoughts whenever he remembered Miss Brandon.

Providentially, it seemed to him, Maxime had not gone out, or, rather, having been to breakfast at the English cafe with some of his friends, he had just returned.

In ten words Daniel had told him every thing, and even shown him that masterpiece of forgery, which he attributed to Miss Brandon's mind, and M. Elgin's skill. Then, without heeding Maxime's exclamations of wonder and indignation, loud and deep as they were, he continued,—

"Now, my dear Maxime, listen to me. It may be my last will which I am going to give in your charge."

And, when his friend tried to remonstrate, he insisted,—

"I know what I am saying. I am sure I hope I shall not be buried out there; but the climate is murderous, and I may encounter a cannon-ball. It is always better to be prepared."

He paused a moment to collect his thoughts; and then he went on.

"You alone, in this world, Maxime, know all my private affairs. I have no secret from you. I have friends whom I have known longer than you; but I have none in whom I feel more confidence. Besides, my old friends are all sailors,—men, who, like myself, may at any moment be sent, Heaven knows where. Now I want a reliable, safe, and experienced man, possessed of prudence and energy, and sure not to leave Paris. Will you be that man, Maxime?"

M. de Brevan, who had remained in his chair, rose, and, putting his hand on his heart, said,—

“Between us, Daniel, oaths are useless; don’t you think so? I say, therefore, simply, you may count upon me.”

“And I do count upon you,” exclaimed Daniel,—“yes, blindly and absolutely; and I am going to give you a striking proof of it.”

For a few moments it looked as if he were trying to find some brief and yet impressive form for his communication; and then he said, speaking very rapidly,—

“If I leave in despair, it is because I leave Henrietta in the hands of the enemy. What persecution she will have to endure! My heart bleeds at the mere thought. Miss Brandon must be meditating some terrible blow, or she would not have been so anxious to keep me at a distance.”

He sobbed almost, so great was his excitement; but he instantly became master again of his emotion, and continued,—

“Well, Maxime, I shall ask you to watch over Henrietta. I intrust her to you as I would intrust her to my brother, if I had one.”

M. de Brevan was about to state some objections; but Daniel cut him short, saying,—

“I will tell you how and in what manner you can watch over Miss Ville-Handry. To-morrow evening I shall see her, and tell her the new misfortune which has befallen us. I shall take leave of her then. I know she will be terrified; but then, to reassure her, I shall explain to her that I leave her a friend, another myself, ready, like myself, to assist her at her first summons, and ready, like myself, to run any danger in order to succor her. I shall tell her to appeal to you as if it were to myself; to write to you as she used to write to me; to keep you informed of all they may attempt to do; to consult and to obey you without hesitation.

“As to what you will have to do, Maxime, I cannot tell you that, even in a general way, as I know nothing of Miss Brandon’s plans. I rely upon your experience to do what is most expedient. Still there are two alternatives

which I can foresee. It may be that her father's house becomes impossible for Henrietta, and that she should wish to leave it. It may also be, that, under certain circumstances, you may think it inexpedient for her to remain there, and that you have to advise her to escape. In either case, you will take Henrietta to an old lady, a relative of mine, who lives at the Rosiers, a little village in the department of Maine-et-Loire, and whose address I will give you, while I will inform her beforehand of what may happen."

He paused, trying to remember if there was any thing else, and, recalling nothing, he said,—

"This, my dear Maxime, is all I expect you to do for me."

With open brow, a clear eye, and grave face, M. de Brevan replied in a solemn tone of voice, speaking like a man who feels that he deserves such confidence,—

"Friend Daniel, you may sail without fear."

But Daniel had not done yet.

Pressing his friend's hand heartily, he thanked him, and then with a careless air, under which he very imperfectly concealed his real embarrassment, he said,—

"There remains only to provide the means for carrying out these measures, and for possible contingencies. You are not rich, my dear Maxime, I mean rich in comparison with the people who are your friends; you have told me so more than once."

He touched a wound which was always open, and always bleeding.

"Certainly," replied M. de Brevan, "in comparison with a number of my friends, with men like Gordon Chalusse, for instance, I am only a poor devil."

Daniel did not notice the bitterness of this reply.

"Now," he said, "suppose, at a given moment, Miss Henrietta's safety should make a certain sum of money necessary,—perhaps a very large sum,—are you sure you will always have enough in your drawer, and be able to dispose of it without inconvenience?"

“Ah! you expect too much of me; but I have friends.”

“And you would ask them! you would expose yourself to the humiliation of hearing those set excuses which serve to conceal refusals! I could never permit that.”

“I assure you”—

“Let me tell you that I have forgotten nothing. Although my means are modest, I can, by selling out some bonds, realize enough to secure you against any embarrassment on that score. I also own property in Anjou which is valued at fifty or sixty thousand dollars, and I mean to sell it.”

The other man opened his eyes wide.

“You mean,” he said slowly.

“To sell it, yes. You heard right. Except, however, my home, my father’s house, with the little garden in front, the orchard, and the meadow adjoining the house. In that house my father and my mother have lived and died. I find them there, so to say, whenever I go in; their thoughts are still filling the rooms, after so many years. The garden and the orchard are the first little bits of land my father bought from his earnings as ploughboy. He cultivated them in his leisure hours, and there is literally not a foot of soil which he has not moistened with the sweat of his brow. They are sacred to me; but the rest—I have already given orders.”

“And you expect to sell every thing in the three days before your departure?”

“Oh, no! But you are here.”

“What can I do?”

“Take my place, I should think. I will leave you a power-of-attorney. Perhaps, if you make haste, you can get fifty thousand dollars for the property. You will invest that so as to be able to use it any moment. And, if ever Miss Henrietta should be compelled to leave her father’s house, you will hand the money over to her.”

M. de Brevan had turned very pale.

“Excuse me,” he said, “excuse me.”

“What?”

“Well, it seems to me it would be more suitable to leave some one else in charge of that.”

“Whom?”

“Oh! I do not know,—a more experienced man! It may be that the property will not bring as much as you expect. Or I might invest the money in the wrong funds. Money questions are so delicate!”

But Daniel said, shrugging his shoulders,—

“I do not understand why you should hesitate to undertake so simple a thing, when you have already consented to render me so signal and so difficult a service.”

So simple! M. de Brevan did not look upon it in that light.

A nervous shiver, which he could hardly conceal, ran down his backbone; drops of perspiration broke out on his temples; and he turned deadly pale.

“Fifty thousand dollars! That is an enormous sum.”

“Oh, yes!” replied Daniel in the most careless manner.

And, looking at the clock, he added,—

“Half-past three. Come, Maxime, be quick. My carriage is waiting. The notary expects us between three and four o’clock.”

This notary was an exceptional man. He took an interest in the affairs of his clients, and sometimes even listened to hear their explanations. When Daniel had told him what he intended doing, he replied,—

“You have nothing to do, M. Champcey, but to give M. de Brevan a power-of-attorney in proper form.”

“Would it be possible,” asked Daniel, “to have it drawn up at once?”

“Why not? It can be recorded this evening; and to-morrow”—

“Well, then, lose no time.”

The notary called his chief clerk, gave him briefly his instructions, then, making a sign to Daniel, he drew him into a kind of recess resembling an enormous cupboard, adjoining his office, in which he “confessed” his clients, as he called it. When they were there, he said,—

“How is it, M. Champcey, do you really owe this M. de Brevan so much money?”

“Not a cent.”

“And you leave your entire fortune thus in his hands! You must have marvellous confidence in the man.”

“As much as in myself.”

“That is a good deal. And if he should, during your absence, run away with the fifty thousand dollars?”

Daniel was a little shaken; but he remained firm.

“Oh!” he said, “there are still some honest people in the world.”

“Ah?” laughed the notary.

And, from the manner in which he shook his head, it was clearly seen that experience had made him very sceptical on that subject.

“If you would only listen to me,” he resumed, “I could prove to you”—

But Daniel interrupted him, and said,—

“I have no desire, sir, to change my mind; but, even if I should wish to do so, I cannot retract my word. There are particular circumstances in this case which I cannot explain to you in so short a time.”

The notary raised his eyes to the ceiling, and said in a tone of great pity,—

“At least, let me make him give you a deed of defeasance.”

“Very well, sir.”

This was done, but in such carefully guarded terms, that even the most exquisite susceptibility on the part of Maxime could not have been hurt. It was five o'clock, when the power-of-attorney and the deed were signed, and the two friends left the worthy notary's office. It was too late now for Daniel to write to Henrietta to send him for that same evening the key to the little garden-gate; but he wrote to get it for the next evening.

After that, having dined with M. de Brevan, he went all over Paris in search of the thousand little things which are necessary for such a long and perilous voyage. He came home late, and was fortunate enough to fall asleep as soon as he had lain down. The next morning he breakfasted in his rooms, for fear of being out of the house when they should bring him the key.

It came towards one o'clock. It was brought by a large girl, nearly thirty years old, with a cross expression of face, and eyes more than modestly seeking the ground, and with narrow lips which seemed to be perpetually engaged in reciting prayers. This was Clarissa, whom Henrietta considered the safest of her waiting-women, and whom she had taken into her confidence.

"Miss Henrietta," she said to Daniel, "has given me this key and this letter for you, sir. She expects an answer."

Daniel tore the envelope, and read,—

"Take care, O my darling friend! to resort to this dangerous expedient which we ought to reserve for the last extremity. Is what you have to tell me really so important as you say? I can hardly believe it; and yet I send you the key. Tell Clarissa the precise hour at which you will be here."

Alas! the poor girl had no idea of the terrible news that was in store for her.

"Request Miss Henrietta," said Daniel to the maid, "to expect me at seven o'clock."

Sure now of seeing Henrietta, Daniel slipped the key in his pocket, and hurried away. He had only a short afternoon to himself, and there were still a thousand things to get, and countless preparations to make.

At his notary's, where he went first, he found the papers ready; all the formalities had been fulfilled. But, at the moment when the deed was placed before him, the worthy lawyer said in a prophetic voice,—

“M. Champcey, take care, reflect! I call that tempting a man pretty strongly when you hand over to him fifty thousand dollars the day before you start on a long and dangerous expedition.”

“Ah! What matters my fortune, if I only see my Henrietta again?”

The notary looked discouraged.

“Ah! if there is a woman in the affair, I have nothing more to say.”

It was as well. The next moment Daniel had forgotten him and his sombre presentiments.

Seated in M. de Brevan's little sitting-room, he was handing over his deeds and papers to his faithful confidant, explaining to him how he might make the most of the different parcels of land which he owned; how certain woods might be sold together; how, on the other hand, a large farm, now held by one tenant, might be advantageously divided into small lots, and sold at auction.

M. de Brevan did not look so pale now. He had recovered his self-possession, and laid aside his usual reserve in order to show himself all eagerness for his friend.

He declared that he would see to it that his friend Daniel should not be robbed. He intended, therefore, to go himself to Anjou to call upon those who were likely to purchase, and to be present at the sale. In his opinion, it would be wiser to sell piecemeal, without hurry. If money was needed, why, one could always get it at the bank.

Daniel was deeply touched by the devotion of his friend, whose intense selfishness he had noticed but too often. Nor was this all. Capable of the greatest sacrifices where Daniel's interests were at stake, M. de Brevan had formed a grand resolution. He proposed to overcome his aversion to Miss Brandon, and to seek, immediately after her marriage, an introduction at Count Ville-Handry's palace, for the purpose of going there constantly. He

might have to play a disagreeable part, he admitted; but he would thus be enabled to see Miss Henrietta frequently; he would hear every thing that happened, and be at hand whenever she should need advice or assistance.

“Dear Maxime,” repeated Daniel, “dear, excellent friend, how can I ever thank you for all you are doing for me!”

As the day before, they dined together at one of the restaurants on the boulevard; and after dinner M. de Brevan insisted upon accompanying his friend back to Count Ville-Handry’s house. As they reached it long before the appointed hour, they walked up and down on the sidewalk which runs along the wall of the immense park belonging to the palace. It was a cold but perfectly clear night. There was not a cloud in the sky, no mist nor haze; and the moon was shining so brightly, that one could have read by its light.

In the meantime seven o’clock struck at a neighboring convent.

“Come, courage, my friend!” said M. de Brevan.

And, pressing his hand once more cordially, he walked off rapidly in the direction of the Invalides.

Daniel had not answered a word. Terribly excited, he had drawn near the small door, examining anxiously all the surroundings. The street was deserted. But he trembled so violently, that for a moment he thought he would never be able to turn the key in the rusty lock. At last he succeeded in opening it, and he slipped into the garden.

No one there. He was the first on the spot.

Looking for some dark place under the tall trees, he hid himself there, and waited. It seemed to him a century. He had counted sixty by the beating of his pulse ever so many times, and was beginning to be very anxious, when at last he heard some dry branches crackling under rapid footsteps. A shadow passed between the trees. He went forward, and Henrietta was standing before him.

“What is it now, great God!” she said anxiously. “Clarissa said you looked so pale and undone, that I have been terribly frightened.”

Daniel had come to the conclusion that the plain truth would be less cruel than the most skilful precautions.

“I have been ordered on active service,” he replied, “and I must be on board ship the day after tomorrow.”

And then, without concealing any thing, he told her all he had suffered since the day before. Miss Ville-Handry felt as if she had been stunned by a crushing blow. She was leaning against a tree. Did she even hear Daniel? Yes; for, suddenly rousing herself, she said,—

“You will not obey! It is impossible for you to obey!”

“Henrietta, my honor is at stake.”

“Ah, what does it matter?”

He was about to reply; but she continued in a broken voice,—

“You will certainly not go when you have heard me. You think I am strong, brave, and capable to breast the storm? You are mistaken. I was only drawing upon your energy, Daniel. I am a child, full of daring as long as it rests on its mother’s knee, but helpless as soon as it feels that it is left to itself; I am only a woman, Daniel; I am weak.”

The unhappy man felt his strength leaving him; he could no longer bear the restraint which he had imposed upon himself.

“You insist upon sending me off in utter despair?” he asked her. “Ah, I have hardly courage enough for myself!”

She interrupted him with a nervous laugh, and said in bitter sarcasm,—

“It would be courage to stay, to despise public opinion.”

And, as any thing appeared to her preferable to such a separation, she added,—

“Listen! If you will stay, I will yield. Let us go together to my father, and I will tell him that I have overcome my aversion to Miss Brandon. I will ask him to present me to her; I will humble myself before her.”

“That is impossible, Henrietta.”

She bent towards him, joining her hands; and in a suppliant voice she repeated,—

“Stay, I beseech you, in the name of our happiness! If you have ever loved me, if you love me now, stay!”

Daniel had foreseen this heartrending scene; but he had vowed, that, if his heart should break, he would have the fortitude to resist Henrietta’s prayers and tears.

“If I were weak enough to give way now, Henrietta,” he said, “you would despise me before the month is over; and I, desperate at having to drag out a life of disgrace, would blow out my brains with a curse on you.”

With her arms hanging listlessly by her side, her hands crossed behind her, Miss Ville-Handry stood there motionless, like a statue. She felt in her heart that Daniel’s resolution was not to be shaken.

Then he said in a gentle voice,—

“I am going, Henrietta; but I leave you a friend of mine,—a true and noble friend, who will watch over you. You have heard me speak of him often,—Maxime de Brevan. He knows my wishes. Whatever may happen, consult him. Ah! I should leave more cheerfully if you would promise me to trust this faithful friend, to listen to his advice, and to follow his directions.”

“I promise you, Daniel, I will obey him.”

But a rustling of the dry leaves interrupted them.

They turned round. A man was cautiously approaching them.

“My father!” cried Henrietta.

And, pushing Daniel towards the gate, she begged him to flee.

To remain would only have been to risk a painful explanation, insults, perhaps even a personal collision. Daniel understood that but too well.

“Farewell,” he said to Henrietta, “farewell! Tomorrow you will receive a letter from me.”

And he escaped, but not so promptly that he should not have heard the count’s angry voice, as he said,—

“Ah, ah! Is this the virtuous young lady who dares to insult Miss Sarah?”

As soon as Daniel had locked the door again, he listened for a moment, hoping that he might hear something of importance. But he could only make out a few indistinct exclamations, then nothing, nothing more.

It was all over now. He would have to sail without seeing Henrietta again, without enjoying that bitter happiness of holding her once more in his arms. And yet he had told her nothing of all he had to tell her; he had not spoken to her of half his recommendations, nor given her a thousandth part of his tender farewells.

How had they been surprised? How came it about that the count had stayed at home, instead of hurrying off immediately after dinner, as was his custom? Why should he have inquired after his daughter, he who generally took no more trouble about her than if she had not existed?

“Ah, we have been betrayed!” thought the unhappy man.

By whom? By that unpleasant maid evidently, whom he had seen that morning; by that very Clarissa in whom Henrietta put such confidence. If that was so,—and it was but too probable,—to whom should he send his letters hereafter? Here, again, he saw himself reduced to Maxime de Brevan as the only one who could convey news from him to Henrietta. Ah! he recognized but too clearly the execrable but most cunning policy of Miss Brandon.

“The wretch!” he swore; “the infamous woman!”

Wrath, mad wrath, set his brains on fire. And he could do nothing against that woman!

“But she does not stand alone!” he suddenly exclaimed. “There is a man there who shelters her under his responsibility,—Sir Thorn!”

M. Elgin might be insulted; he might be struck in the face, and thus be compelled to fight.

And, without considering this absurd plan, he hurried to Circus Street. Although it was barely eight o'clock, Miss Brandon's house looked as if everybody were asleep. He rang the bell, however; and, when a servant came to the door, he inquired,—

"M. Thomas Elgin?"

"M. Elgin is absent," replied the servant.

"At what hour will he be back?"

"He is not coming home to-night."

And whether he had received special instructions, or was only acting upon general orders, he added,—

"Mrs. Brian is at the theatre; but Miss Brandon is at home."

Daniel's wrath changed into a kind of cold fury.

"They expected me," he thought.

And he hesitated. Should he see Miss Brandon? But for what end? He was just turning away, when a sudden thought occurred to him. Why should he not talk with her, come to an understanding, and perhaps make a bargain with her?

"Show me to Miss Brandon's room," he said to the servant.

She sat, as she always did when left alone in the house, in the little boudoir, where Daniel had already once been carried by her. Dressed in a long dressing-wrapper of pale-blue cashmere, her hair scarcely taken up at all, she was reading, reclining on a sofa.

As the door opened, she raised herself carelessly a little, and, without turning around, asked,—

"Who is that?"

But, when the servant announced the name of M. Champcey, she rose with a bound, almost terrified, dropping the book which she had in her hand.

“You!” she murmured as soon as the servant had left. “Here, and of your own accord?”

Firmly resolved this time to remain master of his sensations, Daniel had stopped in the middle of the room, as stiff as a statue.

“Don’t you know, madam, what brings me here? All your combinations have succeeded admirably; you triumph, and we surrender.”

She looked at him in perfect amazement, stammering—

“I do not understand you. I do not know what you mean.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and continued in an icy tone,—

“Do me the honor to think that I am not altogether a fool. I have seen the letter which you have sent to the minister, signed with my name. I have held that masterpiece of forgery in my hand and know now how you free yourself of my presence!”

Miss Brandon interrupted him with an angry gesture,—

“Then it is really so! He has done it; he has dared do it!”

“Who is this he? M. Thomas Elgin, no doubt?”

“No, not he; another man.”

“Name him!”

She hesitated, hung her head, and then said with a great effort,—

“I knew they wished to separate us; and, without knowing precisely what means they would employ, I suspected them. And, when I came to you the other day, I wanted to say to you, ‘Have a care!’ and you, M. Champcey, you drove me from you.”

He looked upon her with such an ironical smile that she broke off, and cried,—

“Ah, he does not believe me! Tell me that you do not believe me!”

He bowed ceremoniously, and replied in his gravest manner,—

“I believe, Miss Brandon, that you desire to become Countess Ville- Handry; and you clear everything out of your path that can hinder you in your plans.”

She was about to answer; but he did not give her time, and continued,—

“Mark, I pray, that I make no charges. Come, let us play openly. You are too sensible and too practical to hate us—Miss Henrietta and myself—from gratuitous and purely platonic motives. You hate us because we are in your way. How are we in your way? Tell me; and, if you will promise to help us, we—Henrietta and I—pledge ourselves not to stand in your way.”

Miss Brandon looked as if she could not trust her ears.

“But, sir, this is a bargain, I should say, which you propose?”

“Yes, indeed! And, that there may be no misunderstanding, I will mention the precise terms: if you will swear to be kind to Henrietta during my absence, to protect her against violence on the part of her father, and never to force her to act contrary to her sentiments for me, I will give you, in return, my word that I shall give up to you, without dispute and without reserve, the whole immense fortune possessed by Count Ville-Handry.”

Succumbing to her grief, Miss Brandon seemed to be almost fainting; and big tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Have I not yet been humiliated sufficiently?” she said in a low voice. “Must you add shame to shame? Daniel, you think I am very mean.”

And, checking the sobs which impeded her words, she went on,—

“And yet I cannot blame you for it, I cannot. No, you are right! Every thing is against me; every thing bears witness against me. Yes, I must appear a very wicked girl in your eyes. If you knew the truth, however, Daniel—if I could, if I dared, tell you all!”

She drew nearer to him, all trembling; and then continued in a still lower tone of voice, as if she feared to be overheard,—

“Do you not understand yet that I am no longer my own? Unfortunate as I am, they have taken me, bound me, fettered me. I have no longer the right to have a will of my own. If they say, ‘Do this!’ I must needs do it. What a life I lead! Great God! Ah, if you had been willing, Daniel! If you were willing even now!”

She became excited almost to exaltation; her eyes, moist with tears, shone with matchless splendor; passing blushes colored her face; and her voice had strange, weird vibrations.

Was she forgetting herself? Was she really about to betray her secret? or was she merely inventing a new falsehood? Why should he not let her go on?

“That is no answer, Miss Brandon,” at last said Daniel. “Will you promise me to protect Henrietta?”

“Do you really love her so dearly, your Henrietta?”

“Better than life!”

Miss Brandon turned as white as the lace on her dress; a flash of indignation shot through her eyes; and, drying her tears, she said curtly,—

“Oh!”

Then Daniel replied,—

“You will give me no answer, madam?”

And, as she persisted in her silence, he resumed,—

“Very well, then, I understand. You declare open war. Be it so! Only listen to me carefully. I am setting out on a dangerous expedition, and you hope I shall never return. Undeceive yourself, Miss Brandon; I shall return. With a passion like mine, with so much love in one’s heart, and so much hatred, a man can defy every thing. The murderous climate will not touch me; and, if I had ten rifle-balls in my body, I should still have the strength to return, and hold you to an account for what you have done to Henrietta. And if you have touched a hair on her head, if you have made her shed a single tear, by all that is holy, it will bring ill luck to you, and ill luck to others!”

He was going to leave her, when a thought struck him.

“I ought to tell you, moreover,” he added, “that I leave a faithful friend behind me; and, if the count or his daughter should die very suddenly, the coroner will be informed. And now, madam, farewell—or, rather, till we meet again!”

At eight o'clock on the evening of the next day, after having left in M. de Brevan's hands a long letter for Henrietta, and after having given him his last instructions, Daniel took his seat in the train which was to take him to his new post.

CHAPTER 13

It was a week after Daniel's departure, a Wednesday, and about half- past eleven o'clock.

Some thirty carriages, the most elegant, by all means, that Paris could boast of, were standing alongside of the Church of St. Clothilda. In the pretty little square before the building, some hundred and fifty or two hundred idlers were waiting with open mouths. The passers-by, noticing the crowd, went up and asked,—

"What is going on?"

"A wedding," was the answer.

"And a grand wedding, apparently."

"Why, the grandest thing you ever saw. It is a nobleman, and an immensely rich one, who is going to be married,—Count Ville-Handry. He marries an American lady. They have been in the church now for some time, and they will soon come out again."

Under the porch a dozen men, in the orthodox black costume, with yellow kid gloves, and white cravats showing under their overcoats, evidently men belonging to the wedding-party, were chatting merrily while they were waiting for the end of the ceremony. If they were amused, they hardly showed it; for some made an effort to hide their yawning, while others kept up a broken conversation, when a small *coupe* drove up, and stopped at the gate.

"Gentlemen," said a young man, "I announce M. de Brevan."

It was he really.

He stepped leisurely out of his carriage, and came up in his usual phlegmatic manner. He knew the majority, perhaps, of the young men in the crowd; and so he commenced at once shaking hands all around, and then said in an easy tone of voice,—

“Who has seen the bride?”

“I!” replied an old beau, whose perpetual smile displayed all the thirty-two teeth he owed to the dentist.

“Well, what do you think of her?”

“She is always sublime in her beauty, my dear. When she walked up the aisle to kneel down at the altar, a murmur of admiration followed her all the way. Upon my word of honor, I thought they would applaud.”

This was too much enthusiasm. M. de Brevan cut it short, asking,—

“And Count Ville-Handry?”

“Upon my word,” replied the old beau ironically, “the good count can boast of a valet who knows almost as much as Rachel, the famous English enameller. At a little distance you would have sworn that he was sixteen years old, and that he was going, not to be married, but to be confirmed.”

“And how did he look?”

“Restless, I think.”

“He might well be,” observed a stout, elderly gentleman, who was said not to be very happily married.

Everybody laughed; but a very young man, a mere youth, who did not catch the joke, said,—

“Why so?”

A man of about thirty years, a perfect model of elegance, whom the others called, according to the degree of intimacy which they could claim, either “Your Grace,” or “Duke” simply replied,—

“Because, my dear viscount, Miss Brandon is one of those ladies who never are married. They are courted; they are worshipped; they make us commit a thousand follies for their sakes; they allow us to ruin ourselves, and, finally, to blow our brains out for them, all right! But to bear our name, never!”

“It is true,” said Brevan, “that they tell a number of stories about her; but it is all gossip. However”—

“You certainly would not ask,” replied the duke, “that I should prove her to have been brought before a police-court, or to have escaped from the penitentiary?”

And, without permitting himself to be interrupted, he went on,—

“Good society in France, they say, is very exclusive. It does not deserve that reputation. Except, perhaps, a score of houses, where old traditions are still preserved, all other houses are wide open to the first-comer, man or woman, who drives up in a carriage. And the number of such first-comers is prodigiously large. Where do they come from? No one knows. From Russia, from Turkey, from America, from Hungary, from very far, from everywhere, from below, I do not count the impudent fellows who are still muddy from the gutter in which they have been lying. How do all these people live? That is a mystery. But they do live, and they live well. They have, or at least seem to have, money; and they shine, they intrigue, they conspire, they make believe, and they extort. So that I verily believe all this high-life society, by dint of helping one another, of pushing and crowding in, will, in the end, be master of all. You may say that I am not in the crowd. Very true. I willingly shake hands with the workmen who work for me, and who earn their living worthily; but I do not shake hands with these ambiguous personages in yellow kids, who have no title but their impudence, and no means of living but their underhand intrigues.”

He addressed himself apparently to no one, following, with his absent-minded glance, the crowd in the garden; and yet, by his peculiar manner, you would have known that he was speaking at some one among the listeners.

However, it was evident that he had no success, and that his doctrine seemed to be utterly out of season, and almost ridiculous. A young man with a delicate black mustache, and extremely well dressed, even turned to his neighbor, and asked,—

“Who is our friend, the preacher?”

“What! don’t you know him?” replied the other.

“That is the Duke of Champdoce, you know, who has married a princess of Mussidan. Quite an original.”

M. de Brevan, however, had remained perfectly impassive, and now said,—

“At all events, I suppose it was not altogether a question of interest which made Miss Brandon marry the count.”

“Why not?”

“Because she is immensely rich.”

“Pshaw!”

An old gentleman came up, and said,—

“She must needs be perfectly disinterested; for I have it from the count himself that none of the property is to be settled upon Miss Brandon.”

“That certainly is marvellously disinterested.”

Having said what he meant to say, the duke had entered the church; and the old beau now took the word.

“The only thing that is clear to me in this matter is, that I think I know the person whom this wedding will not please particularly.”

“Whom do you mean?”

“Count Ville-Handry’s daughter, a young girl, eighteen years old, and wondrously pretty. Just imagine! Besides, I have looked for her all over the church, and she is not there.”

“She is not present at the wedding,” replied the old gentleman, the friend of Count Ville-Handry, “because she was suddenly taken ill.”

“So they say,” interposed the young man; “but the fact is, that a friend of mine has just seen her driving out in her carriage in full dress.”

“That can hardly be so.”

“My friend was positive. She intended this pretty piece of scandal as a wedding-present for her stepmother.”

M. de Brevan shrugged his shoulders, and said in an undertone,—

“Upon my word, I should not like to stand in the count’s shoes.”

As a faithful echo of the gossip that was going on in society, this conversation, carried on in broken sentences, under the porch of St. Clothilda, made it quite clear that public opinion was decidedly in favor of Miss Brandon. It would have been surprising if it should have been otherwise. She triumphed; and the world is always on the side of the victor. That Duke of Champdoce, an original, was the only one there who was disposed to remember the past; the others had forgotten it. The brilliancy of her success was even reflected on those who belonged to her; and a young man who copied to exaggeration English fashions was just singing the praises of M. Thomas Elgin and Mrs. Brian, when a great commotion was noticed under the porch.

People came out, and said,—

“It is all over. The wedding-guests are in the vestry now to sign their names.”

The conversation stopped at once. The old beau alone exclaimed,—

“Gentlemen, if we wish to present our respects to the newly-married couple, we must make haste.”

And with these words he hurried into the church, followed by all the others, and soon reached the vestry, which was too small to hold all the guests invited by Count Ville-Handry. The parish register had been placed upon a small table; and every one approached, as his turn came, taking off his gloves before seizing the pen. Fronting the door, and leaning against one of the cupboards in which the holy vessels are kept, stood Miss Brandon, now Countess Ville-Handry, having at her side grim Mrs. Brian, and tall, stiff M. Elgin.

Her admirers had exaggerated nothing. In her white bridal costume she looked amazingly beautiful; and her whole person exhaled a perfume of innocence and ingenuous purity.

She was surrounded by eight or ten young persons, who overwhelmed her with congratulations and compliments. She replied with a slightly tremulous voice, and casting down her eyes with the long, silky eyelashes. Count Ville-Handry stood in the centre of the room, swelling with almost comic happiness; and at every moment, in replying to his friends, used the words, "My wife," like a sweet morsel which he rolled on his tongue.

Still a careful observer might have noticed underneath his victorious airs a trace of almost painful restraint. From time to time his face darkened as one of those unlucky, awkward people, who turn up everywhere, asked him,—

"I hope Miss Henrietta is not complaining much? How very sorry she must be to be detained at home!"

It is true, that, among these unlucky ones, there were not a few malicious ones. Nobody was ignorant that something unpleasant had happened in the count's family. They had suspected something from the beginning of the ceremony.

For the count had hardly knelt down by Miss Brandon's side, on a velvet cushion, when a servant wearing his livery had come up, and whispered a few words in his ear. The guests who were nearest had seen him turn pale, and utter an expression of furious rage.

What had the servant told him?

It became soon known, thanks to the Countess Bois, who went about telling everybody with inexhaustible volubility, that she had just met Miss Ville-Handry in the street.

When the last name had been signed, nobody was, therefore, surprised at seeing Count Ville-Handry give his arm to his wife, and hand her hurriedly to her carriage,—a magnificent state-carriage. He had invited some twenty people, former friends of his, to a great wedding-breakfast; but he seemed to have forgotten them. And once in his carriage, alone with Mrs. Brian, M.

Elgin, and the young countess, he broke forth in incoherent imprecations and absurd threatenings.

When they reached the palace, he did not wait for the coachman to drive as usually around the yard, but jumped out, and, rushing up to the vestibule, cried out,—

“Ernest! send Ernest here!”

Ernest was his own valet, the clever artist to whom he was indebted for the roses of his complexion. As soon as he appeared, he asked,—

“Where is the young lady?”

“Gone out.”

“When?”

“Immediately after you, sir.”

The young countess, Mrs. Brian, and M. Elgin, had, in the meantime, come up, and gone into the room in the lower story, where this scene took place.

“Do you hear that?” he asked them.

Then, turning again to the valet, he asked,—

“How did it happen?”

“Very naturally. The gates had not been closed behind your carriage, sir, when the young lady rang the bell. They went up to see what she wanted, and she ordered the landau to be brought round. She was told very respectfully, that all three coachmen were out, and that there was no one there to drive her. ‘If that be so,’ she answered, ‘I want you to run and get me a hired carriage.’ And, when the servant to whom she gave the order hesitated, she added, ‘If you do not go instantly, I shall go myself.’”

The count trembled with rage.

“And then?” he asked, seeing that the man was hesitating.

“Then the servant was frightened, and did what she wanted.”

“He is dismissed, the fool!” exclaimed Count Ville-Handry.

“But allow me to say,” commenced Ernest.

“No! Let his wages be paid. And you go on.”

Without showing any embarrassment, the valet shrugged his shoulders, and continued in a lazy tone,—

“Then the hack came into the court-yard; and we saw the young lady come down in a splendid toilet, such as we have never seen her wear before,—not pretty exactly, but so conspicuous, that it must have attracted everybody’s attention. She settled herself coolly on the cushions, while we looked at her, utterly amazed; and, when she was ready, she said, ‘Ernest, you will tell my father that I shall not be back for breakfast. I have a good many visits to make; and, as the weather is fine, I shall afterwards go to the Bois de Boulogne.’ Thereupon the gates were opened, and off they went. It was then that I took the liberty to send you word, sir.”

In all his life Count Ville-Handry had not been so furious. The veins in his neck began to swell; and his eyes became bloodshot, as if he had been threatened with a fit of apoplexy.

“You ought to have kept her from going out,” he said hoarsely. “Why did you not prevent her? You ought to have made her go back to her room, use force if necessary, lock her up, bind her.”

“You had given no orders, sir.”

“You ought to have required no orders to do your duty. To let a mad woman run about! an impudent girl whom I caught the other day in the garden with a man!”

He cried out so loud, that his voice was heard in the adjoining room, where the invited guests were beginning to assemble. The unhappy man! He disgraced his own child. The young countess at once came up to him and said,—

“I beseech you, my dear friend, be calm!”

“No, this must end; and I mean to punish the wicked girl.”

“I beseech you, my dear count, do not destroy the happiness of the first day of our married life. Henrietta is only a child; she did not know what she was doing.”

Mrs. Brian was not of the same opinion. She declared,—

“The count is right. The conduct of this young lady is perfectly shocking.”

Then Sir Thorn interrupted her, saying,—

“Ah, ah! Brian, where is our bargain? Was it not understood that we would have nothing to do with the count’s private affairs?”

Thus every one took up at once his assigned part. The countess advocated forbearance; Mrs. Brian advised discipline; and Sir Thorn was in favor of silent impartiality.

Besides, they easily succeeded in calming the count. But, after such a scene, the wedding breakfast could not be very merry. The guests, who had heard nearly all, exchanged strange looks with each other.

“The count’s daughter,” they thought, “and a lover? That can hardly be!”

In vain did the count try to look indifferent; in vain did the young countess display all her rare gifts. Everybody was embarrassed; nobody could summon up a smile; and every five minutes the conversation gave out. At half-past four o’clock, the last guest had escaped, and the count remained alone with his new family. It was growing dark, and they were bringing in the lamps, when the rolling of carriage-wheels was heard on the sand in the court-yard. The count rose, turning pale.

“Here she comes!” he said. “Here is my daughter!”

It was Henrietta.

How could a young girl, usually so reserved, and naturally so timid, make up her mind to cause such scandal? Because the most timid people are precisely the boldest on certain occasions. Forced to abandon their nature, they do not reason, and do not calculate, and, losing all self-possession, rush blindly into danger, impelled by a kind of madness resembling that of sheep when they knock their heads against the walls of their stable.

Now, for nearly a fortnight, the count's daughter had been upset by so many and so violent emotions, that she was no longer herself. The insults which her father heaped upon her when he surprised her with Daniel had unsettled her mind completely.

For Count Ville-Handry, acting under a kind of overexcitement, had that day lost all self-control, and forgot himself so far as to treat his daughter as no gentleman would have treated his child while in his senses, and that in the presence of his servants!

And then, what tortures she had had to endure in the week that followed! She had declared that she would not be present at the reading of the marriage-contract, nor at the ceremonies of the civil marriage, nor at church; and her father had tried to make her change her intentions. Hence every day a new lamentable scene, as the decisive moment drew nearer.

If the count had at least used a little discretion, if he had tried the powers of persuasion, or sought to touch his daughter's heart by speaking to her of herself, of her future, of her happiness, of her peace!

But no! He never came to her room without a new insult, thinking of nothing, as he acknowledged himself, but of sparing Miss Brandon's feelings, and of saving her all annoyance. The consequence was, that his threats, so far from moving Henrietta, had only served to strengthen her in her determination.

The marriage-contract had been read and signed at six o'clock, just before a grand dinner. At half-past five, the count had once more come to his daughter's room. Without telling her any thing of it, he had ordered her dressmaker to send her several magnificent dresses; and they were lying about now, spread out upon chairs.

"Dress yourself," he said in a tone of command, "and come down!"

She, the victim of that kind of nervous exaltation which makes martyrdom appear preferable to yielding, replied obstinately,—

"No, I shall not come down."

She did not care for any subterfuge or excuse; she did not even pretend to be unwell; she said resolutely—

“I will not!”

And he, finding himself unable to overcome this resistance, maddened and enraged, broke out in blasphemies and insane threats.

A chambermaid, who had been attracted by the loud voice, had come, and, putting her ear to the keyhole, had heard every thing; and the same evening she told her friends how the count had struck his daughter, and that she had heard the blows.

Henrietta had always denied the charge.

Nevertheless, it was but too true, that, in consequence of these last insults, she had come to the determination to make her protest as public as she could by showing herself to all Paris while her father was married at St. Clothilda to Miss Brandon. The poor girl had no one to whom she could confide her griefs, no one to tell her that all the disgrace would fall back upon herself.

So she had carried out her plan bravely. Putting on a very showy costume, so as to attract as much attention as possible, she had spent the day in driving about to all the places where she thought she would meet most of her acquaintances. Night alone had compelled her to return, and she felt broken to pieces, exhausted, upset by unspeakable anguish of soul, but upheld by the absurd idea that she had done her duty and shown herself worthy of Daniel.

She had just alighted, and was about to pay the coachman, when the count's valet came up, and said to her in an almost disrespectful tone of voice,—

“My master has ordered me to tell you to come to him as soon as you should come home.”

“Where is my father?”

“In the large reception-room.”

“Alone?”

“No. The countess, Mrs. Brian, and M. Elgin are with him.”

“Very well. I am coming.”

Gathering all her courage, and looking whiter and colder than the marble of the statues in the vestibule, she went to the reception-room, opened the door, and entered stiffly.

“Here you are!” exclaimed Count Ville-Handry, restored to a certain degree of calmness by the very excess of his wrath,—“here you are!”

“Yes, father.”

“Where have you been?”

She had at a glance taken in the whole room; and at the sight of the new countess, and those whom she called her accomplices, all her resentment arose. She smiled haughtily, and said carelessly,—

“I have been at the Bois de Boulogne. In the morning I went out to make some purchases; later, knowing that the Duchess of Champdoce is a little unwell, and does not go out, I went to lunch with her; after that, as the weather was so fine”—

Count Ville-Handry could endure it no longer.

Seizing his daughter by the wrists, he lifted her bodily, and, dragging her up to the Countess Sarah, he hurled out,—

“On your knees, unhappy child! on your knees, and ask the best and noblest of women to pardon you for all these insults!”

“You hurt me terribly, father,” said the young girl coldly.

But the countess had already thrown herself between them.

“For Heaven’s sake, madam,” she said, “spare your father!”

And, as Henrietta measured her from head to foot with an insulting glance, she went on,—

“Dear count, don’t you see that your violence is killing me?”

Promptly Count Ville-Handry let his daughter go, and, drawing back, he said,—

“Thank her, thank this angel of goodness who intercedes in your behalf! But have a care! my patience is at an end. There are such things as houses of correction for rebellious children and perverse daughters.”

She interrupted him by a gesture, and exclaimed with startling energy,—

“Be it so, father! Choose among all these houses the very strictest, and send me there. Whatever I may have to suffer there, it will be better than being here, as long as I see in the place of my mother that—woman!”

“Wretch!” howled the count.

He was suffocating. By a violent effort he tore off his cravat; and, conscious that he was no longer master of himself, he cried to his daughter,—

“Leave me, leave me! or I answer for nothing.” She hesitated a moment.

Then, casting upon the countess one more look full of defiance, she slowly went out of the room.

CHAPTER 14

“Well, I am sure the count can boast that he has had a curious wedding-day.”

This was the way the servants spoke at the moment when Henrietta left the reception-room. She heard it; and without knowing whether they approved her conduct, or laughed at it, she felt gratified, so eager is passion for encouragement from anywhere.

But she had not yet gone half-way up the stairs which led to her own rooms, when she was held at the place by the sound of all the bells of the house, which had been set in motion by a furious hand. She bent over the balusters to listen. The servants were rushing about; the vestibule resounded with hurried steps; and she distinguished the imperious voice of M. Ernest, the count's valet, who called out,—

“Salts, quick! Fresh water. The countess has a nervous attack.”

A bitter smile curled Henrietta's lips.

“At least,” she said to herself, “I shall have poisoned this woman's joy.” And, fearing to be caught thus listening, she went up stairs.

But, when she was alone once more, the poor girl failed not to recognize the utter futility of her fancied triumph. Whom had she wounded, after all? Her father.

However unwell the countess might be to-night,—and perhaps she was not really unwell,—she would certainly be well again in the morning; and then what would be the advantage of the scandal she had attempted in order to ruin her? Now Henrietta saw it very clearly,—now, when it was too late.

Worse than that! She fancied that what she had done to-day pledged her for the future. The road upon which she had started evidently led nowhere. Never mind, it seemed to her miserable cowardice to shrink from going on.

Rising with the sun, she was deliberating on what weak point she might make her next attack, when there came a knock at the door, and Clarissa, her own maid, entered.

“Here is a letter for you, miss,” she said. “I have received it this moment, in an envelope addressed to me.”

Henrietta examined the letter for a long time before opening it, studying the handwriting, which she did not know. Who could write to her, and in this way, unless it was Maxime de Brevan, to whom Daniel had begged her to intrust herself, and who, so far, had given no sign of life of himself?

It was M. de Brevan who wrote thus,—

“Madam,—Like all Paris, I also have heard of your proud and noble protest on the day of your father’s unfortunate marriage. Egotists and fools will perhaps blame you. But you may despise them; for all the best men are on your side. And my dear Daniel, if he were here, would approve and admire your courage, as I do myself.”

She drew a full breath, as if her heart had been relieved of a heavy burden.

Daniel’s friend approved her conduct. This was enough to stifle henceforth the voice of reason, and to make her disregard every idea of prudence. The whole letter of M. de Brevan was, moreover, nothing but a long and respectful admonition to resist desperately.

Farther on he wrote,—

“At the moment of taking the train, Daniel handed me a letter, in which he expresses his innermost thoughts. With a sagacity worthy of such a heart, he foresees and solves in advance all the difficulties by which your step-mother will no doubt embarrass you hereafter. This letter is too precious to be intrusted to the mail, I shall, therefore, get myself introduced at your father’s house before the end of the week, and I shall have the honor to put that letter into your own hands.”

And again,—

“I shall have an opportunity, tomorrow, to send Daniel news from here. If you wish to write to him, send me your letter to-day, Rue Laffitte, No. 62, and I will enclose it in mine.”

Finally, there came a postscript in these words,—

“Mistrust, above all, M. Thomas Elgin.”

This last recommendation caused Henrietta particular trouble, and made her feel all kinds of vague and terrible apprehensions.

“Why should I mistrust him,” she said to herself, “more than the others?”

But a more pleasing anxiety soon came to her assistance. What? Here was an opportunity to send Daniel news promptly and safely, and she was running the risk, by her delays, of losing the chance? She hastened to dress; and, sitting down before her little writing-table, she went to work communicating to her only friend on earth all her sufferings since he had so suddenly left her, her griefs, her resentments, her hopes.

It was eleven o’clock when she had finished, having filled eight large pages with all she felt in her heart. As she was about to rise, she suddenly felt ill. Her knees gave way under her, and she felt as if every thing was trembling around her. What could this mean? she thought. And now only she remembered that she had eaten nothing since the day before.

“I must not starve myself,” she said almost merrily to herself. Her long chat with Daniel had evidently rekindled her hopes.

She rang the bell; and, when her maid appeared, she said,—

“Bring me some breakfast!”

Miss Ville-Handry occupied three rooms. The first, her sitting-room, opened upon the hall; on the right was her bed-chamber; and on the left a boudoir with her piano, her music, and her books. When Henrietta took her meals up stairs, which of late had happened quite often, she ate in the sitting-room.

She had gone in there, and was clearing the table of the albums and little trifles which were lying about, so as to hasten matters, when the maid reappeared with empty hands.

“Ah, miss!”

“Well?”

“The count has given orders not to take any thing up stairs.”

“That cannot be.”

But a mocking voice from without interrupted her, saying,—

“It is so!”

And immediately Count Ville-Handry appeared, already dressed, curled, and painted, bearing the appearance of a man who is about to enjoy his revenge.

“Leave us!” he said to the maid-servant.

And, as soon as Clarissa had left the room, he turned to Henrietta with these words,—

“Yes, indeed, my dear Henrietta, I have given strict orders not to bring you up any thing to eat. Why should you indulge such fancies? I ask you. Are you unwell? If you are, we will send for the doctor. If not, you will do me the favor to come down and take your meals in the dining-room with the family,—with the countess and myself, M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian.”

“But, father!”

“There is no father who could stand this. The time of weakness is past, and so is the time of passion; therefore, you will come down. Oh! whenever you feel disposed. You will, perhaps, pout a day, maybe two days; but hunger drives the wolf into the village; and on the third day we shall see you come down as soon as the bell rings. I have in vain appealed to your heart; you see I am forced to appeal to your stomach.”

Whatever efforts Henrietta might make to remain impassive, the tears would come into her eyes,—tears of shame and humiliation. Could this idea of starving her into obedience have originated with her father? No, he would never have thought of it! It was evidently a woman’s thought, and the result of bitter, savage hate.

Still the poor girl felt that she was caught; and her heart revolted at the ignominy of the means, and the certainty that she would be forced to yield. Her cruel imagination painted to her at once the exultation of the new countess, when she, the daughter of Count Ville-Handry, would appear in the dining-room, brought there by want, by hunger.

“Father,” she begged, “send me nothing but bread and water, but spare me that exposure.”

But, if the count was repeating a lesson, he had learned it well. His features retained their sardonic expression; and he said in an icy tone,—

“I have told you what I desire. You have heard it, and that is enough.”

He was turning to leave the room, when his daughter held him back.

“Father,” she said, “listen to me.”

“Well, what is it, now?”

“Yesterday you threatened to shut me up.”

“Well?”

“To-day it is I who beseech you to do so. Send me to a convent. However harsh and strict the rules may be, however sad life may be there, I will find there some relief for my sorrow, and I will bless you with all my heart.”

He only shrugged his shoulders over and over again; then he said,—

“A good idea! And from your convent you would at once write to everybody and everywhere, that my wife had turned you out of the house; that you had been obliged to escape from threats and bad treatment; you would repeat all the well-known elegies of the innocent young girl who is persecuted by a wicked stepmother. Not so, my dear, not so!”

The breakfast-bell, which was ringing below, interrupted him.

“You hear, Henrietta,” he said. “Consult your stomach; and, according to what it tells you, come down, or stay here.”

He went out, manifestly quite proud at having performed what he called an act of paternal authority, without vouchsafing a glance at his daughter, who had sunk back upon a chair; for she felt overcome, the poor child! by all the agony of her pride. It was all over: she could struggle no longer. People who would not shrink from such extreme measures in order to overcome her might resort to the last extremities. Whatever she could do, sooner or later she would have to succumb.

Hence—why might she not as well give way at once? She saw clearly, that, the longer she postponed it, the sweeter would be the victory to the countess, and the more painful would be the sacrifice to herself. Arming herself, therefore, with all her energy, she went down into the dining-room, where the others were already at table.

She had imagined that her appearance would be greeted by some insulting remark. Not at all. They seemed hardly to notice her. The countess, who had been talking, paused to say, “Good-morning, madam!” and then went on without betraying in her voice the slightest emotion.

Henrietta had even to acknowledge that they had been considerate. Her plate had not been put by her mother-in-law. A seat had been kept for her between Mrs. Brian and M. Elgin. She sat down, and, while eating, watched stealthily, and with all her powers of observation, these strangers who were henceforth the masters of her destiny, and whom she now saw for the first time; for yesterday she had hardly perceived them.

She was at once struck, painfully struck, with the dazzling, marvellous beauty of Countess Sarah, although she had been shown her photograph by her father, and ought thus to have been prepared. It was evident that the young countess had barely taken time to put on a wrapper before coming down to breakfast. Her complexion was more animated than usually. She exhibited all the touching confusion of a young bride, and was constantly more or less embarrassed.

Henrietta comprehended but too well the influence such a woman was likely to have over an old man who had fallen in love with her. It made her tremble. But grim Mrs. Brian appeared to her hardly less formidable. She could read nothing in her dull, heavy eye but cold wickedness; nothing in her

lean, yellow face but an implacable will; all the wrinkles seemed to be permanently graven in wax.

She thought, after all, the least to be feared was tall, stiff M. Thomas Elgin. Seated by her, he had shown her discreetly some little attentions; and, when she observed him more closely, she discovered in his eyes something like commiseration.

“And yet,” she thought, “it was against him that M. de Brevan warned me particularly.”

But breakfast was over. Henrietta rose, and having bowed, without saying a word, was going back to her room when she met on the stairs some of the servants, who were carrying a heavy wardrobe. Upon inquiry she learned that, as Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian were hereafter to live in the palace, they were bringing up their furniture.

She shook her head sadly; but in her rooms a greater surprise was awaiting her. Three servants were hard at work taking down her furniture, under the direction of M. Ernest, the count’s valet.

“What are you doing there?” she asked, and “Who has permitted you?”

“We are only obeying the orders of the count, your father,” replied M. Ernest. “We are getting your rooms ready for Madam Brian.”

And, turning round to his colleagues, he said,—

“Go on, men! Take out that sofa; now!”

Overcome with surprise, Henrietta remained petrified where she was, looking at the servants as they went on with their work. What? These eager adventurers had taken possession of the palace, they invaded it, they reigned here absolutely, and that was not enough for them! They meant to take from her even the rooms she had occupied, she, the daughter of their dupe, the only heiress of Count Ville-Handry! This impudence seemed to her so monstrous, that unable to believe it, and yielding to a sudden impulse, she went back to the dining-room, and, addressing her father, said to him,—

“Is it really true, father, that you have ordered my furniture to be removed?”

“Yes, I have done so, my daughter. My architect will transform your three rooms into a large reception-room for Mrs. Brian, who had not space enough for”—

The young countess made a gesture of displeasure.

“I cannot understand,” she said, “how Aunt Brian can accept that.”

“I beg your pardon,” exclaimed the admirable lady, “this is done entirely without my consent.”

But the count interposed, saying,—

“Sarah, my darling, permit me to be sole judge in all the arrangements that concern my daughter.”

Count Ville-Handry’s accent was so firm as he said this, that one would have sworn the idea of dislodging Henrietta had sprung from his own brains. He went on,—

“I never act thoughtlessly, and always take time to mature my decisions. In this case I act from motives of the most ordinary propriety. Mrs. Brian is no longer young; my daughter is a mere child. If one of the two has to submit to some slight inconvenience, it is certainly my daughter.”

All of a sudden M. Elgin rose.

“I should leave,” he began.

Unfortunately the rest of the phrase was lost in an indistinct murmur.

He was no doubt at that moment recalling a promise he had made. And resolved not to interfere in the count’s family affairs, and, on the other hand, indignant at what he considered an odious abuse of power, he left the room abruptly. His looks, his physiognomy, his gestures, all betrayed these sentiments so clearly, that Henrietta was quite touched.

But Count Ville-Handry continued, after a moment’s surprise, saying,—

“Therefore, my daughter will hereafter live in the rooms formerly occupied by the companion of my—I mean of her mother. They are small, but more than sufficient for her. Besides, they have this advantage, that they can be

easily overlooked from one of our own rooms, my dear Sarah; and that is important when we have to deal with an imprudent girl, who has so sadly abused the liberty which she enjoyed, thanks to my blind confidence.”

What should she say? What could she reply?

If she had been alone with her father, she would certainly have defended herself; she would have tried to make him reconsider his decision; she would have besought him; she might have gone on her knees to him.

But here, in the presence of these two women, with the mocking eye of Countess Sarah upon her, it was impossible! Ah! she would have died a thousand times over rather than to give these miserable adventurers the joy and the satisfaction of a new humiliation.

“Let them crush me,” she said to herself; “they shall never hear me complain, or cry for mercy.”

And when her father, who had been quietly watching her, asked,—

“Well?”

“You shall be obeyed this very night,” she replied.

And by a kind of miracle of energy, she went out of the room calmly, her head on high; without having shed a tear.

But God knew what she suffered.

To give up those little rooms in which she had spent so many happy hours, where every thing recalled to her sweet memories, certainly that was no small grief: it was nothing however, in comparison with that frightful perspective of having to live under the wary eye of Countess Sarah, under lock and key.

They would not even leave her at liberty to weep. Her intolerable sufferings would not extort a sigh from her that the countess did not hear on the other side of the partition, and delight in.

She was thus harassing herself, when she suddenly remembered the letter which she had written to Daniel. If M. de Brevan was to have it that same

day, there was not a moment to lose. Already it was too late for the mail; and she would have to send it by a commissionaire.

She rang the bell, therefore, for Clarissa, her confidante, for the purpose of sending it to the Rue Laffitte. But, instead of Clarissa, one of the housemaids appeared, and said,—

“Your own maid is not in the house. Mrs. Brian has sent her to Circus Street. If I can do any thing for you”—

“No, I thank you!” replied Henrietta.

It seemed, then, that she counted for nothing any more in the house. She was not allowed to eat in her rooms; she was turned out of her own rooms; and the maid, long attached to her service, was taken from her. And here she was forced to submit to such humiliations without a chance of rebelling.

But time was passing; and every minute made it more difficult to let M. de Brevan have her letter in time for the mail.

“Well,” said Henrietta to herself, “I will carry it myself.”

And although she had, perhaps, in all her life not been more than twice alone in the street, she put on her bonnet, wrapped herself up in a cloak, and went down swiftly.

The concierge, a large man, very proud of his richly laced livery, was sitting before the little pavilion in which he lived, smoking, and reading his paper.

“Open the gates!” said Henrietta.

But the man, without taking his pipe out of his mouth, without even getting up from his seat, answered in a surly tone,—

“The count has sent me orders never to let you go out without a verbal or written permission; so that”—

“Impudence!” exclaimed Henrietta.

And resolutely she went up to the ponderous gates of the court-yard, stretching out her hand to pull the bolt. But the man, divining her intention,

and quicker than she, had rushed up to the gate, and, crying out as loud as he could, he exclaimed,—

“Miss, miss! Stop! I have my orders, and I shall lose my place.”

At his cries a dozen servants who were standing idly about in the stables, the vestibule, and the inner court, came running up. Then Sir Thorn appeared, ready to go out on horseback, and finally the count himself.

“What do you want? What are you doing there?” he asked his daughter.

“You see, I want to go out.”

“Alone?” laughed the count. Then he continued harshly, pointing at the concierge,—

“This man would be instantly dismissed if he allowed you to leave the house alone. Oh, you need not look at me that way! Hereafter you will only go out when, and with whom, it pleases me. And do not hope to escape my watchful observation. I have foreseen every thing. The little gate to which you had a key has been nailed up. And, if ever a man should dare to steal into the garden, the gardeners have orders to shoot him down like a dog, whether it be the man with whom I caught you the other day, or some one else.”

Under this mean and cowardly insult Henrietta staggered; but, immediately collecting herself, she exclaimed,—

“Great God! Am I delirious? Father, are you aware of what you are saying?”

And, as the suppressed laughter of the servants reached her, she added with—almost convulsive vehemence,—

“At least, say who the man was with whom I was in the garden, so that all, all may hear his name. Tell them that it was M. Daniel Champcey,—he whom my sainted mother had chosen for me among all,—he whom for long years you have daily received at your house, to whom you have solemnly promised my hand, who was my betrothed, and who would now be my husband, if we had chosen to approve of your unfortunate marriage. Tell them that it was M. Daniel Champcey, whom you had sent off the day

before, and whom a crime, a forgery committed by your Sarah, forced to go to sea; for he had to be put out of the way at any *hazard*. As long as he was in Paris, you would never have dared treat me as I am treated.”

Overcome by this unexpected violence, the count could only stammer out a few incoherent words. Henrietta was about to go on, when she felt herself taken by the arm, and gently but irresistibly taken up to the house. It was Sir Thorn, who tried to save her from her own excitement. She looked at him; a big tear was slowly rolling down the cheek of the impassive gentleman.

Then, when he had led her as far as the staircase, and she had laid hold of the balusters, he said,—

“Poor girl!”

And went away with rapid steps.

Yes, “poor girl” indeed!

Her resolve was giving way under all these terrible blows; and seized with a kind of vertigo, out of breath, and almost beside herself, she had rushed up the steps, feeling as if she still heard the abominable accusations of her father, and the laughter of the servants.

“O God,” she sobbed, “have pity on me!”

She felt in her heart that she had no hope left now but God, delivered up as she was to pitiless adversaries, sacrificed to the implacable hatred of a stepmother, abandoned by all, and betrayed and openly renounced by her own father.

Hour by hour she had seen how, by an incomprehensible combination of fatal circumstances, the infernal circle narrowed down, within which she was wretchedly struggling, and which soon would crush her effectually. What did they want of her? Why did they try every thing to exasperate her to the utmost? Did they expect some catastrophe to result from her despair?

Unfortunately, she did not examine this question carefully, too inexperienced as she was to suspect the subtle cunning of people whose wickedness would have astonished a criminal judge. Ah, how useful one

word from Daniel would have been to her at this crisis! But, trembling with anguish for his betrothed, the unhappy man had not dared repeat to her the terrible words which had escaped M. de Brevan, in his first moment of expansion,—

“Miss Brandon leaves the dagger and the poisoned cup to fools, as too coarse and too dangerous means to get rid of people. She has safer means to suppress those who are in her way—means which justice never discovers.”

Lost in sombre reflections, the poor girl was forgetting the hour, and did not notice that it had become dark already, when she heard the dinner-bell ring. She was free not to go down; but she revolted at the idea that the Countess Sarah might think her overcome. So she said to herself,—

“No. She shall never know how much I suffer!”

Ringing, then, for Clarissa, who had come back, she said,—

“Come, quick, dress me!”

And in less than five minutes she had arranged her beautiful hair, and put on one of her most becoming dresses. While changing her dress, she noticed the rustling of paper.

“Ah!” she said to herself, “my letter to Daniel. I had forgotten it.”

Was it already too late to send it to M. de Brevan? Probably it was. But why might she not try, at least? So she gave it to Clarissa, saying,—

“You will take a cab, and take this letter immediately to M. de Brevan, Rue Laffitte, No. 62. If he is out, you will leave it, telling the people to be sure to give it to him as soon as he comes in. You can find some excuse, if they should ask you why you are going out. Be discreet.”

She herself went down stairs, so determined to conceal her emotion, that she actually had a smile on her lips as she entered the dining-room. The fever that devoured her gave to her features unwonted animation, and to her eyes a strange brilliancy. Her beauty, ordinarily a little impaired, shone

forth once more in amazing splendor, so as to eclipse almost that of the countess.

Even Count Ville-Handry was struck by it, and exclaimed, glancing at his young wife,—

“Oh, oh!”

Otherwise, this was the only notice which was taken of Henrietta. After that, no one seemed to mind her presence, except M. Elgin, whose eye softened whenever he looked at her. But what was that to her? Affecting a composure which she was far from possessing, she made an effort to eat, when a servant entered, and very respectfully whispered a few words in the ear of the countess.

“Very well,” she said; “I’ll be there directly.”

And, without vouchsafing an explanation, she left the table, and remained perhaps ten minutes away.

“What was it?” asked Count Ville-Handry, with an accent of tenderest interest, when his young wife reappeared.

“Nothing, my dear,” she replied, as she took her seat again,—“nothing, some orders to give.”

Still Henrietta thought she noticed under this apparent indifference of her step-mother an expression of cruel satisfaction. More than that, she fancied she saw the countess and Mrs. Brian rapidly exchange looks, one saying, “Well,” and the other answering, “All right.”

The poor girl, prejudiced as she was, felt as if she had been stabbed once more to the heart.

“These wretches,” she thought, “have prepared another insult for me.”

This suspicion took so powerfully hold of her, that when dinner was over, instead of returning to her rooms, she followed her father and his new “friends” into the sitting-room. Count Ville-Handry spoke of Mrs. Brian and M. Elgin always as “the family.”

They did not long remain alone. The count and his young wife had probably let it be known that they would be at home that evening; and soon a number of visitors came in, some of them old friends of the family, but the great majority intimates from Circus Street. Henrietta was too busy watching her stepmother to notice how eagerly she herself was examined, what glances they cast at her, and how careful the married ladies, as well as the young girls, were to leave her alone. It required a brutal scene to open her mind to the truth, and to bring her thoughts back to the horrible reality of her situation. That scene came but too soon.

As the visitors increased, the conversation had ceased to be general, and groups had formed; so that two ladies came to sit down close by Henrietta. They were apparently friends of the young countess, for she did not know them, and one of them had a strong foreign accent. They were talking. Instinctively Henrietta listened.

“Why did you not bring your daughter?” asked one of them.

“How could I?” replied the other. “I would not bring her here for the world. Don’t you know what kind of a woman the count’s daughter is? It is incredible, and almost too scandalous. On the day of her father’s marriage she ran away with somebody, by the aid of a servant, who has since been dismissed; and they had to get the police to help them bring her back. If it had not been for our dear Sarah, who is goodness itself, they would have sent her to a house of correction.”

A stifled cry interrupted them. They looked round. Henrietta had suddenly been taken ill, and had fallen to the ground. Instantly, and with one impulse, everybody was up. But the honorable M. Elgin had been ahead of them all, and had rushed up with such surprising promptness at the very moment when the accident happened, that it almost looked as if he had had a presentiment, and was watching for the precise time when his assistance would be needed.

Raising Henrietta with a powerful arm, he laid her on a sofa, not forgetting to slip a cushion under her head. Immediately the countess and the other ladies crowded around the fainting girl, rubbing the palms of her hands,

moistening her temples with aromatic vinegar and cologne, and holding bottles of salts persistently to her nostrils.

Still all efforts to bring her to remained sterile; and this was so extraordinary, that even Count Ville-Handry began to be moved, although at first he had been heard to exclaim,—

“Pshaw! Leave her alone. It is nothing.”

The mad passion of senile love had not yet entirely extinguished in him the instincts of a father; and anxiety rekindled the affection he had formerly felt for his child. He rushed, therefore, to the vestibule, calling out to the servants who were there on duty,—

“Quick! Let some one run for the doctor; never mind which,—the nearest!”

This acted as a signal for the guests to scatter at once. Finding that this fainting-fit lasted too long, and fearing perhaps a fatal termination, a painful scene, and tears, they slyly slipped out, one by one, and escaped.

In this way the countess, Mrs. Brian, M. Elgin, and the unhappy father found themselves soon once more alone with poor Henrietta, who was still unconscious.

“We ought not to leave her here,” said Countess Sarah; “she will be better in her bed.”

“Yes, that is true, you are right!” replied the count. “I shall have her carried to her room.”

And he was stretching out his hand to pull the bell, when Sir Thorn stopped him, saying in a voice of deep emotion,—

“Never mind, count. I’ll carry her myself.”

And, without waiting for an answer, he took her up like a feather, and carried her to her room, followed by Count Ville-Handry, and his young wife. He could, of course, not remain in Henrietta’s room; but it looked as if he could not tear himself away. For some time the servants, quite amazed, saw him walk up and down the passage with feverish steps, and, in spite of his usual impassiveness, giving all the signs of extraordinary excitement. Every

ten minutes he paused in his walk to ask at the door, with a voice full of anxiety,—

“Well?”

“She is still in the same condition,” was the answer.

In the meantime two physicians had arrived, but without obtaining any better results than the countess and her friends. They had exhausted all the usual remedies for such cases, and began, evidently, to be not a little surprised at the persistency of the symptoms. Nor could Count Ville-Handry suppress his growing anxiety as he saw them consulting in the recess of one of the windows, discussing more energetic means to be employed. At last, toward midnight, Sir Thorn saw the young countess come out of Henrietta’s room.

“How is she?” he cried out.

Then the countess said, speaking very loud, so as to be heard by the servants,—

“She is coming to; and that is why I am leaving her. She dislikes me so terribly, that poor unhappy child, that I fear my presence might do her harm.”

Henrietta had indeed recovered her consciousness. First had come a shiver running over her whole body; then she had tried painfully and repeatedly to raise herself on her pillows, looking around,—

Evidently she did not remember what had happened, and mechanically passed her hand to and fro over her brow, as if to brush away the dark veil that was hanging over her mind, looking with haggard eyes at the doctors, at her father, and at her confidante, Clarissa, who knelt by her bedside, weeping.

At last, when, all of a sudden, the horrid reality broke upon her mind, she threw herself back, and cried out,—

“O God!”

But she was saved; and the doctors soon withdrew, declaring that there was nothing to apprehend now, provided their prescriptions were carefully observed. The count then came up to his daughter, and, taking her hands, asked her,—

“Come, child. What has happened? What was the matter?”

She looked upon him in utter despair, and then said in a low voice,—

“Nothing! only you have ruined me, father.”

“How, how?” said the count. “What do you mean?”

And very much embarrassed, perhaps angry against himself, and trying to find an excuse for what he had done, he added, simpering,—

“Is it not your own fault? Why do you treat Sarah so badly, and do all you can to exasperate me?”

“Yes, you are right. It is my fault,” murmured Henrietta.

She said it in a tone of bitter irony now; but afterwards, when she was alone, and more quiet, reflecting in the silence of the night, she had to acknowledge, and confess to herself, that it was so. The scandal by which she had intended to crush her step-mother had fallen back upon herself, and crushed her.

Still, the next morning she was a little better; and, in spite of all that Clarissa could say, she would get up, and go down stairs, for all her hopes henceforth depended on that letter written by Daniel. She had been waiting day after day for M. de Brevan, who was to bring it to her; and for nothing in the world would she have been absent when he came at last.

But she waited for him in vain that day, and four days after.

Attributing his tardiness to some new misfortune, she thought of writing to him, when at last, on Tuesday,—the day which the countess had chosen for her reception-day,—but not until the room was already quite full of company, the servant announced,—“M. Palmer, M. de Brevan!”

Seized with most violent emotions, Henrietta turned round suddenly, casting upon the door one of those glances in which a whole soul is read at once. At last she was to know him whom her Daniel had called his second self. Two men entered: one, quite old, had gray hair, and looked as grave and solemn as a member of parliament; the other, who might be thirty or thirty-five years old, looked cold and haughty, having thin lips and a sardonic smile.

“That is the man!” said Henrietta to herself; “that is Daniel’s friend!”

At first she disliked him excessively. Upon examining him more closely, she thought his composure affected, and his whole appearance lacking in frankness. But she never thought for a moment of distrusting M. de Brevan. Daniel had blindly recommended him to her; and that was enough. She had been too severely punished when she tried to follow her own inspirations, ever to think of repeating the experiment.

Still she kept him in view. After having been presented to the Countess Sarah and her husband, he had thrown himself into the crowd, and managed, after a while, to get near to her. He went from one group to another, throwing a word to each one, gaining thus, insensibly, and without affectation, a small chair, which was vacant, by the side of Henrietta.

And the air of perfect indifference with which he took possession of it would have made you think he had fully measured the danger of risking a confidential talk with a young lady under the eyes of fifty or sixty persons. He commenced with some of those set phrases which furnish the currency of society, speaking loud enough to be heard by the neighbors, and to satisfy their curiosity, if they should have a fancy for listening. As he noticed that Henrietta had turned very red, and looked overcome, while fixing most anxiously her eyes upon him, he even said,—

“I pray you, madam, affect a little more indifference. Smile; we may be watched. Remember that we must not know each other; that we are perfect strangers to each other.”

Then he began in a very loud voice to sing the praise of the last new play that had been performed, until finally, thinking that he had put all suspicions asleep, he drew a little nearer, and, casting down his eyes, he said,—

“It is useless to tell you, madam, that I am M. de Brevan.”

“I heard your name announced, sir,” replied Henrietta in the same way.

“I have taken the liberty of writing to you, madam, under cover to your maid Clarissa, according to Daniel’s orders; but I hope you will pardon me.”

“I have nothing to pardon, sir, but to thank you very much, from the bottom of my heart, for your generous devotion.”

No man is perfect. A passing blush colored the cheeks of M. de Brevan; he had to cough a little; and once or twice passed his hand between his collar and his neck, as if he felt troubled in his throat.

“You must have thought,” continued Henrietta, “that I was not in great haste to avail myself of your kind offer; but—there were difficulties—in my way”—

“Oh, yes! I know,” broke in M. de Brevan, sadly shaking his head; “your maid has told me. For she found me at home, as no doubt you have heard; and your letter arrived just in time to be sent on with mine. They will gain a fortnight in this way; for the mail for Cochin China does not leave more than once a month,—on the 26th.”

But he paused suddenly, or rather raised his voice to resume his account of the new drama. Two young ladies had stopped just before them. As soon as they were gone, he went on,—

“I bring you, madam, Daniel’s letter.”

“Ah!”

“I have folded it up very small, and I have it here in my hand; if you will let your handkerchief fall, I’ll slip it into it as I pick it up.”

The trick was not new; but it was also not very difficult. Still Henrietta did it awkwardly enough. Her letting the handkerchief fall looked any thing but

natural; and, when she took it back again, she was all eagerness. Then, when she felt the crisp paper under the folds of the linen, she became all crimson in her face. Fortunately, M. de Brevan had the presence of mind to rise suddenly, and to move his chair so as to help her in concealing her embarrassment. Then, when he saw her calm again, he sat down once more, and went on, with an accent of deep interest,—

“Now, madam, permit me to inquire after your position here.”

“It is terrible.”

“Do they harass you?”

“Oh, fearfully!”

“No doubt, your step-mother?”

“Alas! who else would do it? But she dissembles, veiling her malignity under the most affected gentleness. In appearance she is all kindness to me. And my poor father becomes a willing instrument in her hands,—my poor father, formerly so kind, and so fond of me!”

She was deeply moved; and M. de Brevan saw the tears starting in her eyes. Quite frightened, he said,—

“Madam, for Heaven’s sake control yourself!”

And, anxious to turn Henrietta’s thoughts from her father, he asked,—

“How is Mrs. Brian to you?”

“She always takes sides against me.”

“Naturally. And Sir Thorn?”

“You wrote me that I should mistrust him particularly, and so I do; but, I must confess, he alone seems to be touched by my misfortunes.”

“Ah! that is the very reason why you ought to fear him.”

“How so?”

M. de Brevan hesitated, and then answered, speaking very rapidly, and after having looked around cautiously,—

“Because M. Elgin might very well cherish a hope of replacing Daniel in your heart, and of becoming your husband.”

“Great God!” exclaimed Henrietta, sinking back in her chair with an expression of horror. “Is it possible?”

“I am quite sure of it,” replied M. Brevan.

And, as if he had been frightened himself by what he had said, he added,—

“Yes, I am quite sure. I have read the heart of that man; and before long you will have some terrible evidence of his intentions. But I pray, madam, let this remain a secret between us, to be kept religiously. Never allow yourself the slightest allusion.”

“What can I do?” murmured the poor girl, “what can I do? You alone, sir, can advise me.”

For some time M. de Brevan continued silent; then he said in a very sad voice,—

“My experience, madam, supplies me with but one advice,—be patient; say little; do as little as possible; and endeavor to appear insensible to their insults. I would say to you, if you will excuse the triviality of the comparison, imitate those feeble insects who simulate death when they are touched. They are defenceless; and that is their only chance of escape.”

He had risen; and, while bowing deeply before Henrietta, he added,—

“I must also warn you, madam, not to be surprised if you see me doing every thing in my power for the purpose of winning the good-will of your step-mother. Believe me, if I tell you that such duplicity is very distasteful to my character. But I have no other way to obtain the privilege of coming here frequently, of seeing you, and of being useful to you, as I have promised your friend Daniel.”

CHAPTER 15

During the last visits which Daniel had paid to Henrietta, he had not concealed from her the fact that Maxime de Brevan had formerly been quite intimate with Sarah Brandon and her friends. But still, in explaining his reasons for trying to renew these relations, M. de Brevan had acted with his usual diplomacy.

But for this, she might have conceived some vague suspicions when she saw him, soon after he had left her, enter into a long conversation with the countess, then speak with Sir Thorn, and finally chat most confidentially with austere Mrs. Brian. But now, if she noticed it all, she was not surprised. Her mind was, in fact, thousands of miles away. She thought only of that letter which she had in her pocket, and which was burning her fingers, so to say. She could think of nothing else.

What would she not have given for the right to run away and read it at once? But adversity was teaching her gradually circumspection; and she felt it would be unwise to leave the room before the last guests had departed. Thus it was past two o'clock in the morning before she could open the precious letter, after having dismissed her faithful Clarissa.

Alas! she did not find what she had hoped for,—advice, or, better than that, directions how she should conduct herself. The fact is, that in his terrible distress, Daniel no longer was sufficiently master of himself to look calmly at the future, and to weigh the probabilities. In his despair he had filled three pages with assurances of his love, with promises that his last thoughts would be for her, and with prayers that she would not forget him. There were hardly twenty lines left for recommendations, which ought to have contained the most precise and minute details.

All his suggestions, moreover, amounted to this,—arm yourself with patience and resignation till my return. Do not leave your father's house unless in the last extremity, in case of pressing danger, and under no circumstances without first consulting Maxime.

And to fill up the measure, from excessive delicacy, and fearing to wound his friend's oversensitive feelings, Daniel had omitted to inform Henrietta of certain most important circumstances. Thus he only told her, that, if flight became her only means of escape from actual danger, she need not hesitate from pecuniary considerations; that he had foreseen every thing, and made the needful preparations.

How could she guess from this, that the unlucky man, carried away and blinded by passion, had intrusted fifty or sixty thousand dollars, his entire fortune, to his friend Maxime? Still the two friends agreed too fully on the same opinion to allow her to hesitate. Thus, when she fell asleep, she had formed a decision. She had vowed to herself that she would meet all the torments they might inflict upon her, with the stoicism of the Indian who is bound to the stake, and to be, among her enemies, like a dead person, whom no insult can galvanize into the semblance of life.

During the following weeks it was not so difficult for her to keep her promises. Whether it were weariness or calculation, they seemed to forget her. Except at meals, they took no more notice of her than if she had not been in existence.

That sudden access of affection which had moved Count Ville-Handry on that evening when he thought his daughter in danger had long since passed away. He only honored her with ironical glances, and never addressed a word to her. The countess observed a kind of affectionate reserve, like a well-disposed person who has seen all her advances repelled, and who is hurt, but quite ready to be friends at the first sign. Mrs. Brian never opened her thin lips but to growl out some unpleasant remark, of which a single word was intelligible: shocking! There remained the Hon. M. Elgin, whose sympathetic pity showed itself daily more clearly. But, since Maxime's warning, Henrietta avoided him anxiously.

She was thus leading a truly wretched life in this magnificent palace, in which she was kept a prisoner by her father's orders; for such she was; she could no longer disguise it from herself. She felt at every moment that she was watched, and overlooked most jealously, even when they seemed to forget her most completely. The great gates, formerly almost always open,

were now kept carefully closed; and, when they were opened to admit a carriage, the concierge mounted guard before them, as if he were the keeper of a jail. The little garden-gate had been secured by two additional enormous locks; and whenever Henrietta, during her walks in the garden, came near it, she saw one of the gardeners watch her with anxious eyes. They were apparently afraid, not only that she might escape, but that she might keep up secret communications with the outer world. She wanted to be clear about that; and one morning she asked her father's permission to send to the Duchess of Champdoce, and beg her to come and spend the day with her. But Count Ville-Handry brutally replied that he did not want to see the Duchess of Champdoce; and that, besides, she was not in Paris, as her husband had taken her south to hasten her recovery.

On another occasion, toward the end of February, and when several days of fine spring weather had succeeded each other, the poor child could not help expressing a desire to go out and breathe a little fresh air. Her father said, in reply to her request,—“Every day, your mother and I go out and drive for an hour or two in the Bois de Boulogne. Why don't you go with us?”

She said nothing. She would sooner have allowed herself to be cut to pieces than to appear in public seated by the side of the young countess and in the same carriage with her.

Months passed thus without her having put a foot outside of the palace, except her daily attendance at mass at eight o'clock on Sunday mornings. Count Ville-Handry had not dared to refuse her that; but he had added the most painful and most humiliating conditions. On these occasions M. Ernest, his valet, accompanied her, with express orders not to let her speak to any one whatsoever, and to “apprehend” her (this was the count's own expression), and to bring her back forcibly, if needs be, if she should try to escape.

But in vain they multiplied the insults; they did not extort a single complaint. Her unalterable patience would have touched ordinary executioners. And yet she had no other encouragement, no other support, but what she received from M. de Brevan.

Faithful to the plan which he had mentioned to her, he had managed so well as gradually to secure the right to come frequently to the house. He was on the best terms with Mrs. Brian; and the count invited him to dinner. At this time Henrietta had entirely overcome her prejudice against him. She had discovered in M. de Brevan such a respectful interest in her welfare, such almost womanly delicacy, and so much prudence and discretion, that she blessed Daniel for having left her this friend, and counted upon his devotion as upon that of a brother.

Was it not he, who, on certain evenings, when she was well-nigh overcome by despair, whispered to her,—

“Courage; here is another day gone! Daniel will soon be back!”

But the more Henrietta was left to the inspirations of solitude, and compelled to live within herself only, the more she observed all that was going on around her. And she thought she noticed some very strange changes. Never would Count Ville-Handry’s first wife have been able to recognize her reception-rooms. Where was that select society which had been attracted by her, and which she had fashioned into something like a court, in which her husband was king? The palace had become, so to say, the headquarters of that motley society which forms the “Foreign Legion” of pleasure and of scandal.

Sarah Brandon, now Countess Ville-Handry, was surrounded by that strange aristocracy which has risen upon the ruins of old Paris,—a contraband aristocracy, a dangerous kind of high life, which, by its unheard-of extravagance and mysterious splendor, dazzles the multitude, and puzzles the police.

The young countess did not exactly receive people notoriously tainted. She was too clever to commit such a blunder; but she bestowed her sweetest smiles upon all those equivocal Bohemians who represent all races, and whose revenues come much less from good acres in the broad sunlight than from the credulity and stupidity of mankind.

At first Count Ville-Handry had been rather shocked by this new world, whose manners and customs were unknown to him, and whose language even he hardly understood. But it had not taken long to acclimatize him.

He was the firm, the receiver of the fortune, the flag that covers the merchandise, the master, in fine, although he exercised no authority. All these titles secured to him the appearance of profound respect; and all vied with each other in flattering him to the utmost, and paying him court in the most abject manner. This led him to imagine that he had recovered the prestige he had enjoyed in former days, thanks to the skilful management of his first wife; and he assumed a new kind of grotesque importance commensurate with his revived vanity.

He had, besides, gone to work once more most industriously. All the business men who had called upon him before his marriage already reappeared now, accompanied by that legion of famished speculators, whom the mere report of a great enterprise attracts, like the flies settling upon a lump of sugar. The count shut himself up with these men in his study, and often spent the whole afternoon with them there.

“Most probably something is going on there,” thought Henrietta.

She was quite sure of it when she saw her father unhesitatingly give up the splendid suite of apartments in the lower story of the palace, which were cut up into an infinite number of small rooms. On the doors there appeared, one by one, signs not usually found in such houses; as, “Office,” “Board Room,” “Secretary,” “Cashier’s Room.”

Then office-furniture appeared in loads,—tables, desks, chairs; then mountains of huge volumes; and at last two immense safes, as large as a bachelor’s-lodging.

Henrietta was seriously alarmed, and knowing beforehand that no one in the house would answer her questions, she turned to M. de Brevan. In the most off-hand manner he assured her that he knew nothing about it, but promised to inquire, and to let her know soon.

There was no necessity; for one morning, when Henrietta was wandering about listlessly around the offices, which began to be filled with clerks, she noticed an immense advertisement on one of the doors.

She went up to it, and read:—

FRANCO-AMERICAN SOCIETY,

For the development of Pennsylvania petroleum wells.

Capital, *Ten Million of Francs*. Twenty Thousand Shares of 500 Francs each.

The Charter may be seen at the Office of M. Lilois, N. P.

President, Count Ville-Handry.

The books for subscription will be opened on the 25th of March.

principal office, *Palace of Count Ville-Handry, Rue de Varennes*. branch office, *Rue Lepelletier, No. 1p*.

At the foot, in small print, was a full explanation of the enormous profits which might be expected, the imperative necessity which had led to the establishment of the Pennsylvania Petroleum Society, the nature of its proposed operations, the immense services which it would render to the world at large, and, above all, the immense profits which would promptly accrue to the stockholders.

Then there came an account of petroleum or oil wells, in which it was clearly demonstrated that this admirable product represented, in comparison with other oils, a saving of more than sixty per cent; that it gave a light of matchless purity and brilliancy; that it burnt without odor; and, above all, that, in spite of what might have been said by interested persons, there was no possible danger of explosion connected with its use.

“In less than twenty years,” concluded the report in a strain of lyric prophecy, “petroleum will have taken the place of all the primitive and useless illuminating mediums now employed. It will replace, in like manner, all the coarse and troublesome varieties of fuel of our day. In less than twenty years the whole world will be lighted and heated by petroleum; and the oil-wells of Pennsylvania are inexhaustible.”

A eulogy on the president, Count Ville-Handry, crowned the whole work,—a very clever eulogy, which called him a man sent by Providence; and, alluding to his colossal fortune, suggested that, with such a manager at the head of the enterprise, the shareholders could not possibly run any risk.

Henrietta was overwhelmed with surprise. “Ah!” she said to herself, “this is what Sarah Brandon and her accomplices were aiming at. My father is ruined!”

That Count Ville-Handry should risk all he possessed in this terrible game of speculation was not so surprising to Henrietta. But what she could not comprehend was this, that he should assume the whole responsibility of such a hazardous enterprise, and run the terrible risk of a failure. How could he, with his deeply-rooted aristocratic prejudices, ever consent to lend his name to an industrial enterprise?

“It must have cost prodigies of patience and cunning,” she thought, “to induce him to make such a sacrifice, such a surrender of old and cherished convictions. They must have worried him terribly, and brought to bear upon him a fearful pressure.”

She was, therefore, truly amazed, when, two days afterwards, she became accidentally a witness to a lively discussion between her father and the countess on this very subject of the famous placards, which were now scattered all over Paris and France. The countess seemed to be distressed by the whole affair, and presented to her husband all the objections which Henrietta herself would have liked to have urged; only she did it with all the authority she derived from the count’s passionate love for her. She did not understand, she said, how her husband, a nobleman of ancient lineage, could stoop to “making money.” Had he not enough of it already? Would he be any happier if he had twice or thrice as many thousands a year?

He met all these objections with a sweetish smile, like a great artist who hears an ignoramus criticise his work. And, when the countess paused, he deigned to explain to her in that emphatic manner which betrayed his intense conceit, that if he, the representative of the very oldest nobility, threw himself into the great movement, it was for the purpose of setting a

lofty example. He had no desire for “filthy lucre,” he assured her; he only desired to render his country a great service.

“Too dangerous a service!” replied the countess. “If you succeed, as you hope, who will thank you for it? No one. More than that, if you speak to them of disinterestedness, they will laugh in your face. If the thing fails, on the other hand, who is to pay? You. And they will call you a dunce into the bargain.”

Count Ville-Handry shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly; and then he said, taking his wife by the hand,—

“Would you love me less if I were ruined?”

She looked at him with her beautiful eyes as if overflowing with affection, and replied in a voice full of emotion,—

“God is my witness, my friend, that I should be delighted to be able to prove to you that I did not think of money when I married you.”

“Sarah!” cried the count in ecstasy, “Sarah, my darling, that was a word worth the whole of that fortune which you blame me for risking.”

Even if Henrietta had been more disposed to mistrust appearances, she would never have supposed that the whole scene was most cunningly devised for the purpose of impressing upon the count’s feeble intellect this idea more forcibly than ever. She was rather inclined to believe, and she did believe, that this Petroleum Society, conceived by Sir Thorn, was unpleasant to the countess; and that thus discord reigned in the enemy’s camp.

The result of her meditations was a long letter to a gentleman for whom her mother had always entertained a great esteem, the Duke of Champdoce. After having explained to him her situation, she told him all that she knew of the new enterprise, and besought him to interfere whilst it was yet time.

When she had written her letter, she gave it to Clarissa, urging her to carry it immediately to its address. Alas! the poor girl was rapidly approaching an incident which was to bring about a crisis.

Having by chance followed the maid down stairs, she saw her go into the Countess Sarah's room, and hand her the letter.

Was Henrietta thus betrayed even by the girl whom she thought so fully devoted to her interests, and since when? Perhaps from the first day. Ah, how many things this explained to her which she had hitherto wondered at as perfectly incomprehensible!

This last infamy, however, tempted her to lay aside for once her carefully-nursed reserve. She rushed into the room, crimson with shame and wrath, and said in a fierce tone,—

“Give me that letter, madam!”

Clarissa had fled when she saw her treachery discovered.

“This letter,” replied the countess coldly, “I shall hand to your father, madam, as it is my duty to do.”

“Ah, take care, madam!” broke in the poor girl with a threatening gesture; “take care! My patience has its limits.”

Her attitude and her accent were so terrible, that the countess thought it prudent to put a table between herself and her victim. But suddenly a great revolution had taken place in Henrietta's heart. She said roughly,—

“Look here, madam, let us have an explanation while we are alone. What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, I assure you.”

“Nothing? Who is it, then, that has meanly slandered me, has robbed me of my father's affection, surrounds me with spies, and overwhelms me with insults? Who forces me to lead this wretched life to which I am condemned?”

The countess showed in her features how deeply she was reflecting. She was evidently calculating the effect of a new plan.

“You will have it so,” she replied resolutely. “Very well, then, I will be frank with you. Yes, I am bent on ruining you. Why? You know it as well as I do. I

will ask you, in my turn, who is it that has done every thing that could possibly be done to prevent my marriage? Who has endeavored to crush me? Who would like to drive me from this house like an infamous person? Is it not you, always you? Yes, you are right. I hate you; I hate you unto death, and I avenge myself!"

"Madam!"

"Wait! What had I done to you before my marriage? Nothing. You did not even know me by name. They came and told you atrocious stories invented by my enemies, and you believed them. Your father told you, 'They are wicked libels.' What did you answer? That 'those only are libelled who deserve it.' I wanted to prove to you that it is not so. You are the purest and chastest of girls whom I know; are you not? Very well. I defy you to find a single person around you who does not believe that you have had lovers."

Extreme situations have this peculiarity, that the principal actors may be agitated by the most furious passions, and still outwardly preserve the greatest calmness. Thus these two women, who were burning with mortal hatred, spoke with an almost calm voice.

"And you think, madam," resumed Henrietta, "that sufferings like mine can be long continued?"

"They will be continued till it pleases me to make an end to them."

"Or till I come of age."

The countess made a great effort to conceal her surprise.

"Oh!" she said to herself. "Oh, oh!"

"Or," continued the young girl, "till he returns whom you have taken from me, my betrothed, M. Daniel Champcey."

"Stop, madam. You are mistaken. It was not I who sent Daniel away."

Daniel! the countess said so; said familiarly, Daniel! Had she any right to do so? How? Whence this extraordinary impudence?

Still Henrietta saw in it only a new insult; no suspicion entered her soul, and she replied in the most ironical tone,—

“Then it was not you who sent that petition to the secretary of the navy? It was not you who ordered and paid for that forged document which caused M. Champcey to be ordered abroad?”

“No; and I told him so myself, the day before he left, in his own room.”

Henrietta was stunned. What? This woman had gone to see Daniel? Was this true? It was not even plausible.

“In his room?” she repeated,—“in his room?”

“Why, yes, in University Street. I foresaw that trick which I could not prevent, and I wished to prevent it. I had a thousand reasons for wishing ardently that he should remain in Paris.”

“A thousand reasons? You? Tell me only one!”

The countess courtesied, as if excusing herself for being forced to tell the truth against her inclination, and added simply,—

“I love him!”

As if she had suddenly seen an abyss opening beneath her feet, Henrietta threw herself back, pale, trembling, her eyes starting from their sockets.

“You—love—Daniel!” she stammered,—“you love him!”

And, agitated by a nervous tremor, she said, laughing painfully,—

“But he—he? Can you hope that he will ever love you?”

“Yes, any day I may wish for it. And I shall wish it the day when he returns.”

Was she speaking seriously? or was the whole scene only a bit of cruel sport? That is what Henrietta was asking herself, as far as she was able to control her thoughts; for she felt her head growing dizzy, and her thoughts rushed wildly through her mind.

“You love Daniel!” she repeated once more, “and yet you were married the very week after his departure!”

“Alas, yes!”

“And what was my father to you? A magnificent prey, which you did not like to let escape,—an easy dupe. After all, you acknowledge it yourself, it was his fortune you wanted. It was for his money’s sake that you married him,—you, the young, marvellously-beautiful woman,—the old man.”

A smile rose upon the lips of the countess, in which she appeared herself in all the deep treachery of her secret calculations. She broke in, laughing ironically—

“I? I had coveted the fortune of this dear count, my husband? You do not think of it, madam? Have you so completely forgotten the zeal with which you heard me, only the other day, try to turn him from this enterprise in which he is about to embark all he possesses?”

Henrietta hardly knew whether she was awake or asleep. Was she not, perhaps, under the influence of one of those hallucinations which fevers produce?

“And you dare tell me all these things, me, Count Ville-Handry’s own daughter, the daughter of your husband?”

“Why not?” asked the countess.

And, shrugging her shoulders, she added in a careless tone,—

“Do you think I am afraid of your reporting me to him? You are at liberty to try it. Listen. I think I hear your father’s footstep in the vestibule; call him in, and tell him what we have been talking about.”

And, as Henrietta said nothing, she laughed, and said,—

“Ah! you hesitate. You do not dare do it? Well, you are wrong. I mean to hand him your letter, and I shall call him.”

There was no need for it; for at the same moment the count entered, followed by austere, grim Mrs. Brian. As he perceived his wife and his daughter, his face lighted up immediately; and he exclaimed,—

“What? You are here, both of you, and chatting amicably like two charming sisters? My Henrietta has come back to her senses, I trust.”

They were both silent; and, seeing how they looked at each other with fierce glances, he went on in a tone of great bitterness—

“But no, it is not so! I am not so fortunate. What is the matter? What has happened?”

The countess shook her head sadly, and replied,—

“The matter is, that your daughter, during your absence, has written a letter to one of my most cruel enemies, to that man who, you know, on our wedding-day, slandered me meanly; in fine, to the Duke of Champdoce!”

“And has any one of my servants dared to carry that letter?”

“No, my friend! It was brought to me in obedience to your orders; and the young lady summoned me haughtily to hand her that letter.”

“That letter?” cried the count. “Where is that letter?”

The countess gave it to him with these words,—

“Perhaps it would be better to throw it into the fire without reading it.”

But already he had torn the envelope; and, as he was reading the first lines, a crimson blush overspread his temples, and his eyes became bloodshot. For Henrietta, sure of the Duke of Champdoce, had not hesitated to open her heart to him, describing her situation as it really was; painting her step-mother as he had anticipated she would be; and at every turn certain phrases were repeated, which were so many blows with a dagger to the count.

“This is unheard of!” he growled with a curse. “This is incomprehensible! Such perversity has never been known before.”

He went and stood before his daughter, his arms crossed, and cried with a voice of thunder,—

“Wretch! Will you disgrace us all?”

She made no reply. Immovable like a statue, she did not tremble under the storm. Besides, what could she do? Defend herself? She would not stoop to do that. Repeat the impudent avowals of the countess? What would be the use? Did she not know beforehand that the count would not believe her? In the meantime, grim Mrs. Brian had taken a seat by the side of her beloved Sarah.

“I,” she said, “if I were, for my sins, afflicted with such a daughter, I would get her a husband as soon as possible.”

“I have thought of that,” replied the count; “and I believe I have even hit upon an arrangement which”—

But, when he saw his daughter’s watchful eye fixed upon him, he paused, and, pointing towards the door, said to her brutally,—

“You are in the way here!”

Without saying a word, she went out, much less troubled by her father’s fury than by the strange confessions which the countess had made. She only now began to measure the full extent of her step-mother’s hatred, and knew that she was too practical a woman to waste her time by making idle speeches. Therefore, if she had stated that she loved Daniel,—a statement which Henrietta believed to be untrue,—if she had impudently confessed that she coveted her husband’s fortune, she had a purpose in view. What was that purpose? How could any one unearth the truth from among such a mass of falsehood and deception?

At all events, the scene was strange enough to confound any one’s judgment. And when Henrietta, that evening, found an opportunity to tell M. de Brevan what had happened, he trembled in his chair, and was so overwhelmed with surprise, that he forgot his precautions, and exclaimed almost aloud,—

“That is not possible!”

There was no doubt that he, usually so impassive, was terribly excited. In less than five minutes he had changed color more than ten times. You would

have thought he was a man who at a single blow sees the edifice of all his hopes crumble to pieces. At last, after a moment's reflection, he said,—

“Perhaps it would be wise, madam, to leave the house.”

But she replied sadly,—

“What? How can I do that? After so many odious calumnies, my honor and Daniel's honor oblige me to remain here. He recommends me only to flee at the last extremity, and when there is no other resource left. Now, I ask you, shall I be more unhappy or more seriously threatened to-morrow than I am to-day? Evidently not.”

CHAPTER 16

But, this confidence which Henrietta expressed was only apparent. In her heart she suffered from the most terrible presentiments. A secret voice told her that this scene, no doubt well prepared and carefully brought about, was but another step leading to the final catastrophe.

Days, however, passed by, and nothing unusual happened. It looked as if they had resolved, after that crisis, to give her a short respite, and time to recover.

Even the watch kept upon her movements was not quite as strict as heretofore. The countess kept out of her way. Mrs. Brian had given up the desire to frighten her by her incessant remarks. Her father she saw but rarely; for he was entirely absorbed in the preparations for the Pennsylvania Petroleum Society. Thus, a week later, all seemed to have entirely forgotten the terrible explosion produced by the letter to the Duke of Champdoce.

All? By no means. There was one of the inmates of the palace who recalled it daily,—M. Thomas Elgin.

On the very evening after the scene, his generous indignation had so far gotten the better of his usual reserve, and his pledge of neutrality, that he had taken the Countess Sarah aside, and overwhelmed her with sharp reproaches.

“You will have to eat your own words,” he had told her, among other things, “if you use such abominable means to gratify your hatred.”

It is true, that, when he thus took his kinswoman aside, he also took pains to be overheard by Henrietta. And besides, for fear, perhaps, that she might not fully appreciate his sentiments, he had stealthily pressed her hand, and whispered into her ear,—

“Poor, dear girl! But I am here. I shall watch.”

This sounded like a promise to afford her protection, which certainly would have been efficient if it had been sincere. But was it sincere?

“No; most assuredly not!” said M. de Brevan when he was consulted. “It can be nothing but vile hypocrisy and the beginning of an abominable farce. You will see, madam.”

What Henrietta really saw was, that the Hon. M. Elgin suddenly underwent a complete metamorphosis. A new Sir Thorn appeared, whom no one would have ever suspected under the cloak of icy reserve which the former had worn. His sympathetic pity of former days was succeeded by more tender sentiments. It was not pity now, which animated his big, blue-china eyes, but the half-suppressed flame of a discreet passion. In public he did not commit himself much; but there was no little attention which he did not pay Henrietta by stealth. He never left the room before her; and, on the reception-evenings, he always took a seat by her, and remained there till the end. The most direct result of these manoeuvres was to keep M. de Brevan from her. The latter became naturally very indignant at this, and began to dislike Sir Thorn to such an extent, that he could hardly contain himself.

“Well, madam,” he said to Henrietta on one of the few occasions when he could speak to her,—“well, what did I tell you? Does the wretch show his hand clearly enough now?”

Henrietta discouraged her curious lover as much as she could; but it was impossible for her to avoid him, as they lived under the same roof, and sat down twice a day at the same table.

“The simplest way,” was M. de Brevan’s advice, “would be, perhaps, to provoke an explanation.”

But he did not wait to be asked. One morning, after breakfast, he waited for Henrietta in the vestibule; and, when she appeared, he said in an embarrassed manner,—

“I must speak to you, madam; it is absolutely necessary.”

She did not manifest any surprise, and simply replied,—

“Follow me, sir.”

She entered into the parlor, and he came with her. For about a minute they remained there alone, standing face to face,—she trying to keep up her spirits, although blushing deeply; he, apparently so overcome, that he had lost the use of his voice. At last, all of a sudden, and as if making a supreme effort, Sir Thorn began in a breathless voice to declare, that, according to Henrietta's answer, he would be the happiest or the most unfortunate of mortals. Touched by her innocence, and the persecutions to which she was exposed, he had at first pitied her, then, discovering in her daily more excellent qualities, unusual energy, coupled with all the charming bashfulness of a young girl, he had no longer been able to resist such marvellous attractions.

Henrietta, still mistress of herself, because she was convinced that M. Elgin was only playing a wretched farce, observed him as closely as she could, and, when he paused a moment, began,—

“Believe me, sir”—

But he interrupted her, saying with unusual vehemence,—

“Oh! I beseech you, madam, let me finish. Many in my place would have spoken to your father; but I thought that would hardly be fair in your exceptional position. Still I have reason to believe that Count Ville-Handry would look upon my proposals with favor. But then he would probably have attempted to do violence to your feelings. Now I wish to be indebted to you only, madam, deciding in full enjoyment of your liberty; for”—

An expression of intense anxiety contracted the features of his usually so impassive face; and he added with great earnestness,—

“Miss Henrietta, I am an honorable man; I love you. Will you be my wife?”

By a stroke of instinctive genius, he had found the only argument, perhaps, that might have procured credit for his sincerity.

But what did that matter to Henrietta? She began, saying,—

“Believe me, sir. I fully appreciate the honor you do me; but I am no longer free”—

“I beseech you”—

“Freely, and among all men, I have chosen M. Daniel Champcey. My life is in his hands.”

He tottered as if he had received a heavy blow, and stammered with a half-extinct voice,—

“Will you not leave me a glimpse of hope?”

“I would do wrong if I did so, sir, and I have never yet deceived any one.”

But the Hon. M. Elgin was not one of those men who despair easily, and give up. He was not discouraged by a first failure; and he showed it very soon. The very next day he became a changed man, as if Henrietta’s refusal had withered the very roots of his life. In his carriage, his gestures, and his tone of voice, he betrayed the utmost dejection. He looked as if he had grown taller and thinner. A bitter smile curled on his lips; and his magnificent whiskers, usually so admirably kept, now hung down miserably on his chest. And this intense melancholy grew and grew, till it became so evident to all the world, that people asked the countess,—

“What is the matter with poor M. Elgin? He looks funereal.”

“He is unhappy,” was the answer, accompanied by a sigh, which sounded as if it had been uttered in order to increase curiosity, and stimulate people to observe him more closely. Several persons did observe him; and they soon found out that Sir Thorn no longer took his seat by Henrietta as formerly, and that he avoided every occasion to address her a word.

For all that he was not resigned; far from that. He only laid siege from a distance now, spending whole evenings in looking at her from afar, absorbed in mute ecstasy. And at all times, incessantly and everywhere, she met him, as if he had been her shadow, or as if he had been condemned to breathe the air which had been displaced by her petticoats. One would have thought him endowed with the gift of multiplying himself; for he was inevitably seen wherever she was,—leaning against the door-frame, or resting his elbow on the mantelpiece, his eyes fixed upon her. And, when she did not see him, she felt his looks still weighing her down. M. de Brevan,

having been made aware of his importunate attentions, seemed to check his indignation only with great difficulty. Once or twice he spoke of calling out this wretched fellow (so he called Sir Thorn); and, in order to quiet him, Henrietta had to repeat to him over and over again, that, after such an encounter, he would no longer be able to appear at the palace, and would thus deprive her of the only friend to whom she could look for assistance.

He yielded; but he said after careful consideration,—

“This abominable persecution cannot go on, madam: this man compromises you too dreadfully. You ought to lay your complaint before Count Ville-Handry.”

She decided to do so, not without great reluctance; but the count stopped her at the first word she uttered.

“I think, my daughter, your vanity blinds you. Before M. Elgin, who is one of the most eminent financiers in all Europe, should think of a little insignificant person like you, he would look a long time elsewhere.”

“Permit me, father”—

“Stop! If you should, however, not deceive yourself, it would be the greatest good luck for you, and an honor of which you ought to be very proud indeed. Do you think it would be easy to find a husband for you, after all the unpleasant talk to which you have given occasion?”

“I do not wish to marry, father.”

“Of course not. However, as such a marriage would meet all my wishes, as it would serve to tighten the bonds which unite us with this honorable family (if M. Thomas Elgin should really have such intentions as you mention), I should know, I think, how to force you to marry him. However, I shall speak to him, and see.”

He spoke to him indeed, and soon; for the very next morning the countess and Mrs. Brian purposely went out, so as to leave Henrietta and Sir Thorn alone. The honorable gentleman looked sadder than usually. He began thus,—

“Is it really true, madam, that you have made complaint to your father?”

“Your pertinacity compelled me to do so,” replied Henrietta.

“Is the idea of becoming my wife so very revolting to you?”

“I have told you, sir, I am no longer free.”

“Yes, to be sure! You love M. Daniel Champcey. You love him. He knows it; for you had told him so, no doubt: and yet he has forsaken you.”

Sometimes, in her innermost heart, Henrietta had accused Daniel. But what she thought she would permit no one else to think. She replied, therefore, haughtily,—

“It was a point of honor with M. Champcey, and it was so with me. If he had hesitated, I would have been the first one to say to him, ‘Duty calls; you must go.’”

Sir Thorn shook his head with a sardonic smile, and said,—

“But he did not hesitate. It is ten months now since he left you; and no one knows for how many more months, for how many years, he will be absent. For his sake you suffer martyrdom; and, when he returns, he may have long since forgotten you.”

Her eyes beaming with faith, Henrietta rose to her full height, and replied,—

“I believe in Daniel as surely as in myself.”

“And if they convinced you that you were mistaken?”

“They would render me a very sad service, which would bring no reward to any one.”

Sir Thorn’s lips moved, as if he were about to answer. A thought seemed to stop him. Then in a stifled voice, with a gesture of despair, he added,—

“Keep your illusions, madam; and farewell.”

He was going to leave the room; but she threw herself in his way, crossed her arms, and said to him in an imperative tone,—

“You have gone too far, sir, to retrace your steps. You are bound now to justify your insidious insinuations, or, to confess that they were false.”

Then he seemed to make up his mind, and said, speaking rapidly,—

“You will have it so? Well, be it so. Know, then, since you insist upon it, that M. Daniel Champcey has been deceiving you most wickedly; that he does not love you, and probably never did love you.”

“That is what you say,” replied Henrietta.

Her haughty carriage, the disdain, rather than disgust, with which she spoke, could not fail to exasperate M. Elgin. He checked himself, however, and said, in a short and cutting tone,—

“I say so because it is so; and any one but you, possessing a less noble ignorance of evil, would long since have discovered the truth. To what do you attribute Sarah’s implacable enmity? To the memory of your offences on the occasion of her wedding? Poor child! If that had been all, her indifference would have given you back your place months ago. Jealousy alone is capable of that fierce and insatiable hatred which cannot be disarmed by tears or submission,—that hatred which time increases, instead of diminishing. Between Sarah and you, Miss Henrietta, there stands a man.”

“A man?”

“Yes,—M. Daniel Champcey.”

Henrietta felt as if a sharp knife had been plunged into her bosom.

“I do not understand you, sir,” she said.

He, shrugging his shoulders, and assuming an air of commiseration, went on,—

“What? You will not understand that Sarah is your rival; that she has loved M. Champcey; that she is still madly in love with him? Ah! they have deceived Mrs. Brian and myself cruelly.”

“How so?”

He turned his head aside, and murmured, as if speaking to himself,—

“_____ was her lover.”

Miss Ville-Handry discerned the truth with admirable instinct, drew herself up, and said in her most energetic way,—

“That is false!”

Sir Thorn trembled; but that was all.

“You have asked me to tell the truth,” he said coldly, “and I have done so. Try to remember. Have you forgotten that little scene, after which M. Champcey fled from our house in the middle of the night, bareheaded, without taking his overcoat?”

“Sir?”

“Did you not think that was extraordinary? That night, you see, we discovered the whole thing. After having been one of the foremost to recommend to Sarah to marry your father, M. Champcey came and asked her to give up that marriage. He had, before that, tried to have it broken off through your agency, madam, using thus his influence over you, his betrothed, for the benefit of his passion.”

“Ah! You lie impudently, sir!” said Henrietta.

To this charge, which fell like a blow upon his face, he only replied,—

“I have proofs.”

“What proofs?”

“Letters written by M. Champcey to Sarah. I have obtained two; and I have them here in my pocket-book.”

He put at the same time his hand to his pocket. She stopped him.

“These letters would prove nothing to me, sir.”

“But”—

She cast a withering glance at him, and said, in a voice of unbearable contempt,—

“Those who have sent a letter to the Navy Department, which pretended to have been written by Daniel, cannot find any difficulty in imitating his signature. Let us break off here, sir. I forbid you ever to speak to me again.”

M. Elgin laughed in a terrible way.

“That is your last word?” he asked.

Instead of answering him, she drew a step aside, thus opening the way to the door, at which she pointed with her finger.

“Well,” said Sir Thorn with an accent of fierce threatening, “remember this; I have sworn you shall be my wife, whether you will or not; and my wife you shall be!”

“Leave the room, sir, or I must give it up to you!”

He went out swearing; and, more dead than alive, Henrietta sank into an arm-chair. As long as she had been in the presence of the enemy, her pride had enabled her to keep up the appearance of absolute faith in Daniel; but, now she was alone, terrible doubts began to beset her. Was there not something true in the evident exaggerations of the Hon. M. Elgin? She was not quite sure. Had not Sarah also boasted of it, that she loved Daniel, and that she had been in his room? Finally, Henrietta recalled with a shudder, that, when Daniel had told her of his adventure in Circus Street, he had appeared embarrassed towards the end, and had failed fully to explain the reasons of his flight.

And to crown the matter, when she had tried to draw from M. de Brevan additional information on the subject, she had been struck by his embarrassment, and the lame and confused way in which he had defended his friend.

“Ah, now all is really over!” she thought. “The measure of my sufferings is full indeed!”

Unfortunately it was not yet full. A new persecution awaited her, infamous, monstrous, by the side of which all the others amounted to nothing.

“Whether you will, or not, you shall be mine,” had Sir Thorn said; and from that moment he was bent upon convincing her that he was not the man to shrink from any thing, even unto violence.

He was no longer the sympathetic defender of former days, nor the timid lover, nor the sighing, rejected lover, who followed Henrietta everywhere. He was, henceforth, a kind of wild beast, pursuing her, harassing her, persecuting her, with his eyes glaring at her with abominable lust. He no longer looked at her furtively, as formerly; but he lay in wait for her in the passages, ready, apparently, to throw himself upon her; projecting his lips as if to touch her cheeks, and extending his arms as if to seize her around her waist. A drunken lackey pursuing a scullion would not have looked and acted more impudently.

Terrified, the poor girl threw herself on her knees before her father, beseeching him to protect her. But he pushed her back, and reproached her for slandering the most honorable and most inoffensive of men. Blindness could go no farther.

And Sir Thorn knew probably of her failure; for the next day he looked at her, laughing, as if he felt that he now might venture upon any thing. And he did venture upon something, that so far would have seemed impossible. One evening, or rather one night, when the count and the countess were at a ball, he came and knocked at the door of Henrietta’s chamber.

Frightened, she rang the bell; and the servants who came up freed her from the intruder. But from that moment her terrors had no limit; and, whenever the count went out at night with his wife, she barricaded herself up in her chamber, and spent the whole night, dressed, in a chair. Could she remain any longer standing upon the brink of an abyss without name? She thought she could not; and after long and painful hesitation, she said one evening to M. de Brevan,—

“My mind is made up; I must flee.”

Taken aback, as if he had received a blow upon his head, with his mouth wide open, his eyes stretched out, M. de Brevan had turned deadly pale; and the perspiration pearled in large drops on his temples, while his hands trembled like the eager hands of a man who touches, and is about to seize, a long-coveted prize.

“Then,” he stammered out, “you are decided; you will leave your father’s house?”

“I must,” she said; and her eyes filled with bright tears. “And the sooner I can do it the better; for every moment I spend here now may bring a new danger. And yet, before risking any thing decisive, it might be better first to write to Daniel’s aunt in order to ask her about the directions she may have received, and to tell her that very soon I shall come to ask for her pity and her protection.”

“What? You think of seeking refuge at the house of that estimable lady?”

“Certainly.”

M. de Brevan, now entirely master of himself, and calculating with his usual calmness, gravely shook his head, and said,—

“You ought to be careful, madam. To seek an asylum at the house of our friend’s relative might be a very grave imprudence.”

“But Daniel recommended it to me in his letter.”

“Yes; but he had not considered the consequences of the advice he gave you. Do not deceive yourself; the wrath of your enemies will be terrible when they find that you have escaped them. They will pursue you; they will employ the police; they will search for you all over France. Now, it is evident, that the very first place where they will look for you will be Daniel’s relatives. The house of the old aunt will be watched at once, and most jealously. How can you there escape from inquiry and pursuit? It would be folly to hope for safety there.”

Pensively Henrietta hung her head. Then she said,—

“Perhaps you are right, sir.”

“Now,” continued M. de Brevan, “let us see what they would do if they should discover you. You are not of age, consequently you are entirely dependent on the will of your father. Under the inspiration of your step-mother, he would attack Daniel’s aunt, on the score of having inveigled a minor, and would bring you back here.”

She seemed to reflect; then she said suddenly,—“I can implore the assistance of the Duchess of Champdoce.”

“Unfortunately, madam, they told you the truth. For a year now, the Duke of Champdoce and his wife have been travelling in Italy.”

A gesture of despair betrayed the terrible dejection of the poor girl.

“Great God!” she said, “what must I do?”

A passing smile appeared on the face of M. de Brevan; and he answered in his most persuasive manner,—

“Will you permit me to offer you some advice, madam?”

“Alas, sir! I beg you to do so for Heaven’s sake.”

“Well, this is the only plan that seems to me feasible. To-morrow morning I will rent in a quiet house a suitable lodging, less than modest, a little chamber. You will move into it, and await there your coming of age, or Daniel’s return. No detective will ever think of seeking the daughter of Count Ville-Handry in a poor needlewoman’s garret.”

“And I am to stay there alone, forsaken and lost?”

“It is a sacrifice which it seems to me you have to make for safety’s sake.”

She said nothing, weighing the two alternatives,—to remain in the house, or to accept M. de Brevan’s proposition. After a minute she said,—

“I will follow your advice, sir; only”—She was evidently painfully embarrassed, and covered with blushes.

“You see,” she said, after long hesitation, “all this will cost money. Formerly I used to have always a couple of hundred dollars in my drawers somewhere; but now”—

“Madam,” broke in M. de Brevan, “madam, is not my whole fortune entirely at your disposal?”

“To be sure, I have my jewels; and they are quite valuable.”

“For that very reason you ought to be careful not to take them with you. We must guard against every thing. We may fail. They may discover my share in the attempt; and who knows what charges they would raise against me?”

His apprehension alone betrayed the character of the man; and still it did not enlighten Henrietta.

“Well, prepare every thing as you think best, sir,” she said sadly. “I rely entirely upon your friendship, your devotion, and your honor.”

M. de Brevan had a slight attack of coughing, which prevented him from answering at first. Then, finding that Henrietta was bent upon escaping, he tried to devise the means.

Henrietta proposed that they should wait for a night when the count would take the countess to a ball. She might then slip into the garden, and climb the wall. But the attempt seemed to be too dangerous in M. de Brevan’s eyes. He said,—

“I think I see something better. Count Ville-Handry is going soon to give a great party?”

“The day after to-morrow, Thursday.”

“All right. On Thursday, madam, you will complain early in the morning already, of a bad headache, and you will send for the doctor. He will prescribe something, I dare say, which you will not take; but they will think you are sick, and they will watch you less carefully. At night, however, towards ten o’clock, you will come down and conceal yourself at the foot of the back-stairs, in the corner of the courtyard. You can do that, I presume?”

“Very easily, sir.”

“In that case all will be right. I will be here with a carriage at ten o’clock precisely. My coachman, whom I will instruct beforehand, instead of stopping at the great entrance, will pretend to go amiss, and stop just at the

foot of the staircase. I will jump out; and you, you will swiftly jump into the carriage.”

“Yes, that also can be done.”

“As the curtains will be down, no one will see you. The carriage will drive out again, and wait for me outside; and ten minutes later I shall have joined you.”

The plan being adopted, as every thing depended upon punctuality, M. de Brevan regulated his watch by Henrietta’s; and then, rising, he said,—

“We have already conversed longer than we ought to have done in prudence. I shall not speak to you again to-night. Till Thursday.”

And with sinking voice, she said,—

“Till Thursday.”

CHAPTER 17

By this one word Henrietta sealed her destiny; and she knew it. She was fully aware of the terrible rashness of her plan. A voice had called to her, from her innermost heart, that her honor, her life, and all her earthly hopes, had thus been staked upon one card. She foresaw clearly what the world would say the day after her flight. She would be lost, and could hope for rehabilitation only when Daniel returned.

If she could only have been as sure of the heart of her chosen one as she had formerly been! But the cunning innuendoes of the countess, and the impudent asseverations of Sir Thorn, had done their work, and shaken her faith. Daniel had been absent for nearly a year now, and during all that time she had written to him every month; but she had received from him only two letters through M. de Brevan,—and what letters! Very polite, very cold, and almost without a word of hope.

If Daniel upon his return should abandon her!

And still, the more she reflected with all that lucidity with which the approach of a great crisis inspired her, the more she became impressed with the absolute necessity of flight. Yes, she must face unknown dangers, but only in order to escape from dangers which she knew but too well. She was relying upon a man who was almost a stranger to her; but was not this the only way to escape from the insults of a wretch who had become the boon companion, the friend, and the counsellor of her father? Finally, she sacrificed her reputation, that is, the appearance of honor; but she saved the reality, honor itself.

Ah, it was hard! As long as the day lasted on Wednesday, she was wandering about, pale as a ghost, all over the vast palace. She bade farewell to this beloved house, full of souvenirs of eighteen years in which she had played as a child, where Daniel's voice had caused her heart to beat loud and fast, and where her sainted mother had died. And in the evening, at table, big tears

were rolling down her cheeks as she watched the stupidly-triumphant serenity of her father.

The next day, however, Thursday, Henrietta complained, as was agreed upon, of a violent headache; and the doctor was sent for. He found her in a violent fever, and ordered her to keep her bed. He little knew that he was thus restoring the poor girl to liberty. As soon as he had left, she rose; and, like a dying person who makes all her last dispositions, she hastened to put every thing in order in her drawers, putting together what she meant to keep, and burning what she wished to keep from the curiosity of the countess and her accomplices.

M. de Brevan had recommended her not to take her jewels. She left them, therefore, with the exception of such as she wore every day, openly displayed on a *chiffonnier*. The manner of her escape forbade her taking much baggage; and still some linen was indispensable. Upon reflection it did not seem to her inexpedient to take a small carpet-bag, which her mother had given her, and which contained a dressing-case, all the articles in which were of solid gold and of marvellously fine workmanship. When her preparations were complete, she wrote to her father a long letter, in which she explained fully the motives of her desperate resolution.

Then she waited. Night had fallen long since; and the last preparations for a princely entertainment filled the palace with noise and movement. She could hear the hasty steps of busy servants, the loud orders of butlers and stewards, the hammer of upholsterers who gave here and there a final touch.

Soon there came the rolling of wheels on the fine gravel in the court-yard, and the arrival of the first guests.

Henceforth it was for Henrietta only a question of minutes; and she counted them by her watch with a terrible beating of her heart. At last the hands marked a quarter before ten. Acting almost automatically, she rose, threw an immense cashmere shawl over her shoulders; and, taking her little bag in her hand, she escaped from her room, and slipped along the passages to the servants' stairs.

She went on tiptoe, holding her breath, eye and ear on the watch, ready at the smallest noise to run back, or to rush into the first open room. Thus she got down without difficulty, reached the dark hall at the foot of the staircase; and there in the shade, seated on her little bag, she waited, out of breath, her hair moist with a cold perspiration, her teeth clattering in her mouth from fear. At last it struck ten o'clock; and the vibration of the bell could still be heard, when M. de Brevan's coupe stopped at the door.

His coachman was certainly a skilful driver. Pretending to have lost the control of his horse, he made it turn round, and forced it back with such admirable awkwardness, that the carriage came close up to the wall, and the right hand door was precisely in the face of the dark little hall in which Henrietta was standing. As quick as lightning M. de Brevan jumped out. Henrietta rushed forward. Nobody saw any thing.

A moment later the carriage slowly drove out of the court-yard of the palace of Count Ville-Handry, and stopped at some little distance.

It was done. In leaving her father's house, Miss Ville-Handry had broken with all the established laws of society. She was at the mercy now of what might follow; and, according as events might turn out favorable or unfavorable, she was saved or lost. But she did not think of that. As the danger of being surprised passed away, the feverish excitement that had kept her up so far, also subsided, and she was lying, undone, on the cushions, when the door suddenly opened, and a man appeared. It was M. de Brevan.

"Well, madam," he cried with a strangely embarrassed voice, "we have conquered. I have just presented my respects to the Countess Sarah and her worthy companions; I have shaken hands with Count Ville-Handry; and no one has the shadow of a suspicion." And, as Henrietta said nothing, he added,—

"Now I think we ought to lose no time; for I must show myself again at the ball as soon as possible. Your lodgings are ready for you, madam; and I am going, with your leave, to drive you there."

She raised herself, and said, with a great effort,—

"Do so, sir!"

M. de Brevan had already jumped into the carriage, which started at full gallop; and, while they were driving along, he explained to Henrietta how she would have to conduct herself in the house in which he had engaged a lodging for her. He had spoken of her, he said, as of one of his relatives from the provinces, who had suffered a reverse of fortune, and who had come to Paris in the hope of finding here some way to earn her living.

“Remember this romance, madam,” he begged her, “and let your words and actions be in conformity with it. And especially be careful never to utter my name or your father’s. Remember that you are still under age, that you will be searched for anxiously, and that the slightest indiscretion may put them upon your traces.”

Then, as she still kept silent, weeping, he wanted to take her hand, and thus noticed the little bag which she had taken.

“What is that?” he asked, in a tone, which, under its affected gentleness, betrayed no small dissatisfaction.

“Some indispensable articles.”

“Ah! you did not after all take your jewels, madam?”

“No, certainly not, sir!”

Still this persistency on the part of M. de Brevan began to strike her as odd; and she would have betrayed her surprise, if the carriage had not at that moment stopped suddenly before No. 23 Water Street.

“Here we are, madam,” said M. de Brevan.

And, lightly jumping down, he rang the bell at the door, which opened immediately. The room of the concierge was still light. M. de Brevan walked straight up to it, and opened the door like a man who is at home in a house.

“It is I,” he said.

A man and a woman, the concierge and his wife, who had been dozing, her nose in a paper, started up suddenly.

“Monsieur Maxime!” they said with one voice.

"I bring," said M. de Brevan, "my young kinswoman, of whom I told you, Miss Henrietta."

If Henrietta had had the slightest knowledge of Parisian customs, she would have guessed from the bows of the concierge, and the courtesies of his wife, how liberally they had been rewarded in advance.

"The young lady's room is quite ready," said the man.

"My husband has arranged every thing himself," broke in his wife; "it was no trifle, after the papering had been done. And I—I made a fine fire there as early as five o'clock, to take out the dampness."

"Let us go up then," said Brevan.

The concierge and his wife, however, were economical people; and the gas on the stairs had long since been put out.

"Give me a candlestick, Chevassat," said the woman to her husband.

And with her lighted candle she went ahead, lighting M. de Brevan and Henrietta, and stopping at every landing to praise the neatness of the house. At last, in the fifth story, at the entrance to a dark passage, she opened a door, and said,—

"Here we are! The young lady will see how nice it is."

It might possibly have been nice in her eyes; but Henrietta, accustomed to the splendor of her father's palace, could not conceal a gesture of disgust. This more than modest chamber looked to her like a garret such as she would not have permitted the least of her maids to occupy at home.

But never mind! She went in bravely, putting her travelling-bag on a bureau, and taking off her shawl, as if to take possession of the lodging. But her first impression had not escaped M. de Brevan. He drew her into the passage while the woman was stirring the fire, and said in a low voice,—

"It is a terrible room; but prudence induced me to choose it."

"I like it as it is, sir."

“You will want a great many things, no doubt; but we will see to that to-morrow. To-night I must leave you: you know it is all important that I should be seen again at your father’s house.”

“You are quite right; sir, go, make haste!”

Still he did not wish to go without having once more recommended his “young kinswoman” to Mrs. Chevassat. He only left when she had over and over again assured him that there was nothing more to be done; and then the woman also went down.

The terrible emotions which had shaken and undermined Henrietta during the last forty-eight hours were followed now by a feeling of intense astonishment at what she had done, at the irrevocable step she had taken. Her quiet life had been interrupted by an event which to her appeared more stupendous than if a mountain had been moved. Standing by the mantle-piece, she looked at her pale face in the little looking-glass, and said to herself,—

“Is that myself, my own self?”

Yes, it was she herself, the only daughter of the great Count Ville-Handry, here in a strange house, in a wretched garret-room, which she called her own. It was she, yesterday still surrounded by princely splendor, waited on by an army of servants, now in want of almost every thing, and having for her only servant the old woman to whom M. de Brevan had recommended her.

Was this possible? She could hardly believe it herself. Still she felt no repentance at what she had done. She could not remain any longer in her father’s house where she was exposed to the vilest insults from everybody. Could she have stayed any longer?

“But what is the use,” she said to herself, “of thinking of what is past? I must not allow myself to think of it; I must shake off this heaviness.”

And, to occupy her mind, she rose and went about to explore her new home, and to examine all it contained. It was one of those lodgings about which the owners of houses rarely trouble themselves, and where they

never make the smallest repairs, because they are always sure of renting them out just as they are. The floor, laid in bricks, was going to pieces; and a number of bricks were loose, and shaking in their layers of cement. The ceiling was cracked, and fell off in scales; while all along the walls it was blackened by flaring tallow-candles. The papering, a greasy, dirty gray paper, preserved the fingermarks of all the previous occupants of the room from the time it had first been hung. The furniture, also, was in keeping with the room,—a walnut bedstead with faded calico curtains, a chest of drawers, a table, two chairs, and a miserable arm-chair; that was all.

A short curtain hung before the window. By the side of the bed was a little strip of carpeting; and on the mantelpiece a zinc clock between two blue glass vases. Nothing else!

How could M. de Brevan ever have selected such a room, such a hole? Henrietta could not comprehend it. He had told her, and she had believed him, that they must use extreme caution. But would she have been any more compromised, or in greater danger of being discovered by the Countess Sarah, if they had papared the room anew, put a simple felt carpet on the floor, and furnished the room a little more decently?

Still she did not conceive any suspicion even yet. She thought it mattered very little where and how she was lodged. She hoped it was, after all, only for a short time, and consoled herself with the thought that a cell in a convent would have been worse still. And any thing was better than her father's house.

“At least,” she said, “I shall be quiet and undisturbed here.”

Perhaps she was to be morally quiet; for as to any other peace, she was soon to be taught differently. Accustomed to the profound stillness of the immense rooms in her father's palace, Henrietta had no idea, of course, of the incessant movement that goes on in the upper stories of these Paris lodging-houses, which contain the population of a whole village, and where the tenants, separated from each other by thin partition-walls, live, so to say, all in public.

Sleep, under such circumstances, becomes possible only after long experience; and the poor girl had to pay very dear for her apprenticeship. It was past four o'clock before she could fall asleep, overcome by fatigue; and then it was so heavy a sleep, that she was not aroused by the stir in the whole house as day broke. It was broad daylight, hence, when she awoke; and a pale sun-ray was gliding into the room through the torn curtain. The zinc clock pointed at twelve o'clock. She rose and dressed hastily.

Yesterday, when she rose, she rang her bell, and her maid came in promptly, made a fire, brought her her slippers, and threw over her shoulders a warm, wadded dressing-wrapper. But to-day!

This thought carried her back to her father's house. What were they doing there at this hour? Her escape was certainly known by this time. No doubt they had sent the servants out in all directions. Her father, most probably, had gone to call in the aid of the police. She felt almost happy at the idea of being so safely concealed; and looking around her chamber, which appeared even more wretched by daylight than last night, she said,—

“No, they will never think of looking for me here!”

In the meantime she had discovered a small supply of wood near the fireplace; and, as it was cold, she was busy making a fire, when somebody knocked at her door. She opened; and Mrs. Chevassat, the wife of the concierge appeared.

“It is I, my pretty young lady,” she said as she entered. “Not seeing you come down, I said to myself, ‘I must go up to look after her.’ And have you slept well?”

“Very well, madam, thank you!”

“Now, that's right. And how is your appetite? For that was what I came up for. Don't you think you might eat a little something?”

Henrietta not only thought of it; but she was very hungry. For there are no events and no adventures, no excitements and no sorrows, which prevent us from getting hungry; the tyranny of our physical wants is stronger than any thing else.

“I would be obliged to you, madam,” she said, “if you would bring me up some breakfast.”

“If I would! As often as you desire, my pretty young lady. Just give me the time to boil an egg, and to roast a cutlet, and I’ll be up again.”

Ordinarily sour-tempered, and as bitter as wormwood, Mrs. Chevassat had displayed all the amiability of which she was capable, hiding under a veil of tender sympathy the annoying eagerness of her eyes. Her hypocrisy was all wasted. The efforts she made were too manifest not to arouse the very worst suspicions.

“I am sure,” thought Henrietta, “she is a bad woman.”

Her suspicions were only increased when the worthy woman reappeared, bringing her breakfast, and setting it out on a little table before the fire, with all kinds of hideous compliments.

“You’ll see how very well every thing is cooked, miss,” she said.

Then, while Henrietta was eating, she sat down on a chair near the door, and commenced talking, without ever stopping. To hear her, the new tenant ought to thank her guardian angel who had brought her to this charming house, No. 23 Water Street, where there was such a concierge with such a wife!—he, the best of men; she, a real treasure of kindness, gentleness, and, above all, discretion.

“Quite an exceptional house,” she added, “as far as the tenants are concerned. They are all people of notoriously high standing, from the wealthy old ladies in the best story to Papa Ravinet in the fourth story, and not excepting the young ladies who live in the small rooms in the back building.”

Then, having passed them all in review, she began praising M. de Brevan, whom she always called M. Maxime. She declared that he had won her heart from the beginning, when he had first come to the house, day before yesterday, to engage the room. She had never seen a more perfect gentleman, so kind, so polite, and so liberal! With her great experience, she had at once recognized in him one of those men who seem to be born

expressly for the purpose of inspiring the most violent passions, and of securing the most lasting attachments.

Besides, she added with a hideous smile, she was sure of his deep interest in her pretty new tenant; and she was so well convinced of this, that she would be happy to devote herself to her service, even without any prospect of payment.

This did not prevent her from saying to Henrietta, as soon as she had finished her breakfast,—

“You owe me two francs, miss; and, if you would like it, I can board you for five francs a day.”

Thereupon she went into a lively discussion to show that this would be on her part a mere act of kindness, because, considering how dear every thing was, she would most assuredly lose.

But Henrietta stopped her. Drawing from her purse a twenty-franc piece, she said,—

“Make yourself paid, madam.”

This was evidently not what the estimable woman expected; for she drew back with an air of offended dignity, and protested,—

“What do you take me to be, miss? Do you think me capable of asking for payment?”

And, shrugging her shoulders, she added,—

“Besides, does not all that regards your expenses concern M. Maxime?”

Thereupon she quickly folded the napkin, took the plates, and disappeared. Henrietta did not know what to think of it. She could not doubt that this Megsera pursued some mysterious aim with all her foolish talk; but she could not possibly guess what that aim could be. And still that was not all that kept her thoughts busy. What frightened her most of all was the feeling that she was evidently altogether at M. de Brevan’s mercy. All her possessions amounted to about two hundred francs. She was in want of every thing, of the most indispensable articles: she had not another dress,

nor another petticoat. Why had not M. de Brevan thought of that beforehand? Was he waiting for her to tell him of her distress, and to ask him for money? She could not think so, and she attributed his neglect to his excitement, thinking that he would no doubt come soon to ask how she was, and place himself at her service.

But the day passed away slowly, and night came; but he did not appear. What did this mean? What unforeseen event could have happened? what misfortune could have befallen him? Torn by a thousand wild apprehensions, Henrietta was more than once on the point of going to his house.

It was not before two o'clock on the next day that he appeared at last, affecting an easy air, but evidently very much embarrassed. If he did not come the night before, he said, it was because he was sure the Countess Sarah had him watched. The flight of the daughter of Count Ville-Handry was known all over Paris, and he was suspected of having aided and abetted her: so they had told him, he said, at his club. He also added that it would be imprudent in him to stay longer; and he left again, without having said a word to Henrietta, and without having apparently noticed her destitution.

And thus, for three days, he only came, to disappear almost instantly.

He always came painfully embarrassed, as if he had something very important to tell her; then his brow clouded over; and he went away suddenly, without having said any thing.

Henrietta, tortured by terrible doubts, felt unable to endure this atrocious uncertainty any longer. She determined to force an explanation when, on the fourth day, M. de Brevan came in, evidently under the influence of some terrible determination. As soon as he had entered, he locked the door, and said in a hoarse voice,—

“I must speak to you, madam, yes, I must!”

He was deadly pale; his white lips trembled; and his eyes shone with a fearful light, like those of a man who might have sought courage in strong drink.

“I am ready to listen,” replied the poor girl, all trembling.

He hesitated again for a moment; then overcoming his reluctance, apparently by a great effort, he said,—

“Well, I wish to ask you if you have ever suspected what my real reasons were for assisting you to escape?”

“I think, sir, you have acted from kind pity for me, and also from friendship for M. Daniel Champcey.”

“No! You are entirely mistaken.”

She drew back instinctively, uttering only a low, “Ah!”

Pale as he had been, M. de Brevan had become crimson.

“Have you really noticed nothing? Are you really not aware that I love you?”

She could understand any thing but this, the unfortunate girl; any thing but such infamy, such an incredible insult! M. de Brevan must be either drunk or mad.

“Leave me, sir!” she said peremptorily, but with a voice trembling with indignation.

But he advanced towards her with open arms, and went on,—

“Yes, I love you madly, and for a long time,—ever since the first day I saw you.”

Henrietta, however, had swiftly moved aside, and opened the window.

“If you advance another step, I shall cry for help.”

He stopped, and, changing his tone, said to her,—

“Ah! You refuse? Well, what are you hoping for? For Daniel’s return? Don’t you know that he loves Sarah?”

“Ah! you abuse my forlorn condition infamously!” broke in the young girl. And, as he still insisted, she added,—

“Why don’t you go, coward? Why don’t you go, wretched man? Must I call?”

He was frightened, backed to the door, and half opened it; then he said,—

“You refuse me to-day; but, before the month is over, you will beg me to come to you. You are ruined; and I alone can rescue you.”

CHAPTER 18

At last, then, the truth had come out!

Overcome with horror, her hair standing at an end, and shaken by nervous spasms, poor Henrietta was trying to measure the depth of the abyss into which she had thrown herself.

Voluntarily, and with the simplicity of a child, she had walked into the pit which had been dug for her. But who, in her place, would not have trusted? Who could have conceived such an idea? Who could have suspected such monstrous rascality?

Ah! Now she understood but too well all the mysterious movements that had so puzzled her in M. de Brevan. She saw how profound had been his calculations when he recommended her so urgently not to take her jewels with her while escaping from her father's house, nor any object of value; for, if she had had her jewelry, she would have been in possession of a small fortune; she would have been independent, and above want, at least for a couple of years.

But M. de Brevan wanted her to have nothing. He knew, the coward! with what crushing contempt she would reject his first proposals; but he flattered himself with the hope that isolation, fear, destitution would at last reduce her to submission, and enable him—

“It is too horrible,” repeated the poor girl,—“too horrible!”

And this man had been Daniel's friend! And it was he to whom Daniel, at the moment of sailing, had intrusted his betrothed! What atrocious deception! M. Thomas Elgin was no doubt a formidable bandit, faithless and unscrupulous; but he was known as such: he was known to be capable of any thing, and thus people were on their guard. But this man!—ah, a thousand times meaner and viler!—he had watched for a whole year, with smiling face, for the hour of treachery; he had prepared a hideous crime under the veil of the noblest friendship!

Henrietta thought she could divine what was the traitor's final aim. In obtaining possession of her, he no doubt thought he would secure to himself a large portion of Count Ville-Handry's immense fortune.

And hence, she continued in her meditations, hence the hatred between Sir Thorn and M. de Brevan. They both coveted the same thing; and each one trembled lest the other should first get hold of the treasure which he wanted to secure. The idea that the new countess was in complicity with M. de Brevan did not enter Henrietta's mind. On the contrary, she thought they were enemies, and divided from each other by separate and opposite interests.

"Ah!" she said to herself, "they have one feeling, at all events, in common; and that is hatred against me."

A few months ago, so fearful and so sudden a catastrophe would have crushed Henrietta, in all probability. But she had endured so many blows during the past year, that she bore this also; for it is a fact that the human heart learns to bear grief as the body learns to endure fatigue. Moreover, she called in to her assistance a light shining high above all this terrible darkness,—the remembrance of Daniel.

She had doubted him for an instant; but her faith had, after all, remained intact and perfect. Her reason told her, that, if he had really loved Sarah Brandon, her enemies, M. Elgin and M. de Brevan, would not have taken such pains to make her believe it. She thought, therefore, she was quite certain that he would return to her with his heart devoted to her as when he left her.

But, great God! to think of the grief and the rage of this man, when he should hear how wickedly and cowardly he had been betrayed by the man whom he called his friend! He would know how to restore the count's daughter to her proper position, and how to avenge her.

"And I shall wait for him," she said, her teeth firmly set,—*"I shall wait for him!"*

How? She did not ask herself that question; for she was yet in that first stage of enthusiasm, when we are full of heroic resolves which do not allow us to

see the obstacles that are to be overcome. But she soon learned to know the first difficulties in her way, thanks to Dame Chevassat, who brought her her dinner as the clock struck six, according to the agreement they had made.

The estimable lady had assumed a deeply grieved expression; you might have sworn she had tears in her eyes. In her sweetest voice, she asked:—

“Well, well, my beautiful young lady; so you have quarrelled with our dear M. Maxime?”

Henrietta was so sure of the uselessness of replying, and so fearful of new dangers, that she simply replied,—

“Yes, madam.”

“I was afraid of it,” replied the woman, “just from seeing him come down the stairs with a face as long as that. You see, he is in love with you, that kind young man; and you may believe me when I tell you so, for I know what men are.”

She expected an answer; for generally her eloquence was very effective with her tenants. But, as no reply came, she went on,—

“We must hope that the trouble will blow over.”

“No!”

Looking at Mrs. Chevassat, one would have thought she was stunned.

“How savage you are!” she exclaimed at last. “Well, it is your lookout. Only I should like to know what you mean to do?”

“About what?”

“Why, about your board.”

“I shall find the means, madam, you may be sure.”

The old woman, however, who knew from experience what that cruel word, “living,” sometimes means with poor forsaken girls, shook her head seriously, and answered,—

“So much the better; so much the better! Only I know you owe a good deal of money.”

“Owe?”

“Why, yes! The furniture here has never been paid for.”

“What? The furniture”—

“Of course, M. Maxime was going to pay for it; he has told me so. But if you fall out in this way—you understand, don’t you?”

She hardly did understand such fearful infamy. Still Henrietta did not show her indignation and surprise. She asked,—

“What did the furniture of this room cost? do you know?”

“I don’t know. Something like five or six hundred francs, things are so dear now!” The whole was probably not worth a hundred and fifty or two hundred francs.

“Very well. I’ll pay,” said Henrietta. “The man will give me forty- eight hours’ time, I presume?”

“Oh, certainly!”

As the poor girl was now quite sure that this honeyed Megsera was employed by M. de Brevan to watch her, she affected a perfectly calm air. When she had finished her dinner, she even insisted upon paying on the spot fifty francs, which she owed for the last few days, and for some small purchases. But, when the old woman was gone, she sank into a chair, and said,—

“I am lost!”

There was, in fact, no refuge for her, no help to be expected.

Should she return to her father, and implore the pity of his wife? Ah! death itself would be more tolerable than such a humiliation. And besides, in escaping from M. de Brevan, would she not fall into the hands of M. Elgin?

Should she seek assistance at the hands of some of the old family friends?
But which?

In greater distress than the shipwrecked man who in vain examines the blank horizon, she looked around for some one to help her. She forced her mind to recall all the people she had ever known. Alas! she knew, so to say, nobody. Since her mother had died, and she had been living alone, no one seemed to have remembered her, unless for the purpose of calumniating her.

Her only friends, the only ones who had made her cause their own, the Duke and the Duchess of Champdoce, were in Italy, as she had been assured.

“I can count upon nobody but myself,” she repeated,—“myself, myself!”

Then rousing herself, she said, her heart swelling with emotion,—

“But never mind! I shall be saved!”

Her safety depended upon one single point: if she could manage to live till she came of age, or till Daniel returned, all was right.

“Is it really so hard to live?” she thought. “The daughters of poor people, who are as completely forsaken as I am, nevertheless live. Why should not I live also?”

Why?

Because the children of poor people have served, so to say, from the cradle, an apprenticeship of poverty,—because they are not afraid of a day without work, or a day without bread,—because cruel experience has armed them for the struggle,—because, in fine, they know life, and they know Paris,—because their industry is adapted to their wants, and they have an innate capacity to obtain some advantage from every thing, thanks to their smartness, their enterprise, and their energy.

But Count Ville-Handry’s only daughter—the heiress of many millions, brought up, so to say, in a hothouse, according to the stupid custom of modern society—knew nothing at all of life, of its bitter realities, its struggles, and its sufferings. She had nothing but courage.

“That is enough,” she said to herself. “What we will do, we can do.”

Thus resolved to seek aid from no one, she set to work examining her condition and her resources.

As to objects of any value, she owned the cashmere which she had wrapped around her when she fled, the dressing-case in her mother’s travelling-bag, a brooch, a watch, a pair of pretty ear-rings, and, lastly, two rings, which by some lucky accident she had forgotten to take off, one of which was of considerable value. All this, she thought, must have cost, at least, eight or nine thousand francs; but for how much would it sell? since she was resolved to sell it. This was the question on which her whole future depended.

But how could she dispose of these things? She wanted to have it all settled, so as to get rid of this sense of uncertainty; she wanted, especially, to pay for the scanty, wretched furniture in her chamber. Whom could she ask to help her? For nothing in the world would she have confided in Mrs. Chevassat; for her instincts told her, that, if she once let that terrible woman see what were her necessities, she would be bound hand and foot to her. She was thinking it out, when the idea of the pawnbroker occurred to her. She had heard such men spoken of; but she only knew that they kept places where poor people could get money upon depositing a pledge.

“That is the place I must go to,” Henrietta said to herself.

But how was she to find one?

“Well, I’ll find it some way,” she said.

So she went down, to Mrs. Chevassat’s great astonishment, but without answering her questions, where she was going to in such a hurry.

Having turned at the first corner, she went on at haphazard, walking quite rapidly, and not minding the passers-by, entirely occupied in looking at the houses and the sign-boards. But for more than an hour she wandered thus through all the small streets and alleys in those suburbs; she found nothing, and it was getting dark.

“And still I won’t go home till I have found it,” she said to herself wrathfully.

This resolution gave her courage to go up to a policeman, and, crimson like a poppy, to ask him,—

“Will you be so kind, sir, as to tell me a pawnbroker’s shop?”

The man looked with pity at the young girl, whose whole person exhaled a perfume of distinction and of candor, asking himself, perhaps, what terrible misfortune could have reduced a lady like her to such a step; then he answered with a sigh,—

“There, madam, at the corner of the first street on the right, you will find a loan office.”

“Loan office?” These words suggested to Henrietta no clear idea. But it mattered not. She went on in feverish haste, recognized the house that had been pointed out to her, went up stairs, and, pushing open a door, found herself in a large room, where some twenty people were standing about, waiting.

On the right hand three or four clerks, shut off from the public by a railing breast-high, were writing down the names of the depositors, and counting out money. Far back, a large opening was visible, where another clerk appeared from time to time, to take in the articles that were pawned. After waiting for five minutes, and without asking a question from anybody, Henrietta understood the whole process. Trembling as if she had committed a crime, she went to the opening behind, and put upon the ledge one of her rings, the most valuable of the two. Then she waited, not daring to look up; for it seemed to her as if all eyes were upon her.

“One diamond ring!” cried the clerk. “Nine hundred francs. Whose is it?”

The large amount caused all to look around; and a big woman, but too well dressed, and with a very impudent expression, said,—

“Oh, oh! The damsel dresses well!”

Crimson with shame, Henrietta had stepped up. She whispered,—

“It is my ring, sir.”

The clerk looked at her, and then asked quite gently,—

"You have your papers?"

"Papers? What for?"

"The papers that establish your identity. Your passport, a receipt for rent, or any thing."

The whole company laughed at the ignorance of this girl. She stammered out,—

"I have no such papers, sir."

"Then we can make no advance."

One more hope, her last, vanished thus. She held out her hand, saying,—

"Please give me back my ring."

But the clerk now laughed, and replied,—

"No, no, my dear! that can't be done. You shall have it back when you bring me the papers, or when you come accompanied by two merchants who are known to us."

"But, sir"—

"That is so."

And, finding that he had lost time enough, he went on,—

"One velvet cloak! Thirty francs. Whose is it?"

Henrietta was rushing out, and down the stairs, pursued, as it seemed to her, by the cries of the crowd. How that clerk had looked at her! Did he think she had stolen the ring? And what was to become of it? The police would inquire; they would trace her out; and she would be carried back to her father's house, and given up to Sir Thorn. She could hardly keep up until she reached Water Street; and there fatigue, fright, and excitement made her forget her resolutions. She confessed her discomfiture to Mrs. Chevassat.

The honest woman tried to look as grave as an attorney whom a great client consults, who has unwittingly stirred up a wasps' nest; and, when her tenant had finished, she said in a voice apparently half drowned in tears,—

“Poor little kitten, poor little innocent kitten!”

But, if she succeeded in giving to her face an expression of sincere sympathy, the greedy look in her eyes betrayed but too clearly her immense satisfaction at seeing Henrietta at last at her feet.

“After all,” she said, “you are prodigiously lucky in your misfortunes; for you are too imprudent in all conscience.”

And, as the poor girl was not a little astonished at this, she went on,—

“Yes, you ran a great risk; and I can easily prove it to you. Who are you? Well, you need not turn pale that way: I don’t ask any questions. But after all, if you carry your jewels yourself to the ‘Uncle,’ you go, so to say, and rush right into the lion’s mouth. If they had arrested you when they saw you had no papers; if they had carried you before a magistrate—eh? Ah! my beautiful friend, you would have fared pretty badly, I dare say.”

And then, changing her tone, she began scolding her beautiful young lady for having concealed her troubles from her. That was wrong; that hurt her feelings. Why had she given her money last night? Did she ask for money? Did she look like such a terrible creditor? She knew, God be thanked! what life was here below, and that we are bound to help one another. To be sure, there was that furniture dealer, who must be paid; but she would have been quite willing to make him wait; and why should he not? She had got very different people to wait! Why, only last week, she had sent one of those men away, and a dressmaker into the bargain, who came to levy upon one of her tenants in the back building,—the very nicest, and prettiest, and best of them all.

Thus she discoursed and discoursed with amazing volubility, till at last, when she thought she had made a sufficiently strong impression on her “poor little pussy-cat,” she said,—

“But one can easily see, my dear young lady, that you are a mere child. Sell your poor little jewels! Why, that is murder, as long as there is some one at hand quite ready to do any thing for you.”

At this sudden, but not altogether unexpected attack, Henrietta trembled.

“For I am sure,” continued Mrs. Chevassat, “if it were only to be agreeable to you, he would give one of his arms, this poor M. Maxime.”

Henrietta looked so peremptorily at her, that the worthy lady seemed to be quite disconcerted.

“I forbid you,” cried the young lady, with a voice trembling with indignation,—“I forbid you positively ever to mention his name!”

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“As you like it,” she answered.

And then, ready to change the conversation, she added,—

“Well, then, let us return to your ring. What do you propose to do?”

“That is exactly why I came to you,” replied Henrietta. “I do not know what is to be done in such a case.”

Mrs. Chevassat smiled, very much pleased.

“And you did very well to come to us,” she said.

“Chevassat will go, take the charcoal-dealer and the grocer next door with him; and before going to bed you will have your money, I promise you! You see he understands pretty well how to make the clerks do their duty, my Chevassat.”

That evening the excellent man really condescended to go up stairs, and to bring Henrietta himself eight hundred and ninety-five francs.

He did not bring the whole nine hundred francs, he said; for, having put his two neighbors to some inconvenience, he was bound, according to established usage, to invite them to take something. For himself, he had, of course, kept nothing,—oh, nothing at all! He could take his oath upon that; for he preferred by far leaving that little matter to the beautiful young lady’s liberality.

“Here are ten francs,” said Henrietta curtly, in order to make an end to his endless talk.

Thus, with the few gold-pieces which she had found in her purse, the poor girl had a capital of about a thousand francs in hand. How many days, how many months, this sum would have secured to her, if the furniture-dealer had not been there with his bill! He did not fail to present himself next day, accompanied by Mrs. Chevassat. He asked for five hundred and seventy-nine francs. Such a sum for a few second-hand pieces of furniture which adorned that wretched garret! It was a clear swindle, and the impudence so great, that Henrietta was overwhelmed. But still she paid.

When he was gone, she sadly counted from one hand into the other the twenty-three gold-pieces that were left, when suddenly a thought occurred to her, that might have saved her, if she had followed it out.

It was the thought of leaving the house by stealth, of going to the station of the Orleans Railway, and of taking the first train for the home of Daniel's aunt. Alas! she was content with writing to her, and remained.

CHAPTER 19

This inspiration was, moreover, to be the last favor which Providence vouchsafed to Henrietta,—an opportunity which, once allowed to pass, never returns. From that moment she found herself irrevocably ensnared in a net which tightened day by day more around her, and held her a helpless captive. She had vowed to herself, the unfortunate girl, that she would economize her little hoard like the blood in her veins. But how could she economize?

She was without every thing. When M. de Brevan had gone to engage this garret-room, he had thought of nothing; or rather (and such a calculation was quite in keeping with his cold-blooded rascality) he had taken his measures so that his victim must soon be in utter destitution. Without any other clothes than those she wore on the night of her flight, she had no linen, no shoes, not a towel even to wipe her hands, unless she borrowed them from her friend down stairs.

Accustomed as she was to all the comforts of boundless wealth, and to all the refinements of cleanliness, these privations became to her a genuine martyrdom. Thus she spent in a variety of small purchases more than a hundred and fifty francs. The sum was enormous at a time when she could already count the days to the hour when she would be without bread. In addition to that she had to pay Mrs. Chevassat five francs a day for her board. Five francs were another enormous sum which troubled her grievously; for she would have been quite willing to live on bread and water. But in that direction she thought no economizing was possible.

One evening she had hinted at the necessity of retrenching, when Mrs. Chevassat had shot at her a venomous glance, which pierced her to the very marrow of her bones.

“It must be done,” she said to herself.

In her mind she felt as if the five francs were a kind of daily ransom which she paid the estimable concierge’s wife for her good-will. It is true, that, for

such a consideration, the terrible woman was all attention for her “poor little pussy-cat;” for thus she had definitely dubbed Henrietta, becoming daily more familiar, and adding this odious and irritating presumption to all the other tortures of the poor girl. Many a time poor Henrietta had been made so indignant and furious, that she had been on the point of rebelling; but she had never dared, submitting to this familiarity for the same reason for which she paid her five francs every day. The old woman, taking her silence for consent, put no longer any restraint upon herself. She declared she could not comprehend how her “little pussy-cat,” young and pretty as she was, could consent to live as she did. Was that a life?

Then she always came back to M. Maxime, who continued to call regularly twice a day, the poor young man!

“And more than that, poor little pussy,” she added, “you will see that one of these days he will summon courage enough to come and offer you an apology.”

But Henrietta would not believe that.

“He will never have such consummate impudence,” she thought.

He had it, nevertheless. One morning, when she had just finished righting up her room, somebody knocked discreetly, at her door. Thinking that it was Mrs. Chevassat, who brought her her breakfast, she went to the door and opened it, without asking who was there. And she started back with amazement and with terror when she recognized M. de Brevan.

It really looked as if he were making a supreme effort over himself. He was deadly pale; his lips trembled; his eyes looked dim and uncertain; and he moved his lips and jaws as if he had gravel in his mouth.

“I have come, madam,” he said, “to ask if you have reconsidered.”

She made no reply, looking at him with an air of contempt which would have caused a man with some remnant of honor in his heart to flee from the spot instantly. But he had, no doubt, armed himself beforehand, against contempt.

"I know," he continued, "that my conduct must appear abominable in your eyes. I have led you into this snare, and I have meanly betrayed a friend's confidence; but I have an excuse. My passion is stronger than my will, than my reason."

"A vile passion for money!"

"You may think so, madam, if you choose. I shall not even attempt to clear myself. That is not what I came for. I came solely for the purpose of enlightening you in regard to your own position, which you do not seem to realize."

If she had followed her own impulses, Henrietta would have driven the wretch away. But she thought she ought to know his intentions and his plans. She overcame her disgust, therefore, and remained silent.

"In the first place," said M. de Brevan, apparently trying to collect his thoughts, "bear this in mind, madam. You are ruined in reputation, and ruined through me. All Paris is convinced, by this time, that I have run away with you; and that I keep you concealed in a charming place, where we enjoy our mutual love; in fact, that you are my mistress."

He seemed to expect an explosion of wrath. By no means! Henrietta remained motionless like a statue.

"What would you have?" he went on in a tone of sarcasm. "My coachman has been talking. Two friends of mine, who reached the palace on foot when I drove up, saw you jump into my coupe; and, as if that had not been enough, that absurd M. Elgin must needs call me out. We had a duel, and I have wounded him."

The manner in which the young girl shrugged her shoulders showed but too clearly that she did not believe M. de Brevan. He added,—

"If you doubt it, madam, pray read this, then, at the top of the second column."

She took the paper which he offered her, and there she read,—

“Yesterday, in the woods near Vincennes, a duel with swords was fought between M. M. de B—— and one of the most distinguished members of our American colony. After five minutes’ close combat, M. E—— was wounded in the arm. It is said that the sudden and very surprising disappearance of one of the greatest heiresses of the Faubourg Saint Germain was not foreign to this duel. Lucky M. de B—— is reported to know too much of the beautiful young lady’s present home for the peace of the family. But surely these lines ought to be more than enough on the subject of an adventure which will ere long, no doubt, end in a happy and brilliant marriage.”

“You see, madam,” said M. de Brevan, when he thought Henrietta had had time enough to read the article, “you see it is not I who advise marriage. If you will become my wife, your honor is safe.”

“Ah, sir!”

In that simple utterance there was so much contempt, and such profound disgust, that M. de Brevan seemed to turn, if possible, whiter than before.

“Ah! I see you prefer marrying M. Thomas Elgin,” he said.

She only shrugged her shoulders; but he went on,—

“Oh, do not smile! He or I; you have no other alternative. Sooner or later you will have to choose.”

“I shall not choose, sir.”

“Oh, just wait till poverty has come! Then you think, perhaps, you will only need to implore your father to come to your assistance. Do not flatter yourself. Your father has no other will but that of the Countess Sarah; and the Countess Sarah will have it so, that you marry Sir Thorn.”

“I shall not appeal to my father, sir.”

“Then you probably count upon Daniel’s return? Ah, believe me! do not indulge in such dreams. I have told you Daniel loves the Countess Sarah; and, even if he did not love her, you have been too publicly disgraced for him ever to give you his name. But that is nothing yet. Go to the navy department, and they will tell you that ‘The Conquest’ is out on a cruise of

two years more. At the time when Daniel returns, if he returns at all (which is very far from being certain), you will long since have become Mrs. Elgin or Madame de Brevan, unless"—

Henrietta looked at him so fixedly, that he could not bear the glance; and then she said in a deep voice,—

"Unless I die! did you not mean that? Be it so."

Coldly M. de Brevan bowed, as if he intended to say,—

"Yes, unless you should be dead: that was what I meant."

Then, opening the door, he added,—

"Let me hope, madam, that this is not your last word. I shall, however, have the honor of calling every week to receive your orders."

And, bowing, he left the room.

"What brought him here, the wretch! What does he want of me?"

Thus she questioned herself as soon as she was alone, and the door was 'shut.' And her anguish increased tenfold; for she did not believe a word of the pretexts which M. de Brevan had assigned for his visit. No, she could not admit that he had come to see if she had reflected, nor that he really cherished that abominable hope, that misery, hunger, and fear would drive her into his arms.

"He ought to know me well enough," she thought with a new access of wrath, "to be sure that I would prefer death a thousand times."

There was no doubt in her mind that this step, which had evidently been extremely painful to himself, had become necessary through some all-powerful consideration. But what could that be? By a great effort of mind Henrietta recalled, one by one, all the phrases used by M. de Brevan, in the hope that some word might give her light; but she discovered nothing. All he had told her as to the consequences of her flight, she had foreseen before she had resolved to escape. He had told her nothing new, but his duel with Sir Thorn; and, when she considered the matter, she thought that, also, quite natural. For did they not both covet with equal eagerness the

fortune which she would inherit from her mother as soon as she came of age? The antagonism of their interests explained, she thought, their hatred; for she was well convinced that they hated each other mortally. The idea that Sir Thorn and M. de Brevan understood each other, and pursued a common purpose, never entered her mind; and, if it had suggested itself, she would have rejected it as absurd.

Must she, then, come to the conclusion that M. de Brevan had really, when he appeared before her, no other aim but to drive her to despair? But why should he do so? what advantage would that be to him? The man who wants to make a girl his own does not go to work to chill her with terror, and to inspire her with ineffable disgust. Still M. de Brevan had done this; and therefore he must aim at something different from that marriage of which he spoke.

What was that something? Such abominable things are not done for the mere pleasure of doing them, especially if that involves some amount of danger. Now, it was very clear, that upon Daniel's return, whether he still loved Henrietta or not, M. de Brevan would have a terrible account to give to that brave sailor who had trusted him with the care of his betrothed. Did M. de Brevan ever think of that return? Oh, yes! he did; and with secret terror. There was proof of that in one of the phrases that had escaped him.

After having said, "When Daniel returns," he had added, "if he ever returns, which is by no means sure."

Why this proviso? Had he any reasons to think that Daniel might perish in this dangerous campaign? Now she remembered, yes, she remembered distinctly, that M. de Brevan had smiled in a very peculiar way when he had said these words. And, as she recalled this, her heart sank within her, and she felt as if she were going to faint. Was he not capable of anything, the wretched man, who had betrayed him so infamously,—capable even of arming an assassin?

"Oh, I must warn Daniel!" she exclaimed, "I must warn him, and not lose a minute."

And, although she had written him a long letter only the day before, she wrote again, begging him to be watchful, to mistrust everybody, because most assuredly his life was threatened. And this letter she carried herself to the post-office, convinced as she was that to confide it to Mrs. Chevassat would have been the same as to send it to M. de Brevan.

It was astonishing, however, how the estimable lady seemed to become day by day more attached to Henrietta, and how expansive and demonstrative her affections grew. At all hours of the day, and on the most trivial pretexts, she would come up, sit down, and for entire hours entertain her with her intolerable speeches. She did not put any restraint upon herself any longer, but talked "from the bottom of her heart" with her "dear little pussy-cat," as if she had been her own daughter. The strange doctrines at which she had formerly only hinted, she now proclaimed without reserve, boasting of an open kind of cynicism, which betrayed a terrible moral perversity. It looked as if the horrible Megsera had been deputed by Henrietta's enemies for the special purpose of demoralizing and depraving her, if possible, and to drive her into the brilliant and easy life of sin in which so many unhappy women perish.

Fortunately, in this case, the messenger was ill-chosen. The eloquence of Mrs. Chevassat, which very likely would have inflamed the imagination of some poor but ambitious girl, caused nothing but disgust in Henrietta's heart. She had gotten into the habit of thinking of other things while the old woman was holding forth; and her noble soul floated off to regions where these vulgarities could reach her no more.

Her life was, nevertheless, a very sad one. She never went out, spending her days in her chamber, reading, or working at a great embroidery, a masterpiece of patience and taste, which she had undertaken with a faint hope that it might become useful in case of distress. But a new source of trouble roused her soon after from this dull monotony. Her money grew less and less; and at last the day came when she changed the last gold-piece of her nine hundred francs. It became urgent to resort once more to the pawnbroker; for these were the first days of April, and the honeyed words of Mrs. Chevassat had given her to understand that she had better get ready to pay on the 8th her rent, which amounted to a hundred francs.

She intrusted therefore to the concierge the remaining ring to be pawned. Calculating from the sum she had received for the first ring, she hoped to obtain for this one, at the very least, five or six hundred francs.

The concierge brought her one hundred and ninety francs.

At first, she was convinced the man had robbed her; and she gave him to understand that she thought so. But he showed her the receipt in a perfect rage.

“Look there,” he said, “and remember to whom you are talking!”

On the receipt she read in fact these words: “Advanced, two hundred francs.” Convinced of the injustice of her accusations, Henrietta had to make her apologies, and hardly succeeded by means of a ten-franc-piece in soothing the man’s wounded feelings.

Alas! the poor girl did not know that one is always at liberty to pledge an article only for a given sum, a part of its real value; and she was too inexperienced in such matters to notice the reference to that mode of pawning on her receipt. However, it was one of those mishaps for poor Henrietta which cannot be mended, and from which we never recover. She lost two months’ existence, the very time, perhaps, that was needed till Daniel’s return. Still the day when the rent was due came, and she paid her hundred francs. The second day after that, she was once more without money, and, according to Mrs. Chevassat’s elegant expression, forced to “live on her poor possessions.” But the pawnbroker had too cruelly disappointed her calculations: she would not resort to him again, and risk a second disappointment.

This time she thought she would, instead of pawning, sell, her gold-dressing-case; and she requested the obliging lady below to procure her a purchaser. At first Mrs. Chevassat raised a host of objections.

“To sell such a pretty toy!” she said, “it’s murder! Just think, you’ll never see it again. If, on the other hand, you carry it to ‘Uncle’ you can take it out again as soon as you have a little money.”

But she lost her pains, she saw and at last consented to bring up a kind of dealer in toilet-articles, an excellent honest man, she declared, in whom one could put the most absolute confidence. And he really showed himself worthy of her warm recommendation; for he offered instantly five hundred francs for the dressing-case, which was not worth much more than three times as much. Nor was this his last bid. After an hour's irritating discussions, after having ten times pretended to leave the room, he drew with many sighs his *portemonnaie* from its secret home, and counted upon the table the seven hundred francs in gold upon which Henrietta had stoutly insisted.

That was enough to pay Mrs. Chevassat for four months' board.

"But no," said the poor young girl to herself, "that would be pusillanimous in the highest degree."

And that very evening she summoned all her courage, and told the formidable woman in a firm tone of voice, that henceforth she would only take one meal, dinner. She had chosen this half-way measure in order not to avoid a scene, for that she knew she could not hope for, but a regular falling-out.

Contrary to all expectations, the concierge's wife appeared neither surprised nor angry. She only shrugged her shoulders as she said,—

"As you like, my 'little pussy-cat.' Only believe me, it is no use economizing in one's eating."

From the day of this *coup d'état*, Henrietta went down every morning herself to buy her penny-roll and the little supply of milk which constituted her breakfast. For the rest of the day she did not leave her room, busying herself with her great work; and nothing broke in upon the distressing monotony of her life but the weekly visits of M. de Brevan.

For he did not forget his threat; and every week Henrietta was sure to see him come. He came in with a solemn air, and coldly asked if she had reflected since he had had the honor of presenting his respects to her. She did not answer him ordinarily, except by a look of contempt; but he did not seem in the least disconcerted. He bowed respectfully, and invariably said, before leaving the room,—

“Next time, then; I can wait. Oh! I have time; I can wait.”

If he hoped thus to conquer Henrietta more promptly, he was entirely mistaken. This periodical insult acted only as an inducement to keep up her wrath and to increase her energy. Her pride rose at the thought of this unceasing struggle; and she swore that she would be victorious. It was this sentiment which inspired her with a thought, which, in its results, was destined to have a decisive influence on her future.

It was now the end of June, and she saw with trembling her little treasure grow smaller and smaller; when one day she asked Mrs. Chevassat, who seemed to be of unusually good-humor, if she could not procure her some work. She told her that she was considered quite skilful in all kinds of needlework.

But the woman laughed at the first words, and said,—

“Leave me alone! Are hands like yours made to work?”

And when Henrietta insisted, and showed her, as a proof of what she could do, the embroidery which she had commenced, she replied,—

“That is very pretty; but embroidering from morning till night would not enable a fairy to keep a canary-bird.”

There was probably some truth in what she said, exaggerated as it sounded; and the poor girl hastened to add that she understood other kinds of work also. She was a first-class musician, for instance, and fully able to give music-lessons, or teach singing, if she could only get pupils. At these words a ray of diabolic satisfaction lighted up the old woman’s eyes; and she cried out,—

“What, my ‘pussy-cat,’ could you play dancing-music, like those artists who go to the large parties of fashionable people?”

“Certainly!”

“Well, that is a talent worth something! Why did you not tell me before? I will think of it, and you shall see.”

On the next Saturday, early in the morning, she appeared in Henrietta’s room with the bright face of a bearer of good news.

"I have thought of you," she said as soon as she entered.

"Ah!"

"We have a tenant in the house who is going to give a large party to-night. I have mentioned you to her; and she says she will give you thirty francs if you will make her guests jump. Thirty francs! That's a big sum; and besides, if they are pleased, you will get more customers."

"In what part of the house does she live?"

"In the second story of the back building, looking upon the yard. Mrs. Hilaire, a very nice person, and so good! there is no one like her. You would have to be there at nine o'clock precisely."

"I'll come."

Quite happy, and full of hope, Henrietta spent a part of the afternoon in mending her only dress, a black silk dress, much worn unfortunately, and already often repaired. Still, by much skill and patience, she had managed to look quite respectable when she rang the bell at Mrs. Hilaire's door. She was shown into a room furnished with odd furniture, but brilliantly lighted, in which seven or eight ladies in flaming costumes, and as many fashionable gentlemen, were smoking and taking coffee. Both ladies and gentlemen had just risen from table; there was no mistaking it from their eyes and the sound of their voices.

"Look! there is the musician from the garret!" exclaimed a large, dark-skinned woman, pretty, but very vulgar, who seemed to be Mrs. Hilaire.

And, turning to Henrietta, she asked,—

"Will you take a little glass of something, my darling?"

The poor girl blushed crimson, and, painfully embarrassed, declined, and asked pardon for declining; when the lady broke in rather rudely, and said,—

"You are not thirsty? Very well. You'll drink after some time. In the meantime will you play us a quadrille? and mark the time, please."

Then imitating with distressing accuracy the barking voice of masters of ceremonies at public balls, she called out,—

“Take your positions, take your positions: a quadrille!”

Henrietta had taken her seat at the piano. She turned her back to the dancers; but she had before her a mirror, in which she saw every gesture of Mrs. Hilaire and her guests. And then she became quite sure of what she had suspected from the beginning. She understood into what company she had been inveigled by the concierge’s wife. She had, however, sufficient self-control to finish the quadrille. But, when the last figure had been danced, she rose; and, walking up to the mistress of the house, said, stammering painfully, and in extreme embarrassment,—

“Please excuse me, madam, I have to leave. I feel very unwell. I could not play any more.”

“How funny!” cried one of the gentlemen. “Here is our ball at an end!”

But the young woman said,—

“Hush, Julius! Don’t you see how pale she is,—pale like death, the poor child! What is the matter with you, darling? Is it the heat that makes you feel badly? It is stifling hot here.”

And, when Henrietta was at the door, she said,—

“Oh, wait! I do not trouble people for nothing. Come, Julius, turn your pockets inside out, and give the little one a twenty-franc-piece.”

The poor girl was almost outside, when she turned, and said,—

“Thank you, madam; but you owe me nothing.”

It was high time for Henrietta to leave. Her first surprise had been followed by mad anger, which drove the blood to her head, and made her weep bitter tears. She knew now that Mrs. Chevassat had caught her in this trap. What could the wretched woman have meant?

Carried away by an irresistible impulse, and no longer mistress of herself, Henrietta rushed down stairs, and broke like a whirlwind into the little box of the concierge, crying out,—

“How could you dare to send me to such people? You knew all about it. You are a wretch!”

Master Chevassat was the first to rise, and said,—

“What is the matter? Do you know to whom you are talking?”

But his wife interrupted him with a gesture, and, turning to Henrietta, said with cynic laughter,—

“Well, what next? Are these people not good enough for you; eh? In the first place, I am tired of your ways, my ‘pussy-cat.’ When one is a beggar, as you are, one stays at home like a good girl; and one does not run away with a young man, and gad about the world with lovers.”

Thereupon she took advantage of the fact that Henrietta had paused upon the threshold, to push her brutally out of the room at the risk of throwing her down, and fiercely banged the door. An hour afterwards the poor girl vehemently reproached herself for her passion.

“Alas!” she said to herself, weeping, “the weak, the unhappy, have no right to complain. Who knows what this wicked woman will now do to avenge herself?”

She found it out the second day afterwards.

Coming down a little before seven o’clock, in order to buy her roll and her milk for breakfast, she met at the entrance-door Mrs. Hilaire, face to face. At the sight of the poor girl, that irascible woman turned as red as a poppy, and, rushing up to her, seized her by the arm, and shook it furiously, crying out at the same time with the full force of her lungs,—

“Ah, it is you, miserable beggar, who go and tell stories on me! Oh, what wickedness! A beggar whom I had sent for to allow her to earn thirty francs! And I must needs think she is sick, and pity her, and ask Julius to give her a twenty-franc-piece.”

Henrietta felt that she ought not to blame this woman, who, after all, had shown her nothing but kindness. But she was thoroughly frightened, and tried to get away. The woman, however, held her fast, and cried still louder, till several tenants came to the open windows.

“They’ll make you pay for that, my darling,” she yelled, amid foul oaths, which her wrath carried along with it, as a torrent floats down stones and debris. “They’ll make you pay for it! You’ll have to clear out of here, I tell you!”

And the threat was not an idle one. That very afternoon the same lamentable scene was repeated; and so it went on every morning and every day. Mrs. Hilaire had friends in the house, who took up the quarrel, and fell upon Henrietta whenever she appeared. They lay in wait for her by turns; and she no sooner ventured upon the staircase than the shouts began; so that the unfortunate girl no longer dared leave the house. Early in the morning, as soon as the door was opened, she ran out to buy her daily provisions; then, running up swiftly, she barricaded herself in her chamber, and never stirred out again.

Surely, there was no lack of desire on her part to leave the house. But where should she go? Besides, the unknown frightened her; might it not have still greater terrors in reserve for her?

At last she was entirely without money.

In July her rent had cost her a hundred francs, and she had been compelled to buy a dress in place of her merino dress, which was falling to pieces. In the first days of August she was at the end of her resources. Nor would she have been able to make them last so long, even if she had not, ever since that evening at Mrs. Hilaire’s, done entirely without the expensive board of Mrs. Chevassat. Even this rupture, at which Henrietta had at first rejoiced, became now to her a source of overwhelming trouble. She had still a few things that she might sell,—a brooch, her cashmere, her watch, and her earrings; but she did not know how and to whom she could sell them.

All the stories by which the wicked woman down stairs had tried to frighten her from going herself to the pawnbroker came back to her mind; and she

saw herself, at the first attempt, arrested by the police, examined, and carried back to her father, handed over to Sarah and Sir Thorn, and—

Still want pressed her hard; and at last, after long hesitation, one evening, at dark, she slipped out to find a purchaser. What she was looking for was one of those dark little shops in which men lie in wait for their prey, whom the police always suspects, and carefully watches. She found one such as she desired. An old woman with spectacles on her nose, without even asking her name, and evidently taking her to be a thief, gave her, for her brooch and her ear-rings, a hundred and forty francs.

What was this sum of money? A nothing; Henrietta understood that perfectly. And hence, overcoming all her reserve and her reluctance, she vowed she would try every thing in her power to obtain work.

She kept her word, sustained by a secret hope of triumphing, by dint of energy and perseverance, over fate itself. She went from store to store, from door to door, so to say, soliciting employment, as she would have asked for alms, promising to do any thing that might be wanted, in return merely for her board and lodging. But it was written that every thing should turn against her. Her beauty, her charms, her distinguished appearance, her very manner of speaking, were so many obstacles in her way. Who could think of engaging a girl as a servant, who looked like a duchess? So that all her prayers only met with cold faces, shrugging of shoulders, and ironical smiles. She was refused everywhere. It is true that now and then some gallant clerk replied to her application by a declaration of love.

Chance had thrown into her hands one of those small handbills which bill-stickers paste upon the gutters, and in which workwomen are “wanted.” Henceforth she spent her days in looking up these handbills, and in going to places from which they were issued. But here she met with the same difficulties. There was no end of questions.

“Who are you? Where have you been? By whom have you been employed?” and finally, always the same distressing answer,—

“We cannot employ persons like you.”

Then she went to an employment agency. She had noticed one which displayed at the door a huge placard, on which places were offered from thirty-five up to a thousand francs a month. She went up stairs. A very loquacious gentleman made her first deposit a considerable sum, and then told her he had exactly what she wanted. She went ten times back to the office, and always in vain. After an eleventh appointment, he gave her the address of two houses, in one of which he assured her she would certainly be employed. These two houses turned out to be two small shops, where pretty young ladies were wanted to pour out absinthe, and to wait upon the customers.

This was Henrietta's last effort. For ten months she had now been struggling with a kind of helpless fury against unconquerable difficulties, and at last the springs of her energy had lost their elasticity. Now, crushed in body and mind, overwhelmed and conquered, she gave up.

It lacked still eighteen months before she would become of age. Since she had escaped from her father's house, she had not received a line from Daniel, although she had constantly written to him, and she had, of course, no means of ascertaining the date of his return. She had once, following M. de Brevan's advice, summoned courage enough to go to the navy department, and there to inquire if they had any news about "The Conquest." A clerk had replied to her, with a joke, that "The Conquest" might be afloat yet "a year or two." How could the poor girl wait till then? Why should she any longer maintain the useless struggle? She felt acute pains in her chest; she coughed; and, after walking a few yards, her legs gave way under her, and she broke out in cold perspiration. She now spent her days almost always in bed, shivering with chills, or plunged in a kind of stupor, during which her mind was filled with dismal visions. She felt as if the very sources of life were drying up within her, and as if all her blood was, drop by drop, oozing out of her through an open wound.

"If I could die thus!" she thought.

This was the last favor she asked of God. Henceforth, a miracle alone could save her; and she hardly wished to be saved. A perfect indifference and

intense distaste of every thing filled her soul. She thought she had exhausted all that man can suffer; and there was nothing left for her to fear.

A last misfortune which now befell her did not elicit even a sigh from her. One afternoon, while she had been down stairs, she had left the window open. The wind had suddenly sprung up, slammed the blinds, and thus upset a chair. On this chair hung her cashmere; it fell into the fireplace, in which a little fire was still burning; and when she came back she found the shawl half-burnt to ashes. It was the only article of value which she still possessed; and she might at any time have procured several hundred francs for it.

“Well,” she said, “what does it matter? It means three months taken from my life; that is all.”

And she did not think of it any more; she did not even trouble herself about the rent, which became due in October.

“I shall not be able to pay it,” she said to herself. “Mrs. Chevassat will give me notice, and then the hour will have come.”

Still, to her great surprise, the worthy woman from below did not scold her for not having the money ready, and even promised she would make the owner of the house give her time. This inexplicable forbearance gave Henrietta a week’s respite. But at last, one morning, she woke up, having not a cent left, having nothing even, she thought, that she could get money for, and being very hungry.

“Well,” she thought, as if announcing to her own soul that the catastrophe had at last come, “all I need now is a few minutes’ courage.”

She said so in her mind; but in reality she was chilled to the heart by the fearful certainty that the crisis had really come: she felt as if the executioner were at the door of the room, ready to announce her sentence of death. And yet, for a month now, she had thought of suicide only; and the evening before she had thought it over with a kind of delight.

“I am surely not such a coward?” she said to herself in a fit of rage.

Yes, she was afraid. Yes, she told herself in vain that there was no other choice left to her but that between death and Sir Thorn, or M. de Brevan. She was terrified.

Alas! she was only twenty years old; she had never felt such exuberance of life within her; she wanted to live,—to live a month more, a week, a day!

If only her shawl had not been burnt! Then, examining with haggard eyes her chamber, she saw that exquisite piece of embroidery which she had undertaken. It was a dress, covered *all* over with work of marvellous delicacy and exquisite outlines. Unfortunately, it was far from being finished.

“Never mind!” she said to herself; “perhaps they will give me something for it.”

And, wrapping the dress up hastily, she hurried to offer it for sale to the old woman who had already bought her ear-rings, and then her watch. The fearful old hag seemed to be overcome with surprise when she saw this marvel of skill.

“That’s very fine,” she said; “why, it is magnificent! and, if it were finished, it would be worth a mint of money; but as it is no one would want it.”

She consented, however, to give twenty francs for it, solely from love of art, she said; for it was money thrown away. These twenty francs were, for Henrietta, an unexpected release.

“It will last me a month,” she thought, determined to live on dry bread only; “and who can tell what a month may bring forth?”

And this unfortunate girl had an inheritance from her mother of more than a million! If she had but known it, if she had but had a single friend to advise her in her inexperience! But she had been faithful to her vow never to let her secret be known to a living soul; and the most terrible anguish had never torn from her a single complaint.

M. de Brevan knew this full well; for he had continued his weekly visits with implacable regularity. This perseverance, which had at first served to

maintain Henrietta's courage, had now become a source of unspeakable torture.

"Ah, I shall be avenged!" she said to him one day. "Daniel will come back."

But he, shrugging his shoulders, had answered,—

"If you count upon that alone, you may as well surrender, and become my wife at once."

She turned her head from him with an expression of ineffable disgust. Rather the icy arms of Death! And still the pulsations of her heart were apparently counted. Since the end of November her twenty francs had been exhausted; and to prolong her existence she had had to resort to the last desperate expedients of extreme poverty. All that she possessed, all that she could carry from her chamber without being stopped by the concierge, she had sold, piece by piece, bit after bit, for ten cents, for five cents, for a roll. Her linen had been sacrificed first; then the covering of her bed, her curtains, her sheets. The mattress had gone the way of the rest,—the wool from the inside first, carried off by handfuls; then the ticking.

Thus, on the 25th of December, she found herself in a chamber as utterly denuded as if a fire had raged there; while she herself had on her body but a single petticoat under her thin alpaca dress, without a rag to cover herself in these wintry nights. Two evenings before, when terror triumphed over her resolution for a time, she had written her father a long letter. He had made no reply. Last night she had again written in these words:—

"I am hungry, and I have no bread. If by tomorrow at noon you have not come to my assistance, at one o'clock you will have ceased to have a daughter."

Tortured by cold and hunger, emaciated, and almost dying, she had waited for an answer. At noon nothing had come. She gave herself time till four o'clock. Four o'clock, and no answer.

"I must make an end of it," she said to herself.

Her preparations had been made. She had told the Cerberus below that she would be out all the evening; and she had procured a considerable stock of

charcoal. She wrote two letters,—one to her father, the other to M. de Brevan.

After that she closed hermetically all the openings in her room, kindled two small fires, and, having commended her soul to God, stretched herself out on her bed. It was five o'clock.

A dense, bitter vapor spread slowly through the room; and the candle ceased to give a visible light. Then she felt as if an iron screw were tightening on her temples. She was suffocating, and felt a desire to sleep; but in her stomach she suffered intense pains.

Then strange and incoherent thoughts arose deliriously in her head; her ears were filled with confused noises; her pulse beat with extraordinary vehemence; nausea nearly convulsed her; and from time to time she fancied terrific explosions were breaking her skull to pieces.

The candle went out. Maddened by a sensation of dying, she tried to rise; but she could not. She wanted to cry; but her voice ended in a rattle in her throat.

Then her ideas became utterly confused. Respiration ceased. It was all over. She was suffering no longer.

CHAPTER 20

Thus a few minutes longer, and all was really over. Count Ville-Handry's daughter was dying! Count Ville-Handry's daughter was dead!

But at that very hour the tenant of the fourth story, Papa Ravinet, the second-hand dealer, was going to his dinner. If he had gone down as usually, by the front staircase, no noise would have reached him. But Providence was awake. That evening he went down the back stairs, and heard the death-rattle of the poor dying girl. In our beautiful egotistical days, many a man, in the place of this old man, would not have gone out of his way. He, on the contrary, hurried down to inform the concierge. Many a man, again, would have been quieted by the apparent calmness of the Chevassat couple, and would have been satisfied with their assurance that Henrietta was not at home. He, however, insisted, and, in spite of the evident reluctance of the concierge and his wife, compelled them to go up, and brought out, by his words first, and then by his example, one tenant after another.

It was he likewise, who, while the concierge and the other people were deliberating, directed what was to be done for the dying girl, and who hastened to fetch from his magazine a mattress, sheets, blankets, wood to make a fire, in fact, every thing that was needed in that bare chamber.

A few moments later Henrietta opened her eyes. Her first sensation was a very strange one.

In the first place she was utterly amazed at feeling that she was in a warm bed,—she who had, for so many days, endured all the tortures of bitter cold. Then, looking around, she was dazzled by the candles that were burning on her table, and the beautiful, bright fire in her fireplace. And then she looked with perfect stupor at all the women whom she did not know, and who were bending over her, watching her movements.

Had her father at last come to her assistance?

No, for he would have been there; and she looked in vain for him among all these strange people.

Then, understanding from some words which were spoken close by her, that it was to chance alone she owed her rescue from death, she was filled with indescribable grief.

“To have suffered all that can be suffered in dying,” she said to herself, “and then not to die after all!”

She almost had a feeling of hatred against all these people who were busying themselves around her. Now that they had brought her back to life, would they enable her to live?

Nevertheless, she distinguished very clearly what was going on in her room. She recognized the wealthy ladies from the first story, who had stayed to nurse her, and between them Mrs. Chevassat, who assumed an air of great activity, while she explained to them how Henrietta had deceived her affectionate heart in order to carry out her fatal purpose.

“You see, I did not dream of any thing,” she protested in a whining tone. “A poor little pussy-cat, who was always merry, and this morning yet sang like a bird. I thought she might be a little embarrassed, but never suspected such misery. You see, ladies, she was as proud as a queen, and as haughty as the weather. She would rather have died than ask for assistance; for she knew she had only a word to say to me. Did I not already, in October, when I saw she would not be able to pay her rent, become responsible for her?”

And thereupon the infamous hypocrite bent over the poor girl, kissed her on her forehead, and said with a tender tone of voice,—

“Did you not love me, dear little pussy-cat; did not you? I know you loved poor old Mrs. Chevassat.”

Unable to articulate a word, even if she had understood what was said, poor Henrietta shivered, shrank with horror and disgust from the contact with those lying lips. And the emotion which this feeling caused her did more for her than all the attentions that were paid her. Still, it was only after the doctor, who had been sent for, had come and bled her, that she was

restored to the full use of her faculties. Then she thanked, in a very feeble voice, the people around her, assuring them that she felt much better now, and might safely be left alone.

The two wealthy ladies, whom curiosity had carried off at the moment when they were sitting down to dinner, did not wait for more, and, very happy to be released, slipped away at once. But the concierge's wife remained by Henrietta's bedside till she was alone with her victim; and then every thing changed in her face, tone of voice, look, and manner.

"Well," she commenced, "now you are happy, miss! You have advertised my house, and it will all be in the papers. Everybody will pity you, and think your lover a cold-blooded villain, who lets you die of starvation."

The poor young girl deprecated the charge with such a sweet, gentle expression of face, that a savage would have been touched; but Mrs. Chevassat was civilized.

"And still you know very well," she went on in a bitter tone, "that dear M. Maxime has done all he could to save you. Only day before yesterday, he offered you his whole fortune"—

"Madam," stammered Henrietta, "have you no mercy?"

Mercy—Mrs. Chevassat! What a joke!

"You would take nothing," she continued, "from M. Maxime. Why, I ask you? To play the virtuous woman, was it? It was hardly worth while, if you meant, immediately afterwards, to accept that old miser, who will make life hard enough for you. Ah, you have fallen into nice hands!"

Gathering up all the strength that had come back to her, Henrietta raised herself on the pillows, and asked,—

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing! I see. After all, you would have it so. Besides, he had been looking after you a long time already."

As soon as Henrietta opened her eyes, Papa Ravinet had discreetly withdrawn, in order to leave the ladies, who were about her, time to

undress her. Thus she had not seen the man who had saved her, and did not understand the allusions of the old woman.

“Explain, madam, explain!”

“Ah, upon my word! that is not difficult. The man who has pulled you out, who has brought you all these things to make your bed, and kindle a fire; why, that is the second-hand dealer of the fourth story! And he will not stop there, I am sure. Patience, and you will know well enough what I mean.”

It must be borne in mind, that the woman, for fear Henrietta might sell to Papa Ravinet what she had to sell, or for some other reason, had always painted the old man to her in colors by no means flattering.

“What ought I to be afraid of?” asked Henrietta.

The woman hesitated. At last she answered,—

“If I were to tell you, you would repeat it to him when he comes back.”

“No, I promise you.”

“Swear it on your mother’s sacred memory.”

“I swear.”

Thus reassured, the old woman came close up to her bed; and, in an animated but low voice, she said,—

“Well, I mean this: if you accept now what Papa Ravinet will offer you, in six months you will be worse than any of Mrs. Hilaire’s girls. Ah! don’t tell me ‘I do not mean to touch him.’ The old rascal has ruined more than one who was just as good as you are. That’s his business; and, upon my word! he understands it. Now, forewarned, forearmed. I am going down to make you a soup. I’ll be back at night. And above all, you hear, not a word!”

By one word Mrs. Chevassat had plunged Henrietta once more into an abyss of profound despair.

“Great God!” she said to herself, “why must the generous assistance of this old man be a new snare for me?”

With her elbow resting on her pillow, her forehead supported by her hand, her eyes streaming with tears, she endeavored to gather her ideas, which seemed to be scattered to the four winds, like the leaves of trees after a storm; when a modest, dry cough aroused her from her meditations.

She trembled, and raised her head.

In the framework of the open door stood a man of mature age and of medium height, looking at her.

It was Papa Ravinet, who, after a long conversation with the concierge, and after some words with his amiable wife, had come up to inquire after his patient. She guessed at it, rather than she knew; for, although she lived in the same house with him, she was not in the same part of the building, and she scarcely recollected having caught a glimpse of him now and then in crossing the yard.

“That,” she thought, “is the man who plots my ruin, the wretch whom I am to avoid.”

Now, it is true that this man, with his mournful face, his huge, brushlike eyebrows, and his small, yellow eyes, startling by their incessant activity, had for the observer something enigmatical about him, and therefore did not inspire much confidence.

Nevertheless, Henrietta thanked him none the less heartily, although greatly embarrassed, for his readiness to help her, his kind care, and his generosity in providing every thing she wanted.

“Oh! you owe me no thanks,” he said. “I have only done my duty, and that very imperfectly.”

And at once, in a rather grim manner, he began to tell her that what he had done was nothing in comparison with what he meant to do. He had but too well guessed what had led Henrietta to attempt suicide; he had only to look around her room. But he swore she should have nothing more to fear from want as long as he was there.

But, the more earnest and pressing the good man became in his protestations, the more Henrietta drew back within her usual reserve; her

mind being filled with the prejudices instilled by Mrs. Chevassat. Fortunately he was a clever man, the old dealer; and by means of not saying what might shock her, and by saying much that could not fail to touch her, he gradually regained his position. He almost conquered her when he returned to her the letters she had written before making her dreadful preparations, and when she saw that they looked unhurt, and sealed as before. Thus, when he left her, after half an hour's diplomatic intercourse, he had obtained from the poor young girl the promise that she would not renew the attempt at her life, and that she would explain to him by what fatal combination of circumstances she had been reduced to such extreme suffering.

"You would not hesitate," he said, "if you knew how easy it often is, by a little experience, to arrange the most difficult matters."

Henrietta did not hesitate. A thought which had occurred to her as soon as she found herself alone had brought her to this conclusion: "If Papa Ravinet were really what Mrs. Chevassat says, that bad woman would not have warned me against him. If she tries to keep me from accepting the old man's assistance, she no doubt finds it to her advantage that I should do so."

When she tried, after that, to examine as coolly as she could the probable consequences of her decision, she found enormous chances in her favor. If Papa Ravinet was sincere, she might be enabled to wait for Daniel; if he was not sincere, what did she risk? She who had not feared death itself need not fear any thing else. Lucretia's dagger will always protect a brave woman's liberty.

But still, in spite of the pressing need she had for rest, her promise kept her awake for the greater part of the night; for she passed in her mind once more over the whole lamentable story of her sufferings, and asked herself what she might confess to, and what she ought to withhold from the old dealer. Had he not already discovered, by the address of one of her letters, that she was the daughter of Count Ville-Handry? And just that she would have liked to keep him from knowing. On the other hand, was it not foolish to ask the advice of a man to whom we will not confess the whole truth?

"I must tell him all," she said, "or nothing." And, after a moment's reflection, she added,—"I will tell him all, and keep nothing back." She was

in this disposition, when in the morning, about nine o'clock, Papa Ravinet reappeared in her room. He looked very pale, the old man; and the expression of his face, and the tone of his voice, betrayed an emotion which he could scarcely control, together with deep anxiety.

"Well?" he asked forgetting in his preoccupation to inquire even how the poor girl had passed the night.

She shook her head sadly, and replied, pointing to a chair,—

"I have made up my mind, sir; sit down, please, and listen to me." The old dealer had been fully convinced that Henrietta would come to that; but he had not hoped for it so soon. He could not help exclaiming, "At last!" and intense, almost delirious joy shone in his eyes. Even this joy seemed to be so unnatural, that the young girl was made quite uncomfortable by it. Fixing her eyes upon the old man with all the power of observation of which she was capable, she said,—

"I am fully aware that what I am about to do is almost unparalleled in rashness. I put myself, to a certain extent, absolutely in your power, sir,—the power of an utter stranger, of whom I am told I have every thing to fear."

"O miss!" he declared, "believe me"—

But she interrupted him, saying with great solemnity,—

"I think, if you were to deceive me, you would be the meanest and least of men. I rely upon your honor."

And then in a firm voice she began the account of her life, from that fatal evening on which her father had said to her,—

"I have resolved, my daughter, to give you a second mother."

The old dealer had taken a seat facing Henrietta, and listened, fixing his eyes upon her face as if to enter into her thoughts, and to anticipate her meaning. His face was all aglow with excitement, like the face of a gambler who is watching the little white ball that is to make him a rich man or a beggar. It looked almost as if he had foreseen the terrible communication

she was making, and was experiencing a bitter satisfaction at finding his presentiments confirmed,—

As Henrietta was proceeding, he would murmur now and then,—

“That is so! Yes, of course that had to come next.”

And all these people whose abominable intrigues Henrietta was explaining to him were apparently better known to him than to her, as if he had frequently been in contact with them, or even lived in their intimacy. He gave his judgment on each one with amazing assurance, as the occasion presented itself, saying,—

“Ah! There I recognize Sarah and Mrs. Brian.”

Or,—

“Sir Thorn never does otherwise.”

Or, again,—

“Yes, that is all over Maxime de Brevan.”

And, according to the different phases of the account, he would laugh bitterly and almost convulsively, or he would break out in imprecations.

“What a trick!” he murmured with an accent of deep horror, “what an infernal snare!”

At another point he turned deadly pale, and almost trembled on his chair, as if he were feeling ill, and were about to fall. Henrietta was telling him at that moment, from Daniel’s recital, the circumstances under which M. de Kergrist had died, and Malgat had disappeared,—that poor cashier who had left such an immense deficit behind; who had been condemned to penal servitude; and whose body the police believed to have found in a wood near Paris. But, as soon as the young girl had finished, he rose all of a sudden, and cried out in a formidable voice,—

“I have them now, the wretches! this time I have them!”

And, breaking down under his excessive excitement, he sank into his chair, covering his face with his hands. Henrietta was dumfounded; she looked

aghast at the old man, in whom she now placed all her hopes. Already, the night before, she had had some suspicions that he was not what he seemed to be; now she was quite sure. But who was he? She had nothing to go by to solve that riddle.

This only she thought she saw clearly, that Sarah Brandon, Mrs. Brian, and M. Thomas Elgin, as well as M. de Brevan, had at some time or other come in personal contact with Papa Ravinet, and that he hated them mortally.

“Unless he should try to deceive me,” she thought, not having quite shaken off all doubts yet.

He had in the meantime mastered his emotion, and was regaining all his composure.

“Let no one, henceforth, deny Providence!” he exclaimed. “Ah! fools and idiots alone can do so. M. de Brevan had every reason to think that this house would keep the secret of his crime as safe as the grave, and so brought you here. And here it happens I must chance to live,—of all men, I,—and he remain unaware of it! By a kind of miracle we are brought together under the same roof,—you, the daughter of Count Ville-Handry, and I, one after the other, without knowing each other; and, at the very moment when this Brevan is about to triumph, Providence brings us together, and this meeting ruins him!”

His voice betrayed his fierce joy at approaching vengeance; his sallow cheeks flushed up; and his eyes shone brilliantly.

“For M. de Brevan was triumphing last night. The woman Chevassat, his confederate, had watched you, and noticing your preparations for committing suicide, had said to him, ‘Rejoice! at last we shall get rid of her.’”

Henrietta shuddered, and stammered out,—

“Is it possible?”

Then the old man, looking at her half surprised, said,—

“What! after all you have seen of M. de Brevan, you have never suspected him of meditating your death?”

“Why, yes! I sometimes thought so.”

“Well, this time you were right, madam. Ah! you do not know your enemies yet. But I know them, I; for I have had a chance of measuring the depth of their wickedness. And there your safety would lie, if you would follow my advice.”

“I will, sir.”

Papa Ravinet was evidently a little embarrassed. He said, however,—

“You see, madam, I shall have to ask you to trust me blindly.”

“I will trust you blindly.”

“It is of the utmost importance that you should escape out of reach of M. de Brevan; he must lose every trace of you. You will, consequently, have to leave this house.”

“I will leave it.”

“And in the way I say.”

“I will obey you in every point.”

The last shadow of trouble which had still overclouded the old dealer’s brow vanished as if by magic.

“Then all will go well,” he said, rubbing his hands as if he were taking off the skin; “and I guarantee the rest. Let us make haste to understand each other; for I have been here a long time, and the woman Chevassat must be on needles. Still, it is important she should not suspect that we are acting in concert.”

As if afraid that an indiscreet ear might be listening at the door, he drew his chair quite close to Henrietta’s bed, and whispered in a voice but just audible to her,—

“As soon as I have turned my back that woman will come up, burning with curiosity to know what has happened between us. You must pretend to be very angry with me. Give her to understand that you think me a wicked old

man, who wants you to pay the price of infamy for the services I wish to render to you.”

Henrietta had turned crimson. Now she stammered out,—

“But, sir”—

“Perhaps you dislike telling a falsehood?”

“You see—I cannot, I fear. It would not be easy to lie so as to deceive Mrs. Chevassat.”

“Ah, madam, you must! it cannot be helped. If you admit the absolute necessity, you may succeed in misleading her. Remember that we must fight the enemy with his own weapons.”

“Well, then, I will try, sir.”

“So be it. The rest, you will see, is a small matter. As soon as night falls, you will dress, and watch for the moment when the concierge, as usually, goes about the house lighting the gas. As soon as you see him on the great staircase; you will make haste and run down. I shall take measures to have the woman Chevassat either kept engaged, or out of the house; and you will thus find it easy to slip out without being perceived. Once in the street, you will turn to the right. At the corner of the street, in front of the great Auction-Mart, you will see a cab standing, with a plaid handkerchief like this hanging out of the window. Get into it boldly; I’ll be inside. I do not know if I have made it all clear to you?”

“Oh, perfectly, sir!”

“Then we understand each other. Do you feel strong enough?”

“Yes, sir. You may rely on me.”

Every thing passed off just as the old dealer had foreseen; and Henrietta played her part so well, that at night, when her disappearance was discovered, Mrs. Chevassat was neither much surprised nor troubled.

“She was tired of life, the girl!” she said to her husband. “I saw it when I was up there. We’ll see her again at the Morgue. As the charcoal did not do the work, she has tried the water.”

CHAPTER 21

Dear woman! She would not have gone to bed so quietly, nor have fallen asleep so comfortably, if she had suspected the truth.

What gave her such perfect peace was the certainty she had, that Henrietta had left the house bareheaded, with wretched, worn-out shoes on her feet, with nothing but one petticoat, and her thin alpaca dress on her body. Now, she was quite sure, that in such a state of destitution, and in this cold December night, the poor young girl would soon be weary wandering through the streets of Paris, and would be irresistibly drawn to the waters of the Seine.

But it was by no means so. When Henrietta was alone, after the departure of Papa Ravinet, she had only become confirmed in her determination to trust in him blindly: she had even forbore to think it over, as she had, humanly speaking, no other choice on earth. Thus, after having received Mrs. Chevassat's visit, and after having played the part assigned to her by the old dealer, she rose, and, although quite exhausted yet, took her place at the window to watch for the proper time. Four o'clock struck; and, as it was growing dark, the concierge came out, with a light in his hand, and went up the big staircase to light the lamps.

"Now is the time!" she said to herself.

And casting a last look at this wretched room, where she had suffered so much, and wept so much, and where she had expected to die, she slipped out. The back stairs were quite dark, and thus she was not recognized by two persons whom she met. The court was deserted, and the concierge's room locked. She crossed the hall, and at one bound was in the street. Some forty paces to the left she could see the place where Papa Ravinet was waiting for her in his cab. She ran there, got in; and the driver, who had received his instructions, whipped his horses as soon as he heard the door shut.

"And now, sir," she began, "where do you take me?"

By the light of the gas in the stores, which from time to time lighted up the interior of the carriage, she could see the features of her neighbor. He looked at her with manifest satisfaction; and a smile of friendly malice played upon his lips.

“Ah!” he replied, “that is a great secret. But you will know soon, for the man drives well.”

The poor horses went, indeed, as fast as if the dollar which the driver had received had infused the noble blood of the fastest racer into their veins. They drove down the whole long street at a furious rate, turned to the right, and, after many more turns, stopped at last before a house of modest appearance. Lightly and promptly, like a sheriff’s clerk, Papa Ravinet jumped out; and, having aided Henrietta to alight, he offered her his arm, and drew her into the house, saying,—

“You will see what a surprise I have in store for you.”

In the third story the old man stopped; and, drawing a key from his pocket, he opened the door which faced the staircase. And, before she had time to consider, Henrietta found herself gently pushed into a small sitting-room, where a middle-aged lady was embroidering at a frame by the light of a large copper lamp.

“Dear sister,” said Papa Ravinet, still in the door, “here is the young lady of whom I spoke to you, and who does us the honor to accept our hospitality.”

Slowly the elderly lady put her needle into the canvas, pushed back the frame, and rose.

She seemed to be about fifty years old, and must have been beautiful formerly. But age and sorrow had blanched her hair, and furrowed her face; and the habit of silence and meditation seemed to have sealed her lips forever. Her stern countenance, nevertheless, expressed kindness. She was dressed in black; and her costume betrayed a lady from a provincial town.

“You are welcome, madam,” she said in a grave voice. “You will find in our modest home that peace and that sympathy which you need.”

In the meantime, Papa Ravinet had come forward; and, bowing to Henrietta, he said,—

“I beg to present to you Mrs. Bertolle, my dearly beloved sister Mary, a widow, and a saint, who has devoted herself to her brother, and who has sacrificed to him every thing,—her fortune, her peace, and her life.”

Ah! there was no mistaking the look with which the old man caressed the old lady: he worshipped her. But she interrupted him, as if embarrassed by his praise, saying,—

“You have told me so late, Anthony, that I have not been able to attend to all of your orders. But the young lady’s room is ready, and if you choose”—

“Yes, we must show her the way.”

The old lady having taken the lamp, after removing the screen, opened a door which led from the parlor directly into a small, modestly furnished room, which shone with exquisite tidiness, and which exhaled that fresh odor of lavender so dear to all housekeepers from the country. The mirrors and the furniture all glistened alike in the bright fire on the hearth; and the curtains were as white as snow.

At one glance the old dealer had taken in every thing; and, after a smile of gratitude addressed to his sister, he said to Henrietta,—

“This is your room, madam.”

The poor girl, all overcome, sought in vain for words to express her gratitude. The old lady did not give her time. She showed her, spread out on the bed, petticoats, white linen, stockings, a warm dressing- wrapper of gray flannel with blue flowers, and at the foot a pair of slippers.

“This will answer for a change to-night, madam,” she said. “I have provided what was most pressing; to-morrow we will see about the rest.”

Big tears, tears of happiness and gratitude, this time, rolled down Henrietta’s pale cheeks. Oh, indeed! this was a surprise, and a delicious one, which the ingenious foresight of her new friend had prepared for her.

“Ah, you are so kind!” she said, giving her hands to brother and sister—“you are so kind! How can I ever repay what you are doing for me?”

Then overcoming her emotion, and turning to Papa Ravinet, she added,—

“But pray, who are you, sir,—you who thus come to succor, a poor young girl who is an utter stranger to you, doubling the value of your assistance by your great delicacy?”

The old lady replied in his place,—“My brother, madam, is an unfortunate man, who has paid for a moment’s forgetfulness of duty, with his happiness, his prospects, and *his* very life. Do not question him. Let him be for you what he is for all of us,—Anthony Ravinet, dealer in curiosities.”

The voice of the old lady betrayed such great sorrow, silently endured, that Henrietta looked ashamed, regretting her indiscretion. But the old man at once said,—

“What I may say to you madam, is, that you owe me no gratitude,—no, none whatever. What I do, my own interest commands me to do; and I deserve no credit for it. Why do you speak of gratitude? It is I who shall forever be under obligations to you for the immense service which you render me.”

He seemed to be inspired by his own words; his figure straightened up; his eyes flashed fire; and he was on the point of letting, perhaps, some secret escape him, when his sister interrupted him, saying reproachfully,—

“Anthony, Anthony!”

He stopped at once. Then he resumed,—

“You are right; you are right! I forget myself here; and I ought to be already back in Water Street. It is of the utmost importance that that woman Chevassat should not miss me a moment to-night.”

He was about to leave them, when the old lady held him back, and said,—

“You ought to go back, I know; only be careful! It is a miracle that M. de Brevan has never met you and recognized you, during the year he has been coming to the house in which you live. If such a misfortune should happen

now, our enemies might once more escape us. After the young lady's desperate act, he would not fail to recognize the man who has saved her. What can you do to avoid meeting him?"

"I have thought of that danger," he replied. "When I go back, I shall tell the two Chevassats a little story, which will frighten them, so that they will advise Brevan never to appear there, except at night, as he formerly did."

Thereupon he bowed to Henrietta, and went away with the words,—

"To-morrow we will consult with each other."

The shipwrecked man who is saved at the last moment, when, strength and spirits being alike exhausted, he feels himself sinking into the abyss, cannot, upon feeling once more firm ground under his feet, experience a sense of greater happiness than Henrietta did that night. For the delicious sensation had become deeper and intenser by the evening spent in company with Papa Ravinet's sister.

The widow, free from embarrassment as from affectation, possessed a quiet dignity which appeared in certain words and ways she had, and which made Henrietta guess the principal events of her life. Ruined all of a sudden,—she did not say how,—some months after the death of her husband, she, who had been accustomed to all the comforts of opulence had seen herself reduced to poverty, and all its privations. This had happened about five years ago. Since then she had imposed upon herself the strictest economy, although she never neglected her appearance. She had but one servant, who came every morning to clean up the house; she herself did all the other work, washing and ironing her own linen, cooking only twice a week, and eating cold meat on the other days, as much to save money as to save time.

For her time had its value. She worked on her frame patterns for embroideries, for which a fashionable store paid her very good prices. There were days in summer when she earned three francs.

The blow had been a severe one; she did not conceal it. Gradually, however, she had become reconciled to it, and taken up this habit of economizing with unflinching severity, and down to the smallest details. At present, she felt in these very privations a kind of secret satisfaction which results from

the sense of having accomplished a duty,—a satisfaction all the greater, the harder the duty is.

What duty, she did not say.

“That lady is a noble creature among many!” said Henrietta to herself that night, when she retired after a modest repast.

Still she could not get over the mystery which surrounded the lives of these two personages, whom fate, relenting at last, had placed in her way. What was the mystery in the past of this brother and sister? For there was one; and, so far from trying to conceal it, they had begged Henrietta not to inquire into it. And how was their past connected with her own past? How could their future depend in any way on her own future?

But fatigue soon made an end to her meditations, and confused her ideas; and, for the first time in two years, she fell asleep with a sense of perfect security; she slept peacefully, without starting at the slightest noise, without being troubled by silence, without wondering whether her enemies were watching her, without suspecting the very walls of her room.

When she awoke next morning, calm and refreshed, it was broad daylight, nearly ten o’clock; and a pale ray of the sun was playing over the polished furniture. When she opened her eyes, she saw the dealer’s sister standing at the foot of her bed, like a good genius who had been watching over her slumbers.

“Oh, how lazy I am!” she exclaimed with the hearty laugh of a child; for she felt quite at home in this little bedroom, where she had only spent a night; she felt as much at home here as in her father’s palace when her mother was still alive; and it seemed to her as if she had lived here many a year.

“My brother was here about half an hour ago to talk with you,” said the old lady; “but we did not like to wake you. You needed repose so much! He will be back in the evening, and dine with us.”

The bright smile which had lighted up Henrietta’s face went out instantly. Absorbed in the happiness of the moment, she had forgotten every thing;

and these few words brought her back to the reality of her position, and recalled to her the sufferings of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

The good widow in the meantime assisted her in getting up; and they spent the day together in the little parlor, busily cutting out and making up a black silk dress for which Papa Ravinet had brought the material in the morning, and which was to take the place of Henrietta's miserable, worn-out, alpaca dress. When the young girl had first seen the silk, she had remembered all the kind widow had told her of their excessive economy, and with difficulty only succeeded in checking her tears.

"Why should you go to such an expense?" she had said very sadly. "Would not a woollen dress have done quite as well? The hospitality which you offer me must in itself be quite a heavy charge upon you. I should never forgive myself for becoming a source of still greater privations to such very kind friends."

But the old lady shook her head, and replied,—

"Don't be afraid, child. We have money enough."

They had just lighted the lamp, when they heard a key in the outer door; and a moment later Papa Ravinet appeared. He was very red; and, although it was freezing outdoors, he was streaming with perspiration.

"I am exhausted," he said, sinking into, an armchair, and wiping his forehead with his broad checkered handkerchief. "You cannot imagine how I have been running about to-day! I wanted to take an omnibus to come home, but they were all full."

Henrietta jumped up, and exclaimed,—

"You have been to see my father?"

"No, madam. A week ago already, Count Ville-Handry left his palace."

A mad thought, the hope that her father might have separated from his wife, crossed Henrietta's mind.

"And the countess," she asked,—*"the Countess Sarah?"*

“She has gone with her husband. They live in Peletier Street, in a modest apartment just above the office of the Pennsylvania Petroleum Company. Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian are there also. They have only kept two servants,—Ernest, the count’s valet, and a certain Clarissa.”

The name of the vile creature whose treachery had been one of the principal causes of Henrietta’s misfortunes did not strike her ear.

“How could my father ever be induced to leave his home?” she asked.

“He sold it, madam, ten days ago.”

“Great God! My father must be ruined!”

The old man bowed his head.

“Yes!”

Thus were the sad presentiments realized which she had felt when first she had heard Count Ville-Handry speak of the Pennsylvania Petroleum Company. But never, oh, never! would she have imagined so sudden a downfall.

“My father ruined!” she repeated, as if she were unable to realize the precise meaning of these words.

“And only a year ago he had more than a hundred thousand dollars a year. Six millions swallowed up in twelve months!—six millions!”

And as the enormous amount seemed to be out of all proportion to the shortness of time, she said,—

“It cannot be. You must be mistaken, sir; they have misled you.”

A smile of bitter irony passed over the old dealer’s lips. He replied, as if much puzzled by Henrietta’s doubts,—

“What, madam, you do not see yet? Alas! what I tell you is but too true; and, if you want proofs”—

He drew a newspaper from his pocket and handed it to Henrietta, pointing out to her on the first page an article marked with a red pencil.

“There!” he said.

It was one of those financial sheets which arise every now and then, and which profess to teach the art of becoming rich in a very short time, without running any risk. This paper bore a title calculated to reassure its readers. It was called “Prudence.” Henrietta read aloud,—

“We shall never tire repeating to our subscribers the words which form our motto and our heading, ‘Prudence, prudence! Do not trust new enterprises!’

“Out of a hundred enterprises which appear in the market, it may safely be said that sixty are nothing but the simplest kind of wells, into which the capital of foolhardy speculators is sunk almost instantly. Out of the remaining forty, twenty-five may be looked upon as suspicious enterprises, partaking too much of gambling speculations. Among the last fifteen even, a careful choice must be made before we find out the few that present safe guarantees.”

The young girl paused, not understanding a word of all this stuff. But the old man said,—

“That is only the honey of the preface, the sweet syrup intended to conceal the bitterness of the medicine that is to follow. Go on, and you will understand.”

She continued to read,—

“A recent event, we ought to say a recent disaster, has just confirmed our doctrines, and justifies but too clearly our admonition to be careful.

“A company which started into existence last year with amazing suddenness, which filled the whole world with its flaming advertisements, crowding the newspapers, and decorating the street-corners,—a company which was most surely to enrich its stockholders, is already no longer able to pay the interest on its paid-up capital.

“As to the capital itself—but we will not anticipate events.

“All of our readers will have understood that we are speaking of the Franco-American Society of Pennsylvania Oil-Wells, which for the last eight days has been the subject of universal excitement.

“On ‘Change the shares of a hundred dollars are quoted at 4-to-5.’”

Blinding tears prevented Henrietta from going on. “Great God!” she exclaimed. “O God!” Then, mastering her weakness, she began once more to read,—

“And yet if ever any company seemed to offer all the material and moral guarantees which we can desire before risking our carefully saved earnings, this company presented them.

“It had at its head a man who in his day was looked up to as a statesman endowed with rare administrative talents, and whose reputation as a man of sterling integrity seemed to lie above all suspicion.

“Need we say that this was the ‘high and mighty Count Ville-Handry’?

“Hence they did not spare this great and noble name, but proclaimed it aloud on the housetops. It was the Count Ville-Handry here, and the Count Ville-Handry there. He was to bestow upon the country a new branch of industry. He was to change vile petroleum into precious gold.

“It was especially brought into notice that the noble count’s personal fortune was nearly equal to the whole capital of the new company,—ten millions. Hence he was risking his own money rather than the money of others.

“It is now a year since these dazzling promises were made. What remains of them all? Shares, worth five dollars yesterday, worth, perhaps, nothing at all to-morrow, and a more than doubtful capital.

“Who could have expected in our day a new edition of Law’s Mississippi Scheme?”

The paper fell from the hands of the poor girl. She had turned as pale as death, and was staggering so, that Papa Ravinet’s sister took her in her arms to support her.

“Horrible,” she murmured; “this is horrible!” Still she had not yet read all. The old man picked up the paper, and read from another article, below the lines which carried poison in every word, the following comments:—

“Two delegates of the stockholders of the Pennsylvania Petroleum Company were to sail this morning from Brest for New York.

“These gentlemen have been sent out by their fellow-sufferers to examine the lands on which the oil-wells are situated which constitute the only security of the shareholders. Certain people have gone so far as to doubt even the existence of such oil-wells.”

And in another place, under the head of local items:—

“The palace of Count Ville-Handry was sold last week. This magnificent building, with the princely real estate belonging to it, was knocked down to the highest bidder for the sum of one hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. The misfortune is, that house and lot are burdened with mortgages, which amount together to nearly a hundred thousand dollars.”

Henrietta was overcome, and had sunk into a chair.

“But that is simply infamous,” she stammered out in an almost inaudible tone. “Nobody will believe such atrocious libels.”

Pale and deeply grieved, Papa Ravinet and his sister exchanged looks of distress. Evidently the poor girl did not at all realize the terrible nature of the circumstances. And yet, seeing her thus crushed, they did not dare to enlighten her. At last the old dealer, knowing but too well that uncertainty is more agonizing than the most painful reality, said,—

“Your father is fearfully calumniated. But I have tried to inform myself. Two facts are but too certain. Count Ville-Handry is ruined; and the shares of the company of which he is the president have fallen to five dollars, because”—

His voice changed, and he added in a very low tone,—

“Because it is believed that the capital of the company has been appropriated to other purposes, and lost in speculations on ‘Change.’”

The poor old dealer was suffering intensely, and showed it.

“Ah, madam, perfectly as I am convinced of Count Ville-Handry’s uprightness and integrity, I also know that he was utterly ignorant of business. What did he understand of these speculations into which he was drawn? Nothing. It is a difficult and often a dangerous thing to manage large capitals. They have no doubt deceived him, cheated him, misled him, and driven him at last to the verge of bankruptcy.”

“Who?”

Papa Ravinet trembled on his chair, and, raising his hands to the ceiling, exclaimed,—

“Who? You ask who? Why, those who had an interest in it, the wretches by whom he was surrounded,—Sarah, Sir Thorn”—

Henrietta shook her head and said,—

“I do not think the Countess Sarah looked with a favorable eye upon the formation of this company.”

And, when objection was made, she went on,—

“Besides, what interest could she have in ruining my father? Evidently none. To ruin him was to ruin herself, since she was absolute mistress of her fortune, and free to dispose of it as she chose.”

Proud of the accuracy of her decision, she was looking triumphantly at the old dealer. The latter saw now that he must strike a decisive blow; and his sister encouraged him by a gesture. He said,—

“Pray, listen to me, madam. So far I have only repeated to you the report on ‘Change. I told you: They say the capital of the Pennsylvania Petroleum *Company* has been swallowed up by unlucky speculations on ‘Change. But I do not believe these reports. I am, on the contrary, convinced, I am quite sure even, that these millions were not lost on ‘Change, because they never were used for the purpose of speculating.”

“Still”—

“Still they have disappeared, none the less; and your father is probably the last man in the world to tell us how and where they have disappeared. But I

know it; and, when the question is raised how to recover these enormous sums, I shall cry out, 'Search Sarah Brandon, Countess Ville-Handry; search M. Thomas Elgin and Mrs. Brian; search Maxime de Brevan,' the wretched tool of these wicked women!"

Now at last a terrible light broke upon Henrietta's mind.

"Then," she stammered, "these infamous slanders are only put out to conceal an impudent robbery?"

"Yes."

The young girl's face showed that she was making a great effort to comprehend; and then she said again,—

"And in that case, the articles in the papers"—

"Were written by the wretches who have robbed your father, yes, madam!" And, shaking his fist with a threatening air, he added,—

"Oh! there is no mistaking it. Since when does this journal exist? Since about six months ago. From the day on which it was established, it was the aim and purpose of the founders to publish in it the articles which you haven't read."

Even if she could not well understand by what ingenious combinations such enormous sums could be abstracted, Henrietta was conquered by Papa Ravinet's sincere and earnest conviction.

"Then," she went on, "these wretches who have robbed my father now mean to ruin him!"

"They must do it for their own safety. The money has been stolen, you see; therefore there must be a thief. For the world, for the courts, the guilty one will be Count Ville-Handry."

"For the courts?"

"Alas, yes!"

The poor girl's eyes went from the brother to the sister with a terrible expression of bewilderment. At last she asked,—

“And do you believe Sarah will allow my father’s name to be thus dishonored,—the name which she bears, and of which she was so proud?”

“She will, perhaps, even insist upon it.”

“Great God! What do you mean? Why should she?”

Seeing her brother’s hesitation, the old lady took it upon herself to answer. She touched the poor girl’s arm, and said in a subdued voice,—

“Because, you see, my poor child, now that Sarah has gotten possession of the fortune she wanted, your father is in her way; because, you see, she wants to be free—do you understand?—free!”

Henrietta uttered a cry of such horror that both the brother and the sister saw at once that she had not misunderstood the horrible meaning of that word “free.”

But, since the blow had fallen, the old dealer did not think the rest need be concealed from Henrietta. He got up, therefore, and, leaning against the mantelpiece, he addressed the poor girl, trembling in all her limbs with terror, and looking at him with a fixed and painful gaze, in these words,—

“You must at last learn to know, madam, the execrable woman who has sworn to ruin you. You see, I know, because I have experienced it myself, of what crimes she is capable; and I see clear in the dark night of her infernal intrigues. I know that this woman with the chaste brow, the open smile, and the soft eyes, has the genius and the instinct of a murderess, and has never counted upon any thing else, but murder for the gratification of her lusts.”

The attitude of the old man, who raised his head on high while his breast swelled, breathed in every one of his sharp and threatening gestures an intense thirst of vengeance. He no longer measured his words carefully; and they overflowed from his lips as they came boiling up under the pressure of his rage.

“Anthony!” said the old lady more than once,—“Anthony, brother! I beseech you!”

But this friendly voice, ordinarily all-powerful, was not even heard by him now. He went on,—

“And now, madam, must I still explain to you the simple and yet formidable plan by which Sarah Brandon has succeeded in obtaining by one effort the immense fortune of the Ville-Handry family? From the first day, she has seen that you were standing between her and those millions; therefore she attacked you first of all. A brave and honest man, M. Daniel Champcey, loved you; he would have protected you; therefore she got him out of the way. The world might have become interested in you, might have taken your side; she beguiled your father, in his blind passion, to calumniate you, to ruin your reputation, and to expose you to the contempt of the world. Still you might have wished to secure a protector, you might have found one. She placed by your side her wretched tool, her spy, a forger, a criminal whom she knew to be able of doing things from which even an accomplished galley-slave would have shrunk with disgust and horror: I mean Maxime de Brevan.”

The very excess, of eruption had restored a part of her energy to Henrietta. She said, therefore,—

“Alas, *sir*! have I not told you, on, the contrary, that Daniel himself had confided me to the care of M. de Brevan? Have I not told you”—

The old dealer smiled almost contemptuously, and then continued,—

“What does that prove? Nothing but the skill of M. de Brevan in carrying out Sarah Brandon’s orders. In order to get the more completely the mastery over you, he began by obtaining the mastery over M. Champcey. How he succeeded in doing this, I do not know. But we shall know it when we want to know it; for we are going to find out every thing. Thus Sarah was, through M. de Brevan, kept informed of all your thoughts, of all your hopes, of every word you wrote to M. Champcey, and of all he said in reply; for you need not doubt he did answer, and they suppressed the letters, just as they, very probably, intercepted all of your letters which you did not yourself carry to the post-office. Still, as long as you were living under your father’s roof, Sarah could do nothing against your life. She resolved, therefore, to force you to flee; and those mean persecutions of M. Elgin served their purpose. You thought, and perhaps, they think, that bandit really wanted

your hand. Undeceive yourself. Your enemies knew your character too well to hope that you would ever break your word, and become faithless to M. Champcey. But they were bent upon handing you over to M. de Brevan. And thus, poor child! you were handed over to him. Maxime had as little idea of marrying you as Sir Thomas; he was quite prepared, when he dared to approach you with open arms, to be rejected with disgust. But he had received orders to add the horror of his persecutions to the horror of your isolation and your destitution.

“For he was quite sure, the scoundrel! that the secret of your sufferings would be well kept. He had carefully chosen the house in which you were to die of hunger and misery. The two Chevassats were bound to be his devoted accomplices, even unto death. This is what gave him the amazing boldness, the inconceivable brutality, to watch your slow agony; no doubt he became quite impatient at your delaying suicide so long.

“Finally you were driven to it; and your death would have realized their atrocious hopes, if Providence had not miraculously stepped in,—that Providence which always, sooner or later, takes its revenge, whatever the wicked may say to the contrary. Yes, these wretches thought they had now surely gotten rid of you, when I came in. That very morning, the woman Chevassat had told them, no doubt, ‘She’ll do it to-night!’ And that evening, Sarah, Mrs. Brian, and M. Elgin asked, no doubt, full of hope, ‘Is it all over?’”

Immovable, and white as marble, her eyes dilated beyond measure, and her lips half-open, poor Henrietta listened. She felt as if a bright ray of the sun had suddenly illumined the darkest depths of the abyss from which she had been barely snatched.

“Yes,” she said, “yes; now I see it all.”

Then, as the old dealer, out of breath, and his voice hoarse with indignation, paused a moment, she asked,—

“Still there is one circumstance which I cannot understand: Sarah insists upon it that she knew nothing of the forged letter by means of which Daniel was sent abroad. She told me, on the contrary, that she had wished to keep him here, because she loved him, and he loved her.”

“Ah! do not believe a word of those infamous stories,” broke in Papa Ravinet’s sister.

But the old man scratched his head, and said,—

“No, certainly not! We ought not to believe such stories. And yet, I wonder if there is not some new trick in that. Unless, indeed—But no, that would be almost too lucky for us! Unless Sarah should really love M. Champcey!”

And, as if he was afraid of having given rise to hopes which he founded upon this contingency, he added at once,—

“But let us return to facts. When Sarah was sure of you, she turned her attention to your father. While they were murdering you slowly, she abused the inexperience of Count Ville-Handry to lead him into a path at the end of which he could not but leave his honor behind him. Notice, pray, that the articles which you read are dated on the very day on which you would probably have died. That is a clear evidence of her crime. Thinking that she had gotten rid of you, she evidently said to herself, ‘And now for the father.’”

Henrietta grew red in her face, as if a jet of fire had blazed up in it. She exclaimed,—

“Great God! The proofs are coming out; the crime will be disclosed. I have no doubt the assassins told each other that Count Ville-Handry would never survive such a foul stain on his honor. And they dared all, sure as they were that that honorable man would carry the secret of their wickedness and of their unheard-of robbery with him to the grave.”

Papa Ravinet leisurely wiped the perspiration from his brow. Then he replied in a hoarse voice,—

“Yes, that was probably, that was assuredly, the way Sarah Brandon reasoned within herself.”

But Henrietta, full of admirable energy, had roused herself; and, with flushed cheeks and burning eyes, she said to him,—

“What! you knew all this? You knew that they were assassinating my father, and you did not warn him? Ah, that was cruel cautiousness!”

And quick like lightning she dashed forward, and would have rushed out, if the old lady had not promptly stepped in front of the door, saying,—

“Henrietta, poor child! where are you going?”

“To save my father, madam, who, perhaps at this very moment is struggling in the last agonies of death, as I was struggling in like manner only two nights ago.”

Quite beside herself, she had clasped the knob of the door in her hands, and tried with all the strength she still possessed to move the old lady out of the way. But Papa Ravinet seized her by the arm, and said to her solemnly,—

“Madam, I swear to you by all you hold sacred, and my sister will swear to you in like manner, that your father’s life is in no kind of danger.”

She gave up the struggle; but her face bore the expression of the most harassing anxiety. The old man continued,—

“Do you wish to defeat our triumph? Would you like to give warning to our enemies, to put *them* on their guard, and to deprive us of all hopes of revenge?”

Henrietta almost mechanically passed her hand to and fro across her brow, as if she hoped she could thus restore peace to her mind.

“And mind,” continued the old man with a persuasive voice, “mind that such imprudence would save our enemies, but would not save your father. Pray consider and answer me. Do you really think that your arguments would be stronger than Sarah Brandon’s? You cannot so far underrate the diabolical cunning of your enemy. Why, she has no doubt taken all possible measures to keep your father’s faith in her unshaken, and to let him die as he has lived, completely deceived by her, and murmuring with his last breath words of supreme love for her who kills him.”

These arguments were so overwhelming, that Henrietta let go the door-knob, and slowly went back to her seat by the fire. And yet she was far from being reassured.

“If I were to appeal to the police,” she suddenly proposed.

The old lady had come and taken a seat by Henrietta’s side. She took her hands in her own now, and said, gently,—

“Poor child! Do you not see that the whole power of this abominable creature lies in the fact that she employs means which are not within the reach of human justice. Believe me, my child, it is best for you to rely blindly on my brother.”

Once more the old dealer had come up to the mantelpiece. He repeated,—

“Yes, Miss Henrietta, rely on me. I have as much reason to curse Sarah Brandon as you have, and perhaps I hate her more. Rely on me; for my hatred has now been watching and waiting for years, ever anxious to reach her, and to avenge my sufferings. Yes, for long years I have been lying in wait, thirsting for vengeance, lost in darkness, but pursuing her tracks with the unwearied perseverance of the Indian. For the purpose of finding out who she is, and who her accomplices are, whence they came, and how they have met to plot together such fearful crimes,—for that purpose I have walked in the deepest mud, and stirred up heaps of infamy. But I have found out all. And yet in the whole life of Sarah Brandon,—a life of theft and murder,—I have till this moment not found a single fact which would bring her within the reach of the law, so cunning is her wickedness.”

His face brightened with an air of triumph; and his voice rose high as he added,—

“But now! This time success seemed to her so sure and so easy, that she has neglected her usual precautions. Eager to enjoy her millions, and, in proportion, weary of playing a comedy of love with your father, she has been too eager. And she is lost if we, on our side, are not also too eager.

“As to your father, madam, I have my reasons for feeling safe about him. According to your mother’s marriage contract, and in consequence of a

bequest of a million and a half which were left her by one of her uncles, your father's estate is your debtor to the amount of two millions; and that sum is invested in mortgages on his estates in Anjou. That sum he cannot touch, even if he is bankrupt. Should he die before you, that sum remains still yours; but, if you die before him, it goes to him. Now Sarah has sworn, in her insatiate cupidity, that she will have these two millions also."

"Ah," said Henrietta, "you are right! It is Sarah's interest that my father should live; and he will live, therefore, as long as she does not know whether I am dead or alive, in fact, as long as she does not know what has become of me."

"And she must not know that for some time," chimed in the old man.

Then laughing his odd, silent laugh,—

"You ought to see the anxiety of your enemies since you have slipped out of their hands. That woman Chevassat had, last night, come to the conclusion that you were gone, and gone forever; but this morning matters looked very differently. Maxime de Brevan had been there, making a terrible row, and beating her (God forgive him!) because she had relaxed in her watchfulness. The rascal! The fellow has been spending the whole day in running from the police office to the Morgue, and back again. Destitute as you were, and almost without clothes, what could have become of you? I, for my part, did not show; and the Chevassats are far from suspecting that I had any thing to do with the whole affair. Ah! It will soon be our turn, and if you will only accept my suggestions, madam"—

It was past nine o'clock when the old dealer, his sister, and Henrietta sat down to their modest meal. But in the interval a hopeful smile had reappeared on Henrietta's face, and she looked almost happy, when, about midnight, Papa Ravinet left them with the words,—

"To-morrow evening I shall have news. I am going to the navy department."

The next day he reappeared precisely at six o'clock, but in what a condition! He had in his hand a kind of carpet-bag; and his looks and gestures made him look almost insane.

“Money!” he cried out to his sister as he entered. “I am afraid I have not enough; and make haste. I have to be at the Lyons Railway at seven o’clock.”

And when his sister and Henrietta, terribly frightened, asked him,—

“What is the matter? What are you going to do?”

“Nothing,” he replied joyously, “but that Heaven itself declares in our favor. I went to the department. ‘The Conquest’ will remain another year in Cochin China; but M. Champcey is coming back to Europe. He was to have taken passage on board a merchant vessel, ‘The Saint Louis,’ which is expected in Marseilles every day, if she has not already come in. And I—I am going to Marseilles, I must see M. Champcey before anybody else can see him.”

When his sister had given him notes to the amount of four hundred dollars, he rushed out, exclaiming,—

“To-morrow I will send you a telegram!”

CHAPTER 22

If there is in our civilized states a profession more arduous than others it is surely that of the sailor. So arduous is it, that we are almost disposed to ask how men can be found bold enough to embrace it, and firm enough in their resolution not to abandon it after having tried it. Not because of the hazards, the fatigues, and the dangers connected with it, but because it creates an existence apart, and because the conditions it imposes seem to be incompatible with free will.

Still no one is more attached to his home than the sailor. There are few among them who are not married. And by a kind of special grace they are apt to enjoy their short happiness as if it were for eternity, indifferent as to what the morning may bring.

But behold! one fine morning, all of a sudden, a big letter comes from the department.

It is an order to sail.

He must go, abandoning every thing and everybody,—mother, family, and friends, the wife he has married the day before, the young mother who sits smiling by the cradle of her first-born, the betrothed who was looking joyfully at her bridal veil. He must go, and stifle all those ominous voices which rise from the depth of his heart, and say to him, “Will you ever return? and, if you return, will you find them all, your dear ones? and, if you find them, will they not have changed? will they have preserved your memory as faithfully as you have preserved theirs?”

To be happy, and to be compelled to open to mishap this fatal door, absence! Hence it is only in comic operas, and inferior novels, that the sailors are seen to sing their most cheerful songs at the moment when a vessel is about to sail on a long and perilous voyage. The moment is, in reality, always a sad one, very grave and solemn.

Such could not fail to be the scene also, when “The Conquest” sailed,—the ship on board of which Daniel Champcey had been ordered as lieutenant. And certainly there had been good reasons for ordering him to make haste and get down to the port where she lay; for the very next day after his arrival, she hoisted anchor. She had been waiting for him only.

Having reached Rochefort at five o’clock in the morning, he slept the same night on board; and the next day “The Conquest” sailed. Daniel suffered more than any other man on board, although he succeeded in affecting a certain air of indifference. The thought of Henrietta being left in the hands of adventurers who were capable of any thing was a thorn in his side, which caused him great and constant pain. As he gradually calmed down, and peace returned to his mind, a thousand doubts assailed him concerning Maxime de Brevan: would he not be exposed to terrible temptation when he found himself thrown daily into the company of a great heiress? Might he not come to covet her millions, and try to abuse her peculiar situation in order to secure them to himself?

Daniel believed too firmly in his betrothed to apprehend that she would even listen to Brevan. But he reasoned, very justly, that his darling would be in a desperate condition indeed, if M. de Brevan, furious at being refused, should betray his confidence, and go over to the enemy, to the Countess Sarah.

“And I,” he thought, “who in my last directions urged her to trust implicitly in Maxime, and to follow his advice as if it were my own!”

In the midst of these terrible anxieties, he hardly recollected that he had intrusted to Maxime every thing that he possessed. What was his money to him in comparison!

Thus it appeared to him a genuine favor of Providence when “The Conquest,” six days out at sea, experienced a violent storm, which endangered her safety for nearly seventy-two hours. His thoughts disappeared while he felt his grave responsibility, as long as the sea tossed the vessel to and fro like a mere cork, and while the crew fought with the elements till they were overcome by fatigue. He had actually a good night’s rest, which he had not enjoyed since he left Paris.

When he awoke, he was surprised to feel a certain peace of mind. Henceforth his fate was no longer in his own hands; he had been shown very clearly his inability to control events. Sad resignation succeeded to his terrible anxiety.

A single hope now kept him alive,—the hope of soon receiving a letter from Henrietta, or, it might be, of finding one upon arriving at his destination; for it was by no means impossible for “The Conquest” to be outstripped by some vessel that might have left port three weeks later. “The Conquest,” an old wooden frigate, and a sailing vessel, justified her bad reputation of being the worst sailor in the whole fleet. Moreover, alternate calms and sudden blows kept her much longer than usually on the way. The oldest sailors said they had never seen a more tedious voyage.

To add to the discomfort, “The Conquest” was so crammed full with passengers, that sailors and officers had hardly half of the space usually allotted to them on board ship. Besides the crew, there were on board a half battalion of marines, and a hundred and sixty mechanics of various trades, whom government sent out for the use of the colony. Some of these artisans had their families with them, having determined to become settlers in Cochin China; others, generally quite young yet, only made the voyage in order to have an opportunity for seeing foreign lands, and for earning, perhaps, a little money. They were occasionally called upon to assist in handling the ship, and were, on the whole, good men, with the exception of four or five, who were so unruly that they had to be put in irons more than once.

The days passed, nevertheless; and “The Conquest” had been out three months, when one afternoon, as Daniel was superintending a difficult manoeuvre, he was suddenly seen to stagger, raise his arms on high, and fall backwards on the deck.

They ran up to him, and raised him up; but he gave no sign of life; and the blood poured forth from his mouth and nose in streams. Daniel had won the hearts of the crew by his even temper, his strict attention to duty, and his kindness, when off duty, to all who came in contact with him. Hence, when the accident became known, in an instant sailors and officers came hurrying

up from one end of the frigate to the other, and even from the lowest deck, to see what had happened to him.

What had happened? No one could tell; for no one had seen any thing. Still it must be a very grave matter, to judge from the large pool of blood which dyed the deck at the place where the young man had fallen down so suddenly. They had carried him to the infirmary; and, as soon as he recovered his senses, the surgeons discovered the cause of his fall and his fainting.

He had an enormous contused wound on the back of his head, a little behind the left ear,—a wound such as a heavy hammer in the hands of a powerful man might have produced. Whence came this terrible blow, which apparently a miracle alone had prevented from crushing the skull? No one could explain this, neither the surgeons, nor the officers who stood around the bed of the wounded man. When Daniel could be questioned, he knew no more about it than the others. There had been no one standing near him; nor had he seen anybody come near him at the time of the accident; the blow, moreover, had been so violent, that he had fallen down unconscious. All these details soon became current among the sailors and passengers who had crowded on deck. They were received with incredulous smiles, and, when they could no longer be held in doubt, with bursts of indignation.

What! Lieut. Champcey had been struck in broad daylight, in the midst of the crew! How? By whom?

The whole matter was so wrapped up in mystery, that it became all important to clear it up; and the sailors themselves opened at once a kind of court of inquest. Some hairs, and a clot of blood, which were discovered on an enormous block, seemed to explain the riddle. It would seem that the rope to which this enormous block was fastened had slipped out of the hands of one of the sailors who were engaged in the rigging, carrying out the manoeuvre superintended by Daniel.

Frightened by the consequences of his awkwardness, but, nevertheless preserving his presence of mind, this man had, no doubt, drawn up the block so promptly, that he had not been noticed. Could it be hoped that he would accuse himself? Evidently not. Besides, what would be the use of it?

The wounded man was the first to request that the inquiries might be stopped.

When, at the end of a fortnight, Champcey returned to duty, they ceased talking of the accident; unfortunately, such things happen but too frequently on board ship. Besides, the idea that “The Conquest” was drawing near her destination filled all minds, and sufficed for all conversations.

And really, one fine evening, as the sun was setting, land was seen, and the next morning, at daybreak, the frigate sailed into the Dong-Nai, the king of Cochin Chinese rivers, which is so wide and so deep, that vessels of the largest tonnage can ascend it without difficulty till they reach Saigon.

Standing on deck, Daniel watched the monotonous scenes which they passed,—a landscape strange in form, and exhaling mortal fevers from the soil, and the black yielding slime.

After a voyage of several months, he derived a melancholy pleasure from seeing the banks of the river overshadowed by mango trees and mangroves, with their supple, snakelike roots wandering far off under water; while on shore a soft, pleasant vegetation presented to the eye the whole range of shades in green, from the bluish, sickly green of the idrys to the dark, metallic green of the stenia. Farther inland, tall grapes, lianes, aloes, and cactus formed impenetrable thickets, out of which rose, like fluted columns, gigantic cocoa-palms, and the most graceful trees on earth, areca-palms. Through clearings here and there, one could follow, as far as the eye reached, the course of low, fever-breeding marshes, an immense mud-plain covered with a carpet of undulating verdure, which opened and closed again under the breeze, like the sea itself.

“Ah! That is Saigon, is it?” said to Daniel a voice full of delight.

He turned round. It was his best friend on board, a lieutenant like himself, who had come to his side, and, offering him a telescope, said with a great sigh of satisfaction,—

“Look! there, do you see? At last we are here. In two hours, Champcey, we shall be at anchor.”

In the distance one could, in fact, make out upon the deep blue of the sky the profile of the curved roof of the pagodas in Saigon. It took a long hour yet, before, at a turn in the river, the town itself appeared, miserable looking,—with all deference to our geographies, be it said,—in spite of the immense labor of the French colony.

Saigon consists mainly of one wide street running parallel with the right bank of the Dong-Nai, a primitive, unpaved street cut up into ruts, broken in upon by large empty spaces, and lined with wooden houses covered with rice-straw or palm-leaves.

Thousands of boats crowd against the banks of the river along this street, and form a kind of floating suburb, overflowing with a strange medley of Annamites, Hindoos, and Chinamen. At a little distance from the river, there appear a few massive buildings with roofs of red tiles, pleasing to the eye, and here and there an Annamite farm, which seems to hide behind groups of areca-palms. Finally, on an eminence, rise the citadel, the arsenal, the house of the French commander, and the former dwelling of the Spanish colonel.

But every town is beautiful, where we land after a voyage of several months. Hence, as soon as “The Conquest” was safely at anchor, all the officers, except the midshipman on duty, went on shore, and hastened to the government house to ask if letters from France had arrived there before them. Their hopes were not deceived. Two three-masters, one French, the other English, which had sailed a month later than “The Conquest,” had arrived there at the beginning of the week, bringing despatches.

There were two letters for Daniel, and with feverish hands and beating heart he took them from the hand of the old clerk. But at the first glance at the addresses he turned pale. He did not see Henrietta’s handwriting. Still he tore open the envelopes, and glanced at the signatures. One of the letters was signed, “Maxime de Brevan;” the other, “Countess Ville-Handry,” *nee* Sarah Brandon.

Daniel commenced with the latter. After informing him of her marriage, Sarah described at great length Henrietta’s conduct on the wedding-day.

“Any other but myself,” she said, “would have been incensed at this atrocious insult, and would abuse her position to be avenged. But I, who never yet forgave anybody, I will forgive her, Daniel, for your sake, and because I cannot see any one suffer who has loved you.”

A postscript she had added ran thus,—

“Ah! why did you not prevent my marriage, when you could do so by a word? They think I have reached the summit of my wishes. I have never been more wretched.”

This letter made Daniel utter an exclamation of rage. He saw nothing in it but bitter irony.

“This miserable woman,” he thought, “laughs at me; and, when she says she does not blame Henrietta, that means that she hates her, and will persecute her.”

Maxime’s letter fortunately reassured him a little. Maxime confirmed Sarah’s account, adding, moreover, that Miss Henrietta was very sad, but calm and resigned; and that her step-mother treated her with the greatest kindness. The surprising part was, that Brevan did not say a word of the large amounts that had been intrusted to his care, nor of his method of selling the lands, nor of the price which he had obtained.

But Daniel did not notice this; all his thoughts were with Henrietta.

“Why should she not have written,” he thought, “when all the others found means to write?”

Overwhelmed with disappointment, he had sat down on a wooden bench in the embrasure of one of the windows in the hall where the letters were distributed. Travelling across the vast distance which separated him from France, his thoughts were under the trees in the garden of the count’s palace. He felt as if a powerful effort of his will would enable him to transport himself thither. By the pale light of the moon he thought he could discern the dress of his beloved as she stole towards him between the old trees.

A friendly touch on the shoulder recalled him rudely to the real world. Four or five officers from "The Conquest" were standing around him, gay, and free from cares, a hearty laugh on their lips.

"Well, my dear Champcey," they said, "are you coming?"

"Where?"

"Why, to dinner!"

And as he looked at them with the air of a man who had just been roused, and has not had time to collect his thoughts, they went on,—

"Well, to dinner. It appears Saigon possesses an admirable French restaurant, where the cook, a Parisian, is simply a great artist. Come, get up, and let us go."

But Daniel was in a humor which made solitude irresistibly attractive. He trembled at the idea of being torn from his melancholy reveries, of being compelled to take his part in conversation, to talk, to listen, to reply.

"I cannot dine with you to-day, my friends," he said to his comrades.

"You are joking."

"No, I am not. I must return on board." Then only, the others were struck by the sad expression of his face; and, changing their tone, they asked him in the most affectionate manner,—

"What is the matter, Champcey? Have you heard of any misfortune, any death?"

"No."

"You have had letters from France, I see."

"They bring me nothing sad. I was expecting news, and they have not come; that is all."

"Oh! then you must come with us."

"Do not force me; I would be a sorry companion."

Still they insisted, as friends will insist who will not understand that others may not be equally tempted by what charms them; but nothing could induce Daniel to change his mind. At the door of the government house he parted with his comrades, and went back, sad and solitary, towards the harbor.

He reached without difficulty the banks of the Dong-Nai; but here obstacles presented themselves of which he had not thought. The night was so dark, that he could hardly see to find his way along a wharf in process of construction, and covered with enormous stones and timber. Not a light in all the native huts around. In spite of his efforts to pierce this darkness, he could discern nothing but the dark outline of the vessels lying at anchor in the river, and the light of the lighthouse as it trembled in the current.

He called. No voice replied. The silence, which was as deep as the darkness, was broken only by the low wash of the river as it flowed down rapidly.

“I am quite capable,” thought Daniel, “of not finding the boat of ‘The Conquest.’”

Still he did find it, after long search, drawn up, and half lost, in a crowd of native boats. But the boat seemed to be empty. It was only when he got into it, that he discovered a little midshipman fast asleep in the bottom, wrapped up in a carpet which was used to cover the seats for the officers. Daniel shook him. He rose slowly, and grumbling, as if overcome by sleep.

“Well, what is the matter?” he growled.

“Where are the men?” asked Daniel.

Quite awake now, the midshipman, who had good eyes, had noticed, in spite of the darkness, the gold of the epaulets. This made him very respectful at once; and he replied,—

“Lieutenant, all the men are in town.”

“How so? All?”

“Why, yes, lieutenant! When all the officers had gone on shore, they told the boatswain they would not come back very soon, and he might take his time to eat a mouthful, and to drink a glass, provided the men did not get drunk.”

That was so; and Daniel had forgotten the fact.

“And where did they go?” he asked.

“I don’t know, lieutenant.”

Daniel looked at the large, heavy boat, as if he had thought for a moment to return in it to “The Conquest” with no other help but the little midshipman; but, no, that was impracticable.

“Well, go to sleep again,” he said to the boy.

And jumping on shore, without uttering a word of disappointment, he was going in search of his comrades, when he saw suddenly a man turn up out of the darkness, whose features it was impossible to distinguish.

“Who is there?” he asked.

“Mr. Officer,” answered the man in an almost unintelligible jargon, a horrible medley of French, Spanish, and English. “I heard you tell the little man in the boat there”—

“Well?”

“I thought you wanted to get back on board your ship?”

“Why, yes.”

“Well, then, if you like it, I am a boatman; I can take you over.”

There was no reason why Daniel should mistrust the man. In all ports of the world, and at any hour of the day or the night, men are to be found who are lying in wait on the wharves for sailors who have been belated, and who are made to pay dear for such extra services.

“Ah! you are a boatman, you say?” Daniel exclaimed, quite pleased at the encounter. “Well, where is your boat?”

“There, Mr. Officer, a little way down; just follow me. But what ship do you want to go to?”

“That ship there.”

And Daniel pointed out to him "The Conquest" as she lay not six hundred yards off in the river, showing her lights.

"That is rather far," grumbled the man; "the tide is low; and the current is very strong."

"I'll give you a couple of francs for your trouble."

The man clapped his hands with delight, and said,—

"Ah! if that's the way, all right. Come along, Mr. Officer, a little farther down. There, that's my boat. Get in, now steady!"

Daniel followed his directions; but he was so much struck by the man's awkwardness in getting the boat off, that he could not help saying to him,—

"Ah, my boy, you are not a boatman, after all!"

"I beg pardon, sir; I used to be one before I came to this country."

"What is your country?"

"Shanghai."

"Nevertheless, you will have to learn a great deal before you will ever be a sailor."

Still, as the boat was very small, a mere nutshell, in fact, Daniel thought he could, if needs be, take an oar himself. Thereupon, sitting down, and stretching out his legs, he was soon once more plunged in meditations. The unfortunate man was soon roused, however, by a terrible sensation.

Thanks to a shock, a wrong movement, or any other accident, the boat upset, and Daniel was thrown into the river; and, to fill the measure of his mishaps, one of his feet was so closely jammed in between the seat and the boat itself, that he was paralyzed in his movements, and soon under water.

He saw it all in an instant; and his first thought was,—

"I am lost!"

But, desperate as his position was, he was not the man to give up.

Gathering, by one supreme effort, all his strength and energy, he took hold

of the boat, that had turned over just above him, and pushed it so forcibly, that he loosened his foot, and at the same moment reached the surface. It was high time; for Daniel had swallowed much water.

“Now,” he thought, “I have a chance to escape!”

A very frail chance, alas!—so small a chance, in fact, that it required all the strong will and the invincible courage of Daniel to give it any effect. A furious current carried him down like a straw; the little boat, which might have supported him, had disappeared; and he knew nothing about this formidable Dong-Nai, except that it went on widening to its mouth. There was nothing to guide him; for the night was so dark, that land and water, the river and its banks, all melted together in the uniform, bottomless darkness.

What had become of the boatman, however? At all events, he called,—

“Ahoy, my man!”

No answer. Had he been swept off? Or did he get back into the boat? Perhaps he was drowned already.

But all of a sudden Daniel’s heart trembled with joy and hope. He had just made out, a few hundred yards below, a red light, indicating a vessel at anchor. All his efforts were directed towards that point. He was carried thither with an almost bewildering rapidity. He nearly touched it; and then, with incredible presence of mind, and great precision, at the moment when the current drove him close up to the anchor-chain, he seized it. He held on to it; and, having recovered his breath, he uttered three times in succession, with all the strength of his lungs, so sharp a cry, that it was heard above the fierce roar of the river,—

“Help, help, help!”

From the ship came a call, “Hold on!” proving to him that his appeal had been heard, and that help was at hand.

Too late! An eddy in the terrible current seized him, and, with irresistible violence, tore the chain, slippery with mud, out of his stiffened hands. Rolled

over by the waters, he was rudely thrown against the side of the vessel, went under, and was carried off.

When he rose to the surface, the red light was far above him, and below no other light was in sight. No human help was henceforth within reach. Daniel could now count only upon himself in trying to make one of the banks. Although he could not measure the distance, which might be very great, the task did not seem to him beyond his strength, if he had only been naked. But his clothes encumbered him terribly; and the water which they soaked up made them, of course, every moment more oppressive.

“I shall be drowned, most assuredly,” he thought, “if I cannot get rid of my clothes.”

Excellent swimmer as he was, the task was no easy one. Still he accomplished it. After prodigious efforts of strength and skill, he got rid of his shoes; and then he cried out, as if in defiance of the blind element against which he was struggling,—

“I shall pull through! I shall see Henrietta again!”

But it had cost him an enormous amount of time to undress; and how could he calculate the distance which this current had taken him down—one of the swiftest in the world? As he tried to recall all he knew about it, he remembered having noticed that, a mile below Saigon, the river was as wide as a branch of the sea. According to his calculation, he must be near that spot now.

“Never mind,” he said to himself, “I mean to get out of this.”

Not knowing to which bank he was nearest, he had resolved, almost instinctively, to swim towards the right bank, on which Saigon stands.

He was thus swimming for about half an hour, and began already to feel his muscles stiffening, and his joints losing their elasticity, while his breathing became oppressed, and his extremities were chilled, when he noticed from the wash of the water that he was near the shore. Soon he felt the ground under his feet; but, the moment he touched it, he sank up to his waist into

the viscous and tenacious slime, which makes all the Cochin China rivers so peculiarly dangerous.

There was the land, no doubt, and only the darkness prevented his seeing it; and yet his situation was more desperate than ever. His legs were caught as in a vice; the muddy water was boiling nearly up to his lips; and, at every effort to extricate himself, he sank deeper in, a little at a time, but always a little more. His presence of mind now began to leave him, as well as his strength; and his thoughts became confused, when he touched, instinctively feeling for a hold, the root of a mangrove.

That root might be the saving of his life. First he tried its strength; then, finding it sufficiently solid, he hoisted himself up by it, gently, but with the frenzied energy of a drowning man; then, creeping cautiously on the treacherous mud, he finally succeeded in reaching firm ground, and fell down exhausted.

He was saved from drowning; but what was to become of him, naked, exhausted, chilled as he was, and lost in this dark night in a strange and deserted country? After a moment, however, he rose, and tried to get on; but at every step he was held back on all sides by lianes and cactus thorns.

“Well,” he said, “I must stay here till day breaks.”

The rest of the night he spent in walking up and down, and beating his chest, in order to keep out the terrible chills which penetrated to the very marrow of his bones. The first light of dawn showed him how he was imprisoned within an apparently impenetrable thicket, out of which, it seemed, he could never find his way. He did find it, however, and after a walk of four hours, he reached Saigon.

Some sailors of a merchant-ship, whom he met, lent him a few clothes, and carried him on board “The Conquest,” where he arrived more dead than alive.

“Where do you come from, great God! in such a state?” exclaimed his comrades when they saw him.

“What has happened to you?”

And, when he had told them all he had gone through since they parted, they said,—

“Certainly, my dear Champcey, you are a lucky fellow. This is the second accident from which you escape as by a miracle. Mind the third!”

“Mind the third!” that was exactly what Daniel thought.

For, in the midst of all the frightful sufferings he had undergone during the past night, he had reflected deeply. That block which had fallen on his head, no one knew whence; this boat sinking suddenly, and without apparent cause—were they the work of chance alone?

The awkwardness of the boatman who had so unexpectedly turned up to offer him his services had filled his mind with strange doubts. This man, a wretched sailor, might be a first-class swimmer; and, having taken all his measures before upsetting the boat, he might easily have reached land after the accident.

“This boatman,” Daniel thought, “evidently wanted me to perish. Why, and what purpose? Evidently not for his sake. But who is interested in my death? Sarah Brandon? No, that cannot be!”

What was still less likely was, that a wretch in Sarah Brandon’s pay should have found his way on board “The Conquest,” and should then have been precisely at the right moment at the wharf, the first time Daniel went on shore. Still his suspicions troubled him to such a degree, that he determined to make every effort to solve the mystery.

To begin, he asked for a list of all the men who had been allowed to go on shore the night before. He learned in reply, that only the crews of the different boats had been at Saigon, but that all the emigrants having been allowed to land, several of these men had also gone on shore. With this information, and in spite of his great weakness, Daniel went to the chief of police at Saigon, and asked him for an officer. With this agent he went to the wharf, to the spot where the boat of “The Conquest” had been lying the night before, and asked him to make inquiries there as to any boatman that might have disappeared during the night.

None of the boatmen was missing; but they brought Daniel a poor Annamite fellow, who had been wandering about the river-bank ever since early morning, tearing his hair, and crying that he had been robbed; that they had stolen his boat. Daniel had been unable the night before to distinguish the form or the dress of the man whose services he had accepted; but he had heard his voice, and he recalled the peculiar intonation so perfectly, that he would have recognized it among thousands. Besides, this poor devil did not know a word of French (more than ten persons bore witness to it); and born on the river, and having always lived there, he was an excellent sailor. Finally, it was very clear, that, if this man had committed the crime, he would have been careful not to claim his boat.

What could Daniel conclude from this summary inquiry?

“There is no doubt about it,” he thought. “I was to be murdered.”

CHAPTER 23

There is no man, however brave he may think himself, who would not tremble at the idea that he has, just by a miracle, escaped from the assassin's hand. There is not one who would not feel his blood grow chill in his veins at the thought that those who have failed in their attempt once will no doubt renew their efforts, and that perhaps the miracle may not be repeated.

That was Daniel's position.

He felt henceforth this terrible certainty, that war had been declared against him, a savage warfare, merciless, pitiless, a war of treachery and cunning, of snare and ambush. It had been proved to him that at his side, so to say, as his very shadow, there was ever a terrible enemy, stimulated by the thirst of gain, watching all his steps, ever awake and on the watch, and ready to seize the first opportunity to strike. The infernal cunning of the first two attempts enabled Daniel to measure the superior wickedness of the man who had been chosen and enlisted—at least Daniel thought so—by Sarah Brandon.

Still he did not say a word of the danger to which he was exposed, and even assumed, as soon as he had recovered from the first shock, a certain cheerfulness which he had not shown during the whole voyage, and under which he concealed his apprehensions.

"I do not want my enemy," he said to himself, "to suspect my suspicions."

But from that moment his suspicions never fell asleep; and every step he took was guided by most careful circumspection. He never put one foot before the other, so to say, without first having examined the ground; he never seized a man-rope without having first tried its solidity; he had made it a law to eat and drink nothing, not even a glass of water, but what came from the officers' table.

These perpetual precautions, these ceaseless apprehensions, were extremely repugnant to his daring temper; but he felt, that, under such

circumstances, careless would be no longer courage, but simple folly. He had engaged in a duel in which he wanted to be victorious; hence he must at least defend himself against the attack. He felt, moreover, that he was the only protector his beloved had now; and that, if he died, she would certainly be lost. But he also thought not only of defending himself, but of getting at the assassin, and, through him, at the infamous creature by whom he was employed, Sarah Brandon.

He therefore pursued his search quietly, slowly, but indefatigably. Certain circumstances which he had at first forgotten, and a few points skilfully put together, gave him some hope. He had, for instance, ascertained that none but the crews of the boats had been on shore, and that, of these, not one had been for ten minutes out of sight of the others. Hence the pretended boatman was not a sailor on board "The Conquest." Nor could it have been one of the marines, as none of them had been allowed to leave the vessel. There remained the emigrants, fifty or sixty of whom had spent the night in Saigon.

But was not the idea that one of these men might have led Daniel into the trap contradicted by the circumstances of the first attempt? By no means; for many of the younger men among these emigrants had asked permission to help in the working of the ship in order to break the monotony of the long voyage. After careful inquiry, Daniel ascertained even that four of them had been with the sailors on the yards from which the heavy block fell that came so near ending his life.

Which were they? This he could not ascertain.

Still the result was enough for Daniel to make his life more endurable. He could breathe again on board ship; he went and came in all safety, since he was sure that the guilty man was not one of the crew. He even felt real and great relief at the thought that his would-be assassin was not to be looked for among these brave and frank sailors; none of them, at least, had been bribed with gold to commit a murder. Moreover, the limits of his investigations had now narrowed down in such a manner, that he might begin to hope for success in the end.

Unfortunately the emigrants had, a fortnight after the landing, scattered abroad, going according as they were wanted, to the different establishments in the colony, which were far apart from each other. Daniel had therefore, at least for the moment, to give up a plan he had formed, to talk with every one of them until he should recognize the voice of the false boatman.

He himself, besides, was not to remain at Saigon. After a first expedition, which kept him away for two months, he obtained command of a steam-sloop, which was ordered to explore and to take all the bearings of the River Kamboja, from the sea to Mitho, the second city of Cochin China. This was no easy task; for the Kamboja had already defeated the efforts of several hydrographic engineers by its capricious and constant changes, every pass and every turn nearly changing with the monsoons in direction and depth.

But the mission had its own difficulties and dangers. The Kamboja is not only obstructed by foul swamps; but it flows through vast marshy plains, which, in the season of rains, are covered with water; while in the dry season, under the burning rays of the sun, they exhale that fatal malaria which has cost already thousands of valuable lives.

Daniel was to experience its effects but too soon. In less than a week after he had set out, he saw three of the men who had been put under his orders die before his eyes, after a few hours' illness, and amid atrocious convulsions. They had the cholera. During the next four months, seven succumbed to fevers which they had contracted in these pestilential swamps. And towards the end of the expedition, when the work was nearly done, the survivors were so emaciated, that they had hardly strength enough to hold themselves up. Daniel alone had not yet suffered from these terrible scourges. God knows, however, that he had not spared himself, nor ever hesitated to do what he thought he ought to do. To sustain, to electrify these men, exhausted as they were by sickness, and irritated at wasting their lives upon work that had no reward, a leader was required who should possess uncommon intrepidity, and who should treat danger as an enemy who is to be defied only by facing him; and such a leader they found in Daniel.

He had told Sarah Brandon on the eve of his departure,—

“With a love like mine, with a hatred like mine, in the heart, one can defy all things. The murderous climate is not going to harm me; and, if I had six balls in my body, I should still find strength enough to come and call you to account for what you have done to Henrietta before I die.”

He certainly had had need of all that dauntless energy which passion inspires to sustain him in his trials. But alas! his bodily sufferings were as nothing in comparison with his mental anxiety. At night, while his men were asleep, he kept awake, his heart torn with anguish, now crushed under the thought of his helplessness, and now asking himself if rage would not deprive him of his reason.

It was a year now since he had left Paris to go on board “The Conquest,” a whole year.

And he had not received a single letter from Henrietta,—not one. Every time a vessel arrived from France with despatches, his hopes revived; and every time they were disappointed.

“Well,” he would say to himself, “I can wait for the next.” And then he began counting the days. Then it arrived at last, this long-expected ship, and never, never once brought a letter from Henrietta—

How could this silence be explained? What strange events could have happened? What must he think, hope, fear?

To be chained by honor to a place a thousand leagues from the woman he loved to distraction, to know nothing about her, her life, her actions and her thoughts, to be reduced to such extreme wretchedness, to doubt—

Daniel would have been much less unhappy if some one had suddenly come and told him, “Miss Ville-Handry is no more.”

Yes, less unhappy; for true love in its savage selfishness suffers less from death than from treason. If Henrietta had died, Daniel would have been crushed; and maybe despair would have driven him to extreme measures; but he would have been relieved of that horrible struggle within him,

between his faith in the promises of his beloved and certain suspicions, which caused his hair to stand on end.

But he knew that she was alive; for there was hardly a vessel coming from France or from England which did not bring him a letter from Maxime, or from the Countess Sarah. For Sarah insisted upon writing to him, as if there existed a mysterious bond between them, which she defied him to break.

"I obey," she said, "an impulse more powerful than reason and will alike. It is stronger than I am, stronger than all things else; I must write to you, I cannot help it."

At another time she said,—

"Do you remember that evening, O Daniel! when, pressing Sarah Brandon to your heart, you swore to be hers forever? The Countess Ville-Handry cannot forget it."

Under the most indifferent words there seemed to palpitate and to struggle a passion which was but partially restrained, and ever on the point of breaking forth. Her letters read like the conversations of timid lovers, who talk about the rain and the weather in a tone of voice trembling with desire, and with looks burning with passion.

"Could she really be in love with me?" Daniel thought, "and could that be her punishment?"

Then, again, swearing, like the roughest of his men, he added,—

"Am I to be a fool forever? Is it not quite clear that this wicked woman only tries to put my suspicions to sleep? She is evidently preparing for her defence, in case the rascal who attempted my life should be caught, and compromise her by his confessions."

Every letter; moreover, brought from the Countess Sarah some news about his betrothed, her "stepdaughter." But she always spoke of her with extreme reserve and reticence, and in ambiguous terms, as if counting upon Daniel's sagacity to guess what she could not or would not write. According to her account, Henrietta had become reconciled to her father's marriage. The poor child's melancholy had entirely disappeared. Miss Henrietta was

very friendly with Sir Thorn. The coquettish ways of the young girl became quite alarming; and her indiscretion provoked the gossip of visitors. Daniel might as well accustom himself to the idea, that, on his return, he might find Henrietta a married woman.

“She lies, the wretch!” said Daniel; “yes, she lies!”

But he tried in vain to resist; every letter from Sarah brought him the germ of some new suspicion, which fermented in his mind as the miasma fermented in the veins of his men.

The information furnished by Maxime de Brevan was different, and often contradictory even, but by no means more reassuring. His letters portrayed the perplexity and the hesitation of a man who is all anxiety to soften hard truths. According to him, the Countess Sarah and Miss Ville-Handry did not get on well with each other; but he declared he was bound to say that the wrong was all on the young lady’s side, who seemed to make it the study of her life to mortify her step-mother, while the latter bore the most irritating provocations with unchanging sweetness. He alluded to the calumnies which endangered Miss Henrietta’s reputation, admitting that she had given some ground for them by thoughtless acts. He finally added that he foresaw the moment when she would leave her father’s house in spite of all his advice to the contrary.

“And not one line from her,” exclaimed Daniel,—“not one line!”

And he wrote her letter after letter, beseeching her to answer him, whatever might be the matter, and to fear nothing, as the certainty even of a misfortune would be a blessing to him in comparison with this torturing uncertainty.

He wrote without imagining for a moment that Henrietta suffered all the torments he endured, that their letters were intercepted, and that she had no more news of him than he had of her.

Time passed, however, carrying with it the evil as well as the good days. Daniel returned to Saigon, bringing back with him one of the finest hydrographic works that exist on Cochin China. It was well known that this work had cost an immense outlay of labor, of privations, and of life; hence

he was rewarded as if he had won a battle, and he was rewarded instantly, thanks to special powers conferred upon his chief, reserving only the confirmation in France, which was never refused.

All the survivors of the expedition were mentioned in public orders and in the official report; two were decorated; and Daniel was promoted to officer of the Legion of Honor. Under other circumstances, this distinction, doubly valuable to so young a man, would have made him supremely happy; now it left him cold.

The fact was, that these long trials had worn out the elasticity of his heart; and the sources of joy, as well as the sources of sorrow, had dried up. He no longer struggled against despair, and came to believe that Henrietta had forgotten him, and would never be his wife. Now, as he knew he never could love another, or rather as no other existed for him; as, without Henrietta, the world seemed to him empty, absurd, intolerable,—he asked himself why he should continue to live. There were moments in which he looked lovingly at his pistols, and said to himself,—

“Why should I not spare Sarah Brandon the trouble?”

What kept his hand back was the leaven of hatred which still rose in him at times. He ought to have the courage, at least, to live long enough to avenge himself. Harassed by these anxieties, he withdrew more and more from society; never went on shore; and his comrades on board “The Conquest” felt anxious as they looked at him walking restlessly up and down the quarter-deck, pale, and with eyes on fire.

For they loved Daniel. His superiority was so evident, that none disputed it; they might envy him; but they could never be jealous of him. Some of them thought he had brought back with him from Kamboja the germ of one of those implacable diseases which demoralize the strongest, and which break out suddenly, carrying a man off in a few hours.

“You ought not to become a misanthrope, my dear Champcey,” they would say. “Come, for Heaven’s sake shake off that sadness, which might make an end of you before you are aware of it!”

And jestingly they added,—

“Decidedly, you regret the banks of the Kamboja!”

They thought it a jest: it was the truth. Daniel did regret even the worst days of his mission. At that time his grave responsibility, overwhelming fatigues, hard work, and daily danger, had procured him at least some hours of oblivion. Now idleness left him, without respite or time, face to face with his distressing thoughts. It was the desire, the necessity almost, of escaping in some manner from himself, which made him accept an invitation to join a number of his comrades who wanted to try the charms of a great hunting party.

On the morning of the expedition, however, he had a kind of presentiment.

“A fine opportunity,” he thought, “for the assassin hired by Sarah Brandon!”

Then, shrugging his shoulders, he said with a bitter laugh,—

“How can I hesitate? As if a life like mine was worth the trouble of protecting it against danger!”

When they arrived on the following day on the hunting ground, he, as well as the other hunters, received their instructions, and had their posts assigned them by the leader. He found himself placed between two of his comrades, in front of a thicket, and facing a narrow ravine, through which all the game must necessarily pass as it was driven down by a crowd of Annamites.

They had been firing for an hour, when Daniel’s neighbors saw him suddenly let go his rifle, turn over, and fall.

They hurried up to catch him; but he fell, face forward, to the ground, saying aloud, and very distinctly,—

“This time they have not missed me!”

At the outcry raised by the two neighbors of Daniel, other hunters had hastened up, and among them the chief surgeon of “The Conquest,” one of those old “pill-makers,” who, under a jovial scepticism, and a rough, almost brutal outside, conceal great skill and an almost feminine tenderness. As soon as he looked at the wounded man, whom his friends had stretched out

on his back, making a pillow of their overcoats, and who lay there pale and inanimate, the good doctor frowned, and growled out,—

“He won’t live.”

The officers were thunderstruck.

“Poor Champcey!” said one of them, “to escape the Kamboja fevers, and to be killed here at a pleasure party! Do you recollect, doctor, what you said on the occasion of his second accident,—‘Mind the third?’”

The old doctor did not listen. He had knelt down, and rapidly stripped the coat off Daniel’s back. The poor man had been struck by a shot. The ball had entered on the right side, a little behind; and between the fourth and the fifth rib, one could see a round wound, the edges drawn in. But the most careful examination did not enable him to find the place where the projectile had come out again. The doctor rose slowly, and, while carefully dusting the knees of his trousers, he said,—

“All things considered, I would not bet that he may not escape. Who knows where the ball may be lodged? It may have respected the vital parts.

“Projectiles often take curious turns and twists. I should almost be disposed to answer for M. Champcey, if I had him in a good bed in the hospital at Saigon. At all events, we must try to get him there alive. Let one of you gentlemen tell the sailors who have come with us to make a litter of branches.”

The noise of a struggle, of fearful oaths and inarticulate cries, interrupted his orders. Some fifteen yards off, below the place where Daniel had fallen, two sailors were coming out of the thicket, their faces red with anger, dragging out a man with a wretched gun, who hurled out,—

“Will you let me go, you parcel of good-for-nothings! Let me go, or I’ll hurt you!”

He was so furiously struggling in the arms of the two sailors, clinging with an iron grip to roots and branches and rocks, turning and twisting at every step, that the men at last, furious at his resistance, lifted him up bodily, and threw him at the chief surgeon’s feet, exclaiming,—

“Here is the scoundrel who has killed our lieutenant!”

It was a man of medium size, with a dejected air, and lack-lustre eyes, wearing a mustache and chin-beard, and looking impudent. His costume was that of an Annamite of the middle classes,—a blouse buttoned at the side, trousers made in Chinese style, and sandals of red leather. It was, nevertheless, quite evident that the man was a European.

“Where did you find him?” asked the surgeon of the men.

“Down there, commandant, behind that big bush, to the right of Lieut. Champcey, and a little behind him.”

“Why do you accuse him?”

“Why? We have good reasons, I should think. He was hiding. When we saw him, he was lying flat on the ground, trembling with fear; and we said at once, ‘Surely, there is the man who fired that shot.’”

The man had, in the meantime, raised himself, and assumed an air of almost provoking assurance.

“They lie!” he exclaimed. “Yes, they lie, the cowards!”

This insult would have procured him a sound drubbing, but for the old surgeon, who held the arm of the first sailor who made the attack. Then, continuing his interrogatory, he asked,—

“Why did you hide?”

“I did not hide.”

“What were you doing there, crouching in the bush?”

“I was at my post, like the others. Do they require a permit to carry arms in Cochin China? I was not invited to your hunting party, to be sure; but I am fond of game; and I said to myself, ‘Even if I were to shoot two or three head out of the hundreds their drivers will bring down, I would do them no great harm.’”

The doctor let him talk on for some time, observing him closely with his sagacious eye; then, all of a sudden, he broke in, saying,—

“Give me your gun!”

The man turned so visibly pale, that all the officers standing around noticed it. Still he did what he was asked to do, and said,—

“Here it is. It’s a gun one of my friends has lent me.”

The doctor examined the weapon very carefully; and, after having inspected the lock, he said,—

“Both barrels of your gun are empty; and they have not been emptied more than two minutes ago.”

“That is so; I fired both barrels at an animal that passed me within reach.”

“One of the balls may have gone astray.”

“That cannot be. I was aiming in the direction of the prairie; and, consequently, I was turning my back to the place where the officer was standing.”

To the great surprise of everybody, the doctor’s face, ordinarily crafty enough, now looked all benevolent curiosity,—so much so, that the two sailors who had captured the man were furious, and said aloud,—

“Ah! don’t believe him, commandant, the dirty dog!”

But the man, evidently encouraged by the surgeon’s apparent kindness, asked,—

“Am I to be allowed to defend myself, or not?”

And then he added in a tone of supreme impudence,—

“However, whether I defend myself or not, it will, no doubt, be all the same. Ah! if I were only a sailor, or even a marine, that would be another pair of sleeves; they would hear me! But now, I am nothing but a poor civilian; and here everybody knows civilians must have broad shoulders. Wrong or right, as soon as they are accused, they are convicted.”

The doctor seemed to have made up his mind; for he interrupted this flow of words, saying in his kindest voice,—

“Calm yourself, my friend. There is a test which will clearly establish your innocence. The ball that has struck Lieut. Champcey is still in the wound; and I am the man who is going to take it out, I promise you. We all here have rifles with conical balls; you are the only one who has an ordinary shot-gun with round balls, so there is no mistake possible. I do not know if you understand me?”

Yes, he understood, and so well, that his pale face turned livid, and he looked all around with frightened glances. For about six seconds he hesitated, counting his chances; then suddenly falling on his knees, his hands folded, and beating the ground with his forehead, he cried out,—

“I confess! Yes, it may be I who have hit the officer. I heard the bushes moving in his direction, and I fired at a guess. What a misfortune! O God, what a misfortune! Ah! I would give my life to save his if I could. It was an accident, gentlemen, I swear. Such accidents happen every day in hunting; the papers are full of them. Great God! what an unfortunate man I am!”

The doctor had stepped back. He now ordered the two sailors who had arrested the man, to make sure of him, to bind him, and carry him to Saigon to prison. One of the gentlemen, he said, would write a few lines, which they must take with them. The man seemed to be annihilated.

“A misfortune is not a crime,” he sighed out. “I am an honest mechanic.”

“We shall see that in Saigon,” answered the surgeon.

And he hastened away to see if all the preparations had been made to carry the wounded man. In less than twenty minutes, and with that marvellous skill which is one of the characteristic features of good sailors, a solid litter had been constructed; the bottom formed a real mattress of dry leaves; and overhead a kind of screen had been made of larger leaves. When they put Daniel in, the pain caused him to utter a low cry of pain. This was the first sign of life he had given.

“And now, my friends,” said the doctor, “let us go! And bear in mind, if you shake the lieutenant, he is a dead man.”

It was hardly eight in the morning when the melancholy procession started homeward; and it was not until between two and three o'clock on the next morning that it entered Saigon, under one of those overwhelming rains which give one an idea of the deluge, and of which Cochin China has the monopoly. The sailors who carried the litter on which Daniel lay had walked eighteen hours without stopping, on footpaths which were almost impassable, and where every moment a passage had to be cut through impenetrable thickets of aloes, cactus, and jack-trees. Several times the officers had offered to take their places; but they had always refused, relieving each other, and taking all the time as ingenious precautions as a mother might devise for her dying infant. Although, therefore, the march lasted so long, the dying man felt no shock; and the old doctor said, quite touched, to the officers who were around him,—

“Good fellows, how careful they are! You might have put a full glass of water on the litter, and they would not have spilled a drop.”

Yes, indeed! Good people, rude and rough, no doubt, in many ways, coarse sometimes, and even brutal, bad to meet on shore the day after pay-day, or coming out from a drinking-shop, but keeping under the rough outside a heart of gold, childlike simplicity, and the sacred fire of noblest devotion. The fact was, they did not dare breathe heartily till after they had put their precious burden safe under the hospital porch.

Two officers who had hastened in advance had ordered a room to be made ready. Daniel was carried there; and when he had been gently put on a white, good bed, officers and sailors withdrew into an adjoining room to await the doctor's sentence. The latter remained with the wounded man, with two assistant surgeons who had been roused in the meantime.

Hope was very faint. Daniel had recovered his consciousness during the journey, and had even spoken a few words to those around him, but incoherent words, the utterance of delirium. They had questioned him once or twice; but his answers had shown that he had no consciousness of the accident which had befallen him, nor of his present condition; so that the general opinion among the sailors who were waiting, and who all had more

or less experience of shot-wounds, was, that fever would carry off their lieutenant before sunrise.

Suddenly, as if by magic, all was hushed, and not a word spoken.

The old surgeon had just appeared at the door of the sick-chamber; and, with a pleasant and hopeful smile on his lips, he said,—

“Our poor Champcey is doing as well as could be expected; and I would almost be sure of his recovery, if the great heat was not upon us.”

And, silencing the murmur of satisfaction which arose among them at this good news, he went on to say,—

“Because, after all, serious as the wound is, it is nothing in comparison with what it might have been; and what is more, gentlemen, I have the *corpus delicti*.”

He raised in the air, as he said this, a spherical ball, which he held between his thumb and forefinger.

“Another instance,” he said, “to be added to those mentioned by our great masters of surgery, of the oddities of projectiles. This one, instead of pursuing its way straight through the body of our poor friend, had turned around the ribs, and gone to its place close by the vertebral column. There I found it, almost on the surface; and nothing was needed to dislodge it but a slight push with the probe.”

The shot-gun taken from the hands of the murderer had been deposited in a corner of the large room: they brought it up, tried the ball, and found it to fit accurately.

“Now we have a tangible proof,” exclaimed a young ensign, “an unmistakable proof, that the wretch whom our men have caught is Daniel’s murderer. Ah, he might as well have kept his confession!”

But the old surgeon replied with a dark frown,—

“Gently, gentlemen, gently! Don’t let us be over-hasty in accusing a poor fellow of such a fearful crime, when, perhaps, he is guilty only of imprudence.”

“O doctor, doctor!” protested half a dozen voices.

“I beg your pardon! Don’t let us be hasty, I say; and let us consider, For an assassination there must be a motive, and an all-powerful motive; for, aside from the scaffold which he risks, no man is capable of killing another man solely for the purpose of shedding his blood. Now, in this case, I look in vain for any reason, which could have induced the man to commit a murder. He certainly did not expect to rob our poor comrade. But hatred, you say, or vengeance, perhaps! Well, that may be. But, before a man makes up his mind to shoot even the man he hates like a dog, he must have been cruelly offended by him; and, to bring this about, he must have been in contact, or must have stood in some relation to him. Now, I ask you, is it not far more probable that the murderer saw our friend Champcey this morning for the first time?”

“I beg your pardon, commandant! He knew him perfectly well.”

The man who interrupted the doctor was one of the sailors to whom the prisoner had been intrusted to carry him to prison. He came forward, twisting his worsted cap in his hands; and, when the old surgeon had ordered him to speak, he said,—

“Yes, the rascal knew the lieutenant as well as I know you, commandant; and the reason of it is, that the scoundrel was one of the emigrants whom we brought here eighteen months ago.”

“Are you sure of what you say?”

“As sure as I see you, commandant. At first my comrade and I did not recognize him, because a year and a half in this wretched country disfigure a man horribly; but, while we were carrying him to jail, we said to one another, ‘That is a head we have seen before.’ Then we made him talk; and he told us gradually, that he had been one of the passengers, and that he even knew my name, which is Baptist Lefloch.”

This deposition of the sailor made a great impression upon all the bystanders, except the old doctor. It is true he was looked upon, on board “The Conquest,” as one of the most obstinate men in holding on to his opinions.

“Do you know,” he asked the sailor, “if this man was one of the four or five who had to be put in irons during the voyage?”

“No, he was not one of them, commandant.”

“Did he ever have anything to do with Lieut. Champcey? Has he been reprimanded by him, or punished? Has he ever spoken to him?”

“Ah, commandant! that is more than I can tell.”

The old doctor slightly shrugged his shoulders, and said in a tone of indifference,—

“You see, gentlemen, this deposition is too vague to prove anything. Believe me, therefore, do not let us judge before the trial, and let us go to bed.”

Day was just breaking, pale and cool; the sailors disappeared one by one. The doctor was getting ready to lie down on a bed which he had ordered to be put up in a room adjoining that in which the wounded man was lying, when an officer came in. It was one of those who had been standing near Champcey; he, also, was a lieutenant.

“I should like to have a word in private with you, doctor,” he said.

“Very well,” replied the old surgeon. “Be kind enough to come up to my room.” And when they were alone, he locked the door, and said,—

“I am listening.”

The lieutenant thought a moment, like a man who looks for the best form in which to present an important idea, and then said,—

“Between us, doctor, do you believe it was an accident, or a crime?”

The surgeon hesitated visibly.

“I will tell you, but you only, frankly, that I do not believe it was an accident. But as we have no evidence”—

“Pardon me! I think I have evidence.”

“Oh!”

“You shall, judge yourself. When Daniel fell, he said, ‘This time, they have not missed me!’”

“Did he say so?”

“Word for word. And Saint Edme, who was farther from him than I was, heard it as distinctly as I did.”

To the great surprise of the lieutenant, the chief surgeon seemed only moderately surprised; his eyes, on the contrary, shone with that pleased air of a man who congratulates himself at having foreseen exactly what he now is told was the fact. He drew a chair up to the fireplace, in which a huge fire had been kindled to dry his clothes, sat down, and said,—

“Do you know, my dear lieutenant, that what you tell me is a matter of the greatest importance? What may we not conclude from those words, ‘This time they have not missed me’? In the first place, it proves that Champcey was fully aware that his life was in danger. Secondly, that plural, ‘They have not,’ shows that he knew he was watched and threatened by several people: hence the scamp whom we caught must have accomplices. In the third place, those words, ‘This time,’ establish the fact that his life has been attempted before.”

“That is just what I thought, doctor.”

The worthy old gentleman looked very grave and solemn, meditating deeply.

“Well, I,” he continued slowly, “I had a very clear presentiment of all that as soon as I looked at the murderer. Do you remember the man’s amazing impudence as long as he thought he could not be convicted of the crime? And then, when he found that the calibre of his gun betrayed him, how abject, how painfully humble, he became! Evidently such a man is capable of anything.”

“Oh! you need only look at him”—

“Yes, indeed! Well, as I was thus watching him, I instinctively recalled the two remarkable accidents which so nearly killed our poor Champcey,—that

block that fell upon him from the skies, and that shipwreck in the Dong-Nai. But I was still doubtful. After what you tell me, I am sure.”

He seized the lieutenant’s hand; and, pressing it almost painfully, he went on,—

“Yes, I am ready to take my oath that this wretch is the vile tool of people who hate or fear Daniel Champcey; who are deeply interested in his death; and who, being too cowardly to do their own business, are rich enough to hire an assassin.”

The lieutenant was evidently unable to follow.

“Still, doctor,” he objected, “but just now you insisted”—

“Upon a diametrically opposite doctrine; eh?”

“Precisely.”

The old surgeon smiled, and said,—

“I had my reasons. The more I am persuaded that this man is an assassin, the less I am disposed to proclaim it on the housetops. He has accomplices, you think, do you?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, if we wish to reach them, we must by all means reassure them, leave them under the impression that everybody thinks it was an accident. If they are frightened, good-night. They will vanish before you can put out your hand to seize them.”

“Champcey might be questioned; perhaps he could furnish some information.”

But the doctor rose, and stopped him with an air of fury,—

“Question my patient! Kill him, you mean! No! If I am to have the wonderful good luck to pull him through, no one shall come near his bed for a month. And, moreover, it will be very fortunate indeed if in a month he is sufficiently recovered to keep up a conversation.”

He shook his head, and went on, after a moment's silence,—

“Besides, it is a question whether Champcey would be disposed to say what he knows, or what he suspects. That is very doubtful. Twice he has been almost killed. Has he ever said a word about it? He probably has the same reasons for keeping silence now that he had then.”

Then, without noticing the officer's objections, he added,—

“At all events, I will think it over, and go and see the judges as soon as they are out of bed. But I must ask you, lieutenant, to keep my secret till further order. Will you promise?”

“On my word, doctor.”

“Then you may rest assured our poor friend shall be avenged. And now, as I have barely two hours to rest, please excuse me.”

CHAPTER 24

As soon as he was alone, the doctor threw himself on his bed; but he could not sleep. He had never in his life been so much puzzled. He felt as if this crime was the result of some terrible but mysterious intrigue; and the very fact of having, as he fancied, raised a corner of the veil, made him burn with the desire to draw it aside altogether.

“Why,” he said to himself, “why might not the scamp whom we hold be the author of the other two attempts likewise? There is nothing improbable in that supposition. The man, once engaged, might easily have been put on board ‘The Conquest;’ and he might have left France saying to himself that it would be odd indeed, if during a long voyage, or in a land like this, he did not find a chance to earn his money without running much risk.”

The result of his meditations was, that the chief surgeon appeared, at nine o’clock, at the office of the state attorney. He placed the matter before him very fully and plainly; and, an hour afterwards, he crossed the yard on his way to the prison, accompanied by a magistrate and his clerk.

“How is the man the sailors brought here last night?” he asked the jailer.

“Badly, sir. He would not eat.”

“What did he say when he got here?”

“Nothing. He seemed to be stupefied.”

“You did not try to make him talk?”

“Why, yes, a little. He answered that he had done some mischief; that he was in despair, and wished he were dead.”

The magistrate looked at the surgeon as if he meant to say, “Just as I expected from what you told me!” Then, turning again to the jailer, he said,—

“Show us to the prisoner’s cell.”

The murderer had been put into a small but tidy cell in the first story. When they entered, they found him seated on his bed, his heels on the bars, and his chin in the palm of his hands. As soon as he saw the surgeon, he jumped up, and with outstretched arms and rolling eyes, exclaimed,—

“The officer has died!”

“No,” replied the surgeon, “no! Calm yourself. The wound is a very bad one; but in a fortnight he will be up again.”

These words fell like a heavy blow upon the murderer. He turned pale; his lips quivered; and he trembled in all his limbs. Still he promptly mastered this weakness of the flesh; and falling on his knees, with folded hands, he murmured in the most dramatic manner,—

“Then I am not a murderer! O Great God, I thank thee!”

And his lips moved as if he were uttering a fervent prayer.

It was evidently a case of coarsest hypocrisy; for his looks contradicted his words and his voice. The magistrate, however, seemed to be taken in.

“You show proper feelings,” he said. “Now get up and answer me. What is your name?”

“Evariste Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet.”

“What age?”

“Thirty-five years.”

“Where were you born?”

“At Bagnolet, near Paris. And on that account, my friend”—

“Never mind. Your profession?”

The man hesitated. The magistrate added,—

“In your own interest I advise you to tell the truth. The truth always comes out in the end; and your position would be a very serious one if you tried to lie. Answer, therefore, directly.”

“Well, I am an engraver on metal; but I have been in the army; I served my time in the marines.”

“What brought you to Cochin China?”

“The desire to find work. I was tired of Paris. There was no work for engravers. I met a friend who told me the government wanted good workmen for the colonies.”

“What was your friend’s name?”

A slight blush passed over the man’s cheek’s, and he answered hastily,—

“I have forgotten his name.”

The magistrate seemed to redouble his attention, although he did not show it.

“That is very unfortunate for you,” he answered coldly. “Come, make an effort; try to remember.”

“I know I cannot; it is not worth the trouble.”

“Well; but no doubt you recollect the profession of the man who knew so well that government wanted men in Cochin China? What was it?”

The man, this time, turned crimson with rage, and cried out with extraordinary vehemence,—

“How do I know? Besides, what have I to do with my friend’s name and profession? I learned from him that they wanted workmen. I called at the navy department, they engaged me; and that is all.”

Standing quietly in one of the corners of the cell, the old chief surgeon lost not a word, not a gesture, of the murderer. And he could hardly refrain from rubbing his hands with delight as he noticed the marvellous skill of the magistrate in seizing upon all those little signs, which, when summed up at the end of an investigation, form an overwhelming mass of evidence against the criminal. The magistrate, in the meantime, went on with the same impassive air,—

“Let us leave that question, then, since it seems to irritate you, and let us go on to your residence here. How have you supported yourself at Saigon?”

“By my work, forsooth! *I* have two arms; and I am not a good-for- nothing.”

“You have found employment, you say, as engraver on metal?”

“No.”

“But you said”—

Evariste Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, could hardly conceal his impatience.

“If you won’t let me have my say,” he broke out insolently, “it isn’t worth while questioning me.”

The magistrate seemed not to notice it. He answered coldly,—

“Oh! talk as much as you want. I can wait.”

“Well, then, the day after we had landed, M. Farniol, the owner of the French restaurant, offered me a place as waiter. Of course I accepted, and stayed there a year. Now I wait at table at the Hotel de France, kept by M. Roy. You can send for my two masters; they will tell you whether there is any complaint against me.”

“They will certainly be examined. And where do you live?”

“At the Hotel de France, of course, where I am employed.”

The magistrate’s face looked more and more benevolent. He asked next,—

“And that is a good place,—to be waiter at a restaurant or a hotel?”

“Why, yes—pretty good.”

“They pay well; eh?”

“That depends,—sometimes they do; at other times they don’t. When it is the season”—

“That is so everywhere. But let us be accurate. You have been now eighteen months in Saigon; no doubt you have laid up something?”

The man looked troubled and amazed, as if he had suddenly found out that the apparent benevolence of the magistrate had led him upon slippery and dangerous ground. He said evasively,—

“If I have put anything aside, it is not worth mentioning.”

“On the contrary, let us mention it. How much about have you saved?”

Bagnolet’s looks, and the tremor of his lips, showed the rage that was devouring him.

“I don’t know,” he said sharply.

The magistrate made a gesture of surprise which was admirable. He added,—

“What! You don’t know how much you have laid up? That is too improbable! When people save money, one cent after another, to provide for their old age, they know pretty well”—

“Well, then, take it for granted that I have saved nothing.”

“As you like it. Only it is my duty to show you the effect of your declaration. You tell me you have not laid up any money, don’t you? Now, what would you say, if, upon search being made, the police should find a certain sum of money on your person or elsewhere?”

“They won’t find any.”

“So much the better for you; for, after what you said, it would be a terrible charge.”

“Let them search.”

“They are doing it now, and not only in your room, but also elsewhere. They will soon know if you have invested any money, or if you have deposited it with any of your acquaintances.”

“I may have brought some money with me from home.”

“No; for you have told me that you could no longer live in Paris, finding no work.”

Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, made such a sudden and violent start, that the surgeon thought he was going to attack the magistrate. He felt he had been caught in a net the meshes of which were drawing tighter and tighter around him; and these apparently inoffensive questions assumed suddenly a terrible meaning.

“Just answer me in one word,” said the magistrate. “Did you bring any money from France, or did you not?”

The man rose, and his lips opened to utter a curse; but he checked himself, sat down again, and, laughing ferociously, he said,—

“Ah! you would like to ‘squeeze’ me, and make me cut my own throat. But luckily, I can see through you; and I refuse to answer.”

“You mean you want to consider. Have a care! You need not consider in order to tell the truth.”

And, as the man remained obstinately silent, the magistrate began again after a pause, saying,—

“You know what you are accused of? They suspect that you fired at Lieut. Champcey with intent to kill.”

“That is an abominable lie!”

“So you say. How did you hear that the officers of ‘The Conquest’ had arranged a large hunting-party?”

“I had heard them speak of it at *table d’hôte*.”

“And you left your service in order to attend this hunt, some twelve miles from Saigon? That is certainly singular.”

“Not at all; for I am very fond of hunting. And then I thought, if I could bring back a large quantity of game, I would probably be able to sell it very well.”

“And you would have added the profit to your other savings, wouldn’t you?”

Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, was stung by the point of this ironical question, as if he had received a sharp cut. But, as he said nothing, the magistrate continued,—

“Explain to us how the thing happened.”

On this ground the murderer knew he was at home, having had ample time to get ready; and with an accuracy which did great honor to his memory, or to his veracity, he repeated what he had told the surgeon on the spot, and at the time of the catastrophe. He only added, that he had concealed himself, because he had seen at once to what terrible charges he would be exposed by his awkwardness. And as he continued his account, warming up with its plausibility, he recovered the impudence, or rather the insolence, which seemed to be the prominent feature of his character.

“Do you know the officer whom you have wounded?” asked the magistrate when he had finished.

“Of course, I do, as I have made the voyage with him. He is Lieut. Champcey.”

“Have you any complaint against him?”

“None at all.”

Then he added in a tone of bitterness and resentment,—

“What relations do you think could there be between a poor devil like myself and a great personage like him? Would he have condescended even to look at me? Would I have dared to speak to him? If I know him, it is only because I have seen him, from afar off, walk the quarter-deck with the other officers, a cigar in his mouth, after a good meal, while we in the forecastle had our salt fish, and broke our teeth with worm-eaten hard-tack.”

“So you had no reason to hate him?”

“None; as little as anybody else.”

Seated upon a wretched little footstool, his paper on his knees, an inkhorn in his hand, the clerk was rapidly taking down the questions and the answers. The magistrate made him a sign that it was ended, and then said, turning to the murderer,—

“That is enough for to-day. I am bound to tell you, that, having so far only kept you as a matter of precaution, I shall issue now an order for your arrest.”

“You mean I am to be put in jail?”

“Yes, until the court shall decide whether you are *guilty* of murder, or of involuntary homicide.”

Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, seemed to have foreseen this conclusion: at least he coolly shrugged his shoulders, and said in a hoarse voice,—

“In that case I shall have my linen changed pretty often here; for, if I had been wicked enough to plot an assassination, I should not have been fool enough to say so.”

“Who knows?” replied the magistrate. “Some evidence is as good as an avowal.”

And, turning to the clerk, he said,—

“Read the deposition to the accused.”

A moment afterwards, when this formality had been fulfilled, the magistrate and the old doctor left the room. The former looked extremely grave, and said,—

“You were right, doctor; that man is a murderer. The so-called friend, whose name he would not tell us, is no other person than the rascal whose tool he is. And I mean to get that person’s name out of him, if M. Champcey recovers, and will give me the slightest hint. Therefore, doctor, nurse your patient.”

To recommend Daniel to the surgeon was at least superfluous. If the old original was inexorable, as they said on board ship, for those lazy ones who pretended to be sick for the purpose of shirking work, he was all tenderness for his real patients; and his tenderness grew with the seriousness of their danger. He would not have hesitated a moment between an admiral who was slightly unwell, and the youngest midshipman of the fleet who was dangerously wounded. The admiral might have waited a long time before he

would have left the midshipman,—an originality far less frequent than we imagine.

It would have been enough, therefore, for Daniel to be so dangerously wounded. But there was something else besides. Like all who had ever sailed with Daniel, the surgeon, also, had conceived a lively interest in him, and was filled with admiration for his character. Besides that, he knew that his patient alone could solve this great mystery, which puzzled him exceedingly.

Unfortunately, Daniel's condition was one of those which defy all professional skill, and where all hope depends upon time, nature, and constitution. To try to question him would have been absurd; for he had so far continued delirious. At times he thought he was on board his sloop in the swamps of the Kamboja; but most frequently he imagined himself fighting against enemies bent upon his ruin. The names of Sarah Brandon, Mrs. Brian, and Thomas Elgin, were constantly on his lips, mixed up with imprecations and fearful threats.

For twenty days he remained so; and for twenty days and twenty nights his "man," Baptist Lefloch, who had caught the murderer, was by his bedside, watching his slightest movement, and ever bending over him tenderly. Not one of those noble daughters of divine wisdom, whom we meet in every part of the globe, wherever there is a sick man to nurse, could have been more patient, more attentive, or more ingenious, than this common sailor. He had put off his shoes, so as to walk more softly; and he came and went on tiptoe, his face full of care and anxiety, preparing draughts, and handling with his huge bony hands, with laughable, but almost touching precautions, the small phials out of which he had to give a spoonful to his patient at stated times.

"I'll have you appointed head nurse of the navy, Lefloch," said the old surgeon.

But he shook his head and answered,—

"I would not like the place, commandant. Only, you see, when we were down there on the Kamboja, and Baptist Lefloch was writhing like a worm in

the grip of the cholera, and when he was already quite blue and cold, Lieut. Champcey did not send for one of those lazy Annamites to rub him, he came himself, and rubbed him till he brought back the heat and life itself. Now, you see, I want to do some little for him.”

“You would be a great scamp if you did not.”

The surgeon hardly left the wounded man himself. He visited him four or five times a day, once at least every night, and almost every day remained for hours sitting by his bedside, examining the patient, and experiencing, according to the symptoms, the most violent changes from hope to fear, and back again. It was thus he learned a part, at least, of Daniel’s history,—that he was to marry a daughter of Count Ville- Handry, who himself had married an adventuress; and that they had separated him from his betrothed by a forged letter. The doctor’s conjectures were thus confirmed: such cowardly forgers would not hesitate to hire an assassin.

But the worthy surgeon was too deeply impressed with the dignity of his profession to divulge secrets which he had heard by the bedside of a patient. And when the magistrate, devoured by impatience, came to him every three or four days, he always answered,—

“I have nothing new to tell you. It will take weeks yet before you can examine my patient. I am sorry for it, for the sake of Evariste Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, who must be tired of prison; but he must wait.”

In the meantime, Daniel’s long delirium had been succeeded by a period of stupor. Order seemed gradually to return to his mind. He recognized the persons around him, and even stammered a few sensible words. But he was so excessively weak, that he remained nearly all the time plunged in a kind of torpor which looked very much like death itself. When he was aroused for a time, he always asked in an almost inaudible voice,—

“Are there no letters for me from France?”

Invariably, Lefloch replied, according to orders received from the doctor,—

“None, lieutenant.”

But he told a falsehood. Since Daniel was confined to his bed, three vessels had arrived from France, two French and one English; and among the despatches there were eight or ten letters for Lieut. Champcey. But the old surgeon said to himself, not without good reason,—

“Certainly it is almost a case of conscience to leave this unfortunate man in such uncertainty: but this uncertainty is free from danger, at least; while any excitement would kill him as surely and as promptly as I could blow out a candle.”

A fortnight passed; and Daniel recovered some little strength; at last he entered upon a kind of convalescence—if a poor man who could not turn over in bed unaided can be called a convalescent. But, with his returned consciousness, his sufferings also reappeared; and, as he gradually ascertained how long he had been confined, his anxiety assumed an alarming character.

“There must be letters for me,” he said to his man; “you keep them from me. I must have them.”

The doctor at last came to the conclusion that this excessive agitation was likely to become as dangerous as the excitement he dreaded so much; so he said one day,—

“Let us run the risk.”

It was a burning hot afternoon, and Daniel had now been an invalid for seven weeks. Lefloch raised him on his pillows, stowed him away, as he called it; and the surgeon handed him his letters.

Daniel uttered a cry of delight.

At the first glance he had recognized on three of the envelopes Henrietta’s handwriting. He kissed them, and said,—

“At last she writes!”

The shock was so violent, that the doctor was almost frightened.

“Be calm, my dear friend,” he said. “Be calm! Be a man, forsooth!”

But Daniel only smiled, and replied,—

“Never mind me, doctor; you know joy is never dangerous; and nothing but joy can come to me from her who writes to me. However, just see how calm I am!”

So calm, that he did not even take the time to see which was the oldest of his letters.

He opened one of them at haphazard, and read:—

“Daniel, my dear Daniel, my only friend in this world, and my sole hope, how could you intrust me to such an infamous person? How could you hand over your poor Henrietta to such a wretch? This Maxime de Brevan, this scoundrel, whom you considered your friend, if you knew”—

This was the long letter written by Henrietta the day after M. de Brevan had declared to her that he loved her, and that sooner or later, whether she chose or not, she should be his, giving her the choice between the horrors of starvation and the disgrace of becoming his wife.

As Daniel went on reading, a deadly pallor was spreading over his face, pale as it was already; his eyes grew unnaturally large; and big drops of perspiration trickled down his temples. A nervous trembling seized him, so violent, that it made his teeth rattle; sobs rose from his chest; and a pinkish foam appeared on his discolored lips. At last he reached the concluding lines,—

“Now,” the young girl wrote, “since, probably, none of my letters have reached you, they must have been intercepted. This one will reach you; for I am going to carry it to the post-office myself. For God’s sake, Daniel, return! Come back quick, if you wish to save, not your Henrietta’s honor, for I shall know how to die, but your Henrietta’s life!”

Then the surgeon and the sailor witnessed a frightful sight.

This man, who but just now had not been able to raise himself on his pillows; this unfortunate sufferer, who looked more like a skeleton than a human being; this wounded man, who had scarcely his breath left him,—threw

back his blankets, and rushed to the middle of the room, crying, with a terrible voice,—

“My clothes, Lefloch, my clothes!”

The doctor had hastened forward to support him; but he pushed him aside with one arm, continuing,—

“By the holy name of God, Lefloch, make haste! Run to the harbor, wretch! there must be a steamer there. I buy it. Let it get up steam, instantly. In an hour I must be on my way.”

But this great effort had exhausted him. He tottered; his eyes dosed; and he fainted away in the arms of his sailor, stammering,—

“That letter, doctor, that letter; read it, and you will see I must go.”

Raising his lieutenant, and holding him like a child in his arms, Lefloch carried him back to his bed; but, for more than ten minutes, the doctor and the faithful sailor were unable to tell whether they had not a corpse before their eyes, and were wasting all their attentions.

No! It was Lefloch who first noticed a slight tremor.

“He moves!” he cried out. “Look, commandant, he moves! He is alive! We’ll pull him through yet.”

They succeeded, in fact, to rekindle this life which had appeared so nearly extinct; but they did not bring back that able intellect. The cold and indifferent look with which Daniel stared at them, when he at last opened his eyes once more, told them that the tottering reason of the poor man had not been strong enough to resist this new shock. And still he must have retained some glimpses of the past; for his efforts to collect his thoughts were unmistakable. He passed his hands mechanically over his forehead, as if trying to remove the mist which enshrouded his mind. Then a convulsion shook him; and his lips overflowed with incoherent words, in which the recollection of the fearful reality, and the extravagant conceptions of delirium, were strangely mixed.

“I foresaw it,” said the chief surgeon. “I foresaw it but too fully.”

He had by this time exhausted all the resources of his skill and long experience; he had followed all the suggestions nature vouchsafed; and he could do nothing more now, but wait. Picking up the fatal letter, he went into the embrasure of one of the windows to read it. Daniel had in his wanderings said enough to enable the doctor to understand the piercing cry of distress contained in the poor girl's letter; and Lefloch, who watched him, saw a big tear running down his cheek, and in the next moment a flood of crimson overspread his face.

"This is enough to madden a man!" he growled. "Poor Champcey!"

And like a man who no longer possesses himself, who must move somehow, he stuffed the letter in his pocket, and went out, swearing till the plaster seemed to fall from the ceiling.

Precisely at the same hour, the magistrate, who had been notified of the trial, came to ask for news. Seeing the old surgeon cross the hospital yard, he ran up and asked, as soon as he was within hearing,—

"Well?"

The doctor went a few steps farther, and then replied in a tone of despair,—

"Lieut. Champcey is lost!"

"Great God! What do you mean?"

"What I think. Daniel has a violent brain-fever, or rather congestion of the brain. Weakened, exhausted, extenuated as he is, how can he endure it? He cannot; that is evident. It would take another miracle to save him now; and you may rest assured it won't be done. In less than twenty-four hours he will be a dead man, and his assassins will triumph."

"Oh!"

The old surgeon's eyes glared with rage; and a sardonic smile curled his lips as he continued,—

"And who could keep those rascals from triumphing? If Daniel dies, you will be bound to release that scamp, the wretched murderer whom you keep imprisoned,—that man Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet; for there will be no

evidence. Or, if you send him before a court, he will be declared guilty of involuntary homicide. And yet you know, as well as I do, he has wantonly fired at one of the noblest creatures I have ever known. And, when he has served his term, he will receive the price of Champcey's life, and he will spend it in orgies; and the others, the true criminals, who have hired him, will go about the world with lofty pride, rich, honored, and haughty."

"Doctor!"

But the old original was not to be stopped. He went on,—

"Ah, let me alone! Your human justice,—do you want me to tell you what I think of it? I am ashamed of it! When you send every year three or four stupid murderers to the scaffold, and some dozens of miserable thieves to the penitentiary, you fold your black gowns around you, and proudly proclaim that all is well, and that society, thus protected, may sleep soundly. Well, do you know what is the real state of things? You only catch the stupid, the fools. The others, the strong, escape between the meshes of your laws, and, relying on their cleverness and your want of power, they enjoy the fruit of their crimes in all the pride of their impunity, until"—

He hesitated, and added, unlike his usual protestations of atheism,—

"Until the day of divine judgment."

Far from appearing hurt by such an outburst of indignation, the magistrate, after having listened with impassive face, said, as soon as the doctor stopped for want of breath,—

"You must have discovered something new."

"Most assuredly. I think I hold at last the thread of the fearful plot which is killing my poor Daniel. Ah, if he would but live! But he cannot live."

"Well, well, console yourself, doctor. You said human justice has its limits, and hosts of criminals escape its vengeance; but in this case, whether Lieut. Champcey live or die, justice shall be done, I promise you!"

He spoke in a tone of such absolute certainty, that the old surgeon was struck by it. He exclaimed,—

“Has the murderer confessed the crime?”

The magistrate shook his head.

“No,” he replied; “nor have I seen him again since the first examination. But I have not been asleep. I have been searching; and I think I have sufficient evidence now to bring out the truth. And if you, on your side, have any positive information”—

“Yes, I have; and I think I am justified now in communicating it to you. I have, besides, a letter”—

He was pulling the letter out of his pocket; but the magistrate stopped him, saying,—

“We cannot talk here in the middle of the court, where everybody can watch us from the windows. The court-room is quite near: suppose we go there, doctor.”

For all answer the surgeon put on his cap firmly, took his friend’s arm, and the next moment the soldier on duty at the gate of the hospital saw them go out, engaged in a most animated conversation. When they had reached the magistrate’s room, he shut the door carefully; and, after having invited the surgeon to take a seat, he said:—

“I shall ask you for your information in a moment. First listen to what I have to say. I know now who Evariste Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, really is; and I know the principal events of his life. Ah! it has cost me time and labor enough; but human justice is patient, doctor. Considering that this man had sailed on board ‘The Conquest’ for more than four months, in company with one hundred and fifty emigrants, I thought it would be unlikely that he should not have tried to break the monotony of such a voyage by long talks with friends. He is a good speaker, a Parisian, a former soldier, and a great traveller. He was, no doubt, always sure of an audience. I sent, therefore, one by one, for all the former passengers on board ‘The Conquest,’ whom I could find, a hundred, perhaps; and I examined them. I soon found out that my presumption was not unfounded.

“Almost every one of them had found out some detail of Bagnolet’s life, some more, some less, according to the degree of honesty or demoralization which Bagnolet thought he discovered in them. I collected all the depositions of these witnesses; I completed and compared them, one by the other; and thus, by means of the confessions of the accused, certain allusions and confidences of his made to others, and his indiscretions when he was drunk, I was enabled to make up his biography with a precision which is not likely to be doubted.”

Without seeming to notice the doctor’s astonishment, he opened a large case on his table; and, drawing from it a huge bundle of papers, he held it up in the air, saying,—

“Here are the verbal depositions of my hundred and odd witnesses.”

Then, pointing at four or five sheets of paper, which were covered with very fine and close writing, he added,—

“And here are my extracts. Now, doctor, listen,—”

And at once he commenced reading this biography of his “accused,” making occasional remarks, and explaining what he had written.

“*Evariste Crochard*, surnamed *Bagnolet*, was born at Bagnolet in 1829, and is, consequently, older than he says, although he looks younger. He was born in February; and this month is determined by the deposition of a witness, to whom the accused offered, during the voyage, a bottle, with the words, ‘To-day is my birthday.’

“From all the accounts of the accused, it appears that his parents were evidently very honest people. His father was foreman in a copper foundry; and his mother a seamstress. They may be still living; but for many years they have not seen their son.

“The accused was sent to school; and, if you believe him, he learned quickly, and showed remarkable talents. But from his twelfth year he joined several bad companions of his age, and frequently abandoned his home for weeks, roaming about Paris. How did he support himself while he was thus vagabondizing?

“He has never given a satisfactory explanation. But he has made such precise statements about the manner in which youthful thieves maintain themselves in the capital, that many witnesses suspect him of having helped them in robbing open stalls in the streets.

“The positive result of these investigations is, that his father, distressed by his misconduct, and despairing of ever seeing him mend his ways, had him sent to a house of correction when he was fourteen years old.

“Released at the end of eighteen months, he says he was bound out as an apprentice, and soon learned his business well enough to support himself. This last allegation, however, cannot be true; for four witnesses, of whom one at least is of the same profession as Crochard, declare that they have seen him at work, and that, if he ever was a skilled mechanic, he is so no longer. Besides, he cannot have been long at work; for he had been a year in prison again, when the revolution of 1848 began. This fact he has himself stated to more than twenty-five persons. But he has explained his imprisonment very differently; and almost every witness has received a new version. One was told that he had been sentenced for having stabbed one of his companions while drunk; another, that it was for a row in a drinking-saloon; and a third, that he was innocently involved with others in an attempt to rob a foreigner.

“The prosecution is, therefore, entitled to conclude fairly that Crochard was sentenced simply as a thief.

“Set free soon after the revolution, he did not resume his profession, but secured a place as machinist in a theatre on the boulevards. At the end of three months he was turned off, because of ‘improper conduct with women,’ according to one; or, if we believe another statement, because he was accused of a robbery committed in one of the boxes.

“Unable to procure work, he engaged himself as groom in a wandering circus, and thus travelled through the provinces. But at Marseilles, he is wounded in a fight, and has to go to a hospital, where he remains three months.

“After his return to Paris, he associated himself with a rope-dancer, but was soon called upon to enter the army. He escaped conscription by good luck. But the next year we find him negotiating with a dealer in substitutes; and he confesses having sold himself purely from a mad desire to possess fifteen hundred francs at once, and to be able to spend them in debauch. Having successfully concealed his antecedents, he is next admitted as substitute in the B Regiment of the line; but, before a year had elapsed, his insubordination has caused him to be sent to Africa as a punishment.

“He remained there sixteen months, and conducted himself well enough to be incorporated in the First Regiment of Marines, one battalion of which was to be sent to Senegambia. He had, however, by no means given up his bad ways; for he was very soon after condemned to ten years’ penal servitude for having broken into a house by night as a robber.”

The chief surgeon, who had for some time given unmistakable signs of impatience, now rose all of a sudden, and said,—

“Pardon me, if I interrupt you, sir; but can you rely upon the veracity of your witnesses?”

“Why should I doubt them?”

“Because it seems to me very improbable that a cunning fellow, such as this Crochard seems to be, should have denounced himself.”

“But he has not denounced himself.”

“Ah?”

“He has often mentioned this condemnation; but he has always attributed it to acts of violence against a superior; On that point he has never varied in his statements.”

“Then how on earth did you learn”—

“The truth? Oh, very simply. *I* inquired at Saigon; and I succeeded in finding a sergeant in the Second Regiment of Marines, who was in the First Regiment at the same time with Crochard. He gave me all these details. And there is no

mistake about the identity; for, as soon as I said 'Crochard' the sergeant exclaimed, 'Oh, yes! Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet.'"

And, as the doctor bowed without saying a word, the magistrate said,—

"I resume the account. The statements of the accused since his arrest are too insignificant to be here reported. There is only one peculiarity of importance for the prosecution, which may possibly serve to enable us to trace the instigators of this crime. On three occasions, and in the presence of, at least, three witnesses each time, Crochard has used, in almost the same terms, these words,—

"No one would believe the strange acquaintances one makes in prisons. You meet there young men of family, who have done a foolish thing, and lots of people, who, wishing to make a fortune all at once, had no chance. When they come out from there, many of these fellows get into very good positions; and then, if you meet them, they don't know you. I have known some people there, who now ride in their carriages."

The doctor had become silent.

"Oh!" he said half aloud, "might not some of these people whom the assassin has known in prison have put arms in his hand?"

"That is the very question I asked myself."

"Because, you see, some of Daniel's enemies are fearful people; and if you knew what is in this letter here in my hand, which, no doubt, will be the cause of that poor boy's death"—

"Allow me to finish, doctor," said the man of law. And then, more rapidly, he went on,—

"Here follows a blank. How the accused lived in Paris, to which he had returned after his release, is not known. Did he resort to mean cheating, or to improper enterprises, in order to satisfy his passions? The prosecution is reduced to conjectures, since Crochard has refused to give details, and only makes very general statements as to these years.

“This fact only is established, that every thing he took with him when he left Paris was new,—his tools, the linen in his valise, the clothes he wore, from the cap on his head to his shoes. Why were they all new?”

As the magistrate had now reached the last line on the first sheet, the surgeon rose, bowed low, and said,—

“Upon my word, sir, I surrender; and I do begin to hope that Lieut. Champcey may still be avenged.”

A smile of pleased pride appeared for a moment on the lips of the lawyer; but assuming his mask of impassiveness instantly again, as if he had been ashamed of his weakness, he said with delicate irony,—

“I really think human justice may this time reach the guilty. But wait before you congratulate me.”

The old surgeon was too candid to make even an attempt at concealing his astonishment.

“What!” he said, “you have more evidence still?”

The magistrate gravely shook his head, and said,—

“The biography which I have just read establishes nothing. We do not succeed by probabilities and presumptions; however strong they are in convincing a jury. They want and require proof, positive proof, before they condemn. Well, such proof I have.”

“Oh!”

From the same box from which he had taken the papers concerning Crochard he now drew a letter, which he shook in the air with a threatening gesture. “Here is something,” he said, “which was sent to the state attorney twelve days after the last attempt had been made on M. Champcey’s life. Listen!” And he read thus,—

“Sir,—A sailor, who has come over to Boen-Hoa, where I live with my wife, has told us that a certain Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, has shot, and perhaps mortally wounded, Lieut. Champcey of the ship ‘Conquest.’

“In connection with this misfortune, my wife thinks, and I also consider it a matter of conscience, that we should make known to you a very serious matter.

“One day I happened to be on a yardarm, side by side with Crochard, helping the sailors to furl a sail, when I saw him drop a huge block, which fell upon Lieut. Champcey, and knocked him down.

“No one else had noticed it; and Crochard instantly pulled up the block again. I was just considering whether I ought to report him, when he fell at my feet, and implored me to keep it secret; for he had been very unfortunate in life, and if I spoke he would be ruined.

“Thinking that he had been simply awkward, I allowed myself to be moved, and swore to Crochard that the matter should remain between us. But what has happened since proves very clearly, as my wife says, that I was wrong to keep silence; and I am ready now to tell all, whatever may be the consequences.

“Still, sir, I beg you will protect me, in case Crochard should think of avenging himself on me or on my family,—a thing which might very easily happen, as he is a very bad man, capable of any thing.

“As I cannot write, my wife sends you this letter. And we are, with the most profound respect, &c.”

The doctor rubbed his hands violently.

“And you have seen this blacksmith?” he asked.

“Certainly! He has been here, he and his wife. Ah! if the man had been left to his own counsels, he would have kept it all secret, so terribly is he afraid of this Crochard; but, fortunately, his wife had more courage.”

“Decidedly,” growled the surgeon. “The women are, after all, the better part of creation.”

The magistrate carefully replaced the letter in the box, and then went on in his usual calm voice,—

“Thus the first attempt at murder is duly and fully proven. As for the second,—the one made on the river,—we are not quite so far advanced. Still I have hopes. I have found out, for instance, that Crochard is a first-rate swimmer. Only about three months ago he made a bet with one of the waiters at the hotel where he is engaged, that he would swim across the Dong-Nai twice, at a place where the current is strongest; and he did it.”

“But that is evidence; is it not?”

“No; it is only a probability in favor of the prosecution. But I have another string to my bow. The register on board ship proves that Crochard went on shore the very evening after the arrival of the vessel. Where, and with whom, did he spend the evening? Not one of my hundred and odd witnesses has seen him that night. And that is not all. No one has noticed, the next day, that his clothes were wet. Therefore he must have changed his clothes; and, in order to do that, he must have bought some; for he had taken nothing with him out of the ship but what he had on. Where did he buy these clothes? I mean to find that out as soon as I shall no longer be forced to carry on the investigation secretly, as I have done so far. For I never forget one thing, that the real criminals are in France, and that they will surely escape us, if they hear that their wretched accomplice here is in trouble.”

Once more the surgeon drew Henrietta’s letter from his pocket, and handed it to the lawyer, saying,—

“I know who they are, the really guilty ones. I know Daniel’s enemies,—Sarah Brandon, Maxime de Brevan, and the others.”

But the magistrate waved back the letter, and replied,—

“It is not enough for us to know them, doctor; we want evidence against them,—clear, positive, irrefutable evidence. This evidence we will get from Crochard. Oh, I know the ways of these rascals! As soon as they see they are overwhelmed by the evidence against them, and feel they are in real danger, they hasten to denounce their accomplices, and to aid justice, with all their perversity to discover them. The accused will do the same. When I shall have established the fact that he was hired to murder M. Champcey, he will tell

me by whom he was hired; and he will have to confess that he was thus hired, when I show him how much of the money he received for the purpose is now left."

The old surgeon once more jumped up from his chair.

"What!" he said, "you have found Crochard's treasure?"

"No," replied the lawyer, "not yet; but"—

He could hardly keep from smiling grimly; but he added at once,—

"But I know where it is, I think. Ah! I can safely say it was not on the first day exactly that I saw where the truth probably was hid. I have had a good deal of perplexity and trouble. Morally sure as I was, after the first examination of the accused, that he had a relatively large sum hidden somewhere, I first gave all my attention to his chamber. Assisted by a clever police-agent, I examined that room for a whole fortnight, till I was furious. The furniture was taken to pieces, and examined, the lining taken out of the chairs, and even the paper stripped from the walls. All in vain. I was in despair, when a thought struck me,—one of those simple thoughts which make you wonder why it did not occur to you at once. I said to myself, 'I have found it!' And, anxious to ascertain if I was right, I immediately sent for the man with whom Crochard had made the bet about swimming across the Dong-Nai. He came; and—But I prefer reading you his deposition."

He took from the large bundle of papers a single sheet, and, assuming an air of great modesty, read the affidavit.

"*Magistrate.*—At what point of the river did Crochard swim across?

"*Witness.*—A little below the town.

"*M.*—Where did he undress?

"*W.*—At the place where he went into the water, just opposite the tile-factory of M. Wang-Tai.

"*M.*—What did he do with his clothes?

"*W.* (very much surprised).—Nothing.

“M.—Excuse me; he must have done something. Try to recollect.

“W. (striking his forehead).—Why, yes! I remember now. When Bagnolet had undressed, I saw he looked annoyed, as if he disliked going into the water. But no! that was not it. He was afraid about his clothes; and he did not rest satisfied till I had told him I would keep watch over them. Now, his clothes consisted of a mean pair of trousers and a miserable blouse. As they were in my way, I put them down on the ground, at the foot of a tree. He had in the meantime done his work, and came back; but, instead of listening to my compliments, he cried furiously, ‘My clothes!’—‘Well,’ I said, ‘they are not lost. There they are.’ Thereupon he pushed me back fiercely, without saying a word, and ran like a madman to pick up his clothes.”

The chief surgeon was electrified; he rose, and said,—

“I understand; yes, I understand.”

CHAPTER 25

Thus proceeding from one point to another, and by the unaided power of his sagacity, coupled with indefatigable activity, the magistrate had succeeded in establishing Crochard's guilt, and the existence of accomplices who had instigated the crime. No one could doubt that he was proud of it, and that his self-esteem had increased, although he tried hard to preserve his stiff and impassive appearance. He had even affected a certain dislike to the idea of reading Henrietta's letter, until he should have proved that he could afford to do without such assistance.

But, now that he had proved this so amply, he very quickly asked for the letter, and read it. Like the chief surgeon, he, also, was struck and amazed by the wickedness of M. de Brevan.

"But here is exactly what we want," he exclaimed,—“an irrefragable proof of complicity. He would never have dared to abuse Miss Ville- Handry's confidence in so infamous a manner, if he had not been persuaded, in fact been quite sure, that Lieut. Champcey would never return to France.”

Then, after a few minutes' reflection, he added,—

“And yet I feel that there is something underneath still, which we do not see. Why had they determined upon M. Champcey's death even before he sailed? What direct and pressing interest could M. de Brevan have in wishing him dead at that time? Something must have happened between the two which we do not know.”

“What?”

“Ah! that is what I cannot conceive. But remember what I say, doctor: the future reserves some fearful mysteries yet to be revealed to us hereafter.”

The two men had been so entirely preoccupied with their thoughts, that they were unconscious of the flight of time; and they were not a little astonished, therefore, when they now noticed that the day was gone, and

night was approaching. The lawyer rose, and asked, returning Henrietta's letter to the doctor,—

“Is this the only one M. Champcey has received?”

“No; but it is the only one he has opened.”

“Would you object to handing me the others?”

The excellent doctor hesitated.

“I will hand them to you,” he said at last, “if you will assure me that the interests of justice require it. But why not wait”—

He did not dare say, “Why not wait for M. Champcey's death?” but the lawyer understood him.

“I will wait,” he said.

While thus talking, they had reached the door. They shook hands; and the chief surgeon, his heart full of darkest presentiments, slowly made his way to the hospital.

A great surprise awaited him there. Daniel, whom he had left in a desperate condition, almost dying,—Daniel slept profoundly, sweetly. His pale face had recovered its usual expression; and his respiration was free and regular.

“It is almost indescribable,” said the old doctor, whose experience was utterly at fault. “I am an ass; and our science is a bubble.”

Turning to Lefloch, who had respectfully risen at his entrance, he asked,—

“Since when has your master been sleeping in this way?”

“For an hour, commandant.”

“How did he fall asleep?”

“Quite naturally, commandant. After you left, the lieutenant was for some time pretty wild yet; but soon he quieted down, and finally he asked for something to drink. I gave him a cup of your tea; he took it, and then asked me to help him turn over towards the wall. I did so, and I saw him remain so, his arm bent, and his head in his hand, like a man who is thinking profoundly.

But about a quarter of an hour later, all of a sudden, I thought I heard him gasp. I came up softly on tiptoe, and looked. I was mistaken; the lieutenant was not gasping, he was crying like a baby; and what I had heard were sobs. Ah, commandant! I felt as if somebody had kicked me in the stomach. Because, you see, I know him; and I know, that, before a man such as he is goes to crying like a little child, he must have suffered more than death itself. Holy God! If I knew where I could catch them, these rascals who give him all this trouble”—

His fists rose instinctively, and most undoubtedly something bright started from his eyes which looked prodigiously like a tear rolling slowly down one of the deep furrows in his cheek.

“Now,” he continued in a half-stifled voice, “I saw why the lieutenant had wished to turn his face to the wall, and I went back without making a noise. A moment after that, he began talking aloud. But he was right in his senses now, I tell you.”

“What did he say?”

“Ah! he said something like, ‘Henrietta, Henrietta!’ Always that good friend of his, for whom he was forever calling when he had the fever. And then he said, ‘I am killing her, I! I am the cause of her death. Fool, stupid, idiot that I am! He has sworn to kill me and Henrietta, the wretch! He swore it no doubt, the very day on which I, fool as I was, confided Henrietta and my whole fortune to him.’”

“Did he say that?”

“The very words, commandant, but better, a great deal better.”

The old surgeon seemed to be amazed.

“That cunning lawyer had judged rightly,” he said. “He suspected there was something else; and here it is.”

“You say, commandant?” asked the good sailor.

“Nothing of interest to you. Go on.”

“Well, after that—but there is nothing more to tell, except that I heard nothing more. The lieutenant remained in the same position till I came to light the lamp; then he ordered me to make him tack ship, and to let down the screen over the lamp. I did so. He gave out two or three big sighs, and then goodnight, and nothing more. He was asleep as you see him now.”

“And how did his eyes look when he fell asleep?”

“Quite calm and bright.”

The doctor looked like a man to whom something has happened which is utterly inexplicable to him, and said in a low voice,—

“He will pull through, I am sure now. I said there could not be another miracle; and here it is!”

Then turning to Lefloch, he asked,—

“You know where I am staying?”

“Yes, commandant.”

“If your officer wakes up in the night, you will send for me at once.”

“Yes, commandant.”

But Daniel did not wake up; and he had hardly opened his eyes on the next morning, about eight o’clock, when the chief surgeon entered his room. At the first glance at his patient, he exclaimed,—

“I am sure our imprudence yesterday will have no bad effects!”

Daniel said nothing; but, after the old surgeon had carefully examined him, he began,—

“Now, doctor, one question, a single one: in how many days will I be able to get up and take ship?”

“Ah! my dear lieutenant, there is time enough to talk about that.”

“No, doctor, no! I must have an answer. Fix a time, and I shall have the fortitude to wait; but uncertainty will kill me. Yes, I shall manage to wait, although I suffer like”—

The surgeon was evidently deeply touched.

“I know what you suffer, my poor Champcey,” he said; “I read that letter which came much nearer killing you than Crochard’s ball. I think in a month you will be able to sail.”

“A month!” said Daniel in a tone as if he had said an age. And after a pause he added,—

“That is not all, doctor: I want to ask you for the letters which I could not read yesterday.”

“What? You would—But that would be too great an imprudence.”

“No, doctor, don’t trouble yourself. The blow has fallen. If I did not lose my mind yesterday, that shows that my reason can stand the most terrible trial. I have, God be thanked, all my energy. I know I must live, if I want to save Henrietta,—to avenge her, if I should come too late. That thought, you may rest assured, will keep me alive.”

The surgeon hesitated no longer: the next moment Daniel opened the other two letters from Henrietta. One, very long, was only a repetition of the first he had read. The other consisted only of a few lines:—

“M. de Brevan has just left me. When the man told me mockingly that I need not count upon your return, and cast an atrocious look at me, I understood. Daniel, that man wants your life; and he has hired assassins. For my sake, if not for your own, I beseech you be careful. Take care, be watchful; think that you are the only friend, the sole hope here below, of your Henrietta.”

Now it was truly seen that Daniel had not presumed too much on his strength and his courage. Not a muscle in his face changed; his eye remained straight and clear; and he said in an accent of coldest, bitterest irony,—

“Look at this, doctor. Here is the explanation of the strange ill luck that has pursued me ever since I left France.”

At a glance the doctor read Henrietta’s warning, which came, alas! so much too late.

"You ought to remember this, also, that M. de Brevan could not foresee that the assassin he had hired would be caught."

This was an unexpected revelation; and Daniel was all attention.

"What?" he said. "The man who fired at me has been arrested?"

Lefloch was unable to restrain himself at this juncture, and replied,—

"I should say so, lieutenant, and by my hand, before his gun had cooled off."

The doctor did not wait for the questions which he read in the eyes of his patient. He said at once,—

"It is as Lefloch says, my dear lieutenant; and, if you have not been told anything about it, it was because the slightest excitement would become fatal. Yesterday's experience has only proved that too clearly. Yes, the assassin is in jail."

"And his account is made up," growled the sailor.

But Daniel shrugged his shoulders, and said,—

"I do not want him punished, any more than the ball which hit me. That wretched creature is a mere tool. But, doctor, you know who are the real guilty ones."

"And justice shall be done, I swear!" broke in the old surgeon, who looked upon the cause of his patient with as much interest as if it were his own.

"Our lucky star has sent us a lawyer who is no trifler, and who, if I am not very much mistaken, would like very much to leave Saigon with a loud blast of trumpets."

He remained buried in thought for a while, watching his patient out of the corner of his eye, and then said suddenly,—

"Now I think of it, why could you not see the lawyer? He is all anxiety to examine you. Consider, lieutenant, do you feel strong enough to see him?"

"Let him come," cried Daniel, "let him come! Pray, doctor, go for him at once!"

"I shall do my best, my dear Champcey. I will go at once, and leave you to finish your correspondence."

He left the room with these words; and Daniel turned to the letters, which were still lying on his bed. There were seven of them,—four from the Countess Sarah, and three from Maxime. But what could they tell him now? What did he care for the falsehoods and the calumnies they contained? He ran over them, however.

Faithful to her system, Sarah wrote volumes; and from line to line, in some way or other, her real or feigned love for Daniel broke forth more freely, and no longer was veiled and hidden under timid reserve and long-winded paraphrases. She gave herself up, whether her prudence had forsaken her, or whether she felt quite sure that her letters could never reach Count Ville-Handry. It sounded like an intense, irresistible passion, escaping from the control of the owner, and breaking forth terribly, like a long smouldering fire. Of Henrietta she said but little,—enough, however, to terrify Daniel, if he had not known the truth.

"That unfortunate, wayward girl," she wrote, "has just caused her aged father such cruel and unexpected grief, that he was on the brink of the grave. Weary of the control which her indiscretions rendered indispensable, she has fled, we know not with whom; and all our efforts to find her have so far been unsuccessful."

On the other hand, M. de Brevan wrote, "Deaf to my counsel and prayers even, Miss Ville-Handry has carried out the project of leaving her paternal home. Suspected of having favored her escape, I have been called out by Sir Thorn, and had to fight a duel with him. A paper which I enclose will give you the details of our meeting, and tell you that I was lucky enough to wound that gentleman of little honor, but of great skill with the pistol.

"Alas! my poor, excellent Daniel, why should I be compelled by the duties of friendship to confess to you that it was not for the purpose of remaining faithful to you, that Miss Henrietta was so anxious to be free? Do not desire to return, my poor friend! You would suffer too much in finding her whom you have loved so dearly unworthy of an honest man, unworthy of you. Believe me, I did all I could to prevent her irregularities, which now have

become public. I only drew her hatred upon me, and I should not be surprised if she did all she could to make us all cut our throats."

This impudence was bold enough to confound anybody's mind, and to make one doubt one's own good sense. Still he found the newspaper, which had been sent to him with the letter, and in it the account of the duel between M. de Brevan and M. Thomas Elgin. What did that signify? He once more read over, more attentively than at first, the letters of Maxime and the Countess Sarah; and, by comparing them with each other, he thought he noticed in them some traces of a beginning disagreement.

"It may be that there is discord among my enemies," he said to himself, "and that they do no longer agree, now that, in their view, the moment approaches when they are to divide the proceeds of their crimes. Or did they never agree, and am I the victim of a double plot? Or is the whole merely a comedy for the purpose of deceiving me, and keeping me here, until the murderer has done his work?"

He was not allowed to torture his mind long with efforts to seek the solution of this riddle. The old doctor came back with the lawyer, and for more than half an hour he had to answer an avalanche of questions. But the investigation had been carried on with such rare sagacity, that Daniel could furnish the prosecution only a single new fact,—the surrender of his entire fortune into the hands of M. de Brevan.

And even this fact must needs, on account of its extreme improbability, remain untold in an investigation which was based upon logic alone. Daniel very naturally, somewhat ashamed of his imprudence, tried to excuse himself; and, when he had concluded his explanations, the lawyer said,—

"Now, one more question: would you recognize the man who attempted to drown you in the Dong-Nai in a boat which he had offered to you, and which he upset evidently on purpose?"

"No, sir."

"Ah! that is a pity. That man was Crochard, I am sure; but he will deny it; and the prosecution will have nothing but probabilities to oppose to his denial, unless I can find the place where he changed his clothes."

“Excuse me, there is a way to ascertain his identity.”

“How?”

“The voice of the wretch is so deeply engraven on my mind, that even at this moment, while I am speaking to you, I think I can hear it in my ear; and I would recognize it among a thousand.”

The lawyer made no reply, weighing, no doubt, in his mind the chances of a confrontation. Then he made up his mind, and said,—

“It is worth trying.”

And handing his clerk, who had been a silent witness of this scene, an order to have the accused brought to the hospital, he said,—

“Take this to the jail, and let them make haste.”

It was a month now since Crochard had been arrested; and his imprisonment, so far from discouraging him, had raised his spirits. At first, his arrest and the examination had frightened him; but, as the days went by, he recovered his insolence.

“They are evidently looking for evidence,” he said; “but, as they cannot find any, they will have to let me go.”

He looked, therefore, as self-assured as ever when he came into Daniel’s room, and exclaimed, while still in the door, with an air of intolerable arrogance,—

“Well? I ask for justice; I am tired of jail. If I am guilty, let them cut my throat; if I am innocent”—

But Daniel did not let him finish.

“That is the man!” he exclaimed; “I am ready to swear to it, that is the man!”

Great as was the impudence of Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, he was astonished, and looked with rapid, restless eyes at the chief surgeon, at the magistrate, and last at Lefloch, who stood immovable at the foot of the bed of his lieutenant. He had too much experience of legal forms not to know that he had given way to absurd illusions,—and that his position was far

more dangerous than he had imagined. But what was their purpose? what had they found out? and what did they know positively? The effort he made to guess all this gave to his face an atrocious expression.

“Did you hear that, Crochard?” asked the lawyer.

But the accused had recovered his self-control by a great effort; and he replied,—

“I am not deaf.” And there was in his voice the unmistakable accent of the former vagabond of Paris. “I hear perfectly well; only I don’t understand.”

The magistrate, finding that, where he was seated, he could not very well observe Crochard, had quietly gotten up, and was now standing near the mantle-piece, against which he rested.

“On the contrary,” he said severely, “you understand but too well Lieut. Champcey says you are the man who tried to drown him in the Dong-Nai. He recognizes you.”

“That’s impossible!” exclaimed the accused. “That’s impossible; for”—

But the rest of the phrase remained in his throat. A sudden reflection had shown him the trap in which he had been caught,—a trap quite familiar to examining lawyers, and terrible by its very simplicity. But for that reflection, he would have gone on thus,—

“That’s impossible; for the night was too dark to distinguish a man’s features.”

And that would have been equivalent to a confession; and he would have had nothing to answer the magistrate, if the latter had asked at once,—

“How do you know that the darkness was so great on the banks of the Dong-Nai? It seems you were there, eh?”

Quite pallid with fright, the accused simply said,—

“The officer must be mistaken.”

“I think not,” replied the magistrate.

Turning to Daniel, he asked him,—

“Do you persist in your declaration, lieutenant?”

“More than ever, sir; I declare upon honor that I recognize the man’s voice. When he offered me a boat, he spoke a kind of almost unintelligible jargon, a mixture of English and Spanish words; but he did not think of changing his intonation and his accent.”

Affecting an assurance which he was far from really feeling, Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, shrugged his shoulders carelessly, and said,—

“Do I know any English? Do I know any Spanish?”

“No, very likely not; but like all Frenchmen who live in this colony, and like all the marines, you no doubt know a certain number of words of these two languages.”

To the great surprise of the doctor and of Daniel, the prisoner did not deny it; it looked as if he felt that he was on dangerous ground.

“Never mind!” he exclaimed in the most arrogant manner. “It is anyhow pretty hard to accuse an honest man of a crime, because his voice resembles the voice of a rascal.”

The magistrate gently shook his head. He said,—

“Do you pretend being an honest man?”

“What! I pretend? Let them send for my employers.”

“That is not necessary. I know your antecedents, from the first petty theft that procured you four months’ imprisonment, to the aggravated robbery for which you were sent to the penitentiary, when you were in the army.”

Profound stupor lengthened all of Crochard’s features; but he was not the man to give up a game in which his head was at stake, without fighting for it.

“Well, there you are mistaken,” he said very coolly. “I have been condemned to ten years, that is true, when I was a soldier; but it was for having struck an officer who had punished me unjustly.”

“You lie. A former soldier of your regiment, who is now in garrison here in Saigon, will prove it.”

For the first time the accused seemed to be really troubled. He saw all of a sudden his past rising before him, which until now he had thought unknown or forgotten; and he knew full well the weight which antecedents like his would have in the scales of justice. So he changed his tactics; and, assuming an abject humility, he said,—

“One may have committed a fault, and still be incapable of murdering a man.”

“That is not your case.”

“Oh! how can you say such a thing?—I who would not harm a fly. Unlucky gun! Must I needs have such a mishap?”

The magistrate had for some time been looking at the accused with an air of the most profound disgust. He interrupted him rudely now, and said,—

“Look here, my man! Spare us those useless denials. Justice knows everything it wants to know. That shot was the third attempt you made to murder a man.”

Crochard drew back. He looked livid. But he had still the strength to say in a half-strangled voice,—

“That is false!”

But the magistrate had too great an abundance of evidence to allow the examination to continue. He said simply,—

“Who, then, threw, during the voyage, an enormous block at M. Champcey’s head? Come, don’t deny it. The emigrant who was near you, who saw you, and who promised he would not report you at that time, has spoken. Do you want to see him?”

Once more Crochard opened his lips to protest his innocence; but he could not utter a sound. He was crushed, annihilated; he trembled in all his limbs; and his teeth rattled in his mouth. In less than no time, his features had sunk in, as it were, till he looked like a man at the foot of the scaffold. It may be,

that, feeling he was irretrievably lost, he had had a vision of the fatal instrument.

“Believe me,” continued the lawyer, “do not insist upon the impossible; you had better tell the truth.”

For another minute yet, the miserable man hesitated. Then, seeing no other chance of safety, except the mercy of the judges, he fell heavily on his knees, and stammered out,—

“I am a wretched man.”

At the same instant a cry of astonishment burst from the doctor, from Daniel, and the worthy Lefloch. But the man of law was not surprised. He knew in advance that the first victory would be easily won, and that the real difficulty would be to induce the prisoner to confess the name of his principal. Without giving him, therefore time to recover, he said,—

“Now, what reasons had you for persecuting M. Champcey in this way?”

The accused rose again; and, making an effort, he said slowly,—

“I hated him. Once during the voyage he had threatened to have me put in irons.”

“The man lies!” said Daniel.

“Do you hear?” asked the lawyer. “So you will not tell the truth? Well, I will tell it for you. They had hired you to kill Lieut. Champcey, and you wanted to earn your money. You got a certain sum of money in advance; and you were to receive a larger sum after his death.”

“I swear”—

“Don’t swear! The sum in your possession, which you cannot account for, is positive proof of what I say.”

“Alas! I possess nothing. You may inquire. You may order a search.”

Under the impassive mask of the lawyer, a certain degree of excitement could at this moment be easily discerned. The time had come to strike a decisive blow, and to judge of the value of his system of induction. Instead,

therefore, of replying to the prisoner, he turned to the gendarmes who were present and said to them,—

“Take the prisoner into the next room. Strip him, and examine all his clothes carefully: see to it that there is nothing hid in the lining.”

The gendarmes advanced to seize the prisoner, when he suddenly jumped up, and said in a tone of ill-constrained rage,—

“No need for that! I have three one thousand-franc-notes sewn into the lining of my trousers.”

This time the pride of success got completely the better of the imperturbable coldness of the magistrate. He uttered a low cry of satisfaction, and could not refrain from casting a look of triumph at Daniel and the doctor, which said clearly,—

“Well? What did I tell you?”

It was for a second only; the next instant his features resumed their icy immobility; and, turning to the accused, he said in a tone of command,—

“Hand me the notes!”

Crochard did not stir; but his livid countenance betrayed the fierce suffering he endured. Certainly, at this moment, he did not play a part. To take from him his three thousand francs, the price of the meanest and most execrable crime; the three thousand francs for the sake of which he had risked the scaffold,—this was like tearing his entrails from him.

Like an enraged brute who sees that the enemy is all-powerful, he gathered all his strength, and, with a furious look, glanced around the room to see if he could escape anywhere, asking himself, perhaps, upon which of the men he ought to throw himself for the purpose.

“The notes!” repeated the inexorable lawyer. “Must I order force to be used?”

Convinced of the uselessness of resistance, and of the folly of any attempt at escape, the wretch hung his head.

“But I cannot undo the seams of my trousers with my nails,” he said. “Let them give me a knife or a pair of scissors.”

They were careful not to do so. But, at a sign given by the magistrate, one of the gendarmes approached, and, drawing a penknife from his pocket, ripped the seam at the place which the prisoner pointed out. A genuine convulsion of rage seized the assassin, when a little paper parcel appeared, folded up, and compressed to the smallest possible size. By a very curious phenomenon, which is, however, quite frequently observed in criminals, he was far more concerned about his money than about his life, which was in such imminent danger.

“That is my money!” he raged. “No one has a right to take it from me. It is infamous to ill use a man who has been unfortunate, and to rob him.”

The magistrate, no doubt quite accustomed to such scenes, did not even listen to Crochard, but carefully opened the packet. It contained three notes of a thousand francs each, wrapped up in a sheet of letter-paper, which was all greasy, and worn out in the folds. The bank-notes had nothing peculiar; but on the sheet of paper, traces could be made out of lines of writing; and at least two words were distinctly legible,—*University and Street*.

“What paper is this, Crochard?” asked the lawyer.

“I don’t know. I suppose I picked it up somewhere.”

“What? Are you going to lie again? What is the use? Here is evidently the address of some one who lives in University Street.”

Daniel was trembling on his bed.

“Ah, sir!” he exclaimed, “I used to live in University Street, Paris.”

A slight blush passed over the lawyer’s face, a sign of unequivocal satisfaction in him. He uttered half loud, as if replying to certain objections in his own mind,—

“Everything is becoming clear.”

And yet, to the great surprise of his listeners, he abandoned this point; and, returning to the prisoner, he asked him,—

“So you acknowledge having received money for the murder of Lieut. Champcey?”

“I never said so.”

“No; but the three thousand francs found concealed on your person say so very clearly. From whom did you receive this money?”

“From nobody. They are my savings.”

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders; and, looking very sternly at Crochard, he said,—

“I have before compelled you to make a certain confession. I mean to do so again and again. You will gain nothing, believe me, by struggling against justice; and you cannot save the wretches who tempted you to commit this crime. There is only one way left to you, if you wish for mercy; and that is frankness. Do not forget that!”

The assassin was, perhaps, better able to appreciate the importance of such advice than anybody else there present. Still he remained silent for more than a minute, shaken by a kind of nervous tremor, as if a terrible struggle was going on in his heart. He was heard to mutter,—

“I do not denounce anybody. A bargain is a bargain. I am not a tell-tale.”

Then, all of a sudden, making up his mind, and showing himself just the man the magistrate had expected to find, he said with a cynic laugh,—

“Upon my word, so much the worse for them! Since I am in the trap, let the others be caught as well! Besides, who would have gotten the big prize, if I had succeeded? Not I, most assuredly; and yet it was I who risked most. Well, then, the man who hired me to ‘do the lieutenant’s business’ is a certain Justin Chevassat.”

The most intense disappointment seized both Daniel and the surgeon. This was not the name they had been looking for with such deep anxiety.

“Don’t you deceive me, Crochard?” asked the lawyer, who alone had been able to conceal all he felt.

"You may take my head if I lie!"

Did he tell the truth? The lawyer thought he did; for, turning to Daniel, he asked,—

"Do you know anybody by the name of Chevassat, M. Champcey?"

"No. It is the first time in my life I hear that name."

"Perhaps that Chevassat was only an agent," suggested the doctor.

"Yes, that may be," replied the lawyer; "although, in such matters, people generally do their own work."

And, continuing his examination, he asked the accused,—

"Who is this Justin Chevassat?"

"One of my friends."

"A friend richer than yourself, I should think?"

"As to that—why, yes; since he has always plenty of money in his pockets, dresses in the last fashion, and drives his carriage."

"What is he doing? What is his profession?"

"Ah! as to that, I know nothing about it. I never asked him, and he never told me. I once said to him, 'Do you know you look like a prodigiously lucky fellow?' And he replied, 'Oh, not as much so as you think;' but that is all."

"Where does he live?"

"In Paris, Rue Louis, 39."

"Do you write to him there? For I dare say you have written to him since you have been in Saigon."

"I send my letters to M. X. O. X. 88."

It became evident now, that, so far from endeavoring to save his accomplices, Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, would do all he could to aid justice in discovering them. He began to show the system which the wretch

was about to adopt,—to throw all the responsibility and all the odium of the crime on the man who had hired him, and to appear the poor devil, succumbing to destitution when he was tempted and dazzled by such magnificent promises, that he had not the strength to resist. The lawyer continued,—

“Where and how did you make the acquaintance of this Justin Chevassat?”

“I made his acquaintance at the galleys.”

“Ah! that is becoming interesting. And do you know for what crime he had been condemned?”

“For forgery, I believe, and also for theft.”

“And what was he doing before he was condemned?”

“He was employed by a banker, or perhaps as cashier in some large establishment. At all events, he had money to handle; and it stuck to his fingers.”

“I am surprised, as you are so well informed with regard to this man’s antecedents, that you should know nothing of his present means of existence.”

“He has money, plenty of money; that is all I know.”

“Have you lost sight of him?”

“Why, yes. Chevassat was set free long before I was. I believe he was pardoned; and I had not met him for more than fifteen years.”

“How did you find him again?”

“Oh! by the merest chance, and a very bad chance for me; since, but for him, I would not be here.”

CHAPTER 26

Never would a stranger who should have suddenly come into Daniel's chamber, upon seeing Crochard's attitude, have imagined that the wretch was accused of a capital crime, and was standing there before a magistrate, in presence of the man whom he had tried three times to assassinate.

Quite at home in the law, as far as it was studied at the galleys, he had instantly recognized that his situation was by no means so desperate as he had at first supposed; that, if the jury rendered a verdict of guilty of death, it would be against the instigator of the crime, and that he would probably get off with a few years' penal servitude.

Hence he had made up his mind about his situation with that almost bestial indifference which characterizes people who are ready for everything, and prepared for everything. He had recovered from that stupor which the discovery of his crime had produced in him, and from the rage in which he had been thrown by the loss of his bank-notes. Now there appeared, under the odious personage of the murderer, the pretentious and ridiculous orator of the streets and prisons, who is accustomed to make himself heard, and displays his eloquence with great pride.

He assumed a studied position; and it was evident that he was preparing himself for his speech, although, afterwards, a good many words escaped him which are found in no dictionary, but belong to the jargon of the lowest classes, and serve to express the vilest sentiments.

"It was," he began, "a Friday, an unlucky day,—a week, about, before 'The Conquest' sailed. It might have been two o'clock. I had eaten nothing; I had not a cent in my pockets and I was walking along the boulevards, loafing, and thinking how I could procure some money.

"I had crossed several streets, when a carriage stopped close to me; and I saw a very fine gentleman step out, a cigar in his mouth, a gold chain across his waistcoat, and a flower in his buttonhole. He entered a glove-shop.

“At once I said to myself, ‘Curious! I have seen that head somewhere.’

“Thereupon, I go to work, and remain fixed to the front of the shop, a little at the side, though, you know, at a place where, without being seen myself, I could very well watch my individual, who laughed and talked, showing his white teeth, while a pretty girl was trying on a pair of gloves. The more I looked at him, the more I thought, ‘Positively, Bagnolet, although that sweet soul don’t look as if he were a member of your society, you know him.’

“However, as I could not put a name to that figure, I was going on my way, when suddenly my memory came back to me, and I said, ‘Cretonne, it is an old comrade. I shall get my dinner.’

“After all, I was not positively sure; because why? Fifteen years make a difference in a man, especially when he does not particularly care to be recognized. But I had a little way of my own to make the thing sure.

“I waited, therefore, for my man; and, at the moment when he crossed the sidewalk to get into his carriage, I stepped up, and cried out, though not very loud, ‘Eh, Chevassat!’

“The scamp! They might have fired a cannon at his ear, and he would not have jumped as he did when I spoke to him. And white he was,—as white as his collar. But, nevertheless, he was not without his compass, the screw. He puts up his eyeglass, and looks at me up and down; and then he says in his finest manner, ‘What is it, my good fellow? Do you want to speak to me?’

“Thereupon, quite sure of my business now, I say, ‘Yes, to you, Justin Chevassat. Don’t you recall me? Evariste Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet; eh? Do you recollect now?’ However, the gentleman continued to hold his head high, and to look at me. At last he says, ‘If you do not clear out, I will call a policeman.’ Well, the mustard got into my nose, and I began to cry, to annoy him, so as to collect a crowd,—

“‘What, what! Policemen, just call them, please do! They will take us before a magistrate. If I am mistaken, they won’t hang me; but, if I am not mistaken, they will laugh prodigiously. What have I to risk? Nothing at all; for I have nothing.’

“I must tell you, that, while I said all this, I looked at him fixedly with the air of a man who has nothing in his stomach, and who is bent upon putting something into it. He also looked at me fixedly; and, if his eyes had been pistols—but they were not. And, when he saw I was determined, the fine gentleman softened down.

“‘Make no noise,’ he whispered, looking with a frightened air at all the idlers who commenced to crowd around us. And pretending to laugh very merrily,—for the benefit of the spectators, you know,—he said, speaking very low and very rapidly,—

“‘In the costume that you have on, I cannot ask you to get into my carriage; that would only compromise us both uselessly. I shall send my coachman back, and walk home. You can follow quietly; and, when we get into a quiet street, we will take a cab, and talk.’

“As I was sure I could catch him again, if he should try to escape, I approved the idea. ‘All right. I understand.’”

The magistrate suddenly interrupted the accused. He thought it of great importance that Crochard’s evidence should be written down, word for word; and he saw, that, for some little while, the clerk had been unable to follow.

“Rest a moment, Crochard,” he said.

And when the clerk had filled up what was wanting, and the magistrate had looked it over, he said to the prisoner,—

“Now you can go on, but speak more slowly.”

The wretch smiled, well pleased. This permission gave him more time to select his words, and this flattered his vanity; for even the lowest of these criminals have their weak point, in which their vanity is engaged.

“Don’t let your soup get cold,” he continued. “Chevassat said a few words to his coachman, who whipped the horse, and there he was, promenading down the boulevard, turning his cane this way, puffing out big clouds of smoke, as if he had not the colic at the thought that his friend Bagnolet was following on his heels.

"I ought to say that he had lots of friends, very genteel friends, who wished him good-evening as they passed him. There were some even who stopped him, shook hands with him, and offered to treat him; but he left them all promptly, saying, 'Excuse me, pray, I am in a hurry.'

"Why, yes, he was in a hurry; and I who was behind him, and saw and heard it all, I laughed in my sleeve most heartily."

Whatever advantage there may be in not interrupting a great talker, who warms up as he talks, and consequently forgets himself, the magistrate became impatient.

"Spare us your impressions," he said peremptorily.

This was not what Crochard expected. He looked hurt, and went on angrily,—

"In fine, my individual goes down the boulevard as far as the opera, turns to the right, crosses the open square, and goes down the first street to the left. Here a cab passes; he hails it; orders the driver to take us to Vincennes. We get in; and his first care is to let down the curtains. Then he looks at me with a smile, holds out his hand, and says, 'Well, old man! how are you?'

"At first, when I saw myself so well received, I was quite overcome. Then reflecting, I thought, 'It is not natural for him to be so soft. He is getting ready for some trick. Keep your eyes open, Bagnolet.'

"Then you are not angry that I spoke to you; eh?' He laughs, and says, 'No.'

"Then I, 'However, you hadn't exactly a wedding-air when I spoke to you, and I thought you were looking for a way to get rid of me unceremoniously.' But he said very seriously, 'Look here, I am going to talk to you quite openly! For a moment I was surprised; but I was not annoyed. I have long foreseen something of the kind would happen; and I know that every time I go out I run the risk of meeting a former comrade. You are not the first who has recognized me, and I am prepared to save myself all annoyance. If I wanted to get rid of you, this very evening you would have lost all trace of me, thanks to a little contrivance I have arranged. Besides, as you are in Paris without leave, before twenty-four hours are over, you would be in jail.' He

told me all this so calmly, that I felt it was so, and that the scamp had some special trick.

“‘Then,’ I said, ‘you rather like meeting an old friend, eh?’

“He looked me straight in the face and replied, ‘Yes; and the proof of it is, that if you were not here, sitting at my side, and if I had known where to find you, I should have gone in search of you. I have something to do for you.’”

Henceforth Bagnolet had reason to be satisfied.

Although the magistrate preserved his impassive appearance, Daniel and the chief surgeon listened with breathless attention, feeling that the prisoner had come to the really important part of his confession, from which, no doubt, much light would be obtained. Lefloch himself listened with open mouth; and one could follow on his ingenuous countenance all the emotions produced by the recital of the criminal, who, but for him, would probably have escaped justice.

“‘Naturally,’” continued Crochard, “‘when he talked of something to do, I opened my ears wide. ‘Why,’ I said, ‘I thought you had retired from business.’ And I really thought he had. ‘You are mistaken,’ he replied. ‘Since I left that place you know of, I have been living nicely. But I have not put anything aside; and if an accident should happen to me, which I have reason to fear, I would be destitute.’”

“‘I should have liked very much to know more; but he would not tell me anything else concerning himself; and I had to give him my whole history since my release. Oh! that was soon done. I told him how nothing I had undertaken had ever succeeded; that, finally, I had been a waiter in a drinking-shop; that they had turned me out; and that for a month now I had been walking the streets, having not a cent, no clothes, no lodgings, and no bed but the quarries.

“‘Since that is so,’ he said, ‘you shall see what a comrade is.’ I ought to say that the cab had been going all the time we were talking, and that we were out in the suburbs now. My Chevassat raised the blind to look out; and, as soon as he saw a clothing store, he ordered the driver to stop there. The driver did so; and then Chevassat said to me, ‘Come, old man, we’ll begin by

dressing you up decently.' So we get out; and upon my word, he buys me a shirt, trousers, a coat, and everything else that was needful; he pays for a silk hat, and a pair of varnished boots. Farther down the street was a watchmaker. I declare he makes me a present of a gold watch, which I still have, and which they seized when they put me in jail. Finally, he has spent his five hundred francs, and gives me eighty francs to boot, to play the gentleman.

"You need not ask if I thanked him, when we got back into the cab. After such misery as I had endured, my morals came back with my clothes. I would have jumped into the fire for Chevassat. Alas! I would not have been so delighted, if I had known what I should have to pay for all this; for in the first place"—

"Oh, go on!" broke in the lawyer; "go on!"

Not without some disappointment, Crochard had to acknowledge that everything purely personal did not seem to excite the deepest interest. He made a face, full of spite, and then went on, speaking more rapidly,—

"All these purchases had taken some time; so that it was six o'clock, and almost dark, when we reached Vincennes. A little before we got into the town, Chevassat stopped the cab, paid the driver, sends him back, and, taking me by the arm, says, 'You must be hungry: let us dine.'

"So we first absorb a glass of absinthe; then he carries me straight to the best restaurant, asks for a private room, and orders a dinner. Ah, but a dinner! Merely to hear it ordered from the bill of fare made my mouth water.

"We sit down; and I, fearing nothing, would not have changed places with the pope. And I talked, and I ate, and I drank; I drank, perhaps, most; for I had not had anything to drink for a long time; and, finally, I was rather excited. Chevassat seemed to have unbuttoned, and told me lots of funny things which set me a-laughing heartily. But when the coffee had been brought, with liquors in abundance, and cigars at ten cents apiece, my individual rises, and pushes the latch in the door; for there was a latch.

“Then he comes back, and sits down right in front of me, with his elbows on the table. ‘Now, old man,’ he says, ‘we have had enough laughing and talking. I am a good fellow, you know; but you understand that I am not treating you for the sake of your pretty face alone. I want a good stout fellow; and I thought you might be the man.’

“Upon my word, he told me that in such a peculiar way, that I felt as if somebody had kicked me in the stomach; and I began to be afraid of him. Still I concealed my fears, and said, ‘Well, let us see; go it! What’s the row?’

“At once he replies, ‘As I told you before, I have not laid up a cent. But if anything should happen to a certain person whom I think of, I should be rich; and you—why, you might be rich too, if you were willing to give him a little push with the elbow, so that the thing might happen to him a little sooner.’”

Earnestly bent upon the part which he had to play for the sake of carrying out his system of defence, the prisoner assumed more and more hypocritical repentance, an effort which gave to his wicked face a peculiarly repulsive expression.

The magistrate, however, though no doubt thoroughly disgusted with this absurd comedy, did not move a muscle of his face, nor make a gesture, anxious, as he was, not to break the thread of this important deposition.

“Ah, sir!” exclaimed Crochard, his hand upon his heart, “when I heard Chevassat talk that way, my heart turned within me, and I said, ‘Unfortunate man, what do you mean? I should commit a murder? Never! I’d rather die first!’ He laughed, and replied, ‘Don’t be a fool; who talks to you of murder? I spoke of an accident. Besides, you would not risk anything. The thing would happen to him abroad.’ I continued, however, to refuse, and I spoke even of going away; when Chevassat seized a big knife, and said, now that I had his secret, I was bound to go on. If not!—he looked at me with such a terrible air, that, upon my word, I was frightened, and sat down again.

“Then, all at once, he became as jolly again as before; and, whilst he kept pouring the brandy into my glass, he explained to me that I would be a fool to hesitate; that I could never in all my life find such a chance again of

making a fortune; that I would most certainly succeed; and that then I would have an income, keep a carriage as he did, wear fine clothes, and have every day a dinner like the one we had just been enjoying together.

“I became more and more excited. This lot of gold which he held up before my mind’s eyes dazzled me; and the strong drink I had been taking incessantly got into my head. Then he flourished again the big knife before my face; and finally I did not know what I was saying or doing. I got up; and, striking the table with my fist, I cried out, ‘I am your man!’”

Although, probably, the whole scene never took place, except in the prisoner’s imagination, Daniel could not help trembling under his cover, at the thought of these two wretches arranging for his death, while they were there, half drunk, glass in hand, and their elbows resting on a table covered with wine-stains. Lefloch, on his part, stood grasping the bedstead so hard with his hand, that the wood cracked. Perhaps he dreamed he held in his grasp the neck of the man who was talking so coolly of murdering his lieutenant. The lawyer and the doctor thought of nothing but of watching the contortions of the accused. He had drawn a handkerchief from his pocket, and rubbed his eyes hard, as if he hoped thus to bring forth a few tears.

“Come, come!” said the magistrate. “No scene!”

Crochard sighed deeply, and then continued in a tearful tone,—

“They might cut me to pieces, and I would not be able to say what happened after that. I was dead drunk, and do not recollect a thing any more. From what Chevassat afterwards told me, I had to be carried to the carriage; and he took me to a hotel in the suburb, where he hired a lodging for me. When I woke the next day, a little before noon, my head was as heavy as lead; and I tried to recall what had happened at the restaurant, and if it was not perhaps merely the bad wine that had given me the nightmare.

“Unfortunately, it was no dream; and I soon found that out, when a waiter came up and brought me a letter. Chevassat wrote me to come to his house, and to breakfast with him for the purpose of talking business.

“Of course I went. I asked the concierge where M. Justin Chevassat lives in the house; and he directs me to go to the second floor, on the right hand. I go up, ring the bell; a servant opens the door; I enter, and find, in an elegant apartment, my brigand in a dressing-gown, stretched out on a sofa. On the way I had made up my mind to tell him positively that he need not count upon me; that the thing was a horror to me; and that I retracted all I had said. But, as soon as I began, he became perfectly furious, calling me a coward and a traitor, and telling me that I had no choice but to make my fortune, or to receive a blow with the big knife between my shoulders. At the same time he spread out before me a great heap of gold. Then, yes, then I was weak. I felt I was caught. Chevassat frightened me; the gold intoxicated me. I pledged my word; and the bargain was made.”

As he said this, Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, sighed deeply and noisily, like a man whose heart has been relieved of a grievous burden. He really felt prodigiously relieved. To have to confess everything on the spot, without a moment's respite to combine a plan of apology, was a hard task. Now, the wretch had stood this delicate and dangerous trial pretty well, and thought he had managed cleverly enough to prepare for the day of his trial a number of extenuating circumstances. But the magistrate hardly gave him time to breathe.

“Not so fast,” he said: “we are not done yet. What were the conditions which you and Chevassat agreed upon?”

“Oh! very simple, sir. I, for my part, said yes to everything he proposed. He magnetized me, I tell you, that man! We agreed, therefore, that he would pay me four thousand francs in advance, and that, after the accident, he would give me six thousand certain, and a portion of the sum which he would secure.”

“Thus you undertook, for ten thousand francs, to murder a man?”

“I thought”—

“That sum is very far from those fabulous amounts by which you said you had been blinded and carried away.”

“Pardon me! There was that share in the great fortune.”

“Ah! You knew very well that Chevassat would never have paid you anything.”

Crochard’s hands twitched nervously. He cried out,—

“Chevassat cheat me! *cochonnere!* I would have—but no; he knows me; he would never have dared”—

The magistrate had caught the prisoner’s eye, and, fixing him sternly, he said good-naturedly,—

“Why did you tell me, then, that that man magnetized you, and frightened you out of your wits?”

The wretch had gone into the snare, and, instead of answering, hung his head, and tried to sob.

“Repentance is all very well,” said the lawyer, who did not seem to be in the least touched; “but just now it would be better for you to explain how your trip to Cochin China was arranged. Come, collect yourself, and give us the details.”

“As to that,” he resumed his account, “you see Chevassat explained to me everything at breakfast; and the very same day he gave me the address which you found on the paper in which the bank-notes were wrapped up.”

“What did he give you M. Champcey’s address for?”

“So that I might know him personally.”

“Well, go on.”

“At first, when I heard he was a lieutenant in the navy, I said I must give it up, knowing as I did that with such men there is no trifling. But Chevassat scolded me so terribly, and called me such hard names, that I finally got mad, and promised everything.

“‘Besides,’ he said to me, ‘listen to my plan. The navy department wants mechanics to go to Saigon. They have not gotten their full number yet: so you go and offer yourself. They will accept you, and even pay your journey to Rochefort: a boat will carry you out to the roadstead on board the frigate

“Conquest.” Do you know whom you will find on board? Our man, Lieut. Champcey. Well, now, I tell you! that if any accident should happen to him, either during the voyage, or at Saigon, that accident will pass unnoticed, as a letter passes through the post-office.’

“Yes, that’s what he told me, every word of it; and I think I hear him now. And I—I was so completely bewildered, that I had nothing to say in return. However, there was one thing which troubled me; and I thought, ‘Well, after all, they won’t accept me at the navy department, with my antecedents.’

“But, when I mentioned the difficulty to Chevassat, he laughed. Oh, but he laughed! it made me mad.

“‘You are surely more of a fool than I thought,’ he said. ‘Are your condemnations written on your face? No, I should say. Well, as you will exhibit your papers in excellent order, they will take you.’

“I opened my eyes wide, and said, ‘That’s all very pretty, what you say; but the mischief is, that, as I have not worked at my profession for more than fifteen years, I have no papers at all.’ He shrugs his shoulders, and says, ‘You shall have your papers.’ That worries me; and I reply, ‘If I have to steal somebody’s papers, and change my name, I won’t do it.’ But the brigand had his notions. ‘You shall keep your name,’ he said, touching me on the shoulder. ‘You shall always remain Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet; and you shall have your papers as engraver on metal as perfect as anybody can have them.’

“And, to be sure, the second day after that he gave me a set of papers, signatures, seals, all in perfect order.”

“The papers found in your room, you mean?” asked the lawyer.

“Exactly.”

“Where did Chevassat get them?”

“Get them? Why, he had made them himself. He can do anything he chooses with his pen, the scamp! If he takes it into his head to imitate your own handwriting, you would never suspect it.”

Daniel and the old surgeon exchanged glances. This was a strong and very important point in connection with the forged letter that had been sent to the navy department, and claimed to be signed by Daniel himself. The magistrate was as much struck by the fact as they were; but his features remained unchanged; and, pursuing his plan in spite of all the incidents of the examination, he asked,—

“These papers caused no suspicion?”

“None whatever. I had only to show them, and they accepted me. Besides, Chevassat said he would enlist some people in my behalf; perhaps I had been specially recommended.”

“And thus you sailed?”

“Yes. They gave me my ticket, some money for travelling expenses; and, five days after my meeting with Chevassat, I was on board ‘The Conquest.’ Lieut. Champcey was not there. Ah! I began to hope he would not go out on the expedition at all. Unfortunately, he arrived forty- eight hours afterwards, and we sailed at once.”

The marvellous coolness of the wretch showed clearly under his affected trouble; and, while it confounded Daniel and the old surgeon, it filled the faithful Lefloch with growing indignation. He spoke of this abominable plot, of this assassination which had been so carefully plotted, and of the price agreed upon, and partly paid in advance, as if the whole had been a fair commercial operation.

“Now, Crochard,” said the lawyer, “I cannot impress it too strongly on your mind, how important it is for your own interests that you should tell the truth. Remember, all your statements will be verified. Do you know whether Chevassat lives in Paris under an assumed name?”

“No, sir! I have always heard him called Chevassat by everybody.”

“What? By everybody?”

“Well, I mean his concierge, his servants.”

The magistrate seemed for a moment to consider how he should frame his next question; and then he asked, all of a sudden,—

“Suppose that the—accident, as you call it, had succeeded, you would have taken ship; you would have arrived in France; you reach Paris; how would you have found Chevassat to claim your six thousand francs?”

“I should have gone to his house, where I breakfasted with him; and, if he had left, the concierge would have told me where he lived now.”

“Then you really think you saw him at his own rooms? Consider. If you left him only for a couple of hours, between the time when you first met him and the visit you paid him afterwards, he might very well have improvised a new domicile for himself.”

“Ah! I did not lie, sir. When dinner was over, I had lost my consciousness, and I did not get wide awake again till noon on the next day. Chevassat had the whole night and next morning.”

Then, as a suspicion suddenly flashed through Crochard’s mind, he exclaimed,—

“Ah, the brigand! Why did he urge me never to write to him otherwise than ‘to be called for’?”

The magistrate had turned to his clerk.

“Go down,” he said, “and see if any of the merchants in town have a Paris Directory.”

The clerk went off like an arrow, and appeared promptly back again with the volume in question. The magistrate hastened to look up the address given by the prisoner, and found it entered thus: “*Langlois*, sumptuous apartments for families and single persons. Superior attendance.”

“I was almost sure of it,” he said to himself.

Then handing Daniel the paper on which the words “University” and “Street” could be deciphered, he asked,—

“Do you know that handwriting, M. Champcey?”

Too full of the lawyer's shrewd surmises to express any surprise, Daniel looked at the words, and said coolly,—

“That is Maxime de Brevan's handwriting.”

A rush of blood colored instantly the pale face of Crochard. He was furious at the idea of having been duped by his accomplice, by the instigator of the crime he had committed, and for which he would probably never have received the promised reward.

“Ah, the brigand!” he exclaimed. “And I, who was very near not denouncing him at all!”

A slight smile passed over the lawyer's face. His end had been attained. He had foreseen this wrath on the part of the prisoner; he had prepared it carefully, and caused it to break out fully; for he knew it would bring him full light on the whole subject.

“To cheat me, me!” Crochard went on with extraordinary vehemence,—“to cheat a friend, an old comrade! Ah the rascal! But he sha'n't go to paradise, if I can help it! Let them cut my throat, I don't mind it; I shall be quite content even, provided I see his throat cut first.”

“He has not even been arrested yet.”

“But nothing is easier than to catch him, sir. He must be uneasy at not hearing from me; and I am sure he is going every day to the post-office to inquire if there are no letters yet for M. X. O. X. 88. I can write to him. Do you want me to write to him? I can tell him that I have once more missed it, and that I have been caught even, but that the police have found out nothing, and that they have set me free again. I am sure, after that, the scamp will keep quiet; and the police will have nothing to do but to take the omnibus, and arrest him at his lodgings.”

The magistrate had allowed the prisoner to give free vent to his fury, knowing full well by experience how intensely criminals hate those of their accomplices by whom they find themselves betrayed. And he was in hopes that the rage of this man might suggest a new idea, or furnish him with new facts. When he saw he was not likely to gain much, he said,—

“Justice cannot stoop to such expedients.” Then he added, seeing how disappointed Crochard looked,—

“You had better try and recollect all you can. Have you forgotten or concealed nothing that might assist us in carrying out this examination?”

“No; I think I have told you every thing.”

“You cannot furnish any additional evidence of the complicity of Justin Chevassat, of his efforts to tempt you to commit this crime, or of the forgery he committed in getting up a false set of papers for you?”

“No! Ah, he is a clever one, and leaves no trace behind him that could convict him. But, strong as he is, if we could be confronted in court, I’d undertake, just by looking at him, to get the truth out of him somehow.”

“You shall be confronted, I promise you.”

The prisoner seemed to be amazed.

“Are you going to send for Chevassat?” he asked.

“No. You will be sent home, to be tried there.”

A flash of joy shone in the eyes of the wretch. He knew the voyage would not be a pleasant one; but the prospect of being tried in France was as good as an escape from capital punishment to his mind. Besides, he delighted in advance in the idea of seeing Chevassat in court, seated by his side as a fellow-prisoner.

“Then,” he asked again, “they will send me home?”

“On the first national vessel that leaves Saigon.”

The magistrate went and sat down at the table where the clerk was writing, and rapidly ran his eye over the long examination, seeing if anything had been overlooked. When he had done, he said,—

“Now give me as accurate a description of Justin Chevassat as you can.”

Crochard passed his hand repeatedly over his forehead; and then, his eyes staring at empty space, and his neck stretched out, as if he saw a phantom which he had suddenly called up, he said,—

“Chevassat is a man of my age; but he does not look more than twenty seven or eight. That is what made me hesitate at first, when I met him on the boulevard. He is a handsome fellow, very well made, and wears all his beard. He looks clever, with soft eyes; and his face inspires confidence at once.”

“Ah! that is Maxime all over,” broke in Daniel.

And, suddenly remembering something, he called Lefloch. The sailor started, and almost mechanically assumed the respectful position of a sailor standing before his officer.

“Lieutenant?” he said.

“Since I have been sick, they have brought part of my baggage here; have they not?”

“Yes, lieutenant, all of it.”

“Well. Go and look for a big red book with silver clasps. You have no doubt seen me look at it often.”

“Yes, lieutenant; and I know where it is.”

And he immediately opened one of the trunks that were piled up in a corner of the room, and took from it a photograph album, which, upon a sign from Daniel, he handed to the lawyer.

“Will you please,” said Daniel at the same time, “ask the prisoner, if, among the sixty or seventy portraits in that book, he knows any one?”

The album was handed to Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, who turned over leaf after leaf, till all of a sudden, and almost beside himself, he cried out,—

“Here he is, Justin Chevassat! Oh! that’s he, no doubt about it.”

Daniel could, from his bed, see the photograph, and said,—

“That is Maxime’s portrait.”

After this decisive evidence, there could be no longer any doubt that Justin Chevassat and Maxime de Brevan were one and the same person. The investigation was complete, as far as it could be carried on in Saigon; the remaining evidence had to be collected in Paris. The magistrate directed, therefore, the clerk to read the deposition; and Crochard followed it without making a single objection. But when he had signed it, and the gendarmes were about to carry him off again, and to put on the handcuffs, he asked leave to make an addition. The magistrate assented; and Crochard said,—

“I do not want to excuse myself, nor to make myself out innocent; but I do not like, on the other hand, to seem worse than I am.”

He had assumed a very decided position, and evidently aimed at giving to his words an expression of coarse but perfect frankness.

“The thing which I had undertaken to do, it was not in my power to do. It has never entered my head to kill a man treacherously. If I had been a brute, such as these are, the lieutenant would not be there, wounded to be sure, but alive. Ten times I might have done his business most effectively; but I did not care. I tried in vain to think of Chevassat’s big promises; at the last moment, my heart always failed me. The thing was too much for me. And the proof of it is, that I missed him at ten yards’ distance. The only time when I tried it really in earnest was in the little boat, because there, I ran some risk; it was like a duel, since my life was as much at stake as the lieutenant’s. I can swim as well as anybody, to be sure; but in a river like the Dong-Nai, at night, and with a current like that, no swimmer can hold his own. The lieutenant got out of it; but I was very near being drowned. I could not get on land again until I had been carried down two miles or more; and, when I did get on shore, I sank in the mud up to my hips. Now, I humbly beg the lieutenant’s pardon; and you shall see if I am going to let Chevassat escape.”

Thereupon he held out his hands for the handcuffs, with a theatrical gesture, and left the room.

CHAPTER 27

In the meantime, the long, trying scene had exhausted Daniel; and he lay there, panting, on his bed. The surgeon and the lawyer withdrew, to let him have some rest.

He certainly needed it; but how could he sleep with the fearful idea of his Henrietta—she whom he loved with his whole heart—being in the hands of this Justin Chevassat, a forger, a former galley-slave, the accomplice and friend of Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet?

“And I myself handed her over to him!” he repeated for the thousandth time,—“I, her only friend upon earth! And her confidence in me was so great, that, if she had any presentiment, she suppressed it for my sake.”

Daniel had, to be sure, a certain assurance now, that Maxime de Brevan would not be able to escape from justice. But what did it profit him to be avenged, when it was too late, long after Henrietta should have been forced to seek in suicide the only refuge from Brevan’s persecution? Now it seemed to him as if the magistrate was far more anxiously concerned for the punishment of the guilty than for the safety of the victims. Blinded by passion, so as to ask for impossibilities, Daniel would have had this lawyer, who was so clever in unearthing crimes committed in Saigon, find means rather to prevent the atrocious crime which was now going on in France. On his part, he had done the only thing that could be done.

At the first glimpse of reason that had appeared after his terrible sufferings, he had hastened to write to Henrietta, begging her to take courage, and promising her that he would soon be near her. In this letter he had enclosed the sum of four thousand francs.

This letter was gone. But how long would it take before it could reach her? Three or four months, perhaps even more.

Would it reach her in time? Might it not be intercepted, like the others? All these anxieties made a bed of burning coals of the couch of the poor

wounded man. He twisted and turned restlessly from side to side, and felt as if he were once more going to lose his senses. And still, by a prodigious effort of his will, his convalescence pursued its normal, steady way in spite of so many contrary influences.

A fortnight after Crochard's confession, Daniel could get up; he spent the afternoon in an arm-chair, and was even able to take a few steps in his chamber. The next week he was able to get down into the garden of the hospital, and to walk about there, leaning on the arm of his faithful Lefloch. And with his strength and his health, hope, also, began to come back; when, all of a sudden, two letters from Henrietta rekindled the fever.

In one the poor *girl* told him how she had lived so far on the money obtained from the sale of the little jewelry she had taken with her, but added that she was shamefully cheated, and would soon be compelled to seek employment of some sort in order to support herself.

"I am quite sure," she said, with a kind of heartrending cheerfulness, "that I can earn my forty cents a day; and with that, my friend, I shall be as happy as a queen, and wait for your return, free from want."

In the other she wrote,—

"None of my efforts to procure work has so far succeeded. The future is getting darker and darker. Soon I shall be without bread. I shall struggle on to the last extremity, were it only not to give my enemies the joy of seeing me dead. But, Daniel, if you wish to see your Henrietta again, come back; oh, come back!"

Daniel had not suffered half as much the day when the assassin's ball ploughed through his chest. He was evidently reading one of those last cries which precede agony. After these two fearful letters, he could only expect a last one from Henrietta,—a letter in which she would tell him, "All is over. I am dying. Farewell!"

He sent for the chief surgeon, and said, as soon as he entered,—

"I must go!"

The good doctor frowned, and replied rudely,—

“Are you mad? Do you know that you cannot stand up fifteen minutes?”

“I can lie down in my berth.”

“You would kill yourself.”

“What of that? I would rather suffer death than what I now endure. Besides, I have made up my mind irrevocably! Read this, and you will see yourself that I cannot do otherwise.”

The chief surgeon took in Henrietta’s last letter almost at a single glance; but he held it in his hand for some time, pretending to read it, but in reality meditating.

“I am sure,” the excellent man thought in his heart, “I am sure, in this man’s place, I should do the same. But would this imprudence be of any use to him? No; for he could not reach the mouth of the Dong-Nai alive. Therefore it is my duty to keep him here: and that can be done, since he is as yet unable to go out alone; and Lefloch will obey me, I am sure, when I tell him that his master’s life depends upon his obedience.”

Too wise to meet so decided a determination as Daniel’s was by a flat refusal, he said,—

“Very well, then; be it as you choose!”

Only he came in again the same evening, and, with an air of disappointment, said to Daniel,—

“To go is all very well; but there is one difficulty in the way, of which neither you nor I have thought.”

“And what is that?”

“There is no vessel going home.”

“Really, doctor?”

“Ah! my dear friend,” replied the excellent man boldly, “do you think I could deceive you?”

Evidently Daniel thought him quite capable of doing so; but he took good care not to show his suspicions, reserving to himself the right of making direct inquiries as soon as the opportunity should offer. It came the very next morning. Two friends of his called to see him. He sent Lefloch out of the room on some pretext, and then begged them to go down to the port, and to engage a passage for him,—no, not for him, but for his man, whom urgent business recalled to France.

In the most eager manner the two gentlemen disappeared. They stayed away three hours; and, when they came back, their answer was the same as the doctor's. They declared they had made inquiries on all sides; but they were quite sure that there was not a single vessel in Saigon ready to sail for home. Ten other persons whom Daniel asked to do the same thing brought him the same answer. And yet, that very week, two ships sailed,—one for Havre, the other for Bordeaux. But the concierge of the hospital, and Lefloch, were so well drilled, that no visitor reached Daniel before having learned his lesson thoroughly.

Thus they succeeded in keeping Daniel quiet for a fortnight; but, at the end of that time, he declared that he felt quite well enough to look out for a ship himself; and that, if he could do no better, he meant to sail for Singapore, where he would be sure to procure a passage home. It would, of course, have been simple folly to try and keep a man back who was so much bent upon his purpose; and, as his first visit to the port would have revealed to him the true state of things, the old surgeon preferred to make a clean breast of it. When he learned that he had missed two ships, Daniel was at first naturally very much incensed.

“That was not right, doctor, to treat me thus,” he exclaimed. “It was wrong; for you know what sacred duties call me home.”

But the surgeon was prepared for his justification. He replied with a certain solemnity which he rarely assumed,—

“I have only obeyed my conscience. If I had let you set sail in the condition in which you were, I should have virtually sent you to your grave, and thus have deprived your betrothed, Miss Ville-Handry, of her last and only chance of salvation.”

Daniel shook his head sadly, and said,—

“But if I get there too late, too late; by a week, a day, do you think, doctor, I shall not curse your prudence? And who knows, now, when a ship will leave?”

“When? On Sunday, in five days; and that ship is ‘The Saint Louis’ a famous clipper, and so good a sailor, that you will easily overtake the two big three-masters that have sailed before you.”

Offering his hand to Daniel, he added,—

“Come, my dear Champcey; don’t blame an old friend who has done what he thought was his duty to do.”

Daniel was too painfully affected to pay much attention to the conclusive and sensible reasons alleged by the chief surgeon; he saw nothing but that his friends had taken advantage of his condition to keep him in the dark. Still he also felt that it would have been black ingratitude and stupid obstinacy to preserve in his heart a shadow of resentment. He therefore, took the hand that was offered him, and, pressing it warmly, replied in a tone of deep emotion,—

“Whatever the future may have in store for me, doctor, I shall never forget that I owe my life to your devotion.”

As usually, when he felt that excitement was overcoming him,—a very rare event, to tell the truth,—the old surgeon fell back into his rough and abrupt manner.

“I have attended you as I would have attended any one: that is my duty, and you need not trouble yourself about your gratitude. If any one owes me thanks, it is Miss Ville-Handry; and I beg you will remind her of it when she is your wife. And now you will be good enough to dismiss all those dismal ideas, and remember that you have only five days longer to tremble with impatience in this abominable country.”

He spoke easily enough of it,—five days! It was an eternity for a man in Daniel’s state of mind. In three hours he had made all his preparations for his departure, arranged his business matters, and obtained a furlough for

Lefloch, who was to go with him. At noon, therefore, he asked himself with terror, how he was to employ his time till night, when they came, and asked if he would please come over to the courthouse, to see the magistrate.

He went at once, and found the lawyer, but so changed, that he hardly recognized him at first. The last mail had brought him the news of his appointment to a judgeship, which he had long anxiously desired, and which would enable him to return, not only to France, but to his native province. He meant to sail in a frigate which was to leave towards the end of the month, and in which Crochard, also, was to be sent home.

“In this way,” he said, “I shall arrive at the same time as the accused, and very soon after the papers, which were sent home last week; and I trust and hope I shall be allowed to conduct the trial of an affair, which, so far, has gone smoothly enough in my hands.”

His impassive air was gone; and that official mask was laid aside, which might have been looked upon as much a part of his official costume as the black gown which was lying upon one of his trunks. He laughed, he rubbed his hands, and said,—

“I should take pleasure in having him in my court, this Justin Chevassat, alias Maxime de Brevan. He must be a cool swindler, brimful of cunning and astuteness, familiar with all the tricks of criminal courts, and not so easily overcome. It will be no child’s play, I am sure, to prove that he was the instigator of Crochard’s crimes, and that he has hired him with his own money. Ah! There will be lively discussions and curious incidents.”

Daniel listened, quite bewildered.

“He, too,” he thought. “Professional enthusiasm carries him away; and here he is, troubling himself about the discussions in court, neither less nor more than Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet. He thinks only of the honor he will reap for having handed over to the jury such a formidable rascal as”—

But the lawyer had not sent for Daniel to speak to him of his plans and his hopes. Having learned from the chief surgeon that Lieut. Champcey was on the point of sailing, he wished to tell him that he would receive a very

important packet, which he was desired to hand to the court as soon as he reached Paris.

“This is, you understand,” he concluded, “an additional precaution which we take to prevent Maxime de Brevan from escaping us.”

It was five o'clock when Daniel left the court-house; and on the little square before it he found the old surgeon, waiting to carry him off to dinner, and a game of whist in the evening. So, when he undressed at night, he said to himself,—

“After all, the day has not been so very long!”

But to-morrow, and the day after to-morrow, and the next days!

He tried in vain to get rid of the fixed idea which filled his mind,—a mechanical instinct, so to say, which was stronger than his will, and drove him incessantly to the wharf where “The Saint Louis” was lying. Sitting on some bags of rice, he spent hour after hour in watching the cargo as it was put on board. Never had the Annamites and the Chinamen, who in Saigon act as stevedores, appeared to him so lazy, so intolerable. Sometimes he felt as if, seeing or guessing his impatience, they were trying to irritate him by moving the bales with the utmost slowness, and walking with unbearable laziness around with the windlass.

Then, when he could no longer bear the sight, he went to the cafe on the wharf, where the captain of “The Saint Louis” was generally to be found.

“Your men will never finish, captain,” he said. “You will never be ready by Sunday.”

To which the captain invariably replied in his fierce Marseilles accent,—

“Don't be afraid, lieutenant. ‘The Saint Louis,’ I tell you, beats the Indian mail in punctuality.”

And really, on Saturday, when he saw his passenger come as usual to the cafe, the captain exclaimed,—

“Well, what did I tell you? We are all ready. At five o’clock I get my mail at the post-office; and to-morrow morning we are off. I was just going to send you word that you had better sleep on board.”

That evening the officers of “The Conquest,” gave Daniel a farewell dinner; and it was nearly midnight, when, after having once more shaken hands most cordially with the old chief surgeon, he took possession of his state-room, one of the largest on board ship, in which they had put up two berths, so that, in case of need, Lefloch might be at hand to attend his master.

Then at last, towards four o’clock in the morning, Daniel was aroused by the clanking of chains, accompanied by the singing of the sailors. He hastened on deck. They were getting up anchors; and, an hour after that, “The Saint Louis” went down the Dong-Nai, aided by a current, rushing along “like lightning.”

“And now,” said Daniel to Lefloch, “I shall judge, by the time it will take us to get home, if fortune is on my side.”

Yes, fate, at last, declared for him. Never had the most extraordinarily favorable winds hastened a ship home as in this case. “The Saint Louis” was a first-class sailer; and the captain, stimulated by the presence of a navy lieutenant, always exacted the utmost from his ship; so that on the seventeenth day after they had left Saigon, on a fine winter afternoon, Daniel could see the hills above Marseilles rise from the blue waters of the Mediterranean. He was drawing near the end of the voyage and of his renewed anxieties. Two days more, and he would be in Paris, and his fate would be irrevocably fixed.

But would they let him go on shore that evening? He trembled as he thought of all the formalities which have to be observed when a ship arrives. The quarantine authorities might raise difficulties, and cause a delay.

Standing by the side of the captain, he was watching the masts, which looked as if they were loaded down with all the sails they could carry, when a cry from the lookout in the bow of the vessel attracted his attention. That man reported, at two ship’s lengths on starboard, a small boat, like a pilot-boat, making signs of distress. The captain and Daniel exchanged looks of

disappointment. The slightest delay in the position in which they were, and at a season when night falls so suddenly, deprived them of all hope of going on shore that night. And who could tell how long it would take them to go to the rescue of that boat?

“Well, never mind!” said Daniel. “We have to do it.”

“I wish they were in paradise!” swore the captain.

Nevertheless, he ordered all that was necessary to slacken speed, and then to tack so as to come close upon the little boat.

It was a difficult and tedious manoeuvre; but at last, after half an hour’s work, they could throw a rope into the boat.

There were two men in it, who hastened to come on the deck of the clipper. One was a sailor of about twenty, the other a man of perhaps fifty, who looked like a country gentleman, appeared ill at ease, and cast about him restless glances in all directions. But, whilst they were hoisting themselves up by the man-rope; the captain of “The Saint Louis” had had time to examine their boat, and to ascertain that it was in good condition, and every thing in it in perfect order.

Crimson with wrath, he now seized the young sailor by his collar; and, shaking him so roughly as nearly to disjoin his neck, he said with a formidable oath,—

“Are you making fun of me? What wretched joke have you been playing?”

Like their captain, the men on board, also, had discovered the perfect uselessness of the signals of distress which had excited their sympathy; and their indignation was great at what they considered a stupid mystification. They surrounded the sailor with a threatening air, while he struggled in the captain’s hand, and cried in his Marseilles jargon,—

“Let go! You are smothering me! It is not my fault. It was the gentleman there, who hired my boat for a sail. I, I would not make the signal; but”—

Nevertheless, the poor fellow would probably have experienced some very rough treatment, if the “gentleman” had not come running up, and covered him with his own body, exclaiming,—

“Let that poor boy go! I am the only one to blame!”

The captain, in a great rage, pushed him back, and, looking at him savagely, said,—

“Ah! so it is you who have dared”—

“Yes, I did it. But I had my reasons. This is surely ‘The Saint Louis,’ eh, coming from Saigon?”

“Yes. What next?”

“You have on board Lieut. Champcey of the navy?”

Daniel, who had been a silent witness of the scene, now stepped forward, very much puzzled.

“I am Lieut. Champcey, sir,” he said. “What do you desire?”

But, instead of replying, the “gentleman” raised his hands to heaven in a perfect ecstasy of joy, and said in an undertone,—

“We triumph at last!”

Then, turning to Daniel and the captain, he said,—

“But come, gentlemen, come! I must explain my conduct; and we must be alone for what I have to tell you.”

Pale, and with every sign of seasickness in his face, when he had first appeared on deck, the man now seemed to have recovered, and, in spite of the rolling of the vessel, followed the captain and Daniel with a firm step to the quarter-deck. As soon as they were alone, he said,—

“Could I be here, if I had not used a stratagem? Evidently not. And yet I had the most powerful interest in boarding ‘The Saint Louis’ before she should enter port; therefore I did not hesitate.”

He drew from his pocket a sheet of paper, simply folded twice, and said,—

“Here is my apology, Lieut. Champcey; see if it is sufficient.”

Utterly amazed, the young officer read,—

“I am saved, Daniel; and I owe my life to the man who will hand you this. I shall owe to him the pleasure of seeing you again. Confide in him as you would in your best and most devoted friend; and, I beseech you, do not hesitate to follow his advice literally.

“Henrietta.”

Daniel turned deadly pale, and tottered. This unexpected, intense happiness overcame him.

“Then—it is true—she is alive?” he stammered.

“She is at my sister’s house, safe from all danger.”

“And you, sir, you have rescued her?”

“I did!”

Prompt like thought, Daniel seized the man’s hands, and, pressing them vehemently, exclaimed with a penetrating voice,—

“Never, sir, never, whatever may happen, can I thank you enough. But remember, I pray you, under all circumstances, and for all times, you can count upon Lieut. Champcey.”

A strange smile played on the man’s lips; and, shaking his head, he said, “I shall before long remind you of your promise, lieutenant.”

Standing between the two men, the captain of “The Saint Louis” was looking alternately at the one and the other with an astonished air, listening without comprehending, and imagining marvellous things. The only point he understood was this, that his presence was, to say the least, not useful.

“If that is so,” he said to Daniel, “we cannot blame this gentleman for the ugly trick he has played us.”

“Blame him? Oh, certainly not!”

“Then I’ll leave you. I believe I have treated the sailor who brought him on board a little roughly; but I am going to order him a glass of brandy, which will set him right again.”

Thereupon the captain discreetly withdrew; while Papa Ravinet continued,—

“You will tell me, M. Champcey, that it would have been simpler to wait for you in port, and hand you my letter of introduction there. That would have been grievous imprudence. If I heard at the navy department of your arrival, others may have learned it as well. As soon, therefore, as ‘The Saint Louis’ was telegraphed in town, you may be sure a spy was sent to the wharf, who is going to follow you, never losing sight of you, and who will report all your goings and your doings.”

“What does it matter?”

“Ah! do not say so, sir! If our enemies hear of our meeting, you see, if they only find out that we have conversed together, all is lost. They would see the danger that threatens them, and they would escape.”

Daniel could hardly trust his ears.

“Our enemies?” he asked, emphasizing the word “our.”

“Yes: I mean our enemies,—Sarah Brandon, Countess Ville-Handry, Maxime de Brevan, Thomas Elgin, and Mrs. Brian.”

“You hate them?”

“If I hate them! I tell you for five years I have lived only on the hope of being able to avenge myself on them. Yes, it is five years now, that, lost in the crowd, I have followed them with the perseverance of an Indian,—five years that I have patiently, incessantly, inch by inch, undermined the ground beneath their steps. And they suspect nothing. I doubt whether they are aware of my existence. No, not even—What would it be to them, besides? They have pushed me so far down into the mud, that they cannot imagine my ever rising again up to their level. They triumph with impunity; they boast of their unpunished wickedness, and think they are strong, and safe from all attacks, because they have the prestige and the power of gold. And

yet their hour is coming. I, the wretched man, who have been compelled to hide, and to live on my daily labor,—I have attained my end. Every thing is ready; and I have only to touch the proud fabric of their crimes to make it come down upon them, and crush them all under the ruins. Ah! if I could see them only suffer one-fourth of what they have made me suffer, I should die content.”

Papa Ravinet seemed to have grown a foot; his hatred convulsed his placid face; his voice trembled with rage; and his yellow eyes shone with ill-subdued passion.

Daniel wondered, and asked himself what the people who had sworn to ruin him and Henrietta could have done to this man, who looked so inoffensive with his bright-flowered waistcoat and his coat with the high collar.

“But who are you, sir?” he asked.

“Who am I?” exclaimed the man,—“who am I?”

But he paused; and, after waiting a little while, he sunk his head, and said,—

“I am Anthony Ravinet, dealer in curiosities.”

The clipper was in the meantime making way rapidly. Already the white country houses appeared on the high bluffs amid the pine-groves; and the outlines of the Castle of If were clearly penned on the deep blue of the sky.

“But we are getting near,” exclaimed Papa Ravinet; “and I must get back into my boat. I did not come out so far, that they might see me enter on board ‘The Saint Louis.’”

And when Daniel offered him his state-room, where he might remain in concealment, he replied,—

“No, no! We shall have time enough to come to an understanding about what is to be done in Paris; and I must go back by rail to-night; I came down for the sole purpose of telling you this. Miss Henrietta is at my sister’s house; but you must take care not to come there. Neither Sarah nor Brevan know what has become of her; they think she has thrown herself into the

river; and this conviction is our safety and our strength. As they will most assuredly have you watched, the slightest imprudence might betray us.”

“But I must see Henrietta, sir.”

“Certainly; and I have found the means for it. Instead of going to your former lodgings, go to the Hotel du Louvre. I will see to it that my sister and Miss Ville-Handry shall have taken rooms there before you reach Paris; and you may be sure, that, in less than a quarter of an hour after your arrival, you will hear news. But, heavens, how near we are! I must make haste.”

Upon Daniel’s request, the ship lay by long enough to allow Papa Ravinet and his sailor to get back again into their boat without danger. When they were safely stowed away in it, and at the moment when they cast off the man-rope, Papa Ravinet called to Daniel,—

“We shall soon see you! Rely upon me! Tonight Miss Henrietta shall have a telegram from us.”

CHAPTER 28

At the same hour when Papa Ravinet, on the deck of "The Saint Louis," was pressing Daniel's hand, and bidding him farewell, there were in Paris two poor women, who prayed and watched with breathless anxiety,—the sister of the old dealer, Mrs. Bertolle, the widow; and Henrietta, the daughter of Count Ville-Handry. When Papa Ravinet had appeared the evening before, with his carpet-bag in his hand, his hurry had been so extraordinary, and his excitement so great, that one might have doubted his sanity. He had peremptorily asked his sister for two thousand francs; had made Henrietta write in all haste a letter of introduction to Daniel; and had rushed out again like a tempest, as he had come in, without saying more than this,—

"M. Champcey will arrive, or perhaps has already arrived, in Marseilles, on board a merchant vessel, 'The Saint Louis.' I have been told so at the navy department. It is all important that I should see him before anybody else. I take the express train of quarter past seven. To-morrow, I'll send you a telegram."

The two ladies asked for something more, a hope, a word; but no, nothing more! The old dealer had jumped into the carriage that had brought him, before they had recovered from their surprise; and they remained there, sitting before the fire, silent, their heads in their hands, each lost in conjectures. When the clock struck seven, the good widow was aroused from her grave thoughts, which seemed so different from her usual cheerful temper.

"Come, come, Miss Henrietta," she said with somewhat forced gayety, "my brother's departure does not condemn us, as far as I know, to starve ourselves to death."

She had gotten up as she said this. She set the table, and then sat down opposite to Henrietta, to their modest dinner. Modest it was, indeed, and still too abundant. They were both too much overcome to be able to eat; and yet both handled knife and fork, trying to deceive one another. Their

thoughts were far away, in spite of all their efforts to keep them at home, and followed the traveller.

“Now he has left,” whispered Henrietta as it struck eight.

“He is on his way already,” replied the old lady.

But neither of them knew anything of the journey from Paris to Marseilles. They were ignorant of the distances, the names of the stations, and even of the large cities through which the railroad passes.

“We must try and get a railway guide,” said the good widow. And, quite proud of her happy thought, she went out instantly, hurried to the nearest bookstore, and soon reappeared, flourishing triumphantly a yellow pamphlet, and saying,—

“Now we shall see it all, my dear child.”

Then, placing the guide on the tablecloth between them, they looked for the page containing the railway from Paris to Lyons and Marseilles, then the train which Papa Ravinet was to have taken; and they delighted in counting up how swiftly the “express” went, and all the stations where it stopped.

Then, when the table was cleared, instead of going industriously to work, as usually, they kept constantly looking at the clock, and, after consulting the book, said to each other,—

“He is at Montereau now; he must be beyond Sens; he will soon be at Tonnerre.”

A childish satisfaction, no doubt, and very idle. But who of us has not, at least once in his life, derived a wonderful pleasure, or perhaps unspeakable relief from impatience, or even grief, from following thus across space a beloved one who was going away, or coming home? Towards midnight, however, the old lady remarked that it was getting late, and that it would be wise to go to bed.

“You think you will sleep, madam?” asked Henrietta, surprised.

“No, my child; but”—

“Oh! I, for my part,—I could not sleep. This work on which we are busy is very pressing, you say; why could we not finish it?”

“Well, let us sit up then,” said the good widow.

The poor women, reduced as they were to conjectures by Papa Ravinet’s laconic answers, nevertheless knew full well that some great event was in preparation, something unexpected, and yet decisive. What it was, they did not know; but they understood, or rather felt, that Daniel’s return would and must totally change the aspect of affairs. But would Daniel really come?

“If he does come,” said Henrietta, “why did they only the other day tell me, at the navy department, that he was not coming? Then, again, why should he come home in a merchant vessel, and not on board his frigate?”

“Your letters have probably reached him at last,” explained the old lady; “and, as soon as he received them, he came home.”

Gradually, however, after having exhausted all conjectures, and after having discussed all contingencies, Henrietta became silent. When it struck half-past three, she said once more,—

“Ah! M. Ravinet is at the Lyons station now.”

Then her hand became less and less active in drawing the worsted, her head oscillated from side to side, and her eyelids closed unconsciously. Her old friend advised her to retire; and this time she did not refuse.

It was past ten o’clock when she awoke; and upon entering, fully dressed, into the sitting-room, Mrs. Bertolle greeted her with the exclamation:—

“At this moment my brother reaches Marseilles!”

“Ah! then it will not be long before we shall have news,” replied Henrietta.

But there are moments in which we think electricity the slowest of messengers. At two o’clock nothing had come; and the poor women began to accuse the old dealer of having forgotten them, when, at last, the bell was rung.

It was really the telegraph messenger, with his black leather pouch. The old lady signed her receipt with marvellous promptness; and, tearing the envelope hastily open, she read,—

Marseilles, 12.40 a.m.

“Saint Louis” signalled by telegraph this morning. Will be in to-night. I hire boat to go and meet her, provided Champcey is on board. This evening telegram.

Ravinet.

“But this does not tell us any thing,” said Henrietta, terribly disappointed.

“Just see, madam, your brother is not even sure whether M. Champcey is on board ‘The Saint Louis.’”

Perhaps Mrs. Bertolle, also, was a little disappointed; but she was not the person to let it be seen.

“But what did you expect, dear child? Anthony has not been an hour in Marseilles; how do you think he can know? We must wait till the evening. It is only a matter of a few hours.”

She said this very quietly; but all who have ever undergone the anguish of expectation will know how it becomes more and more intolerable as the moment approaches that is to bring the decision. However the old lady endeavored to control her excitement, the calm and dignified woman could not long conceal the nervous fever that was raging within her. Ten times during the afternoon she opened the window, to look for—what? She could not have told it herself, as she well knew nothing could come as yet. At night she could not stay in any one place. She tried in vain to work on her embroidery; her fingers refused their service.

At last, at ten minutes past nine, the telegraph man appeared, as impassive as ever.

This time it was Henrietta who had taken the despatch; and, before opening it, she had half a minute’s fearful suspense, as if the paper had contained the secret of her fate. Then, by a sudden impulse, tearing the envelope, she read, almost at a glance,—

Marseilles, 6.45 p.m.

I have seen Champcey. All well; devoted to Henrietta. Return this evening. Will be in Paris tomorrow evening at seven o'clock. Prepare your trunks as if you were to start on a month's journey immediately after my return. All is going well.

Pale as death, and trembling like a leaf, but with open lips and bright eyes, Henrietta had sunk into a chair. Up to this moment she had doubted every thing. Up to this hour, until she held the proof in her hand, she had not allowed herself to hope. Such great happiness does not seem to the unhappy to be intended for them. But now she stammered out,—

“Daniel is in France! Daniel! Nothing more to fear; the future is ours. I am safe now.”

But people do not die of joy; and, when she had recovered her equanimity, Henrietta understood how cruel she had been in the incoherent phrases that had escaped her in her excitement. She rose with a start, and, seizing Mrs. Bertolle's hands, said to her,—

“Great God! what am I saying! Ah, you will pardon me, madam, I am sure; but I feel as if I did not know what I am doing. Safe! I owe it to you and your brother, if I am safe. Without you Daniel would find nothing of me but a cross at the cemetery, and a name stained and destroyed by infamous calumnies.”

The old lady did not hear a word. She had picked up the despatch, had read it; and, overcome by its contents, had sat down near the fireplace, utterly insensible to the outside world. The most fearful hatred convulsed her ordinarily calm and gentle features; and pale, with closed teeth, and in a hoarse voice, she said over and over again,—

“We shall be avenged.”

Most assuredly Henrietta did not find out only now that the old dealer and his sister hated her enemies, Sarah Brandon and Maxime de Brevan, mortally; but she had never seen that hatred break out so terribly as to-night. What had brought it about? This she could not fathom. Papa Ravinet,

it was evident, was not a nobody. Ill-bred and coarse in Water Street, amid the thousand articles of his trade, he became a very different man as soon as he reached his sister's house. As to the Widow Bertolle, she was evidently a woman of superior intellect and education.

How had they both been reduced to this more than modest condition? By reverses of fortune. That accounts for everything, but explains nothing.

Such were Henrietta's thoughts, when the old lady roused her from her meditations.

"You saw, my dear child," she began saying, "that my brother desires us to be ready to set out on a long journey as soon as he comes home."

"Yes, madam; and I am quite astonished."

"I understand; but, although I know no more than you do of my brother's intentions, I know that he does nothing without a purpose. We ought, therefore, in prudence, comply with his wishes."

They agreed, therefore, at once on their arrangements; and the next day Mrs. Bertolle went out to purchase whatever might be necessary,—ready-made dresses for Henrietta, shoes, and linen. Towards five o'clock in the afternoon, all the preparations of the old lady and the young girl had been made; and all their things were carefully stowed away in three large trunks. According to Papa Ravinet's despatch, they had only about two hours more to wait, three hours at the worst. Still they were out of their reckoning. It was half-past eight before the good man arrived, evidently broken down by the long and rapid journey which he had just made.

"At last!" exclaimed Mrs. Bertolle. "We hardly expected you any longer to-night."

But he interrupted her, saying,—

"Oh, my dear sister! don't you think I suffered when I thought of your impatience? But it was absolutely necessary I should show myself in Water Street."

"You have seen Mrs. Chevassat?"

"I come from her just now. She is quite at her ease. I am sure she has not the slightest doubt that Miss Ville-Handry has killed herself; and she goes religiously every morning to the Morgue."

Henrietta shuddered.

"And M. de Brevan?" she asked.

Papa Ravinet looked troubled.

"Ah, I don't feel so safe there," he replied. "The man I had left in charge of him has foolishly lost sight of him."

Then noticing the trunks, he said,—

"But I am talking, and time flies. You are ready, I see. Let us go. I have a carriage at the door. We can talk on the way."

When he noticed some reluctance in Henrietta's face, he added with a kindly smile,—

"You need not fear anything, Miss Henrietta; we are not going away from M. Champcey, very far from it. Here, you see, he could not have come twice without betraying the secret of your existence."

"But where are we going?" asked Mrs. Bertolle.

"To the Hotel du Louvre, dear sister, where you will take rooms for Mrs. and Miss Bertolle. Be calm; my plans are laid."

Thereupon, he ran out on the staircase to call the concierge to help him in taking down the trunks.

Although the manoeuvres required by Papa Ravinet's appearance on board "The Saint Louis" had taken but little time, the delay had been long enough to prevent the ship from going through all the formalities that same evening. She had, therefore, to drop anchor at some distance from the harbor, to the great disgust of the crew, who saw Marseilles all ablaze before them, and who could count the wineshops, and hear the songs of the half-drunken people as they walked down the wharves in merry bands.

The least unhappy of them all was, for once, Daniel. The terrible excitement he had undergone had given way to utter prostration. His nerves, strained to the utmost, relaxed; and he felt the delight of a man who can at last throw down a heavy burden which he has long borne on his shoulders. Papa Ravinet had given him no details; but he did not regret it, he hardly noticed it. He knew positively that his Henrietta was alive; that she was in safety; and that she still loved him. That was enough.

“Well, lieutenant,” said Lefloch, delighted at his master’s joy, “did I not tell you? Good wind during the passage always brings good news upon landing.”

That night, while “The Saint Louis” was rocking lazily over her anchors, was the first night, since Daniel had heard of Count Ville-Handry’s marriage, that he slept with that sweet sleep given by hope. He was only aroused by the noise of the people who came in the quarantine boat; and, when he came on deck, he found that there was nothing any longer to prevent his going on shore. The men had been actively engaged ever since early in the morning, to set things right aloft and below, so as to “dress” “The Saint Louis;” for every ship, when it enters port, is decked out gayly, and carefully conceals all traces of injuries she has suffered, like the carrier-pigeon, which, upon returning to his nest after a storm, dries and smooths his feathers in the sun.

Soon the anchors were got up again; and the great clock on the wharf struck twelve, when Daniel jumped on the wharf at Marseilles, followed by his faithful man, and dazzled by the most brilliant sunlight. Ah! when he felt his foot once more standing on the soil of France, whence a vile plot had driven him long ago, his eyes flashed, and a threatening gesture boded ill to his enemies. It looked as if he were saying to them,—

“Here I am, and my vengeance will be terrible!”

Neither his joy nor his excitement, however, could make him forget the apprehensions of Papa Ravinet, although he thought they were eccentric, and very much exaggerated. That a spy should be waiting for him in the harbor, concealed in this busy, noisy crowd, to follow his track, and report his minutest actions,—this seemed to him, if not impossible, at least very improbable.

Nevertheless, he determined to ascertain the fact. Instead, therefore, of simply following the wharf, of going up Canebiere Street, and turning to the right on his way to the Hotel du Luxembourg, he went through several narrow streets, turning purposely every now and then. When he reached the hotel, he was compelled to acknowledge that the old dealer had acted wisely.

A big fellow, dark complexioned, and wicked looking, had followed the same route as he, always keeping some thirty yards behind him. The man who thus watched him, with his nose in the air and his hands in his pockets, hardly suspected the danger which he ran by practising his profession within reach of Lefloch. The idea of being tracked put the worthy sailor into a red-hot fury; and he proposed nothing less than to “run foul” of the spy, and make an end of him for good.

“I can do it in a second,” he assured his master. “I just go up to him, without making him aware of my presence. I seize him by his cravat; I give him two turns, like that—and good-night. He won’t track anybody again.”

Daniel had to use all his authority to keep him back, and found it still harder to convince him of the necessity to let the scamp not know that he had been discovered.

“Besides,” he added, “it is not proved yet that we are really watched; it may be merely a curious coincidence.”

“That may be so,” growled Lefloch.

But they could no longer doubt, when, just before dinner, as they looked out of the window, they saw the same man pass the hotel. At night they saw him again at the depot; and he took the same express train of 9.45 for Paris, in which they went. They recognized him in the refreshment-room at Lyons. And the first person they saw as they got out at Paris was the same man.

But Daniel did not mind the spy. He had long since forgotten him. He thought of nothing but the one fact that he was in the same town now with Henrietta. Too impatient to wait for his trunks, he left Lefloch in charge, and jumped into a cab, promising the driver two dollars if he would go as fast as he could to the Hotel du Louvre. For such pay, the lean horses of any cab

become equal to English thoroughbreds; and in three-quarters of an hour Daniel was installed in his room at the hotel, and waited with anxiety the return of the waiter. Now that he was really here, a thousand doubts assailed him: "Had he understood Papa Ravinet correctly? Had the good old man given him the right directions? Might they not, excited as they both were, have easily made a mistake?"

"In less than a quarter of an hour after your arrival," Papa Ravinet had said to Daniel, "you shall have news."

Less than a quarter of an hour! It seemed to Daniel as if he had been an eternity in this room. Thinking that Henrietta might possibly occupy a room on the same floor with him, on the same side of the house, that he might even be separated from her only by a partition-wall, he felt like cursing Papa Ravinet, when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he cried.

A waiter appeared, and handed him a visiting-card, on which was written, "Mrs. Bertolle, third story. No. 5."

As the waiter did not instantly disappear, Daniel said almost furiously,—

"Did I not tell you it was all right?"

He did not want the man to see his excitement, the most intense excitement he had ever experienced in all his life. His hands shook; he felt a burning sensation in his throat; his knees gave way under him. He looked at himself in the glass, and was startled; he looked deadly pale.

"Am I going to be ill?" he thought.

On the table stood a carafe with water. He filled a large glass, and drank it at one draught; this made him feel better, and he went out. But, once outside, he was so overcome, that he lost his way in the long passages and interminable staircases, in spite of the directions hung up at every turn, and had finally to ask a waiter, who pointed out a door which he had passed half a dozen times, and said,—

"That is No. 5."

He knocked gently, and the door opened instantly, as if somebody had been standing behind it, ready to open it promptly. As he entered, he tottered, and, almost in a mist, saw on his right side Papa Ravinet and an old lady, then, farther back, near the window, Henrietta.

He uttered a cry, and went forward. But as quickly she bounded to meet him, casting both arms around his neck, and leaning upon his bosom, sobbing and stammering,—

“Daniel, Daniel! At last!”

CHAPTER 29

It was exactly two years since Daniel and Henrietta had been parted by the foulest treachery,—two years since that fatal evening when the stupidly ironical voice of Count Ville-Handry had suddenly made itself heard near them under the old trees of the garden of the palace.

What had not happened since then? What unheard-of, most improbable events; what trials, what tribulations, what sufferings! They had endured all that the human heart can endure. There was not a day, so to say, in these two years, that had not brought them its share of grief and sorrow. How often both of them had despaired of the future! How many times they had sighed for death!

And yet, after all these storms, here they were reunited once more, in unspeakable happiness, forgetting every thing,—their enemies and the whole world, the anxieties of the past, and the uncertainty of the future.

They remained thus for a long time, holding each other closely, overcome with happiness, unable, as yet, to believe in the reality for which they had sighed so long, unable to utter a word, laughing and weeping in one breath.

Now and then they would move apart a little, throwing back the head in order the better to look at each other; then swiftly they would fold each other again closely in their arms, as if they were afraid they might be separated anew.

“How they love each other!” whispered Mrs. Bertolle in her brother’s ear,—“the poor young people!”

And big tears rolled down her cheeks, while the old dealer, not less touched, but showing his emotion differently, closed his hands fiercely, and said,—

“All right, all right! They will have to pay for everything.”

Daniel, in the meantime, was recovering himself gradually; and reason once more got the better of his feelings. He led Henrietta to an arm-chair at the

corner of the fireplace, and sitting down in front of her, after having taken her hands in his own, he asked her to give him a faithful account of the two terrible years that had just come to an end.

She had to tell him everything,—her humiliations in her father's house, the insults she had endured, the wicked slanders by which her honor had been tainted, the incomprehensible blindness of the count, the surly provocations of her step-mother, the horrible attentions of Sir Thorn; in fine, the whole abominable plot which had been formed, as she found out too late, for the purpose of driving her to seek safety in flight, and to give herself up to Maxime de Brevan.

Trembling with rage, livid, his eyes bloodshot, Daniel suddenly let go Henrietta's hands, and exclaimed in a half-smothered voice,—

“Ah, Henrietta! your father deserved—Wretched old man! to abandon his child to the mercy of such miserable wretches!”

And, when the poor girl looked at him imploringly, he replied,—

“Be it so! I will say nothing more of the count. He is your father, and that is enough.”

Then he added coldly,—

“But that M. Thomas Elgin, I swear by God he shall die by my hand; and as to Sarah Brandon”—

He was interrupted by the old dealer, who tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and said with an indescribable smile,—

“You shall not do that honor to the Hon. M. Elgin, M. Champcey. People like him do not die by the sword of honest men.”

In the meantime Henrietta had resumed her history, and spoke of her surprise and amazement when she reached that bare room in Water Street, with its scanty second-hand furniture.

“And yet, Henrietta,” here broke in Daniel, “I had handed that man all my money to be placed at your disposal in case of any accident.”

“What!” exclaimed the old dealer, “you had”—

He did not finish, but looked at the young officer with an utterly amazed air, as if he were an improbable phenomenon, never seen before.

Daniel shook his head sadly.

“Yes,” he said, “I know it was an insane thing. But it was less insane than to intrust my betrothed to his care. I believed in the friendship of that man.”

“And besides,” remarked Mrs. Bertolle, “how could you suppose such atrocious treachery? There are crimes which honest hearts never even conceive.”

Henrietta continued, describing her sensations when she found herself for the first time in her life harassed by want, destitution, hunger. But, when she came to the disgusting ill-treatment she received at the hands of the concierge’s wife, Daniel cried out,—

“Stop!”

And, fearfully excited, he asked her,—

“Did I hear right? Did you say the concierge of that house in Water Street, and his wife, were called Chevassat?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because Maxime de Brevan’s real name is Justin Chevassat.”

Papa Ravinet started up as if he had been shot.

“What,” he said, “you know that?”

“I learned it three months ago. I also know that my friend, the proud nobleman, Maxime de Brevan, who has been received in the most aristocratic *salons* of Paris, has been a galley-slave, condemned for forgery.”

Henrietta had risen, filled with terror.

“Then,” she stammered, “this wretched man was”—

“Chevassat’s son; yes, madam,” replied Mrs. Bertolle.

“Oh!” exclaimed the poor girl, “oh!”

And she fell heavily back into her chair, overcome by this discovery. The old dealer alone preserved his calm appearance.

“How did you learn that?” he asked Daniel.

“Through the man whom my friend Maxime had hired to murder me.”

Positively this threatened to be too much for Henrietta’s mind.

“Ah! I thought the mean coward would try to get you out of the way, Daniel. I wrote to you to be careful.”

“And I received your letter, my darling, but too late. After having missed me twice, the assassin fired at me; and I was in my bed, a ball in my chest, dying.”

“What has become of the murderer?” asked Papa Ravinet.

“He was arrested.”

“Then he confessed?”

“Yes, thanks to the astonishing cleverness of the magistrate who carried on the investigation.”

“What has become of him?”

“He has left Saigon by this time. They have sent him home to be tried here.”

“And Brevan?”

“I am surprised he has not yet been arrested. The papers in the case were sent to Paris by a vessel which left a fortnight before I left. To be sure, ‘The Saint Louis’ may have gotten ahead of her. At all events, I have in my keeping a letter to the court.”

Papa Ravinet seemed to be almost delirious with joy. He gesticulated like a madman; he laughed nervously, and almost frightfully, till his sides shook; and at last he said,—

“I shall see Brevan on the scaffold! Yes, I shall!”

But from that moment there was an end of that logical order which the old gentleman had so far kept up. As it always happens with people who are under the influence of some passion, eager to learn what they do not know, and little disposed to tell what they do know, confusion prevailed soon. Questions crossed each other, and followed, without order or connection. Answers came at haphazard. Each wanted to be heard; and all were speaking at once. Thus the explanations, which, by a little management, might have been given in twenty minutes, took them more than two hours.

At last, after the lapse of this time, and by dint of great efforts, it became possible to ascertain the sum total of the information given by Papa Ravinet, Daniel, and Henrietta. The truth began to show itself in the midst of this chaos; and the plot of Sarah Brandon and her accomplices appeared in all its hideous outlines. A plan of striking simplicity, the success of which seemed to have hung upon a hair. If the old dealer, instead of going down by the backstairs, had taken the front staircase, he would never have heard Henrietta's agony, and the poor child would have been lost.

If Crochard's ball had been a few lines nearer the heart, Daniel would have been killed.

And still the old dealer was not quite satisfied. He hung his lip, and winked with his yellow eyes, as if he wished it to be understood that he was by no means fully convinced, and that there were certain points which required fuller explanation.

"Look here, M. Champcey," he began at last, "the more I think of it, the more I am convinced that Sarah Brandon had nothing to do with these attempts at assassination, which so nearly made an end of you. She is too strong in her perversity to stoop to such coarse means, which always leave traces behind, and finally lead to a court of justice. She always acts alone, when her mind is made up; and her accomplices aid her only unconsciously, so that they can never betray her."

Daniel had been thoughtful.

"What you tell me," he answered, "I was told before by M. de Brevan."

The old gentleman did not seem to hear him, so intensely did he apply all the faculties of his mind to the problem before him.

“Still,” he continued, “there is no doubt about the manner in which Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, was employed. Could Brevan have done so without Sarah’s knowledge, and perhaps even contrary to her wishes?”

“That is quite possible; but then why should he have done so?”

“To secure to himself the fortune which M. Champcey had so imprudently intrusted to him,” said Henrietta.

But Papa Ravinet shook his head, looking very wise, and said,—

“That is one explanation. I do not say no to it; but it is not the true one yet. Murder is so dangerous an expedient, that even the boldest criminals only resort to it in the last extremity, and generally very much against their inclination. Could not Brevan have possessed himself of M. Champcey’s property without a murder? Of course, he could.

“Then we must look for another motive. You may say, it was fear which drove him to it. No; for at the time when he engaged Crochard, he could not foresee the atrocious outrages of which he would have become guilty during the succeeding year. Believe my experience; I discern in the whole affair a hurry and an awkwardness which betray a passion, a violent hatred, or, perhaps”—

He stopped suddenly, and seemed to reflect and deliberate, while he was mechanically stroking his chin. Then all of a sudden, looking strangely at Daniel, he asked him,—

“Could the Countess Sarah be in love with you, M. Champcey?”

Daniel’s face turned crimson. He had not forgotten that fatal evening, when, in the house in Circus Street, he had held Sarah Brandon in his arms; and the intoxicating delirium of that moment had left in his heart a bitter and undying pang of remorse. He had never dared confess to Henrietta that Sarah had actually come to his rooms alone. And even to-night, while giving very fully all the details of his passage out, and his residence in Saigon, he

had not said a word of the letters which had been addressed to him by the countess.

“Sarah Brandon in love with me?” he stammered. “What an idea!”

But he could not tell a falsehood; and Henrietta would not have been a woman, if she had not noticed his embarrassment.

“Why not?” she asked.

And, looking fixedly at Daniel, she went on,—

“That wretched woman impudently boasted to my face that she loved you; more than that, she swore that you, also, had loved her, and were still in love with her. She laughed at me contemptuously, telling me that she had it in her power to make you do anything she chose, and offering to show me your letters”—

She paused a moment, turned her head aside, and said with a visible effort,—

“Finally, M. Thomas Elgin assured me that Sarah Brandon had been your mistress, and that the marriage with my father took place only in consequence of a quarrel between you.”

Daniel had listened to her, trembling with indignation. He now cried out,—

“And you could believe these false calumnies! Oh, no, no! tell me that there is no need for me to justify myself to”—

Then turning to Papa Ravinet, he said,—

“Suppose, we admit, for a moment, that she might have been in love, as you say, what would that prove?”

The cunning old dealer remained apparently unmoved for a time; but his small eyes were sparkling with malicious delight and satisfaction.

“Ah! you would not talk so, if you knew Sarah Brandon’s antecedents as well as I do. Ask my sister about her and Maxime de Brevan, and she will tell you why I look upon that apparently trifling circumstance as so very important.”

Mrs. Bertolle made a sign that she assented; and he, sure, henceforth, that his sagacity had not been at fault, continued,—

“Pardon me, M. Champcey, if I insist, and especially if I do so in Miss Henrietta’s presence; but our interest, I might almost say our safety, requires it. Maxime de Brevan is caught, to be sure; but he is only a vulgar criminal; and we have, as yet, neither Thomas Elgin, nor Mrs. Brian, who are far more formidable, nor, above all, Sarah Brandon, who is a thousand times more wicked, and more guilty, than all the rest. You will tell me that we have ninety-nine chances out of a hundred on our side; maybe! Only a single, slight mistake may lead us altogether astray; and then there is an end to all our hopes, and these rascals triumph after all!”

He was but too right. Daniel felt it; and hence he said, without hesitating any longer, but looking stealthily at Henrietta’s face,—

“Since that is so, I will not conceal from you that the Countess Sarah has written me a dozen letters of at least extraordinary nature.”

“You have kept them, I hope?”

“Yes; they are all in one of my trunks.”

Papa Ravinet was evidently much embarrassed; but at last he said,—

“Ah! if I might dare? But no; it would be asking too much, perhaps, to beg you to let me see them?”

He did not know how ready Daniel was to grant the request. Ready as he was, to tell Henrietta everything, he could not but wish that she should read these letters, as she would see from them, that, if the countess had written to him, he had never returned an answer.

“You can never ask too much, M. Ravinet,” he replied. “Lefloch, my servant, must have come up by this time with the trunks; and, if you give me time to go down to my room, you shall have the letters at once.”

He was on the point of leaving the room, when the old dealer held him back, and said,—

“Sir, you forget the man who has been following you all the way from Marseilles. Wait till my sister has made sure that there is nobody watching you.”

Mrs. Bertolle at once went out; but she noticed nothing suspicious, and found all the passages silent and deserted. The spy had probably gone to make his report to his employers. Daniel went down promptly; and, when he came back, he held in his hand a bundle of faded and crumpled papers, which he handed to Papa Ravinet, with the words,—

“Here they are!”

Strange as it may seem, when the old gentleman touched these letters, impregnated with the peculiar perfume affected by Sarah Brandon, he trembled and turned pale. Immediately, however, perhaps in order to conceal his embarrassment, or to be the better able to reflect, he took a candlestick from the mantelpiece, and sat down aside, at one of the small tables. Mrs. Bertolle, Daniel, and Henrietta were silent; and nothing broke the stillness but the rustling of the paper, and the old gentleman’s voice as he muttered,—

“This is fabulous,—Sarah writing such things! She did not even disguise her handwriting,—she who never committed an imprudence in her life; she ruins herself. And she signs her name!”

But he had seen enough. He folded up the letters, and, rising again, said to Champcey,—

“No doubt now! Sarah loves you madly, insanely. Ah! how she does love! Well, well, all heartless women love thus when a sudden passion conquers them, setting their brains and their senses on fire, and”—

Daniel noticed in Henrietta’s face a sign of concern; and, quite distressed, he beckoned to the old gentleman to say nothing more. But he saw nothing, full as he was of his notion, and went on,—

“Now I understand. Sarah Brandon has not been able to keep her secret; and Brevan, seeing her love, and furious with jealousy, did not consider that to hire an assassin was to ruin himself.”

The indignation he felt had restored the blood to his face; and, as he struck the packet of letters with the palm of his hand, he exclaimed,—

“Yes, all is clear now; and by this correspondence, Sarah Brandon, you are ours!”

What could be the plan of Papa Ravinet? Did he expect to use these letters as weapons against her? or did he propose to send them to Count Ville-Handry in order to open his eyes? Daniel trembled at the idea; for his loyalty rebelled against such a vengeance; he felt as if he would have become a traitor.

“You see, to use a woman’s correspondence, however odious and contemptible she may be, would always be very repugnant to me.”

“I had no idea of asking such a thing of you,” replied the old dealer. “No; it is something very different I want you to do.”

And, when Daniel still seemed to be embarrassed, he added,—

“You ought not to give way to such exaggerated delicacy, M. Champcey. All weapons are fair when we are called upon to defend our lives and our honor against rascals; and that is where we are. If we do not hasten to strike Sarah Brandon, she will anticipate us; and then”—

He had been leaning against the mantelpiece, close to Mrs. Bertolle, who sat there silent and immovable; and now he raised his head, and, looking attentively at Henrietta and Daniel by turns, he added,—

“Perhaps you are both not exactly conscious of the position in which you stand. Having been reunited to-night, after such terrible trials, and having, both of you, escaped, almost by a miracle, from death, you feel, no doubt, as if all trouble was at an end, and the future was yours. I must undeceive you. You are precisely where you were the day before M. Champcey left France. You cannot any more now than at that time marry without Count Ville-Handry’s consent. Will he give it? You know very well that the Countess Sarah will not let him. Will you defy prejudices, and proudly avow your love? Ah, have a care! If you sin against social conventionalities, you risk your whole happiness of life. Will you hide yourself, on the other hand? However

careful you may be, the world will find you out; and fools and hypocrites will overwhelm you with slander. And Miss Henrietta has been too much calumniated already.”

To soar in the azure air, and suddenly to fall back into the mud on earth; to indulge in the sweetest of dreams, and all at once to be recalled to stern reality,—this is what Daniel and Henrietta endured at that moment. The calm, collected voice of the old dealer sounded cruel to them. Still he was but a sincere friend, who did his painful duty in awakening them from such deceptive illusions.

“Now,” he went on, “mind that I take everything at the best; and even suppose the case, that Count Ville-Handry leaves his daughter free to choose: would that be enough? Evidently not; for the moment Sarah Brandon hears that Miss Henrietta has not committed suicide, but is, instead, at the Hotel du Louvre, within easy reach of M. Daniel Champcey, she will prevail on her husband to shut his daughter up in a convent. For another year, Miss Henrietta is yet under paternal control; that is, in this case, at the mercy of a revengeful step-mother, who looks upon her as a successful rival.”

At this idea, that Henrietta might be once more taken from him, Daniel felt his blood chill off in his veins; and he exclaimed,—

“Ah, and I never dreamed of any of these things! I was mad! Joy had blinded my eyes completely.”

But the old gentleman beckoned to him to say nothing, and with an almost imperious gesture went on,—

“Oh, wait! I have not yet shown you the most urgent danger: Count Ville-Handry, who, when you knew him, had, I know not how many millions, is completely ruined. Of all he once owned, of his lands, forests, castles, deeds, and bonds, there is nothing left. His last cent, his last rod of land, has been taken from him. You left him living like a prince in his forefathers’ palace: you will find him vegetating in the fourth story of a lodging-house. You know, that, being poor, he is deemed guilty. The day is drawing near when Sarah Brandon will get rid of him, as she has gotten rid of Kergrist, of

Malgat the poor cashier, and others. The means are at hand. Already the name of Count Ville-Handry is seriously compromised. The company which he has established is breaking to pieces; and the papers hold him up to public contempt. If he cannot pay to-day, he will be to-morrow accused of fraudulent bankruptcy. Now, I ask you, is the count a man who will survive such a disgrace?"

For some time Henrietta had been unable to suppress her sobs; under this terrible threat she broke out in loud weeping.

"Ah, sir!" she said, "you have misled me. You assured me that my father's life was in no danger."

"And I promise you still, it is not in danger. Would I be here, if I did not think that Sarah was not quite ready yet?"

Daniel, also, had suffered terribly during this discussion; and he now said passionately,—

"Would it not be a crime for us to think, to wait, and to calculate, when such great dangers are impending? Come, sir, let us go"—

"Where?"

"Ah, how do I know? Into court, to the count, to a lawyer who can advise us. There must be something that can be done."

The old dealer did not stir.

"Poor, honest young man!" he said with an accent of bitter irony. "And what could we tell the lawyer? That Sarah Brandon has made an old man, the Count Ville-Handry, fall madly in love with her? That is no crime. That she has made him marry her? That was her right. That the count has launched forth in speculations? She opposed it. That he understood nothing of business? She could not help that. That he has been duped, cheated, and finally ruined in two short years? Apparently she is as much ruined as he is. That, in order to delay the catastrophe, he has resorted to illegal means? She is sorry for it. That he will not survive the taint on his ancient name? What can she do? Sarah, who was able to clear herself the day after Malgat's disappearance, will not be at a loss now to establish her innocence."

“But the count, sir, the count! Can we not go to him?”

“Count Ville-Handry would say to you—But you shall hear to-morrow what he will tell you.”

Daniel began to feel utterly dismayed.

“What can be done, then?” he asked.

“We must wait till we have sufficient evidence in hand to crush at one blow Sarah Brandon, Thorn, and Mrs. Brian.”

“Well; but how shall we get such evidence?”

The old gentleman cast a look of intelligence at his sister, smiled, and said with a strange accent in his voice,—

“I have collected some. As to the rest”—

“Well?”

“Well, my dear M. Champcey, I am no longer troubled about getting more, since I have found out that the Countess Sarah is in love with you.”

Now Daniel began to understand the part Papa Ravinet expected him to play. Still he did not object; he bowed his head under the clear eye of Henrietta, and said in a low voice,—

“I will do what you wish me to do, sir.”

The old gentleman uttered a low cry of delight, as if he had been relieved of an overwhelming anxiety.

“Then,” he said, “we will begin the campaign tomorrow morning. But we must know exactly who the enemies are whom we have to meet. Listen, therefore!”

CHAPTER 30

It struck midnight; but the poor people in the little parlor in the Hotel du Louvre hardly thought of sleep. How could they have become aware of the flight of time, as long as all their faculties were bent upon the immense interests that were at stake? On the struggle which they were about to undertake depended Count Ville-Handry's life and honor, and the happiness and whole future life of Daniel and Henrietta.

And Papa Ravinet and his sister had said,—“As for us, even more than that depends upon it.” The old dealer, therefore, drew up an easy-chair, sat down, and began in a somewhat husky voice,—

“The Countess Sarah is not Sarah Brandon, and is not an American. Her real name, by which she was known up to her sixteenth year, is Ernestine Bergot; and she was born in Paris, in the suburb of Saint Martin, just on the line of the corporation. To tell you in detail what the first years of Sarah were like would be difficult indeed. There are things of that kind which do not bear being mentioned. Her childhood might be her excuse, if she could be excused at all.

“Her mother was one of those unfortunate women of whom Paris devours every year several thousands; who come from the provinces in wooden shoes, and are seen, six months later, dressed in all the fashion; and who live a short, gay life, which invariably ends in the hospital.

“Her mother was neither better nor worse than the rest. When her daughter came, she had neither the sense to part with her, nor the courage—perhaps (who knows?) she had not the means—to mend her ways. Thus the little one grew up by God's mercy, but at the Devil's bidding, living by chance, now stuffed with sweet things, and now half-killed by blows, fed by the charity of neighbors, while her mother remained for weeks absent from her lodgings.

“Four years old, she wandered through the neighborhood dressed in fragments of silk or velvet, with a faded ribbon in her hair, but with bare feet

in her torn shoes, hoarse, and shivering with severe colds,—very much after the fashion of lost dogs, who rove around open-air cooking-shops,—and looking in the gutters for cents with which to buy fried potatoes or spoilt fruit.

“At a later time she extended the circle of her excursions, and wandered all over Paris, in company of other children like herself, stopping on the boulevards, before the brilliant shops or performing jugglers, trying to learn how to steal from open stalls, and at night asking in a plaintive voice for alms in behalf of her poor sick father. When twelve years old she was as thin as a plank, and as green as a June apple, with sharp elbows and long red hands. But she had beautiful light hair, teeth like a young dog’s, and large, impudent eyes. Merely upon seeing her go along, her head high with an air of saucy indifference, coquettish under her rags, and walking with elastic steps, you would have guessed in her the young Parisian girl, the sister of the poor ‘gamin,’ a thousand times more wicked than her brothers, and far more dangerous to society. She was as depraved as the worst of sinners, fearing neither God nor the Devil, nor man, nor anything.

“However, she did fear the police.

“For from them she derived the only notions of morality she ever possessed; otherwise, it would have been love’s labor lost to talk to her of virtue or of duty. These words would have conveyed no meaning to her imagination; she knew no more about them than about the abstract ideas which they represent.

“One day, however, her mother, who had virtually made a servant of her, had a praiseworthy inspiration. Finding that she had some money, she dressed her anew from head to foot, bought her a kind of outfit, and bound her as an apprentice to a dressmaker.

“But it came too late.

“Every kind of restraint was naturally intolerable to such a vagabond nature. The order and the regularity of the house in which she lived were a horror to her. To sit still all day long, a needle in her hand, appeared to her harder than death itself. The very comforts around her embarrassed her, and she felt as

a savage would feel in tight boots. At the end of the first week, therefore, she ran away from the dressmaker, stealing a hundred francs. As long as these lasted, she roved over Paris. When they were spent, and she was hungry, she came back to her mother.

“But her mother had moved away, and no one knew what had become of her. She was inquired after, but never found. Any other person would have been in despair. Not she. The same day she entered as waiter in a cheap coffee-house. Turned out there, she found employment in a low restaurant, where she had to wash up the dishes and plates. Sent away here, also, she became a servant in two or three other places of still lower character; then, at last, utterly disgusted, she determined to do nothing at all.

“She was sinking into the gutter, she was on the point of being lost before she had reached womanhood, like fruit which spoils before it is ripe, when a man turned up who was fated to arm her for life’s Struggle, and to change the vulgar thief into the accomplished monster of perversity whom you know.”

Here Papa Ravinet suddenly paused, and, looking at Daniel, said,—

“You must not believe, M. Champcey, that these details are imaginary. I have spent five years of my life in tracing out Sarah’s early life,—five years, during which I have been going from door to door, ever in search of information. A dealer in second-hand goods enters everywhere without exciting suspicion. And then I have witnesses to prove everything I have told you so far,—witnesses whom I shall summon, and who will speak whenever the necessity arises to establish the identity of the Countess Sarah.”

Daniel made no reply.

Like Henrietta, even like Mrs. Bertolle, at this moment he was completely fascinated by the old gentleman’s manner and tone. The latter, after having rested for a few minutes, went on,—

“The man who picked up Sarah was an old German artist, painter and musician both, of rare genius, but a maniac, as they called him. At all events, he was a good, an excellent man.

“One winter morning, as he was at work in his studio, he was struck by the strange ring in a woman’s voice, which recited in the court-yard below a popular song. He went to the window, and beckoned the singer to come up. It was Sarah; and she came. The good German used often to speak of the deep compassion which seized him as he saw this tall girl of fourteen come into his studio,—a child, stained by vice already, thin like hunger itself, and shivering in her thin calico dress. But he was at the same time almost dazzled by the rich promises of beauty in her face, the pure notes of her superb voice, which had withstood so far, and the surprising intelligence beaming in her features.

“He guessed what there was in her; he saw her, in his mind’s eye, such as she was to be at twenty.

“Then he asked her how she had come to be reduced to such misery, who she was, where her parents lived, and what they did for a living. When she had told him that she stood quite alone, and was dependent on no one, he said to her,—

“‘Well, if you will stay with me, I will adopt you; you shall be my daughter; and I will make you an eminent artist.’

“The studio was warm, and it was bitterly cold outside. Sarah had no roof over her head, and had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours. She accepted.

“She accepted, be it understood, not doubting, in her perversity, but that this kind old man had other intentions besides those he mentioned in offering her a home. She was mistaken. He recognized in her marvellous talents, and thought of nothing but of making of her a true marvel, which should astonish the world. He devoted himself heart and soul to his new favorite, with all the enthusiastic ardor of an artist, and all the jealous passion of an amateur.

“It was a hard task, however, which he had undertaken. Sarah could not even read. She knew nothing, except sin.

“How the old German went to work to keep this untamable vagabond at home, how he made her bend to his will, and submit to his lessons, no one will ever be able to tell. It was long a problem for me also. Some of the

neighbors told me that he treated her harshly, beating her often brutally; but neither threats nor blows were apt to make an impression on Sarah Brandon. A friend of the old man's thought he had guessed the riddle: he thought the old artist had succeeded in arousing Sarah's pride. He had kindled in her a boundless ambition and the most passionate covetousness. He intoxicated her with fairylike hopes.

"Follow my counsels,' he used to say to her, 'and at twenty you will be a queen,—a queen of beauty, of wit, and of genius. Study, and the day will come when you will travel through Europe, a renowned artist, welcomed in every capital, *feted* everywhere, honored, and glorified. Work, and wealth will come with fame,—immense, boundless wealth, surpassing all your dreams. You will have the finest carriages, the most magnificent diamonds; you will draw from inexhaustible purses; the whole world will be at your feet; and the women will turn pale with envy and jealousy when they see you. Among men there will be none so noble, none so great, none so rich, but he will beg for one of your looks; and they will fight for one of your smiles. Only work and study!'

"At all events, Sarah did work, and studied with a steady perseverance which spoke of her faith in the promises of her old master, and of the influence he had obtained over her through her vanity. At first she had been deterred by the extreme difficulties which beset so late a beginning; but her amazing natural gifts had soon begun to show themselves, and in a short time her progress was almost miraculous.

"It is true that her innate sagacity had made her soon find out how ignorant she was of the world. She saw that society did not exclusively consist, as she had heretofore imagined, of people like those she had known. She felt, for instance, what she had never suspected before, that her unfortunate mother, with all her friends and companions, were only the rare exceptions, laid under the ban by the immense majority.

"At last she actually learned to know the tree of good fruit, after having for so many years known only the tree of forbidden fruit. She listened with eager curiosity to all the old artist had to tell her. And he knew much; for the eccentric old man had travelled for a long time over the world, and

observed man on every step of the social ladder. He had been a favorite artist at the court of Vienna; he had had several of his operas brought out in Italy; and he had been admitted to the best society in Paris. At night, therefore, while sipping his coffee, his feet on the andirons, and his long pipe in his mouth, he would soon forget himself amid the recollections of his youth. He described to her the splendor of courts, the beauty of women, the magnificence of their toilets, and the intrigues which he had seen going on around him. He spoke to her of the men whose portraits he had painted, of the manners and the jealousies behind the stage, and of the great singers who had sung in his operas.

“Thus it came about, that, two years later, no one would have recognized the lean, wretched-looking vagabond of the suburbs in this fresh, rosy girl, with the lustrous eyes and the modest mien, whom they called in the house the ‘pretty artist in the fifth story.’

“And yet the change was only on the surface.

“Sarah was already too thoroughly corrupted, when the good German picked her up, to be capable of being entirely changed. He thought he had infused his own rough honesty into her veins: he had only taught her a new vice,—hypocrisy.

“The soul remained corrupt; and all the charms with which it was outwardly adorned became only so many base allurements, like those beautiful flowers which unfold their splendor on the surface of bottomless swamps, and thus lead those whom they attract to miserable death.

“At that time, however, Sarah did not yet possess that marvellous self-control which became one of her great charms hereafter; and at the end of two years she could endure this peaceful atmosphere no longer; she grew homesick after sin.

“As she was already a very fair musician, and her voice, trained by a great master, possessed amazing power, she urged her old teacher to procure her an engagement at one of the theatres. He refused in a manner which made it clear to her that he would never change his mind on that subject. He wanted to secure to his pupil one of those debuts which are an apotheosis;

and he had decided, as he told her, that she should not appear in public till she had reached the full perfection of her voice and her talent,—certainly not before her nineteenth or twentieth year.

“That meant she should wait three or four years longer,—a century!

“In former days Sarah would not have hesitated a moment; she would have run away.

“But education had changed her ideas. She was quite able now to reflect and to calculate. She asked herself where she could go, alone, without money, without friends, and what she should do, and what would become of her.

“She knew what destitution meant, and she was afraid of it now.

“When she thought of the life her mother had led,—a long series of nights spent in orgies, and of days without bread; that life of distress and disgrace, when she depended on the whims of a good-for-nothing, or the suspicions of a police constable,—Sarah felt the cold perspiration break out on her temples.

“She wanted her liberty; but she did not want it without money. Vice attracted her irresistibly; but it was gorgeous vice, seated in a carriage, and bespattering with mud the poor, honest women who had to walk on foot, while it was envied by the crowd, and worshipped by the foolish. She remained, therefore, and studied hard.

“Perhaps, in spite of everything, in spite of herself and her execrable instincts, Sarah might have become a great artist, if the old German had not been taken from her by a terrible accident.

“One fine afternoon in April, in the beginning of spring, he was smoking his pipe at the window, when he heard a noise in the street, and leaned over to see.

“The bar broke,—he tried in vain to hold on to the window-frame,—and the next moment he fell from the fifth story to the ground, and was killed instantly.

“I have held in my own hands the police report of the accident. It states that the fall was unavoidable; and that, if no such calamity had occurred before, this was due to the simple fact, that, during the bad weather, nobody had thought of looking out of the window. The castings of the little railing in front were found to be broken in two places, and so long ago, that a thick layer of rust had filled up the cracks. The wooden part had become perfectly loose, as the mortar that originally had kept it in place had been apparently eaten away by the winter frosts.”

Daniel and Henrietta had turned very pale. It was evident that the same terrible suspicion had flashed upon their mind.

“Ah! it was Sarah’s work,” they exclaimed simultaneously. “It was Sarah who had broken the bar, and loosened the wooden rods; she had, no doubt, been watching for months to see her benefactor fall and kill himself.”

Papa Ravinet shook his head.

“I do not say that,” he said; “and, at all events, it would be impossible to prove it at this time,—I mean, to prove it against her denial. It is certain that no one suspected Sarah. She seemed to be in despair; and everybody pitied her sincerely. Was she not ruined by this misfortune?”

“The old artist had left no will. His relatives, of whom several lived in Paris, rushed to his rooms; and their first act was to dismiss Sarah, after having searched her trunks, and after giving her to understand that she ought to be very grateful if she was allowed to take away all she said she owed to the munificence of her late patron.

“Still the inheritance was by no means what the heirs had expected. Knowing that the deceased had had ample means, and how simply he had always lived, they expected to find in his bureau considerable savings. There was nothing. A single bond for less than two thousand dollars, and a small sum in cash, were all that was found.

“Ah! I have long endeavored to find out what had become of the various bonds and the ready money of the old artist; for everybody who had known him agreed that there must be some. Do you know what I discovered by dint of indefatigable investigations? I procured leave to examine the books of

the savings-bank in which he invested his earnings for the year of his death; and I found there, that on the 17th of April, that is, five days before the poor German's fall, a certain Ernestine Bergot had deposited a sum of fifteen hundred francs."

"Ah, you see!" exclaimed Daniel. "Weary of the simple life with the old man, she murdered him in order to get hold of his money."

But the old gentleman continued, as if he had heard nothing,—

"What Sarah did during the three first months of her freedom, I cannot tell. If she went and rented furnished lodgings, she did it under a false name. A clerk in the mayor's office, who is a great lover of curiosities, and for whom I have procured many a good bargain, had all the lists of lodging-houses for the four months from April to July carefully examined; but no Ernestine Bergot could be found.

"I am quite sure, however, that she thought of the stage. One of the former secretaries of the Lyric Theatre told me he recollected distinctly a certain Ernestine, beautiful beyond description, who, came several times, and requested a trial. She was, however, refused, simply because her pretensions were almost ridiculous. And this was quite natural; for her head was still full of all the ambitious dreams of the old artist.

"The first positive trace I find of Sarah in that year appears towards the end of summer. She was then living in a fashionable street with a young painter full of talent, and very rich, called Planix. Did she really love him? The friends of the unfortunate young man were sure she did not. But he—he worshipped her; he loved her passionately, madly, and was so absurdly jealous, that he became desperate if she stayed out an hour longer than he expected. Hence she often complained of his love, which restrained her cherished liberty; and still she bore it patiently till fate threw in her way Maxime de Brevan."

At the name of the wretch who had been so bent upon ruining them both, and who had been so nearly successful, Henrietta and Daniel trembled, and looked at each other. But Papa Ravinet did not give them, time to ask any questions, and continued, as calmly as if he had been reading a report,—

“It was several years before this, that Justin Chevassat, released from the galleys, had made a nobleman of himself, and claimed before all the world to be Maxime de Brevan. We need not be surprised, in this age of ours, where impudence takes the place of everything else, that he should have promptly succeeded in making his way into high life, and in being admitted to many houses which were considered more or less exclusive. In a society which seems to have adopted for its motto the words ‘Toleration and Discretion,’ and where, consequently, anybody is admitted without question, Justin Chevassat very naturally had a great success. He had carefully prepared his way, like those adventurers who never appear abroad without having their passports in much better order than most honest travellers. He had learned prudence by experience; for his antecedents were stormy enough, though less so than Sarah’s.

“Justin’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Chevassat, now concierges of No. 23 Water Street, were, some thirty-eight or forty years ago, living in the upper part of the suburb of Saint Honore. They had a very modest little shop, partly restaurant, partly bar: their customers were generally the servants of the neighborhood. They were people of easy principles and loose morals,—as there are so many in our day,—honest enough as long as there is nothing to be gained by being otherwise. As their trade prospered, they were not dishonest; and, when any of their customers forgot their portemonnaies at the shop, they always returned them. The husband was twenty-four, and the wife nineteen years old, when, to their great joy, a son was born. There was rejoicing in the shop; and the child was christened Justin, in honor of his godfather, who was no less a personage than the valet of the Marquis de Brevan.

“But to have a son is a small matter. To bring him up till he is seven or eight years old, is nothing. The difficulty is to give him an education which shall secure him a position in the world. This thought now began to occupy the minds of his parents incessantly. These stupid people, who had a business which supported them handsomely, and enabled them, in the course of time, to amass a small fortune, did not see that the best thing they could have done would have been to enlarge it, and to leave it to their son. But no. They vowed they would sacrifice all their savings, and deprive themselves

even of the necessities of life, in order that their Justin might become a 'gentleman.'

"And what a gentleman! The mother dreamed of him as a rich broker, or, at the very least, a notary's first clerk. The father preferred seeing him a government official, holding one of those much-coveted places, which give the owner, after twenty-five years' service, a title, and an income of some six or seven hundred dollars.

"The result of all these speculations was, that, at the age of nine, Master Justin was sent to a high school. He conducted himself there just badly enough to be perpetually on the brink of being sent away, without ever being really expelled. This made but little impression upon the two Chevassats. They had become so accustomed to look upon their son as a superior being, that it never entered their mind to think he was not the first, the best, and the most remarkable pupil of the establishment. If Justin's reports were bad,—and they were always bad,—they accused the teachers of partiality. If he gained no prize at the end of the year,—and he never got any,—they did not know what to do for him to console him for having been victimized by such cruel injustice.

"The consequences of such a system need hardly be stated.

"When Justin was fourteen years old, he despised his parents thoroughly, treated them like servants, and was so much ashamed of them, that he would not allow his mother to come and see him in the parlor of the college to which he had been admitted of late. When he was at home during vacations, he would have cut his right arm off rather than help his father, or pour out a glass of wine for a customer. He even stayed away from the house on the plea that he could not endure the odors from the kitchen.

"Thus he reached his seventeenth year. His course was not completed; but, as he was tired of college-life, he declared he would not return there, and he never did return. When his father asked him timidly what he proposed doing, he shrugged his shoulders as his sole reply. What did he do? Nothing. He idled about Paris.

“To dress in the height of fashion; to walk up and down before the most renowned restaurants, with a toothpick in his mouth; to hire a carriage, and drive it himself, having a hired groom in livery by his side,—this was the delight of those days. At night he gambled; and, when he lost, there was the till in his father’s shop.

“His parents had rented for him, and comfortably furnished, a nice set of rooms in their house, and tried by all manner of servility to keep him at home, neglecting even their own business in order to be always ready for his orders. But this did not prevent him from being constantly away. He said he could not possibly receive his friends in a house where his name was to be seen on the signboard of such a low establishment.

“It was his despair to be the son of a restaurant-keeper, and to be called Chevassat.

“But greater grief was to come to him after two years’ idle and expensive life such as has been described.

“One fine morning when he needed a couple of hundred dollars, his parents told him, with tears in their eyes, that they had not twenty dollars in the house; that they were at the end of their resources; that the day before a note of theirs had been protested; and that they were at that moment on the brink of bankruptcy. They did not reproach Justin with having spent all their savings; oh, no! On the contrary, they humbly asked his pardon, if they were no longer able to provide for his wants. And, with fear and trembling, they at last ventured to suggest, that perhaps it would be well if he should seek some kind of work.

“He told them coolly that he would think it over, but that he must have his two hundred dollars. And he got them. His father and mother had still a watch and some jewelry; they pawned everything and brought him the proceeds.

“Still he saw that the till he had considered inexhaustible was really empty, and that henceforth his pockets also would be empty, unless he could devise some means to fill them. He went, therefore, in search of some employment; and his godfather, the valet, found one for him at the house of

a banker, who was in want of a reliable young man to be trained for his business, and hereafter to be intrusted with the management of his funds.”

Papa Ravinet’s voice changed so perceptibly as he uttered these last words, that Daniel and Henrietta, with one impulse, asked him,—

“Is anything the matter, sir?”

He did not make any reply; but his sister, Mrs. Bertolle, said,—

“No, there is nothing the matter with my brother;” and she looked at him with a nod of encouragement.

“I am all right,” he said, like an echo. Then, making a great effort, he continued,—

“Justin Chevassat was at twenty precisely what you know him to be as Maxime de Brevan,—a profound dissembler, a fierce egotist devoured by vanity, in fine, a man of ardent passions, and capable of anything to satisfy his desires.

“The hope of getting rich at once by some great stroke was already so deeply rooted in his mind, that it gave him the strength to change his habits and manner of life from one day to another, and to keep up the deceit with a perseverance unheard of at his age. This lazy, profligate gambler rose with the day, worked ten hours a day, and became the model of all clerks. He had resolved to win the favor of his patron, and to be trusted. He succeeded in doing it by the most consummate hypocrisy. So that, only two years after he had first been admitted into the house, he had already been promoted to a place which conferred upon him the keeping of all the valuables of the firm.

“This occurred before those accidents which have, since that time, procured for the keepers of other people’s money such a sad reputation. Nowadays it seems almost an ordinary event to hear of some cashier’s running away with the funds intrusted to his keeping; and no one is astonished. To create a sensation by such an occurrence, the sum must be almost fabulous, say, two or three millions. And, even in that case, the loser is by no means the man in whom the world is most interested.

“At the time of which I am now speaking, defalcations were quite rare as yet. Financial companies and brokers did not contemplate being robbed by their own clerks as one of the ordinary risks. When they knew the keys of their safe to be in the hands of an honest man, whose family and mode of life were well known, they slept soundly. Justin Chevassat’s patron was thus sleeping soundly for ten months, when one Sunday he was specially in need of certain bonds which Justin used to keep in one of the drawers of his desk. He did not like to have his clerk hunted up on such a day; so he simply sent for a locksmith to open the drawer.

“The first thing he saw was a draft signed by himself; and yet he had never put his name to such a paper. Still, most assuredly, it was his signature; he would have sworn to it in court. And yet he was as sure as he was standing there, that it was not he who had put his name, and the somewhat complicated ornament belonging to it, where he saw it written.

“His first amazement was succeeded by grievous apprehension. He had the other drawers opened likewise, searched them, and soon discovered all the details of a formidable and most ingenious plan, by which he was to be robbed at a single blow of more than a million.

“If he had slept soundly one month longer, he would have been ruined. His favorite clerk was a wretch, a forger of matchless skill. He instantly sent for a detective; and the next morning, when Justin Chevassat came as usual, he was arrested. It was then thought that his crime was confined to this abortive attempt. Not so. A minute and careful examination of all the papers soon revealed other misdeeds. Evidence was found, that, on the very next day after the day on which he had been appointed confidential clerk, he had stolen a thousand dollars, concealing his theft by a false entry. Since that time not a week had passed without his laying hands on a more or less considerable sum; and all these thefts had been most ingeniously covered by such skilful imitations of other people’s signatures, that he had once been sick for a fortnight, and yet his substitute had never become aware of anything. In fine, it appeared that the sum total of his defalcations amounted to some eighty thousand dollars.

“What had he done with all that money? The magistrate before whom he was brought at once asked that question. He replied that he had not a cent left. His explanations and his excuses were the old story pleaded by all who put their hands into their neighbors’ pockets.

“To hear him, no one could be more innocent than he was, however guilty he might appear at first sight. He was like one of those men who allow their little finger to be caught in a machine. His only fault was the desire to speculate on ‘Change. Did not his employer speculate himself? Having lost some money, and fearing to lose his place if he did not pay, the fatal thought had occurred to him to borrow from the strong box. From that moment he had only cherished one thought,—to restore what he had taken. If he speculated anew, it was from extreme honesty, and because he constantly hoped to gain enough to make restitution. But most extraordinary ill luck had pursued him; so that, seeing the deficit growing larger and larger, and overcome with remorse and terror, he had almost gone mad, and ceased to put any restraint upon himself.

“He laid great stress upon the fact that his whole eighty thousand dollars had been lost on ‘Change, and that he would have looked upon himself as the meanest of rascals, if he had spent any part of it on his personal enjoyments. Unfortunately the forged checks and drafts in his drawer destroyed the force of this plea. Convinced that the sums he had thus obtained were not lost, the investigating magistrate suspected the parents of the accused. He questioned them, and obtained sufficient evidence against them to justify their arrest. But they could not be convicted at the trial, and had to be released. Justin Chevassat, however, appeared at the assizes.

“Matters looked very serious for him; but he had the good luck of falling in with a young lawyer who initiated in his case a system of pleading which has since become very popular. He made no effort to exculpate his client: he boldly accused the banker. ‘Was it the act of a sensible man,’ he said, ‘to trust so young a man with such important sums? Was it not tempting him beyond his powers of resistance, and almost provoking him to become dishonest? What, this banker never examined his books for so many months? What kind of a business was it, where a cashier could so easily take

eighty thousand dollars, and remain undiscovered? And then, what immorality in a banker to speculate on 'Change, and thus to set so bad an example to his young, inexperienced clerks!'

"Justin Chevassat escaped with twenty years' penal servitude.

"What he was at the galleys, you may imagine from what you know of him. He played the 'repentant criminal,' overflowing with professions of sorrow for the past, and amendment in future, and cringing and crouching at the feet of the officials of the prison. He carried on this comedy so successfully, that, after three years and a half, he was pardoned. But he had not lost his time in prison. The contact with the vilest of criminals had sharpened his wits, and completed his education in rascality. He came out of prison an accomplished felon. And even while he still dragged the chain and ball along with him, he was already planning and maturing new plots for the future, which he afterwards executed with success. He conceived the idea of bursting forth in a new shape, under which no one would ever suspect his former identity.

"How he went about to do this, I am enabled to tell you accurately. Through his godfather, the valet, who had died before his trial, Justin Chevassat knew the history of the Brevan family in its minutest details. It was a very sad story. The old marquis had died insolvent, after having lost his five sons, who had gone abroad to make their fortunes. The noble family had thus become extinct; but Justin proposed to continue its lineage. He knew that the Brevans were originally from Maine; that they had formerly owned immense estates in the neighborhood of Mans; and that they had not been there for more than twenty years. Would they still be remembered in a land where they had once been all powerful? Most assuredly they would. Would people take the trouble to inquire minutely what had become of the marquis and his five sons? As assuredly not.

"Chevassat's plot was based upon these calculations.

"As soon as he was free once more, he devoted all his energies to the destruction of every trace of his identity; and, when he thought he had accomplished this, he went to Mans, assuming the name of one of the sons of the marquis, who had been nearly of his own age. No one doubted for a

moment that he was Maxime de Brevan. Who could have doubted it, when he purchased the old family mansion for a considerable sum, although it only consisted of a ruinous castle, and a small farm adjoining the house? He paid cash, moreover, proving thus the correctness of the magistrate's suspicions as to his story about losses on 'Change, and as to the complicity of his parents. He even took the precaution of living on his little estate for four years, practising the life of a country-gentleman, received with open arms by the nobility of the neighborhood, forming friendships, gaining supporters, and becoming more and more identified with Maxime de Brevan.

"What was his aim at that time? I always thought he was looking out for a wealthy wife, so as to consolidate his position; and he came near realizing his hopes.

"He was on the point of marrying a young lady from Mans, who would have brought him half a million in money, and the banns had already been published, when, all of a sudden, the marriage was broken off, no one knew why.

"This only is certain: he was so bitterly disappointed by his failure, that he sold his property, and left the country. For the next three years, he lived in Paris, more completely Maxime de Brevan than ever; and then he met Sarah Brandon."

Papa Ravinet had been speaking now for nearly three hours, and he was beginning to feel exhausted. He showed his weariness in his face; and his voice very nearly gave out. Still it was in vain for Daniel, Henrietta, and Mrs. Bertolle herself to unite in begging him to go and lie down for a few moments.

"No," he replied, "I will go to the end. You do not know how important it is that M. Champcey should be in a position to act to-morrow, or rather to-day.

"It was at a fancy ball," he went on, "given by M. Planix, that Sarah Brandon, at that time still known as Ernestine Bergot, and Justin Chevassat, now Maxime de Brevan, met for the first time. He was completely overpowered by her marvellous beauty, and she—she was strangely

impressed by the peculiar expression in Maxime's face. Perhaps they divined each other's character, perhaps they had an intuitive perception of who they were. At all events, they soon became acquainted, drawn as they were to each other by an instinctive and irresistible attraction. They danced several times together; they sat side by side; they talked long and intimately; and, when the ball came to an end, they were friends already.

"They met frequently; and, if it were not profanation, I would say they loved each other. They seemed to be made on purpose to understand, and, so to say, compliment, each other, equally corrupt as they were, devoured by the same sinful desires, and alike free from all the old-fashioned prejudices, as they called it, about justice, morals, and honor. They could hardly help coming soon to some understanding by which they agreed to associate their ambitions and their plans for the future.

"For in those early days, when their feelings were still undented, they had no secrets for each other. Love had torn the mask from their faces; and each one vied with the other in letting the foulness of their past days be seen clearly. This, no doubt, secured, first the constancy of their passion, and the continuation of their intimacy long after they had ceased loving each other.

"For now they hate each other; but they are also afraid of each other. Ten times they have tried to break off their intimacy; and as often they have been compelled to renew it, bound as they feel they are to each other by a chain far more oppressive and solid than the one Justin Chevassat wore at the galleys.

"At first, however, they had to conceal their intimacy; for they had no money. By joining what she had stolen from her benefactor, to what she had obtained from M. Planix, Sarah could not make up more than some forty thousand francs. 'That was not enough,' she said, 'to "set up" the most modest establishment.' As to M. de Brevan, however economical he had been, he had come to an end of the sums stolen from his employer. For eight or ten months now, he had been reduced to all kinds of dangerous expedients in order to live. He rode in his carriage; but he had been more than once very happy when he could extort a twenty-franc-piece from his parents. He visited them, of course only in secret; for they had in the

meantime exchanged their shop, for the modest little box assigned to the concierge of No. 23 Water Street.

“Far, therefore, from being able to be useful to Sarah, he was perfectly delighted when she brought him one fine day ten thousand francs to alleviate his distress.

“‘Ah!’ she said to him on this occasion, and often thereafter, ‘why can’t we have that fool’s money?’ meaning her friend and lover, M. Planix.

“The next step was naturally an attempt at obtaining this much coveted treasure. To begin, Sarah induced him to make a last will, in which he made her his residuary legatee. One would be at a loss to guess how she could obtain this from a young, healthy man, full of life and happiness, if it were not that love will explain everything. When this success had been achieved, M. de Brevan undertook to introduce in the society frequented by Sarah and M. Planix one of his friends, who was considered, and who really was, the best swordsman in Paris, a good fellow otherwise, honor itself, and rather patient in temper than given to quarrelling.

“Without compromising herself, and with that abominable skill which is peculiarly her own, Sarah, coquetted just enough with this young man, M. de Font-Avar, to tempt him to pay her some attentions. But that very night she complained to M. Planix of his persecution, and knew so skilfully how to excite his jealousy, and to wound his vanity, that, three days later, he allowed himself to be carried away by passion, and struck M. de Font-Avar in the presence of a dozen friends.

“A duel became inevitable; and M. de Brevan, pretending to try and reconcile the two young men, secretly fanned the flame. The duel came off one Saturday morning, in the woods near Vincennes. They fought with small-swords; and, after little more than a minute, M. Planix received a stab in his breast, fell, and was dead in an instant. He was not yet twenty-seven years old.

“Sarah’s joy was almost delirious. Accomplished actress as she was, she could hardly manage to shed a few tears for the benefit of the public, when

the body, still warm, was brought to the house. And still she had once loved the man, whom she had now assassinated.

“Even as she knelt by the bedside, hiding her face in her handkerchief, she was thinking only of the testament, lying safe and snug, as she knew, in one of the drawers of that bureau, enclosed in a large official envelope with a huge red wax seal.

“It was opened and read the same day by the justice of the peace, who had been sent for to put the seals on the deceased man’s property. And then Sarah began to cry in good earnest. Her tears were tears of rage. For seized by a kind of remorse, and at a moment when Sarah’s absence had rendered him very angry, M. Planix had added two lines as a codicil.

“He still said, ‘I appoint Miss Ernestine Bergot my residuary legatee’; but he had written underneath, ‘on condition that she shall pay to each of my sisters the sum of a hundred and fifty thousand francs.’ This was more than three-fourths of his whole fortune.

“When she arrived, therefore, that night, at Brevan’s rooms, her first words were,—

“‘We have been robbed! Planix was a wretch! We won’t have a hundred thousand francs left.’

“Maxime, however, recovered his equanimity pretty soon; for the sum appeared to him quite large enough to pay for a crime in which they had run no risk, and he was quite as willing as before to marry Sarah; but she refused to listen to him, saying that a hundred thousand francs were barely enough for a year’s income, and that they must wait. It was then that M. de Brevan became a gambler. The wretch actually believed in the cards; he believed that fortunes could be made by playing. He had systems of his own which could not fail, and which he was bent upon trying.

“He proposed to Sarah to risk the hundred thousand francs, promising to make a million out of them; and she yielded, tempted by the very boldness of his proposition.

“They resolved they would not stop playing till they had won a million, or lost everything. And so they went to Homburg. There they led a mad life for a whole month, spending ten hours every day at the gaming-table, feverish, breathless, fighting the bank with marvellous skill and almost incredible coolness. I have met an old croupier who recollects them even now. Twice they were on the point of staking their last thousand-franc-note; and one lucky day they won as much as four hundred thousand francs. That day, Maxime proposed they should leave Homburg. Sarah, who kept the money, refused, repeating her favorite motto, ‘All, or nothing.’

“It was nothing. Victory remained, as usual, with, the ‘big battalions;’ and one evening the two partners returned to their lodgings, ruined, penniless, having not even a watch left, and owing the hotel-keeper a considerable sum of money.

“That evening Maxime spoke of blowing his brains out. Never, on the contrary, had Sarah been merrier.

“The next morning she dressed very early and went out, saying she had a plan in her head, and would soon be back.

“But she did not come back; and all that day M. de Brevan, devoured by anxiety, waited in vain for her return. At five o’clock, however, a messenger brought him a letter. He opened it; there were three thousand francs in it, and these words:—

“‘When you receive these lines, I shall be far from Homburg. Do not wait for me. Enclosed is enough to enable you to return to Paris. You shall see me again when our fortune is made.

“‘Sarah.’”

“Maxime was at first overcome with amazement. To be abandoned in this way! To be thus unceremoniously dismissed, and by Sarah! He could not recover from it. But anger soon roused him to fury; and at the same time he was filled with an intense desire to avenge himself. But, in order to avenge himself, he must first know how to find his faithless ally. What had become of her? Where had she gone?

“By dint of meditating, and recollecting all he could gather in his memory, M. de Brevan remembered having seen Sarah two or three times, since fortune had forsaken them, in close conversation with a tall, thin gentleman of about forty years, who was in the habit of wandering through the rooms, and attracted much attention by his huge whiskers, his stiff carriage, and his wearied expression. No doubt Sarah, being ruined, had fallen an easy prey to this gentleman, who looked as if he might be a millionaire.

“Where did he stay? At the Hotel of the Three Kings. Maxime went there at once. Unfortunately, he was too late. The gentleman had left that morning for Frankfort, by the 10.45 train, with an elderly lady, and a remarkably pretty girl.

“Sure of his game now, M. de Brevan left immediately for Frankfort, convinced that Sarah’s brilliant beauty would guide him like a star. But he hunted in vain all over town, inquiring at the hotels, and bothering everybody with his questions. He found no trace of the fugitives.

“When he returned to his lodgings that night, he wept.

“Never in his life had he fancied himself half so unhappy. In losing Sarah, he thought he had lost everything. During the five months of their intimacy, she had gained such complete ascendancy over him, that now, when he was left to his own strength, he felt like a lost child, having no thought and no resolution.

“What was to become of him, now that this woman was no longer there to sustain and inspire him,—that woman with the marvellous talent for intrigue, the matchless courage that shrank from nothing, and the energy which sufficed for everything? Sarah had, besides, filled his imagination with such magnificent hopes, and opened before his covetous eyes such a vast horizon of enjoyment, that he had come to look upon things as pitiful, which would formerly have satisfied his highest wishes. Should he, after having dreamed of those glorious achievements by which millions are won in a day, sink back again into the meanness of petty thefts? His heart turned from that prospect with unspeakable loathing; and yet what was he to do?

“He knew, that, if he returned to Paris, matters would not be very pleasant for him there. His creditors, made restless by his prolonged absence, would fall upon him instantly. How could he induce them to wait? Where could he get the money to pay them, at least, a percentage of his dues? How would he support himself? Were all of his dark works to be useless? Was he to be shipwrecked before ever seeing even the distant port?

“Nevertheless, he returned to Paris, faced the storm, passed through the crisis, and resumed his miserable life, associating with another adventurer like himself, and succeeding thus, by immensely hard work, in maintaining his existence and his assumed name. Ah! if our honest friends could but know what misery, what humiliations and anxieties are hid beneath that false splendor of high life, which they often envy, they would think themselves fully avenged.

“It is certain that Maxime de Breva found times hard in those days, and actually more than once regretted that he had not remained a stupid, honest man. He thought that was so simple, and so clever.

“Thus it came about, that, two years later, he had not yet been reconciled to Sarah’s absence. Often and often, in his hours of distress, he recalled her parting promise, ‘You shall see me again when our fortune is made.’ He knew she was quite capable of amassing millions; but, when she had them, would she still think of him? Where was she? What could have become of her?

“Sarah was at that time in America.

“That tall, light-haired gentleman, that eminently respectable lady, who had carried her off, were M. Thomas Elgin and Mrs. Brian. Who were these people? I have had no time to trace out their antecedents. All I know is, that they belonged to that class of adventurers whom one sees at all the watering-places and gambling-resorts,—at Nice, at Monaco, and during the winter in Italy; swindlers of the highest class, who unite consummate skill with excessive caution; who are occasionally suspected, but never found out; and who are frequently indebted to their art of making themselves agreeable, and even useful to others, to the carelessness of travellers, and

their thorough knowledge of life, for the acquaintance, or even friendship, of people whom one is astonished to find in such company.

“Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian were both English, and, so far, they had managed to live very pleasantly. But old age was approaching; and they began to be fearful about the future, when they fell in with Sarah. They divined her, as she had divined Maxime; and they saw in her an admirable means to secure a fortune. They did not hesitate, therefore, to offer her a compact by which she was to be a full partner, although they themselves had to risk all they possessed,—a capital of some twenty thousand dollars. You have seen what these respectable people proposed to make of her,—a snare and a pitfall. They knew very well that her matchless beauty would catch fools innumerable, and bring in a rich harvest of thousand-franc-notes.

“The idea was by no means new, M. Champcey, as you seem to think; nor is the case a rare one.

“In almost all the capitals of Europe, you will find even now some of these almost sublimely beautiful creatures, who are exhibited in the great world by cosmopolitan adventurers. They have six or seven years,—eighteen to twenty-five,—during which, their beauty and their tact may secure an immense fortune to themselves and their comrades; and according to chance, to their skill, or the whims or the folly of men, they end by marrying some great personage in high life, or by keeping a wretched gambling hell in the suburbs. They may fall upon the velvet cushions of a princely carriage, or sink, step by step, to the lowest depths of society.

“M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian had agreed that they would exhibit Sarah in Paris; that she was to marry a duke with any number of millions; and that they should be paid for their trouble by receiving an annual allowance of some ten thousand dollars. But, in order to undertake the adventure with a good chance of success, it was indispensable that Sarah should lose her nationality as a Parisian; that she should rise anew, as an unknown star; and, above all, that she should be trained and schooled for the profession she was to practise.

“Hence the trip to America, and her long residence there.

“Chance had helped the wretches. They had hardly landed, when they found that they could easily introduce the girl as the daughter of Gen. Brandon, just as Justin Chevassat had managed to become Maxime de Brevan. In this way, Ernestine Bergot appeared at once in the best society of Philadelphia as Sarah Brandon. Not less prudent than Maxime, M. Elgin also purchased, in spite of his limited means, for a thousand dollars, vast tracts of land in the western part of the State, where there was no trace of oil-wells, but where there might very well be a good many, and had them entered upon the name of his ward.

“Of all these measures, I have the evidence in hand, and can produce it at any moment.”

For some time already, Daniel and Henrietta had looked at each other with utter amazement. They were almost dumfounded by the prodigious sagacity, the cunning, patience, and labor which the old dealer must have employed to collect this vast mass of information. But he continued, after a short pause,—

“Sir Thorn and Mrs. Brian found out in a few days how well they had been served by their instincts in taking hold of Sarah. In less than six months, this wonderful girl, whose education they had undertaken, spoke English as well as they did, and had become their master, controlling them by the very superiority of her wickedness. From the day on which Mrs. Brian explained to her the part she was expected to play, she had assumed it so naturally and so perfectly, that all traces of art disappeared at once. She had instinctively appreciated the immense advantage she would derive from personifying a young American girl, and the irresistible effect she might easily produce by her freedom of movement and her bold ingenuousness. Finally, at the end of eighteen months’ residence in America, M. Elgin declared that the moment had come when Sarah might appear on the stage.

“It was, therefore, twenty-eight months after their parting in Homburg, that M. de Brevan received, one morning, the following note:—

“‘Come to-night, at nine o’clock, to M. Thomas Elgin’s house in Circus Street, and be prepared for a surprise.’

“He went there. A tall man opened the door of the sitting-room; and, at the sight of a young lady who sat before the fire, he could not help exclaiming, ‘Ernestine, is that you?’

“But she interrupted him at once, saying, ‘You are mistaken: Ernestine Bergot is dead, and buried by the side of Justin Chevassat, my dear M. de Brevan. Come, lay aside that amazed air, and kiss Miss Sarah Brandon’s hand.’

“It was heaven opening for Maxime. She had at last come back to him,—this woman, who had come across his life like a tempest, and whose memory he had retained in his heart, as a dagger remains in the wound it has made. She had come back, more beautiful than ever, irresistible in her matchless charms; and he fancied it was love which had brought her back.

“His vanity led him astray. Sarah Brandon had long since ceased to admire him. Familiar as she was with the life of adventurers in high life, she had soon learned to appreciate M. de Brevan at his just value. She saw him now as he really was,—timid, overcautious, petty, incapable of conceiving bold combinations, scarcely good enough for the smallest of plots, ridiculous, in fine, as all needy scamps are.

“Nevertheless, Sarah wanted him, although she despised him. On the point of entering upon a most dangerous game, she felt the necessity of having one accomplice, at least, in whom she could trust blindly. She had, to be sure, Mrs. Brian and Sir Thorn, as he began to be called now; but she mistrusted them. They held her, and she had no hold on them. On the other hand, Maxime de Brevan was entirely hers, dependent on her pleasure, as the lump of clay in the hands of the sculptor.

“It is true that Maxime appeared almost distressed when he heard that that immense fortune which he coveted with all his might was still to be made, and that Sarah was no farther advanced now than she was on the day of their separation. She might even have said that she was less so; for the two years and more which had just elapsed had made a large inroad upon the savings of M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian. When they had paid for their establishment in Circus Street, when they had advanced the hire of a coupe,

a landau, and two saddle-horses, they had hardly four thousand dollars left in all.

“They knew, therefore, that they must succeed or sink in the coming year. And, thus driven to bay, they were doubly to be feared. They were determined to fall furiously upon the first victim that should pass within reach, when chance brought to them the unlucky cashier of the Mutual Discount Society, Malgat.”

CHAPTER 31

For a few moments the fatigue of the old dealer seemed to have disappeared. He was sitting up straight, with tremulous lips, with flashing eyes, and continued in a strangely strident voice,—

“Fools alone attach no weight to trifling occurrences. And still it is those that appear most insignificant which we ought to fear most, because they alone determine our fate, precisely as an atom of sand dismembers the most powerful engine.

“It was on a fine afternoon in the month of October when Sarah Brandon appeared for the first time before the eyes of Malgat. He was at that time a man of forty, sprung from an old and respectable though modest family, content with his lot in life, and rather simple, as most men are who have always lived far from the intrigues of society. He had one passion, however,—he filled the five rooms of his lodgings with curiosities of every kind, happy for a week to come, if he had discovered a piece of old china, or a curious piece of furniture, which he could purchase cheap. He was not rich, his whole patrimony having been long since spent on his collections; but he had a place that brought him some three thousand dollars; and he was sure of an ample pension in his old age.

“He was honest in the highest sense of the word; his honesty being instinctive, so to say, never reasoning, never hesitating. For fifteen years now, he had been cashier; and hundreds of millions had passed through his hands without arousing in him a shadow of covetousness. He handled the gold in the bags, and the notes in the portfolios, with as much indifference as if they had been pebbles and dry leaves. His employers, besides, felt for him more than ordinary esteem: it was true and devoted friendship. Their confidence in him was so great, that they would have laughed in the face of any one who should have come and told them, ‘Malgat is a thief!’

“Such he was, when, that morning, he was standing near his safe, and saw a gentleman come to his window who had just cashed a check drawn by the

Central Bank of Philadelphia upon the Mutual Discount Bank. This gentleman, who was M. Elgin, spoke such imperfect French, that Malgat asked him, for convenience sake, to step inside the railing. He came in, and behind him Sarah Brandon.

“How can I describe to you the sensations of the poor cashier as he beheld this amazing beauty! He could hardly stammer out a few incoherent words; and the gentleman and the young lady had long since left, when he was still lost in a kind of idiotic delight. He had been overtaken by one of those overwhelming passions which sometimes felled to the ground the strongest and simplest of men at the age of forty.

“Alas! Sarah had but too keenly noticed the impression she had produced. To be sure, Malgat was very far from that ideal of a millionaire husband of whom these adventurers dreamed; but, after all, he held the keys of a safe in which lay millions. One might always get something out of him wherewith to wait for better things to come. Their plan was soon formed.

“The very next day M. Elgin presented himself alone at the office to ask for some information. He returned three days after with another draft. By the end of the week, he had furnished Malgat with an opportunity to render him some trifling service. Thus relations began to exist between them; and, at the end of a fortnight, Sir Thorn could, with all propriety, ask the cashier to dine with him in Circus Street. A voice from within—one of those presentiments to which we ought always to listen—warned Malgat not to accept the invitation; but he was already no longer his own master.

“He went to dinner in Circus Street, and he left it madly in love.

“He had felt as if Sarah Brandon’s eyes had been all the time upon him,—those strange, sublimely beautiful eyes, which upset our very being within us, weakening the most powerful energy, troubling the senses, and leading reason astray—eyes which dazzle, enchant, and bewitch.

“The commonest politeness required that Malgat should call upon Mrs. Brian and M. Elgin. This call was followed by many others. A man less blinded by passion might have become suspicious at the eagerness with which these wretches, driven by necessity, carried on their intrigue. Six

weeks after their first meeting, Malgat fancied that Sarah was wildly in love with him. It was absurd, most assuredly; it was foolish, insane. Nevertheless, he believed it. He thought those rapturous glances were genuine; he believed in the truthfulness of that intoxicating sweetness of her voice, and those enchanting blushes, which his coming never failed to call forth.

“Now began the second act of the hideous comedy. Mrs. Brian appeared one day, all of a sudden, to notice something, and promptly requested Malgat never to put foot again within that house. She accused him of an attempt to seduce Sarah Brandon. I dare say, you can imagine, the fool! how he protested, affirming the purity of his intentions, and swearing that he would be the happiest of mortals if they would condescend to grant him the hand of her niece. But Sir Thorn, in the haughtiest tone possible, asked him how he could dare think of such a thing, and presume that he could ever be a fit match for a young lady who had a dower of two hundred thousand dollars.

“Malgat left with tottering steps, despair in his heart, and resolved to kill himself. When he returned home, he actually went to look among his curiosities for an old flint-lock pistol, and began to load it.

“Ah! why did he not kill himself then? He would have carried his deceptive illusions and his unstained honor with him to the grave.

“He was just about to make his will when they brought him a letter from Sarah. She wrote thus:—

“‘When a girl like myself loves, she loves for life, and she is his whom she loves, or she is nobody’s. If your love is true, if dangers and difficulties terrify you no more than they terrify me, knock to-morrow night, at ten o’clock, at the gate of the court. I will open.’

“Mad with joy and hope, Malgat went to the fatal meeting. Do you know what happened? Sarah fell around his neck, and said,—

“‘I love you. Let us run away.’

“Ah! if he had taken her at her word, and answered her, offering her his arm,—

“‘Yes, let us flee,’ the plot might have been defeated, and he might have been saved; for she would certainly not have gone with him.

“But with that clear perception which was a perfect marvel in her, and looked like the gift of second sight, she had taken the measure of the cashier, and exposed herself to the danger, well-knowing that he would shrink from doing what she asked.

“He did shrink, the idiot! he was afraid. He said to himself that it would be a mean thing to abuse the attachment of this pure and trustful girl, to separate her from her family, and to ruin her forever.

“He did have this wonderful power of self-denial to dissuade her from taking such a step, and to induce her to be patient, giving time an opportunity of coming to their assistance, while he would do all he could to overcome the obstacles in the way.

“For hours after he had left Sarah Brandon, Malgat had not recovered from the excitement; and he would have thought the whole a dream, but for the penetrating perfume which his clothes still retained where she had rested her beautiful head. But, when he at last began to examine his position, he came to the conclusion that he had indulged in childish illusions, and that he could never hope to satisfy the demands made by M. Elgin and Mrs. Brian. There was but one way, a single way, by which he could ever hope to obtain possession of this woman whom he worshipped; and that was the one she had herself proposed,—an abduction. To determine upon such a step, however, was for Malgat to end his peaceful life forever, to lose his place, to abandon the past, and to venture upon an unknown future. But how could he reason at a moment when his whole mind was filled with thoughts of the most amazing happiness that ever was enjoyed by mortal being?

“Whenever he thought of flight, there arose before him one obstacle which he could not overcome. He had no money. How could he expose this rich heiress, who left all for his sake, this beautiful girl, who was accustomed to every imaginable luxury, to want and humiliation? No; that he could never dare. And yet his whole available capital did not amount to three thousand dollars. His fortune was invested in those curiosities that were piled up all over his rooms,—beautiful objects to his eyes in former days, but now

hateful, and annoying to behold. He knew they represented a large sum, quite a respectable fortune; but such collections cannot be sold overnight; and time was pressing.

“He had seen Sarah several times secretly; and each time she had appeared to him more mournful and dejected. She could bring him nothing but most distressing news. Mrs. Brian spoke of giving her in marriage to a friend of hers. M. Elgin proposed to take her abroad. And, with such troubles filling his head, the poor cashier had to attend to his daily duties, and from morning till night receive tens and hundreds of thousands; and never yet, I swear it, the thought occurred to him of taking a small fraction of these treasures.

“He had determined to sell all his collections as a whole, at any price he could get, when one day, a few moments before the office closed, a lady appeared, whose ample dress concealed her figure, while a thick veil completely shrouded her features.

“This lady raised her veil. It was she. It was Sarah Brandon.

“Malgat begged her to enter. He was overcome. What new misfortune had happened to induce her to take such a step? She told him in a few words.

“Sir Thorn had found out their secret meetings: he had told her to be ready to start for Philadelphia the next morning.

“The crisis had come. They must choose now between two things,—either to flee that very day, or be separated forever.

“Ah! never had Sarah been so beautiful as at this moment, when she seemed to be maddened by grief; never had her whole personal beauty exhaled such powerful, such irresistible charms. Her breath went and came, causing her almost to sob at every respiration; and big tears, like scattered beads from a chaplet of pearls, rolled down her pale cheeks.

“Malgat stood a moment before her, stunned by the blow; and the imminence of the danger extorted from him a confession of the reasons that had made him hesitate so long. He told her, cruelly humiliated by the avowal, that he had no money.

“But she rose when she heard it, as if she had been stung by an insult, and repeated with crushing irony,—

““No money? No money?”

“And when Malgat, more heartily ashamed of his poverty than he could have been of a crime, blushed to the roots of his hair, she pointed at the immense safe, which overflowed with gold and bank-notes, and said,—

““And what is all that?”

“Malgat jumped up, and stood before the safe, his arms far outstretched, as if to defend it, and said in an accent of ineffable terror,—

““What are you thinking of? And my honor?”

“This was to be his last effort to preserve his honor. Sarah looked him straight in the face, and said slowly,—

““And my honor! My honor is nothing to you? Do I not give myself? Do you mean to drive a bargain?”

“Great God! She said this with an accent and with a look which would have tempted an angel. Malgat fell helpless into a chair.

“Then she came close up to him, and, casting upon him those burning glances which blazed with superhuman audacity, she sighed,—

““If you loved me really! Ah, if you really loved me!”

“And she bent over him, tremulous with passion, watching his features so closely, that their lips nearly touched.

““If you loved me as I love you,’ she whispered again.

“It was all over; Malgat was lost. He drew Sarah towards him, and said, kissing her,—

““Very well then. Yes!”

“She immediately disengaged herself, and with eager hands seized one parcel of bank-notes after another, pushing them into a little morocco bag which she held in her hand. And, when the bag was full, she said,—

“Now we are safe. To-night at ten o’clock, at the gate of the court-yard, with a carriage. To-morrow, at daybreak, we shall be out of France, and free. Now we are bound to each other forever,—and I love you!”

“And she went away. And he let her go away.”

The old gentleman had become ghastly white, his few hairs seemed to stand on end, and large drops of perspiration inundated his face as he swallowed at a gulp a cup of tea, and then went on, laughing bitterly,—

“You suppose, no doubt, that, when Sarah had left him, Malgat came to himself? By no means. It seemed as if, with that kiss, with which she had paid him for his crime, the infamous creature had inspired him with the same genius for evil that was in her.

“Far from repenting, he rejoiced at what had been done; and when he learned, that, on the following day, the board of directors were to meet to examine the books, he laughed at the faces they would make; for I told you he was mad. With all the coolness of a hardened thief, he calculated the total amount of what had been abstracted: it was four hundred thousand francs. Immediately, in order to conceal the true state of things, he took his books, and, with almost diabolic skill, altered the figures, and changed the entries, so as to make it appear that the defalcation was of long date, and that various sums had been abstracted for several months. When he had finished his fearful task, he wrote to the board a hypocritical letter, in which he stated that he had robbed the safe in order to pay his differences on ‘Change, and that now, when he could no longer conceal his crime, he was going to commit suicide. When this was done, he left his office, as if nothing had happened.

“The proof that he acted under the incomprehensible influence of a kind of hallucination is this, that he felt neither remorse nor fear. As he was resolved not to return to his house, nor to encumber himself with luggage, he dined at a restaurant, spent a few minutes at a theatre, and then posted his letter to the board of directors, so that it might reach them early in the morning.

“At ten o’clock he knocked at the gate of the house in Circus Street. A servant came and opened, saying in a mysterious manner,—

“‘Please go up. The young lady is waiting.’

“A terrible presentiment seized him at that moment, and chilled him to the marrow in his bones. In the parlor Sarah was sitting on a sofa, and Maxime de Brevan by her side. They were laughing so loud, that he heard them in the anteroom. When Malgat entered, she raised her head with a dissatisfied air, and said rudely,—

“‘Ah! It is you. What do you want now?’

“Surely, such a reception ought to have disabused the unfortunate man. But no! When he began to stammer some explanations, she interrupted him, saying,—

“‘Let us speak frankly. You come to run away with me, don’t you? Well, that is simply nonsense. Look at yourself, my good friend, and tell me if a girl such as I am can be in love with a man like you. As to that small loan, it does not pay me, I assure you, by half, for the sublime little comedy which I have had to play. Believe me, at all events, when I tell you that I have taken all my precautions so as not to be troubled by anything you may say or do. And now, sir, I wish you good-evening; or must I go?’

“Ah! she might have spoken a long time yet, and Malgat would not have thought of interrupting her. The fearful truth broke all of a sudden upon him; and he felt as if the whole world were going to pieces. He understood the enormity of the crime; he discerned the fatal consequences, and knew he was ruined. A thousand voices arose from his conscience, telling him, ‘You are a thief! You are a forger! You are dishonored!’

“But, when he saw Sarah Brandon get up to leave the room, he was seized with an attack of furious rage, and threw himself upon her, crying,—

“‘Yes, I am lost; but you shall die, Sarah Brandon!’

“Poor fool! who did not know that these wretches had, of course, foreseen his wrath, and prepared for the emergency. Supple, like one of those lost children of the gutter among whom she had lived once upon a time, Sarah

Brandon escaped from Malgat's grasp, and by a clever trick threw him upon an arm-chair. Before he could rise again, he was held fast by Maxime de Brevan, and by M. Elgin, who had heard the noise, and rushed in from the adjoining room.

"The poor man did not attempt to resist. Why should he? Within him, moreover, a faint hope began to rise. It seemed to him impossible that such a monstrous wrong could be carried out, and that he would have only to proclaim the wickedness of these wretches to have them in his power.

"Let me go!" he said. "I must go!"

"But they did not allow him to go as yet. They guessed what was going on in his mind. Sir Thorn asked him coolly,—

"Where do you think of going? Do you mean to denounce us? Have a care! You would only sacrifice yourself, without doing us any harm. If you think you can use Sarah's letter, in which she appoints a meeting, as a weapon against us, you are mistaken. She did not write that letter; and, moreover, she can prove an alibi. You see we have prepared everything for this business during the last three months; and nothing has been left to chance. Do not forget that I have commissioned you twenty times to buy or sell for me on 'Change, and that it was always done in your name, at my request. How can you say you did not speculate on 'Change?"

"The poor cashier's heart sank within him. Had he not himself, for fear lest a suspicion should fall upon Sarah Brandon, told the board of directors in his letter that he had been tempted by unlucky speculations? Had he not altered the entries in the books in order to prove this assertion? Would they believe him if he were to tell the truth? Whom could he ever hope to persuade that what was probable was false, and that the improbable was true? Sir Thorn continued with his horrid sneers,—

"Have you forgotten the letters which you wrote me for the purpose of borrowing money from me, and in which you confess your defalcations? Here they are. You can read them.'

"These letters, M. Champcey, are those which Sarah showed you; and Malgat was frightened out of his senses. He had never written such letters;

and yet there was his handwriting, imitated with such amazing perfection, that he began to doubt his own senses and his own reason. He only saw clearly that no one would look upon them as forgeries.

“Ah! Maxime de Brevan is an artist. His letter to the navy department has, no doubt, proved it to you.

“Seeing Malgat thus stupefied, Sarah took the word, and said,—

“Look here, my dear; I’ll give you some advice. Here are ten thousand francs: take them, and run for your life. It is time yet to take the train for Brussels.’

“But he rose, and said,—

“No! There is nothing left for me but to die. May my blood come upon you!”

“And he rushed out, pursued by the insulting laugh of the wretches.”

Amazed at the inconceivable boldness of this atrocious plot, Daniel and Henrietta were shuddering with horror. As to Mrs. Bertolle, she had sunk into a chair, trembling in all her limbs. The old gentleman, however, continued with evident haste,—

“Whether Malgat did, or did not, commit suicide, he was never heard of again. The trial came on, and he was condemned *in contumaciam* to ten years’ penal servitude. Sarah, also, was examined by a magistrate; but she made it a success.

“And that was all. And this crime, one of the most atrocious ever conceived by human wickedness, went to swell the long list of unpunished outrages. The robbers triumphed impudently in broad daylight. They had four hundred thousand francs. They could retire from business.

“No, indeed! Twenty thousand francs a year was far too little for their immoderate desires! They accepted this fortune as an installment on account on the future, and used it to wait patiently for new victims to be stripped.

“Unfortunately, such victims would not show themselves. The house was mounted upon a most expensive footing. M. de Brevan had, of course,

claimed his share; Sir Thorn was a gambler; Sarah loved diamonds; and grim Mrs. Brian had her own vices. In short, the hour came when danger was approaching; but, just at that moment, Sarah, looking around, met with the unlucky victim she needed.

“This one was a handsome young man, almost a child yet, kind, generous, and chivalrous. He was an orphan, and came up from his province, his heart full of illusions, and in his pockets his entire fortune,—a sum of five hundred thousand francs. His name was Charles de Kergrist.

“Maxime managed to bring him to the house in Circus Street. He saw Sarah, and was dazzled. He loved her, and was lost.

“Ah! The poor fellow did not last long. At the end of five months, his half million was in the hands of Sarah. And, when he had not a cent left, she well-nigh forced him to write her three forged drafts, swearing, that, on the day on which they became due, she would take them up herself. But when the day came, and he called in Circus Street, he was received as Malgat had been received. They told him that the forgery had been discovered: that suit had been brought; that he was ruined. They offered him, also, money to flee.

“Poor Kergrist! They had not miscalculated. Descended from a family in which a keen sense of honor had been hereditary for many generations, he did not hesitate. As soon as he left the house, he hanged himself on Sarah’s window, thinking that he would thus hold up to public censure the infamous creature who had led him to commit a crime.

“Poor child! They had deceived him. He was not ruined. The forgery had never been discovered; the drafts had never been used at all. A careful investigation revealed nothing against Sarah Brandon; but the scandals of the suicide diminished her prestige. She felt it; and, giving up her dreams of greatness, she thought of marrying a fool who was immensely wealthy, M. Wilkie Gordon, when Sir Thorn spoke to her of Count Ville-Handry.

“In fortune, name, and age, the count was exactly what Sarah had dreamed of so often. She threw herself upon him.

“How the old gentleman was drawn to Circus Street; how he was surrounded, insnared, intoxicated, and finally made a husband—all that you

know but too well, M. Champcey. But what you do not know is the fact that this marriage brought discord into the camp. M. de Brevan would not hear of it; and it was the hope he had of breaking it up, which made him speak to you so frankly of Sarah Brandon. When you went to ask his advice, he was on bad terms with her: she had turned him off, and refused to pay him any money. And he was so mortally offended, that he would have betrayed her to the courts even, if he had known how to do it without inculpating himself.

“You were the very person to reconcile them again, inasmuch as you gave Maxime an opportunity of rendering Sarah Brandon a great service.

“He did not then anticipate that she would ever fall in love with you, and that she, in her turn, would have to succumb to one of those desperate passions which she had so often kindled in others, and used for her own advantage. This discovery made him furious; and Sarah’s love, and Maxime’s rage, will explain to you the double plot by which you were victimized. Sarah, who loved you, wanted to get rid of Henrietta, who was your betrothed: Maxime, stung by jealousy, wanted you to die.”

Visibly overcome by fatigue, Papa Ravinet fell back in his chair, and remained silent for more than five minutes. Then he seemed to make one more effort, and went on,—

“Now, let us sum up the whole. I know how Sarah, Sir Thorn, and Mrs. Brian have gone to work to rob Count Ville-Handry, and to ruin him. I know what they have done with the millions which they report were lost in speculations; and I have the evidence in my hand. Therefore, I can ruin them, without reference to their other crimes. Crochard’s affidavit alone suffices to ruin M. de Brevan. The two Chevassats, husband and wife, have caught themselves by keeping the four thousand francs you sent to Miss Henrietta. We have them safe, the wretches! The hour of vengeance has come at last.”

Henrietta did not let him conclude: she interrupted him, saying,—

“And my father, sir, my father?”

“M. Champcey will save him, madam.”

Daniel had risen, deeply moved, and now asked,—

“What am I to do?”

“You must call on the Countess Sarah, and look as if you had forgotten all that has happened,—as far as she is concerned, Miss Henrietta.”

The young officer blushed all over, and stammered painfully,—

“Ah, I cannot play that part! I would not be able.”

But Henrietta stopped him. Laying her hand on his shoulder, and looking deep into the eyes of her betrothed, as if to search the very depths of his conscience, she said,—

“Have you reasons for hesitating?”

He hung his head, and said,—

“I shall go.”

CHAPTER 32

It struck two when Daniel jumped out of a carriage before No. 79 in Peletier Street, where the offices of the Pennsylvania Petroleum Company were now, and where Count Ville-Handry lived at present.

Never in his life had he felt so embarrassed, or so dissatisfied with himself. In vain had Papa Ravinet and Mrs. Bertolle brought up all possible arguments to convince him, that, with a woman like Sarah Brandon, all reprisals were fair; he would not be convinced.

Unfortunately, he could not refuse to go without risking the peace of his Henrietta, her confidence, and her whole happiness; so he went as bravely as he could.

A clerk whom he asked told him that the president was in his rooms,—in the third story on the left. He went up. The maid who came to open the door recognized him. It was the same Clarissa who had betrayed him. When he asked for the count she invited him in. She took him through an anteroom, dark, and fragrant with odors from the kitchen; and then, opening a door, she said;—

“Please walk in!”

Before an immense table, covered with papers, sat Count Ville-Handry. He had grown sadly old. His lower lip hung down, giving him a painful expression of weakness of mind; and his watery eyes looked almost senile. Still his efforts to look young had not been abandoned. He was rouged and dyed as carefully as ever. When he recognized Daniel, he pushed back his papers; and offering him his hand, as if they had parted the day before, he said,—

“Ah, here you are back again among us! Upon my word, I am very glad to see you! We know what you have been doing out there; for my wife sent me again and again to the navy department to see if there were any news of

you. And you have become an officer of the Legion of Honor! You ought to be pleased.”

“Fortune has favored, me, count.”

“Alas! I am sorry I cannot say as much for myself,” replied the latter with a sigh.

“You must be surprised,” he continued, “to find me living in such a dog’s kennel, I who formerly—But so it goes. ‘The ups and downs of speculations,’ says Sir Thorn. Look here, my dear Daniel, let me give you a piece of advice: never speculate in industrial enterprises! Nowadays it is mere gambling, furious gambling; and everybody cheats. If you stake a dollar, you are in for everything. That is my story, and I thought I would enrich my country by a new source of revenue. From the first day on which I emitted shares, speculators have gotten hold of them, and have crushed me, till my whole fortune has been spent in useless efforts to keep them up. And yet Sir Thorn says I have fought as bravely on this slippery ground as my ancestors did in the lists.”

Every now and then the poor old man passed his hand over his face as if trying to drive away painful thoughts; and then he went on in a different tone of voice,—

“And yet I am far from complaining. My misfortunes have been the source of the purest and highest happiness for me. It is to them I owe the knowledge of the boundless devotion of a beloved wife; they have taught me how dearly Sarah loves me. I alone can tell what treasures are hid in that angelic heart, which they dared to calumniate. Ah! I think I can hear her now, when I told her one evening how embarrassed I had become in my finances.

“‘To have concealed that from me!’ she exclaimed,—‘from me, your wife: that was wrong!’ And the very next day she showed her sublime courage. She sold her diamonds to bring me the proceeds, and gave up to me her whole fortune. And, since we are living here, she goes out on foot, like a simple citizen’s wife; and more than once I have caught her preparing our modest meals with her own hands.”

Tears were flowing down the furrowed cheeks, leaving ghastly lines on the rouged and whitened surface.

“And I,” he resumed in an accent of deepest despair,—“I could not reward her for such love and so many sacrifices. How did I compensate her for being my only consolation, my joy, my sole happiness in life! I ruined her; I impoverished her! If I were to die to-morrow, she would be penniless.”

Daniel trembled.

“Ah, count,” he exclaimed, “don’t speak of dying! People like you live a hundred years.”

But the old man lowered his voice, and said,—

“You see, I have not told you all yet. But you are my friend; and I know I can open my heart to you. I did not have the—the—cleverness to overcome all the restrictions which hamper this kind of business. I was imprudent, in spite of all Sir Thorn’s warnings. To-morrow there will be a meeting of the stockholders; and, if they do not grant me what I shall have to ask of them, I may be in trouble. And, when a man calls himself Count Ville-Handry, rather than appear in a police-court—you know what I mean!”

He was interrupted by one of the clerks, who brought him a letter. He read it, and said,—

“Tell them I am coming.”

Then, turning again to Daniel, he added,—

“I must leave you; but the countess is at home, and she would never forgive me if I did not take you in to present your respects to her. Come! But be careful and don’t say a word of my troubles. It would kill her.”

And, before Daniel could recover from his bewilderment, the count had opened a door, and pushed him into the room, saying,—

“Sarah, M. Champcey.”

Sarah started up as if she had received an electric shock. Her husband had left them; but, even if he had been still in the room, she would probably not have been any more able to control herself.

“You!” she cried, “Daniel, my Daniel!”

And turning to Mrs. Brian, who was sitting by the window, she said,—

“Leave us.”

“Your conduct is perfectly shocking, Sarah!” began the grim lady. But Sarah, as harshly as if she had been speaking to a servant, cut her short, saying,—

“You are in the way, and I beg you will leave the room.”

Mrs. Brian did so without saying a word; and the countess sank into an arm-chair, as if overcome by a sudden good fortune which she was not able to endure, looking intensely at Daniel, who stood in the centre of the room like a statue.

She had on a simple black merino dress; she wore no jewelry; but her marvellous, fatal beauty seemed to be all the more dazzling. The years had passed over her without leaving any more traces on her than the spring breeze leaves on a half-opened rose. Her hair still shone with its golden flashes; her rosy lips smiled sweetly; and her velvet eyes caressed you still, till hot fire seemed to run in your veins.

Once before Daniel had been thus alone with her; and, as the sensations he then felt rose in his mind, he began to tremble violently. Then, thinking of his purpose in coming here, and the treacherous part he was about to act, he felt a desire to escape.

It was she who broke the charm. She began, saying,—

“You know, I presume, the misfortunes that have befallen us. Your betrothed, Henrietta? Has the count told you?”

Daniel had taken a chair. He replied,—

“The count has said nothing about his daughter.”

“Well, then, my saddest presentiments have been fulfilled. Unhappy girl! I did what I could to keep her in the right way. But she fell, step by step, and finally so low, that one day, when a ray of sense fell upon her mind, she went and killed herself.”

It was done. Sarah had overcome the last hesitation which Daniel still felt. Now he was in the right temper to meet cunning with cunning. He answered in an admirably-feigned tone of indifference,—

“Ah!”

Then, encouraged by the joyous surprise he read in Sarah’s face, he went on,—

“This expedition has cost me dear. Count Ville-Handry has just informed me that he has lost his whole fortune. I am in the same category.”

“What! You are”—

“Ruined. Yes; that is to say, I have been robbed,—robbed of every cent I ever had. On the eve of my departure, I intrusted a hundred thousand dollars, all I ever possessed, to M. de Brevan, with orders to hold it at Miss Henrietta’s disposal. He found it easier to appropriate the whole to himself. So, you see, I am reduced to my pittance of pay as a lieutenant. That is not much.”

Sarah looked at Daniel with perfect amazement. In any other man, this prodigious confidence in a friend would have appeared to her the extreme of human folly; in Daniel, she thought it was sublime.

“Is that the reason why they have arrested M. de Brevan?” she asked.

Daniel had not heard of his arrest.

“What!” he said. “Maxime”—

“Was arrested last night, and is kept in close confinement.”

However well prepared Daniel was by Papa Ravinet’s account, he could never have hoped to manage the conversation as well as chance did. He replied,—

"It cannot be for having robbed me. M. de Brevan must have been arrested for having attempted to murder me."

The lioness who has just been robbed of her whelps does not rise with greater fury in her eyes than Sarah did when she heard these words.

"What!" she cried aloud. "He has dared touch you!"

"Not personally; oh, no! But he hired for the base purpose a wretched felon, who was caught, and has confessed everything. I see that the order to apprehend my friend Maxime must have reached here before me, although it left Saigon some time later than I did."

Might not M. de Brevan be as cowardly as Crochard when he saw that all was lost? This idea, one would think, would have made Sarah tremble. But it never occurred to her.

"Ah, the wretch!" she repeated. "The scoundrel, the rascal!"

And, sitting down by Daniel, she asked him to tell her all the details of these attempted assassinations, from which he had escaped only by a miracle.

The Countess Sarah, in fact, never doubted for a moment but that Daniel was as madly in love with her as Planix, as Malgat, and Kergrist, and all the others, had been, she had become so accustomed to find her beauty irresistible and all powerful. How could it ever have occurred to her, that this man, the very first whom she loved sincerely, should also be the first and the only one to escape from her snares? She was taken in, besides, by the double mirage of love and of absence.

During the last two years she had so often evoked the image of Daniel, she had so constantly lived with him in her thoughts, that she mistook the illusion of her desires for the reality, and was no longer able to distinguish between the phantom of her dreams and the real person.

In the meantime he entertained her by describing to her his actual position, lamenting over the treachery by which he had been ruined, and adding how hard he would find it at thirty to begin the world anew.

And she, generally, so clear-sighted, was not surprised to find that this man, who had been disinterestedness itself, should all of a sudden deplore his losses so bitterly, and value money so highly.

“Why do you not marry a rich woman?” she suddenly asked him.

He replied with a perfection of affected candor which he would not have suspected to be in his power the day before,—

“What? Do you—you, Sarah—give me such advice?”

He said it so naturally, and with such an air of aggrieved surprise, that she was delighted and carried away by it, as if he had made her the most passionate avowal.

“You love me? Do you really, really love me?”

The sound of a key turning in the door interrupted them.

And in an undertone, speaking passionately, she said,—

“Go now! You shall know by to-morrow who she is whom I have chosen for you. Come and breakfast with us at eleven o’clock. Go now.”

And, kissing him on his lips till they burnt with unholy fire, she pushed him out of the room.

The poor man staggered like a drunken man, as he went down the stairs.

“I am playing an abominable game,” he said to himself. “She does love me! What a woman!”

It required nothing less to rouse him from his stupor than the sight of Papa Ravinet, who was waiting for him below, hid in a corner of his carriage.

“Is it you?” he said.

“Yes, myself. And it seems it was well I came. But for me, the count would have kept you; but I came to your rescue by sending him up a letter. Now, tell me all.”

Daniel reported to him briefly, while they were driving along, his conversation with the count and with Sarah. When he had concluded, the old dealer exclaimed,—

“We have the whole matter in our hands now. But there is not a minute to lose. Do you go back to the hotel, and wait for me there. I must go to the court.”

At the hotel Daniel found Henrietta dying with anxiety. Still she only asked after her father. Was it pride, or was it prudence? She did not mention Sarah’s name. They had, however, not much time for conversation. Papa Ravinet came back sooner than they expected, all busy and excited. He drew Daniel aside to give him his last directions, and did not leave him till midnight, when he went away, saying,—

“The ground is burning under our feet; be punctual to-morrow.”

At the precise hour Daniel presented himself in Peletier Street, where the count received him with a delighted air.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “you come just in time. Brian is away; Sir Thorn is out on business; and I shall have to leave you directly after breakfast. You must keep the countess company. Come, Sarah, let us have breakfast.”

It was an ill-omened breakfast.

Under the thick layers of rouge, the count showed his livid pallor; and every moment nervous tremblings shook him from head to foot. The countess affected childish happiness; but her sharp and sudden movements betrayed the storm that was raging in her heart. Daniel noticed that she incessantly filled the count’s glass,—a strong wine it was too,—and that, in order to make him take more, she drank herself an unusual quantity.

It struck twelve, and Count Ville-Handry got up.

“Well,” he said with the air and the voice of a man who braces himself to mount the scaffold, “it must be done; they are waiting for me.”

And, after having kissed his wife with passionate tenderness, he shook hands with Daniel, and went out hurriedly.

Crimson and breathless, Sarah also had risen, and was listening attentively. And, when she was quite sure that the count had gone downstairs, she said,—

“Now, Daniel, look at me! Need I tell you who the woman is whom I have chosen for you? It is—the Countess Ville-Handry.”

He shook and trembled; but he controlled himself by a supreme effort, and calmly smiling, in a half tender, half ironical tone, he replied,—

“Why, oh, why! do you speak to me of unattainable happiness? Are you not married?”

“I may be a widow.”

These words from her lips had a fearful meaning. But Daniel was prepared for them, and said,—

“To be sure you may. But, unfortunately, you, also, are ruined. You are as poor as I am; and we are too clever to think of joining poverty to poverty.”

She looked at him with a strange, sinister smile. She was evidently hesitating. A last ray of reason lighted up the abyss at her feet. But she was drunk with pride and passion; she had taken a good deal of wine; and her usually cool head was in a state of delirium.

“And if I were not ruined?” she said at last in a hoarse voice; “what would you say then?”

“I should say that you are the very woman of whom an ambitious man of thirty might dream in his most glorious visions.”

She believed him. Yes, she was capable of believing that what he said was true; and, throwing aside all restraint, she went on,—

“Well, then, I will tell you. I am rich,—immensely rich. That entire fortune which once belonged to Count Ville-Handry, and which he thinks has been lost in unlucky speculations,—the whole of it is in my hands. Ah! I have suffered horribly, to have to play for two long years the loving wife to this decrepit old man. But I thought of you, my much beloved, my Daniel; and that thought sustained me. I knew you would come back; and I wanted to

have royal treasures to give you. And I have them. These much coveted millions are mine, and you are here; and now I can say to you, 'Take them, they are yours; I give them to you as I give myself to you.'"

She had drawn herself up to her full height as she said this; and she looked splendid and fearful at the same time, in her matchless beauty, diffusing energy and immodesty around her, and shaking her head defiantly, till the waves of golden hair flowed over her shoulders.

The untamed vagabond of the gutter reappeared all of a sudden, breathless and trembling, hoarse, lusting.

Daniel felt as if his reason was giving way. Still he had the strength to say,—
"But unfortunately you are not a widow."

She drew close up to him, and said in a strident voice,—

"Not a widow? Do you know what Count Ville-Handry is doing at this moment? He is beseeching his stockholders to relieve him from the effects of his mismanagement. If they refuse him, he will be brought up in court, and tried as a defaulter. Well, I tell you! they will refuse him; for among the largest stockholders there are three who belong to me: I have bribed them to refuse. What do you think the count will do when he finds himself dishonored and disgraced? I will tell you again; for I have seen him write his will, and load his revolver."

But the door of the outer room was opened. She turned as pale as death itself, and, seizing Daniel's arm violently, she whispered,—

"Listen!"

Heavy steps were heard in the adjoining room, then—nothing more!

"It is he!" she whispered again. "Our fate is hanging in the scales"—

A shot was heard, which made the window-panes rattle, and cut her short. She was seized with spasms from head to foot, but, making a great effort, she cried out,—

"Free at last, Daniel; we are free!"

And, rushing to the door, she opened it.

She opened it, but instantly shut it again violently, and uttered a terrible cry.

On the threshold stood Count Ville-Handry, his features terribly distorted, a smoking revolver in his hand.

“No,” he said, “Sarah, no, you are not free!”

Livid, and with eyeballs starting from their sockets, the wretched woman had shrunk back to a door which opened from the dining-room directly into her chamber.

She was not despairing yet.

It was evident she was looking for one of those almost incredible excuses which are sometimes accepted by credulous old men when violent passions seize them in their dotage.

She abandoned the thought, however, when the count stepped forward, and thus allowed Papa Ravinet to be seen behind him.

“Malgat!” she cried,—“Malgat!”

She held out her hands before her as if to push aside a spectre that had suddenly risen from the grave, and was now opening its arms to seize her, and carry her off.

In the meantime Malgat came forward, with Henrietta leaning on Mrs. Bertolle’s arm.

“She also,” muttered Sarah,—“she too!”

The terrible truth broke at last upon her mind: she saw the snare in which she had been caught, and felt that she was lost. Then turning to Daniel, she said to him,—

“Poor man! Who has made you do this? It was not in your loyal heart to plan such treachery against a woman. Are you mad? And do you not see, that for the privilege of being loved by me as I love you, and were it but for a day, Malgat would again rob his employers, and the count would again give all his millions, and his honor itself?”

She said this; but at the same time she had slipped one of her hands behind her back, and was feeling for the knob of the door. She got hold of it, and instantly disappeared, before any one could have prevented her escape.

“Never mind!” said Malgat. “All the outer doors are guarded.”

But she had not meant to escape. There she was again, pale and cold like marble. She looked defiantly all around her, and said in a mocking tone of voice,—

“I have loved; and now I can die. That is just. I have loved. Ah! Planix, Malgat, and Kergrist ought to have taught me what becomes of people who really love.”

Then looking at Daniel, she went on,—

“And you—you will know what you have lost when I am no more. I may die; but the memory of my love will never die: it will rankle ever in you like a wound which opens daily afresh, and becomes constantly sorer. You triumph now, Henrietta; but remember, that between your lips and Daniel’s there will forever rise the shadow of Sarah Brandon.”

As she said the last words, she raised a small phial, which she held in her hand, with an indescribably swift movement to her lips: she drank the contents, and, sinking into a chair, said,—

“Now I defy you all!”

“Ah, she escapes after all!” exclaimed Malgat, “she escapes from justice!” He rushed forward to assist her; but Daniel stepped between, and said,—

“Let her die.”

Already horrible convulsions began to seize her; and the penetrating smell of bitter almonds, which slowly filled the whole room, told but too plainly that the poison which she had taken was one of those from which there is no rescue.

She was carried to her bed; and in less than ten minutes she was dead: she had never uttered another word.

Henrietta and Mrs. Bertolle were kneeling by the side of the bed, and the count was sobbing in a corner of the room, when a police-sergeant entered.

“The woman Brian is not to be found,” he said; “but M. Elgin has been arrested. Where is the Countess Ville-Handry?”

Daniel pointed at the body.

“Dead?” said the officer. “Then I have nothing more to do here.”

He was going out, when Malgat stopped him.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said. “I wish to state that I am not Ravinet, dealer in curiosities; but that my true name is Malgat, formerly cashier of the Mutual Discount Society, sentenced *in contumaciam* to ten years’ penal servitude. I am ready to be tried, and place myself in your hands.”

CHAPTER 33

The magistrate from Saigon saw his hopes fulfilled, and, thanks to his promotion, was commissioned to continue the trial which he had so ably commenced. After the jury had brought in their verdict of guilty, he sentenced Justin Chevassat, alias Maxime de Brevan, to penal servitude for life.

Crochard, surnamed Bagnolet, got off with twenty years; and the two Chevassats escaped with ten years' solitary confinement.

The trial of Thomas Elgin, which came on during the same term, revealed a system of swindling which was so strikingly bold and daring, that it appeared at first sight almost incredible. It excited especial surprise when it was found out that he had issued false shares, which he made Count Ville-Handry buy in, so as to ruin, by the same process, the count as an individual, and the company over which he presided. He was sent for twenty years to the penitentiary.

These scandalous proceedings had one good result. They saved the poor count; but they revealed, at the same time, such prodigious unfitness for business, that people began to suspect how dependent he must have been on his first wife, Henrietta's mother. He remained, however, relatively poor. They had made Thomas Elgin refund, and had even obtained possession of Sarah Brandon's fortune; but the count was called upon to make amends for his want of business capacity. When he had satisfied all his creditors, and handed over to his daughter a part of her maternal inheritance, he had hardly more than six thousand dollars a year left.

Of the whole "band," Mrs. Brian alone escaped.

Malgat, having surrendered to justice with the prescribed limits of time to purge himself, was tried, and the whole process begun anew. But the trial was naturally a mere form. His own lawyer had very little to say. The state attorney himself made his defense. After having fully explained the

circumstances which had led the poor cashier to permit a crime, rather than to commit it himself, the attorney said to the jury,—

“Now, gentlemen, that you have learned what was the wrong of which he is guilty, you ought also to know how he has expiated his crime.

“When he left the miserable woman who had ruined him, maddened by grief, and determined to end his life, Malgat went home. There he found his sister.

“She was one of those women who have religiously preserved the domestic virtues of our forefathers, and who know of no compromise in questions of honor.

“She had soon forced her brother to confess his fatal secret, and, overcoming the horror she naturally felt, she found words, inspired by her excellent heart, which moved him, and led him to reconsider his resolve. She told him that suicide was but an additional crime, and that he was in honor bound to live, so that he might make amends, and restore the money he had stolen.”

“Hope began to rise once more in his heart, and filled him with unexpected energy. And yet what obstacles he had to encounter! How could he ever hope to return four hundred thousand francs. How should he go about to earn so much money? and where? How could he do anything, now that he was compelled to live in concealment?

“Do you know, gentlemen, what this sister did in her almost sublime devotion? She had a moderate income from state bonds; she sold them all, and carried the proceeds to the president of the Mutual Discount Society, begging him to be patient as to the remainder, and promising that he should be repaid, capital and interest alike. She asked for nothing but secrecy; and he pledged himself to secrecy.

“And from that day, gentlemen of the jury, the brother and the sister have lived like the poorest laborers, working incessantly, and denying themselves everything but what was indispensable for life itself.

“And this day, gentlemen, Malgat owes nothing to the society; he has paid everything. He fell once; but he has risen again. And this place in court, where he now sits as a prisoner, will become to him a place of honor, in which he will recover his position in society, and his honor.”

Malgat was acquitted.

The marriage of Henrietta, Countess Ville-Handry, and Lieut. Daniel Champcey, was celebrated at the Church of St. Clothilda. Daniel's groomsmen were Malgat and the old chief surgeon of the frigate “Conquest.” Several persons noticed that the bride wore, contrary to usage, a dress of embroidered muslin. It was the robe which Henrietta had so often covered with her tears, at the time when, having no bread for the morrow, she had tried to live by the work of her hands. Malgat had hunted it up, and bought it: the precious dress was his wedding- gift.

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