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GERMINAL

OR

MASTER AND MAN

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BY

ÉMILE ZOLA

EDITED WITH A PREFACE

BY

ERNEST ALFRED VIZETELLY



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PREFACE

'GERMINAL' deservedly ranks as one of Émile Zola's greatest books, and it has also been one of the most popular. Quite apart from the ordinary French impression, some hundreds of thousands of copies of the original in illustrated penny numbers have been sold in France, Belgium, and Switzerland, wherever, indeed, the French language is used by the working classes. And I may say also that during the years which I have largely devoted to the re-issue of M. Zola's earlier books I have received some scores of letters asking me why 'Germinal' was not republished in an acceptable English form. Those letters have come largely from British workmen, from labour-leaders and prominent social-democrats, who all regard the book as one of high interest and importance.

It is not that 'Germinal' upholds one or another particular social theory, but as a picture of the autocracy of capital and the sufferings of the wage earners it is unsurpassed by any other novel ever written. Yet it gives both sides of the case; it admits the difficulties in which capitalists may be placed, it shows the errors arising from the imperfect education of many who become labour-leaders, and the utter futility also of the excesses to which the strife between the contending parties so often gives rise.

The picture of the strike in 'Germinal' is a masterpiece. It is absolutely based on facts, and is yet as lofty as an epic. A deep pathos permeates the whole work. Mind and heart alike revolt as scene after scene of the tragic sufferings of the toilers pass before one's eyes. The picture is by no means overdrawn. Though the book was written by M. Zola in 1884–5, the conditions of labour among the French coal-miners, whose

struggles form the immediate subject of the work, remain virtually the same as then. In England no doubt the miner is rather better circumstanced, and legislation has done more than in France for his protection. Still, it is certain that he is not yet satisfied, and how can one wonder at it when one remembers that of all current forms of labour that of the pitman is the hardest, the most exhausting, the most dangerous? And assuredly, if any toiler deserves reward and comfort and the protection of the laws, it is he who daily risks his life in the bowels of the earth to provide the whole community with warmth and light, to supply the means for carrying on a thousand forms of industry and commerce.

The title 'Germinal' was borrowed by M. Zola from the new Calendar which the French National Convention adopted in 1792. In this Calendar the month 'Germinal' corresponded with the latter part of March and the beginning of April, when, in our climes, nature springs into renewed life and germination becomes universal. At the same time, in selecting this title M. Zola bore in mind certain events which occurred in Germinal of the year III. of the first French Republic, when hungry men and women swarmed furiously into the Convention Hall, demanding 'Bread and the Constitution of '93.' Those suggestive incidents inspired more than one page of the book; but the idea which permeates it is that of the germination and fruition of a new social system, the coalition and uprising of the toiling masses, banding themselves together to readjust present-day conditions and secure their fair share of the good things of the world. Even as it was foretold to Eve when she was driven from the earthly Paradise that she should in sorrow bring forth children, so it is sorrow and hardship and suffering that attend the advent of all progress. Indeed, progress germinates amidst woe, and though again and again it be impeded it bursts upon the world at last from very excess of suffering. This idea, it will be found, pervades many of the pages of 'Germinal.'

Before M. Zola wrote this book he spent six months

among the coal mines of Northern France and Belgium thoroughly studying the system of labour and the life led by the pitmen. Among the latter the work has always been popular. Mr. R. H. Sherard mentions in his biography of M. Zola that he saw well-thumbed copies of 'Germinal' in all the mining villages of the coal country around Mons. I find too that in addition to personal inspection, M. Zola largely studied the literature of his subject. It has always been my habit when translating or editing a translation of one of his works to turn, for my own information or for guidance in understanding certain allusions, to such text-books as I may find available on the various subjects that M. Zola deals with. And with respect to 'Germinal' I have been able to check a number of statements and identify some of the leading incidents in the book. For instance, the horrible experiences of Étienne Lantier in the Voreux Pit towards the close of the book have been largely based on those of Giraud, a miner walled up in a Lyons pit in 1854, and those of a pitman of the Gard, which latter were described some thirty years ago by an engineer, M. Parran, in the *Bulletin de la Société de l'Industrie Minérale.* From that narrative M. Zola has borrowed the idea of the floating corpse in the inundated mine, a corpse that ever returns to brush against the imprisoned and famished sufferers when they stoop to drink of the murky waters. This incident, therefore, which M. Zola's detractors might be inclined to ascribe to a 'horrid imagination revelling in dirt' is scrupulously according to fact. And, indeed, the same may be said of every notable incident in the book. I have before me several copies of *L'Illustration* and *Le Monde Illustré*, in which French artists have depicted from the life a number of vivid scenes almost identical with those which M. Zola has limned so powerfully in his narrative of the pitmen's strike.

I have already remarked that life in the French coal districts has not changed in any marked degree since 'Germinal' was written. And, indeed, I take it that the conditions of labour in France, generally, are still behind

those existing in Great Britain. But to all observers of French politics it must be evident that great changes are impending in that country. Not only are the French socialist and labour parties prominently and influentially represented in the French Legislature, not only have recognised social-democrats become Ministers of State, but nowadays socialist municipalities govern not merely hundreds of French villages and scores of market towns, but also several of the great cities of the Republic. And all this is evidence of the germination and growth of the working classes and their ideals as foretold in 'Germinal.' Farther, during the last few years, amidst all the excitement of *L'Affaire Dreyfus*, all the interest centring in the great Paris Exhibition, the world of labour has been in a state of incessant unrest. Never before have there been more strikes in France, more abundant signs of social discontent and disruption. The end of the century may not have witnessed the great upheaval, so often foretold by sociologists, but the preliminary work is proceeding apace, spreading on all sides and acquiring greater and greater cohesion. Thus the prophets, if a little mistaken in their dates, have good reasons for persevering in their warnings. As for the influence that the new France, which the great upheaval is to bring into being, may exercise upon the world, it is perhaps dangerous to prophesy. But it should be remembered that, once before, a new France sprang up amidst the throes of Revolution, stirred the world to its very entrails, and, despite all Holy Alliances, changed the whole current of human thought. And who will be so bold as to affirm that France, in spite of all her lapses, may not again accomplish some such prodigious miracle?

I would add that the present version of 'Germinal' is practically a new one, but as I have used here and there with some amendment passages from previous translations after acquiring the copyright thereof, I have preferred to describe myself on the title-page of this book as editor rather than translator.

E. A. V.

GERMINAL

BOOK I

UNDER the starless sky of a night of dense inky blackness, a man was following, all alone, the highroad from Marchiennes to Montsou, some six miles and more of pavement cutting straight across the low-lying plain between the beetroot fields. He could not even see the black ground in front of him, and was only conscious of the vast level horizon through feeling the March wind, which blew in broad gusts like those of the open sea and was icy from contact with miles and miles of marsh and woodless land. Not the faintest shadow of a tree loomed against the sky; the pavement spread out straight ahead like a jetty amidst the blinding, misty gloom.

The man had left Marchiennes a little before two o'clock. He was walking with a quick step and shivering beneath his well-worn cotton jacket and corduroy trousers. A small bundle tied in a chequered handkerchief seemed to inconvenience him very much. He hugged it to his sides first with one, then with the other elbow, in order that he might slip both his benumbed hands into his pockets, for the cutting blast made them bleed. But one idea occupied the brain of this workman without work and without shelter—the hope that the cold would abate with daybreak. And he tramped along in this way for about an hour, when, on his left, at a mile or so from Montsou, he suddenly perceived some reddish lights—three braziers burning in the open air, in which they seemed to be suspended. At first the man hesitated, a name-

less fear taking possession of him; but he could not resist his painful craving to warm his hands, if only for an instant.

A steep hollow suddenly opened before him and everything then disappeared from his view. On his right was a hoarding of coarse deal boards, an enclosure to some railway siding probably; and on his left rose a grassy embankment, atop of which appeared a confused mass of gables, the low regular roofs of village houses. The man advanced another two hundred steps. Suddenly, at a bend of the road, the fires reappeared close to him, though he could not understand any more than before how it was that they burned so high in the lifeless sky like incandescent moons. Down below, however, another sight made him pause. There was a heavy mass, a thick-set pile of irregular buildings, from amidst which rose the silhouette of a factory chimney. Infrequent flashes of light came through the grimy windows, and five or six lanterns, burning low, hung outside from blackened woodwork, which vaguely suggested gigantic trestles. And from this phantom-like place, steeped in darkness and smoke, there arose but one sound—the deep prolonged panting of a steam-engine which could not be seen.

Then the man knew that he was near a coal-pit, and his false shame again got the better of him. What was the good of asking? There would surely be no work. Instead of going towards the building, he at last ventured to climb a huge mound of shale on the top of which the three coal fires were burning in iron braziers to give light and warmth to those who were still toiling. The quarrymen had no doubt worked till late, for shale was still being taken out of the pit. The new-comer could hear the banksmen pushing the trains on to the huge settle-board, and could distinguish shadowy forms tilting the trucks near each fire.

'Good morning,' he said, approaching one of the braziers.

With his back to the fire stood a waggoner, a diminutive old man, wearing a violet-coloured woollen jersey and a rabbit-skin cap. His horse, a big yellowish animal, stood by stock-still, waiting for the six trucks which he had drawn up the incline to be emptied. The man working the tilter—a tall, lean, reddish fellow—was apparently in no hurry; he handled his lever in a heavy sleepy way. And above it all the wind was careering madly; it was an icy blast, whose broad gusts swept by like the strokes of a scythe.

'Good morning,' answered the old carter.

Then both became silent. The new-comer, who felt himself eyed suspiciously, gave his name.

'My name is Étienne Lantier,'[1] said he; 'I am an engine-man. Any chance of getting a job here?'

The flames of the fire in the brazier lit up his handsome, dark features. He might be about one-and-twenty, and looked strong, in spite of his small limbs. The waggoner, no longer distrustful, shook his head.

'A job for an engine-man? I'm sure there isn't. Two called here yesterday. They went away as they came.'

A gust of wind cut short his speech. Then Étienne, pointing to the sombre mass of buildings at the foot of the mound, asked, 'It's a coal-pit, isn't it?'

This time the old man could not answer at all. A violent fit of coughing almost choked him. At last he expectorated, and his saliva left a black stain on the purplish ground.

'Yes, it's a pit—the Voreux pit. Look, the miners' village is quite close.'

And with outstretched arm he indicated the village, whose roofs the young man had vaguely perceived in the darkness. But the six trucks were empty by this time; so the waggoner, his legs stiff with rheumatism, went on behind them without so much as cracking his whip; while the yellowish horse started of his own accord, lazily trudging between the rails to the accompaniment of a fresh blast which made the hair of his coat stand on end.

The Voreux pit began to look less fantastic to Étienne, as he lingered before the fire, warming his poor, bleeding hands. He recognised each part of the mechanism whereby the pit was worked—the large coal staiths, their walls coated with tar, the top of the shaft, the vast engine-room and the square tower of the pumping machine. This mine, with its stunted brick buildings lying in a hollow, and its chimney rising like a threatening horn, assumed in his eyes the evil aspect of some voracious wild beast crouching there to devour everybody. While examining each detail, he began to think of the vagabond life he had been leading for the last week, vainly looking for a new situation. He again saw himself in his shed at the railway works slapping his overseer's face; driven away from Lille; getting the cold shoulder everywhere. On the Saturday he had got as far as Marchiennes, where folks

[1] Son of Gervaise of 'The Dram Shop' (L'Assommoir).—Ed.

had said there was a job to be had at the ironworks; but there was neither a job at the ironworks nor even at Sonneville's place. His Sunday had been spent in a wheelwright's timber-yard, whence the watchman had expelled him at two in the morning. He hadn't a penny in the world, nor a crust of bread to eat, so what was to become of him, wandering across the country without any definite aim, without any shelter from the bitter blast? Yes, this was a pit right enough; the lanterns lighted the enclosure around the shaft, and the sudden opening of a door enabled him to catch a glimpse of the red-hot furnaces of the boiler-room. He even explained to himself the noise of the pumping engine, that deep incessant panting which was like the monster's husky breath.

The fellow at the tilting crane had not yet taken the least notice of Étienne's presence, and the latter was just about to pick up his little bundle, which had fallen to the ground, when the sound of coughing apprised him of the waggoner's return. He saw the old man slowly emerge from the darkness, followed by the yellowish horse, which was pulling six newly-filled trucks.

'Are there any factories at Montsou?' Étienne inquired.

The old chap spat again, and answered amidst the whistling of the wind. 'There's factories enough as far as that goes. You should have been here three or four years ago! Everything was brisk then; there weren't hands enough; wages had never been better. But now we've got to play pinch-belly again. It's real misery throughout the region; the masters are sending away their hands; all the factories are shutting up one after another. May be it's not the Emperor's fault, but why does he want to go fighting in America?[1] Without reckoning that the animals are dying of the cholera as well as human folk.'

Then both men went on complaining—their short phrases cut shorter still every now and then by the wind. Étienne spoke of his useless peregrinations during the last week. Was he to die of hunger, then? The highroads would soon be swarming with beggars. To which the old waggoner replied that it would end by something dreadful happening, for it was not right that so many Christians should be thrown on to the streets.

[1] The reference is to the foolish Mexican expedition undertaken by NapoleonIII.—Ed

'One hasn't meat every day.'

'Ah! if one only had bread!'

Their voices died away—gusts of wind carried off certain words in a melancholy howl.

'Look!' shouted the waggoner, as he turned towards the south; 'Montsou is over yonder.'

And with outstretched hand he indicated certain spots invisible in the darkness, naming them as he did so. Over at Montsou Fauvelle's sugar works were still going, but the Hoton refinery had dismissed half its hands. The only establishments that seemed able to bear up were Dutilleul's flour-mills and Bleuze's rope-yard, where they manufactured mine cables. Then, with a sweeping motion of his hand, embracing half of the northern horizon, he went on: Sonneville's building yards had not got a third of their usual orders; at the Marchiennes smelting works only two furnaces out of three were alight; and a strike had been threatening at the Gagebois glassworks because the masters wanted to lower the wages.

'I know—I know,' the young man repeated at each fresh indication. 'I've been there.'

'As for ourselves,' continued the waggoner, 'we're still kept going, though all the pits have lowered their output. And look over yonder at the Victory blasting works; they've only two fires alight there.'

Then once more he started off behind his sleepy horse and empty trucks.

From the spot where Étienne stood he could overlook the whole of the country. The darkness was as dense as ever, but the old chap's waving hand seemed to have filled it with a crushing, hopeless misery, which the young man felt to be everywhere around him in that boundless expanse. Was it not a wail of hunger that the March wind sent howling over the bleak, bare country? The squalls seemed to be lashing themselves into a fury—to be sounding the death-knell of all labour—to be bringing a famine that would lay low thousands of men. And Étienne's glances, wandering hither and thither, tried to pierce the gloom—eager and yet afraid to see what there might be there. But everything was chaotic in that abyss of darkness. All he could see in the distance was the flames of coke ovens and smelting furnaces. The former, with their batteries of a hundred chimneys, displayed lines of ruddy flames, while the two towers more to the left sent a

bluish glow skywards like gigantic torches. There was all the melancholy of a threatening conflagration about the scene. No other stars arose on the horizon save those nocturnal fires of the land of coal and iron.

'You belong to Belgium, perhaps?' suddenly resumed the old waggoner, who had come back and was standing behind Étienne.

He had only brought three trucks this time. They might as well be emptied while an accident that had happened to the cage was being repaired. A bolt that had given way would prevent further work for at least a quarter of an hour. Down below everything had become silent; the banksmen were standing still; the rumbling of the trucks over the platform had ceased. Only the distant sound of a smith's hammer beating iron fell upon the ear.

'No, I come from the south,' answered the young man.

Then the red-haired fellow who worked the tilter, having emptied the trucks, came to sit down on the mound, well pleased with the accident. He kept obstinately silent, only raising his big, dull eyes to look at the old carter as if overwhelmed by so many words. In fact, the carter was, as a rule, by no means talkative. But the stranger's face evidently pleased him, and he was taken with some itching of the tongue, some desire to unburthen himself, such as sometimes causes old folks to talk aloud to themselves.

'I,' said he, 'belong to Montsou; my name is Jollycorpse.'

'A nickname, surely?' asked Étienne, in surprise.

The old man sniggered contentedly, and pointed to the Voreux pit. 'That's it. Three times have they taken me out of there in pieces: the first time with every hair of my body singed; the second time with my carcase choke-full of earth; the third time with my stomach full of water, like a frog's. Then, as they saw that I wouldn't kick the bucket, they named me Jollycorpse just for fun. But my real name's Vincent Maheu.'

His gaiety increased, his laugh sounding like the creaking of a badly greased wheel and ending in a violent fit of coughing. The fire was shining full upon his huge head, with white and scanty hair, and a flat face of a livid pallor speckled with bluish spots. He was very short, with an apoplectical neck, misshapen legs, and long arms whose square hands descended to his knees. Like his horse, too,

which remained motionless without sign of being inconvenienced by the wind, he seemed to be made of stone—as if he neither felt the biting cold nor heard the squalls whistling past his ears. When he had done coughing he spat, and invariably brought up coal-dust.

'You have been at work for a good many years at the mine, I suppose?' said Étienne, who noticed this.

Jollycorpse opened his long arms. 'For a good many years?' he repeated. 'I should think so. I was barely eight when I first went down into the Voreux here, and now I am fifty-eight; so reckon it out for yourself. I've been everything down there—from trammer, as soon as I had the strength to push the trucks, to hewer, when I could ply a pick; eighteen years of the last job. Then, on account of my wretched legs, they set me to quarrying, cogging, and looking after the props, until they had to take me out because the doctor said I was likely to leave my bones there. Five years ago I became waggoner. So I've had fifty years of it in all—forty-five of them down below. That's a pretty record, isn't it?'

While he was talking some pieces of flaming coal that fell from the brazier cast a sanguineous glow upon his livid face.

'They tell me to take some rest,' he went on, 'but I don't mean to. I'm not such a flat as they think me. I'm right enough for another two years, until I'm sixty, and then I shall have my pension of a hundred and eighty francs. If I were to say good-bye now they'd ship me off with one of a hundred and fifty. They're sharp as needles, the masters are. Besides, if it weren't for my legs I should be strong enough; but it's that confounded water that's got into me; I used to get so soaked in the cuttings. There are days when I can't stir without pain.'

Another fit of coughing made him pause.

'And it makes you cough also?' said Étienne.

But he shook his head violently, and, when he was at length able to speak, replied: 'No, no; but I caught cold a month ago. I never had a cough before, and now I can't get rid of it. It's odd, too, but I keep on spitting and spitting——'

Again he had to stop for fully a minute.

'Is it blood you bring up?' asked Étienne.

Jollycorpse slowly wiped his lips with the back of his

hand. 'No, it's coal. I've got enough of it inside me to keep me warm for the rest of my days. And still, it's five years since I set foot below. It seems I had it in stock without being aware of it. Never mind! Coal preserves one, you know!'

Silence fell once more. The strokes of the smith's hammer ascended rhythmically from the shaft below. The wind howled by like a wail of hunger and weariness from the depths of the night. Standing there before the flickering flames, the old miner went on, recalling the past. It wasn't since yesterday that he and his had been plying the pick down below. The family had worked for the Montsou Mining Company ever since it started—a matter of a hundred and six years already. His grandfather, Guillaume Maheu, when but a stripling of fifteen, had been the first to find caking coal in the old Réquillart pit, the first that the company had worked, over yonder, near the Fauvelle sugar refinery. This was known all over the country, for the seam had been called the Guillaume seam, after his grandfather's Christian name. He, Jollycorpse, had never known his grandfather, but, from what he had been told, he must have been very strong and tall, though he died at sixty of old age. Then his father, Nicolas Maheu, called the Red, had been killed, when barely forty, down in that very Voreux pit, which was being sunk at the time. There was a slip, and he was found flat as a pancake, both blood and bones being crushed out of him by the masses of fallen rock. Two of Jollycorpse's uncles and his three brothers had also left their skins below. He himself, who had come out of it fairly perfect, with only his legs damaged, was considered a clever fellow. Oh, there were risks. But what could a man do? He had to work at something, so as well work at this trade as at any other. His son, Toussaint Maheu, and his grandsons, and all his family, who were living opposite in the miners' village, risked their lives down below every day. Over a hundred years of coal-mining, the young ones after the elders, and all for the same 'guv'nor.' Ah! there were a good many trader folks who couldn't tell their family history so well.

'After all, as long as one gets food, what's the odds?' observed Étienne.

'That's what I say. As long as one gets bread to eat one can manage to live.' Then Jollycorpse lapsed into silence, and turned towards the miners' village, where a few lights

began to twinkle behind the windows. The clock of Montsou struck four. The cold was becoming keener.

'Is your company very rich?' resumed Étienne.

The old man shrugged his shoulders, then dropped them as if overwhelmed by a weight of money.

'Rich? I should think so, indeed. Perhaps not so rich as its neighbour, the Anzin Company; but there are untold millions, for all that. Nineteen pits in all: thirteen for working—the Voreux, the Victory, Crèvecœur, Mirou, Saint-Thomas, Madeleine, Feutry-Cantel, and others besides—and six for pumping or ventilation, like Réquillart. Then there are ten thousand workmen, and rights spreading over sixty-seven communes, an output of five thousand tons a day, a railway connecting all the pits, and all sorts of workshops and factories. Yes, yes, there is plenty of brass in it all!'

The rumbling of some trucks on the settle-board made the yellowish horse prick its ears. The cage must have been repaired by this time, for the banksmen had resumed work. While putting his four-footed companion to the trucks, the waggoner added in a low voice, addressing himself to the animal, 'Shouldn't get in the habit of jabbering like that, you idle brute. If Monsieur Hennebeau only knew that you were wasting your time like this!'

At this, Étienne, who wrapped in thought had been looking up at the sky, inquired, 'Then the mine belongs to Monsieur Hennebeau?'

'No,' explained the old man, 'Monsieur Hennebeau is only the general manager. He is paid, like the rest of us.'

Thereupon the young fellow pointed to the vast expanse which he divined, as it were, behind the darkness. 'To whom does all that belong, then?'

But Jollycorpse could not answer immediately. He was seized with another fit of coughing, so violent, indeed, that it took him some minutes to recover his breath.

'All that? We don't know. To somebody or other,' he said at last, and with his forefinger he pointed to some distant undefined spot, peopled by the folk for whom the Maheus had been working for over a century. His voice had assumed a tone of religious awe: it was as if he alluded to some inaccessible tabernacle, where crouched the insatiable power to which they sacrificed their flesh and blood, without ever beholding it face to face.

'If one at least had sufficient bread to eat,' resumed

Étienne, reverting to his original train of thought, without any apparent transition.

'Yes, as you say, if one always had bread to eat; but that would be too much of a good thing!' retorted Jollycorpse.

His horse had started off, and he in his turn disappeared with the dragging step of an invalid. Meantime the red-haired fellow attending to the tilting crane had not stirred. Gathered up almost in a ball, with his chin betwixt his knees, he stared vacantly before him with his big, dim eyes.

Étienne still lingered there, though he had taken up his bundle. He felt his back chilled by the bitter blast, while his chest roasted before the fierce fire. He would, perhaps, after all, do well to inquire at the pit: the old man might not know. Besides, he would take any job. What was to become of him? Where was he to go in that region, starving for want of work? Was he to die like a dog behind some wall? Yet he hesitated. He felt a nameless fear of that Voreux pit, in the midst of that bleak country, steeped in the densest obscurity. At each squall the wind seemed to increase in violence, as though it blew from an ever extending horizon. Not a gleam of dawn whitened the lifeless heavens. Only the coke ovens and smelting furnaces threw up a lurid glow, imparting a blood-like tinge to the darkness without illumining its unknown depths. And the Voreux pit down in the hollow, where it crouched like some evil beast, panted yet more noisily, as if it experienced growing difficulty and pain in its digestion of human flesh and blood.

II

Amidst the surrounding corn and beetroot fields the miners' village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty lay fast asleep beneath the black sky. One could but vaguely distinguish its four double rows of cottages, built back to back on the self-same pattern like barracks or the wings of a hospital, and parted by three broad avenues which were cut up into tiny patches of garden. And on the deserted plateau all that one heard was the moaning of the wind sweeping through the broken garden fences.

At No. 16 of the second row of cottages, that occupied by the Maheus, not a soul was stirring. The one room on the

first floor was still wrapt in deep gloom that seemed to cast a crushing weight on the slumber of the human beings whom one could divine to be lying there, open-mouthed and overpowered by fatigue. In spite of the bitter cold outside, the air there was close and warm, as in a crowded dormitory.

The clock in the room on the ground floor struck four; still nothing stirred; a chorus of soft sibilant breathing continued, accompanied by loud snores. But suddenly Catherine sat up in bed. From sheer habit she had counted the four strokes of the clock below without having the strength to wake up completely. At last, however, she jerked her legs from under the blankets, and fumbled for a match wherewith to light the tallow candle. For a moment she remained seated on the edge of the mattress, her head feeling so heavy that it sank upon her shoulders, as if it would fain have sought the bolster again.

The candle now lighted up the square room, which had two windows and contained three bedsteads. A table, a wardrobe, and two chairs of old walnut-wood completed the furniture. Their smoky hue contrasted with the walls, which were painted a bright yellow. There was nothing else in the room save a few clothes dangling from some nails, a pitcher standing on the tiled floor, and a red earthenware pan doing duty as a washing-basin. In the bed to the left Zacharie, the eldest of the children, a lad of twenty-one, lay beside his brother Jeanlin, an urchin of eleven. In the bed to the right, two little ones, Lénore and Henri, the first about six years old, the other only four, were sleeping with their arms around each other's necks. Catherine shared the third bed with her sister Alzire, a little cripple who was so puny for her nine years that, but for her hump, which dug into the other's ribs, the latter would not have felt her to be there. The glazed door stood open, and showed the landing passage, a kind of narrow, funnel-like place, where the father and mother occupied a fourth bed, against which stood the cradle of the latest addition to their family, Estelle, a baby scarcely three months old.

Catherine made a desperate effort. She stretched herself and clutched with both hands at her red hair, which tumbled over her forehead and neck. Still very slim at fifteen years of age, she had delicate arms, whose milky whiteness contrasted with her face, which had already become sallow from the constant use of soft soap. A final yawn made her open

her somewhat large mouth and show her teeth, which were splendid, albeit set in pale gums that indicated chlorosis. Her grey eyes were still moist with sleep, against which she struggled in a painful way, like one who found her fatigue overpowering.

But a kind of prolonged grunt came from the landing, and Maheu in a thick voice stuttered: 'Now then. It's time to get up. Are you lighting the candle, Catherine?'

'Yes, father; it's just struck below.'

'Look sharp about it, then. If you had danced a little less last night, you would have called us a little earlier. What a nice lazy life to lead.'

Then he went on grumbling, but was again overcome by sleep, so that his reproaches became indistinct, and finally ceased amidst a fresh snore.

The young girl, still in her shift, and with her feet bare on the tiled floor, moved lazily about the room. As she went she tucked in the two little ones, Henri and Lénore, whose counterpane had slipped down. They did not stir, plunged as they were in the heavy sleep of childhood. Alzire—wide awake—had turned over without a word to take the warm place left by her big sister.

'I say, Zacharie! and you, Jeanlin, I say, wake up!' repeated Catherine, standing before her two brothers, who were stretched at full length, their noses buried in the bolster. She was obliged to take the big one by the shoulders, shake him, and pull the bedclothes partially away.

'Don't be an idiot, leave me alone!' muttered Zacharie angrily, as he at last sat up in bed. 'I don't like practical jokes, you know. . . . Thunder and blazes! To think that one has to turn out at this time of night!'

He was thin, badly built, with a long face, dirty, as it were, with the scanty bristles of a sprouting beard. He had yellow hair, and the bloodless, sickly complexion common to the family.

'It's struck downstairs,' repeated Catherine. 'Get on your clothes, or father will be angry.'

Then she turned to Jeanlin, who, having made himself snug again, closed his eyes and said, 'Go and be hanged; I'm asleep.'

Catherine burst out laughing. He was so small, with tiny limbs and huge joints, the latter enlarged by a scrofulous complaint, that without an effort she took him in her arms,

But he began kicking, and his pale, monkeyish face, with green eyes and large ears, turned livid at the idea of his weakness. Without a word he savagely bit his sister on the breast.

'You spiteful little brute,' she muttered, suppressing a cry and putting him down again.

Alzire, silent but wide awake, had meantime pulled her bedclothes up to her chin. With the wistful, intelligent eyes of a confirmed cripple, she watched her sister and brothers dress themselves. There was another quarrel round the earthenware pan; the lads hustled Catherine because she took too long in washing herself. There was not the least attempt at privacy of any sort; they were as free and easy together as a litter of puppies. Catherine was ready first. She slipped into her miner's trousers, put on her canvas jacket, and tied her blue handkerchief round her chignon; and in those clean Monday morning clothes she looked like a little man. Nothing betrayed her sex save the slight undulation of her hips.

'When the old 'un comes in,' said Zacharie, spitefully, 'he'll be pleased to find his bed tumbled about. I'll tell him you did it.'

He was talking of his grandfather, old Jollycorpse, who, working at night, slept during the day; so that the bed had no time to cool—there was always somebody snoring in it.

Without answering her brother, Catherine began to smooth the bedclothes and to tuck them in. But for the last minute or so there had been a noise in the next cottage. Those brick tenements, run up on the cheap by the mining company, were so flimsy that the faintest breath could be heard through the walls. Folks lived cheek-by-jowl, as it were, from one end of the rows to the other; and not the slightest domestic incident could remain hidden.

'Ah! ah!' said Catherine as she listened to the noise. 'I believe that Levaque has gone off already, and left Bouteloup and his wife alone in the house.'

The others laughed. Every morning they made merry about their next-door neighbour's family of three—a married hewer who lodged a bachelor fellow-workman.

'Philomène's coughing,' said Catherine after listening again. She spoke of the eldest of the Levaques, a big girl of nineteen, the mother of Zacharie's two children. She was weak in the chest—so weak, indeed, that she could not go

'down below,' and was working at the pit's mouth as a corf picker.

'Pooh! it isn't Philomène at all,' replied Zacharie, 'she's fast asleep! It's beastly, sleeping till six o'clock!'

Thereupon an idea seemed to strike him, for he went to open the window. Outside, in the dark, the village was waking up: one by one did lights begin to twinkle between the bars of the closed shutters. Then there ensued another dispute between Zacharie and his sister. He was leaning out of the window in order to get some fresh food for a scandal that was current in connection with the head viewer and Madame Pierron, a banksman's wife. But his sister called to him that he was troubling himself for nothing, as Pierron was now working the day shift, and so Dansaert would not call. Meantime the cold wind came in through the open window in icy gusts; and all at once a loud wail arose from the dark landing. Little Estelle, lying in her cradle, objected to the cold air being let in upon her.

This time Maheu woke up altogether. What could be the matter with him that he had dropped off to sleep again like a lazy brute? He began to swear so loudly that the children in the room dared scarcely breathe. Zacharie and Jeanlin slowly finished washing themselves, as if tired already before starting. Alzire continued watching silently. And the two little ones, Lénore and Henri, still lying in each other's arms, never so much as stirred in spite of the noise around them.

'Catherine, give me the candle,' shouted Maheu. She finished buttoning her jacket, and then carried the candle to the dark tunnel, leaving her brothers to look for their clothes by the faint glimmer that came through the open doorway. Her father sprang out of bed, whilst she groped her way downstairs in her coarse woollen stockings to the room on the ground floor, where she lit another candle to make the coffee by. All the clogs of the family were ranged in a line, under the sideboard.

'Will you hold your noise, you brat?' shouted Maheu, exasperated by the cries of Estelle, who would not cease squealing.

He was short, like old Jollycorpse, a kind of puffed-out counterpart of the waggoner, with much the same flat and sallow face, and close-cropped yellow hair. Frightened by his big sinewy arms swinging about above her, the baby screamed louder than ever.

'Let her be; you know well enough she won't leave off,' said the wife, shifting to the middle of the bed.

She also had waked up and was grumbling. It was a shame that she could not have her proper night's rest. Why could they not get up and go off quietly? She lazily stretched herself out, with the bedclothes snugly wrapped round her, showing only her elongated face, with good but coarse features, already spoilt at thirty-nine by a life of privation and prolific maternity. With her eyes raised to the ceiling, she began to hold forth slowly, while her man went on dressing. And the child continued to cry, neither of them taking further notice of her.

'You know, I'm without a copper, and it's only Monday; six days to wait for the fortnight's pay. It's no good; we can't go on like this. Between the lot of you, you merely bring in nine francs a day, and how am I to manage with that? There's ten of us to be fed.'

'Oh! nine francs!' protested Maheu. 'I and Zacharie three francs each, that makes six; Catherine and the old man two each, that makes four: four and six make ten. And Jeanlin one, that makes eleven.'

'Yes, eleven, but you forget the Sundays and off days. I tell you it never comes to more than nine.'

He did not at first answer, because he was stooping to look for his leather belt that had fallen down. But when he had risen, he replied: 'One mustn't grumble. I keep up very well. There's many a one who, at forty-two, is obliged to take to propping or cogging.'

'May be, old man, but that doesn't put bread into our mouths. How am I to manage? You've no brass, have you?'

'I've got two sous.'

'Keep them to have a drink of beer. Good heavens! what am I to do! Six days—there'll be no end of them. We owe sixty francs to Maigrat, who showed me the door the day before yesterday. All the same, I'll try him again, but what if he persists in refusing?'

Then La Maheude continued complaining in a mournful tone, lying the while perfectly still, and now and then closing her eyes to escape the melancholy flicker of the candle. She repeated that the cupboard was empty, and that the children were asking for bread. Even the coffee was nearly all gone, and the water gave one the colic. And the days were long

and weary, when one had nothing to cheat one's hunger but boiled cabbage-leaves. Little by little she was obliged to raise her voice, as the baby's cries drowned her words. Those cries proved unbearable at last. Maheu all at once became aware of them again; whereupon, beside himself, fuming and stuttering with anger, he snatched the infant from the cradle and flung her on the bed.

'There, take her, or I'll strangle her. The horrid brat! she wants for nothing, sucks as much as she likes, and yet makes more noise than all the others.'

However, the little one, comforted by the warmth of the bed, now quietly began to take the breast.

'Haven't the folks at La Piolaine told you to go and see them?' asked Maheu, after a short pause.

The wife pursed her lips with an air of scarcely-concealed doubt. 'Yes; I met them in the road; they were giving away clothing to poor children. I'll take Lénore and Henri to them this morning. If they would only give me a five-franc piece it would be something.'

Silence ensued once more. Maheu was ready; he remained stock-still for a moment, then in a low husky voice closed the discussion.

'What's the good of fretting? Do the best you can; see that you get some soup ready. It's no use my wasting words; I'd better go down to work.'

'True enough,' answered the wife. 'Blow out the candle; I don't want to see the colour of my thoughts.'

He did as he was bidden. Zacharie and Jeanlin were already going downstairs. He followed them, and the wooden staircase creaked beneath their heavy stockinged feet. Behind them everything relapsed into gloom. The little ones slept. Even Alzire had closed her eyes again. But the mother remained wide awake in the darkness, while Estelle, sucking away, purred every now and then like a kitten.

Downstairs Catherine had at once looked to the fire, which was always kept alight in the cast-iron grate, with an oven on either side. The company made each family a monthly allowance of about twenty bushels of hard coal, the refuse picked up in the galleries. It lighted slowly, so the young girl made it up every night and found it ready to her hand in the morning on simply stirring it and placing a few lumps of soft coal on the top. After putting the kettle on, she stooped down before the sideboard.

The room was a fairly large one, occupying the whole of the ground floor, its walls painted apple-green, its well-scrubbed tiles bestrewn with white sand. Everything showed the cleanliness of a Flemish home. Besides the sideboard of varnished deal, the furniture consisted of a table and some chairs of the same wood. Pasted on the wall, a few highly-coloured prints, the portraits of the Emperor and the Empress, given by the company, some saints and some soldiers with plenty of gold illumination about them, contrasted violently with the bareness of the rest of the room; for there were no other ornaments save a pink cardboard box on the sideboard, and a cuckoo clock with a gaudily-painted dial. Near the door opening on to the staircase was another one, that of some steps leading to the cellar. Notwithstanding the great cleanness, a smell of cooked onions, shut in since the previous night, poisoned the heated atmosphere, rendered oppressive already by the never-ceasing fumes of the coal fire.

Catherine remained reflecting before the open cupboard. Only a hunk of bread was left; there was sufficient cream cheese, but scarcely a scrap of butter. And yet she had to prepare slices for four of them. At last she made up her mind. She cut up the bread, covered one slice with cheese, scraped another with butter, and stuck the two together. The pair formed what is called the 'brick,' the sandwich which the miners took with them every morning. Four 'bricks' were soon laid out in a row upon the table; assigned according to the strictest dictates of equity, the largest being for the father and the smallest for little Jeanlin.

Though Catherine appeared to be entirely absorbed by her household duties, she must still have been thinking of he scandal alluded to by Zacharie, respecting the head viewer and La Pierronne, for all at once she opened the front door and looked out into the dark night. The wind was still howling, but a greater number of lights now appeared at the low windows of the village, whence arose a vague stir of awakening. Doors were already slamming, and dark lines of workmen disappeared into the night. Still the girl remained on the threshold, shivering with cold and watching the opposite cottage across the strip of garden ground. Suddenly the door opened, and Catherine's curiosity increased. But it was only the Pierrons' daughter, Lydie, starting for the pit.

The noise of the kettle boiling over made Catherine turn round. She thereupon closed the door and ran to the fire-

place, but too late to prevent some water running on to the fire. There was no fresh coffee left, so she was obliged to use the grounds left from the day before. She sweetened the drink by throwing some moist sugar into the pot. At that same moment her father and brothers came down.

'Hang it all!' said Zacharie, sniffing at his bowl, 'that won't give us a headache.'

Maheu resignedly shrugged his shoulders. 'Never mind, it's hot, and it isn't half bad.'

Jeanlin gathered up the crumbs of the sandwiches, and began making himself some sop, while Catherine, after drinking her share, emptied the remainder of the coffee into some tin cans. They all stood up in the feeble light of the smoking candle, hastily gulping down their drink.

'Are we going? We haven't got incomes to live on!' said the father.

But a call came from upstairs through the open doorway. It was the mother shouting. 'You'd better take all the bread. I've a little vermicelli for the children.'

'All right,' cried Catherine in answer. She had made up the fire afresh, and put a small pipkin of soup on the hob in readiness for her grandfather's return at six o'clock. Then they all took their clogs from under the sideboard, slipped the strings of their coffee-cans over their shoulders, and the 'bricks' inside their jackets, right between their shoulders. The men went out first, the girl bringing up the rear, after she had blown out the candle and turned the key in the lock. The house once more became quite dark.

One by one, indeed, the lights of the miners' village disappeared; a last door banged, and then everything became quiet. The women and the little ones fell asleep again in the now roomy beds; and from the lifeless village to the panting Voreux pit, under the gusty wind, there slowly descended a a long phantom-like file of pitmen going to their work, rolling along with a gait peculiar to themselves, their long arms crossed on their chests, while the 'bricks' between their shoulders gave them the appearance of so many hunchbacks. Clad in thin linen garments, they shivered with cold; still they did not hurry, but straggled along the road like a scattered drove of cattle.

III

ÉTIENNE, having at last come down from the mound of shale, had plucked up courage to go to the pit's mouth, but all the men of whom he inquired about the chance of getting a job shrugged their shoulders, and told him to wait for the head viewer. He was left free to wander about the place among the ill-lighted buildings, full of black gaping holes and bewildering with their many stories and rooms. After ascending a dark, rotten staircase, and traversing a rickety gangway, he had passed through the screening shed, plunged in such obscurity as to oblige him to feel his way lest he should knock against something. Suddenly he saw in front of him two huge yellow eyes transpiercing the gloom. He was in the receiving shed, just under the head of the shaft. A viewer, old Richomme, a thick-set fellow, with a heavy grey moustache and a good-natured soldier-like look, was just passing on his way to the receiver's office.

'You're not in want of a workman here who doesn't mind putting his hand to any job?' asked Étienne once more.

Richomme was going to say 'No,' when he checked himself. 'Wait for Monsieur Dansaert, the head viewer,' he replied like the others, continuing on his way.

There were four lanterns there with reflectors, which threw all the light upon the mouth of the shaft, vividly illumining the iron railings, the levers of the signals and bolts, and the uprights of the frame in which the two cages ran. The remainder of the vast place, which resembled the nave of a church, was wrapped in semi-darkness and peopled by huge floating shadows. The lamp-shed alone shone out with a bright glare at the farther end, while in the receiver's office there burnt a solitary light which gleamed faintly like a star about to disappear. The trucks were rumbling incessantly across the iron floor, pushed by banksmen, whose bodies, almost bent in twain, could be distinguished amidst all the dark and noisy stir.

For a moment Étienne remained motionless, bereft both of sight and hearing. He was chilled to the bones by the draughts coming from every corner of the building. At last he advanced a few steps, attracted by the engine, whose steel and copper work he could now distinguish. Placed at about

five-and-twenty yards beyond the shaft, in a shed considerably higher than the other one, the engine rested so solidly and evenly on its massive bedding of brickwork that, though it was working at high pressure, with all the force of four hundred horse-power, the motion of its huge driving-rod, plunging upward and downward with oily softness, did not cause the slightest vibration to the floor or walls. The engine-man, with his hand on the lever, listened to the ringing of the signals, and looked fixedly at the indicator which showed the shaft with its different stories in a vertical groove, where bullets representing the cages dangled from strings. At each fresh start, the drums, two enormous wheels five yards in circumference, around whose boxes the steel cables coiled and uncoiled themselves, whirled so rapidly that they looked like so much grey dust.

'Look out there!' shouted three banksmen, who were dragging a gigantic ladder.

Étienne was nearly knocked down. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the sight before him, and he stared at the cables, ninety feet of steel ribbon, leaping straight into the tower of the shaft, whence, after passing over some pulleys, they dropped vertically into the pit, where they were attached to the cages. An iron framework, suggesting that of a belfry, supported the pulleys. And the whole gave Étienne the impression of a bird winging its flight. Noiselessly, without impediment, ever and ever did the cable come and go, capable of lifting twelve tons weight at a time, at the rate of thirty feet a second.

'Look out there!' again shouted the banksmen, who were shifting the ladder to the other side to examine the left-hand pulley.

Étienne slowly retraced his steps to the receiving shed. The terrific whirl above his head had somewhat bewildered him. Shivering in the draughty air, deafened by the rumbling of the trucks, he stood watching the working of the cages. Close to the shaft, the signal, a heavy hammer moved by a lever, pulled from below by a rope, and falling upon a metal block, kept striking—one stroke to stop, two to let down, three to haul up. The blows rose incessantly above the tumult, accompanied by a perpetual sounding of alarums. The brakesman directing the manœuvres increased the noise by shouting his directions to the engine-man through a speaking-trumpet. Amidst all this commotion the cages came

and went, filled and emptied, without Étienne understanding aught of the complicated business.

One thing he comprehended well enough—that the shaft swallowed up men by mouthfuls of twenty and thirty at one gulp, and with such apparent ease as to be unconscious of it. At four o'clock the descent of the colliers had begun. They arrived from the shed, barefooted, lamp in hand, and waited in small groups until a sufficient number had collected. Without a sound, gliding softly from the dark depths below, the cage, with its four stories, each containing two trucks full of coal, swung silently on to the platform in front. At each landing the banksmen took out the full trucks and replaced them by empty ones, or by others already filled with wood for propping purposes. The colliers wedged themselves into the empty trucks, five by five, as many as forty at a time when they occupied all the compartments. An order, a kind of indistinct roar, was shouted through the speaking-trumpet; the signal-rope was pulled four times to give notice of the starting of this cargo of human flesh; then after a slight jerk the cage plunged silently, like a stone thrown down a well, leaving no trace of its passage behind save the vibrating flight of the cable.

'It's deep, isn't it?' Étienne asked of a collier, who, still half asleep, stood near him waiting for his turn.

'Just a little over eighteen hundred feet,' the man replied. 'But there are four junctions before that, the first at nearly a thousand feet from the top.'

Both became silent, with their eyes fixed on the cable which was coming up.

'And when it breaks?' resumed Étienne.

'Ah! when it breaks,' echoed the man: and he finished the sentence with an expressive gesture. His turn to descend had come; the cage was waiting. He squatted down in it with some comrades. It plunged again, and in another four minutes reappeared for a fresh load. And so things went on for more than half an hour, during which the shaft continued swallowing its human prey, in more or less gluttonous fashion according to the depth of the junction to which the cage descended. Ever famished, like some giant who was capable of digesting a whole nation, it swallowed and swallowed, while the gloom remained lifeless and the cage kept reappearing from the abyss amid the same voracious silence.

At last Étienne was taken with the sickening sensation

that had assailed him on the mound of shale. Why remain there? The head viewer would send him about his business as all the others had done. Moved by a vague fear, he suddenly made up his mind and went away, only halting when he was outside in front of the boiler-room. The door stood wide open, and one could see the seven boilers, each with two furnaces. Athwart the puffs of white hissing steam he saw a stoker busy feeding one of the furnaces, whose glaring heat could be felt as far as the threshold. The young man, only too glad to get a little more warmth, was eagerly drawing near, when he encountered a fresh batch of miners on their way to the pit. They were the Maheus and Levaques. When Étienne saw Catherine, with her good-natured, boyish look, walking in front, some superstitious idea took hold of him to risk a last application.

'I say, mate, they don't happen to want a workman here who'll put his hand to anything?'

She looked at him in surprise, somewhat startled by this abrupt appeal from out of the darkness. But her father, who was just behind her, had also heard the question, and he answered, and remained talking for a moment. No, there was no berth vacant. That poor devil of a workman wandering along the highroads in search of a job interested him. Once out of Étienne's hearing, he said to the others, 'After all, we might be like that. We mustn't grumble. Every one isn't killed with work.'

The gang made straight for the waiting shed, a spacious building roughly whitewashed, with padlocked lockers all round it. In the centre was a big iron fireplace, a kind of stove without a door, glowing with tightly-packed incandescent coal, a lump of which split every now and then and fell upon the trodden earthen floor. There was no other light there save this brazier, whose ruddy gleams danced over the grimy woodwork to the ceiling coated with black dust.

At the moment when the Maheus arrived loud laughter rang out there amidst the intense heat. A score and a half of colliers were standing about, with their backs to the fire, roasting themselves, with an air of thorough enjoyment. They all came thither before going down, 'to take a stock of heat between their skin and their flesh against the moisture below,' as they expressed it. But that morning they were more than usually gay: they were chaffing La Mouquette, a trammer girl of about eighteen, whose plumpness of person

was accentuated by her masculine garb. She lived at Réquillart with her father, old Mouque, a stableman, and her brother, Mouquet, a banksman. Only their hours of work did not coincide, so she came to the pit alone. And in her spare time she was always gadding about, picking up a fresh sweetheart every other week. One day when she was reproached with having been kissed by a nailer from Marchiennes, she had almost burst with rage, exclaiming that she respected herself too much, and would rather cut her arm off than allow any such liberty on the part of anybody but a collier.

'So it's no longer big Chaval?' said one miner, with a jeer. 'You've gone for that little 'un now. I saw you together the other side of Réquillart.'

'What then?' replied La Mouquette, good-humouredly. 'What's it to you?'

At length the hilarity subsided, and the girl began to tell Maheu that Fleurance, tall Fleurance, would come to work no more. She had been found the previous night lying stark and stiff on her bed. Some said it was a case of heart disease, others one of a quart of gin gulped down at a draught. Anyhow, it vexed Maheu, who cursed his bad luck at losing a trammer girl and being unable to replace her. He worked at piecework, there being four hewers associated together in his cutting—he, Zacharie, Levaque, and Chaval. If they merely had Catherine to fill and run the trucks they would get behindhand. Suddenly, however, an idea struck him:

'And that fellow who was looking for a job?' he cried.

Just then Dansaert was passing the shed. Maheu told him the story, and asked leave to take the man on. He laid stress upon the wish which the company had expressed some time already to gradually replace the trammer girls by lads, as had been done at Anzin. The head viewer could not help smiling, however, because the idea of excluding the women from the pit was generally distasteful to the miners, who were anxious to find work for their daughters, in spite of all considerations of morality and health. At last, after some hesitation, Dansaert consented, but on the express condition that his decision must be ratified by Monsieur Négrel, the engineer.

'Ah! well, you'll have to catch your man first; he must be far away by this time!' said Zacharie.

'No, I saw him stop at the boiler-room,' replied Cathe-

'Run and fetch him then, lazybones,' shouted Maheu.

The girl took to her heels, while a batch of men went off to the shaft, leaving the fire to others. Jeanlin did not wait for his father, but went to get his lamp in company with Bébert, a big simple-looking fellow, and Lydie, a thin, weak lassie of ten.

Étienne was indeed standing inside the boiler-room, talking to the stoker, who was feeding the fires. He shivered at the idea of having to go out into the cold night again. Nevertheless, he had just made up his mind to do so when he felt a touch on the shoulder.

'Come along,' said Catherine, 'there's something for you to do.'

At first he did not understand her; then, overcome with delight, he vigorously pressed her hand, saying, 'Thanks, mate; you're a good sort, you are.'

Catherine burst out laughing, looking at him in the red glare which fell upon them both. It tickled her fancy to be mistaken for a lad, slim as she was, with her back hair tied up under her handkerchief. He also laughed, but simply with pleasure at having found some work, and they remained face to face for a moment, their cheeks all aglow.

In the waiting shed, Maheu was squatting down before his locker, taking off his clogs and his coarse woollen stockings. When Étienne came in, the matter was settled in a few words; thirty sous a day and hard work, but he would soon learn it. The hewer advised him to keep his shoes on, and lent him an old cap made of stiff leather, intended to protect the head—a precaution which the others disdained. The tools were taken out of the locker, and it fortunately happened that Fleurance's tommy-spade was amongst them. Then, as soon as Maheu had put away their clogs, their stockings, and also Étienne's bundle, he suddenly grew impatient.

'What's he messing after, that brute Chaval? We're half an hour late this morning.'

Zacharie and Levaque were quietly roasting themselves before the fire. The former eventually observed:

'Are you waiting for Chaval? Why, he arrived before us and went down long ago.'

'What, you knew it and didn't tell me! Come along! look sharp there.'

Catherine, who was warming herself, reluctantly followed.

Étienne let her pass before him. Again he found himself in a maze of dark passages and staircases, along which bare feet went pattering But they suddenly came upon the lamp-room, a glazed apartment full of racks in which were ranged hundreds of Davy lamps, cleaned and examined the previous evening, and suggesting so many wax tapers in a chapel decked out for a funeral. At the wicket each man took his own lamp, stamped with his number; he examined and locked it himself, while the timekeeper, seated at a table, noted the hour in his register. Maheu had to intervene to procure a lamp for his new trammer. Then there was still another formality to be gone through: the men had to pass before an inspector, who made sure that their lamps were locked.

'Hang it! It's none too warm here,' said Catherine, shivering.

Étienne simply nodded. He once more found himself beside the shaft, in the receiving shed, swept by such icy draughts. He did not feel a coward; nevertheless, emotion almost choked him, as he listened to the rolling thunder of the trucks, the incessant beating of the signal hammers, and the muffled roar of the speaking-trumpet, while before him the cables incessantly coiled and uncoiled round the drums of the engine. The cages came and went with the stealthy glide of nocturnal beasts of prey, ever carrying men whom the pit seemed to suck in. It was soon Étienne's turn; he felt very cold, and nervously maintained silence, which provoked a jeer from Zacharie and Levaque; for they both disapproved the hiring of this stranger—especially Levaque, who felt hurt at not having been consulted. Noticing their hostility, Catherine felt pleased when she heard her father trying to explain things to the young man.

'Look,' said the miner, 'do you see that gear above the cage? That's a saving apparatus; those iron cramp-hooks are to bite into the uprights of the frame in case of an accident. Do they work? Not always. . . Yes, the shaft is divided into three compartments, boarded in from top to bottom; the cages in the middle, to the left the ladders——'

But he paused to grumble, without, however, venturing to raise his voice.

'What the deuce are we waiting for? Are we going to stop here till we are frozen to death?'

Richomme, the viewer, who was also waiting to go down,

with his lamp hanging on a nail stuck in his leather cap heard this remark.

'Softly, the walls have ears!' he said good-naturedly, like a man who remembered that he had been one of Maheu's own class. 'Things have to be done properly. Here we are! Get in, the lot of you.'

And, indeed, the cage with its large iron bands and close wire-netting was waiting for them, poised squarely on the bolts of the landing-stage. Maheu, Zacharie, Levaque, and Catherine got into a bottom truck, and as it was meant to hold five Étienne had to enter also. But the best places were taken, so he had to press close to the young girl, one of whose elbows stuck into his ribs. His lamp also embarrassed him; and when he was told to hook it to a buttonhole of his jacket he did not hear, but continued fumbling with it awkwardly. The loading of the trucks continued above and around them. There was some delay. It seemed to Étienne that he had been waiting several minutes. At last he felt a slight shock, and everything became confusion. Objects around him seemed to spring into the air, while he himself experienced a painful sensation as of falling. This lasted as long as he could see, while traversing the two stories of the receiving shed, but when they reached the gloom of the shaft itself he became as it were stunned, without the least perception of anything.

'Now we're off,' said Maheu quietly.

They were all at home there. He was asking himself every now and then whether they were going down or up. When the cage descended quite straight without touching the guide-ropes or uprights, it seemed to him that it remained motionless. When, on the other hand, it bumped, however slightly, he feared an accident. Besides, he could not distinguish the wall of the shaft from behind the close network to which he pressed his face. The lamps shed but a faint light on the human bodies at his feet. The ordinary lamp carried by the viewer in the next truck alone flashed out clearly like a beacon.

'This shaft is something like four yards and a half in diameter,' said Maheu, continuing to offer information. 'It's sadly in want of being tubbed afresh, for water filters in from all sides. Listen! we are getting to a stream, do you hear?'

Étienne was just asking himself what that sound of falling water meant. Some large drops had at first splashed on the

top of the cage, as when a shower is beginning; and now the downpour increased, becoming a continuous stream, a veritable deluge. There was no doubt a hole in the roof of the cage, for in a few minutes Étienne was drenched to the skin. Moreover the cold became glacial; they sank deeper and deeper into the dank gloom. Then all of a sudden there was a glare, a vision as of a cavern where some men were moving about illumined by a flash of lightning. And afterwards they sank into darkness again.

'That was the first junction,' said Maheu. 'We are now about a thousand feet from the top. Look how fast we are going.'

Raising his lamp, he cast its light on one of the uprights of the frame, which flew past like a rail under a train going at full speed. Beyond that, one could see nothing. Three more junctions were passed, with momentary flashes of light. And the noisy water kept pouring down into the darkness.

'How deep it is!' murmured Étienne.

Their descent must have lasted for hours. He felt cramped by his awkward position. Catherine's elbow was torturing him, yet he dared not stir. She had not spoken a word; he only felt her against him, keeping him warm on that side at any rate. When the cage at last got to the bottom, he was surprised to hear that the descent had lasted just one minute. However, the grating of the bolts, the sensation of having solid ground under his feet once more, suddenly made him lively, and he began to chaff Catherine.

'What have you under your skin to be as warm as that? I've got your elbow in my ribs for certain.'

Then she burst out laughing also. What a fool he must be to continue taking her for a boy! Where were his eyes? 'You've got my elbow in your eyes, more likely,' she said, amidst a tempest of laughter, for which the astonished young man could not account.

The cage was disgorging its load and the miners crossed the landing vault, excavated in the rock, and coated with strong brickwork. Three ordinary lamps lighted it. On the iron floor, men were noisily rolling full trucks of coal. A cellar-like smell oozed from the walls, whiffs of air impregnated with saltpetre blending with warm gusts from the adjacent stables. Four galleries opened there, gaping blackly.

'This way,' said Maheu to Étienne. 'You've not arrived yet; we've yet another mile and a half to go.'

The men separated into groups, and disappeared into the dark passages. Some fifteen of them took the gallery to the left, Étienne coming last, behind Maheu, in front of whom were Catherine, Zacharie, and Levaque. It was a fine gallery, reserved for the haulage, cut through the rock, and so solid that it had only been necessary to wall it in parts. One by one the miners advanced, without a word, guided by the light of their lamps. The young man stumbled at each step, knocking his toes against the rails. He was again growing uneasy at a muffled sound which he had noticed for the last few minutes—a distant noise as of a storm, increasing in violence, and coming seemingly from the very bowels of the earth. Was it the thunder of a slip bringing down upon their heads the enormous mass of rock and earth that separated them from the light of day? But a sudden flash pierced the surrounding gloom: he felt the rock-shake, and when, like his mates, he stood aside against the wall he saw a big white horse, pulling a long line of trucks, pass close in front of him. On the first truck sat Bébert holding the reins, while Jeanlin ran barefooted behind the last, clinging to it with his hands.

They resumed their journey. Farther on there was another open space whence radiated two new galleries. Then the party divided once more; the men were slowly distributing themselves throughout the mine. At this point the haulage gallery was walled in; rough-hewn oak props supported the roof and provided the shivery rock with a kind of coating behind which one perceived layers of schist glistening with mica, and a rough mass of dull, rugged sandstone. Long trains of trucks, full or empty, were continually passing and crossing with a noise as of thunder, drawn into the darkness by shadowy beasts with a phantom trot. On a double-railed siding was something that suggested a long black serpent asleep: it was a train that had been shunted; its horse neighed, so steeped in the darkness that he simply looked like a huge block of stone fallen from the vaulted roof. Then some ventilating doors opened and closed slowly. And as the pitmen advanced the gallery became narrower and its lower roof, compelling them to stoop almost continuously.

All at once Étienne knocked his head violently against some projecting rock. But for his leather cap, his skull would have been split. He, nevertheless, closely watched the slightest movements of Maheu, who was in front of him, and whose sombre silhouette stood out against the light of the

lamps. Not any of the others knocked themselves; they seemed to know every projection of the woodwork, every bulge of the rock.

The young man also suffered from the slippery ground, which became more sodden as they advanced. At certain spots they had to wade through pools of slush. But what surprised Étienne still more were the abrupt changes in the temperature. At the bottom of the shaft it had been very cool, and in the haulage gallery, through which came all the air of the mine, there had been an icy blast blowing like a storm every now and then in the narrower parts. As they advanced, however, into the other galleries, which only had their bare share of ventilation, the gusts subsided and the heat increased until it became suffocating and heavy like lead.

Maheu had hitherto kept silent. As he turned into a gallery on the right, however, he said to Étienne, without turning round: 'This is the Guillaume seam.'

It was the seam where their cutting was situated. At the first steps Étienne hurt both his head and his elbows. The sloping roof came down so low as to compel him to bend almost double for twenty and thirty yards at a time. He was ankle-deep in water. He went on thus for some couple of hundred yards, when suddenly Levaque, Zacharie and Catherine disappeared. They seemed to have flown through a narrow fissure opening in front of him.

'You must get up,' said Maheu. 'Sling your lamp to your buttonhole and hold on by the cogging.'

He himself disappeared, and Étienne could but follow him. This chimney left in the seam was intended solely for the miners, and led to all the smaller passages. Its width was equal to the thickness of the coal-bed thereabouts, that is five-and-twenty inches at the utmost. Luckily, the young man was lean enough; but being very awkward in such climbing exercise, he hoisted himself up with a useless waste of muscle, pressing in his shoulders and hips, and rising by the sheer strength of his wrists, while holding on to the pinning. When some fifty feet had been climbed, they came upon the first of the smaller passages. But Maheu's cutting was the sixth in rotation, 'in the very jaws of hell,' as he himself expressed it. At every sixty feet were passages, cut one above the other; there seemed indeed no end to the ascent through this crack that scraped one's back and chest. Étienne gasped for

breath as if the whole weight of the rocks was crushing him. His hands bled, the flesh of his legs was torn; and, above all, he felt the want of air; his veins were swelling ready to burst. In one passage which they passed he perceived two figures stooping—a thin and a stout one. They were La Mouquette and Lydie already pushing their trucks along. And he had still to climb two cuttings higher! The perspiration streaming from his forehead blinded him, and he began to despair of overtaking the others, whose agile limbs he heard gliding against the rock with a long rustling sound.

'Courage, we are there!' said Catherine.

And just as he was arriving he heard another voice call from the depths of the cutting: 'What's the meaning of this? Do you want to make a fool of me? I've a mile and a half's walk from Montsou, and yet I'm here first!'

It was Chaval—a tall, lank, bony, coarse-featured fellow of five-and-twenty. He was in a rage at having had to wait. When he perceived Étienne he asked, with a kind of contemptuous surprise, 'What's this?'

And when Maheu had told him the story, he muttered between his teeth, 'It's come to this, then; fellows take the bread out of the girls' mouths now!'

The two men exchanged a look full of that instinctive hatred that blazes into being so suddenly. Étienne had felt the insult, though as yet he did not understand. But silence fell and every one set to work. The mine was full at last, toilers were busy in every cutting on every story, and at the end of every gallery. The devouring shaft had swallowed its daily ration of men; nearly seven hundred hands were now at labour in that gigantic ants' nest, perforating the earth in every direction, as if it were some old worm-eaten log. And amidst the profound silence, the oppressiveness of the lower depths, one might have heard, by putting one's ear to the rock, all the working of those human insects, from the flight of the cables which lowered and raised the cages to the sound of the picks biting into the coal at the bottom of the farthermost cuttings.

Étienne, on turning round, found himself once more close to Catherine. But this time he suddenly divined the nascent fulness of her bosom, and understood things.

'Why, you're a girl!' he murmured, taken aback.

She answered gaily, and without the slightest blush: 'Of course I am; you've been a long time finding it out.'

IV

THE four hewers had stretched themselves at full length, one above the other, across the front of their cutting.[1] Separated one from another by boards which were driven into the seam by means of pointed wedges, and which caught the coal as it fell, they each occupied about five yards of the vein, which was so thin in this particular spot—barely more than eighteen inches—that they were, so to say, flattened between the roof and the walls, and had to crawl along on knees and elbows, unable to turn without hurting their shoulders. They had to strike the seam lying upon one side, their necks twisted and their arms wielding their short-handled picks obliquely.

At the bottom came Zacharie; Chaval and Levaque were above him, and at the very top was Maheu. Each began by striking at the bed of schist, which he hollowed out with his pick; then he made two vertical cuts in the seam and loosened the lump by driving an iron gad into the upper part. The coal was soft, the lump broke into pieces and rolled over the miner's legs and chest. The board, however, arrested all further progress until the coal formed a heap around the man, who almost entirely disappeared in the narrow opening he had made.

It was Maheu who suffered most. Up above, where he found himself, the temperature rose to ninety-five degrees;[2] there was not a whiff of air, suffocation seemed almost imminent. In order to see he had been obliged to hang his lamp on a nail beside his head, and its heat scorched his skull. But his martyrdom was still farther aggravated by the dampness. At a few inches above his face some water oozed from the rock; large drops fell rapidly with obstinate rhythm ever on the self-same spot. Though he twisted his neck, and held his head back, he could not avoid them; they ever beat and splashed upon his face. At the end of a quarter of an hour he was drenched, and, what with the heat, steaming like a boiler. That morning, too, the water kept on falling in his eye, and made him swear. Still, he would not give over, but

[1] The reader should remember that the conditions and in some respects the methods of coal-mining are not the same in France as in England.—ED.

[2] Fahrenheit.

struck his hardest, shaking violently the while between the rocks, like a fly caught between the leaves of a book, and in danger of being absolutely flattened.

The toilers did not exchange a syllable. Nothing was heard but their irregular blows, muffled as if coming from a distance, and falling upon the dead atmosphere without ever an echo. The gloom, too, was dense, laden with flying coal-dust and oppressive gases, unrelieved by aught save the reddish flicker of the safety-lamps within cylinders of wire-gauze. Nothing could be plainly distinguished; the cutting opened and ascended like a flat chimney built obliquely, which the accumulated soot of a dozen winters filled with impenetrable gloom. Spectral forms moved about in it; the rounded contour of a hip, a knotty arm, and a threatening head, begrimed as for a contemplated crime, were visible now and then, but nothing more. At intervals some crystal-like glimmers flashed from the sharp edges of falling coal. Then everything became black again, and the picks went on dealing heavy, muffled blows, amidst the panting of oppressed chests, and the growling born of discomfort and fatigue beneath the heavy foul air and the downpour of water.

Zacharie, still limp from the effects of a spree overnight, soon gave over on the pretext of pinning, which for a time enabled him to remain gently whistling, while vacantly staring at nothing in particular. More than three yards of the seam remained unsupported behind the hewers, who had taken no precautions to prop the rock, indifferent as they were to personal danger and anxious to save time.

'You young swell there!' shouted Zacharie to Étienne, 'just hand me up some pins.'

Étienne, who was just learning from Catherine how to use his tommy-spade, had to carry some pins into the cutting. There was still a little stock left from the day before. As a rule, a provision of them, cut to the measure of the vein, was taken down every morning.

'Look sharp about it, you confounded slow coach,' resumed Zacharie, on seeing how awkwardly the new trammer hoisted himself up amidst the coal, while carrying four oaken pins.

With his pick Zacharie then made a notch in the roof, another in the wall, and wedged the ends of a pin into them, thus propping up the rock. In the afternoon the quarrymen

gathered up the gobbing left by the hewers in the galleries and filled the worked-out cuttings of the seam, burying the wooden props, and leaving only the uppermost and the lowest galleries free for the haulage.

Maheu left off moaning. He had at last managed to loosen his block, and while wiping the perspiration from his face with his sleeve, became anxious to know why Zacharie had come up behind him.

'Leave that alone,' said he. 'We'll see about it after breakfast. We had better get the coal down if we want to have our number of trucks.'

'But it's dropping,' replied the young man. 'Look, there's a crack. I'm afraid it'll fall in.'

However, his father simply shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah! pooh, indeed! fall in! Besides, it wouldn't be the first time, and they would manage to get out of it somehow.' At last he grew angry over the matter, and sent his son back to the front of the cutting.

They were all fuming and fretting. Levaque, still lying on his back, cursed and examined the thumb of his left hand, from which some falling sandstone had torn a piece of skin. Chaval, on his side, was stripping himself to the waist, for he could not stand the heat. They were already as black as niggers, covered with coal-dust which their perspiration converted into an ointment. Maheu was the first to start work again, with his head low down against the rock. The water now kept dropping on his forehead so obstinately that he fancied it was drilling a hole in his skull.

'Don't mind them,' said Catherine to Étienne; 'they're always howling.'

And she continued giving him lessons, like a good-natured girl. Each filled truck reached the top the same as it left the seam, marked with a special check in order that the receiver might duly credit it to the account of the right gang. It was necessary to be careful in filling it properly with none but good coal, as otherwise it was refused at the receiving shed.

The young man, whose eyes were getting accustomed to the darkness, kept looking at Catherine, who, with her chlorotic complexion, showed whitely in the gloom; and he could not tell her age: he took her to be about twelve, she seemed so slight and thin. Nevertheless, he felt she must be older, from her boyish unconcern, her naive effrontery, which some-

what embarrassed him. She did not please him; he thought her pale wan face, bound round with a blue handkerchief, rather too much like an urchin's. But what surprised him above all was the strength of this seeming child, a strength in which skill went for much. She filled her trucks much faster than he did his, using her tommy-spade dexterously in a quick and regular way. And she propelled each truck as far as the inclined plane with a slow but sure hand, without ever stumbling or knocking against anything, passing with the greatest ease under the lowest rocks, whereas he hurt himself, or ran his truck off the rails, and blundered about in a most distressing manner.

Truth to tell, the way was not an easy one. There were some seventy yards from the cutting to the inclined plane, and the gallery, not having yet been enlarged by the quarrymen, was scarcely wider than a drainpipe, not to mention the ever-varying height of its roof and its frequent bulges. At certain spots there was only just room enough for a full truck to pass; the trammer had to bend low, and propel it on his knees, in order to avoid breaking his skull. Many props were bending and giving way already. They were often split in the middle, like crutches too weak to support such weight. The workmen had to be careful not to tear themselves with the splinters; and beneath the slow subsidence which shivered those oaken logs as big as a man's thigh, they were forced to crawl along on their stomachs, haunted by the fear of suddenly hearing their backbones break.

'What, again?' said Catherine laughing.

Étienne's truck had gone off the rails at the most awkward spot of all. He could not manage to push the truck straight on those rails, which every now and then sank into the sodden ground; and he swore, and flew into a passion, and struggled angrily with the wheels, which, in spite of all his violent efforts, he was unable to get into their place again.

'Just wait a minute,' said the girl. 'If you lose your temper you'll never manage it.'

Then she cleverly slipped half under the truck and lifted it by sheer force on to the rails again. It weighed nearly fourteen hundredweight. And he, surprised and ashamed, uttered awkward apologies.

She also had to show him how to use his legs, keeping them far apart and fixing his feet against the propping on either side so as to get a good leverage. One's body had to

be bent, and one's arms stiffened, so that one might exert all the muscles of one's shoulders and hips. During one journey Étienne followed her, watching her as she advanced with her back arched and her hands so low that she seemed trotting on all fours like one of those dwarf animals that perform in circuses. She also perspired and panted, and at times her joints cracked, but she uttered no complaint. She had become callous from habit, as if it were the common lot of all to live like this, bent in twain. And he was unable to do as much; his shoes embarrassed him, his body seemed likely to break at being obliged to walk like that with his head so low. After some minutes the position became martyrdom, intolerable agony, so painful, indeed, that he was compelled to kneel down for a moment in order to rest his weary limbs and catch his breath.

At the inclined plane another hard task was in store for him. She taught him how to place his truck quickly. At the top and the bottom of this plane, which served for all the cuttings from one story to another, there was a truller: the brakesman at the top, the receiver at the bottom. These young scamps, from twelve to fifteen years of age, exchanged the most dreadful remarks at the top of their voices, and to make oneself heard by them one had to shout louder than they. The moment there was an empty truck ready, the receiver gave the signal, and the trammer girl started her full one, the weight of which pulled up the other as soon as the brakesman lifted his brake. Down below, in the haulage gallery, were coupled the trains which the horses pulled to the bottom of the shaft.

'I say, you young brutes, look out there!' shouted Catherine down the plane, which was more than a hundred yards long, and propped throughout, and which echoed like a gigantic speaking-trumpet.

The trullers were no doubt taking it easy, for no one answered. The haulage was stopped along the whole line. At last a girl cried in a shrill voice:

'One of 'em's gone after La Mouquette, that's certain!'

At this there was an enormous burst of laughter. All the trammer girls held their sides.

'Who is it?' asked Étienne of Catherine.

The latter then named little Lydie, a precocious young chit who pushed her truck as well as a woman in spite of her doll-like arms.

But all at once the receiver was heard calling to them to start. A viewer was no doubt passing. Then the haulage was resumed on each of the nine stories. For some moments nothing was heard but the regular calls of the trullers, and the panting of the trammer girls, as they reached the inclined plane, steaming like overladen beasts of burden.

After each journey Étienne found the same suffocating air at the bottom of the cutting, amidst the same rhythmical tapping of picks and the same deep pain-fraught sighs of the hewers, obstinately persevering with their work. All four had stripped and become coal-like, begrimed with black greasy slush up to their eyes. At one moment it had been necessary to drag out Maheu, who almost had the death-rattle of suffocation in his throat; and the boards had to be removed to let the blocks of coal surrounding him slip down to the ground. Zacharie and Levaque swore at the seam which, according to them, was becoming harder and harder. In that case they would decidedly have a bad bargain of it. However, Chaval turned round and, lying flat on his back, began to abuse Étienne, whose presence seemed to exasperate him.

'Look at that flabby brute, who hasn't even got the strength of a girl! Will you make haste and fill your truck, or are you trying to save your elbow grease? Curse you! you'll see if I don't dock you ten sous if we get a truck sent back.'

Étienne did not answer him. A mere labourer, only too glad to have obtained that convict-like toil, he meekly submitted to the brutal authority of a skilled workman. But he felt unable to stir another step, for his feet were bleeding, his limbs were twisted with atrocious cramp, and his whole body seemed girt by a belt of iron. Luckily it was ten o'clock, and the men made up their minds to breakfast.

Maheu had a watch, but he had no need to look at it. Amidst that starless night he knew the time almost to a minute. They all put on their shirts and vests. Then, descending the cutting, they squatted down on their hams, in that attitude which is so habitual to miners as to make them independent, even elsewhere, of chair or bench. And each one, taking out his 'brick,' gravely bit into the thick slice, just saying a word every now and then with reference to the morning's work. Catherine, who had remained standing, ended by joining Étienne, who had seated himself further down across the rails, with his back against a prop. The spot was a tolerably dry one.

'Why don't you eat?' she asked, with her mouth full and her 'brick' in her hand. Then she suddenly remembered how Étienne had wandered about in the dark night, perhaps without a penny, or even a bit of bread. 'Will you share with me?' she said.

But seeing that he refused, assuring her that he was not hungry, though his voice quivered the while from his ravenous want of food, she continued, chaffingly, 'Oh! if you're afraid to eat after me, all right! But, look here! I've only bitten this side; I'll give you some off the other.'

She had already broken the slices in two. The young man took his share, and only by the greatest effort prevented himself from not devouring the whole at one bite. And he rested his arms on his thighs so that she might not notice how they trembled. She, with her tranquil air of good-fellowship, stretched herself flat by his side, her chin resting on one hand, while she held her bread with the other. The light of their lamps, placed between them, fell full on their faces.

Catherine looked at Étienne for a moment in deep silence. She doubtless thought him handsome, with his delicate features and black moustache. Hardly knowing why, she smiled with pleasure.

'So you're an engine-man, and they dismissed you at the railway works. Why?'

'Because I slapped my overseer's face.'

She was dumfounded; all her hereditary ideas of subordination, of passive obedience, were upset.

'I'm bound to say that I had been drinking,' he went on; 'and when I drink it drives me mad. I'd go for everybody then. Yes; I can't take two small drops without feeling that I must go for somebody. And then I'm ill for two days afterwards.'

'You mustn't drink,' she said, seriously.

'No fear; I know myself too well!'

And he shook his head. He had an insuperable hatred of brandy, the hatred of the last descendant of a race of drunkards, of one whose flesh suffered from all the hereditary effects of alcoholism to such a degree that a mere drop became poison to him.

'It's on account of my mother that I'm sorry at having been sent away,' he resumed, after swallowing a bite. 'My

mother's very badly off, and I used to send her a five-franc piece every now and then.'

'Where is your mother?'

'In Paris; she's a laundress in the Rue de la Goutte-d'Or.'[1]

There came another pause. When Étienne thought of all those things his dark eyes became dim; it was the momentary anguish, born of the hereditary lesion which lurked within him, with unknown possibilities, in spite of his health and youth. For a moment his looks wandered vacantly into the gloom of the mine, and he conjured up a vision of his infancy. He once more saw his mother, still young and courageous, deserted by his father, then won back again after marrying another, and living between those two men who devoured her earnings, while she sank deeper and deeper into the abyss of vice and drunkenness. It was yonder in Paris; he remembered the street, and other particulars came back to him: the soiled linen lying in heaps in the shop, the stench of drink that pervaded the house, and the blows, hard enough to break one's jaw, that flew about.

'I sha'n't be able to make her many presents out of thirty sous a day,' he resumed, slowly. 'She'll die of starvation I'm sure.'

He shrugged his shoulders in a fit of despair, and took another bite from his 'brick.'

'Will you drink a drop?' asked Catherine, uncorking her can. 'Oh, it's coffee, you needn't be afraid; it will do you no harm. It chokes one to eat without drinking.'

But he refused. It was quite enough that he had taken half of her bread. She, however, insisted good-naturedly, and ended by saying; 'Well! I'll drink before you, as you're so polite. Only, you can't refuse now, it would be ungracious.'

Then she held out her can. She was now on her knees quite close to him, her face lighted by the two lamps. What was it that had made him think her ugly at first? Now that her face was covered with finely-powdered coal-dust, it appeared to have a singular charm. Amidst the duskiness of her flesh the teeth of her somewhat over large mouth gleamed pearly white, and her eyes seemed to become larger, and to flash with a greenish glow like the eyes of a cat. A

[1] The reference is of course to Gervaise of *L'Assommoir* ('The Dram Shop').—Ed.

lock of her red hair that had escaped from under her handkerchief tickled her ear and made her laugh. She no longer appeared so young to him as previously; she might be fourteen after all.

'To please you,' said he, drinking, and then handing the can back to her.

She took a second draught and compelled him to follow her example, 'being determined to share and share alike,' said she. And the can passing from mouth to mouth amused them. He suddenly wondered whether he ought not to catch her in his arms and kiss her. She had full pink lips, whose hue was intensified by the surrounding coal-dust, and which tormented him with increasing desire. But he dared not venture. Suddenly timidity came upon him at the thought of her extreme youthfulness.

'You must be about fourteen,' said he, after another bite at his bread.

She opened her eyes quite wide and seemed almost vexed. 'Fourteen, indeed! I'm fifteen! It's true I'm not very stout. Girls don't grow up very quickly hereabouts.'

He continued to question her, and she answered him in the most natural tone possible, without shame or effrontery. When he referred to La Mouquette, she told him some dreadful stories, in a quiet voice, and as if highly amused. Ah! there was a girl who had her fling and no mistake. Then, on Étienne asking whether she also had no sweetheart, she simply replied with a laugh that she did not wish to displease her mother, but that sooner or later she was sure to find one.

'There are lots of sweethearts to be found, no doubt,' said Étienne.

'Yes, indeed.'

'And after all one needn't tell the priest if a young fellow comes courting one.'

'Oh! the priest, I don't care a hang for him!' said Catherine. 'But there's the Black Man, you know.'

'Who's the Black Man?'

'Why, the old miner who every now and then comes back to the mine, and twists the necks of all the badly-behaved girls.'

At this Étienne fancied that she was poking fun at him. 'What, you believe in that nonsense!' said he. Don't you know anything then?'

'Indeed I do: I can read and write; and it comes in very

useful at home, for in father's and mother's time children learnt nothing.'

She was certainly a very pleasant girl; and Étienne quite made up his mind that when she had finished eating her bread he would kiss her on her rosy lips. He himself had swallowed his last mouthful. He took another draught from the can and then handed it to her to empty. Now was the time for action, and he was glancing uneasily in the direction of the miners at the end of the cutting, when somebody suddenly blocked his view.

It was Chaval, who for some moments had been looking at them from a distance. After turning round to make sure that Maheu could not see him he now came forward, and as Catherine had remained seated, he caught her by the shoulders, and almost crushed her mouth with a brutal kiss, affecting perfect unconcern of Étienne the while. That kiss was, so to say, a kind of jealous challenge.

The girl tried to resist. 'Leave me alone, do you hear?' she exclaimed.

But he kept her head betwixt his hands, looking her full in the face. His red beard and moustache flashed forth as it were from his blackened countenance. At last he released her, and went off without a word.

A kind of chill had come over Étienne. It was stupid to have waited. He certainly would not kiss her now, for she might think that he merely wished to do so because the other had done it.

'Why did you tell me a falsehood?' he said, in a low voice. 'He's your sweetheart.'

'Indeed he isn't,' she replied. 'I'll swear to it. We're nothing to each other. He simply likes his joke. He doesn't even belong to these parts. He only came from the Pas-de-Calais six months ago.'

Both had now got up, for it would be necessary to resume work in another moment. When she saw him so cold she seemed pained. No doubt she thought him much nicer than the other, and perhaps would have preferred to be kissed by him. The idea of doing something by way of consoling him seemed to worry her; and as the young man began to examine his lamp, the flame of which burned blue with a large pale halo around it, she tried to divert his thoughts.

'Come along and I will show you something,' she said, with an air of good fellowship.

Then having led him to the far end of the cutting, she pointed to a crevice in the seam. A slight boiling, hissing noise, like the whistling of a bird, escaped from the fissure.

'Put your hand there; do you feel the draught? That's fire-damp.'

He was greatly astonished. Why, was that all it was, that terrible thing which could blow everybody up! She laughed, and replied that there must be a great deal of it about that day, since the lamps burned so blue.

'Now, then, haven't you done jawing, you idle vagabonds?' bawled Maheu in his rough voice.

Catherine and Étienne thereupon made haste to fill their trucks again and push them to the inclined plane, stiffening their backs as they crawled along under the bossy roof of the passage. By the time they made their second journey they were soaked with perspiration, and their bones were again cracking.

In the cutting also the hewers had resumed their work. They often hurried over breakfast so as to avoid catching a chill; and their 'bricks,' devoured far from the sunshine and with silent voracity, lay like lead in their stomachs. Stretched on their sides, they now struck their hardest, intent on providing coal to fill as large a number of trucks as possible. Everything else disappeared in that furious craving for gain, so painfully earned. They no longer felt the water that fell on their limbs and swelled their joints, the cramp begotten of their distorted posture, the suffocating gloom in which they etiolated like plants stowed away in a cellar. As the day advanced the air became yet more foul and hotter, what with the smoky lamps, the pestilential breathing, and the asphyxiating fire-damp. Only the nightly ventilation would sweep that impure atmosphere away. Meantime, in the depths of their mole-like recesses, beneath the weight of mother earth, with scarcely breath left in their burning lungs, the hewers still and ever continued striking.

V

All at once Maheu, without looking at his watch, which he had left in his vest, stopped in the midst of his work and said: 'It's close upon one o'clock, Zacharie. Have you finished?'

For a few moments the young man had been pinning; and

in the midst of his work, lying flat on his back, he had begun staring about vacantly, thinking of the games at hockey he had played the day before. At the sound of his father's voice he woke up and answered: 'Yes, it will do until to-morrow.'

Then he again took his place in the cutting, while Chaval and Levaque put down their picks to snatch a moment's rest. They all wiped their faces on their bare arms and looked up at the rock above them, where a mass of schist was cracking. They seldom talked of anything but their work.

'Just like our luck,' muttered Chaval, 'to get into stuff that won't hold together. They didn't allow for it in the bargain.'

'A set of swindlers!' grunted Levaque. 'They're always trying to best us.'

Zacharie burst out laughing. He did not care a jot about the work or anything else, but he liked to hear the company abused. In his quiet way Maheu began to explain that the nature of the soil changed at every twenty yards or so. They ought to be fair; no one could foresee things. Then, seeing that the others went on inveighing against the masters, he became uneasy and kept looking round. 'Hush! that'll do!'

'You're right,' said Levaque, also lowering his voice; 'it isn't safe.'

The fear of spies haunted them, even down below at that depth, as if indeed the shareholders' coal still in the seam was possessed of ears.

However, Chaval, in a loud and defiant tone, went on: 'All the same, if that beast Dansaert speaks to me again as he did the other day, I'll shy a brick at him. I don't interfere with his love affairs.'

This time Zacharie burst into a loud guffaw; whilst Maheu got angry, seized with a fear he did not seek to hide.

'Will you hold your tongue? Wait till you're by yourself if you want to get into trouble.'

He was still speaking, when a sound of footsteps was heard in the gallery above. Almost immediately afterwards the engineer of the pit, little Négrel, as he was called among the workmen, appeared at the top of the cutting, accompanied by Dansaert, the head viewer.

'Didn't I tell you so?' whispered Maheu. 'There's always some of them springing from the earth.'

Paul Négrel, Monsieur Hennebeau's nephew, was a young man of about twenty-six, lithe and good-looking, with curly

hair and dark moustache. His pointed nose and bright eyes gave him the appearance of an amiable ferret of sceptical intelligence, which changed into overbearing authority in his relations with the workmen. He was dressed like them, and like them begrimed with coal-dust; and to compel their respect he affected a dare-devil pluck, squeezing himself through the most difficult places, and always being the first at the post of danger whenever a slip or explosion occurred.

'This is the cutting, isn't it, Dansaert?' he inquired.

The head viewer, a Belgian with a heavy face and a fleshy sensual nose, answered obsequiously: 'Yes, Monsieur Négrel; there is the man they took on this morning.'

Both had advanced as far as the middle of the cutting. They made Étienne come up. The engineer lifted his lamp and looked at him without saying a word.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'Still, I don't much like strangers being picked up on the highroad like that. Mind you don't let it occur again.'

He did not for a moment listen to the explanations offered to him, the necessity of not remaining short of hands, and the wish to replace the women by men for haulage purposes. He was attentively studying the roof, while the hewers took up their picks again. All at once he exclaimed: 'I say, Maheu, do you take us for a set of fools? You will all be buried here, that's certain!'

'Oh! it's strong enough,' answered the other, quietly.

'What do you mean, strong enough? Why the rock is settling down already, and you put up your props more than two yards apart, and as if you even regretted having to do that much! Ah! you're all the same, you'd let your skulls be smashed rather than stop work for a while to give the proper time to the propping! Be good enough to see to it at once. Double the props, do you hear?'

And on noticing the ill-will of the workmen who raised objections, saying that they could look to their own safety, he became downright angry. 'Don't talk to me. When your heads are staved in it won't be you who'll have to bear the consequences. Not a bit of it! It'll be the company who'll have to pension you or your wives. I tell you that I know all about you; you'd sell your skins in order to hew two extra truck-loads of coal every evening.'

Thereupon Maheu, notwithstanding his rising anger, calmly replied: 'If we were better paid, we'd prop better.'

The engineer shrugged his shoulders without answering. He had already gone through the cutting, and concluded: 'You've still got an hour left. Set about it, all of you; and I warn you that you are fined three francs.'

A suppressed growl from the hewers was the only answer. The force of established dominion alone restrained them, that military discipline which, from the small truller boy to the head viewer himself, kept them all bowed down one beneath another. Nevertheless, Chaval and Levaque made threatening gestures, while Maheu tried to check them with a glance, and Zacharie facetiously shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps the one most affected by the scene was Étienne. Ever since he had come down into that hell a feeling of revolt had been gradually taking possession of him. He gazed at Catherine, who was almost bent in twain as if quite resigned. Was it possible that people sacrificed their lives at such ruthless labour, in such deadly gloom, without even earning sous enough for their daily bread? However, Négrel was moving away with Dansaert, who had contented himself with approving the engineer's decision by a prolonged nodding of the head. Suddenly their voices were heard once more. They had again stopped, and were examining the propping of the rolling way, the care of which, for a distance of ten yards beyond the cutting, devolved upon the hewers.

'I tell you that they don't care a curse for anybody!' exclaimed the engineer. 'And you, too! why don't you look after them?'

'But I do,' stammered the head viewer. 'I'm tired of always telling them the same thing.'

'Maheu! Maheu!' shouted Négrel violently.

They all came down, and he continued: 'Do you call that solid enough? Why, it's run up anyhow. There's a piece of hooding that the piles scarcely support at all, it's been put up so carelessly. I can see now why the repairs cost us so much. You don't care a fig provided the propping only lasts so long as you have the responsibility. Afterwards the whole lot suddenly comes down, and the company has to employ no end of hands to do the repairs. Just look there: it's simply abominable!'

Chaval wanted to speak, but the other cut him short. 'I know what you're going to say. That you ought to be paid more, eh? But I'll tell you what you'll force the company to do in the end. You'll be paid for your propping apart,

and the price of the truckloads will be proportionately lowered. We'll see then whether you'll be any the better off. Meanwhile look to this at once. I shall be back here to-morrow.'

Before the men had time to recover from their astonishment at his threat, he was gone. Dansaert, so humble before him, remained behind for a few moments in order to bully the workmen.

'I've got you to thank for this row!' he shouted; 'but it won't be three francs that I'll fine you. You'd better be careful!'

When he was gone, Maheu in his turn burst out: 'Hang it all! that isn't just, isn't just at all. I like to keep calm, because it's the best way; but they'd make a saint swear. Did you hear? The price of the truckload lowered, and the propping paid apart! That's another of their games to dock our earnings, curse the whole lot of them!' Then he looked round for someone to vent his rage upon, and noticed Catherine and Étienne, who had dropped their spades. 'You just hand me some props!' he cried. 'Does it concern you? You'll feel my foot somewhere in a moment if you don't make haste.'

Étienne obeyed him without a word. He himself felt so angry with the masters that he thought the miners angels of patience.

Chaval and Levaque were letting off steam in a choice selection of oaths. Nevertheless, all of them, Zacharie included, set to propping ragefully. For fully half an hour nothing was heard but the cracking of the wood as it was wedged in with sledge-hammers. They did not exchange a word, they panted and puffed, in a passion with the hard rock, which they would have hustled about and raised by the sheer strength of their shoulders, had they been able.

'That'll do,' at last said Maheu, who was absolutely broken down with anger and fatigue. 'It's half-past one. We've done a nice day's work; we shan't have fifty sous apiece! I'm off; I've had enough of it.'

Thereupon, though it wanted another half-hour to the time for leaving off work, he dressed himself. The others followed his example. The very sight of the cutting seemed to exasperate them. Seeing that the trammer girl had returned to her trucks, they called her, rating her for her zeal. If the coal had feet it might get out by itself. Then

the six of them, with their tools under their arms, went off, having nearly two miles to trudge on their way back to the bottom of the shaft, by the same road that they had taken in the morning.

When they came to the air-shaft Catherine and Étienne lingered behind, while the hewers slipped down to the lower gallery. They had met little Lydie, who stopped short in the middle of a passage to let them pass, and who told them that La Mouquette had suddenly disappeared, seized with such a violent bleeding of the nose that she had been away for an hour past to bathe her face, no one knew where. When they left her, the child returned to her truck, pushing it along with all her strength, panting, and covered with mud, as she strained her arms and legs, which were as slender as an insect's. She looked, indeed, like a black ant struggling with a load too heavy for it. The two others slid down the shaft on their backs, holding their shoulders in, lest they should leave some of their skin behind them; and as they quickly descended the incline, whose sides were, so to say, polished by the daily contact of so many bodies, they every now and then had to check themselves by holding on to the props, for fear lest the friction should set them on fire, as they said.

When they reached the bottom they found themselves alone. Some red lights were disappearing in the distance at a bend of the way. Their hilarity subsided, and they walked on with dragging steps, she in front, he behind. Their lamps were carbonising, and Étienne could scarcely see Catherine, wrapped as she was in a kind of smoky mist. He felt annoyed, thinking that it had been very stupid of him to refrain from kissing her, when the other had done so. He persuaded himself that she had told him a falsehood: the other must certainly be her lover. Thus he sulked, as if the girl had really deceived him. She, however, turned round at every step, warning him of some obstacle or other, and inviting him, as it were, to be amiable with her. Still this had no effect on him. When they at last got into the main gallery, he even felt relieved, while she gave him a sad regretful look.

And now all was animation in the underground life around them. There was the constant coming and going of viewers and the incessant rumbling of trucks, drawn along at a trot by the horses. Lamps were at every moment flickering in the gloom. They had to stand back close against the rock to make way for shadowy men and beasts, whose panting breath

blew on their faces. Jeanlin, running barefooted behind his train, shouted some coarse, spiteful joke to his sister, which was lost amidst the rumbling of the wheels. They kept on, she quite silent now, and he never recognising the open spaces and galleries that he had passed in the morning, but fancying that she was leading him deeper and deeper into the earth. He suffered terribly from the cold, an icy cold which had settled on him ever since he had come out of the cutting, and which made him shiver more and more as he drew nearer to the shaft. In the narrow passages a bitter blast was blowing like a hurricane. He was despairing of ever getting to the journey's end, when all at once they found themselves in the landing vault at the bottom of the shaft.

Chaval gave them a sidelong glance, his lips set in an expression of mistrust. The others were there, all perspiring in the icy draught, and stifling angry growls. They were before their time, and those in charge of the cages refused to let them ascend for another half-hour, especially as some complicated manœuvring was going on so that a horse might be lowered. Some men too were still despatching trucks of coal amid a deafening noise of clanking iron, and the cages flew upward, disappearing into the beating rain which poured down the black hole. At their feet, the sump, a kind of shallow well, some ten yards in circumference, was full almost to overflowing. And men kept continually moving around the shaft, pulling the signal ropes and working the levers amidst the drizzle that drenched them to their skins. The reddish glow of three lanterns outlined their gigantic restless shadows, and gave that underground hall the aspect of some cut-throat cavern, some brigands' forge set close to a torrent.

Maheu made a last attempt. He went up to Pierron, who had begun duty at six o'clock.

'Come, you might let us go up,' said he.

But the man in charge of the cage, a handsome fellow, with strong limbs and a gentle-looking face, refused with a frightened gesture. 'Impossible; ask the viewer. They'd fine me if I did.'

Two or three more growls were stifled; while Catherine bent forward and whispered in Étienne's ear: 'Come and see the stables; it's nice and warm there!'

They had to get away unnoticed, for the miners were not allowed to go into these stables, which were situated at the

end of a short gallery on the left. About ninety feet long, and fifteen high, excavated in the rock and walled with brick, they could hold twenty horses. They were indeed nice and warm, with the pleasant heat of animal life, and the healthy smell of fresh litter, properly attended to. The one lamp hanging there burnt with the peaceful glow of a night-light. Some horses at rest looked round with a kind of childish curiosity, and then returned to their oats like healthy, plump labourers, petted by every one.

However, while Catherine was reading aloud their names, on the zinc labels above their hay-racks, she uttered a low cry, for somebody suddenly started up before her. It was La Mouquette, who, quite dazed, was rising from a heap of straw on which she had been sleeping. On Mondays, when she felt tired from her Sunday-night's dissipation, she generally dealt herself a punch on the nose, left her cutting on the pretext of fetching some water, and then snugly ensconced herself in the warm litter with the animals. Her father, who had a weakness for this saucy young damsel of his, winked at her proceedings at the risk of getting himself into trouble.

Just then old Mouque came in. Short, bald, and bearing the marks of hard toil, he had nevertheless managed to retain his corpulence, which is sufficiently rare with an old miner of fifty years' service. Since he had been made a stableman, he chewed tobacco to such a degree that his gums quite bled in his black mouth. When he saw the two others with his daughter he became angry.

'What are you up to there? Quick, out with you, you hussies! I won't have any gallivanting here.'

La Mouquette thought this funny and began to laugh. But Étienne felt confused, and went off while Catherine smiled at him. As the three returned to the bottom of the shaft, Bébert and Jeanlin also arrived in charge of a long line of trucks. There was a stoppage while waiting for the cages, and the girl went and stroked the horse, and told her companion all about the animal. It was Battle, the head horse of the mine; he was quite white, and had been ten years down below, ever occupying the same corner in the stables, and accomplishing the same task day by day along those black galleries, without ever having seen daylight again. Very fat, with a glossy coat, looking the picture of good nature, Battle seemed to lead the calm existence of a philosopher, safe from the trials that befall his species in the

open air. Besides, the constant gloom had made him very sharp. The road which he worked had become so familiar to him that he would push the ventilating doors open with his head, and stoop wherever the roof was low, in order that he might not knock himself. He no doubt counted his journeys, because, when the regulation number had been performed, he refused to go another, and they were obliged to take him back to his hay-rack. Old age, however, was now creeping over him; his cat-like eyes were becoming dim and sad at times. Perhaps, in the midst of his obscure dreams, he had vague recollections of his birthplace, the mill near Marchiennes, on the banks of the Scarpe, a mill surrounded by broad meadows, and exposed to every wind. Something there had flared high above him, an enormous lamp, the exact image of which escaped his brutish memory. He would stand with bowed head, trembling on his old legs, vainly trying to recall what the sun was like.

Meanwhile, the intricate manœuvring was going on in the shaft; the signal hammers had struck four blows; the horse which was expected was at last being let down. Such an event always produced a certain amount of excitement, for it happened at times that the animal was taken with such extreme fear as to be dead by the time it was landed. At the top, when put into the net, the present victim had kicked out most desperately; but when the solid earth suddenly disappeared from under its hoofs the poor brute was like petrified; it disappeared down the shaft without a shiver, its eyes wide open and gazing fixedly. As it was too big to pass between the guides, they had been compelled to strap its head to its flank, in order to sling it under the cage. The descent lasted nearly three minutes; the engine worked very slowly by way of precaution, so that the excitement below grew more intense. 'Were they going to leave the poor beast suspended in the deep gloom?' the pitmen asked each other. But it came at last, motionless, like a block of stone, its large eyes still fixed and dilated with terror. It was a bay horse, scarcely three years old, and was named Trumpet.

'Look out, there,' shouted old Mouque, whose duty it was to receive the animal. 'Bring him here; don't untie him yet.'

Trumpet was soon deposited on the iron flooring, where he lay like a lifeless mass, still remaining motionless, quite unable to shake off the horrid nightmare of that huge dark

cavity, that deep vault, ringing with an unceasing uproar. The men were beginning to unstrap him, when Battle, who had just been unharnessed, drew near and stretched out his neck to have a sniff at the new companion that had dropped as it were from the earth. The pitmen drew back and jokingly widened the circle round the two animals. Well! what was it that the old horse found so nice to smell? But Battle became more excited, heedless of their chaff. He had no doubt detected a pleasant odour of the open air, the odour of sunshine lingering in the grass. And he suddenly set up a sonorous neigh, joyously musical, yet instinct it seemed with all the emotion of a sob. It was his welcome, full of delight at the recollection of bygone days, and of melancholy at the thought of the fate of this new prisoner who would never see daylight again.

'Look at old Battle!' cried the pitmen, put into good humour by their favourite's behaviour. 'He's talking to his new mate.'

Trumpet, though entirely unstrapped by this time, still remained motionless. He lay on his flank, paralysed by fear, and as if he still felt the network around him. At last they got him on his legs, dazed, with a violent quiver shaking his every limb. And then old Mouque led away both animals, which were fraternising together.

'Well, can we go up now?' asked Maheu.

The others had to readjust the gear of the cages, and, besides, it still wanted ten minutes to the proper time. Little by little, however, the cuttings were being deserted; miners flocked in from all directions. There were already more than fifty waiting, drenched to the skin, and shivering in the deadly draughts which blew from all sides. Pierron, notwithstanding his good-natured looks, slapped his daughter Lydie because she had left off too early. Zacharie took to slyly pinching La Mouquette. But the discontent continued increasing; Chaval and Levaque told their mates of the engineer's threats—the price of the truck-loads to be lowered, and the propping paid for apart. The news was received with exclamations; a revolt was evidently brewing in that little nook more than six hundred yards below the surface of the earth. The voices soon grew louder and louder; those men, begrimed with coal, frozen with waiting, accused the company of killing half their workmen in the mine, and with starving the other half to death. Étienne listened, quivering,

'Make haste! look sharp!' repeated Richomme, the viewer, to the men in charge of the cages.

He was hurrying them on, pretending not to hear the complaints in order that he might not be obliged to punish. Still the murmurs became such as to necessitate his interference. Behind him some pitmen shouted that things could not go on like that for ever, and that one fine morning the whole concern would be blown up.

'You are a man of sense, make them hold their tongues,' said he to Maheu. 'When people are not the strongest they should be prudent.'

But Maheu, who for his part was calming down, and growing anxious, had no need to interfere. All voices were suddenly hushed. Négrel and Dansaert, returning from their tour of inspection, had just turned out of a gallery, drenched with perspiration like the others. The habit of discipline made the men stand aside while the engineer passed between them without a word. He seated himself in one truck, and the head viewer entered another; the signal sounded five times to give notice of 'swell meat coming up,' as the workmen expressed it, when their superiors were in question, and then the cage ascended amidst dismal silence.

VI

Once in the cage that took him up, huddled in a truck with four others, Étienne made up his mind to resume his starving course along the highroads. One might as well die of hunger there and then as go back to that inferno, where one could not even earn enough to keep alive. Catherine had had to find room in a truck above him, and he preferred not to dwell upon any thought of folly, but to go right away, for with his more liberal education he could not share the resignation of that herd; he would surely end by strangling some overseer one day or other.

All at once he felt blinded. The ascent had been so rapid that he was quite dazed by the light of day, his eyes blinking at the glare, from which they had already become estranged. Nevertheless he felt great relief on hearing the cage swing on to the bolts of the platform. A banksman opened the door and the miners jumped from the trucks.

'I say, Mouquet,' whispered Zacharie to the young banksman, 'shall we go to the Volcano to-night?'

The Volcano was a music-hall at Montsou. Mouquet winked his left eye with a silent grin that distended his mouth from ear to ear. Short and stout, like his father, he had the pert nose and general saucy look of a youngster who spent every farthing he earned without taking thought of the morrow. Just at that moment La Mouquette jumped down in her turn, and he dealt her a smacking slap on the back as a token of his brotherly affection.

Étienne scarcely recognised the lofty receiving shed, which he had only seen by the indistinct flicker of the lanterns. It looked bare and grimy. A gloomy light filtered through its dusty windows. At its far end the engine, with its polished brass, was as bright as ever; the steel cables, well greased, flew up and down like ribbons dipped in ink, while the pulleys up above the huge framework that supported them, the cages, the trucks, all the lavishly employed metal, harshly greyish like old iron, made the shed look more sombre still. The rumbling of the wheels shook the iron flooring without cessation, and from the coal rolling to and fro there ascended a fine dust that blackened the floor, the walls, and even the cross-beams of the belfry.

Chaval, who had gone to glance at the checkboard in the receiver's little glazed office, came back furious. He had discovered that two of their trucks had been refused, one because it did not contain the regulation quantity, the other because its contents were dirty.

'It only wanted that to complete our day's work,' he exclaimed. 'Another twenty sous gone to the devil! That comes of employing lazy brutes who use their arms like a pig does its tail.'

His sidelong glance at Étienne emphasised his allusion. The latter itched to give him his answer straight on the nose. But he asked himself what would be the use of it, seeing that he had made up his mind to go. That incident absolutely confirmed him in his determination.

However, Maheu intervened: 'One can't be perfect all at once,' he said good-naturedly. 'To-morrow he'll get on better.'

Nevertheless the whole gang felt aggravated, and inclined to quarrel with somebody. As they crossed the lamp shed to

whom he accused of neglecting to clean his Davy. They only recovered their equanimity when they reached the shed containing their lockers, where the fire was burning as brightly as ever. Too much coal had even been piled upon it, for the stove was red-hot, and the big windowless place seemed in flames, so vivid was the reflection on the walls. The miners vented grunts of satisfaction, while they stood with their backs to the blaze, steaming away like cauldrons of soup. When their backs were sufficiently roasted they turned round.

'I'm going,' said Chaval, after stowing his tools away in his locker.

No one stirred save La Mouquette, who followed close upon his heels, under the pretext that they were both bound for Montsou. But some chaffing ensued, for they all knew he would have nothing more to do with her. Catherine, seemingly anxious, was meantime talking in a low voice to her father. Maheu looked surprised, but approvingly nodded his head. Then he called to Étienne to come and take his bundle.

'Look here,' he whispered; 'if you haven't any coin, you're likely to be dead before you get your fortnight's pay. Would you like me to find you "tick" somewhere?'

For a moment the young man felt confused. He had been on the point of asking for his thirty sous and then proceeding on his way. But he felt ashamed in presence of the girl. She was looking him full in the face. She might fancy that he wanted to shirk the work.

'I can promise you nothing, you know,' continued Maheu; 'we can try, and they can only say no.'

And Étienne did not refuse. The landlord was sure to say no; and besides, he was not bound to remain even if he said yes. He could eat a morsel of something and go away afterwards. Then, noticing Catherine's evident satisfaction, her pretty smile, her friendly look of gladness at having come to his aid, he felt angry with himself for having consented. What was the use of it all?

After putting on their clogs and shutting their lockers, the Maheus quitted the shed in the wake of their mates, who went off one by one as soon as they had warmed themselves. Étienne followed them, and Levaque and his lad joined the band. But just as they were crossing the sifting staith a violent quarrel caused the party to stop.

The sifting was done in a huge shed, with beams black-

ened by flying coal-dust, and large grated shutters which admitted a constant draught. The coal-trucks arrived direct from the receiving shed, and their contents were at once tilted into the hoppers, inclined troughs made of sheet iron, to the right and left of which the sifters, standing on steps and armed with spades and rakes, kept back the shale and pushed down the clean coal, which, passing through large funnels, dropped into waggons on the railway line underneath the shed.

Philomène Levaque, looking pale and thin, with the signs of pulmonary disease strong upon her, was there among the sifters. With her head tied up in a blue woollen rag, and her hands and arms begrimed with coal-dust as far as the elbows, she was working just below an old hag, La Pierronne's mother-in-law. The Scorched One, as she was called, was terrible to look upon, with eyes like those of an owl, and tight-set lips drawn as closely as the strings of a miser's purse. The two were quarrelling violently, the young woman accusing the old crone of sneaking her lumps to such a point that she could not fill a corf even in ten minutes. They were paid by the corf-full; hence the frequent disputes, when the women tore each other's hair, and left the imprints of their black fingers on each other's ruddy face.

'Give her one in the ribs,' shouted Zacharie to Philomène, from where he stood.

At this there was a roar of laughter on the part of the sifters. But the Scorched One turned like a tigress on Zacharie. 'You, you brute, you'd do better to look after the two children she's had by you! The idea of that broom-stick of eighteen being a mother!'

Maheu thereupon had to hold back his son, who at once wanted to go down to see the colour of the old crone's skin. However, an overseer appeared on the spot, and the women speedily resumed their work. In another moment alongside the hoppers one could only see the bent backs of the women eagerly fighting for the shale.

Outside, the wind had suddenly abated; damp coldness fell from the leaden sky. The colliers tucked their heads between their shoulders, flung their arms across their chests, and straggled away with that peculiar roll that made their big bones show so prominently in their thin linen clothing. In the light of day they had the appearance of a band of niggers who had been ducked in a quagmire. Some of them

had not finished their 'bricks,' and the remnant of bread that they brought back between their shirts and their vests made them look humpbacked.

'Hallo! here comes Bouteloup,' chuckled Zacharie.

Levaque, without stopping, exchanged a word or two with his lodger, a strapping, handsome, dark fellow, of about thirty-five, with a good-natured open face.

'Is the soup ready, Louis?'

'I think so.'

'So the old woman's in a good temper to-day?'

'Yes, pretty fair, I think.'

Then a lot of quarrymen arrived in successive gangs, which, one after the other, were swallowed up by the pit. This was the three o'clock shift, which replaced the piece-work pitmen. The mine never stood still; day and night human insects were burrowing through the rock at six hundred yards beneath the beet-root fields.

Meanwhile the lads had gone on in front. Jeanlin was propounding to Bébert a complicated scheme by which four sous' worth of tobacco might possibly be procured on tick, while Lydie kept respectfully at a distance. Catherine followed with Zacharie and Étienne. Neither of them spoke a word, and it was only in front of the Good Luck tavern that Maheu and Levaque came up with them.

'Here we are,' said Maheu to Étienne. 'Will you come in?'

The party thereupon separated. For a moment Catherine remained perfectly still, casting another glance at the young man with her greenish, limpid eyes, whose transparency was heightened by the blackness of her face. She smiled, and then disappeared with the others up the slope that led to the miners' village.

The tavern stood between the pit and the village, at a point where two roads crossed. It was a two-storied house of brick, whitewashed from roof to doorstep, except for some sky-blue borders running round each of the windows. On a square signboard, nailed above the door, was painted in yellow letters, 'The Good Luck, kept by Rasseneur.' At the back there was a skittle-yard, bounded by a quickset hedge. And the company, which had made every effort to buy this strip of ground, wedged into its own vast property, was distressed by the presence of the tavern standing there in the fields at the very door of the Voreux pit.

'Go in,' repeated Maheu to Étienne.

The small front room was chill and bare, with its white-washed walls, its dozen chairs, its three tables, and its deal counter, no bigger than a kitchen dresser. On it were some ten mugs, three bottles of liqueurs, a water-bottle, and a small pewter receptacle with a brass tap for the beer. That was all. No pictures, no shelves, nothing of any kind for recreation. In the iron fireplace, brightly black-leaded, a small coal fire slowly burned. On the paved floor, a thin layer of white sand absorbed the everlasting moisture of this region overrun with water.

'A mug of beer,' said Maheu to a stout fair girl, a neighbour's daughter who sometimes attended to the customers. 'Is Rasseneur at home?'

The girl, while turning the beer-tap, answered that the landlord would be there directly. Slowly, but at a single draught, the hewer drank half the contents of his mug to get rid of the coal-dust that obstructed his throat. He offered nothing to his companion. Only one other customer was there, a damp and grimy collier, seated at a table and sipping his beer silently, lost in deep meditation. A third came in: he was served at a nod, put down his money, and went away without uttering a word. However, a stout fellow of about thirty-eight, whose round face was clean shaven, appeared, smiling complacently. This was Rasseneur, a former hewer, whom the company had discharged three years previously in consequence of a strike in which he had borne a part. A very good workman with a fluent tongue, he had put himself forward every time there was complaint to be made, and had ended by becoming the leader of the malcontents. His wife was then already keeping a liquor-shop, like many of the miners' wives; so when he was dismissed he turned host himself, found someone to advance him money, and set up a tavern right in front of the Voreux pit, like a challenge to the company. His business now prospered; he had become a centre, and was growing fat on the discontent which little by little he had fomented among his former comrades.

'This is a lad I took on this morning,' Maheu at once explained. 'Have you one of your two rooms disengaged, and will you trust him till next pay-day?'

Rasseneur's large round face suddenly assumed an expression of great mistrust. With one glance he took in Étienne

from head to foot, and without troubling himself to say that he was sorry, he answered:

'My two rooms are engaged; it's impossible.'

The young man had expected this refusal; nevertheless it pained him. He himself was surprised at the sudden annoyance which the idea of having to go caused him. But for all that, he would depart when he had received his thirty sous. The miner who had been drinking by himself at one of the tables had now left. Others came and went, one by one, rinsing their throats and then lurching away. This drinking was a mere cleansing process in which no enjoyment was taken, the mute satisfying of a want.

'So there's nothing new?' Rasseneur suddenly asked in a significant tone of Maheu, who was sipping the remainder of his beer. The hewer looked round and saw that only Étienne was left there with them.

'There's that much new that there's been another row; yes, all on account of the propping.'

He told Rasseneur about it, and the landlord as he listened turned very red, his blood seemingly rushing to his brain, while his eyes flashed. At last he thundered forth: 'Well, if they try to lower the pay they're done for.'

Étienne's presence made him uncomfortable. Nevertheless, glancing askance at the young man, he continued speaking, at times with some reticence, merely hinting things. He talked of Hennebeau the director, his wife and his nephew, little Négrel, without naming them, and every now and then repeated that things could not go on as they were going, and that the whole would come to grief some fine morning. The misery had become too great. He named the factories that had closed, the workmen who were gone or going. For the last month he had given away more than six pounds of bread a day. He had been told the previous night that Monsieur Deneulin, the owner of an adjacent pit, did not know how to meet his engagements. Besides, he had just received a letter from Lille, full of very disquieting news.

'You know,' he whispered, 'it comes from the person whom you saw here one evening.'

But he was interrupted. His wife, a tall, thin, excitable-looking woman, with a long nose and purplish cheeks, had just come in. She was much more radical in her political opinions than her husband.

'Yes, Pluchart's letter,' she said. 'Ah! if he were the master things would soon get a little better!'

Étienne, who had been listening for the last few minutes, had begun to understand the other's allusions, and was excited by the thought of all the misery and the revenge which it must necessarily bring. The name so abruptly uttered by the woman made him start. Then, almost unconsciously, he said aloud, 'I know Pluchart.'

The others looked at him, and he felt bound to add, 'Yes, I'm an engine-man, and he was my foreman at Lille. A very able fellow. I have often chatted with him.'

Rasseneur began to examine Étienne anew, and this time his face assumed a sudden expression of sympathy. At last he said to his wife, 'It's Maheu who brought this gentleman, one of his trammers, to know if there is a room vacant upstairs, and if we would give him trust for a fortnight.'

After that the matter was settled in a few words. Yes, there was a room; its tenant had gone away that very morning. And the landlord, now greatly excited, freely opened his mind, repeating all the while that he only asked what was fair from the masters, without clamouring for the impossible as some did. At this his wife shrugged her shoulders. She wanted her due absolutely; nothing less.

'Well, good day,' interrupted Maheu. 'All this won't stop us from going down, and as long as there're folks going down so long will there be folks who'll leave their skins there. Look at yourself: you are a different man from what you were three years ago.'

'Yes, I've picked up wonderfully,' replied Rasseneur in a complacent way.

Étienne went as far as the door, and thanked the departing hewer, but the latter simply nodded his head without saying a word, and painfully toiled up the road that led to the village, watched the while by the young man. Madame Rasseneur, busy serving some customers, had asked her new lodger to wait for a few minutes, saying that she would herself then take him up to his room, where he could have a good wash. Was he to stay or not? Doubt beset Étienne once more; something made him regret the freedom of the highroads, the hunger suffered under the open sky with the consciousness of being his own master. He felt as if he had lived here for years from the time when he had arrived in the bitter blast to the hours he had passed in the bowels of the earth, crawl-

ing on his stomach along the dark galleries. And he was loth to begin that life again; it was too unjust and cruel. His manly pride revolted at the idea of being a beast of burden, blindfolded and crushed.

While Étienne was thus debating with himself, his eyes, which were wandering across the plain, gradually began to distinguish things. He felt astonished. He had not pictured the view to himself in that way when Jollycorpse had pointed it out to him in the gloom. True enough there was the Voreux pit lying in a hollow before him; there were the buildings of bricks and wood; there was the shifting shed, coated with pitch; there were the top of the shaft, with its slated roof, the engine-room, and its tall slender chimney of a pale reddish colour, the whole huddled together and evil-looking. But around the buildings the yards spread out, and he had not imagined them to be so large—changed, as it were, into a lake of ink by the rising waves of accumulated coal, bristling too with the high trestles which supported the rails of the various gangways, and littered in one corner with piles of props, suggesting a forest that had fallen beneath the axe of the woodman. To the right the view was impeded by the colossal mountain of shale, resembling a barricade thrown up by giants, and already covered in some of its older parts with sprouting grass, while at the other end internal fire had been smouldering for the last twelve months, emitting dense columns of smoke, and leaving long tracks of blood-like rust on the surface amid the greyish masses of schist and sandstone. Then spread out corn and beet-root fields, bare at this time of the year, marshes, overrun by coarse vegetation and intersected by a few stunted willows, and distant meadows parted by meagre rows of poplars. More distant still, a few whitish spots denoted the towns; Marchiennes to the north, Montsou to the south; while the forest of Vandame on the east bounded the horizon with a violet line of leafless trees. And under the leaden sky, in the dull light of that winter's afternoon, it seemed as though all the grime of the Voreux pit, all the flying coal-dust, had settled on the plain, powdering the trees, bestrewing the roads, and penetrating the soil.

Étienne continued looking, and what surprised him above all was a waterway, the canalised river Scarpe, which he had not perceived on the previous night. From the Voreux pit to Marchiennes it stretched out like a ribbon of frosted silver, six miles long, an avenue, as it were, bordered

by tall trees, banked in above the low-lying land, and flowing into the distance, with the perspective of its grassy slopes and pale grey water, through which the crimson sterns of pinnaces glided away. Near the pit was a landing stage, with moored lighters, filled direct from the trucks which passed over the gangways. Then the canal made a bend, cutting across the marshes; and the whole life of the open plain seemed to rest in that geometrically traced waterway, which traversed it like a highroad, bearing coal and iron along.

Étienne's glance wandered from the canal to the village built on the top of the hill, and of which he could only distinguish the red tiles. Then his eyes again sought the Voreux pit, and rested at the foot of the clayey slope, on two enormous stacks of bricks, moulded and baked on the spot. A loop line of the company's railway passed behind a fence, for the service of the mine. No doubt the quarrymen were now being lowered into the pit, for only one waggon, propelled by some shunters, gave out at intervals a sharp screech. There was no longer the mystery of last night's gloom, the rumbling of inexplicable thunder, the flashing of unknown stars. In the distance the blasting and coke furnaces had paled as the daylight broke. There remained of the night's vision only the incessant puffing of the pumping-engine, ever panting with the same long hoarse gasp, the breath of an insatiable ogre, which he could distinguish escaping in a greyish cloud.

Then Étienne suddenly made up his mind. Perhaps he fancied that Catherine's bright eyes were looking at him from the entrance of the village up yonder. Perhaps it was rather a gust of revolt blowing from the Voreux pit that decided him. He did not know, but he desired to go down into the mine again, to suffer and to battle, for he thought ragefully of all those people to whom Jollycorpse had alluded, and of that insatiable crouching idol to whom ten thousand famished mortals gave their flesh and blood without ever having beheld it face to face.

BOOK II

I

La Piolaine, the Grégoire family's estate, stood about a mile and a half from Montsou, towards the east, on the road to Joiselle. It was a large square mansion, without pretensions to architectural style, built at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Of the extensive lands which formerly belonged to it there remained only about seventy acres of fertile ground, enclosed by high walls. People spoke admiringly of the orchard and kitchen gardens, which yielded the best fruit and vegetables for miles round. Of the former park only a copse was left. However the avenue of old limes, a leafy vault three hundred yards in length, stretching from the iron gates to the very steps of the mansion, was one of the curiosities of that bare woodless region where, from Marchiennes to Beaugnies, large trees were few and far between.

That morning the Grégoires had risen at eight o'clock. As a rule they did not get up until nine. They were fond of their beds and slept soundly; but the storm during the night had disturbed them. And while her husband went outside to see whether the wind had done any damage, Madame Grégoire, in a flannel dressing-gown and slippers, repaired to the kitchen. Short and plump, and fifty-eight years old, she had a fat doll-like face, which wore a startled expression beneath her dazzling white hair.

'Mélanie,' said she to the cook, 'suppose you were to make the *brioche* this morning, as you have your paste ready. Mademoiselle won't be down for another half-hour, and she might have some with her chocolate. It would be a surprise.'

The cook, a skinny old woman, who had been with them for thirty years, laughed.

'Yes, that's true, it would be a surprise,' said she. 'Well,

I've got a good fire, and the oven must be hot by this time. Besides, Honorine will help me a bit.'

Honorine, a girl of about twenty, who had been taken into the house when a child and brought up by the family, now served it as housemaid. The only other servants were Francis, the coachman, who also did much of the rough work, and the gardener, with his wife, who looked after the fruit, vegetables, flowers, and poultry-yard. The family lived in a very simple, homely way, and so everybody around them was happy enough.

Madame Grégoire, who had planned the surprise of the *brioche* while still in bed, remained to see it put in the oven. The kitchen was very large; its importance might be guessed by its scrupulous cleanliness, and the vast array of pots and pans and other utensils with which it was filled. There was a pleasant odour of good cheer about it. From every rack, cupboard and dresser, there peeped an abundance of provisions.

'See that the *brioche* is browned nicely,' said Madame Grégoire, before she went into the dining-room.

Notwithstanding the heating apparatus which kept up an equal temperature throughout the whole house, a bright coal fire was burning in the dining-room. But everything was very plain—the large table, the chairs, the sideboard, were all of mahogany, and two well-stuffed, cosy, easy-chairs, deep and roomy, were the only things that betrayed the tendency of the inmates to a life of comfort, to long, uninterrupted, happy hours of slow digestion. The drawing-room was scarcely ever opened; the family felt more among themselves in the other apartment.

Just then, Monsieur Grégoire came in, dressed in a rough moleskin jacket. He, too, looked rosy for his sixty years, with large, honest, and good-natured features, amidst a mass of curly white hair. He had been to see the coachman and the gardener; there was no damage worth speaking of, only a chimney-cowl blown down. He liked to make the round of La Piolaine every morning. The estate was not sufficiently large to give him much trouble, nor too small to deny him the joys of a landed proprietor.

'And Cécile?' he asked; 'isn't she getting up to-day?'

'I can't make it out,' said his wife. 'I fancied I heard her stir.'

The table was laid: three bowls were set on the white

cloth. Honorine was sent to see what mademoiselle might be doing. She came down again immediately, suppressing a laugh and hushing her voice, as if she were still in the room upstairs.

'If monsieur and madame could only see mademoiselle! She is asleep—yes, as soundly as a little baby. It is a real treat to look at her.'

The parents glanced at each other with tears of affection in their eyes. Then the father said, smiling, 'Will you come and look?'

'Poor darling!' answered the mother. 'Yes, I'm coming.'

And they went upstairs together. Their daughter's room was the only elegantly furnished one in the house. Hung with and upholstered in blue silk, its enamelled furniture, white with narrow blue fillets, denoted the whim of a spoiled child gratified by fond parents. Amidst the vague whiteness of the bed, in the half light admitted by a partially drawn curtain, the young girl slept with her head resting on her bare arm. She was not pretty; she looked too healthy, as it were, too well developed for her eighteen years; but her skin was of milky freshness, and her auburn hair and pert little nose between round cheeks made her pleasant to look upon. The coverlet had slipped down and her breath came so softly that her bosom did not even stir.

'This dreadful wind must have kept her awake all night,' said the mother in a whisper.

But the father held up his hand, warning her to be silent. Then both remained bending over, looking with admiration at that child for whom they had so ardently longed, and who had come to them late in life, when they had given up all hopes of such happiness. To them she was perfect, not a bit too plump; on the contrary, they never thought that she ate enough. And she slept on, her face near theirs, without feeling the contact. Nevertheless, a slight quiver stole over her placid features. Thereupon they feared that they had disturbed her, and went away on tiptoe.

'Hush!' said the father when they got to the door. 'If she hasn't slept all night we must let her be.'

'As long as she likes, the poor darling,' answered the mother. 'We can wait well enough.'

They went down and ensconced themselves in the roomy easy-chairs, while the servants, making merry over mademoi-

selle's sound sleep, kept the chocolate hot without grumbling at the delay. Monsieur Grégoire had taken up the newspaper, and his wife a large woollen counterpane which she was knitting. The room was very warm, and not a sound could be heard in the silent house.

The income of the Grégoires—about forty thousand francs a year—was entirely derived from a share in the Montsou mines. They were very fond of relating the origin of their wealth, which dated from the founding of the company itself.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a sudden mania to search for coal declared itself from Lille to Valenciennes. The first successes of the concession holders, who, later on, were to found the Anzin Company, turned other people's heads. In every parish the soil was examined. Companies were started and concessions acquired in a single night. Among the most obstinate men of that period, Baron Desrumaux had certainly left the highest reputation for intelligence and heroic endurance. For forty years he struggled unflinchingly against the most crushing odds: fruitless researches, barren pits abandoned after months of labour, slips that filled up newly-opened mines, inundations that drowned the workmen, hundreds of thousands of francs thrown down into the earth; not to mention all sorts of administrative worries, panics on the part of shareholders and constant battles with the landowning nobles, who refused to acknowledge the royal grants, unless they were first of all treated with. He succeeded at last, however, in founding the firm of Desrumaux, Fauquenoix, and Company, for working the Montsou concession; and the pits there were beginning to yield some little profit, when two neighbouring concessions—that of Cougny, belonging to Count de Cougny, and that of Joiselle, belonging to the firm of Cornille and Jenard—very nearly drove him out of the field by dint of competition. Luckily, on August 25, 1760, a treaty was signed whereby the three concessions were merged into one. The Montsou Mining Company was thereby constituted such as it exists to-day. Desrumaux, proclaimed the victor on his deathbed, was unable to reap the fruits of his conquest, but he at least died a rich man.

In those days the baron owned La Piolaine, with its seven hundred and fifty acres of land. His steward was a certain Honoré Grégoire, a native of Picardy, the great-grandfather

of Léon Grégoire, Cécile's father. When the treaty of Montsou was signed, Honoré, who had saved some fifty thousand francs, yielded tremblingly to his master's unshakable faith in the enterprise. He brought out ten thousand francs in bright crown pieces, and took a share, silently accusing himself the while of robbing his children of the money. And, indeed, his son Eugène received but very meagre dividends. Having become somewhat too proud to follow his father's calling, he managed to make ducks and drakes of the remaining forty thousand francs of his inheritance, and ended by having to live rather modestly. But little by little the dividends grew. A new era of prosperity began with his son Félicien, who was able to realise the dream wherewith his grandfather, the former steward, had beguiled his infancy—that is, the purchase of the remnants of La Piolaine, which he bought for a song when it came into the market as national property during the First Revolution. Nevertheless, the years that followed were sufficiently disastrous; it was necessary to wait for the finish of the revolutionary catastrophes and then for the bloody downfall of Napoleon. And it was Léon Grégoire who benefited to an almost miraculous extent by the timid and reluctant investment of his great-grandfather. Those poor ten thousand francs multiplied and multiplied with the growing prosperity of the company. In 1820 they produced a hundred per cent. per annum—ten thousand francs. In 1844 they produced twenty thousand francs; in 1850, forty thousand. And now it was two years since the dividend had risen to the astounding figure of fifty thousand francs; while the value of the share was quoted on the Lille Bourse at one million francs.[1]

Monsieur Grégoire, who had been advised to sell out when this big sum was reached, declined to listen to the advice, simply shaking his head with a paternal and benevolent smile. Six months afterwards, a great industrial crisis supervened. The share fell to six hundred thousand francs; but he kept on smiling. He regretted nothing, for the Grégoires now had an obstinate faith in the value of their share. It would rise again. Heaven itself was not more to be depended upon than was the mine. To this religious belief there was added a feeling of sympathetic gratitude towards an investment which for more than a century had spared the family

[1] £40,000; its original value having been but £400.

from having to work like other mortals. That share of theirs was like a family divinity, which their egotism surrounded with silent worship; it was their benefactor, for it enabled them to lie lazily in bed and to grow fat at their well-spread board. Things had been like this from father to son. Why run the risk of angering fate by distrusting it! And moreover, there was at the bottom of their fidelity a kind of superstitious awe, a fear lest the million which the share would bring might suddenly melt away if they were ill-advised enough to sell out and lock up the proceeds in a drawer. Thus they thought the million safer in the bowels of the earth, whence a nation of miners, succeeding generations of starving wretches, drew it forth for them, a little each day, according to their wants.

Besides, prosperity showered her gifts upon the house. Monsieur Grégoire, when still very young, had married the daughter of an apothecary of Marchiennes, a very plain young woman, without a penny of her own, but whom he worshipped, and who repaid his adoration a hundredfold by making him very happy. She shut herself up in her new home, going into ecstasies over her husband, and having no other will but his. No divergencies of taste ever estranged them; the same ideal of material well-being blended their desires into one. And in this wise they lived for forty years amidst mutual worship and reciprocal kindness. Theirs was a carefully regulated existence. The forty thousand francs of their income were spent without show or noise, the surplus being devoted to the whims of Cécile, whose tardy birth had for a moment disturbed their budget. Even now they satisfied her slightest wishes; there were two more carriages, a second horse, and dresses sent from Paris. But all this only afforded them another joy; they thought nothing too good for their daughter, though they themselves had such a horror of anything like personal display that they still dressed in the fashion of their youth. Every expense that brought no benefit seemed stupid to them.

All at once the dining-room door flew open abruptly, and a full voice exclaimed:

'What! At breakfast without me!'

It was Cécile, just out of bed, her eyes still heavy with sleep. She had simply pinned up her hair, and wrapped a white flannel dressing-gown round her.

'Indeed, dear, we are not at breakfast. Don't you see

that we are waiting for you?' said her mother. 'The wind, no doubt, prevented you from sleeping, poor darling.'

The girl looked at her mother in great surprise.

'There has been a storm, then?' she asked. 'I know nothing about it. I didn't stir all night.'

They all thought this very funny, and laughed outright. The servants who brought the breakfast in burst out also. The idea of mademoiselle indulging in twelve hours' sleep straight off the reel, enlivened the household. The sight of the *brioche* added to the general feeling of content.

'What! the *brioche* is baked, is it?' repeated Cécile. 'That's a surprise intended for me! It'll be very nice—all smoking hot with the chocolate.'

They had seated themselves round the table; the chocolate steamed in the bowls, and the *brioche* was the only topic of conversation for the next few minutes. Mélanie and Honorine remained in the room, to supply particulars about the baking, and to declare that it was a real pleasure to make pastry for masters who enjoyed the eating of it so much.

All at once, the dogs set up a loud barking, and it was thought that this betokened the arrival of Cécile's music mistress, who came from Marchiennes every Monday and Friday. There was also a professor of literature engaged for the young lady, whose education was entirely carried out at home, under conditions which fostered blissful ignorance, diversified at times by childish caprice. Whenever a question proved too much for her, she simply flung her schoolbook out of the window.

'It's Monsieur Deneulin,' reported Honorine, who had gone to see.

Immediately behind the maid came Monsieur Deneulin, one of Monsieur Grégoire's cousins. He entered without ceremony, speaking in a loud voice, and gesticulating in the manner of an old cavalry officer. Though considerably over fifty, his closely-cropped hair and big moustache were black as jet.

'It's only me. How do you do? Pray, don't disturb yourselves,' he said; and, without further ado, he took a chair, and made himself at home, while the family resumed their breakfast.

'Have you anything to tell me?' asked Monsieur Grégoire.

'Nothing whatever,' Deneulin hastened to reply. 'But I

have been out for a ride, and, as I was passing the house, I thought I would just look in to see how you were.'

Cécile inquired after his daughters, Jeanne and Lucie. They were in perfect health; the one did not stir from her easel, while the other—the elder—practised, from morning to night, at the piano, cultivating her voice. However, Deneulin's high spirits did not altogether seem genuine. Every now and then his voice slightly quivered, notwithstanding his evident efforts to dissimulate emotion.

'Is everything all right at the pit?' asked Monsieur Grégoire.

'Well, I'm being knocked about a bit, like all the others, by this confounded crisis. Sure enough, we are paying for our past prosperity. Too many factories have been built, too many railways constructed, too much capital has been sunk, in the expectation of an unlimited output. And now all the money is tied up, there isn't any floating capital to keep things going. However, things might be worse; I shall get over it all the same.'

Like his cousin, he had inherited a share in the Montsou mines, but being an enterprising engineer, anxious to make a large fortune, he had hastened to sell out as soon as his share attained the value of a million francs. For months previously he had been nursing an idea. His wife had inherited from an uncle the small concession of Vandame, where only two pits had been opened—the Jean-Bart and the Gaston-Marie. But they had been so neglected and their material was so defective, that they scarcely paid expenses. His idea was to repair the Jean-Bart, renew the machinery, enlarge the shaft so as to be able to go deeper, and to keep the Gaston-Marie simply for drainage purposes. He said that the scheme would prove a veritable gold mine. Indeed the idea, in itself, was right enough; but its realisation had already swallowed up his million, and the industrial crisis had arisen just when large profits would have proved the truth of his theory. Moreover, being a bad manager, kind though rough with his workmen, he had allowed himself to be robbed since the death of his wife, and had also let his daughters get the upper hand of him. The elder wanted to go on the stage, and the younger had already had three landscapes refused at the Salon. They remained, however, full of spirits amidst the general rout, and revealed shrewd housekeeping capacities in the presence of bad fortune.

'You see, Léon, you were wrong in not selling out when I did,' continued Deneulin, hesitatingly. 'Everything is going down now, and you may have to wait for your dividends. If you had entrusted your money to me, you would soon have found out what we could do at Vandame, in our mine.'

Monsieur Grégoire was leisurely finishing his chocolate.

'Never!' he quietly answered. 'You know well enough that I don't wish to speculate. I am living very peacefully; it would be silly on my part to bother my head with business. As for the Montsou stock, it may continue to go down; there will be always sufficient for us. One mustn't be too greedy. Listen to me: If you don't look out, it is you who will burn your fingers one day, for Montsou will go up again; the children of Cécile's children will get their wheaten bread out of it yet.'

Deneulin listened with an embarrassed smile.

'So, if I asked you to put a hundred thousand francs in my affair, you'd refuse?' he said.

Then, noticing the Grégoires' consternation, he regretted having been so quick, and postponed his hint of a loan, reserving it as a last resource.

'Oh, it hasn't come to that yet; I was only joking. Perhaps you are right, after all. The money that others earn for one is the surest to thrive upon.'

Then they changed the topic. Cécile made further inquiries about her cousins, whose tastes interested her, though she was shocked at them. Madame Grégoire promised to take her daughter to see the dear girls directly the weather became fine. Monsieur Grégoire, busy with his own thoughts, took no part in this conversation; but all at once exclaimed: 'If I were you, I'd give in, and treat with Montsou. They would only be too glad to treat, and you would get your money back again.'

He was alluding to the old hatred that existed between the Montsou and Vandame concessions. Notwithstanding the slight importance of the latter, its powerful neighbours were furious at seeing its square league of ground wedged in between their own vast property. Having vainly tried to kill it, the company was now scheming to buy it for a mere song, as soon as the death-rattle should be in its throat. The war between the two continued without ever a truce; their galleries now stopped at two hundred yards one from another,

and truly it was a duel to the death, though the intercourse of the rival directors and engineers remained strictly polite.

Deneulin's eyes flashed fire.

'Never!' he exclaimed in his turn. 'While I am alive Montsou will never get Vandame. I dined on Thursday at Hennebeau's, and I saw well enough what he was driving at. And last autumn, when the big-wigs were down here—do you think I don't know what all their politeness meant? Yes, yes; I know them—those dukes and marquises and generals and ministers, highwaymen all, who'd strip one of one's shirt at the corner of a wood!'

Thus he rattled on and Monsieur Grégoire did not try to stop him. He himself did not defend the Montsou Board, whose six members, deriving their powers from the Treaty of 1760, ruled the company so despotically. Whenever one of them died, the right of selecting a successor devolved upon the five survivors, who chose him from among the most powerful and wealthy shareholders. The owner of La Piolaine, so modest in his tastes, was of opinion that these gentlemen often overstepped the bounds of fairness in their exaggerated love of money.

However, Mélanie had now come to clear the table. Outside the dogs barked again, and Honorine was going to see what it meant when Cécile herself rose. What with the heat of the room and the quantity of *brioche* and chocolate she had consumed, she felt uncomfortable.

'Don't you trouble, Honorine,' she said; 'it must be for my lesson.'

Deneulin had also risen from his chair. When the door closed behind the young girl, he asked with a smile: 'Well, and what about the marriage with little Négrel?'

'Nothing is settled,' replied Madame Grégoire. 'It's merely an idea; we must have time to think it over.'

'Of course,' resumed Deneulin with a significant laugh. 'I believe the nephew and the aunt—But what puzzles me is that Madame Hennebeau of all people should be so eager about it.'

At this Monsieur Grégoire protested. Such a distinguished lady, and fourteen years older than the young man! It was monstrous; he did not like joking on such subjects. Deneulin, still laughing, shook hands and went off.

'No, it isn't for my lesson,' said Cécile, coming back. 'It's that woman with her two children whom we met the

other day; you know, mamma, the miner's wife. Are they to come in here?'

Madame Grégoire didn't know. Were they very dirty? Not very; and they could leave their clogs on the steps. The mother and father had already ensconced themselves in their easy-chairs; their digestion had begun, and the fear of arresting its progress by too sudden a change of air decided them.

'Tell them to come in, Honorine.'

Then La Maheude and her little ones entered, frozen, hungry, and half scared with fright at finding themselves in that nice room which was so warm with the smell of the *brioche* still about it.

II

In the Maheus' bedroom, the door of which had remained closed, the grey daylight was gradually filtering through the latticed shutters and spreading fanlike across the ceiling. They all continued sleeping in the heavy, musty atmosphere, Lénore and Henri lying in each other's arms, and Alzire with her head thrown back and resting on her hump; while old Jollycorpse, all by himself in Zacharie's and Jeanlin's bed, snored lustily with his mouth open. Not a sound came from the dark hole where La Maheude had fallen asleep again while giving her breast to Estelle, who, gorged with milk, lay, overcome, across her mother.

The cuckoo clock below struck six. Almost immediately afterwards along the village houses there was a noise of doors being opened and shut, and of clogs clanking on the foot pavement; the sifters were going to their work. Then all became still again until seven, when shutters were thrown back, and yawns and coughs echoed through the thin walls. For a long time the grinding of a coffee-mill resounded without anybody in the Maheus' room being disturbed by it.

But suddenly a distant noise of slapping and howling made Alzire start up in bed. She instinctively divined the time, and ran barefooted to awaken her mother.

'Mother, mother, you'll be late for your walk. Take care, you'll smother Estelle.' And she took away the child, which was almost suffocated by the woman's weight.

'Botheration!' muttered La Maheude, rubbing her eyes violently; 'one goes to bed so tired that one would like to sleep all day. Get Lénore's and Henri's clothes on. I'll take them with me, and you can look after Estelle. I won't drag her along too, for she might catch cold in this beastly weather.'

She washed herself hurriedly, slipped on an old blue skirt, the best she had, and a gray woollen jacket which she had patched up overnight.

'And, botheration! what about the soup?' she murmured to herself.

Alzire, while her mother went downstairs, knocking about everything in her way, went back to the room, carrying Estelle, who was screaming with all her might. But the girl was used to the baby's temper, and though but nine, she had tender, motherly ways of quieting the little one. She put it down gently in her own bed, which was still warm, and allowed it to suck her thumb until it fell fast asleep. It was time, for presently there was another uproar, and she had to interfere between Lénore and Henri, who were at last awaking. These two did not agree, and only embraced each other when asleep. The girl, about six, the moment she opened her eyes, belaboured the urchin, her junior by about two years, who meekly received her blows without retaliating. Both had big heads, much too large for their bodies, and surmounted by coarse yellow hair. Alzire had to pull her sister's legs, threatening to skin her alive if she did not leave off knocking the boy about. Then both kicked and squealed while they were being washed and dressed. The shutters were left closed so as not to disturb old Jollycorpse, who continued snoring in spite of the uproar made by the children.

'It's ready! are you coming down?' at last shouted La Maheude.

She had opened the shutters below, looked to the fire and put some fresh coal on. She secretly hoped that the old man had not eaten all the soup. But the pipkin was scraped clean, so she boiled a handful of vermicelli which she had kept in reserve for the last three days. They would have to eat it plainly boiled, without butter, for there would surely remain none of the scrap of the previous night. Great, therefore, was her surprise when she found that Catherine had managed to leave a little, the size of a walnut. But this time the cupboard was certainly empty; nothing, not a crust of

bread remained, not a morsel of anything, not a bone to gnaw. What would become of them if Maigrat should remain obstinate and refuse to trust them, and if the folk at La Piolaine should not give her five francs? She would have to find something for the men and the girl when they came back from the pit, for as yet unfortunately no one had invented a means of living without food.

'Are you coming down or not?' she shouted angrily. 'It's time I was going.'

When Alzire and the two little ones did come down, she divided the vermicelli on three small plates. She wasn't hungry, she said. Though Catherine had previously poured water on the old coffee grounds, she did so yet a second time, and swallowed two mugfuls of the brew. It looked much more like water from a rusty tank than coffee. Never mind, it would at any rate keep some life in her.

'Listen,' she said to Alzire; 'don't wake your grandfather, and take care of Estelle. If she wakes up and squeals too much, take this lump of sugar, put some water on it, and give her a few spoonfuls of it. I know that you're a good girl and that you won't eat it yourself.'

'And how about going to school, mother?'

'School must wait for another day,' said La Maheude. 'I can't spare you.'

'And the soup! Shall I put it on if you're late?'

'The soup! the soup! No; wait till I come back.'

Alzire, with all the precociousness of a confirmed cripple, knew very well how to make the soup. But she, no doubt, understood matters and did not insist. The whole of the village was awake by now; children went by in groups on their way to school, dragging their clogs along the pavement. It had just struck eight, and the sound of voices gossiping on the left, at La Levaque's, rose higher and higher. The women were beginning their day, sipping their morning's coffee, their arms akimbo and their tongues going twenty to the dozen. Some sloven, with coarse lips and a snub nose, pressed her face against a window-pane and cried out, 'There's something new, just listen!'

'Not now,' answered La Maheude, 'by-and-by. I've got to go out.'

And lest she should be tempted from her resolve by the offer of a glass of hot coffee, she crammed the food down the little ones' throats and started off with them. Upstairs old

Jollycorpse continued snoring with a rhythmical noise that sounded throughout the house.

To La Maheude's surprise the wind had abated outside. There was a sudden thaw and a leaden sky; the walls were dripping with sticky greenish moisture, the roads were heavy with mud, a mud peculiar to that coal country, black, like soot mixed with grease, in which one's clogs stuck fast. La Maheude felt obliged to slap Lénore, because the little one kept kicking up the paste with the tips of her clogs, as if she had been using a shovel. On leaving the village, they skirted the mound of shale and took the road by the canal, making short cuts through waste ground with rotten wooden fences. Shed succeeded shed, interspersed with long factory buildings and towering chimneys, which vomited soot and befouled the whole dismal expanse of this manufacturing faubourg. Behind a small plantation of poplars was the old Réquillart pit with the crazy belfry of its shaft, of which only the timbers remained standing. Then, taking to the right, La Maheude found herself on the highroad.

'Wait till I get at you, you dirty pig!' she cried, 'I'll teach you to make mud pies.'

This time it was Henri, who was amusing himself with kneading a handful of mud. The two little ones, slapped without distinction, at last became quiet, merely squinting as they went at the footprints of their clogs in the mud. They floundered about, tired as they already were by the effort of lifting their feet out of the slush at every step.

Towards Marchiennes stretched two leagues of pavement, lying straight, like a ribbon dipped in dirty wheel-grease, across the reddish soil. But on the other side it descended zigzag through Montsou, which was built on the slope of a wavy undulation of the plain. These northern roads, drawn by line between the manufacturing towns with scarcely ever a bend or a gradient, are laid down bit by bit, and tend to convert a department into a city. Little brick cottages, some painted yellow, others blue, and a third lot black—the latter, no doubt, to arrive the quicker at the final hue—descended to the right and the left of the Montsou road as far as the bottom of the slope. Some two-storied buildings belonging to various factory managers, showed between the serried lines of narrow frontages. A church, also built of brick, looked very like a new model smelting furnace, with its square steeple already begrimed by flying coal-dust. And amidst the sugar

refineries, the ropewalks, and the flour-mills, there were so many public dancing rooms, beer and coffee shops, that out of a thousand houses they formed more than half.

As La Maheude was nearing the yards of the company, a vast series of warehouses and workshops, she took her children by the hand. A little farther down stood the house of the managing director, Monsieur Hennebeau, a sort of vast chalet, separated from the highroad by lofty railings, and fronted by a garden in which a few lank trees vegetated. A carriage had just drawn up to the door, and a gentleman, wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, and a lady in a fur cloak, alighted from it. They were, no doubt, some visitors from Paris who had driven over from the Marchiennes station, for Madame Hennebeau, who appeared in the half-light of the hall, uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure on perceiving them.

'Get along, do!' growled La Maheude to the little ones, dragging them out of the mud in which they were floundering.

She was at last reaching Maigrat's and she felt very excited. Maigrat lived next door to the director's; only a wall divided the mansion from the shop, a long building with no proper frontage alongside the road. He sold everything—grocery, salted provisions, fruit and vegetables, bread, beer, and ironmongery. Formerly an inspector at the Voreux pit, he had started in business with a small canteen; then, thanks to the protection of his chiefs, he had gradually enlarged his store, driving all the petty hucksters' shops from the field. He bought wholesale, and the custom of the miners' villages combined enabled him to sell cheaper, and to give credit on a larger scale. Moreover, he had remained on good terms with the company, which had built his store and the small cottage attached to it.

'Here I am again, Monsieur Maigrat,' said La Maheude humbly, as she saw him standing at his door.

He glanced at her without replying. He was stout, self-composed, and polite, and he prided himself upon never changing his mind.

'Look here, you won't have the heart to send me away again like yesterday. We must have bread to eat till Saturday. Sure enough we've been owing you sixty francs these last two years, but——'

She tried to explain things in short jerky phrases. It was an old score, run up during the last strike. Twenty

times or more they had promised to settle it, but they could not manage to do so; they did not lessen it by two francs a fortnight. Added to this she had had another misfortune: a shoemaker to whom she owed twenty francs had threatened to put the brokers in if she did not pay. That was the reason of their being now without a penny. Otherwise they would have been able to hold out until Saturday like the others.

However Maigrat, with his stomach bulging out and his arms crossed upon his chest, shook his head at each fresh entreaty.

'Only two loaves, Monsieur Maigrat. I'm reasonable enough, I don't ask for coffee. Only two three-pound loaves a day.'

'No!' he exclaimed at last in a most determined way.

His wife had just appeared upon the scene. She was a sickly creature, who bent all day over her ledger, without daring to lift her eyes from it. She turned away almost immediately, frightened by the wretched woman's ardently appealing eyes. It was related that her husband had so completely awed her that she dared not even protest against the vicious life which he openly led. There were many loathsome stories current of the way in which he treated the wives and daughters of the miners who owed him money.

La Maheude found it useless to beseech him; and in rageful despair she at last went off, dragging with her Lénore and Henri, who had beguiled the time with picking up some nutshells in the gutter, in the hope of finding a stray kernel in them.

'It won't bring you luck, Monsieur Maigrat; no, it won't, mark my words,' said the wretched woman.

Her last chance lay with the gentlefolk at La Piolaine. If they did not bring out a five-franc piece she and her people might all lie down and die. She now turned to the left and took the road to Joiselle. At a bend of this road were the head offices of the company, a real palace of bricks, where the swells from Paris, and princes and generals and Government personages, came to eat grand dinners every autumn. And while trudging along she already began to lay out the hoped-for five francs. First of all, there must be some bread, then coffee, then a quarter of a pound of butter and a bushel of potatoes for the morning soup and the evening stew; the money might even run, perhaps, to a little bit of brawn, for the father wanted some meat.

The parish priest of Montsou.

along, holding up his cassock, and gingerly picking his way among the puddles, like a well-fed cat that fears the wet. He was a very soft-spoken man, and made a point of never meddling in anything, so that he might not displease either the workmen or the employers.

'Good morning, your reverence,' said La Maheude.

He did not stop, however, but smiled at the children and left her standing in the middle of the road. She had not the faintest sense of religion, but she had suddenly been struck with the idea that this priest would give her something.

And now she continued her journey through the black, sticky mud. They had still nearly two miles to go; the little ones, no longer finding any amusement in the walk, had to be fairly dragged along. On both sides of the road were much the same plots of waste ground as before, with similar mouldy palings and smoke-begrimed factory buildings, surmounted by tall chimneys. Then, in the open country, came stretches of low fields, an ocean of brown soil, unrelieved by a tree as far as the violet line of the forest of Vandame.

'Carry me, mother,' said one of the children.

She carried them in turns. Large puddles riddled the road, and she tucked up her skirts, lest she should be overdirty on reaching La Piolaine. Twice or thrice she almost lost her footing, the pavement was so greasy. And when they came at last within sight of the entrance, two huge dogs flew at them, barking so violently that the little ones yelled with fright. The coachman had to lay about him with his whip.

'Leave your clogs, and come in,' repeated Honorine.

In the dining-room the mother and the little ones remained motionless, feeling faint with the sudden heat and embarrassed by the glances of the old gentleman and lady, who were reclining in their easy-chairs.

'My dear, perform your little office,' said the latter.

The Grégoires had charged Cécile with their almsgiving. According to them, this formed part of a genteel education. Charity was an imperative duty; they themselves said that their house was its abode. They furthermore prided themselves upon their discernment in assisting others, so haunted were they by the fear of being imposed upon and encouraging vice. Consequently, they never gave money, not so much as half a franc, not even a copper, for it was a well-known fact that the moment a beggar had a copper it went in drink. Their charity, therefore, was in kind, above all in warm clothing, given to indigent children during the winter.

'The poor dears,' exclaimed Cécile, 'they are pale with the cold! Honorine, run up and fetch the bundle from the wardrobe.'

The servants also looked at the wretched trio with the pity and concern of women whom the question of meals inspires with no uneasiness. While the housemaid went upstairs, the cook, lost in contemplation, replaced the remainder of the *brioche* on the table, and stood there, her arms dangling by her sides.

'I have just two nice little woollen dresses and scarves left,' continued the young lady; 'you will see they will keep them beautifully warm.'

La Maheude then recovered her speech. 'Thank you very much, mademoiselle,' she stammered. 'You are all very kind.'

Tears had started to her eyes; she made sure of her five francs now; she was only debating with herself as to the manner of asking for them, in case they were not offered. However, the housemaid was a long while coming back, and there was a moment of awkward silence. Hanging on to their mother's skirts, the little ones were staring with wondering eyes at the *brioche* on the table.

'You have only these two?' asked Madame Grégoire, feeling the silence becoming irksome.

'Oh! madame, I have seven.'

Monsieur Grégoire, who had taken up his paper again, started indignantly.

'Seven!' he exclaimed, 'seven children! Good gracious me!'

'It is very imprudent,' purred the old lady.

La Maheude made a vague gesture of excuse. Children came, there was no denying it. And, at all events, when they grew up they brought in money. At home they would have been all right if they had not to keep the grandfather, who was becoming stiff and unfit for work, and if the others, besides the two elder lads and the girl, had been old enough to go down. The little ones must have food, though they couldn't work.

'I suppose you have worked a long while at the mine?' said Madame Grégoire.

A silent smile lighted up La Maheude's sallow face. 'A long while, indeed, madame, as you say. I myself went down until I was twenty. But after my second child the doctor

said I had better give it up, because, it appears, the work upset me too much. Besides, I got married then, and had enough to do to look after the home. But on my husband's side they have been going down ever so long—from father to son—ever since the first stroke of the pick was dealt yonder at the Réquillart pit.'

Monsieur Grégoire looked dreamily at the woe-begone woman and children, those dismally ugly little starvelings, with their waxen skin, their colourless hair, their visible degeneration, and consuming anemia. There was another pause, during which nothing was heard but the hissing of some gas escaping from the fire. The room was pervaded by that heavy atmosphere of comfort in which quiet *bourgeois* happiness loves to doze.

'Whatever is she doing?' said Cécile, impatiently. 'Mélanie, go up and tell her that the parcel is at the bottom of the wardrobe on the left.'

Meanwhile Monsieur Grégoire finished aloud the reflections with which the sight of those hungry wretches had inspired him.

'True enough, some people have a deal of trouble in this world; but, my good woman, one can't help saying that many of our workmen are not prudent. Instead of putting money by like the peasants do, the miners drink, get into debt, and end by having nothing wherewith to feed their children.'

'You're right, sir,' answered La Maheude, quietly. 'They're not always what they should be. That's what I often tell some of the ne'er-do-wells when they grumble. I've been lucky enough; my husband does not drink. Now and then he may take just a drop too much, but there it stops. It's the more credit to him, because before his marriage he used to drink like a very pig, saving your presence. But we don't seem to be any better off for his good conduct. There are times, like to-day, when you might turn the house upside down without finding a copper in it.'

She was working up to the five-franc piece, and continued in a whining voice, explaining their fatal state of indebtedness, small at first, but at last getting the upper hand of them. One paid one's way regularly for several fortnights. But one day one got behindhand and then it was all over; one could never get square again. One sank deeper and deeper into the hole, and the men became disgusted with the work which did not even allow of their debts being paid. Work might go

hang! Folks ended by getting up to their eyes in the mess. It was easily explained. The men must needs have a mug of beer to wash down the coal-dust. That's how it began, and it ended by their sticking in the beershop morn, noon, and night, when they were in trouble. Without wishing to lay the blame upon anybody in particular, it might be, after all, that the workmen didn't earn enough.

'I thought,' said Madame Grégoire, 'that the company allowed you firing and rent.'

La Maheude cast a sidelong glance at the glowing coal in the fireplace.

'Yes, yes, they give us coal of a kind; still it burns. As for the rent, it's only six francs a month; it looks nothing, but sometimes it's very hard to pay, for all that. Thus if they were to cut me into pieces to-day they wouldn't find two sous on me. Nay, not one, not one.'

The lady and gentleman kept silent, comfortably lying back in their easy-chairs, but gradually getting worried and anxious at the display of all this misery. La Maheude felt afraid that she had offended them, so she added, in the calm, sensible voice of a practical woman, 'I don't say all this for the sake of complaining. Things are as they are, and we must make the best of them; besides, what else could we do? We can't change them. The best, after all, is to try and do one's duty honestly in the walk of life God has placed us in; isn't it so, sir?'

Monsieur Grégoire nodded very approvingly. 'With such principles, my good woman, one is above bad fortune,' he said.

Honorine and Mélanie had now brought the bundle. It was Cécile who undid it, and took out the two woollen dresses. She added scarves and even stockings and mittens, all of which would fit wonderfully well. She now hurried over the business, and made the servants wrap up the things, while gently edging the mother and her little ones towards the door, for her music mistress had already arrived.

'We are so hard up,' stammered La Maheude; 'if we only had a five-franc piece.'

The words almost stuck in her throat, for the Maheus were proud, and did not ask for charity. Cécile, very confused, looked at her father, but the latter refused peremptorily with an air of duty.

'No, that isn't our habit; we couldn't do it.'

Then the young girl, moved by the mother's bitterly disappointed look, wanted to make up for it with the children, who still had their eyes fixed on the *brioche*. She cut two large slices, which she gave to them. 'There, that's for you,' she said. Then, suddenly bethinking herself, she took the pieces back again, and asked for an old newspaper. 'Wait a bit, you must share with your brothers and sisters.'

And with her parents looking on admiringly she continued to push them to the door. Those poor little ones, who were in want of bread, went away holding the cake reverently in their little numbed hands.

La Maheude dragged her children along the pavement. She no longer saw the waste fields nor the black mud, nor the leaden sky above her. When she reached Montsou again she resolutely entered Maigrat's shop and pleaded so eloquently that she ended by bringing away two loaves, some coffee, some butter, and even the wished-for five-franc piece; for he also lent money, to be repaid in weekly instalments. But he told her plumply enough that the next time she wanted provisions she had better send her daughter Catherine for them. La Maheude understood him. Well, she would see. Catherine would slap his face if he became impertinent.

III

It struck eleven o'clock at the little church of the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, a brick building where Abbé Joire came to say mass on Sundays. Close by, at the school, also built of brick, the droning voices of the children could be heard, notwithstanding that the windows were closed against the cold. The broad expanses divided into garden plots, back to back, remained deserted between the four long rows of uniform cottages; and the gardens, ravaged by winter, looked very melancholy with their stretches of marly soil, bossy with remaining vegetables. Every one was making the day's soup, smoke was rising from the chimneys, and now and again a woman would appear here and there along the row of cottages, open a door and disappear. From one end of the paved footway to the other water kept continually dripping from the pipes into the butts, for though it did not actually

rain, the lowering sky was overladen with moisture. And this village, rising abruptly on a vast stretch of table-land, edged with black roads as with crape, had nothing bright about it save its regular lines of red tiles, which were constantly washed clean by the showers.

When La Maheude got back, she went out of her way in order to buy some potatoes of the wife of an inspector who had some of her own crop left. Behind a belt of lank, lean poplars, the only trees to be found in those flat parts, rose an isolated group of houses, built four by four, and standing in their own gardens. The company having reserved these new buildings as dwellings for the viewers and inspectors, the miners had given the locality the name of 'Silk-Stockings,' in the same way as, with good-humoured irony born of their wretchedness, they had nicknamed their own portion of the village 'Pay-your-Debts.'

'At last here we are!' said the mother, bending beneath her parcels, and pushing Henri and Lénore, coated with mud, into her own doorway.

Before the fire, Estelle was squealing dreadfully, though Alzire was dandling her in her arms. Having no more sugar to give her, and not knowing how to keep her quiet, the little girl had pretended to give her the breast, a subterfuge which often succeeded. But this time it had only increased the infant's desperation.

'Give her to me,' exclaimed the mother as soon as she had put down her parcels. 'She won't allow us to hear our own words, otherwise.'

When she had taken the baby to her bosom, the squealing suddenly subsided, and she and Alzire were able to consult together. The little girl had managed very well. She had swept and tidied the room and kept up a bright fire.

'What a lot of things you've brought!' she said, smiling at the provisions. 'If you like, mother, I'll make the soup.'

The table was littered—what with the bundle of clothes, two loaves, some potatoes, butter, coffee, chicory, and half a pound of pig's brawn.

'Oh! the soup!' said La Maheude with a weary air; 'you would have to go and cut some sorrel and pull up some leeks. I'll make some by-and-by for the men. Just put some potatoes on to boil; we'll have them with a little butter. And some coffee, eh? Don't forget the coffee!'

But suddenly she remembered the *brioche*. She looked

at Henri and Lénore, who had already recovered from their fatigue and were sprawling on the floor, kicking each other playfully. Their hands were perfectly empty. The greedy little pigs had surreptitiously eaten the whole of the cake on the way! They were slapped accordingly, while Alzire, putting the saucepan on the fire, tried to pacify her mother.

'Never mind, mother; if it was for me, you know that I don't care for cake. They were hungry, trudging about like that.'

It struck twelve, and the school children's clogs were heard pattering on the pavement outside. The potatoes were cooked; the coffee, thickened by a large quantity of chicory, began to pass through the strainer with a musical drip, drip. A corner of the table was cleared, but the mother sat down there by herself; the children took their plates on their laps, the little boy all the while greedily eyeing the pig's brawn, the greasy paper around which excited his appetite.

La Maheude was sipping her coffee leisurely, holding her glass in both hands to enjoy its heat, when old Jollycorpse suddenly came downstairs. As a rule, he got up much later, and his breakfast awaited him on the hob. That day he began to grumble because there was no soup. Then, as his daughter-in-law told him that people did as they could, and not always as they would, he ate his potatoes in silence. From time to time he got up to spit in the fire for cleanliness' sake. And, huddled in his chair, having no teeth wherewith to chew, he kept mashing his food, with his head on his breast and his dim eyes staring vacantly before him.

'Oh, I forgot, mother,' said Alzire, 'our neighbour La Levaque came in—'

But her mother interrupted her. 'She's a pest,' she cried.

La Maheude had a grudge against La Levaque, who had pleaded poverty the previous night in order not to lend her anything. She happened to know, however, that her neighbour was by no means so hard up as she pretended to be, her lodger Bouteloup having paid his fortnight in advance. But there was not much lending between the families in the miners' village.

'That just reminds me,' resumed La Maheude; 'measure me out a millful of coffee and put it in a piece of paper. I'll take it to La Pierronne, who lent me some the day before yesterday.'

When the girl had made up the little parcel, her mother added that she would be back in a minute to put the soup for the men on the fire. Then she went out with Estelle in her arms, leaving old Jollycorpse to pound his potatoes between his toothless gums, while Henri and Lénore quarrelled with each other for the parings which had dropped on the floor.

Instead of going round by the front, La Maheude cut straight across the gardens, lest La Levaque should call her in. Her plot of ground was just at the back of Pierron's, and there was a gap in the mouldy paling through which they chatted. The common well, supplying four families, stood there. On one side, behind a tuft of drooping lilac, there was also an out-house, a kind of shed used for storing old iron and tools, and serving too as a sort of hutch for the breeding of rabbits with which they regaled themselves on high days and holidays. It had just struck one, the hour at which the village took its coffee. Thus not a soul was to be seen at door or window. A solitary quarryman, waiting for his shift, was digging his garden, and did not even raise his head. But when La Maheude got to the other block of buildings, she was surprised to see a gentleman and two ladies, coming round by the church. She stopped a second and recognised them; one of the ladies was Madame Hennebeau, who was showing the village to her two visitors, the gentleman with the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, and the lady in the fur cloak.

'Why did you trouble yourself?' said La Pierronne, when La Maheude handed her the coffee; 'there was no hurry.'

La Pierronne was about eight-and-twenty, and was admitted to be the handsome woman of the village. Dark, with a low forehead, large eyes, and a small mouth, she was also very coquettish, and as clean as a cat. Her figure had kept its shape, for she had had no children. Her mother, the Scorched One, the widow of a miner who had lost his life below, after sending her daughter to a factory, swearing that she should never marry a pitman, had never left off nagging since this daughter had married Pierron, a widower, with a girl of eight by his first wife. The couple lived very happily, notwithstanding the gossip of the neighbours about La Pierronne's 'goings on.' They did not owe a farthing, they ate meat twice a week, their house was cleanly kept and their stewpans shone like looking-glasses. By a still greater stroke

of luck, and thanks to certain influence, the company had given La Pierronne permission to sell lollipops and biscuits, glass jars filled with which stood upon shelves behind the window. This meant six or seven sous gain per day, some Sundays as many as twelve. And amidst all this comfort the Scorched One alone bellowed incessantly, like the old revolutionary hag she was, eager to wreak vengeance on the masters for her man's death, while little Lydie suffered in kicks for the hasty temper of the rest of the family.

'How she's getting on!' said La Pierronne, patting Estelle's podgy cheeks.

'Don't talk to me about it; children are a trouble and no mistake,' said La Maheude. 'You may think yourself lucky in having none. You can keep things tidy, at any rate.'

Though her own home was tidy enough, though she scrubbed the house from top to bottom every Saturday, she glanced somewhat enviously at the other's neat room, in which there were even ornaments, gilt vases on the sideboard, a looking-glass, and three engravings in frames.

La Pierronne was taking her coffee by herself, her people being all at the mine at that hour of the day.

'You'll have a glass of coffee with me?' she said.

'No, thank you, I've just had mine.'

'What does that matter?'

It mattered nothing. So both sipped leisurely. Between the jars of sweets and biscuits their glances wandered to the houses over the way, where the rows of little window-curtains, according to their degree of whiteness, testified to the more or less cleanly habits of the housewives. Those at Levaque's were very dirty—downright rags, indeed, that seemed to have been used for wiping saucepans.

'I don't understand how people can live in such filth!' murmured La Pierronne. Then La Maheude started off as though she would never stop. If she had only had the luck to get a lodger like Bouteloup, she would have managed her house differently from that! If people only knew how to manage, a lodger was a capital thing. Only he ought to be kept in his proper place. Besides, the husband drank and beat his wife and went gadding about after music-hall singers at Montsou.

La Pierronne put on an air of profound disgust. Those music-hall singers were the vilest of the vile.

'What surprises me,' she added, 'is that you allow your son to keep company with Levaque's girl.'

'How could I hinder it? Their garden joins ours. In the summer-time Zacharie was always there with Philomène; it was impossible to go to the well for water without coming across them.'

It was the common story of the promiscuousness of the miners' village, where the boys and girls mingled together. True, in the long run, they generally ended by marrying. The mothers alone were angry when their lads commenced sweethearting too early, for a boy who married no longer assisted his family.

'Were I in your place, I should prefer to bring things to a crisis,' resumed La Pierronne wisely. 'Otherwise they're sure to go off somewhere and live together. The money's lost to you, whatever happens.'

La Maheude, beside herself with anger, extended her hands.

'Listen to this: I'll curse them if they do. Doesn't Zacharie owe us some respect? He's been an expense to us, hasn't he? Well then! he must make us some return, before he picks up with a woman. What would become of us all, if our children began at once to work for others? We might just as well lie down and die!'

By-and-by she grew more composed. 'Of course I speak in general,' she added. 'We'll see later on. Your coffee is nice and strong; you put in sufficient.'

They gossiped for another quarter of an hour, and then La Maheude suddenly got up, saying that the men's soup was not ready. Outside, the children were now going back to school and a few women stood lolling at their doors, watching Madame Hennebeau, who was walking beside one of the rows of houses explaining things to her guests. The visit began to interest the village. The quarryman left off digging for a moment, and two hens scampered about the gardens, frightened out of their wits.

Just as La Maheude was reaching her own cottage, she ran full tilt against La Levaque, who had rushed out to intercept Doctor Vanderhaghen, the company's medical man, a hasty little individual, overwhelmed with business, who prescribed for his patients on the run.

'Sir,' said she, 'I can't sleep; I've got pains everywhere. I wish you'd tell me what to do.'

He treated them all most familiarly. So he answered without stopping: 'Don't pester me! You drink too much

'And my husband, sir?' said La Maheude in her turn. 'You ought to come and see him. He always complains of pains in his legs.'

'Don't pester me; you should leave him a little peace.'

The two women remained in the middle of the road looking after the retreating doctor.

'Come in for a minute,' said La Levaque, after exchanging a despairing shrug of the shoulders with her neighbour. 'There's something new. You'll surely take a drop of coffee, it's just fresh made.'

La Maheude struggled in vain against this new temptation. Well, she'd go and have another sip, just to show that she bore no illwill. And she went in.

The living-room was filthily black, its floor and walls stained with grease, the table and sideboard sticky with dirt. And an indescribable smell pervaded the whole. Near the fire, with his elbows on the table and his nose in his plate, Bouteloup, looking young for his five-and-thirty years, was finishing some remnants of boiled meat. He ate placidly, like the big stolid fellow he was; and Achille, Philomène's firstborn, a boy about three years old, stood by looking at him with the earnest, mute supplication of a greedy animal. The lodger, despite the fierceness of his long brown beard, was tender-hearted enough, and from time to time stuffed a piece of meat into the little one's mouth.

'Wait till I sweeten it,' said La Levaque, putting some brown sugar into the coffee-pot.

She, by six years her lodger's senior, looked horrid with her triple chin dropping on to her bosom, her bosom dropping on to her stomach, and her hideous, animal-like face covered with stubbly tufts of grey hair.

'Look here,' said La Levaque, the moment they sat down, 'what I wanted to tell you is this: La Pierronne was seen last evening loitering near Silk-Stockings; the gentleman, you know, met her behind Rasseneur's, and the two strolled away together along the canal. What do you think of that?'

Bouteloup burst out laughing, and dropped some bread-crumb dipped in gravy into Achille's mouth. Then the two women went on telling stories about La Pierronne—a downright coquette, no better looking than any one else, but always tittivating and washing and scenting herself. They only stopped their cackle when a neighbour came in bringing Désirée, Philomène's last born, a baby nine months old. As

the mother took her breakfast in the sifting-shed, she had arranged for the child to be brought her thither, so that she might give it the breast while squatting amidst the coal-dust.

'I can't leave mine for a minute, or she sets up squealing directly,' said La Maheude, looking at Estelle, who had fallen asleep in her arms. However, she did not succeed in avoiding the demand for an explanation which for the last few moments she had read in La Levaque's eyes.

'I say,' said the latter, 'I think it's high time there should be an end to all this.'

At the outset the two mothers, without need of consultation, had agreed that they would not hurry the marriage of their son and daughter. If Zacharie's mother wished to continue receiving her lad's fortnightly pay as long as possible, Philomène's mother on her side did not relish the idea of giving up her girl's wages. There was no need to hurry things. La Levaque had even preferred to keep her daughter's first child; but since it was growing up and needed bread like the rest, and a second had come besides, she found she was playing a losing game. Hence her anxiety for the marriage. Like a practical woman, she did not wish to pay out of her own pocket.

'Zacharie has drawn for the conscription,' she resumed, 'so nothing stands in the way. When shall it be, say?'

'Wait at least till the weather gets fine,' replied La Maheude, rather embarrassed. 'Such matters are always a nuisance! Just as though they couldn't have waited! Honour bright, I'd strangle Catherine if I found her gadding about.'

La Levaque shrugged her shoulders. 'Dont fret; she'll follow the others!'

Bouteloup, like a man who feels perfectly at home, had gone to the cupboard for the loaf of bread. Some vegetables for Levaque's soup—potatoes and leeks—were lying on a corner of the table half peeled, having been taken up and put down again a dozen times amidst the incessant gossiping. La Levaque took them in hand once more, but all at once she left off anew to plant herself in front of the window.

'What's all this? Oh, it's Madame Hennebeau with some swells. They're going to La Pierronne's.'

And all at once both fell foul of La Pierronne again. Whenever the company showed the village to visitors, they never missed taking them straight to La Pierronne's, because,

forsooth, the place was clean. But the visitors weren't treated to the stories about her and the head viewer. It was easy enough to be clean and tidy when one had a lover who earned three thousand francs, besides his lodging and firing, and the presents he managed to get hold of.

'There they go,' said La Levaque at last. 'Those folks are making the round, my dear. I bet they're going to your place now.'

At this La Maheude became frightened. If Alzire had only wiped the table! And her soup, her men's soup, which was not ready! Thereupon, with a hasty 'Good-bye,' she rushed away, making straight for her door without looking to the right or left.

But at home everything seemed bright and clean. Alzire, very serious, with a cloth wrapped round her, had set about making the soup, as her mother did not come back. She had pulled up the last leeks in the garden, cut some sorrel, and was busy picking the latter, while in a cauldron on the fire water was being heated in readiness for the men's bath as soon as they might come in. As luck would have it, Henri and Lénore were quiet, being occupied in tearing up an old almanack; and Jollycorpse sat smoking his pipe in silence.

La Maheude had scarcely recovered her breath, when Madame Hennebeau, after knocking, opened the door.

'You'll allow us, won't you, my good woman?'

Tall, fair, a little heavy perhaps in the superb maturity of her forty years, she smiled with an effort at making herself pleasant, without showing over-plainly her fear of spoiling her gown of sage-green silk and her velvet mantle.

'Come in, come in,' she kept on saying to her visitors. 'We are not troubling anybody. Well, what say you to cleanliness like this? And this good woman has seven children! All our households are like this. I think I explained to you that the company lets them have their cottages at six francs a month. A large room on the ground floor, two rooms upstairs, a cellar and a garden.'

The gentleman with the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, and the lady in the fur cloak, fresh from Paris that morning, looked quite scared at the unfamiliar sight.

'And a garden,' repeated the lady. 'But it's delightful. One would live here oneself.'

'We give them coal, more than they want,' continued Madame Hennebeau. 'A doctor attends to them twice a

week, and when they are old they get a pension, though nothing is deducted from their wages.'

'A Paradise, a real land of Cockayne!' murmured the gentleman, delighted.

La Maheude had hastened forward to offer chairs. But the ladies declined them. Madame Hennebeau was getting tired. She was glad enough to forget for a moment the weariness of her exile by playing the 'wild beast' showman, but she almost invariably turned faint at the sight and the smell of misery, notwithstanding the well-known cleanliness of the cottages which she selected for exhibition. Moreover, she merely repeated bits of phrases she had heard, without ever taking the slightest interest in the needy, suffering community of workers around her.

'Oh, the pretty dears!' minced the lady, though she really thought the children hideous, with their big heads and their shocks of yellow hair.

Then La Maheude had to tell their ages. Questions were also asked about Estelle out of politeness. Old Jollycorpse had respectfully put his pipe away; but he, nevertheless, remained a cause of embarrassment, looking, as he did, so thoroughly broken down by his forty years' labour in the mine, his legs stiff with rheumatism, his body knocked to bits, and his face livid and wrinkled. Being taken with a violent fit of coughing, he preferred to get up and go outside, under the impression that his black saliva might be unpleasant to the gentlefolks. To Alzire fell the greatest success. What a nice little housewife she made with her cloth wrapped round her! The mother was complimented upon having a little girl who was already so sharp for her age. And no one alluded to her deformity, though pitying, awkward glances ever and anon reverted to the poor tiny child.

'And now,' concluded Madame Hennebeau, 'if people speak of our mining villages in Paris, you'll know what to answer. No more noise than this at any time, a patriarchal way of living, everybody happy and in good health, as you see for yourselves; in short, a spot where you might come and recruit a bit on account of its peacefulness and pure air.'

'Marvellous, marvellous!' exclaimed the gentleman, in a final burst of enthusiasm.

They went out with the delighted air of people leaving a show-booth. La Maheude, who accompanied them to the door, remained on her threshold watching them as they

walked away leisurely, talking very loud. The streets were now full of people, and they had to pass through groups of women, attracted by the news of their visit, which had spread from house to house.

Just before her own door La Levaque had managed to intercept La Pierronne, who had come out from sheer curiosity. Both had pretended to be disagreeably surprised. Were the visitors going to stay all night at the Maheus' ? It wasn't so very lively there, after all, was it ?

'They never have a sou to bless themselves with, in spite of all their earnings! Well, it's not to be wondered at when people have vices!'

'I've just heard that she went this morning to beg of the folk at La Piolaine, and that Maigrat, who wouldn't trust them any more, has let them have some things after all. We know what that means.'

'Hush! Here the gentlefolks come.'

Thereupon La Levaque and La Pierronne, looking very demure, without any impolite curiosity, contented themselves with stealthily watching the visitors as they strolled away. After which, they made a sign to La Maheude, who still had Estelle in her arms, to join them. And all three, standing there, carefully took stock of Madame Hennebeau and her guests. The latter had scarcely proceeded a dozen yards when the cackling began afresh with renewed vigour.

'That means money what they've got on; more money than they themselves are worth, perchance!'

'Sure enough! I don't know the other one, but I wouldn't give twopence for the one that belongs here, big though she be. Nice stories they tell about her and the little engineer.'

Madame Hennebeau and her friends were strolling along, still talking, when a carriage stopped before the church. A gentleman, about forty-eight years old, very dark, dressed in a tightly-buttoned frock-coat, and with a quiet air of authority about him, alighted from it.

'The husband,' whispered La Levaque, suddenly lowering her voice, as if he could have heard her. She was simply yielding to the fear with which the managing director inspired his ten thousand workpeople. 'It's true, though, he looks as if a woman could lead him by the nose.'

By this time the whole village was in the streets. The excitement of the women increased, the groups drew closer together and at last became a crowd, while ill-kempt children

sprawled about the pavements, their mouths wide open. The schoolmaster's pale face appeared for a moment above the hedge of the school. The quarryman left off digging his garden, and stood open mouthed, with one foot resting on his spade. And the cackling rose higher and higher, sounding like a gust of wind sweeping through withered leaves.

The crowd was at its thickest in front of La Levaque's door. Two women had joined the original group, then ten, then twenty. La Pierronne prudently held her tongue now that there were too many listeners. La Maheude, one of the most sensible, also kept silent. Estelle had awaked, squealing as usual, and in order to pacify her her mother again had to give her the breast. When Monsieur Hennebeau had put the ladies inside the carriage, which drove off in the direction of Marchiennes, there was a final explosion of chattering. All the women gesticulated, drew closer together still, and bawled in one another's faces, amidst a tumult like that of an ant-hill in a state of revolution.

But three o'clock struck. The quarrymen, Bouteloup and the others, were gone. Suddenly from behind the church appeared the first miners returning from the pit, their faces begrimed, their clothes wringing wet, their arms across their breasts, and their shoulders up to their ears. Then there came a general stampede among the women; they all rushed away, making for their own doors, scared like neglectful housewives, who had been coffee-bibbing and tittletattling too long. And but one cry, full of the apprehension of coming storms, was heard on all sides.

'Ah! good heavens! and the soup! the soup which isn't ready!'

IV

When Maheu came in, after leaving Étienne at Rasseneur's, he found Catherine, Zacharie, and Jeanlin at table just finishing their soup. On coming back from the pit they were always so hungry that they sat down in their wet clothes before even washing themselves. They did not wait for each other, the table remained spread from morn till night, there being always some one there, swallowing his share of food, according as the work fell out.

From the very threshold Maheu noticed the provisions. He said nothing, but the uneasy expression on his face cleared away. During the whole morning the emptiness of the side-board, the home without coffee or butter, had worried him; the thought of it all had obtruded itself on him every now and then, even while he was wielding his pick and lying half choked in front of his cutting. How would the wife manage? And what would become of them, should she come back empty-handed? And, behold, there was something of every-thing. She would tell him all about it by-and-by. Mean-while he smiled like a man well pleased.

Catherine and Jeanlin had already got up, and were taking their coffee standing; while Zacharie, who still felt hungry after his soup, cut himself a large slice of bread, which he spread with butter. He noticed well enough the pig's brawn lying on a plate; but he did not touch it, knowing that when there was only enough meat for one, it was for the father. All had washed down their soup with copious draughts of fresh water, the beverage that prevailed at the fag-end of each fortnight.

'There's no beer,' said the mother, when the father had seated himself in his turn. 'I wished to keep a little money by me. But if you want some the child can run and fetch a pint.'

He stared at her with delight. What, she had money also!

'No, no,' he said; 'I've just had a mugful; I'll do well enough as it is.' And plying his spoon slowly, he set to eating the mess of bread, potato, leek, and sorrel in the basin that served him as a plate. Together with Alzire, his wife, without putting down Estelle, looked to his wants; handed him the butter and the pig's brawn, and placed the coffee on the fire again so that it might keep hot.

Meanwhile, beside the fire, the washing business had begun in a half-barrel converted into a bath tub. Catherine, Jeanlin, and Zacharie washed themselves in turn without any attention being paid to them. True Jeanlin and Zacharie quarrelled because the latter claimed that he ought to follow Catherine and declared that the youngster's rinsings were black enough to supply the whole of the village with ink. The dispute ended by their washing together, after which, like their sister, they scampered away upstairs.

'They do make a mess, to be sure,' muttered La Maheude,

picking up the wet clothes to hang them before the fire. 'Alzire, just wipe up a bit.'

But her remarks were suddenly interrupted by an uproar in the next house, a man's oaths, a woman's sobs, and all the noise of a scuffle.

'La Levaque is getting her allowance,' quietly observed Maheu, scraping his basin with his spoon. 'It's rather funny, for Bouteloup said that the soup was ready.'

'Ready, indeed!' said his wife; 'I saw the vegetables on the table; they weren't even pared.'

The cries grew louder; there was a terrific rush that shook the wall, then all became still. 'If the soup wasn't ready, that accounts for it,' concluded the pitman, with the air of a judge, and thereupon he swallowed his last spoonful.

After gulping down a glass of water he attacked the pig's brawn. He cut it into little square pieces, which he picked up with the point of his knife and set on his bread, without using a fork. When the father was eating no one spoke. He himself habitually ate in silence, and though his brawn did not taste as Maigrat's usually did he asked no questions. His only inquiry was whether the old man were still in bed upstairs. He was then told that the grandfather had gone out for his constitutional. And another pause followed.

The smell of the meat, however, had attracted the attention of Lénore and Henri, who were dipping their fingers in the water spilt from the tub. Both came and stood by their father, the little one in front. They watched every mouthful, looking at it hopefully as it started from the plate and despairingly as it disappeared in their parent's mouth. At last Maheu noticed the greedy glances that blanched their cheeks and moistened their lips.

'Have the children had any?' he asked. And as his wife hesitated, he added: 'You know that I don't like that sort of thing. It takes my appetite away to see them standing there, begging for a morsel.'

'Of course they've had some!' she exclaimed angrily. 'If you were to listen to them you would have to give them your share and that of the others, too. They'd guzzle till they burst. Ask Alzire if we didn't all have some brawn?'

'Sure enough, mother,' said the little cripple, who, on such occasions, lied with all the assurance of a grown-up person.

Lénore and Henri remained speechless with astonishment,

inwardly revolting at such falsehoods; they who were whipped if they did not speak the truth! They felt as if their little hearts would break; and longed to protest, and say that they had not been there when the others had their share.

'Get along with you,' said their mother, driving them to the other end of the room. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, always having your noses in your father's plate. And even if he were the only one to get meat, doesn't he work for it, while you do nothing but cost money, and more than you're worth?'

Maheu, however, called them back. He took Henri on his right knee, Lénore on his left, and he finished his brawn, sharing it with them. Each had a piece in turn. The children, delighted, swallowed as fast as he could cut.

When the brawn was all gone, he said to his wife, 'Don't give me my coffee yet; I'll wash first. Just lend me a hand to empty these slops.'

They each took the tub by a handle and were emptying it into the gutter before the door, when Jeanlin came down in his dry clothes—a blue woollen blouse and trousers to match, which were much too big for him, and had already been half worn out by his brother. Noticing that he was slyly making off, his mother stopped him.

'Where are you going?'

'Over there.'

'Where over there? Look here, you've got to gather some dandelions for a salad for to-night. Do you hear me? If you don't bring back the salad, you'll have me to deal with.'

'All right! all right!'

And he walked away with his hands in his pockets, clanking his clogs and rolling his thin little carcase about like an old pitman. In another moment Zacharie came down. He was much more spruce in his black and blue woollen jersey. His father shouted to him not to be late, and he just nodded his head with his pipe in his mouth, and strolled off. The tub was now once more filled with warm water, and Maheu was already taking off his jacket when, at a sign from her mother, Alzire, as usual, took Lénore and Henri outside to play. The father did not care to perform his ablutions in the presence of his children, as was done in most households in the village. But he criticised nobody; he simply said it was all very well for the children to paddle together, and that expressed everything.

'What are you doing up there?' called La Maheude at the bottom of the staircase.

'I'm mending my gown, which I tore yesterday,' answered Catherine.

'Very well; don't come down,' was the retort. 'Your father is washing.'

Then, the husband and wife remained alone. The latter had put Estelle on a chair near the fire, where, feeling comfortable, she did not cry, but stared vacantly at her parents like the semi-unconscious being she was. Maheu now started on his ablutions, and his wife on a general explanation of the position.

'I say, old man,' she said, 'I noticed your looks when you came in. You were worrying yourself, and the sight of the eatables relieved your mind. Just fancy! the folks at La Piolaine didn't give me a sou! They're nice enough; they've rigged out the little ones, and I felt ashamed to trouble them, for it sticks in my throat to have to ask.'

She paused in order to put Estelle straight on the chair lest she should tumble off. Then she continued: 'I must tell you that Maigrat refused me outright. He almost turned me out like a dog. You may imagine the treat I had! Woollen dresses are right enough to keep one warm; but they don't put anything in one's stomach, do they?'

Maheu raised his head, without saying a word—simply looking at her. Nothing at La Piolaine, nothing at Maigrat's; how then had she managed?

'So I went back to Maigrat's,' she proceeded, 'and gave him a bit of my mind. I told him that he had no heart, and that one day it would all come back to him, if there was any justice in this world. It annoyed him; he kept turning his eyes away; he would have liked to run off. At last he called me a beastly old bore. But, at all events, we shall have bread till Saturday; and the best of it is he lent me five francs. I took the butter, coffee, and chicory of him, and I should have got the brawn and the potatoes there also, but I noticed that he began to growl. Seven sous of brawn, eighteen sous of potatoes; I've got three francs and fifteen sous left for a mutton stew and some soup beef. I didn't waste my morning, did I?'

He, without worrying about the extra responsibility of this new debt, laughed heartily, and stretched out his arms as if to embrace her.

'That'll do, you big stupid! you're soaking, and you'll make me all wet. I think, though, that Maigrat-

She was about to allude to Catherine, when she hesitated. What was the good of worrying the father? It would cause no end of bother.

'What about him?' asked Maheu.

'Why, he has ideas of robbing us, to be sure! Catherine will have to look carefully over the bill.'

Maheu's wash was over and he now put on a pair of dry trousers. His great delight, when he was clean, was to remain bare to the waist. On his white skin—white like that of a sickly girl—the cuts and scratches of the coal had left a number of scars like tattoo marks, of which he was very proud, as well as of his powerful arms and brawny chest, veined with blue like a block of marble. In the summer all the miners stood thus shirtless at their doors. Even now, indeed, notwithstanding the damp weather, Maheu went out for a moment, and exchanged a few words across the garden, with a comrade who was similarly stripped. Others made their appearance; and the children, sprawling about the pavement, lifted their little heads, and laughed also at the sight of all that flesh weary from work now displayed in the open air.

While taking his coffee, still shirtless, Maheu told his wife of the engineer's anger on account of the propping. He was now calm and composed, and listened, with approving nods, to the prudent counsels of La Maheude, who generally showed great sense in these matters. She always maintained that it was of no use fighting against the company. After which she told him of Madame Hennebeau's visit. Without admitting as much, both of them felt very proud of it.

'Can I come down?' suddenly inquired Catherine from the top of the stairs.

'Yes, yes, your father is drying himself.'

The young girl had put on her Sunday gown, a dark-blue poplin, faded, and somewhat shabby already about the folds. On her head was a plain cap of black tulle.

'What are you dressed for? Where are you going?' asked her mother.

'I'm going to Montsou, to buy a ribbon for my cap. I took the old one out; it was too dirty.'

'I didn't know you had any money.'

'No more I have. La Mouquette promised to lend me ten sous.'

Her mother then let her go. But when her hand was on the door she called her back.

'Listen: Don't buy your ribbon at Maigrat's. He'll only take you in, and think we're rolling in gold.'

The father, who was squatting before the fire, merely called after her: 'Just try and be in before dark.'

In the afternoon, Maheu worked in his garden. He had already put in potatoes, haricot beans, and peas; and he now set about planting out some young lettuces and cabbages. This bit of garden provided them with all the vegetables they needed—save potatoes, of which they never had enough. Besides, Maheu understood gardening very well, and even grew some artichokes, which was treated as affectation by his neighbours. While he was getting his bed ready, Levaque came into his own garden to smoke a pipe and look at some cos-lettuces which Bouteloup had dibbled in that morning. In fact, if it had not been for the lodger, Levaque's plot of ground would have grown nothing but nettles. The men got talking to each other across the fence. Levaque, refreshed and excited by having thrashed his wife, vainly tried to get Maheu to go to Rasseneur's. Surely he could not be frightened of a mug of beer. They might have a game of skittles and a gossip, and then come back to dinner. Such was their life, after the return from the pit. Of course, there was no harm in it, but Maheu insisted upon planting his lettuces. If he did not do so they would be withered by the following morning. In reality, he refused from motives of economy, not caring to ask his wife for a penny of the remainder of the five-franc piece.

It had just struck five, when La Pierronne came to see whether Lydie had gone off with Jeanlin. Levaque answered that such was most likely the case, for Bébert had disappeared also, and the three were always gadding about together. When Maheu had eased their minds by telling them of the dandelion salad which Jeanlin had been told to go and pick, he and his mate began jesting with the young woman. She pretended to be vexed, still she did not go away, inwardly pleased as she was at their somewhat highly-seasoned banter. At last a scraggy woman, whose stuttering anger manifested itself in a clucking noise, like that of a hen, came to her rescue. Others—some applauding the coarse raillery, some

doing the reverse—had gathered at their respective doorways, and were witnessing the scene from a distance. School was now over; the infant population was also disporting itself in the street, yelling, fighting, and making itself generally conspicuous; while the fathers, such as were not at the beer-shops, collected in groups of three and four, squatting on their haunches against the walls as if they were still in the pits, and sucking at their pipes, while exchanging a few words every now and then. La Pierronne rushed away furious when Levaque wanted to pinch her, and he thereupon decided to go to Rasseneur's by himself, leaving Maheu to plant his cabbages.

Night came on suddenly that day, and La Maheude lighted her lamp, fretting that the boys and the girl had not returned. She could have staked her oath on it; they never managed to be together at the only meal which might have found them all gathered round the same board. Then there was the dandelion salad for which she was waiting. What, in the name of all that was good, could the boy be up to? A salad would have been the very thing with the mash of potatoes, leeks, sorrel, and fried onions which she had set on the fire. The whole house was redolent of that savoury smell that grows stale so quickly, and which pervades the very bricks of the miners' villages in such wise that it assails one's nostrils a mile off like the unmistakable fumes of poverty's kitchen.

When Maheu left his garden at nightfall, he dropped asleep on a chair, his head resting against the wall. The moment he sat down at night, he dozed off. The clock struck seven; Henri and Lénore had just broken a plate whilst trying to help Alzire, who was laying the table, when old Jollycorpse came in. He was n a hurry to have his dinner, and get back to the pit.

'Let's sit down, then,' said La Maheude, waking up her husband. 'So much the worse for those who're not here! They're big enough to know better; only I'm vexed about the salad!'

V.

At Rasseneur's, Étienne, after eating some soup, went up to the small room which he was to occupy under the roof, and which overlooked the Voreux pit. Dead tired, he flung himself on his bed all dressed. He had not had four hours' sleep during the last two days. When he awoke, it was getting dusk, and for a moment he felt bewildered, failing to remember where he was. Ill at ease, with his head weighing a ton, he slowly rose with the idea of snatching a little fresh air before dinner, and of going to bed for the night immediately after the meal.

The weather had become milder and milder. There was a coppery hue about the sooty sky, which was laden with one of those long drizzles of northern climes, whose approach is felt in the warm damp air. Dusk was coming on apace, in gusts of mist that enveloped the distant horizon of the plain. Above that ocean of reddish soil, the low-lying sky seemed to melt into a pall of sable dust; not a breath of wind now animated the stilly gloom. Dismal, lifeless melancholy hung over all.

Étienne walked straight on, at random, with no other aim than to shake off his fever. When he passed in front of the Voreux pit, wrapped in darkness, for the lanterns were not as yet alight, he stopped for a moment watching the journeymen miners as they came out. It must have been six o'clock which had just struck, for the banksmen, waggoners, and others were leaving, mixed up with the sifters, all indistinct in the darkness, their presence only revealed by infrequent shouts of laughter.

First and foremost came the Scorched One and her son-in-law, Pierron, who passed close to the young man. She was rating him because he had not stood by her in a quarrel which she had had with an inspector with reference to her quantity of shale.

'You big nincompoop, get along with you! You call yourself a man, and yet you grovel before one of those brutes who live on our flesh and blood!' she cried.

Pierron kept by her side without answering. But at last he broke out: 'You'd have liked me to knock him down,

perhaps, and get into trouble afterwards. Much obliged! Not if I know it!'

'All right! I hope he'll kick you!' she yelled. 'Ah! if my girl had only listened to me! It isn't enough that they killed the father; you'd like me to thank 'em for doing so, perhaps. No, I'll make 'em suffer, you bet!'

Their voices died away in the distance. Étienne watched the Scorched One disappear, with her hook nose, her dishevelled white locks fluttering in the night air, and her skeleton arms gesticulating violently. But close behind him the conversation of two young men made him prick up his ears. He had recognised the voice of Zacharie, who had just been joined by his friend, Mouquet.

'Are you coming?' asked the latter. 'We'll have a bite and then be off to the Volcano.'

'Yes, presently; I've something to see about first.'

'What?'

But on turning round, the banksman noticed Philomène coming out of the sifting-shed.

'Very well,' he added, 'I'm going on in front.'

'Yes, I'll catch you up.'

A few steps further on, Mouquet met his father, who had just come from the pit. The two men simply wished each other good-night; the son took the highroad, and the father the path by the canal.

Zacharie had already stopped Philomène, and, in spite of her resistance, was also leading her down by the canal. When they reached the shadow of the mound of shale, he wished to know whether she had any money.

'What for?' she asked.

He thereupon muttered something about owing two francs, of which he did not want them to know anything at home.

'At home, indeed! Why! I saw Mouquet; you're only going to the Volcano, after a lot of singing sluts.'

He denied it, striking his breast, and swearing that it was not so. And seeing that she continued to shrug her shoulders incredulously, he exclaimed all at once: 'Come with us, if you like. You won't be in the way. Will you come?'

'And the little one?' she answered. 'Just as if I could stir with a child that's always squealing. Let me go home. I'll bet that they can't hear their own words there.'

But he would not get out of her way, and continued begging her to give him some money. She surely did not want

him to look a fool before Mouquet, whom he had promised to join. A man could not go to roost every night with the fowls. She, already conquered, was fumbling with the seam of her jacket, the stitching of which she undid with her nail. Then she drew some half-franc pieces from between the lining. Lest she should be robbed by her mother she thus hid the money which she made by overtime at the pit. 'I've got five, you see,' she said. 'I don't mind lending you three; but swear to me that you'll persuade your mother to get us married! I've had enough of this kind of life! Besides, mother grudges me every mouthful of food I eat. Swear to me that you will.'

She spoke slowly, in the passionless voice of a sickly girl who was simply tired of the life she led. He promised, and swore that it was an understood thing. Then, having got the money, he kissed and fondled her, and made her laugh. At last, whilst she returned to the village by herself, he cut across the fields, running as hard as he could to overtake his mate. Étienne had mechanically followed them for a little distance, merely fancying that it was a lovers' meeting. The pit girls were evidently quite as forward as the factory girls of Lille, whom he well remembered. However, another scene made him stop once more. At the foot of the mound of shale, in a large hole into which some boulders had slipped, Jeanlin was threatening Lydie and Bébert, one of whom sat on his right and the other on his left.

'What's that you say? I'll give you each a jolly good slap if you're not satisfied. Who thought of it first, just tell me?'

As it happened, Jeanlin had had an idea. After rolling about alongside the canal with the two others, all three of them picking dandelions, he had suddenly bethought himself, on seeing the large pile of salad, that they would certainly not want all of it at home. Accordingly, instead of returning to the village, he had gone to Montsou with Bébert to keep watch, while Lydie rang at the doors of private houses to offer the green stuff. Experience had taught him already, he said, that a girl would succeed much better than a boy in that sort of thing. Excited by their successes, the whole pile of dandelions had been sold, and Lydie had obtained for it eleven sous. Now, their hands empty, they were dividing their gains.

'It isn't fair!' declared Bébert, 'you should divide the

money into three. If you keep seven sous there'll only be two sous for each of us.'

'What isn't fair?' asked Jeanlin, furiously. 'First of all, 'I picked the most!'

The other generally submitted with a kind of cowardly admiration, and a gullibility that made him a constant victim. Though older and stronger than his playfellow, he even suffered himself to be knocked about. This time, however, the idea of all that money incited him to resistance.

'He's robbing us, isn't he, Lydie? If he doesn't share fair we'll tell his mother.'

Thereupon Jeanlin shoved his fist in Bébert's face.

'Just say that again, if you dare. If you don't hold your tongue I'll go and tell your mother that you sold my mother's salad. And besides, idiot that you are, how can I divide eleven sous into three? Just try, you who think yourself so clever. Here are your two sous each. Make haste and take them, or I'll pocket the lot.'

Bébert, thoroughly cowed, accepted the two sous. Lydie, trembling all over, had not said a word. When she was in Jeanlin's presence she experienced that kind of loving fear which a woman not unfrequently feels for the husband who beats her. As he was tendering her the two sous she held out her hand with a submissive smile. But suddenly he altered his mind.

'After all, what would you do with all that money? Your mother would only take it away if you didn't hide it somewhere. I'd better keep it for you. When you want money, you can ask me.'

Thereupon the nine sous disappeared in his pocket. To prevent her from protesting, he laughingly caught hold of her and rolled about with her on the shale.

All at once, however, Bébert, still smarting from the other's injustice and anxious to revenge himself on Jeanlin, called out: 'Hallo! there's a man watching! Isn't it your father?'

It was only Étienne who had decided to continue his walk. Nevertheless, the children sprang up and scampered away, and he passed by, laughing at their fright. A score of yards further on he met other young people. He was approaching the old Réquillart pit, and all around the ruined shaft the girls of Montsou were strolling with their lovers. This was the common trysting-place; the broken palings

admitted everyone to the former yard, which was now a mere plot of waste ground, bestrewn with the remains of two sheds, and the woodwork of some gangways, whose supports still remained standing. Old and useless rolling stock lay scattered about, half-rotten props were piled up in stacks; whilst luxuriant vegetation, seeking to reconquer this patch of soil, showed here and there in vigorous young saplings and thick matted grass. And around the now idle machinery, beside the pit weary of disgorging coal, young people were for ever sweethearting.

Yet old Mouque resided there as keeper. The company had given him a kind of tenement, consisting of two rooms, almost under the dismantled belfry of the shaft, whose crazy timbers constantly threatened to bury the whole place. He had even been obliged to shore up part of his ceiling, still he lived there very comfortably with his family; he and Mouquet in one room, and La Mouquette in the other. As there was not a single pane of glass left, he had boarded up the windows; a process which excluded the light, but kept the place warm. He took no care of anything else, least of all of the ruins of the Réquillart pit, whose shaft had simply been left to serve as a chimney for the ventilation of the adjacent mine. He simply went to and fro across the ground to the Voreux pit to attend to his horses there.

And it was thus that old Mouque lived in the centre of that lovers' trysting-place. On his way to and from his work at Voreux, every time indeed that he put his nose out of doors, he could scarcely take a step without coming upon some philandering couple. But neither paid much attention to the other. As they grew to know him, so he ended by knowing them, even as one comes to be acquainted with the saucy magpies which make merry amidst the pear-trees of one's garden. Ah! youth, how it enjoyed itself! At times he would shake his head with silent regret as he turned aside to avoid disturbing the young people.

Every evening he received a visit from his friend old Jollycorpse, who invariably took the same walk before his dinner. The two greybeards scarcely spoke to each other, barely exchanged a dozen words during the half hour that they remained together, But it enlivened them to be in one another's company like this, thinking of bygone things. They seated themselves side by side on some log of wood, near the abandoned pit, just vented a monosyllable now and then, and

gave rein to their fancies, never lifting their eyes from the ground. No doubt they recalled their own youthful days. Around them were lads and lasses, and sounds of kissing and laughing were wafted to the spot where they sat. It was here, forty-three years previously, that old Jollycorpse had first courted his wife, a trammer girl, who was so small and slender that he had been wont to seat her on a truck, in order that he might kiss her at his ease. Ah, those were golden days!

The two old cronies often left each other without saying as much as good-night. But on that particular evening, just as Étienne appeared in sight, old Jollycorpse, who was getting up to return to the village, remarked to Mouque: 'Good-night, old man. I say, did you know that girl Carrots?'

Mouque remained silent for a moment, then nodded his ad affirmatively and went off into his shanty, muttering: 'ood-night, old fellow, good-night.'

Étienne took their place on the log. His sadness had increased without his knowing why. The old man, whom he had just seen disappearing, reminded him of his own arrival that morning, and of the avalanche of words to which one usually so taciturn had given vent in the nervousness fomented by the hurricane. Ah! what wretchedness. To think of all those girls and lads and their certain fate. Was it not folly to people the world with children doomed to suffering and hard toil! Woe would never come to an end if folks continued to bring starvelings into existence. Perhaps these sombre thoughts chased each other through Étienne's brain because he himself was alone, while the others went off philandering two by two. The murky night air oppressed him, and the first large drops of a shower, falling on his feverish hands, proved welcome.

As Étienne sat there in the shade, scarcely stirring, a couple coming from Montsou, and going towards the plot of waste ground, brushed past without seeing him. The girl, a bashful maiden for certain, was hanging back, while the young man, without a word, continued leading her onward. It was Catherine and tall Chaval. But Étienne had not recognised them as they passed, though he followed them with his eyes.

On leaving the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, Catherine had proceeded to Montsou by the highroad. From the age of ten, from the time she had begun to earn her own living at the pit, she had gone about the place all alone, with the freedom general among miners' children. That evening

when she found herself in front of the company's yards she crossed the road and went into a laundress's shop, where she felt certain of meeting La Mouquette. The latter passed hour upon hour there with the ironers, who treated themselves to 'goes' of coffee from morn till night. But a great disappointment was in store for her. La Mouquette had just been standing treat in her turn, and could not lend her the promised ten sous. To console her she was offered a glass of hot coffee, but she declined it; and she would not even allow La Mouquette to borrow some money from another woman for her. A sudden idea of economy came upon her, a kind of superstitious fear, the feeling that if she bought the ribbon now it would assuredly bring her ill-luck.

She made haste to get back to the village, and had just reached the last houses of Montsou when a man, standing at the door of Piquette's coffee-house, called out to her:

'Hallo! Catherine, what's your hurry?'

It was tall Chaval who lodged there. She felt vexed; not that she disliked him, but she did not feel in the humour for larking.

'Come in a minute and have something—a drop of something sweet?'

She refused prettily, saying that it was getting dark, and that she was in a hurry; they were waiting for her at home. He had come towards her, however, and in the middle of the street began pressing her in a low voice to come in. They stood chatting, one word led to another, and without knowing how, she suddenly mentioned her disappointment about the blue ribbon.

'But I'll treat you to one!' he exclaimed.

She blushed, feeling that she had better refuse once more, though all the time she longed to have the ribbon. Then the idea of merely accepting it as a loan came to her, and she said 'Yes,' on condition that she should pay him back. That led to more chaff between them, and it was agreed that if she did not respond kindly to his suit, she should return him the money he expended. However, there came another difficulty when he wanted to go to Maigrat's.

'No, not to Maigrat's; mother told me not to go there.'

'What's the odds? You needn't say where you bought it. He has the prettiest ribbons in Montsou.'

When Maigrat saw tall Chaval and Catherine enter his shop like two lovers buying their wedding presents, he turned

crimson. He showed them his pieces of blue ribbon with the rage of a man who feels that he is being made a fool of. When at last he had served the young people he planted himself in the doorway and watched them walk off through the twilight. As his wife timidly came to ask about something, he turned round, swore at her, and shouted that one day or other he would punish all the dirty brutes of Montsou, who were wanting in gratitude to him, whereas they ought all to be stooping down and licking his feet.

Meantime tall Chaval accompanied Catherine along the highroad. He walked by her side, swinging his arms; only he kept close to her, leading her without pretending to do so. Suddenly she noticed that he had made her leave the highroad, and that they were going in the direction of the Réquillart pit. But he left her no time to protest; he had now slipped his arm round her waist, and began coaxing her with a flow of honeyed words. What a little duck she was, with a skin as soft as silk, so tender too that he could have eaten her! And his breath played behind her ear, and down her neck. She, quite overcome, was unable to find anything to say in reply. It was true, he really seemed to be fond of her. Yet at the same time she experienced a feeling of repugnance and a kind of regret. Whilst his moustache tickled the nape of her neck, so gently that she shut her eyes with delight, the image of another man, of the young stranger whom she had seen for the first time that morning, seemed to arise before her.

Suddenly she cast a glance around her. Chaval had led her amidst the Réquillart ruins, and then once again she would have drawn back. But Chaval held her closely and drew her onward.

Étienne, meanwhile, had watched them pass and followed them with his eyes, without stirring. At last when they had disappeared he slowly rose to go, full of uneasiness, a sort of jealous excitement and anger. He scrambled over the logs and turned his steps towards the road, and was greatly surprised when on turning round, after going a hundred yards or so, he saw the same couple already on their way back to the village. The man had his arm round the girl's waist and was pressing her to him, and bending over her and whispering in her ear, whilst she seemed anxious to be gone, vexed at being belated.

Then Étienne suddenly felt that he should like to see their faces; but the next moment he said to himself that this was

idiotic; and he thereupon strode along as fast as he could. In spite of himself his steps gradually slackened again, and at the first lamp-post he hid himself in the gloom. He remained as if rooted to the spot when he recognised Catherine and Chaval. At first he refused to believe his own eyes. Surely that could not be Catherine, that girl in a cap and a blue gown. Was it she whom he had taken for a boy in her linen trousers, her head wrapped in a handkerchief? But he doubted no longer; he had just seen her eyes, greenly limpid like the water of a spring. The hussy! and he felt an irresistible and unreasoning desire to revenge himself on her with withering contempt. After all, the dress of her own sex did not suit her. She looked horrid in it.

Catherine and Chaval had slowly sauntered by. They had no suspicion of being watched. He was still detaining her and stooping to kiss her; and she received his caresses with childish, rippling laughter. Now that Étienne had remained behind, he was, as it were, obliged to follow them, and he felt furious that they should be in his path and make him a witness of their cooings, which exasperated him. What she had sworn that morning was true; she had then had no sweetheart, but he had not believed her, and had let another snatch her from under his very nose. It made him mad to think of it; he clenched his fists and felt inclined to kill that man, seized as he was with one of those fits of murderous fury in which he saw all things red.

The walk lasted half an hour. When the couple reached the Voreux pit they went slower still, they stopped twice beside the canal, thrice by the mound of shale, talking to each other. Étienne was obliged to stop also, since he did not wish to be seen. Then, when he had an opportunity to go off to dine at Rasseneur's, he nevertheless persisted in following them. He accompanied them to the village, and remained standing in the gloom for a quarter of an hour, waiting until Chaval at last let Catherine go home. And when he had made quite sure that they had left each other, he once more set out on the road to Marchiennes, striding along without thinking about anything in particular, but feeling too greatly oppressed, too sad, to shut himself up in his room.

An hour later, towards nine o'clock, Étienne recrossed the village, saying to himself that if he was to be up at four, he had better get something to eat and go to bed. The village was already fast asleep and wrapt in darkness. Not a glimmer

made its way between the closed shutters; the long frontages stretched out silent like barracks, given up to slumber. A solitary cat alone bounded across the deserted gardens. This was the day's finish, the workmen dragging themselves from their meals to their beds, heavy with fatigue and food.

At Rasseneur's, where the lights were still burning, an engineman and two day workers sat sipping beer. But before going in Étienne cast a last look at the darkness around him. There was the same dusky immensity as in the morning when he had come along in the howling storm. In front of him the Voreux pit—vague, only lighted by the flicker of a few lanterns—was crouching like a beast of prey. The three braziers at the top of the mound of shale burnt there like blood-red moons, occasionally showing up the huge shadows of old Jollycorpse and his yellow horse. And yonder, in the level plain, everything had sunk out of sight; Montsou, Marchiennes, the forest of Vandame, the vast ocean of beet-root and wheat, where only the blue fires of the smelting furnaces and the red ones of the coke ovens now shone forth like distant beacons. Little by little the gloom grew denser still, the rain was falling slowly, continuously, enveloping everything with its monotonous drizzle, while one solitary sound could yet be heard, the thick heavy breathing of the pumping engine which panted incessantly both day and night.

BOOK III

I

On the next morning and those which followed, Étienne resumed his work at the pit. He grew accustomed to it. He regulated his existence in accordance with the new duties and habits that had seemed so hard to him at the beginning. One solitary incident relieved the monotony of the first fortnight. He was taken with a fever which kept him in bed for forty-eight hours, his limbs quite powerless and his brain on fire. In his semi-delirium he ever fancied that he was obstinately pushing his truck along so narrow a passage that he could not squeeze his body through it. This was simply the effect of the strain put upon him by his apprenticeship, excessive fatigue, from which he soon recovered.

And the days came and went; weeks, months elapsed. Like his comrades he got up at three in the morning, drank his coffee, and took his sandwich, which Madame Rasseneur prepared for him overnight. On his way to the pit he regularly met old Jollycorpse returning home, and on leaving in the afternoon he met Bouteloup going to his labour. He wore a biggin and a linen jacket and trousers; he shivered and roasted his back at the fire in the large shed. Then came the wait, barefooted, in the receiving shed, which was full of such frightful draughts. But the engine, with its bright steel and brass flashing in the gloom, moved him no longer; nor did the cables flying upwards silently, like some black night-bird; nor the cages plunging down, and re-appearing incessantly amidst the noise of the signals, the shouting of orders, and the rumbling of trucks over the iron floor. His lamp sometimes burnt badly, the man had probably neglected to clean it; he only felt himself again when Mouquet had put

them all in the cage, smacking the girls as he did so. The cage started, dropped like a stone down a well, without as much as a glance on his part at the departing daylight. He never thought of the possibility of an accident; the lower he descended into the darkness, beneath the beating rain, the more he felt at home. When they reached the bottom and the cage was unbolted by Pierron, in his hypocritical gentle way, there was always the same flock-like tramp, tramp, as each gang repaired to its own cutting with dragging steps. In a short time he knew the galleries of the mine better than the streets of Montsou, knew exactly where to turn, where to stoop, where to avoid a pool of water. He became so used to those two miles of underground passages that he might have travelled along them lampless, with his hands in his pockets. And the same incidents were repeated each day; a viewer held up his lamp to look at the miners as they went by, old Mouque passed leading a horse, Bébert drove Battle, who began whinnying, Jeanlin ran behind a train and shut the ventilating doors, and plump La Mouquette and skinny Lydie came up pushing their trucks.

After a while Étienne also suffered less from the dampness and stifling atmosphere of the cutting. The chimney seemed to him very comfortable to get up and down in, as if he were now endowed with the faculty of squeezing himself through cracks where formerly he would not have risked his hand. He inhaled the coal-dust without the least discomfort, saw as clearly in the gloom as in daylight, perspired without complaining, and became accustomed to wearing his wet clothes from morning till night. He no longer wasted his strength to no purpose; he became adroit with a rapidity which astonished the others. At the end of three weeks he was quoted among the skilful trammers of the pit; no one trundled a truck to the inclined plane and started it afterwards as quickly or as cleverly as he. His slimness enabled him to pass everywhere, and his arms, though they were smooth and white like a woman's, seemed made of iron beneath their delicate skin, so well did they perform their fatiguing work. He never complained, no doubt from pride, even though he might be ready to drop. The others only reproached him with being unable to stand chaff; he became angry the moment they attempted it. Save for that he was accepted and looked upon as a real pitman, in proportion as force of habit gradually reduced him to the level of a mere machine.

Maheu, above all, had taken a great fancy to Étienne, for he liked to see work ably done. Besides, like the others, he felt that this lad had been educated better than himself: he saw him read and write and sketch bits of plans, and he heard him talk of things of whose very existence he had hitherto been ignorant. This did not surprise him, colliers being less apt to learn than engine-men; but he was struck by this youngster's pluck, the gallant way in which he bit into the coal, so as not to die of starvation. He was the first casual workman who had grown acclimatised so quickly. Henceforward, when they were pressed for time and Maheu did not want to trouble a hewer, he charged the young man with the propping, feeling certain that it would be skilfully done. The chiefs were ever worrying about the propping; Maheu always apprehended a visit from Négrel, the engineer, accompanied by Dansaert, both disputing and finding fault with everything. He fancied, however, that his trammer's propping and shoring met with those gentlemen's approval, despite their grumbling and their threats that the company would some day adopt radical measures. As things went on, a growing spirit of discontent prevailed among the men. Maheu himself, usually so calm, occasionally ended by clenching his fists.

At first there had been a kind of rivalry between Zacharie and Étienne, and one evening they had nearly come to blows. But the former, good-natured withal, and caring for nothing but his own pleasure, was speedily appeased by the friendly offer of a mug of beer, and soon acknowledged the newcomer's superiority. Levaque also showed him a kinder face, and talked politics with him, as their ideas, said he, were the same. And among the men working at piece work Étienne felt conscious of the hostility of one only—tall Chaval. Not that they sulked; on the contrary, they became very good mates; only their eyes devoured each other whenever they joked together. Between the two, Catherine had resumed her weary, resigned existence, bending in twain as she pushed her truck along, bestowing an ever-pleasant smile upon her fellow-trammer, who now often came to her aid; and on the other hand, showing herself very submissive to her lover, and suffering his caresses in public. For the situation was an accepted one, a recognised fact to which the family closed their eyes, to the point that Chaval now walked out with the girl every evening, and kissed her before all the village.

Étienne, who thought himself resigned to the situation, often teased Catherine about those strolls. She replied in the same bantering tone, but he only had to look her straight in the face to produce a change: the quasi-defiant voice then became a gentle one, she felt confused and turned pale. At such times they both turned their heads away, and often remained for hours without exchanging a word. They seemed to hate each other for reasons deeply buried in their own hearts, which they never ventured to explain.

Spring had come. One day on stepping out of the cage Étienne felt full in the face the warm breeze of April, laden with the pleasant smell of young earth, tender verdure, and life-giving air; and now, each time that he came up, the spring smelt yet sweeter, and brought him more warmth after his ten hours' work below amidst eternal winter, damp gloom which no summer sun ever dissipated. The days grew longer, and in May he went down at dawn, when the crimson sky illumined the entrance to the Voreux pit with all the brightness of sunrise, amidst which the fleecy steam of the valves showed pink. Étienne no longer shivered now; a warm breeze came from the far-off plain, while the larks sang on high. Then, at three o'clock, when he came up, he was dazzled by the scorching sun, setting the horizon on fire, and tinting the bricks crimson under their layers of coal-dust. In June the corn was already tall, showing a bluish green which contrasted with the darker verdure of the beetroots. There was an endless ocean of greenery falling and rising at the slightest breeze. He watched it grow day by day, often with a look of surprise, as though he found it different in the evening from what he had left it in the morning. Above all, the poplars alongside the canal were donning their garb of foliage. Weeds sprouted on the mounds of shale, flowers covered the meadows, life sprang everywhere from the soil below which he toiled and moiled in privation and misery.

Whenever Étienne took a walk of an evening now, he no longer startled loving couples behind the shale, but observed the traces of their passage through the corn. Zacharie and Philomène were often to be met in the fields; the old Scorched One tramped about them in search of Lydie and Jeanlin; and, as for La Mouquette, one could not cross a field without espying her. But all this did not concern Étienne; he only felt vexed whenever he came upon Chaval and Catherine. On those occasions he would often make

haste to return to Rasseneur's, preferring to spend his evening there.

'Give me a mug of beer, Madame Rasseneur,' said he, 'I'm tired out!' And turning towards a comrade, who generally sat at the far end of the room with his head resting against the wall, he would add: 'Won't you take something, Souvarine?'

'No, thanks; nothing.'

Étienne had made Souvarine's acquaintance through the circumstance that they lived in the same house, side by side. He was an engine-man at the Voreux pit, and occupied the room next to Étienne's upstairs. He looked about thirty, slight, with clean-cut features, long fair hair, and a slight beard. His small, sharp white teeth, his thin nose and lips, and his pinkish complexion, gave him a girlish appearance, an air of obstinate gentleness, which the pale glow of his steel-grey eyes lighted up with a flash of savagery every now and then. In his poor workman's room he kept nothing save a few clothes and a box of papers and books. He was a Russian and never spoke about himself, as if indifferent to the legends related of him. The pitmen, who are very suspicious of foreigners, guessed that he belonged to a class different from their own by his small soft hands, and they had at first pictured him as mixed up in some adventure, some crime, from the consequences of which he had fled. But he showed himself so friendly towards them, distributing all his coppers among the children of the village, and never evincing the slightest pride, that they had now accepted him as one of themselves, reassured by the vague expression 'political refugee,' with which his name was coupled, in which they pictured an excuse for crime itself, and a kind of fellowship in suffering.

During the first weeks Étienne had found the other reserved almost to bearishness. Hence he only learnt his history much later on. Souvarine was the last born of a noble family of Toula. While he was studying medicine at St. Petersburg, the socialist passion then turning the heads of the Russian youth had decided him to learn a handicraft, that of a working engineer, in order that he might mix with the people, and come to their aid like a brother. And it was by this trade that he now earned his bread, after having to fly in consequence of an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the Emperor. For a month he had lived in a fruiterer's cellar, digging a mine under a street and manufacturing

bombshells at the hourly risk of being blown up with the house. Disowned by his family, penniless, regarded in every French workshop as a foreigner who might be a spy, he was starving when the Montsou company engaged him during press of business. He had been with them for the last twelve months, discharging his duties like a capable, sober, well-behaved man, working the night shift one week, the day shift the next, and withal so punctual as to be held up as an example by his superiors.

'Are you never thirsty, then?' inquired Étienne laughing. Thereupon in a soft tone, almost without any foreign accent, Souvarine answered, 'I am thirsty when I eat.'

His companion often bantered him about the girls, and taxed him with having been seen walking with a trammer-lass not far from Silk-Stockings. In reply he merely shrugged his shoulders with quiet indifference. Woman was to him simply a comrade: provided, that is, that she had a man's courage and fraternal capabilities. He saw no use in opening his heart to any feeling that might possibly unman him. He wanted neither wife nor friend, nor any tie; he wished to be as free with his own blood as with that of others.

Every evening towards nine o'clock, when the tavern grew empty, Etienne would remain chatting with Souvarine. He slowly sipped his beer, while the engine-man smoked cigarette after cigarette, the tobacco of which had stained his slender fingers. His dreamy mystic eyes seemed to watch the cloudlets of smoke through a dream; his left hand, nervously fidgeting for something, kept gently beating the air, and he generally ended by taking on his knee a tame rabbit, a fat, prolific doe, which had the run of the house. This rabbit, which he himself had christened Poland, had taken a violent fancy to him, smelt his legs, cuddled up against him, and put up its paws until he took it in his arms like an infant. Then, snugly pressed against him, with drooping ears, it shut its eyes, while he, with a soft, caressing motion, kept on stroking its grey silky coat, apparently calmed by the contact of the animal's gentle warmth.

'You know,' said Étienne one evening, 'I've had a letter from Pluchart.'

No one was near but Rasseneur. The last customer had just left for the village, which was going to bed.

'Indeed,' exclaimed the landlord, standing before his lodgers. 'What has Pluchart to say?'

For the last two months Étienne had kept up a constant correspondence with his old foreman at Lille. He had had the idea of apprising him of his engagement at Montsou, and the other, struck by the thought of the propaganda which the young man might carry on among the miners, was now indoctrinating him.

'He says that the association in question is getting on very well. It appears to be gathering adherents from all sides.'

'What say you to their association?' asked Rasseneur, of Souvarine.

The latter, who was gently scratching Poland's head, blew away a whiff of smoke, and said in his quiet fashion, 'Mere rubbish!'

Étienne, however, got excited. His revolutionary instincts had thrown him into the struggle of labour against capital with all the illusions bred from ignorance. They were alluding to the International Association of Labour, that famous 'International' which had just been started in London. Was there not here a superb effort, a campaign, in which justice would prevail at last? No more frontiers, the toilers of the world uprising, combining to insure themselves the bread to which they were entitled. And how grand and simple was the organisation! At the base 'the section' representing the parish; then 'the federation' uniting the sections of a province; higher up still, the nation; and at the very top, humanity personified by a general council, in which each nation would be represented by a corresponding secretary. Before six months were over the world would be conquered, and the workmen would dictate laws to their employers if the latter should prove refractory.

'Rubbish!' repeated Souvarine. 'Your Karl Marx is still at the A B C of the thing; he wants to act by natural forces. No politics, no conspiracy, everything aboveboard and simply in order to raise wages. Don't bother me with your evolution! Set the four corners of every town on fire, cut down the inhabitants, raze everything to the ground, and when there is nothing left of this corrupt world, perhaps a better one may arise.'

Étienne laughed. He did not always catch his comrade's meaning, and the theory of universal destruction seemed to him so much affectation. Rasseneur, more practical still, did not deign to lose his temper. He simply wished to have things set forth clearly.

'Then you are going to try to establish a section at Montsou?'

Such was the wish of Pluchart, who was secretary to the Northern Federation. He laid particular stress on the services which the association would render to the miners should they some day come out on strike. Étienne appeared to think a strike imminent; the trouble about the propping would surely end badly; it only wanted one or two more exactions on the company's part to drive the pitmen to revolt.

'The bother is those subscriptions,' said Rasseneur in a judicial tone. 'Fifty centimes a year for the general fund, and two francs for the section, it looks nothing. Still I'd wager that many will refuse to pay the money.'

'The more especially as they ought to begin here by starting a provident fund, which, in case of need, might become a fund to fall back upon for resistance,' added Étienne. 'It's the moment to think of these matters. I'm ready if the others are.'

There was a spell of silence. The petroleum lamp stood smoking on the counter. Through the open door the noise made by the shovel of a stoker feeding the furnace at the Voreux pit was distinctly heard.

'Everything is so dear!' resumed Madame Rasseneur, who had come in and had been listening with sombre mien, looking taller than ever in her everlasting black gown. 'I can tell you that I pay two sous for eggs. There must be a burst-up.'

This time the three men were in full agreement. They spoke one after the other in a despairing tone. They could not but bewail things. The workman was unable to stand it any longer. The Revolution had only aggravated his misery; it was the *bourgeois* who had been getting fat since '89, without leaving as much to the workers as the scraping out of the dishes. Would anyone maintain that the latter had enjoyed their fair share of the extraordinary increase of wealth and material welfare of the last hundred years? They had been befooled by being declared free; yes, free they were to die of starvation, and a good many availed themselves of that freedom. It did not put bread in one's cupboard to be able to vote for a set of humbugs who took it easy enough when they were elected, without caring any more about the wretches who had returned them than about their old shoes. No; there must be an end to it all, one way

or the other, either gently and lawfully, by a thorough and cordial understanding, or savagely, by burning down everything and devouring one another. The children would assuredly see that come to pass even if the old ones did not, because the century could not come to an end without another revolution; this time the workmen's Revolution, a kind of general flare-up, which would overturn society from top to bottom, and rebuild it on a cleaner and more equitable footing.

'There will have to be a burst-up,' energetically repeated Madame Rasseneur.

'Yes, yes,' exclaimed the three men; 'there will have to be a burst-up.'

Souvarine was now stroking Poland's ears, and the rabbit's nostrils dilated with pleasure. In a low voice, his eyes gazing into vacancy, and as though speaking to himself, the Russian went on: 'To raise wages is all very well, but can it be done? They seem to be fixed by an iron law to the smallest sum possible, that is just enough to allow of workmen having dry bread. If wages fall too low, the workmen die, and the demand for new hands causes a rise. If they were to rise too much the supply would exceed the demand, and that would make them go down again. It all means a life sentence to starvation.'

When he ran on in that way, taking up the subjects like an educated socialist, Étienne and Rasseneur became fidgety, troubled by his despairing assertions, to which they failed to find an answer.

'I tell you,' he went on, in his usual quiet manner, and this time looking at them, 'you must destroy everything, otherwise hunger will only sprout up again. Yes! there must be anarchy, nothing left, the earth cleansed by blood, purified by fire! After that we'll see.'

'The gentleman is quite right,' declared Madame Rasseneur, whose most revolutionary outbreaks invariably took a form of exceeding politeness.

tienne, in despair at his ignorance, would discuss matters no further. He rose, saying, 'Let's go to bed. All this won't prevent my having to get up at three o'clock.'

Already Souvarine, after blowing away the bit of cigarette that stuck to his lips, had gently put his arm round the big rabbit previous to setting it down. Rasseneur on his side went to close the house. They separated in silence, their

ears buzzing, and their heads as though swollen by the weighty questions revolving in their minds.

Each evening there were similar conversations in that bare room over the solitary mug of beer which Étienne took an hour to sip. All the vague notions, slumbering within him until now, were fomenting and growing. Though racked by thirst of knowledge, he long hesitated before borrowing books of his fellow lodger, who, unfortunately, had few but German and Russian works. At last, however, Étienne had managed to secure a French volume on co-operative societies, 'more rubbish,' as Souvarine put it; and he also regularly read a newspaper the latter received, *Le Combat*, an anarchist sheet published at Geneva. Withal, in spite of their daily intercourse, Étienne found the Russian as close as ever; he always seemed to be simply bivouacking in life, without interests, feelings, or possessions of any kind.

Towards the early days of July an improvement took place in Étienne's position. An incident had diversified the monotonous, uneventful life of the mine. The men of the William vein had come upon a shift in the beds which foretold a break. In fact, the latter soon showed itself, to the great surprise of the engineers, who, notwithstanding their knowledge of the ground, had never suspected such a thing. It upset the whole of the pit; nothing was talked of but the vein that had disappeared, dipping down, no doubt, to reappear at the other end of the out-throw. Old, experienced miners already began to sniff about, like hounds, on the track of coal. Meanwhile the men could not remain idle, and so notices were posted up announcing that the company would offer by tender the working of some new cuttings.

One day, on coming out of the pit, Maheu took Étienne aside and made him an offer to enter his gang as a hewer, in lieu of Levaque, who had joined another party. The matter had already been arranged with the head viewer and the engineer, who professed themselves greatly satisfied with the young man. Hence Étienne had only to accept this rapid advancement, well pleased at such a proof of Maheu's growing esteem.

In the evening they returned together to the pit to make themselves acquainted with the notices. The cuttings offered by tender were in the Filonnière vein, in the northern gallery of the Voreux pit. They did not promise to be profitable, and the old miner repeatedly shook his head while Étienne was

reading out the conditions. In fact, the next morning, Maheu, taking him down to visit the cutting, pointed out its distance from the landing-place, the shivery nature of the ground, the thinness of the bed, and the hardness of the coal. Nevertheless, if they were to eat, they would have to work. Accordingly on the following Sunday they repaired to the sale, which took place in the waiting-shed, and which was presided over by the pit engineer, assisted by the head viewer. From five to six hundred pitmen were assembled there in front of the little rostrum erected in a corner; and the adjudications went on so quickly that one heard but a confused tumult of voices, amidst which figures were called aloud, and almost immediately drowned by those which were shouted in response.

For a moment Maheu feared that he might be unable to obtain one of the forty jobs offered by the company. All the competitors lowered their terms, panic-stricken as they were by the rumours of a crisis, and the fear of being thrown out of work. Négrel, the engineer, knew better than to hurry over the business, and quietly allowed the terms to fall to the lowest figures possible, while, on the other hand, Dansaert, anxious to rush matters, stood mendaciously expatiating upon the excellence of the bargains. To get his clear fifty yards of cutting in front of him, Maheu was obliged to underbid a mate, who proved equally tenacious; they each kept taking off a centime from the price of the truckful. And if Maheu remained the victor it was by coming down so low that Richomme, the viewer, who was standing behind him, swore between his teeth, nudged him with his elbow, and averred with a growl that he would never be able to make it pay at that rate.

When they came out Étienne was muttering curses. And he suddenly burst out before Chaval, who was strolling back from the cornfields with Catherine, while his prospective father-in-law had been attending to business.

'That's what I call regular slaughter!' he shouted. 'So their latest game is to make the workman devour his fellows!'

Chaval also lost his temper; he would never have lowered the terms! Even Zacharie, who was there from mere curiosity, declared that it was disgusting. But Étienne, with a gesture of covert violence, made them hold their tongues.

'There'll be an end to all this. We'll be the masters some day!'

At this Maheu, who had been silent ever since coming out of the shed, seemed to wake up. 'The masters,' he repeated. 'Ah! curse it! it'll be high time!'

II

It was the last Sunday in July, the day of the annual fair of Montsou. Early on Saturday night the tidy matrons of the miners' village had had a general cleaning up, a downright deluge of buckets of water dashed against the walls and over the brick floors, the latter not being dry as yet, in spite of the white sand with which they had been strewn, a luxury rather costly to such poor purses. The day promised to be a very hot one, however, for there was one of those heavy storm-laden skies which weigh upon those flat bare northern regions in summer.

Sunday generally upset the routine of getting-up time among the Maheus. While the father, as soon as five had struck, fidgeted in his bed, rose and dressed himself, notwithstanding the leisure before him, the children coddled themselves up till nine. On that particular Sunday Maheu went to smoke a pipe in his garden, and came back to eat a slice of bread and butter by himself. He spent his morning pottering about without exactly knowing how; he mended a tub that was leaking, and stuck a portrait of the Prince Imperial, that had been given to the youngsters, under the clock. Presently, the others came down one by one; first, old Jollycorpse, who took a chair outside to warm himself in the sun; then the mother and Alzire. They immediately began their cooking preparations, and eventually Catherine made her appearance, with Lénore and Henri, whom she had dressed. It was on the stroke of eleven, however, and the smell of the rabbit, which was stewing with potatoes, already pervaded the house, when Zacharie and Jeanlin came down last of all, their eyes still heavy with sleep. Everywhere the mining village was astir in expectation of the fair, and briskly preparing for dinner in order to be off as quickly as possible to Montsou. Groups of children kept running to and fro, and men in shirt-sleeves and slippers down at heel were loafing about. The doors and windows thrown wide open to the warm air afforded a view of the long rows of living-rooms,

buzzing with noise and swarming with large families. And from one end to the other of the various blocks there arose a smell of rabbit, an odour of rich cookery which on that day battled against the inveterate fumes of fried onions.

The Maheus sat down to their meal at the stroke of twelve. They were quiet enough amidst the gossip that went on from door to door, the chattering of the women who were mutually borrowing kitchen utensils, and the hubbub of the little ones who were driven off or admonished with slaps. Besides, for the last three weeks the Maheus had fallen out with their neighbours, the Levaques, on the subject of Zacharie's marriage with Philomène. The men spoke to each other, but the women affected to be utter strangers. This coolness had tightened the bonds of intimacy with La Pierronne. Only the latter, leaving her husband and Lydie with her mother, had started very early in the morning to spend the day with a female cousin, at Marchiennes. Everybody chaffed about it; they knew the lady, she had a moustache, and was head viewer at the Voreux pit. La Maheude declared that it was not right for one to leave one's family on the Sunday of the fair.

Besides the potatoes and the stewed rabbit—which had been fattened up in the outhouse for the last month—the Maheus had some meat soup, and the beef it was made from. The fortnight's pay had fallen the day before. They failed to remember such a treat as the present one. Even on last Sainte-Barbe's day, the miner's holiday, when the men knock off for seventy-two hours, the rabbit had not been so fat or so tender. Therefore the ten pairs of jaws, from those of little Estelle, who was getting her teeth, to those of old Jollycorpse, who was losing his, set to with such good will that even the bones of the coney vanished. Meat was indeed nice, but they digested it badly; they tasted too little of it. They only left a piece of the cold soup beef for the evening meal, but that did not matter: they would eke it out with some slices of bread and butter if they were hungry.

Jeanlin was the first to get away. Bébert was waiting for him at the other end of the gardens. The two prowled about a long while before they got hold of Lydie, whom the Scorched One, intent on staying at home, wanted to keep with her. When she found the child had gone she yelled and flung about her bony arms, while Pierron, disgusted with her noise, strolled off quietly with the air of a man who amuses himself

without any remorse, knowing that his better half is enjoying herself likewise.

Shortly afterwards old Jollycorpse departed also, and Maheu himself made up his mind to get into the open air, after asking his wife whether she would join him over yonder. No, she could not think of it, it would be too much trouble with all the little ones; perhaps though she might be able to manage it all the same, she would see about it, and of course, she would be sure to find him if she did come. When Maheu got outside he hesitated for a moment, and then went into his neighbour's to see if Levaque was ready. But he found Zacharie there waiting for Philomène, whose mother began to talk about the young people's marriage, shouting that they were leading her by the nose, and that she would have a final explanation with Maheu's wife. What sort of existence was it for her to have to look after her daughter's children, while the girl went gadding about with her lover? Philomène having quietly put on her cap, Zacharie went off with her, repeating that he was agreeable if his mother was. Maheu found that Levaque had made himself scarce already, so he likewise referred the woman to his wife and departed as quickly as he could. Bouteloup, who was finishing a bit of cheese, with both his elbows on the table, obstinately declined the friendly offer of a mug of beer. He was going to stay at home, said he.

Little by little the village became empty, all the men strolling off behind one another, while the girls, watching in the doorways, started in the opposite direction on the arms of their swains. As her father was turning the corner by the church, Catherine, perceiving Chaval, hastened to join him, and they both took the road to Montsou. And La Maheude, left alone with the children, had not the courage to rise from her chair, but poured herself out a second glass of coffee, which she slowly sipped. In a little while the women had the village all to themselves; they were draining the coffee-pots and mutually inviting each other to their respective tables, still warm and greasy from the recent dinners.

Maheu guessed that Levaque was at Rasseneur's, and so he went slowly down the hill. And, in fact, behind the beer-shop, in a narrow strip of garden shut in by a quick-set hedge, Levaque was having a game of skittles with some mates. Old Jollycorpse and old Mouque stood watching the play, so absorbed in it that they even forgot to nudge each other with

their elbows. The burning sun beat down upon their heads, for there was only a little bit of shade close by the house; and there Étienne sat at a table sipping his beer, and feeling somewhat annoyed that Souvarine should have left him to go upstairs to his room. Nearly every Sunday the engine-man shut himself up to read or write.

'Will you play a game?' asked Levaque of Maheu. But the latter refused. He felt too warm, and was already choking with thirst.

'Rasseneur!' called Étienne, 'bring a mug of beer.' Then, turning towards Maheu, he added, 'You know, I stand treat.'

But Rasseneur did not seem in a hurry. He had to be called three times; and, at last, it was Madame Rasseneur who brought some lukewarm beer. The young man had lowered his voice to complain of the bad attendance; the Rasseneurs were no doubt kind-hearted folk, who meant well, but their beer was abominable and their soup still more so! He had made up his mind a dozen times to change his lodging, but the journey to Montsou frightened him. One day or other he would certainly look out for a family in the village itself to board and lodge with.

'It would be the best thing for you,' said Maheu, in his slow, deliberate way; 'you'd surely be more comfortable with a family.'

But they were interrupted by some loud huzzas. Levaque had overturned all the skittles at one stroke. Old Mouque and old Jollycorpse, looking down to the ground, expressed their approval by profound silence. The delight of the others found vent in banter, especially when La Mouquette's jolly face was perceived over the hedge. She had been prowling about for the last hour, and had just plucked up courage to draw near when she heard the loud laughter.

'What! all alone?' cried Levaque; 'and your sweethearts?'

'I've sent them about their business,' the girl answered with impudent gaiety. 'I'm looking out for a new one.'

They all proposed themselves, and began to chaff her, but she shook her head, laughing all the louder.

'Get along with you!' resumed Levaque, looking towards Étienne. 'We all know whom you're after, my lass!'

At this Étienne also brightened up. It was, in fact, after him that the trammer girl came dangling. But though he was secretly amused by her preference, he made her no response. She remained for a few minutes staring at him

with her big eyes, and then slowly turned away, her face becoming very serious all of a sudden, as if she were oppressed by the heat of the sun.

In a voice scarcely above a whisper, Étienne then resumed the explanations he was giving Maheu with respect to the necessity there was for the miners of Montsou to establish a provident fund.

'Seeing that the company professes to leave us free, what have we to fear?' he repeated. 'Of course, it gives its own pensions, but they're granted according to its own fancy, because we contribute nothing to them. Well, side by side with the company's good pleasure, it would be sensible to establish a mutual benefit society, on which we could at least depend, in the event of immediate need.' Forthwith, he began giving particulars, discussed details of organisation, and offered to take no end of trouble.

'As far as I'm concerned I'm agreeable,' said Maheu at last, with an air of conviction. 'But there're the others; try to persuade them.'

Levaque had won the game of skittles, which were now discarded for mugs of beer. But Maheu refused to have a second one. By-and-by he would, perhaps, but not just now; the day was still young. Suddenly he began thinking of Pierron. Where could he be? No doubt at Lenfant's, another tavern; and he prevailed upon Levaque and Étienne to go with him. The three started for Montsou at the very moment when a new set invaded Rasseneur's skittle alley.

On their way thither they felt bound to look in at Casimir's, and then at The Progress, both situated on the paved highroad. Comrades hailed them from the open doors; they could not very well refuse. And each stoppage meant a pint mug of beer, two when they stood treat in their turn. They remained about ten minutes, exchanged about half-a-dozen words, and recommenced a little farther on, very steadily, knowing as they did the nature of the liquor, of which they might drink any amount without much effect on their sobriety. At Lenfant's they met Pierron, who was finishing his second mugful, and who, in order not to be unsociable, swallowed a third. They naturally had theirs. By this time they were four in number and they went off to look for Zacharie, who might be at Tison's, another tavern. The room was empty, so they ordered more mugfuls while they waited a while. They next bethought themselves of the

Saint-Éloi tavern, where they fell in with Richomme, the viewer, who likewise stood a turn. Thence they strolled from beershop to beershop without any definite aim, simply by way of amusing themselves.

'Let's have a look in at the Volcano!' suddenly said Levaque, who was getting merry.

The others laughed and hung back for a moment, then went after all, in order not to abandon their mate. They were by this time in the thick of the fair. At the lower end of the long narrow room of the Volcano, on a kind of platform made of rough deal boards, five female singers, the dregs of the Lille streets, were parading monstrous charms and gestures. The place was full of trammers, banksmen, and even trullers of fourteen, all the youth of the pit, indulging in gin in preference to beer. There were also some old miners, the rakish husbands of the various villages, those whose households were famed for their dirt and disorder.

When the newcomers were seated round a small table, Étienne took possession of Levaque to explain to him his idea of a provident fund. He possessed all the stubborn ardour of a newly-converted propagandist.

'Each member could assuredly afford to give twenty sous a month,' he repeated. 'In that way one might, in four or five years, get a large capital together, and where there are funds there is strength under no matter what circumstances. Isn't that so? Well, what do you think of it?'

'I don't say nay,' answered Levaque, who in reality was paying very little attention, being attracted by a big fair woman on the platform. 'We'll talk about it.' When Maheu and Pierron, after having drunk their beer, wished to leave without hearing a second song, he, Levaque, remained behind.

Outside, Étienne, who had accompanied the others, fell in with La Mouquette, who seemed to have kept close at their heels. She continued to stare at him, but the young man simply chaffed her and shrugged his shoulders. Then she turned away with an angry gesture, and was lost in the crowd.

'Where's Chaval?' asked Pierron.

'Indeed, where is he?' said Maheu. Then, answering himself, he added, 'He is sure to be at Piquette's. Let's go to Piquette's.'

However, when the three of them reached Piquette's, the uproar of a dispute stopped them at the door. Zacharie was

thrusting his fist under the nose of a thick-set phlegmatic Walloon nailer, while Chaval, his hands in his pockets, looked on.

'Here he is,' quietly said Maheu. 'He's with Catherine.' For the last five hours, indeed, the trammer girl and her swain had been walking up and down the fair. Along the Montsou road, that wide street with low-fronted, gaily-painted houses, which sloped down in such a crooked way, there was a continuous mob of people going by under the burning sun, like an army of ants lost amidst the bareness of the level plain. The long-abiding black mud had dried, and a black dust now ascended in clouds. On both sides of the road, the beershops were full of a surging crowd; the landlords had set tables on the pavement, where there was a double row of hawkers' stalls, open-air bazaars, displaying silk handkerchiefs and looking-glasses for the girls, pocket-knives and caps for the lads; besides sweetstuffs, cakes, and biscuits. In front of the church there was an archery gallery; while opposite the company's yards were skittle and bowling alleys. At the corner of the road to Joiselle, next to the counting-houses, cock-fighting was going on inside an enclosure, and the crowd pressed eagerly to see the prowess of two red chanticleers armed with iron spurs, who were already bleeding profusely. Further on, at Maigrat's, people were playing at bagatelle for aprons and trousers. Now and then there came a long spell of silence, the mob was drinking, sousing itself without a sound. A mute guzzling of beer and gorging of fried potatoes went on upon all sides in the heavy atmosphere, which the fumes of the boiling fat in the frying-pans made more stifling still.

Chaval bought Catherine a looking-glass for nineteen sous, and a silk handkerchief for three francs. At every turn they met old Mouque and old Jollycorpse, who had also come to the fair, and hobbled to and fro deeply absorbed in contemplation. But the lovers were greatly disgusted by another meeting. They perceived Jeanlin inciting Bébert and Lydie to steal some bottles of gin from a drinking booth set up on the skirt of some waste ground. All that Catherine could do was to deal her brother a sound slap, for the little girl had already made off with a bottle. Those wretched imps would surely end in prison.

Finding themselves just then in front of the Severed Head, Chaval offered to take his sweetheart in to show her a piping match between chaffinches, which had been advertised

for the last week on the doors. Fifteen nailers from Marchiennes, each with a dozen cages, had responded to the call, and the little darkened prison-houses, in which the blinded birds, perched motionless, were already suspended against a hoarding in the yard of the beershop. The prize fell to the bird which most frequently repeated the phrase of his song in the space of an hour. Each nailer, slate in hand, stood before his cages, noting and watching his neighbours, and being watched himself. The finches had started, the cocks in fuller notes, the hens in trebles, but all very timid at first, only risking a pipe now and then, though gradually working themselves up to the right pitch, accelerating their rhythm until some at last grew so excited in the heat of the strife as to drop dead from their perches. The nailers encouraged them, shouting to them in the Walloon dialect to sing, to sing just once again, while the spectators, about a hundred in all, remained mute, passionately interested, amidst the furious music of a hundred and eighty finches, all repeating the same tune. It was a hen that won the first prize, a wrought-iron coffee-pot.

Catherine and Chaval were standing there, when Zacharie and Philomène also sauntered in. They all shook hands and kept together. But suddenly Zacharie turned round upon a nailer, who, out of curiosity, had accompanied his mates, and was amusing himself with pinching Catherine. The girl, getting very red, bade her brother keep quiet, trembling at the idea of a fight, and of all the nailers falling upon Chaval should the latter object to his sweetheart being pinched. She herself had made no complaint for fear of a disturbance.

Moreover, her swain took the matter very good-naturedly and merely laughed. The four went out, and there seemed an end of the trouble. But they had scarcely entered Piquette's, and were only just sipping their beer, when the nailer reappeared, jeering at them and thrusting his face close to theirs in a provoking manner. At this Zacharie, feeling himself stung in his family honour, rushed upon the man.

'That's my sister, you pig! Wait a moment, I'll teach you to keep your hands off her!'

People came between them, while Chaval very calmly repeated, 'Leave him alone, it's my business. I tell you that I don't care a rap for him!'

Just then Maheu appeared on the scene with his party. He quieted Catherine and Philomène, who were crying. The

nailer had slunk away, and the crowd was laughing. To drown this unpleasant episode in oblivion, Chaval, who was at home at Piquette's, offered beer to his friends. Étienne was in duty bound to clink mugs with Catherine; they all drank together, the father, the daughter and her sweetheart, the son and his young woman, saying politely, 'To the health of the company!' Then Pierron insisted upon standing his turn. And the utmost cordiality prevailed, when all at once Zacharie, perceiving his mate, Mouquet, became furious again. He called out to him that they would go and do for the nailer.

'I must smash him! You, Chaval, keep Philomène with Catherine. I'll be back soon.'

Maheu stood treat in his turn. After all, if the lad wished to take his sister's part, it only showed a good example. But Philomène simply shrugged her shoulders; the moment she had noticed Mouquet she had felt quite easy. The two rascals were merely off to the Volcano.

The pleasures of the fair generally wound up with an evening at the ball of the Jolly Good Fellow. Widow Désir, its proprietress, was a matron of about fifty, as round as a beer-barrel, but looking so fresh as to always have half-a-dozen admirers dangling after her. 'One for every day in the week,' she said; 'and the whole six on a Sunday.' She called the men of the neighbouring mines 'her children,' her tender feelings for them arising, no doubt, from the recollection of the oceans of beer which she had retailed to them during the last thirty years; and she boasted too that not a trammer girl had ever kept company without having first patronised her establishment. The Jolly Good Fellow consisted of two large rooms; the tavern itself, with its counter and tables, behind which was the spacious ballroom, with its floor boarded in the middle, and paved with bricks all round. There was some little attempt at decoration. Two garlands of paper flowers stretched diagonally across the ceiling, and met in the centre so as to form a crown. Along the walls hung gilt shields bearing the names of various saints—Saint Éloi, the patron of the iron puddlers, Saint Crépin, the patron of the cobblers, Sainte Barbe, the patroness of the miners—in fact, the whole calendar of corporation saints. The ceiling of the place was so low, however, that the three musicians on their raised stand, as big as a pulpit, had to keep their heads bent. To shed the required lustre on the scene of an

evening, four paraffin lamps were hung in the respective corners of the room.

On that particular Sunday dancing had begun at five o'clock, in broad daylight. But it was only towards seven that the rooms filled. Outside the wind had risen, and was blowing the black dust about in such wise that it blinded the sauntering people, and grizzled in the fried-potato pans. Maheu, Étienne, and Pierron, having just entered the Jolly Good Fellow, there once more found Chaval, who was now dancing with Catherine, while Philomène, all alone, looked on. Neither Levaque nor Zacharie had reappeared. As there were no seats round the ballroom, Catherine after each dance came to sit at her father's table. They called Philomène, but she declared that she preferred to remain standing. Dusk was falling; the three musicians were playing their hardest; and all one could see in the room was the swinging of the dancers' hips and chests amidst a confused medley of arms. The appearance of the four lamps was greeted with loud cheers, and all at once their light revealed crimson faces, dishevelled locks clinging to the dancers' temples, and flying skirts, disseminating the odour which came from the many perspiring couples. Maheu drew Étienne's attention to La Mouquette, who, plump and shiny like a bladder of lard, was whirling violently on the arm of a tall lank banksman; she was no doubt consoling herself with him for Étienne's disdain.

It was fully eight o'clock when La Maheude made her appearance, having Estelle at her breast and followed by Alzire, Henri, and Lénore. She had come straight to the Jolly Good Fellow, making sure of finding her old man there. They would sup later on; no one was hungry as yet, soaked as they were, the women with coffee and the men with beer. Some other women were arriving also, and people whispered together on seeing La Levaque follow in the wake of La Maheude with Bouteloup, who led Achille and Désirée, Philomène's little ones, by the hand. The two women appeared to be very friendly together, and constantly turned round and spoke one to another. There had been a very lengthy explanation on the road. La Maheude had suddenly consented to Zacharie's marriage, grieved at having to lose her eldest boy's wages, but yielding, nevertheless, because she considered that she could no longer keep him at home without committing an act of injustice. She tried to look cheerful,

though her heart was anxious, for ever and anon she asked herself, like a good housewife, how she was going to make both ends meet now that she would have so much less money to rely upon.

'Sit down there, neighbour,' she said, pointing to a table near the one at which Maheu, Étienne, and Pierron were sipping their beer.

'My husband isn't with you?' asked La Levaque. The men replied that he would be with them presently. They all squeezed in as tightly as possible, Bouteloup and the children being so closely packed between the others as to make the two tables look like one. More beer was at once called for. Philomène, on perceiving her mother and her own little ones, had joined the group. She accepted a chair, and appeared pleased to hear that she was going to be married at last; then, as they were inquiring after Zacharie, she said, in her dead-alive voice, 'I'm waiting for him; he's somewhere about.'

Maheu exchanged a look with his wife. 'Had she given her consent then?' He became very serious and smoked his pipe in silence. He also was thinking about the future, confronted by the ingratitude of his children, who were getting married one by one, leaving their parents to struggle on by themselves.

Meantime, the dancing continued; the final figure of a quadrille raised clouds of reddish dust; the walls shook and creaked; a cornet-à-piston gave vent to a succession of screeches like a locomotive in distress; and when the dancers came to a standstill, they steamed like cart-horses.

The cornet-à-piston next started a polka, and while the hubbub began afresh, Maheu quietly communicated an idea to his wife. Why should they not take a lodger—Étienne for instance—who was just looking out for a family to board with? They would have room as Zacharie was about to leave them, and the money they would lose in one way might be made up to a certain extent in the other. La Maheude's face brightened at the notion, which was a good one, and ought to be acted on as quickly as possible. She beheld threatening hunger staved off once more, and her good humour revived to such an extent that she called for another round of beer.

Étienne, meanwhile, was trying to win over Pierron by explaining to him the plan of the suggested provident fund.

He had got him to promise to subscribe to it, when he was imprudent enough to divulge its real aim. 'And in the event of our striking,' said he, 'you'll see at once how useful our fund would be. We could snap our fingers at the company, for the first money wherewith to resist them would be there. Well, then, it's an understood thing, you'll join?'

Pierron glanced at the floor and turned pale. 'I'll think it over,' he stammered. 'Orderly behaviour is, after all, the best provident fund.'

At that moment Maheu turned to Étienne and straightway, like the honest soul he was, offered to take him as a lodger. The young man accepted in the same spirit, being desirous of living in the village, with the idea of there exerting his influence among his fellow-workmen. Everything was settled in a minute, La Maheude adding that they would merely wait until Zacharie was married.

And just then Zacharie came back, accompanied by Mouquet and Levaque. All three had the odour of the Volcano about them, a smell of gin and a scent of musk. They were very drunk and looking exceedingly pleased with themselves, grinning together and digging each other in the ribs. When Zacharie was told of his approaching marriage he burst out laughing so violently that he almost choked. In her quiet way Philomène declared that she would rather see him laugh than cry. As there were no vacant chairs, Bouteloup offered half of his to Levaque. And the latter, suddenly becoming very sentimental in presence of such a family gathering, ordered another round of beer.

'Dash it all! it isn't often we enjoy ourselves!' he bawled.

They stayed till ten o'clock. Some more women, carrying infants and followed by troops of urchins, came to join their husbands and take them home. The beer overflowed and the customers were so tightly wedged together that they no longer had any elbow-room. A continuous roar of laughter distended people's mouths from ear to ear. The place was as hot as an oven, everyone was mopping him or herself, and under the paper garlands the dancers perspired to such a point that they could no longer see one another. Whenever a couple fell, the cornet-à-piston blared louder still, and a mad whirl of feet rolled the fallen ones along.

Somebody passing by at last came to tell Pierron that his little girl Lydie was lying asleep outside, across the pavement.

The child had drunk her share of the stolen bottle of gin, and was tipsy; he had to carry her home, hanging round his neck, while Jeanlin and Bébert, more inured to drink, followed at a distance, thinking it all great fun. This incident proved the signal for departure; a great many families began to leave; the Maheus and the Levaques likewise made up their minds to get home. Just at that moment old Jollycorpse and old Mouque also left Montsou together, like a pair of sleep-walkers, absorbed in their silent recollections. And thus all went back together, after passing a last time through the fair, between the fried-potato pans and the taverns which were dispensing their last mugs of beer. The storm was still threatening, but the laughter only increased and spread over the country-side when the last lights were left behind. The village was reached in straggling fashion. Neither the Levaques nor the Maheus felt any appetite for supper; the latter fell asleep over the boiled beef left from the morning, while Étienne dragged Chaval to Rasseneur's for a final drink.

'I'm your man!' said Chaval, when his companion had explained the provident fund to him. 'Give us your hand; you're one of the right sort!'

Étienne's eyes flashed with intoxication. 'Yes, we all ought to be of one mind,' he exclaimed. 'As for me, I'd give up everything—women and drink—for the sake of justice. There is only one prospect that affects my heart, the idea I've got that we are going to sweep the *bourgeois* off the face of the earth.'

III

Towards the middle of August, as soon as Zacharie, who was now married, was able to obtain from the company a vacant cottage for Philomène and his two children, Étienne took up his quarters with the Maheus, and, at first, the young man felt some embarrassment in Catherine's presence. They were constantly together; he replaced her elder brother in every respect, even to the sharing of Jeanlin's bed; such is the promiscuity which prevails in these miners' villages, where it is regarded as a mere matter of course. None the less, it at first troubled Étienne, who was by no means accustomed to it. After the first month or so, however, he and Catherine seemed

scarcely to be aware of one another's presence in that first-floor room, where the whole household herded together. The only person of whom Étienne had to complain was Jeanlin, who persisted in lying across the bed in an inconvenient posture. Alzire scarcely breathed; Lénore and Henri never stirred. In the house, wrapped in darkness, nothing was heard save the snoring of Maheu and his wife, puffing as regularly almost as the bellows of a smithy. All things considered, Étienne was more comfortable than at Rasseneur's. The bed was not so hard, and the sheets were changed every month. His soup was more savoury; he only suffered now and then from the scarcity of meat; but they were all in the same boat. He could not expect a rabbit at each meal for his forty-five francs a month. That money was of great assistance to the family; it helped them to make both ends meet, though some back debts always remained; and the Maheus showed themselves very grateful to their lodger. His linen was well washed and mended, and buttons were duly sewed on; his things were kept tidy; in short, he experienced around him all a woman's cleanliness and care.

It was about this period that Étienne began to get a clearer notion of his own ideas. So far his revolt had been merely instinctive amid the fermenting discontent of his fellow-workers. All kinds of questions chased each other confusedly through his brain. Why should one class of men be wretched, why should others be wealthy? Why should some lie prostrate beneath the heel of others, without hope of ever changing positions? And his first stage towards progress was to become aware of his own ignorance. A secret shame, a hidden mortification began to gnaw at him; he knew nothing; he no longer dared to talk of the things that impassioned him: the equality of men, the equity that prescribed a fair division of the world's goods between them. As a matter of course, he took to reading with that lack of method so common among the ignorant who suddenly become science-stricken. He kept up a regular correspondence with Pluchart. He had books sent to him, the ill-digested perusal of which put the finishing stroke to his exaltation. Above all, there was one medical volume, 'The Hygiene of the Miner,' in which a Belgian doctor described the diseases which fall on collier populations. In addition to this work, he devoured treatises on political economy of incomprehensible technical dryness, anarchistic pamphlets that quite upset him, back

numbers of newspapers which he afterwards kept by him as incontrovertible arguments in any discussions that might possibly arise. Souvarine also lent him some volumes, and there was one on co-operative societies that had filled his brain for a month with dreams of an universal association for mutual exchange which should abolish all monetary traffic, and make labour the sole basis of social life. The shame of his ignorance gave place to a certain pride, now that he began to feel conscious of thinking for himself.

During those first months Étienne remained in a neophyte's state of ecstasy, brimming over with generous indignation against oppressors, and hugging the hope of the approaching triumph of the oppressed. Amidst his indiscriminate reading he had as yet not arrived at devising a system. The practical redress of grievances advocated by Rasseneur had in his mind become mixed up with the destructive violence of Souvarine. When of an evening he came away from the Good Luck, where he continued to inveigh with them against the mining company, he walked as it were in a dream; he beheld himself witnessing the regeneration of humanity, which was accomplished without the smashing of so much as a pane of glass, or the shedding of a drop of blood. It signified little or nothing to him that the means for bringing about this universal reform remained obscure: they would reveal themselves in good time; the moment he attempted to think out a programme his head got bewildered. He even showed himself full of moderation and inconsistency; he often repeated that politics ought to be altogether banished from the social question. He had picked up that sentence somewhere, and he imagined it to be very effective with the phlegmatic miners among whom he lived.

At the Maheus' they always went to bed half an hour later now. Étienne there harped on the same string every evening. His nature, becoming more refined, revolted against the promiscuous herding prevalent in the miners' village. Were they then so much cattle to be penned up like that? And what injury it did to health, and how many boys and girls forcibly went to the bad through it!

'You're right enough!' Maheu would reply; 'and if one had a little more money one might have a little more comfort. No doubt it's very bad to live so closely packed together. It always ends by men getting drunk and girls going astray.'

The topic once started, every one put in a word, while the

fumes of the lamp vitiated the atmosphere already laden with the smell of fried onions. Assuredly life was no treat under such conditions. They laboured like brutes at a task which had formerly been reserved for galley-slaves as a punishment; they lost their lives at it more frequently than was right, and after all they could not manage to have a bit of meat for dinner of an evening. No doubt, they had food; they ate, but so little, just enough to keep them from dying of starvation, and they were always burdened with debt, and harassed as if they stole their bread. No, indeed, there was nothing funny in all that.

Then La Maheude would join in: 'The worst, you see, is when one knows there's no chance of a change. As long as one's young, one always thinks that luck will change—there's always some hope. But luck never does change, and one gets disgusted but used to it. I wish no harm to anybody, but my blood boils sometimes at the idea of all this injustice.'

Next a pause would ensue; they all silently panted whilst vaguely fretting at their cramped horizon. The only one who stared with wonder was old Jollycorpse, if he happened to be there, for in his time people had not worried themselves about such things. Folk were then born among the coal, and plied their picks without bothering about aught else; whereas at present the wind blew from another quarter, the pitmen were getting ambitious.

'You shouldn't turn your noses up at anything,' he would murmur. 'A good mug of beer is a good mug of beer. The masters are often scoundrels, but there'll always be masters, isn't that so? It's of no use worrying one's head about these things.'

At this Étienne would blaze up. What! the workman hadn't the right to think! That was just it. Things would change before long, because nowadays the workman did think. In the old man's time the miner had lived in the mine like a brute, like a machine to provide coal, always below, with his ears and eyes shut to the outside world. As a matter of course, the rich who ruled him had then had every opportunity to buy and sell him, feed upon his flesh and blood; he wasn't as much as aware of it. But nowadays the miner was waking up below, germinating in the soil like grain; and one fine morning the world would see what would suddenly sprout up amidst the fields; yes, men would come forth, an army of men who would restore justice. Were not all citizens equal

since the Revolution? Seeing that they all of them voted, why should the workman be the slave of the master who paid him? At present the big companies with their machinery crushed down everything, and one no longer even had against them the guarantees of olden times, when all men of the same trade had combined to defend themselves. It was on account of all this, and for other reasons besides, that there would be a crash one day, thanks to education. Why, they had only to look round in their own village; the grandfathers could not have signed their names; the fathers already did so; and as for the sons, they could read and write like professors. Yes, the revolution was growing, growing little by little, a wonderful harvest of men was ripening in the sunshine! The moment folk were no longer nailed, as it were, in one position for a whole lifetime, the moment they could indulge in the ambition of taking their neighbours' places, why should they not make use of their limbs and endeavour to become the stronger?

Maheu, though somewhat shaken, was nevertheless wanting in confidence.

'The moment a man attempts to stir he gets his discharge,' he would observe. 'The old fellow's right; the pitman will always have the worst of it, without even the hope of a leg of mutton now and then by way of reward.'

After being silent for some minutes, La Maheude seemed to awake from a dream. 'If it were only true what the priests say, that the poor of this world will be the rich in the next!'

A loud burst of laughter interrupted her; even the children shrugged their shoulders at this, they were all unbelievers in the light of day; down below they secretly feared the bogey man, but they made merry over the empty heavens.

'Don't bother me with your priests!' Maheu exclaimed. 'If they believed what they say, they would eat less and work more so as to secure a good berth for themselves up above. No; when a man's dead, he's dead for good.'

La Maheude then sighed desperately. 'Ah! good Lord!—ah! good Lord!' And letting her hands drop in her lap with a gesture of utter despair, 'So it's true, then; we're all done for.'

Everybody looked at everybody else. Old Jollycorpse expectorated. Maheu, though his pipe had gone out, still sat with it between his teeth. Between Henri and Lénore, whose heads had dropped on the table, Alzire remained listening

intently. But it was above all Catherine, who, with her large, limpid eyes, seemed to be drinking in Étienne's words when he protested and recited his creed, revealing to them the fairy vision of his social dream. All around them the village was going to bed; nothing could be heard but the cries of some infant or the quarrelling of some belated tippler. And the cuckoo clock slowly ticked whilst the coolness of damp rose from the sanded floor, notwithstanding the closeness of the atmosphere.

'More cobwebs,' the young man would say. 'Do you want a paradise to be happy? Can't you create happiness on earth?'

And in ardent tones he held forth interminably. The narrow horizon expanded—a rift of light burst upon the melancholy existence of those poor people. The perpetual recurrence of wretchedness, their crushing labour, their destiny akin to that of the brute beast which yields its wool and is slaughtered afterwards—all their unhappiness disappeared, swept away by a great wave of sunshine; and amidst fairy-like radiance justice at last descended from Heaven. Justice would assuredly ensure the happiness of mankind by inaugurating a reign of equality and fraternity. A new social structure sprang up in a day, as in a dream, an immense city of indescribable splendour, where each citizen lived by his labour and took his share of common happiness. The old and corrupt world had fallen into dust; new humanity, purged of crime, was but one sole people of workers having for its motto: 'Each one according to his merit and his works.' And the vision ever grew larger and more beautiful, becoming more and more seductive even as it became more and more impossible.

At first La Maheude refused to listen, being stricken with vague terror. No, no, all this was too good to be true; one ought not to give way to such ideas, for they made life unbearable afterwards, and one would stop at nothing to secure the happiness that had been held out to one. When she saw Maheu impressed, won over, with glistening eyes, she became very uneasy, and interrupting Étienne, exclaimed: 'Don't you heed him, old man! You can see that he's only telling us fairy tales. Just as if the gentry would ever consent to work like we do.'

But, little by little, the charm acted upon her also. Her imagination became excited, and she listened with a smile, as

she crossed the threshold of the enchanted world of hope. It was so sweet to forget, if but for one hour, the sad reality! Living the brute life they did, a stretch of fancy became necessary, so that they might enjoy a vision of things that they would never possess. But what excited her most, what brought her to full agreement with the young man, was the idea of justice.

'You're right there!' she would exclaim. 'When a thing is fair and just I'd be killed for it. And, really, it would only be just to have some enjoyment in our turn.'

Then Maheu flared up: 'Thunder of heaven! I'm not rich, but I'd give five francs to see all this come to pass before I die. What a smash-up it will be, to be sure! Will it come soon? and how will it be managed?'

Thereupon Étienne would resume the thread of his argument. The old social structure was splitting up on all sides; it could only be a question of some months, he would confidently assert. As for the means of execution, he was less explicit. He mixed up what he read, and with those ignorant people he did not fear to rush into explanations in which he himself got lost. Something of every system was put forward, but all was softened by the certainty of easy triumph, amidst an universal kiss of brotherhood that would put an end to all misunderstanding between class and class, though no doubt there would be a few obstinate ones amongst the masters and *bourgeois*, whom it would perhaps be necessary to reduce to reason. And the Maheus would appear to understand, approving and accepting the most miraculous solutions with the blind faith of new converts, even as the Christians of the primitive days of the Church expected a new society to arise on the corruptions of the pagan world. Little Alzire, catching certain words, would picture perfect happiness to herself as consisting in a well-warmed house, where the children were allowed to play as long and to eat as much as they liked. Catherine, without stirring, her chin resting on her hand, would not take her eyes off Étienne, and only when he ceased speaking did she awake with a kind of shudder, as though suddenly chilled.

But La Maheude would look at the clock. 'Gracious me, it's past nine! We ought to know better! We shall never be up in the morning.'

Then the Maheus, sad at heart, almost in despair, would break up for the evening; they felt as though they had just

been rich, and had suddenly fallen back into poverty. Old Jollycorpse, starting to his work, would aver, growling, that all this talk did not make the soup a bit better, while the others, as they went upstairs to bed, noticed the dampness of the walls and the evil-smelling closeness of the air, which had never previously struck them.

Sometimes neighbours looked in of an evening : Levaque, who got excited at the idea of 'share and share alike' ; and Pierron, who slunk away for prudence sake, the moment the company was attacked. Zacharie also came now and then, but he did not care for politics, and preferred going down to Rasseneur's for a mug of beer. As for Chaval, nothing but blood would satisfy him. Almost every evening he passed an hour with the Maheus, but this assiduity on his part was caused by secret jealousy rather than by anything else. He felt afraid of Étienne filching Catherine from him. The girl, of whom he had already grown tired, had suddenly become precious to him since a man was now lodging near her.

Étienne's influence gradually spread ; by degrees he revolutionised the whole village. It was a kind of covert propaganda, the more effectual, since he himself grew in everybody's esteem. La Maheude, notwithstanding her instinctive mistrust as a prudent housewife, treated him with consideration, like a young man who paid her punctually, who neither drank nor gambled, but was always bending over a book. She held him up as a scholar to her female gossips, who took advantage of this home-made reputation to charge him with their correspondence. He became their business man, as it were, and was consulted by every one in delicate matters. Hence, by the beginning of September, he was able to start his provident fund, though it was a very precarious venture at first, merely including the inhabitants of the one village. But he hoped to enlist the miners of all the pits, especially if the company, hitherto passive, refrained from interfering with him. He had been appointed secretary of the association ; and even received a trifling salary for keeping the accounts and carrying on the correspondence. It made him feel almost rich, for, although a married miner can hardly make both ends meet, a single one, of sober habits, and having no encumbrance, may put something by.

From that time a slow transformation became manifest in Étienne. Instincts of coquetry and of material well-being, dormant during his misery, awoke and prompted him to buy

himself a cloth suit. He also purchased more shapely boots, and all of a sudden became the leader of the village, which grouped itself around him. This gratification of self-esteem proved delicious; he became intoxicated with the early delights of popularity. The idea of being at the head of others, of wielding command—he, so young, and but the other day only an obscure labourer—filled him with pride and enlarged his dream of an approaching revolution in which he would surely play a part. His face underwent a change, he became grave and listened to himself talking; while growing ambition imparted passion to his theories and urged him to ideas of battle.

Meanwhile autumn came apace and the October chills cast russet tints over the little village gardens. The lads no longer philandered with the trammer girls among the sickly lilac bushes; and nothing remained but the winter vegetables, the cabbages pearly with rime, the leeks and the salad for pickling. Once again showers fell on the red tiles and ran into the waterbutts under the gutterpipes, with a noise like that of torrents. Inside the cottages the grates never grew cold, filled as they were with coal, whose fumes poisoned the close atmosphere. Another season of great misery was beginning.

The colder weather kept the inmates of the Maheus' cottage more together within doors, and thus Étienne saw more of Catherine than he had done during the summer. He often felt that she was thinking of him, even as he was thinking of her, and this disturbed him. Why was it that they never acknowledged their feelings one to another? Why was it that they sulked? It seemed foolish to do so. However, the more they lived side by side, the higher rose the barrier between them, a barrier compounded of feelings of shame and repugnance, mingled with certain scruples, as of friendship, which they could not have explained themselves.

IV

'LISTEN,' said La Maheude to her husband; 'as you're going to Montsou for your pay, you'd better bring me back a pound of coffee and two pounds of sugar.'

Maheu was busy mending one of his shoes so as to save cobbler's money. 'Very well!' he said, without looking up.

'You might manage to go to the butcher, also. A piece of veal wouldn't come amiss, would it? It's a long while since we tasted any.'

This time he did look up. 'You must think that I've got a fortune to receive. The fortnight's pay is too lean with their beastly habit of stopping work.'

Both became silent. It was after breakfast, on a Saturday, towards the end of October. The officials, on the pretext of its being pay-day, had again stopped the output at all the pits. For some time past, sharing the panic produced by the growing industrial crisis, and not wishing to increase its already heavy stocks, the company had been taking advantage of the most trifling pretexts to compel its ten thousand workmen to remain idle.

'You know that Étienne's waiting for you at Rasseneur's,' resumed La Maheude. 'Take him with you. He's sharper than you, and will see clear if there should be any bother about the pay.'

Maheu nodded approvingly.

'And talk to the gentlemen about your father. The doctor's on the company's side. He's wrong, the doctor, isn't he, old 'un? You're able to work well enough, aren't you?'

For the last ten days old Jollycorpse had been stuck to his chair with his legs stiff with rheumatism. She had to repeat the question, whereupon the old man growled:

'Sure enough, I'm able to work. A man isn't done for because he's got pains in his legs. All this is only so much humbug of theirs, so as to avoid giving me my pension of a hundred and eighty francs.'

La Maheude was thinking of the old man's two francs a day, which he would perhaps never earn again, and she gave vent to a cry of anguish.

'Good Lord! good Lord! we'll all be dead soon if this continues.'

'When people are dead, they're no longer hungry,' remarked Maheu, stolidly.

He knocked some nails into his shoes and made up his mind to start. The village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty was only to be paid towards four o'clock; the men, therefore, did not hurry themselves, but stopped every now and then, and

waited one for another; while their womankind came or called after them, begging them to be back quickly, a good many also charging them with errands on purpose to keep them away from the beershops.

Étienne had gone to Rasseneur's for news. During the last few days some disquieting rumours had been current. It was said that the company professed itself to be more and more dissatisfied with the propping. It inflicted fines broadcast and a conflict seemed inevitable. But this was only the avowed cause of the quarrel; the hidden ones were more complex and serious.

Just as Étienne entered the tavern, a mate, who was drinking a mug of beer on his way back from Montsou, began relating that a notice was stuck up in the cashier's office, only he had not understood very well what it was all about. A second came in, then a third, and each told a different tale. It seemed certain, however, that the company had taken some resolution.

'What do you say to it?' asked Étienne of Souvarine, taking a seat at his table, the only sign of refreshment on which consisted of a packet of tobacco.

The engine-man seemed in no hurry to answer. He slowly rolled a cigarette. 'I say that it was easy to foresee. They are going to drive you into a corner.'

He was the only one with a sufficiently clear intellect to analyse the situation. The company, affected by the crisis, was obliged to reduce its expenses if it did not wish to go to the wall. And, as a matter of course, the workmen would have to suffer; their pay would be reduced under some pretext or other. For two months past the coal had remained in the yards; nearly all the factories had stopped work. As the company did not dare to do the same, for it was frightened at the ruinous effect which would result if its plant and machinery should remain idle, it thought of a middle course, a short strike perhaps, from which the miners would emerge conquered and less paid. Moreover it was worried by the establishment of the provident fund, which might become a source of danger in the future. Now a strike would get rid of it by exhausting it at once while it was still but a small affair.

Rasseneur had taken a seat beside Étienne, and both listened with looks of consternation. They could speak out, for there was no one else present excepting Madame Rasseneur seated behind the bar.

'What an idea!' murmured the landlord. 'The company has no interest in fomenting a strike, or the workman either. Would it not be better to come to an understanding?'

This was very sensible; he always pronounced himself for reasonable redress. Nay, more, since the rapidly growing popularity of his former lodger, he exaggerated this system of attainable progress, saying that nothing was gained when one wanted to obtain everything at once. Amidst his sleek good nature, thriving both monetarily and physically on beer, there had arisen a secret jealousy of Étienne, which was increased by the partial desertion of his shop, whither the Voreux pitmen came less often than in former times to drink and listen. Indeed, it not unfrequently happened to him to take the company's part, forgetting for the nonce his own rancour at having been dismissed.

'Then you're against the strike?' asked Madame Rasseneur, from her place behind the bar. And as he energetically answered in the affirmative, she bade him hold his tongue. 'You've no more heart than a stone!' said she; 'let those gentlemen speak!'

But Étienne was musing, with his eyes fixed on the beer he had ordered. At last he looked up. 'All that our mate tells us seems more likely than not, and we shall have to make up our minds to this strike if the company drives us to it. Pluchart has sent me some very sensible advice on the subject. He isn't in favour of strikes, for the workman suffers as much from them as the master does, without arriving at anything definite. Only, he sees in it all an excellent opportunity to induce our men to enter his grand combination. But here's his letter.'

In fact, Pluchart, grieved by the distrust which the idea of the International had encountered among the miners of Montsou, hoped to see them adhere to it in a body, should matters compel them to fight the company. Notwithstanding his efforts, Étienne had hitherto been unable to dispose of any membership cards; besides, he had reserved his best influence for his provident fund, which project had met with a much better reception. This fund was still so small, however, that, as Souvarine said, it would soon be exhausted in the event of a strike, and then the strikers would undoubtedly throw themselves into the labour association, in order that their brethren of all nations might come to their aid.

'How much have you in hand?' asked Rasseneur.

'Barely three thousand francs,' answered Étienne. 'And you know that the directors sent for me yesterday. Oh! they were very polite; they repeated that they had no objection to their workmen creating a reserve fund, but I understood well enough that they wanted to have the control of it. Go as it may, we're sure to have a struggle on that subject.'

The landlord was walking up and down the room, whistling with an air of contempt. Three thousand francs! What the deuce was the good of that? There would not be enough for six days' bread for the lot of them. And if they were depending on foreigners, on people who were living in England and elsewhere, they might as well lie down at once and swallow their own tongues. No, indeed, that idea of a strike was too idiotic!

Then for the first time angry words passed between these two men, who generally ended by agreeing together in their common hatred of the capitalists.

'Look here, what do you say to it?' repeated Étienne, turning once more to Souvarine.

The latter replied in his usual contemptuous way: 'Strikes! rubbish!' Then, amidst the awkward silence which ensued, he added gently: 'After all, I don't say nay, if it amuses you; it's sure to ruin some, to kill others, and that's so much gained. But in that slow fashion it would take at least a thousand years to renew the world. Why don't you begin by blowing up that hole in which you all starve?'

And with his shapely hand he pointed to the Voreux pit, whose buildings could be seen through the open doorway. But an unforeseen drama cut him short. Poland, the fat tame rabbit, who had ventured outside, suddenly bounded indoors again, flying from a hailstorm of stones hurled at her by a band of truller boys; and in her fright, her ears hanging limp against her head, and her tail turned up, she ran for shelter to Souvarine, hugging his legs, imploring and scratching him in order to be taken on his lap. When he had placed her on his knees, he shielded her with both hands, and fell into the usual reverie to which the contact of her soft silky coat scarcely ever failed to incline him.

Almost immediately afterwards Maheu made his appearance. He would have nothing to drink, notwithstanding the polite persistency of Madame Rasseneur, who sold her beer as

if she offered it for nothing. Étienne rose, and both started for Montsou.

On pay-days at the company's yards Montsou assumed a festive look as at fair times. From all the villages the men arrived in gangs. The cashier's office being very small, they preferred waiting outside, remaining in groups on the pavement till the whole roadway was lined with people. Itinerant vendors profited by the occasion to pitch their travelling stalls, in which they displayed something of everything, from crockery down to sausages. But the drinking-shops fared best, because the miners, while waiting to be paid, went to learn patience at the counters, and returned thither afterwards to wet their wages when they had them in their pockets. And they considered themselves examples of steadiness, indeed, if they did not wind up at the Volcano.

As Maheu and Étienne elbowed their way through the groups that day, they felt that the whole crowd was pervaded by growing exasperation. There was none of the ordinary devil-may-care jollity of money received and frittered away in beershops, but a nervous clenching of fists with violent language on every lip.

'It's true, then?' asked Maheu of Chaval, whom he met in front of Piquette's cookshop. 'It's true, then, that they've played us another dirty trick?'

But Chaval's only reply was a furious growl, and a suspicious glance at Étienne. Since the new tenders had been accepted, Chaval no longer formed part of the same cutting, for he felt a kind of jealousy of the new-comer who played a leader's part, and the dust of whose feet the whole village so complacently licked. This feeling was still further complicated by a lover's tiff. He never now walked out with Catherine without coarsely accusing her of gallivanting with her mother's lodger.

However, Maheu asked him another question—whether it was soon the turn of the Voreux pit to be paid? And as he turned his back upon them after an affirmative nod, the two men made up their minds to enter the yards.

The cashier's office was a small square room, divided in halves by a wooden partition, surmounted by a wire grating. On some wooden benches alongside the walls, five or six miners sat waiting, while the cashier, assisted by a clerk, paid one of their comrades who stood in front of the wicket, cap in hand. Above the left-hand bench a yellow bill was posted,

looking fresh and moist in contrast with the greyish, smoky plaster of the walls. Ever since the morning an uninterrupted procession of men had gone past it. They came in twos and threes, planted themselves in front of it for a minute or so, and then went off never uttering a word, but with an involuntary trembling of their shoulders, as if someone had broken their backs.

Just then two miners were standing in front of the notice, a young one with a square, brutish head, and an old one, very thin, who seemed hebetated by extreme age. Neither of them could read properly; the young one kept spelling out the letters, while the old one gazed stupidly. Many came in like that to have a look without being able to understand.

'Just read it out to us,' said Maheu to his companion, for he himself was not a first-rate hand at the accomplishment.

Étienne did so. It was a notice from the company to the miners of every pit. The latter were apprised that the company, in view of the little care taken in propping, and being tired of inflicting fines, had decided to modify the hewers' rate of pay. Henceforth propping would be paid for apart, according to the amount of wood lowered into the mine and employed, the quantity necessary for good work being taken as a basis. The price per truckload of coal would naturally be lowered, in such proportion that fifty centimes would become forty, but of course regard would be paid to the nature of the seams and their distance from the landing-place. And by a rather obscure calculation there was an attempt to prove that this decrease of ten centimes would be made good by the money paid for propping. Finally, the company added that, wishing to give each man time to convince himself of the advantages presented by the new tariff, it would only come into force on Monday, December 1.

'Supposing you were to read in a rather lower voice, you over there!' shouted the cashier. 'One can't hear oneself speak.'

Étienne went on reading to the end without paying the least attention to this remark. His voice shook, and when he had finished, they all kept staring at the bill. The young and the old miner still listened, as if they expected to hear something more; then they went away quite overcome.

'By all that's holy!' muttered Maheu.

He and his companion sat down, absorbed in their own thoughts, their heads low, while the procession past the

yellow bill continued. They calculated, and soon came to the conclusion that they were being fooled, because the price paid for the propping would never compensate them for the ten centimes taken off each truck-load. They would, at the utmost, get eight centimes back, and the company would therefore rob them of two centimes, to say nothing of the extra time this very careful propping would entail. So this was what the company wanted to get at: to lower wages in an underhand way! to effect a saving at the expense of the miners' pockets!

Maheu lifted his head, swore a few more oaths, and added: 'We're a lot of cowards if we accept this!'

Then, as the cashier's wicket was by this time free, he went up to be paid. Only the principals of the gangs which undertook job work were paid direct. They shared with their men afterwards, which was a saving of time.

'Maheu and mates,' said the clerk, 'Filonnière vein, cutting number seven.'

He looked through the lists, which were drawn up according to the pass-books, on which the viewers inscribed each day the number of truck-loads that came up from each separate cutting. Then he repeated: 'Maheu and mates, Filonnière vein, cutting number seven. One hundred and thirty-five francs.'

Thereupon the cashier put down the money.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' stammered the hewer, almost struck speechless; 'aren't you making a mistake?'

He stood quite still, looking at the little pile of money without taking it up, and struck with a kind of chill that went straight to his heart. He certainly expected a bad fortnight, but the pay could not come to so little as that; there must have been a miscalculation. After handing Zacharie, Étienne, and another mate, who had taken Chaval's place, their share, there would scarcely remain fifty francs for himself, his father, Catherine, and Jeanlin.

'No, no; I'm not making a mistake,' said the clerk. 'You must take off two Sundays, and four off-days besides; that leaves you nine days' work.'

Maheu was following his calculation, and adding up very slowly to himself. Nine days gave him about thirty francs, eighteen to Catherine, and nine to Jeanlin. As for the old man, he had only three days' pay to take. Nevertheless, with the ninety francs coming to Zacharie and his two other mates

'And don't forget the fines,' wound up the clerk. 'Twenty francs in fines for defective propping.'

The hewer could not restrain a gesture of despair. Twenty francs in fines and four off-days! At that rate the account was right. And to think that he had brought away as much as a hundred and fifty francs in his fortnight when old Jolly-corpse still worked and Zacharie was not yet married.

'Look here, are you going to take the money or not?' cried the cashier impatiently. 'Don't you see that someone else is waiting? If you don't want it, you'd better say so.'

As Maheu was taking up his money with his big, trembling hands, the clerk stopped him. 'Wait a minute, I've got your name down. Toussaint Maheu, isn't it? The secretary-general wishes to see you. You can go in; he is by himself.'

Dazed, scarcely conscious of what he was about, the pitman found himself in a room with old-fashioned mahogany furniture upholstered in faded Utrecht velvet. And there he stood listening for fully five minutes to the secretary, a tall, pale individual, who kept talking to him from over his papers, without getting up. However, the buzzing in his ears prevented him from understanding what was said. He had some vague notion that the speech related to his father, the question of whose retirement was under consideration, and who would be granted a pension of a hundred and fifty francs in reward for his forty years' service in the mine. Then it seemed to him that the secretary's voice grew more stern. He was being reprimanded, accused of meddling with politics; there was even an allusion to his lodger, and to the provident fund. In short, he was advised to leave these follies alone—he, who was considered to be one of the best workmen in the pit. He wanted to protest, but was unable to string a sentence together; he only kept twirling his cap between his fingers, and backed out of the room at last, stammering, 'Yes, Mr. Secretary, I can assure you, Mr. Secretary——'

Outside, when he had joined Étienne, who was waiting for him, he broke out: 'I'm a mean coward; I ought to have answered him! No bread to eat, and insults besides! Yes, they've a grudge against you; he told me that the minds of the village were being poisoned. What are we to do? curse it! Bend our backs and say, "Thank you," eh? After all, perhaps that would be the most sensible.'

After which he relapsed into silence, feeling both angry

and afraid. Étienne looked his blackest. They once more made their way through the scattered groups. The feeling of exasperation was increasing, the exasperation of an usually calm population, a rumbling as of an approaching storm that hung terribly over that heavy, stolid mass. A few who were quick at figures had made their calculations, and the fact that two centimes would be gained by the company on the propping went from mouth to mouth, and excited the calmest. But, above all, there was rage at such a disastrous pay-day, a revolt of hunger against enforced idleness and vexatious fines. As things had been, they had scarcely had food enough to keep body and soul together; what would it be if they earned less still? In the beershops anger was at its loudest, and so parched the men's throats that half of their beggarly earnings found its way into the publicans' tills. On the road homeward Étienne and Maheu did not exchange a word. When the latter entered the house, La Maheude, who was alone with the children, at once noticed that he had not brought the things she had asked for.

'That's very kind of you, indeed!' she said. 'And the coffee, and the sugar, and the meat? A piece of veal would not have ruined you.'

He did not answer, choked as he felt by emotion which he tried to gulp down. But a sudden twitching of despair came over his heavy face, hardened by the labour of the mine, big tears welled into his eyes and coursed down his cheeks in a shower. He dropped upon a chair, wept like a child, and threw the fifty francs on the table.

'There!' he stuttered, 'that's what I bring you back. They're the wages of the whole of us.'

La Maheude looked at Étienne, but seeing him mute and overcome, she also burst out crying. How were nine people to live for a fortnight on fifty francs? Her eldest born had left them; the old man could no longer stir; assuredly they'd very soon be starved to death. Alzire, seeing her mother cry, threw her arms round her neck; Lénore and Henri sobbed aloud, and little Estelle set up a long yell.

And the same wail of distress rang throughout the village. Almost all the men had now come back, and each household broke out into lamentations at such disastrous pay. Doors were thrown open, women appeared on the thresholds, giving tongue to their grief, which seemed, as it were, too great to find vent under the low roofs of their homes. There was a

drizzle outside, but they did not heed it; they kept calling to each other, showing their money in the palms of their hands.

'Look here! that's all they gave my man. They're simply making fools of us.'

'I haven't enough to pay for my fortnight's bread.'

'And I—just look, I shall have to sell my linen again!'

La Maheude had come out like the others. A group was forming around La Levaque, who bawled louder than the rest; for her sot of a husband had not even come back, and she felt that, large or small, the pay would be considerably diminished at the Volcano. Philomène was watching Maheu, so that Zacharie might not get hold of his money. The only one who remained sufficiently calm was La Pierronne; but then that sneak Pierron always managed, though one knew not how, to get more work set down on the viewer's pass-book than any other workman. However, the Scorched One thought it cowardly of her son-in-law to allow himself to be thus favoured. She was with the angry ones; she stood amongst them erect and stiff, her clenched fist threatening Montsou in the distance.

'And to think,' she yelled, without naming the Hennebeaus, 'that I saw their servant pass this morning in the carriage! Yes, their cook in a carriage and pair, going to Marchiennes for some fish, to be sure!'

Thereupon came a loud clamour, a renewal of all sorts of violent language. That servant-girl in a white apron, driven to the market of a neighbouring town in her master's carriage, aroused general indignation. Though their workmen were starving the employers must needs have fish! But perhaps they would not always have it; the turn of the poor would come. And the ideas sown by Étienne were growing, spreading, amidst this cry of revolt. There was impatience at the, as yet, distant prospect of the promised golden age—a craving to have a share of the happiness that lay beyond their horizon of wretchedness closed like a tomb. The injustice was becoming too great; they would end by asking for their rights, since even their bread was taken from them. The women, in particular, would there and then have liked to storm the ideal city of progress, where there would be no more misery. Night came on, the drizzle fell thicker and faster, and yet they still filled the village with their tears, amidst the crying and straying of their neglected little ones.

That evening, at Rasseneur's, the strike was decided upon.

Rasseneur himself no longer opposed it, and Souvarine accepted it as a first step. Étienne summed up the situation in a few words. If the company really wanted the strike they would have it.

V

A WEEK went by, and the men continued working, mournful and suspicious, awaiting the struggle.

At the Maheus' the coming fortnight threatened to be even worse than the last. Thus La Maheude became still more bitter, notwithstanding her moderation and her good sense. One day Catherine did not come home, and on the following day was unable to go to work. She wept and declared that Chaval had kept her, threatening to thrash her if she attempted to get away. He was becoming mad with jealousy of Étienne. La Maheude, in her fury, forbade her daughter to see such a brute again, and talked of going to Montsou to slap his face. But, nevertheless, a day's work was lost, and after all, now that she had this lover, the girl felt that she must keep to him.

Two days later there was another upset. On the Monday and Tuesday Jeanlin, whom they believed to be quietly working in the pit, went off to the marshes and the Vandame forest with Bébert and Lydie. There was no doubt that he was the instigator of the escapade; he therefore received a sound drubbing, applied in public by La Maheude, in presence of the terrified youngsters of the village. Had the like ever been seen before? There were children who had done nothing but cost money from their birth, and who ought now to be bringing something in. Thus did La Maheude speak; and in this cry of hers there was the recollection of her own bitter youth, the hereditary misery that made of each child a bread-winner for the future.

On that particular morning, when the men and the girl started for the pit, La Maheude sat up in bed and shouted to Jeanlin: 'You dare do it again, you wicked ape, and I'll flay you alive!'

At Maheu's new cutting the labour proved very hard. That part of the Filonnière vein was growing thinner each day, so that the hewers, wedged between the wall and the roof, bruised their very elbows while plying their picks.

Besides, more and more water came in; they were in constant apprehension of being flooded by one of those torrents which suddenly split the rock asunder and carry the men away. On the previous day Étienne, while driving his pick home and wrenching it back again, had received a spurt of water full in the face, but it was only a warning; the cutting simply got damper and more unhealthy. Besides, he never so much as thought of possible accidents—he had become, like his comrades, careless of danger. They lived amidst fire-damp without even feeling its weight on their eyelids, without perceiving the filmy web it left hanging on their lashes. At times, perhaps, when the flames of the lamps burning lower and lower, grew bluishly pale, a passing thought was just vouchsafed to it. A miner would place his ear to the seam to listen to the hissing noise of the gas, which exuded in little bubbles from the crevices. However, the greatest danger that hung over them was that of a slip, for besides the insufficiency of the propping, always too hastily attended to, the rock scarcely held together, saturated as it was with the trickling water.

Already three times that day had Maheu been obliged to have the props strengthened. It was half-past two o'clock; the men were about to go up again. Lying on his side, Étienne was tugging away at a block, when a distant rumbling shook the whole mine. 'What's that?' he cried, dropping his pick to listen. He was under the impression that the gallery was falling in behind him.

But Maheu was already sliding down the slope of the cutting, crying out, 'Quick, quick! It's a slip!'

All the men came down like lightning, and rushed off, impelled by brotherly anxiety for the safety of their fellows. The flames of their lamps bobbed violently up and down in the death-like silence that had now fallen. They scampered along the traction ways in single file, their backs bent double, as if they were galloping on all fours; and without slackening speed they interrogated each other with a word, and answered as briefly. 'Where is it?' 'In the cuttings, perhaps.' 'No; it came from below—from the main haulage gallery, more likely!' When they reached the air-shaft, they plunged into it and rolled over one another, without paying the slightest attention to scratches or bruises.

Jeanlin, still sore from the drubbing he had received, had not dared to absent himself from the pit that day. He trotted

barefooted behind his train, closing the ventilating doors one by one; and at times, when he felt sure of not meeting a viewer, he climbed on to the hindmost truck, a thing which was strictly forbidden him, lest he should fall asleep there. His greatest delight, however, each time the train was shunted to allow of another passing, was to go and join Bébert, who was driving. He crept up on the sly, without his lamp, pinched his playfellow till he was black and blue, and invented all kinds of monkey tricks, looking indeed not unlike an ape, with his coarse yellow hair, large ears, and generally sharp face, lighted by small greenish eyes, which twinkled in the gloom. Viciously precocious, he seemed to have the dim intellect and the lively physical adroitness of a human abortion retrograding to primitive animality.

In the afternoon old Mouque brought the boys Battle, whose turn it was; and as the horse stood sniffing at a shunting-place, Jeanlin, who had slidden up to Bébert, asked him: 'What's the matter with the beast that he pulls up at every step? He nearly made me break my legs.'

Bébert had no time to answer, for he had to hold in Battle, who was tossing his mane at the approach of another train. He had scented from a distance his mate, Trumpet, for whom he had conceived great friendship since the day when he had seen him come down the shaft. This friendship was like the gentle pity of an old philosopher, anxious to lighten the trials of a young friend by imparting to him some of his own patience and resignation; for Trumpet, ever regretting the sunshine, failed to acclimatise himself, dragged his trucks along without enthusiasm, his head almost between his forelegs, and his eyes blinded by the gloom. Each time, therefore, that Battle met his fellow-worker he stretched forth his neck, greeting him with a cheerful neigh, and licking him with an encouraging caress.

'Dash it all!' swore Bébert, 'there they're at it again.' Then, Trumpet having gone by, he answered respecting Battle:

'Don't you make a mistake; he's sharp enough, the old 'un! Each time he stops it's because there's something in his way—a stone or a hole; he takes great care of himself; he doesn't want to get his bones broken. But I don't know what he means to-day by sniffing about that door yonder. He pushes it open and then remains stock-still. Did you notice anything?'

'No,' said Jeanlin, 'only water. I've got it up to my knees.'

The train started again. And at the next journey, when Battle had opened the ventilating door with a push of his head, he again refused to advance, neighing and trembling. But at last he made up his mind, and went straight off without stopping. Jeanlin, who had to shut the door, remained behind and stooped down to look at the pool in which he was floundering. Then he lifted his lamp, and noticed that the propping overhead had given way with the continuous dripping of the water. Just then a hewer, Berloque, nicknamed Stumpy, came along, anxious to go up, his wife being in childbed. He also stopped to examine the stays. And all at once, as the youngster was about to start off at a run to overtake his train, a formidable creaking was heard; then the falling soil swallowed up the man and the boy.

The deepest silence followed. Fanned by the sudden draught of the downfall, dense clouds of dust obscured the passages. Then, blinded, almost choking, the miners rushed in from all parts, from the most distant spots, their lamps bobbing up and down, and but faintly illumining the mad gallop of their black figures through the dim depths. When the foremost came to the fallen rock, they shouted and called their comrades. A second gang from the furthermost cutting was on the other side of the mass of soil that obstructed the gallery. It was at once seen that the roof had fallen in for a dozen yards at most. The damage was by no means serious; but a pang wrung every heart when a death-rattle was heard issuing from the wreckage.

Bébert, leaving his train, ran to the spot, repeating, 'Jeanlin is underneath! Jeanlin is underneath!'

At the same moment Maheu tumbled out of the air-shaft, with Étienne and Zacharie. His grief found vent in a string of oaths. The women, who by this time had come up also—Catherine, Lydie, La Mouquette—began to sob and to yell with fright, amidst the terrible confusion which was still further increased by the darkness. The men tried to make the girls hold their tongues, but they only screamed the louder at each groan coming from the slip.

Richomme, the viewer, had also hastened to the spot. He was put out by the absence of Négrel, the engineer, and Dansaert. With his ear to the rock, he listened, and ended by saying that the groans were not those of a child. A man

was most certainly there. Twenty times already had Maheu called Jeanlin, but not as much as a whisper came in answer. The boy must have been crushed to death by the fall.

And the groans continued monotonously. They spoke to the dying man, they asked him his name, but fresh groans were their only answer.

'Look sharp! look sharp!' repeated Richomme, who had already organised the rescue gang. 'Look sharp! we'll talk afterwards.'

The miners attacked the fallen soil from both sides with pick and shovel. Chaval worked without saying a word by the side of Maheu and Étienne, while Zacharie superintended the removal of the stuff. The time for going up had come; they all felt hungry, but no one seemed to mind it since some of their comrades were in peril. Nevertheless, they fancied that the village might be getting uneasy at seeing nobody return, and they wanted to send off the women. However, neither Catherine, nor La Mouquette, nor Lydie would stir. They remained there plying their spades. Seeing this Levaque undertook to go and tell the village of the slip, treating it as a matter of no consequence, which was already being set right. It was now nearly four o'clock. In less than an hour the men had done the labour of a day; half of the fallen stuff would have been removed already but for fresh masses sliding from the roof. Maheu worked on with stubborn rage and gesticulated angrily whenever someone offered to replace him for a moment.

'Gently, gently,' said Richomme at length. 'We're getting near. Take care not to hit them.'

In fact, the groans became more and more distinct. It was their continuous sound that guided the workmen, and now they seemed to proceed from under their very picks. Suddenly, however, they ceased altogether.

Not a word was spoken by the men. All had felt the quiver of death passing by them in the darkness. They simply plied their picks with renewed ardour, drenched with perspiration, their nerves and muscles strained to the utmost. Suddenly a foot became visible, and then they threw down their picks and removed the boulders with their hands. Little by little each limb was set free. The head had not been damaged. Lamps were lifted up, and the name of Stumpy went from mouth to mouth. He was still warm, but his spinal column had been broken by a huge block of stone.

'Wrap him in a blanket and put him on a truck,' ordered the viewer. 'Now for the lad, and look sharp about it.'

Maheu gave a last stroke with his pick, and made an opening by which those on his side could communicate with the men clearing away the stuff on the other. They cried that they had just stumbled upon Jeanlin, who was in a faint, still breathing but with both legs broken. It was the father who carried the lad away in his arms. With his jaws tightly set he could only find an oath now and then to express his grief; but Catherine and the other women again burst out shrieking.

The removal was quickly organised. Bébert had brought back Battle, who was put to two trucks. In the first lay Stumpy's body, supported by Étienne, in the second was Maheu with Jeanlin, still motionless, lying across his knees, and covered by a piece of woollen rag, torn from one of the ventilating doors. They went off very slowly. On each truck a lamp shone in the gloom like a red star. Behind came the miners, half a hundred black shadows in Indian file. Now that the work was over they were faint with fatigue; they dragged themselves along, stumbled about in the slush, dismally mournful, like a crowd stricken with an epidemic. It took them nearly half an hour to get to the bottom of the shaft. There seemed to be no end to this underground funeral procession winding along the galleries which forked and twisted and ever stretched away.

At the bottom of the shaft, Richomme, who had gone on in front, had given orders for an empty cage to be reserved. Pierron at once packed in the two trucks. In one remained Maheu with his child stretched across his knees, while in the other Étienne had to hold Stumpy's body in his arms to keep it in. Then, the other pitmen having wedged themselves into the upper compartments, the cage went up. It took two minutes to ascend. The water dripping from the tubbing seemed very cold, and the men looked up, impatient to behold the daylight.

Luckily a boy sent for Doctor Vanderhaghen had found him at home and brought him back. Jeanlin and the corpse were carried to the viewers' room, where, from one year's end to the other, a large fire was kept burning. They had to remove some buckets of hot water, standing ready for the viewers' footbaths, and on two mattresses stretched out on the flagstones the man and the child were laid. Maheu and

Étienne were the only two admitted. Outside had gathered trammer girls, pitmen, and children talking in low voices. The doctor just cast a glance at Stumpy, and murmured: 'Done for! You may wash him.'

Two inspectors thereupon undressed and sponged the body, black with coal-dust and the grimy perspiration of hard toil.

'His head is all right,' resumed the medical man as he knelt by Jeanlin's side; 'the chest also. Ah! it's his legs that have been knocked about.'

He himself undressed the child, untying his biggin, removing his jacket and pulling off his shirt and trousers with the skill of a practised nurse. Then the poor little body appeared insect-like in its thinness, begrimed with coal-dust and yellowish soil, here and there mottled with stains of blood. They were obliged to wash it also, before the injuries could be ascertained. And it seemed to grow thinner still under the moist sponge, the pale transparent skin letting the bones peep through. It was pitiful to behold that last degenerated specimen of a race of wretched beings, that handful of suffering flesh, half crushed to death by the fall of the rock. When the body was clean the injury to the thighs showed in two red marks on the white skin.

Recovering from his faint, Jeanlin uttered a groan. Standing at the foot of the mattress with his hands hanging limp beside him, and big tears coursing down his cheeks, Maheu was looking at his child.

'Are you his father?' asked the doctor, glancing up. 'Don't cry, you see he isn't dead. You'd better lend me a hand.'

He had at once discovered two simple fractures. But the injuries to the right leg looked more serious. It would probably have to be amputated.

At this moment Négrel, the engineer, and Dansaert, who had been informed of the accident, arrived, in company with Richomme. The first listened with an air of exasperation to the story of the disaster as told by the viewer. At last he burst out. Always that confounded propping! Had he not warned them a hundred times that they would leave their skins there! and yet the brutes talked of striking if they were compelled to prop more solidly! The worst was that the company would now have to pay for the damage. Monsieur Hennebeau would be delighted, and no mistake!

'Who is it?' he asked Dansaert, who stood in silence close to the body, which was being wrapped in a sheet.

'Stumpy, one of our best workmen,' answered the head viewer. 'He has got three children. Poor devil!'

Doctor Vanderhaghen now ordered that Jeanlin should be immediately conveyed home. Six o'clock was striking, it was getting dark, they had better take away the body also. The engineer immediately gave orders for the horse to be put to the ambulance van, and for a stretcher to be brought. The child was laid on the latter, while they placed the corpse, on the mattress, in the former.

The trammer girls were still standing outside talking to pitmen who were waiting to know all about the accident. When the door of the viewers' room was thrown open, sudden silence fell upon the groups. And a new procession was formed, the van in front, the stretcher behind, and the file of men and women bringing up the rear. It mournfully wound its way up the slope to the village. The first November frosts had chilled the immense plain; slowly gathering gloom wrapped it round as with a shroud descending from the leaden sky.

Étienne advised Maheu to send Catherine on in front to prepare her mother, by way of softening the blow. The father, who followed the stretcher, dumb with grief, acquiesced with a nod, and the young girl started at a trot, for they were getting very near the house. The van, that sombre well-known conveyance, had already been caught sight of. Some panic-stricken women rushed out of doors; three or four, in their anguish of uncertainty, ran madly and bare-headed towards it. Soon there were thirty, then fifty of them, all choking with a deadly fear. Someone had been killed. Who was it? Levaque's story, after reassuring them all, now drove them frantic with terror. It was not one man who had perished—there must be at least ten whom the van would thus bring back one by one.

Catherine had found her mother agitated by some presentiment. At the very first words La Maheude cried: 'Your father is dead!'

In vain did the girl protest and speak of Jeanlin. Without listening, the woman had rushed out; and on perceiving the van coming round by the church, she turned ashy white, and almost fainted. On every doorstep dumb-stricken women strained their eyes, while others followed, tremblingly watching to see at whose door the procession would stop.

The conveyance passed by, and behind it La Maheude perceived her husband walking beside the stretcher. When the latter was deposited at her door, when she saw Jeanlin alive, though with his legs broken, she underwent so strong and sudden a reaction, that, choking with anger, she shrieked:

'What next? They maim our little ones now! Both legs, good heavens! What am I to do with him?'

'Hold your tongue!' said Dr. Vanderhaghen, who had followed the procession to dress the boy's wounds. 'Would you rather have had him killed?'

But the mother's anger increased amidst the cries vented by Alzire and the other little ones. While helping to get the boy upstairs and handing the doctor whatever he wanted, she cursed her luck, and kept asking where they expected her to find money to feed a lot of cripples? It was not enough that the old man should be losing his legs, the youngster was to be served the same! And thus she went on, while other cries, heartrending sobs, came from a neighbouring cottage, where Stumpy's wife and children were weeping over his corpse. It was now pitch dark; the miners, dead beat, were at last eating their soup, and the dismal silence of the village was only broken by those bitter wails.

Three weeks went by, and the danger of amputation was averted. Jeanlin's legs were saved, though he would limp for life. After an inquiry, the company had granted the family relief to the extent of fifty francs. They had also promised to find a berth aboveground for the little cripple as soon as he should be able to get about. Meanwhile, however, all this aggravated the misery of the Maheus, for the father had received such a shock that for some days he was obliged to take to his bed, racked by violent fever.

He went back to work on the Thursday, and now Sunday had come round. That evening Étienne talked for a long while about the approaching 1st of December, anxious as he was to know whether the company would carry out its threat. They sat up till ten o'clock waiting for Catherine, who was, no doubt, walking with Chaval. However, she did not come in. At last La Maheude in a fury bolted the door, but without saying a word. It was a long while before Étienne could get to sleep; Catherine's absence worried him.

Again, the next day the girl failed to come back; and it was only in the afternoon, on returning from the pit, that they

learned that she would henceforth remain with Chaval. He had led her such a life with his abominable suspicions that she had made up her mind to keep with him altogether. To avoid reproaches, he had suddenly left the Voreux pit and found a berth at the Jean-Bart, Monsieur Deneulin's property, whither she went with him as a trammer. They meant to live at Piquette's cookshop at Montsou.

At first Maheu wished to go and pull Chaval's nose and kick the girl back from Montsou to the village. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he resigned himself to the inevitable. What would be the use of it? This seemed to be the common lot, and all they might do or say would not prevent their girls from going astray. It was better, therefore, to get Chaval to marry her. But La Maheude would not accept the situation so quietly.

'Did I thrash her when she took to walking out with Chaval?' she shrieked to Étienne, who sat listening to her, pale and silent. 'Come, answer me, you who are a young man of sense. We left her free, because all the girls take sweethearts. For my part, when I was young I did not run away from my parents: I should never have played them such a scurvy trick as to take my earnings to a man who didn't want them before I was married. Say what you like, it's disgusting! It makes one regret having any children at all!' Then, as Étienne only answered by nods, she went on: 'Why couldn't she wait till I got her married after helping us a little to get out of our misery? Isn't it natural that one's own daughter should help one to do so? But we were too kind to her; we ought to have put a stop to her gadding about with that Chaval.'

Alzire nodded her head approvingly; Henri and Lénore, frightened by this sudden outbreak, kept on sobbing. La Maheude, now fully launched, enumerated their misfortunes. There was Zacharie, whom they had been compelled to get married; there was old Jollycorpse, nailed to his chair, with his legs twisted into all manner of shapes: then there was Jeanlin, who would not be able to leave his room for another ten days, for his bones were scarcely set; and now, to crown it all, that hussy Catherine went off with her lover. The whole family was breaking up. There only remained the father at the pit. How would they be able to live, seven persons as they were, without reckoning Estelle, on the three francs a day which

the father earned? They had better throw themselves one and all into the canal.

"It's of no use you eating your heart out,' said Maheu in a husky voice. 'Maybe we're not at the end of our troubles, even yet.'

Then Étienne, who had been looking fixedly at the tiled floor, raised his head, and murmured, his eyes lost in some vision of the future:

'Ah! it's time! it's high time!'

BOOK IV

I

On that particular Monday the Hennebeaus had invited the Grégoires and their daughter Cécile to lunch. Quite a party had been arranged. After lunch, Paul Négrel was to take the ladies over the Saint-Thomas pit, which had been newly re-opened, with all the latest mechanical improvements. But all this was nothing more than a pretty pretext. This party had been devised by Madame Hennebeau to hasten the marriage of Paul and Cécile.

And just on that very Monday, at four in the morning, the strike had abruptly broken out. When, on December 1, the company had applied its new tariff, the miners had remained calm. At the end of the fortnight, when paid, not one of them had made the slightest objection. The whole of the administrative staff, from the managing director to the lowest inspector, imagined that the tariff had been accepted. Their surprise that morning was, therefore, the greater on receiving this declaration of war, issued with a tactical *ensemble* that seemed to indicate energetic guidance.

At five o'clock Dansaert came personally to awaken Monsieur Hennebeau, and to tell him that not a single man had gone down the Voreux pit. The village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, through which he had passed, had been sound asleep, with doors and windows securely fastened. The moment the managing director had jumped out of bed, his eyes still heavy with slumber, he was overwhelmed on all sides. Every quarter of an hour messengers ran up; telegrams kept pouring in like hail. At first he had hoped to find the revolt limited to the Voreux pit, but the news became more serious every minute. Work had stopped at the Crève-cœur and the Mirou pits; at the Madeleine only the stablemen had gone down; at the Victory and at Feutry-Cantel, the two best disciplined pits, the men had been reduced by a third; at Saint-Thomas only was every one at his post—its

men having remained, so it seemed, outside the movement. Until nine o'clock M. Hennebeau dictated telegrams to everybody and everywhere—to the prefect at Lille, to the members of the company's board, informing the authorities, and asking for instructions. He also sent Négrel on a tour of inspection to the neighbouring pits in order to obtain authentic particulars. Then, all at once he remembered the lunch, and was about to send his coachman to the Grégoires to tell them that the party was postponed, when sudden hesitation, a want of resolve, made him waver—he who, in a few brief phrases, had just prepared his campaign with almost military decision. He went up to Madame Hennebeau, who was in her dressing-room, having her hair dressed by her maid.

'Really! so they have struck,' she quietly said, when he had consulted her. 'Well! what is that to us? We are not going to stop eating on that account, are we?'

And to all that he could say about the lunch being disturbed perhaps, about the projected visit to the pit becoming impossible, she found a ready answer. Why waste a lunch that was already on the fire? And as for the excursion to the pit, well, if it seemed imprudent, they could abandon the idea later on.

'Besides,' she added, when her maid was gone, 'you know well enough why I wish to have those good people here. This marriage ought to interest you much more than all the nonsense that your workmen are up to. And—and I wish it, so don't stand in the way.'

He looked at her with his lips slightly quivering, and for a moment this stern, resolute disciplinarian's features betrayed all the secret grief of a broken heart. She had remained seated before the looking-glass, her shoulders bare, showing the mature but still resplendent beauty of a woman of forty. For a moment he felt inclined to clasp her in his arms, but he restrained himself; for the last ten years husband and wife had virtually lived apart.

'Very well, then,' he said, leaving the room. 'We will countermand nothing.'

Monsieur Hennebeau had been born in the Ardennes. His start in life had been difficult, like that of most poor young orphans who are thrown on their own resources in Paris. After managing, by dint of great privations, to attend the lectures of the School of Mines, he had, at the age of four-and-twenty, obtained an appointment as engineer to the

Sainte-Barbe pit, belonging to the Grand' Combe Company. Three years later he had become divisional engineer to the Marles pits in the Pas-de-Calais, and it was there that, by one of those strokes of fortune which are almost the rule among mining engineers, he had married the daughter of a wealthy cotton-spinner of Arras. During fifteen years, the couple dwelt in a small provincial town. They had no children, and no incident, however slight, arose to diversify the monotony of their existence. Growing irritation, however estranged Madame Hennebeau from her husband. Brought up in the respect of money, she despised this man who toiled so painfully for his modest salary, and from whom she derived none of the worldly satisfactions which she had dreamt of during her schooldays. He, strictly honest, did not speculate, but stuck to his post like a soldier. Their estrangement increased, aggravated at last by some of that physical repugnance which freezes the most ardent natures. Yet he adored his wife, and she was certainly a sensual creature. They soon occupied separate rooms, and from that time forward she had a lover, and her husband knew nothing of it. At last he made up his mind to leave the provinces, and to accept an administrative post in the capital, thinking that his wife would be grateful to him for the change. But Paris—the Paris for which she had craved while still playing with her dolls—still further widened the gulf between them. In a week or two she had rid herself of her provincial ways and manners, become an *élégante*, and rushed head foremost into all the extravagant follies of the period. The ten years she spent in Paris were marked by an intrigue with a man whose desertion almost killed her. This time her husband did not remain ignorant of the truth, but after some abominable scenes he became resigned, disarmed as it were by his wife's cool unconsciousness of wrong-doing. It was after her lover had deserted her that, seeing her prostrate with grief, he had accepted the appointment of manager at the Montsou mines, hoping to bring her back to the right path in that lonely black country.

During the three years that the Hennebeaus had inhabited Montsou, the weariness and irritation of their early married life had begun afresh. At first Madame Hennebeau had appeared relieved by the profound quietude around her, comforted by the unbroken monotony of the far plains. She shut herself up like a woman who had done with life; she

pretended to be heartbroken, so utterly indifferent to everything that the possibility of getting stout and spoiling her figure did not even affect her. Then, beneath this indifference, another feverish attack came on, a revived craving to return to the world once more, which she endeavoured to beguile for six months by organising and furnishing her small house according to her tastes. She said it was odious to her in its present state, and she filled it with tapestry and knick-knacks, and curios, the fame of which spread as far as Lille. After this, however, she began to loathe her country surroundings, the everlasting procession of stupid fields, the never-ending black roads, swarming with horrid people who frightened and disgusted her. Lamentations about being exiled began; she accused her husband of having sacrificed her to his salary of forty thousand francs, a mere pittance, which was scarcely sufficient to keep the house going. Why did he not take example by others and demand a part of the profits? Why did he not claim some shares? In short, why did he not at last try to be a successful man? She insisted upon all this with the cruelty of a woman strong in the consciousness of the marriage portion she had brought with her. He, ever seeking refuge in managerial imperturbability, was really devoured by love for this wife of his, by one of those belated passions which become the more violent as one grows older. Each morning he hoped that night would bring the desired reconciliation; and each evening he quailed before her cold, stern look, and scarcely dared to touch her hand. His was a suffering that admitted of no cure, a suffering hidden beneath sternness of bearing, the anguish of a tender nature secretly longing for the happiness it had hitherto been unable to find. However, at the end of six months, when the house was completely furnished and no longer occupied Madame Hennebeau, she relapsed into a state of languid weariness, like a victim whom exile would kill, and who was eagerly looking for death.

Just at that time Paul Négrel came to Montsou. His mother, the widow of a captain in the army, living at Avignon, on the slenderest of incomes, had condemned herself to the greatest privations in order to send him to the Polytechnic School. He had scarce managed to pass his examination, and his uncle, Monsieur Hennebeau, had induced him to resign from the state service so as to take him as engineer at the Voreux pit. From that moment, treated like

one of the family, he lived with the Hennebeaus board and rent free, which enabled him to send half his salary of three thousand francs a year to his widowed mother. To cloak his kindness in this matter Monsieur Hennebeau spoke of the trouble it would have been to the young man to make a home of his own in one of the little cottages reserved to each engineer. Madame Hennebeau, on her side, at once assumed the *rôle* of an affectionate aunt, ever ready with good counsel. But he was young and she was lonely and bored; and before long the inevitable came to pass. All the passion was certainly on his side; she was not at all jealous. She chaffed him about the trammer girls whom he declared to be hideous, and she almost sulked with him because he had no little peccadilloes to tell her of. Then, the thought of arranging an advantageous marriage for him became quite a passion with her; she would dream of devoting herself to his interests and of bestowing him on some rich young girl.

Two years passed by; and one day some suspicion of the truth suddenly came to Monsieur Hennebeau. This time his indignation was aroused; but on the very morrow his wife spoke to him of the choice she had made of Cécile Grégoire as a suitable wife for their nephew. And she bestirred herself so energetically in connection with this marriage that he became ashamed of his monstrous thoughts.

On the morning when the strike began, as Monsieur Hennebeau was coming downstairs from his wife's dressing-room, Négrel entered the house by the front door. He looked quite amused by this strike affair.

'Well?' asked his uncle.

'Well, I have been the round of the villages. The people seem quiet enough. But I think they are going to send you a deputation.'

At this moment Madame Hennebeau called from the first floor, 'Is that you, Paul? Just come up and tell me the news. How silly of them to turn naughty when they are all so happy!'

Thus the director was obliged to rest content with this very scanty information, since his wife had called his messenger away. He went back to his private room, where another bundle of telegrams had collected on his writing-table during his absence.

At eleven o'clock, when the Grégoires arrived, they were quite surprised at the manner in which Hippolyte, the man-

servant, pushed them into the house after casting uneasy glances up and down the road. The drawing-room curtains were drawn close, and they were taken immediately to Monsieur Hennebeau's room, where he apologised for receiving them; however, said he, the drawing-room overlooked the road, and it was as well to do nothing to provoke the people.

'What! don't you know, then?' he continued, noticing his guests' surprise.

Monsieur Grégoire, on hearing that the men had at last struck work, shrugged his shoulders very quietly. It would be nothing at all; the people were very quiet and honest. Madame Grégoire nodded by way of endorsing her husband's confidence in the pitmen's traditional resignation; while Cécile, looking very gay and brimful of health in a light brown cloth dress, smiled at the word strike, which reminded her of charitable visits to the villages.

However, Madame Hennebeau, gowned in black silk, and followed by Négrel, now entered the room.

'Isn't it a nuisance?' she exclaimed, on the very threshold. 'Just as if they couldn't have waited! You know, Paul refuses to take us to Saint-Thomas?'

'We'll remain here; the pleasure will be all the greater,' said Monsieur Grégoire, obligingly.

Paul had merely bowed to Cécile and her mother. Noticing this want of gallantry, his aunt drove him to the young girl's side, and when she heard them laughing together she enveloped them in a maternal glance.

Meanwhile Monsieur Hennebeau finished reading his telegrams and writing the answers. They stood chatting around him. His wife thought it incumbent on herself to explain that she had never concerned herself about this study, which had, in fact, kept its old faded red paper, its heavy mahogany furniture, and its green cardboard cases for documents, shabby from constant use. Three-quarters of an hour went by in small talk, but the lunch was on the point of being served, when the man-servant announced Monsieur Deneulin. The latter, looking excited, entered, and bowed low to Madame Hennebeau.

'You here?' he said, noticing the Grégoires. And then straightway, without further ceremony, he began talking to the managing director. 'It's come at last. I heard it from my engineer. My men all went down this morning. But it

may spread nevertheless. I am by no means easy, and I want to know. How do you stand?'

He had ridden over, and his anxiety was betrayed by his loud voice and abrupt gestures, which gave him the appearance of an old cavalry officer. Monsieur Hennebeau was beginning to enlighten him upon the situation, when Hippolyte, the man-servant, opened the dining-room door.

'Stay and lunch with us; I'll tell you more at dessert,' said the director.

'Very well, as you please,' answered Deneulin, so full of his own concerns that he accepted without further ceremony.

He became conscious, however, of his rudeness, and turning to Madame Hennebeau, he apologised. She accepted his apology in the most delightful manner. When she had ordered a seventh cover to be laid, she seated her guests—Madame Grégoire and Cécile beside her husband; then, Monsieur Grégoire and Monsieur Deneulin to her right and left, and at last Paul, whom she put between the young girl and her father. As they started on the *hors-d'œuvre*, she said, smiling:

'You will excuse me; I meant to have given you some oysters. Every Monday some arrive at Marchiennes from Ostend, and I intended to send cook in the carriage, but she was afraid of being stoned on the road.'

She was interrupted by a general burst of laughter. They all thought it very funny.

'Hush!' said Monsieur Hennebeau, looking vexed and glancing at the windows whence the road could be seen. 'Hush! we needn't let all the world know that we have a party this morning.'

'At any rate, they'll not have this slice of sausage,' declared Monsieur Grégoire.

The laughter began afresh, but in a lower key. The guests made themselves at home in the handsome room hung with Flemish tapestry, and furnished with old oak buffets. Silver flashed behind the stained glass of credences; and there was a large chandelier in ruddy copper reflecting the greenery of a dwarf palm and an aspidistra in majolica pots. Outside, that December day was icy with a bitter north-east wind. But not a breath of it entered the room, which was warm like a hothouse and pervaded by the perfume of a pineapple cut in slices in a crystal dish.

'Suppose we drew the curtains?' suggested Négrel, to

whom the idea of terrifying the Grégoires promised some amusement.

The housemaid who was assisting the man-servant took the thing in earnest, and did as she thought she was bidden, at which the jokes commenced afresh. There was no longer a glass or a fork put down without some mock precaution; every dish was hailed as something saved from the sacking of a town that had fallen into the hands of the enemy. However, beneath this simulated gaiety there lurked a secret fear which manifested itself in involuntary glances towards the road, as if some band of starving wretches were watching the table from outside. After the scrambled eggs with truffles came a dish of river trout. The conversation had now turned on the industrial crisis, which had grown worse during the last eighteen months.

'It was inevitable,' said Deneulin; 'the extreme prosperity of the last few years was sure to bring us to it. Think of the vast amount of capital that was sunk, the railways, the harbours, and all the money swallowed up in most extravagant speculations. Why, only in this neighbourhood, people kept on building sugar factories as if the department could yield three crops of beetroot a year. And, as a matter of course, money has become scarce nowadays. We must wait for people to get back the interest of the millions that have been spent, with the result that mortal glut and stagnation of business have set in.'

Monsieur Hennebeau opposed this view of the matter, though he was bound to admit that the years of prosperity had spoiled the workmen.

'When I think,' he exclaimed, 'that these fellows in our pits were able to earn as much as six francs a day or double what they are earning now! And they lived well and their tastes became extravagant. Of course, to-day it seems hard to them to have to revert to their primitive frugality.'

'Monsieur Grégoire, pray take some more trout,' interrupted Madame Hennebeau. 'They are delicious, are they not?'

Then the managing director continued: 'But, really now, is it our fault? We ourselves are cruelly tried. Since the factories have been shutting up one by one we have the devil's own trouble to get rid of our stock; and now, in the face of the ever-decreasing demand, we are naturally obliged to lower the cost of the output. That's what the workmen refuse to understand.'

There was a moment's silence. The man-servant was handing round some roast partridges, while the maid began to pour out the Chambertin.

'There has been a famine in India,' Deneulin resumed in a low voice, as if talking to himself. 'America, by stopping her contracts for cast and other iron, has dealt our smelting furnaces a heavy blow. Everything is standing still. A distant shock suffices to shake the world to its foundations. And to think that the Empire was so proud of that fever of industry!'

He applied his knife to his partridge's wing, then went on in a louder voice:

'The worst is, that to reduce the cost of the output we ought logically to increase the quantity, else the fall affects the workman's wages, and he is right in saying that it's he who pays the piper.'

This admission, which candour wrung from him, gave rise to a discussion in which the ladies found little amusement. However, they were all very busy with their plates, for as yet the edge had not been taken off their appetites. The next time the man-servant came in he looked as if he wished to speak, then hesitated.

'What is it?' asked Monsieur Hennebeau. 'If there are any telegrams you may give them to me. I expect some in answer to mine.'

'No, sir, it's not that; it's Monsieur Dansaert, who is in the hall. But he fears to disturb you.'

The managing director apologised to his guests, and had the head viewer shown in. Dansaert remained standing at a little distance from the table, while they all turned round to look at him, big and panting with the news he brought. The villages were keeping quiet, but it had been decided that a deputation should wait upon Monsieur Hennebeau. It was perhaps on its way already; at any rate, it would not be long in arriving.

'Very well, thank you,' said Monsieur Hennebeau. 'I shall want a report morning and evening, you understand!'

When Dansaert was gone the jesting began afresh. They attacked the Russian salad, declaring that they had better hurry, lest they might not be allowed to finish it. But their hilarity knew no bounds when, in answer to Négrel's request for some bread, the maid uttered a 'Yes, sir,' in so low and terror-stricken a voice that it seemed as if she already felt

a band of strikers ready for outrage and murder behind her.

'You may speak up,' said Madame Hennebeau kindly. 'They are not here yet.'

Her husband, who had just received another batch of letters and telegrams, expressed his wish to read one of the former aloud. It came from Pierron, who informed him in the most respectful terms that he found himself obliged to join his comrades for fear of being maltreated, adding that he had not even been able to refuse forming one of the deputation, though he distinctly blamed the step.

'So much for the liberty of labour!' exclaimed Monsieur Hennebeau. And the conversation turned once more on the strike. His opinion was solicited.

'Oh,' he said, 'we have seen others worse than this. There will be a week's—at the most, a fortnight's—idleness, as there was last time. They will loll about the beershops, and then when they get over-hungry they will go back to the pits.'

But Deneulin shook his head, saying, 'I am not quite so easy on that score. This time they seem to be better organised. Haven't they got a provident fund?'

'Yes, but it barely amounts to three thousand francs. How far can they go with that? I suspect a certain Étienne Lantier to be their leader. He is a capital workman, and I should be very sorry to have to give him his dismissal, as we had to do in the case of the famous Rasseneur, who continues to poison the Voreux pit with his ideas and his beer. But no matter; in a week half of them will go down again, and in a fortnight the whole ten thousand of them will be below.'

He seemed convinced of this. His only anxiety proceeded from possible discredit in the event of the board leaving him the responsibility of the strike. For some time past he had instinctively felt that he was losing favour. Hence he left the spoonful of Russian salad he had on his plate and once more began to read the telegrams he had received from Paris, each word of which he tried to fathom. His guests made every allowance for him, and the repast began to assume the character of a military lunch taken on the battlefield just before the commencement of hostilities.

The ladies now began to mingle in the conversation. Madame Grégoire was the first to express her pity for those poor people who were going to suffer hunger; and Cécile was

already arranging to distribute bread and meat tickets through the villages. But Madame Hennebeau professed herself surprised at hearing of the wretchedness of the Montsou miners. Were they not happy, then? People who were lodged, provided with fuel, and medically attended at the expense of the company! In her indifference to this herd of starvelings all she knew of them was confined to the lesson she had learned by heart, and with which she astonished her Parisian visitors. She had even ended by believing in its truth, and showed herself proportionately indignant at the pitmen's ingratitude.

Meanwhile Négrel continued to frighten Monsieur Grégoire. He did not dislike Cécile, and was quite prepared to marry her in order to please his aunt; but, like the worldly-wise young gentleman he fancied himself to be, he showed no love-sick ardour—he was not going to rush at her, as he expressed it. He professed to be a Republican, which did not prevent him from ruling his workmen with exceeding severity or from mildly ridiculing them in presence of the ladies.

'I do not share my uncle's optimism,' he said. 'I am afraid of serious troubles. And so, Monsieur Grégoire, I would advise you to fasten up La Piolaine securely. They might sack it.'

Just at that moment Monsieur Grégoire, with a beaming, good-natured face, was paternally endorsing his wife's sentiments with regard to the miners.

'Sack La Piolaine!' he exclaimed, in great astonishment. 'And why should they sack La Piolaine?'

'Are you not a shareholder in the Montsou Company? You do nothing. You live by the labour of others. In short, you personify what they call "infamous capital," and that is enough. You may be quite sure that if a social revolution should be triumphant it would compel you to give up your fortune as so much stolen money.'

This time Monsieur Grégoire's childish tranquillity and unquestioning serenity forsook him. 'Stolen money! My fortune!' he spluttered. 'Did not my great-grandfather honestly and with great labour earn the sum he invested many years ago? Did we not run all the risks attaching to the enterprise? Do I make a bad use of my income, now that I've got it?'

Then Madame Hennebeau, seeing Madame Grégoire and Cécile turn pale with fear, hastened to intervene, saying, 'Paul is merely joking, my dear sir.'

But Monsieur Grégoire felt greatly upset. As the servant was handing round some small crayfish arranged in a pretty pyramid, he took three of them without noticing what he did, and began to crunch their claws with his teeth.

'Oh, I don't deny,' he continued, 'that there are shareholders who abuse their wealth. I have been told of certain Ministers who have received presents from the company for having been useful to it. And there is that *grand seigneur*, whom I will not name—a duke, our principal shareholder—whose life is a scandal of extravagance, what with the millions and millions that he throws away on women, in dissipation and useless display. But we—we who live without show and without noise, like the honest folk we are, we who do not speculate, who are content to spend what is strictly our own and do not forget the poor—why, your workmen would be infamous scoundrels indeed to rob us of as much as a pin's head!'

Négrel was obliged to calm him, amused though he felt at the outburst. The crayfish were being discussed, and there was crunching on all sides while the conversation turned on politics. Notwithstanding his choler, which had scarcely subsided, Monsieur Grégoire professed himself a Liberal; he regretted King Louis Philippe. As for Deneulin, he was for a strong government. He declared that the Emperor was drifting into concessions that were to be regretted. 'Remember 1789,' he said. 'It was the nobility that made the first Revolution possible by their complicity, their taste for philosophic novelties. Well, the middle classes are at this moment playing the same idiotic part in their frantic fury for Liberalism, their rage for destroying everything, and their obsequious flattery of the people. Yes, yes, depend upon it, you are only sharpening the monster's teeth so that it may devour us all. And devour us it will, you may rely on it!'

The ladies tried to stop him and to change the conversation by inquiring after his daughters. Lucie was at Marchiennes, he said, singing with a friend. Jeanne was painting the head of an old beggar. But he gave these particulars in an absent-minded way. His eyes were fixed on Hennebeau, who was so absorbed in the perusal of his telegrams as to forget the presence of his guests. Behind those strips of paper Deneulin instinctively divined the influence of Paris and the instructions of the board which would decide the issue of the strike. Hence he reverted to the subject in spite of himself.

'What have you decided to do?' he abruptly inquired.

Monsieur Hennebeau started, then replied vaguely, 'We'll see.'

'No doubt, you are strong, you can afford to wait,' Deneulin continued. 'You can afford to wait, but I shall be done for if the strike spreads to Vandame. Though I've renewed the plant of the Jean-Bart I can only manage to keep going by an incessant output, seeing that it is the only pit I have; and I don't like the look of things, I can assure you!'

This involuntary confession seemed to impress Monsieur Hennebeau. He was listening, and a whole plan arose in his mind then and there. If the strike should turn out badly, why not take advantage of it to aggravate matters, even to the point of ruining neighbour Deneulin and then buying his concession of him for a mere song! This was the surest way to regain the favour of the Montsou board, whose dream for years past had been to get possession of Vandame.

'If the Jean-Bart worries you as much as all that,' said he, laughing, 'why not dispose of it to us?'

But Deneulin was already regretting his lamentations.

'Never while I live!' he exclaimed.

The company made merry over his excitement, and when the dessert was put on the table they had managed to forget the strike. An apple charlotte was pronounced delicious. And the ladies discussed a recipe in reference to the pine-apple, which also met with general approbation. The other fruit, chiefly pears and grapes, put a finishing touch to the good humour which should follow a copious lunch. All spoke at once, having become very affectionate and confidential, while the servant filled their glasses with some Rhine wine, instead of champagne, which they considered vulgar.

The projected union of Paul and Cécile certainly advanced a step amidst the general feeling of sympathy produced by the dessert. His aunt had given him such significant glances that the young man showed himself very amiable, and by his caressing ways regained the favour of the Grégoires, which had been somewhat jeopardised by his stories of pillage. For a moment Monsieur Hennebeau, confronted by the thorough understanding that existed between his wife and his nephew, felt his abominable suspicions revive, as if he detected a guilty meaning in the glances they exchanged. But again the idea of the marriage, planned at that very table, reassured him.

Hippolyte was serving the coffee when the maid darted in, looking terror-stricken.

'Sir, sir, they are here!'

She was alluding to the delegates. Doors were slammed, and it seemed as though a gust of terror blew through the adjacent rooms.

'Show them into the drawing-room,' said Monsieur Hennebeau. Around the table the guests glanced at each other uneasily. The room became silent at once. Then they tried to renew their jokes; they pretended to put the sugar in their pockets; they suggested that the plate should be hidden. But the managing director remained grave, the laughter died away, and the loud voices fell to whispers, while the deputation was heard treading heavily over the drawing-room carpet.

'I hope you'll take your coffee first,' said Madame Hennebeau to her husband, lowering her voice.

'Of course,' he replied. 'They can wait!'

Nevertheless he felt nervous, and pricked up his ears at every sound, whilst pretending to be busy with his cup.

Paul had risen with Cécile and had induced the young girl to glance through the keyhole. They were choking with laughter and whispering very low.

'Do you see them?'

'Yes, I see a stout one, with two shorter ones behind him.'

'Now, haven't they most abominable faces!'

'Not at all; I think they look very nice.'

Suddenly Monsieur Hennebeau rose from his chair, saying that his coffee was too hot, and that he would drink it later on. As he left the room he put his finger to his lips by way of recommending prudence. The others had all seated themselves again, and remained round the table, silent, not daring to move, but straining their ears to hear what went on between their host and those rough-voiced men.

II

At a meeting held at Rasseneur's on the previous night, Étienne and some of his fellow-workmen had chosen the delegates that were to wait upon the managing director the next morning. When during the evening La Maheude found

that her husband was to form part of the deputation she felt very dejected, and asked him whether he wanted them to be turned into the street. Maheu himself had not accepted the position without reluctance. In spite of their undeserved hardships, both, when the moment for action came, relapsed into the resignation of their race, apprehensive of what the morrow might bring forth, and preferring to bow down submissively. In all matters relating to their every-day existence Maheu generally appealed to his wife's judgment, which, upon the whole, was sensible. This time, however he ended by getting angry, the more so as he secretly shared her fears.

'Leave me alone!' he said as he got into bed. 'It would be a nice thing for me to leave my mates in the lurch, wouldn't it? Besides, I'm only doing my duty.'

She got into bed also. Neither of them spoke. Then after a long silence, she answered him.

'You're right; yes, you'd better go. But look here, old man, we're done for.'

They had breakfast at noon, because the appointment was for one o'clock at Rasseneur's, whence they meant to proceed to Monsieur Hennebeau's. They only ate potatoes. As there was merely a small scrap of butter left no one touched it. It would do for supper with some slices of bread.

'You know that we count upon you to be our spokesman,' Étienne suddenly remarked to Maheu.

The latter was so amazed that he could not reply.

'No, that's too much of a good thing!' exclaimed La Maheude. 'I don't mind him going, but I won't let him be the leader. Why should he do more than another?'

Then Étienne began to explain things very eloquently. Maheu was the best workman in the pit, the most respected and liked; ever held up as an example for his common-sense. Consequently the miners' claims, coming from his lips, would acquire decisive weight. At first Étienne himself had been selected to be spokesman, but he had lived at Montsou too short a time; one who had been longer among them would be listened to more attentively. In short, the men wished to confide their interests to the most worthy: Maheu could not refuse, it would be cowardly.

La Maheude made a gesture of despair. 'Go, go, old fellow, then,' said she, 'go and pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the others. You have my leave, after all!'

'But I'll never be able to,' stammered Maheu; 'I shall say something foolish.'

Étienne, pleased at having prevailed upon him, tapped him on the shoulder.

'You'll say what you feel, and that will do very well.'

Old Jollycorpse, the swelling of whose legs was abating, listened with his mouth full of food, and shaking his head all the while. There was a momentary silence. When they ate potatoes, the children gorged themselves and kept quiet. However, after having emptied his mouth, the old man slowly muttered:

'You may say what you like, and it'll be just as if you hadn't said anything at all. Ah! I've seen a lot of that sort of thing in my time! Forty years ago they drove us out of the director's house, and at the point of the sword too! To-day they may receive you, but you'll get no more answer from them than from yonder wall. They've got the brass and they don't care a straw!'

They all became silent once more. At last Maheu and Étienne got up, and left the family sitting sad and mute before their empty plates. On their way they called for Levaque and Pierron; then the four of them went to Rasseneur's, where the delegates of the neighbouring villages were arriving in groups. When the twenty members of the deputation had all arrived, the conditions which were to be demanded in opposition to those of the company were settled, and they started for Montsou. The sharp north-east wind swept the paved highroad. Two o'clock struck when they reached the managing director's house.

At first, the servant told them to wait, and closed the house door upon them; then, on coming back, he showed them into the drawing-room and drew back the large curtains. A softened light filtered through the lacework of the smaller ones. And the miners, all very neat and clean, dressed in their best, shaved that very morning, their yellowish hair and moustaches trimmed, felt, when left to themselves, awkward and afraid to sit down. They kept fidgeting with their caps, casting sheepish glances at the furniture—a kind of mixture of all styles, which the mania for bric-à-brac had brought into fashion. There were Henri II. armchairs, Louis XV. chairs, an Italian cabinet of the seventeenth century, a Spanish *contador* of the fifteenth; the mantel-shelf was draped with an altar-cloth, and the hangings over the

doors were ornamented with embroidery from ancient chasubles. All that old gold, those ancient tawny silks, that chapel-like luxury, filled them with respectful uneasiness. Their feet adhered, as it were, to the pile of the soft Persian carpets. But what made them most uncomfortable was the high temperature diffused by the patent heating apparatus, which came upon them by surprise, for their cheeks were smarting from the bitter blast that blew along the road. Five minutes went by, and still their embarrassment increased amidst the comfort of that hot and richly-furnished room.

At last Monsieur Hennebeau made his appearance, buttoned up to the chin in military fashion, and wearing in the button-hole of his frock coat the small crimson ribbon of his decoration of the Legion of Honour. He was the first to speak:

'Ah, so here you are! You have made up your minds to rebel, it appears.' And he paused to add in a tone of stiff politeness:

'Sit down. I am quite willing to talk matters over with you.'

The miners turned round, looking for seats. Some of them ventured to perch themselves on the chairs, while the others, afraid of the embroidery and silk, remained standing.

Then ensued a moment's silence. Monsieur Hennebeau, who had wheeled his armchair to the fire, took particular stock of each man, trying to remember his face and his name. He recognised Pierron keeping prudently in the background, and at last his eyes fell upon Étienne, seated opposite him.

'Well,' he began, 'what have you to say to me?'

He fully expected the young man to take up the challenge, and was so surprised at seeing Maheu come forward, that he could not help adding: 'What! it's you, a capital workman, who has always shown himself so reasonable! you, one of the oldest hands of Montsou, whose family has been working in the pit ever since the first blows with a pick were dealt! Ah, that's wrong; I am sorry to see you at the head of the malcontents.'

Maheu listened with downcast eyes. Then he began, in a voice which was very low and shaky at first:

'Mr. Director, it's just because I'm a quiet and orderly man, whom no one has a word to say against, that my mates have chosen me. That'll prove to you that we're not a set of brawlers, or a hot-headed lot trying to make a disturbance. We only ask for what's fair, we're tired of being starved to

death, and it seems to us that it's time to arrange for having at least some bread every day of the week.'

His voice grew firmer; he raised his eyes, looked straight at the director, and then continued: 'You know well enough that we can't accept your new system. We're told that we scamp the propping. It's true we don't spend the necessary time on it. But if we did, our day's earnings would be still less, and as they are already not enough to keep us in food, there would be an end of everything, a last blow that would kill off all your workmen. Pay us a little more and we'll prop more carefully; we'll spend the time necessary on it, instead of grudging every minute that we're away from the coal, which is the only work that pays. No other arrangement is possible; the work to be done must be paid for. And what have you proposed instead? Something of which we can make neither head nor tail! You reduce the price of the truckload; then you pretend to make up for it by paying us apart for the propping. Even if that were true we should be none the less taken in, because the propping would always take us more time than the hewing of the coal. But what makes the thing worse to us is that it's not even true. The company doesn't make up anything; it simply puts two centimes out of ten in its pockets. That's what it does!'

'Yes, that's it, that's it,' muttered the other delegates, noticing an angry gesture on Monsieur Hennebeau's part, as if he wished to interrupt Maheu.

But the latter gave him no chance. He was wound up, and his words came without an effort. Every now and then he listened to himself with surprise, as if some stranger were talking from within him. These were things that he had stored within his own breast, things which he even did not know to be there, and which now rushed forth from his almost bursting heart. He spoke of their common misery, of their hard work, of their brutish lives, of their wives and children crying for bread. He spoke of the latter disastrous pay-days, of the fortnight's wages eaten into, nay, almost reduced to nothing, by fines and enforced stoppages, wages taken back to their homes in tears. Did the company want to kill them outright?

'Therefore, Mr. Director,' he concluded, 'we've come to tell you that, death for death, we prefer to die doing nothing. It will, at any rate, be so much fatigue saved. We've left the pits, and we sha'n't go down them again unless the company accepts our terms. It wants to lower the price of the truck-

load, and to pay for the propping apart. Well, we wish things to remain as they were, and require five centimes more for each truckload. And now it remains for you to see whether you're on the side of justice and labour.'

Thereupon some of the miners present exclaimed, 'That's it. He has told you our meaning. We only ask for what's fair.'

Others, without speaking, signified their approval by energetic nods. The magnificent apartment, with its gilding, its embroideries, its litter of bric-à-brac, had disappeared from before their eyes. They no longer even felt the carpet, whose heavy pile they crushed beneath their clumsy boots.

'Will you let me have a word?' exclaimed Monsieur Hennebeau, who was getting angry. 'First of all, it is not true that the company is gaining two centimes per truckload by the new system. Let us examine the figures if you please.'

A somewhat confused discussion ensued. The managing director, in order to divide the men against each other, called upon Pierron, who, however, slunk behind the others and merely stammered a few incoherent sentences. On the other hand, Levaque proved most aggressive, muddling things and boldly asserting facts of which he knew nothing. There was a loud murmur of voices, muffled, so to say, by the draperies of the room, and the hothouse-like atmosphere.

'If you all talk at once,' said Monsieur Hennebeau, 'we shall never understand each other.'

He had recovered his composure, his rough politeness, exempt from acrimony; he had become a mere manager who had received instructions and who meant to act up to them. From the very beginning of the interview he had not taken his eyes off Étienne, and he wished to draw the young man out. Accordingly, dropping the discussion of the two centimes, he abruptly shifted the question.

'You had better come out with it at once; you are simply obeying some detestable instructions, inciting you to revolt. This is a pestilence that nowadays attacks the working man, corrupting the best. Oh! I do not want any one to tell me; I see well enough that you are altered, you, who used to be so quiet. You have been promised more butter than bread, is it not so? You have been told that your turn has come to play the masters. I'll wager that you are already being enrolled in that famous International, that army of brigands who dream of overthrowing society.'

This time Étienne interrupted him. 'You are mistaken, Mr. Director. So far not a single miner of Montsou has adhered to it. But if driven to it, all the pits will probably enrol themselves. It depends upon the company.'

From that moment the struggle continued between him and Monsieur Hennebeau as if the others had been no longer present.

'The company is a very providence to its miners; you are wrong to threaten it,' said the manager. 'Why, this year alone it has spent three hundred thousand francs in building villages, which do not yield two per cent. interest. I say nothing of the pensions it grants, of the coal it gives, or of the medical attendance and the medicine. You, who appear to be very intelligent, who have become one of our most skilful workmen in a few months' time, would it not be better for you to diffuse these truths instead of wasting your time in associating with people who are of little good? Yes, I am alluding to Rasseneur, whom we had to discharge to keep our mines from being infected by Socialist dirt. You are always at his place, and he has, no doubt, egged you on to create this provident fund which we would willingly tolerate if it were merely a savings bank, but which we feel to be a standing menace against us, a reserve fund to defray the cost of war. And while on this subject, I may as well state at once that the company means to exercise some control over this fund.'

Étienne let him run on, firmly meeting his glance, his lips quivering the while. He smiled at the last words, and replied very quietly: 'This, then, is a new condition, for, Mr. Director, you had not mentioned it as yet. Our wish, unfortunately, is that the company should concern itself less with us, and that instead of playing the part of a providence, it should simply show itself just, by giving us our own, our earnings, which it at present divides among the shareholders. Is it honest, I ask you, to let the workmen starve each time there is a crisis in order to save the dividends? You may say what you like, Mr. Director; the new system is nothing but a disguised reduction of wages, and that's what rouses our indignation; for if the company has to retrench, it acts very wrongly in effecting this retrenchment solely at the cost of the workman.'

'That's it,' exclaimed Monsieur Hennebeau. 'I expected this charge of starving the people, of living upon the sweat of

their brows. How can you talk such nonsense, you who ought to know the enormous risk attaching to all capital invested in industry, in mining operations in particular? A properly equipped pit costs from fifteen hundred thousand francs to two millions nowadays; and how difficult it is to get even moderate interest on such a sum! Nearly half of the mining companies in France become bankrupt. Besides, it is stupid to accuse those who succeed of cruelty. When their workmen suffer, they suffer themselves. Do you imagine that the company has not as much to lose as you have by the present crisis? It cannot control wages; it must be guided by competition under penalty of going to ruin. You should blame the facts that are, not the company. But you will not be told, you are determined not to understand!'

'Yes,' said the young man, 'we understand very well that improvement is impossible so long as things are in their present state; and it's just for this reason that one day or other the workmen will end by trying to make them go differently.'

These words, moderate enough in form, were spoken in a low voice, but with such ominous conviction that deep silence fell throughout the room. Sudden embarrassment, undefined, swept by amidst that quietude. The other delegates, who but vaguely understood, felt nevertheless that their spokesman had just claimed the share due to them; and they once more glanced askance at the gorgeous hangings, the comfortable seats, the whole of that display of wealth, the smallest item of which would have paid for their food for a month.

At last Monsieur Hennebeau, who had been lost in thought, got up as a hint for them to go. They all followed his example. Étienne had slightly nudged Maheu with his elbow, and the latter, whose tongue was already cleaving to his palate again, said awkwardly:

'Then, sir, this is all you have to say to us? We're to tell the others that you refuse to listen to our conditions?'

'I, my good fellow?' exclaimed the managing director. 'But I do not refuse anything! I am a servant like yourself. I have no more authority than the smallest of your truller boys. I have my orders, and my sole duty is to see that they are faithfully carried out. I have told you what I thought it was right for me to tell you, but it is not for me to decide.

You have submitted your claims to me; I will transmit them to the board, and I will acquaint you with the answer.'

He spoke in the calm, correct tone of an official, avoiding the least semblance of private motives in the question at issue, and evincing the passionless affability of a simple instrument of authority. But this time the miners looked at him mistrustfully, asking themselves whence he came, what interest he could have in telling them a falsehood, and how much he might gain by placing himself between themselves and the real masters? He was an intriguing adventurer, perhaps, a man who received wages like a workman, and yet could afford to live in such splendid style!

Étienne ventured to interfere once more.

'Just please consider, Mr. Director, what a pity it is that we cannot plead our causes personally. We should explain many things, we should advance reasons which must necessarily escape you, if we only knew to whom to address ourselves!'

Monsieur Hennebeau kept perfectly cool. He even smiled. 'If you have no confidence in me, the matter becomes more complicated still. In that case you must address yourselves further afield.'

The delegates had watched the sweeping motion of his hand towards one of the windows of the drawing-room. Further afield meant Paris, no doubt. But they were not quite certain. Further afield might be some distant, awe-inspiring, inaccessible country, where sat enthroned an unknown divinity which they would never see, and whose power they would merely feel crushing the ten thousand pitmen of Montsou from afar. When the manager spoke doubtless it was this power that was behind him, hidden, and pronouncing sentence like an oracle.

They stood crestfallen. Even Étienne made a motion as if to say to them that it was better to go; while Monsieur Hennebeau familiarly laid his hand on Maheu's shoulder and asked after Jeanlin.

'A severe lesson, assuredly; and it is you who defend bad propping! You had better think over it, my friends, and you will understand that a strike will be a disaster to every one. Before a week is over your heads, you will be starving. What will you do then? I rely upon your good sense, however, and I am convinced that you will go down on Monday, if not before.'

They left the drawing-room, trooping out like sheep, with their shoulders up to their ears, and never uttering a word of reply to this prophecy of submission. The manager, who accompanied them to the door, was obliged to sum up the interview himself: there was the company on one side with its new tariff; and the workmen on the other with their demand for an increase of five centimes per truckload. In order not to leave them any illusions, he thought it his duty to warn them that their conditions would certainly be rejected.

'You had better think matters over before doing anything rash,' he repeated, feeling rather uneasy at their silence.

In the hall Pierron bowed almost to the ground, while Levaque made a show of putting his cap on. Maheu was trying to say a parting word, when Étienne again nudged him with his elbow. And they took their departure amidst a silence that boded no good. The door alone closed upon them with a loud bang.

When Monsieur Hennebeau went back to the dining-room he found his guests sitting motionless and silent before their coffee and liqueurs. In a few words he informed Deneulin of the situation, and the latter's face assumed a still gloomier look. Then, while the manager was sipping his coffee, which was now cold, they tried to change the conversation to some other subject. But the Grégoires themselves came back to the strike and expressed surprise that there should be no law forbidding working men to abandon their labour. Paul on his side tried to reassure Cécile by telling her that the gendarmes had been sent for.

After a while Madame Hennebeau called the servant.

'Hippolyte,' she said, 'just open the windows before we go into the drawing-room, so as to let in some fresh air.'

III

A FORTNIGHT went by, and on the Monday of the third week the time-sheets sent in to the offices showed a still further decrease in the number of workmen who went down. That morning the resumption of work had been confidently expected. But the obstinacy of the board of management exasperated the miners. The Voreux, Crèvecœur, Mirou, and Madeleine pits were no longer the only ones that stood idle;

there was scarcely a fourth of the men at the Victory and at Feutry-Cantel, while contagion was even spreading to Saint-Thomas. The strike was gradually becoming general.

At the Voreux pit heavy silence had settled upon the enclosure. It was like the death of a great factory, the void and abandonment of a big yard whence labour has departed. Under the grey December sky, two or three forgotten trucks on the high gangways increased the mute sadness of everything around. Below, between the tall, lank uprights of the settle boards, the stock of coal was becoming smaller and smaller, and the black, bare soil already showed, while stacks of propping lay rotting under the frequent showers. At the landing-place beside the canal a half-filled lighter seemed to have fallen asleep on the muddy water; and on the deserted mound of shale, whose smouldering sulphur still smoked in spite of the dripping rain, a cart raised its shafts as if in despair. But the buildings especially seemed to be struck with paralysis; there was the sifting shed, with its closed lattice shutters; the belfry, whither the roar of the landing staiths no longer arose; the boiler room, gloomy and cold; the towering chimney, too large for the infrequent puffs of smoke that issued from it. The hoisting engine only got up steam of a morning; the stablemen went down with the horses' fodder; the viewers alone remained below, looking to the traction ways, that were apt to get damaged when they were not attended to regularly. Then, from the hour of nine, the rest of the needful work was done by means of the ladders. And amidst the death-like torpor of the buildings, wrapt in a shroud of black dust, there was nothing heard but the puffing of the pumping engine, with its thick long-drawn breath; this was the last sign of life given by the pit which the water would have destroyed had that breathing ceased.

Opposite, on the upland, the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty seemed dead also. The prefect of Lille had come, and gendarmes had scoured the roads; but confronted by the peaceful attitude of the miners, they had decided to withdraw. Never had the village given such a splendid example to the vast plain. The men, in order to keep away from the beer-shops, slept all day long; the women, docked in their rations of coffee, became less quarrelsome; and even the children seemed to understand things, for they ran about barefooted and whacked each other with as little noise as possible. The password, repeated from mouth to mouth, was, 'Keep steady.'

Nevertheless, there was a constant coming and going at the Maheus'. Étienne, by virtue of his secretaryship, had distributed the three thousand francs of the providence fund among the most necessitous families; he had also received a few hundred francs, the proceeds of subscriptions and collections. But now all their resources seemed exhausted; the miners had no more money to keep up the strike, and the wolf was at their doors, threateningly showing its teeth. Maigrat, after promising credit for a fortnight, had changed his mind at the end of a week, and stopped the supplies. As a rule, he took his instructions from the company; perhaps the latter wished to have done with the thing as quickly as possible by starving the villages into submission. Besides, he played the capricious tyrant, giving or refusing bread according to the attractiveness of the ambassadresses sent by the people. To La Maheude in particular he kept his door closed, as if to punish her for not having sent Catherine. To make things worse, severe frost had set in; the women saw their stock of coal decrease, and were worried by the thought that it would not be renewed at the pit's mouth so long as the men did not go down. Thus they would not only die of starvation, they would be frozen to death besides.

At the Maheus' they were already short of everything. The Levaques still managed to drag along, thanks to a twenty-franc piece lent by Bouteloup. As for the Pierrons, they always had money; but in order to appear as badly off as the rest, lest the latter should try to borrow, they dealt on trust at Maigrat's, who would have given La Pierronne the whole of his shop if she had only asked for it. As early as the Saturday many families had gone to bed supperless. But though they were confronted by terrible days nobody complained; all obeyed the password given to them, with unobtrusive fortitude. In spite of everything, there reigned absolute confidence, a religious faith, the blind submission of a people of believers. Since they had been told that an era of justice was at hand, they were ready to suffer for universal happiness. Hunger turned their heads, as it were. Never beyond their narrow horizon had a more boundless vision of happiness appeared to these poor fanatics, crazed by hardships. When their eyes grew dim from weakness, they beheld the ideal city of their dreams close at hand and real, with its brotherhood of workers, its golden age of labour, and the daily repast partaken of in common by all. Nothing shook

their conviction as to their final entrance into that city. The fund might be exhausted, the company might refuse to give in, every day might aggravate their situation, and still they did not relinquish hope. They smiled contemptuously at existing facts. Had the very ground opened at their feet to swallow them up, even then they would have expected some miracle to happen to save them from destruction. This faith replaced food, and kept them warm. When the Maheus and others had too quickly digested their watery soup, they fell, as it were, into a semi-trance—that ecstasy foretelling the certainty of a better life which made the martyrs of old throw themselves into the lion's den.

Henceforth Étienne was their unquestioned leader. In the conversations that took place every evening he pronounced judgment on this and that in proportion as his studies influenced him. He was constantly reading; he received a greater number of letters than ever; and he had even subscribed to the *Avenger*, a Socialistic sheet published in Belgium, which paper, the first of its kind that had ever entered the village, had gained him extraordinary respect on the part of his fellow-workmen. His increasing popularity intoxicated him more each day. To carry on an extensive correspondence, to scatter his views on the working man's condition to the four corners of the province, to grant interviews to all the miners of the Voreux pit: above all, to become a centre, to feel a whole world moving about at his inspiration, proved a constant source of pride to him, former engine-driver that he was, hewer with greasy, grimy hands. He ascended a rung of the social ladder; he entered, as it were, into that hated middle class with a gratified sense of intellectual and material content, which he dared not avow to himself. One thing alone continued to worry him—the consciousness of his lack of education, which made him timid and awkward the moment he found himself face to face with a gentleman dressed in broad-cloth. True, he continued to educate himself, devouring everything he came upon; but want of method retarded assimilation, and resulted in a superficial knowledge of many things that he could by no means understand. Hence, every now and then, when his common sense gained the upper hand, he felt misgivings as to his mission, doubts as to his fitness for the task. Perhaps a lawyer was needed, a learned man capable of acting and speaking, without running the risk of compromising his

comrades. But self-revolt never failed to restore his equilibrium. No, no lawyers! they were but a lot of scoundrels who profited by their knowledge to fatten upon the people! Come what might, the working man ought to look after his own concerns. And his dream of becoming a popular leader got the upper hand once more; he beheld Montsou at his feet, Paris in a distant mist, with—who could say?—perhaps a seat in the legislature one day, and the privilege of mounting to the tribune of a gorgeously decorated hall, where he pictured himself fulminating against the masters, in the first speech ever pronounced by a working man in a parliament.

At last Étienne became perplexed. Pluchart wrote him letter upon letter, offering to come to Montsou to keep the miners' ardour up to the boiling point. They would have to organise a private meeting, at which the engine-wright would preside. Hidden beneath this proposal was the idea of using the strike as a means of winning over to the International all the miners who till then had shown themselves mistrustful of it. Étienne feared a disturbance; nevertheless, he would have allowed Pluchart to come if Rasseneur had not violently blamed all such intervention. Despite his own power, the young man had to keep in with the tavern-keeper, whose services were prior to his own, and who counted some faithful followers among his customers. Consequently Étienne continued to hesitate, not knowing which course to adopt.

On that very Monday, at about four o'clock, there came another letter from Lille, just when Étienne was alone with La Maheude in the room downstairs. Maheu, upset at being idle, had gone fishing; if he had the luck to catch anything like a fish below the canal lock, he would sell it, and could then buy some bread. Old Jollycorpse and Jeanlin had for their part gone out to give their newly-mended legs a trial trot; while the children were on the mound of shale with Alzire, who passed hours and hours there gathering cinders. Crouching over the miserable fire, which she scarcely dared to make up, La Maheude was nursing Estelle.

When the young man had folded the letter up again she asked him: 'Is it good news? Are they going to send us some money?' And as Étienne shook his head, she went on: 'I don't know what we're going to do this week. Never mind, we'll hold out for all that. When one has right on one's side, it puts some heart into one, is that not so? One always ends by getting the best of it.'

By this time she was entirely but very reasonably in favour of the strike. It would have been better, perhaps, to have compelled the company to act fairly without knocking off work. But seeing that they had done so, they ought not to go back until they had got what they wanted. On that score she showed herself uncompromisingly energetic. One ought to starve to death rather than appear to be in the wrong when one was in the right.

'Ah!' exclaimed Étienne, 'if cholera would only break out and rid us of those bloodsuckers of the company!'

'No, no,' she answered, 'we mustn't wish for the death of anybody. It wouldn't do us any good if they were to die; there'd be others to take their places. All I ask is, that they should come to more reasonable ideas, and I expect they will, because there are honest people everywhere. Besides, you know, I'm not at all in favour of your politics.'

In fact, she generally blamed his violent language; she thought him of a quarrelsome nature. That a man should stand out to have his work paid at its value was right enough, but why meddle with a lot of other things, with the *bourgeois*, and with Government? Why meddle with other people's concerns, in which one would only get some nasty knocks? Withal she continued to respect Étienne because he did not get drunk, and because he paid her the forty-five francs for his month's board very regularly. When a man paid his debts and remained sober, one might well overlook his other faults.

Étienne, however, began to hold forth about the Republic which would provide bread for everybody. But La Maheude shook her head, for she remembered '48, a dog's year—as she called it—which had left them as bare as worms, herself and her man, to whom she had then but recently been married. She became absorbed in her recollections of past worry, which she droned out in a mournful voice, with her eyes fixed on vacancy, while Estelle fell asleep on her lap.

'There wasn't a brass farthing,' she muttered, 'not a sup nor bite, and all the pits stopped. In short, poor folks went to their death as they are doing to-day!'

Just at that moment the door was thrown open, and both remained speechless with surprise at the sight of Catherine, who entered the room. Since her flight with Chaval she had not set foot in the village. She looked so confused that she did not close the door behind her, but remained trembling on

the threshold. She had, no doubt, expected to find her mother alone, and the sight of the young man put the little speech which she had prepared clean out of her head.

'What do you want here?' shouted La Maheude, without getting off her chair. 'I'll have no more of you, so be off!'

Catherine tried to say a few words.

'It's some coffee and sugar, mother. Yes, for the children. I've done some overtime, and I thought of them.'

She drew from her pockets a pound of coffee and a pound of sugar, which she timidly laid on the table. The strike at the Voreux pit worried her, particularly as she was still working at Jean-Bart; and she could devise no other way of helping her parents a little than by pretending to think of the children. However, this proof of the girl's kind heart did not disarm her mother, who replied: 'Instead of bringing us dainties you would have done better to stop with us here to get us some bread.'

And thereupon she overwhelmed the girl with reproaches, repeating everything that she had said against her in the village for the last month. To go off as she had done when there was a family at home and in want! She must be the most ungrateful of ungrateful children.

'What on earth can have possessed you, say?' La Maheude shouted.

Standing against the table, Catherine listened with bowed head and shaking in every limb. She tried to answer, but her words only came in gasps.

'Oh, if there'd only been me, but there's him. When he wills a thing, I'm bound to give in, because he's the stronger. People can never tell how things happen. Well, what's done can't be undone; he's bound to marry me.'

She defended herself in a passionless, resigned way. She was only upset at being upbraided so violently by her mother before that young man, whose presence embarrassed and pained her.

Étienne had, however, got up, pretending to poke the fire, which was almost gone out, in order to lessen the awkwardness of the scene. But their glances met; he thought she looked pale and careworn, but pretty, for all that, with her limpid eyes and long face, which was getting tanned. Strange feelings with regard to her uprose within him, all his anger against her melted, he wished that she might be happy with the man she had chosen. He, indeed, felt concerned for her;

he would have liked to go to Montsou to compel the other to treat her with some consideration. But she only saw pity in his tenderness; she made sure that he must despise her to look at her like that. And at this thought her heart felt ready to burst; she almost choked without being able to find further words of excuse.

'Well, that's the best thing you can do, to hold your tongue,' resumed La Maheude in a relentless voice. 'If you've come back to stay, come in; otherwise, be off at once, and consider yourself lucky that I can't get up, or else I should have already put you out.'

Then, as though this threat were suddenly being realised, Catherine received a kick which overcame her both with surprise and pain. It was from Chaval, who had bounded in by the open doorway, and rushed upon her like a wild beast. For the last minute or so he had been watching her from outside.

'Ah, you hussy!' he yelled. 'I followed you: I knew very well that you came back here! And you treat him to coffee with my money, eh?'

La Maheude and Étienne, both dumb-stricken, did not stir. With a furious gesture Chaval drove Catherine towards the door. 'Will you get out at once, at once?'

And seeing that she crouched in a corner, he darted towards her, caught hold of her wrist and shook her, dragging her out after him. When he got to the door, he turned upon La Maheude, who was still nailed fast to her chair, and pointing to Étienne, he shouted in the vilest language the most abominable charges against them both.

At this, Étienne rushed at his former mate. The fear of disturbing the village by a fight had prevented him from rescuing Catherine from his hands. But now his fury got the better of him. And the two men stood face to face glaring at each other. All their old hatred, their unavowed jealousy revived. One or the other would have to bite the dust.

'Take care!' hissed Étienne, his teeth firmly set, 'or I'll flay you!'

'Just try!' answered Chaval.

They still kept glaring for a few moments, so close that each could feel the other's warm breath, but now Catherine intervened, taking Chaval's hand with a supplicating look, and trying to drag him away. At last she got him out of the village, whence she fled, without once turning her head.

'The brute!' growled Étienne, slamming the door, and so overcome with anger that he felt obliged to sit down again.

La Maheude had not stirred. She made a sweeping gesture, and then a deep silence fell upon both, full of things they did not say.

'He's a pig,' she remarked at last. 'Only a brute like that could say such horrid things. As for myself, I don't care a straw; I treat them with contempt.'

'After all, you're right,' answered Étienne, getting up.

And he went out, leaving La Maheude to relight the fire, after placing Estelle, who was still asleep, on two chairs. If the father should manage to catch and sell a fish, she would make them some soup, come what might.

Outside, night was fast coming on—a bitter cold night; and with his head low upon his breast Étienne trudged along, sad and sick at heart. He no longer felt anger against the man, or pity for the ill-used girl. The brutal scene faded from his mind, drowned in the remembrance of the sufferings of one and all, the abominable wretchedness that each had to endure. He beheld the village without bread, little ones and women foodless that night, famished folks battling for their rights. And the doubts that beset him every now and then arose within him once again, amidst that melancholy twilight, torturing him with a violence he had never felt before. What a terrible responsibility he was incurring! Was he going to urge them still further on? Must he incite them to persist in resistance, now that they no longer had credit or money? And what would be the end if no help came, if hunger should overcome their courage? Suddenly he beheld a vision of disaster—children dying, mothers sobbing, while men, gaunt and worn to skeletons, went back to the pit. He kept tramping on, stumbling against the stones in his way, and the idea that the company might prove the stronger, that he might bring his comrades to dire misfortune, filled him with inexpressible agony.

When he at last raised his head, he perceived that he was close to the Voreux pit. The sombre buildings looked yet more massive in the gathering night. Standing in the deserted enclosure, obstructed by huge motionless, shadowy things, one might have imagined oneself in an abandoned fortress. The moment the hoisting engine stopped, the soul of the place seemed to depart. At that hour of night no sign of life remained; not the glimpse of a lantern, not the

sound of a voice, and even the puffing of the pump was but a distant gasp, coming no one knew whence, amidst the death-like torpor of the whole pit.

Étienne kept looking, and the blood rushed to his heart. If the workmen suffered hunger, the company itself was also eating into its millions. Why should it prove the stronger in this war of labour against capital? At any rate the victory would be dearly bought. They would count the slain afterwards. He again suddenly experienced the fury of battle, a wild craving to put an end to misery even at the cost of life. The village might as well die at once, as linger on in agony, famine, and injustice. His ill-digested reading came back to him, showing him nations who had fired their towns at the approach of the foe; with vague stories of mothers breaking their children's heads on flagstones to save them from slavery; of men slowly starving themselves to death rather than eat the bread of tyrants. All this excited him beyond measure; sanguinary gaiety suddenly sprang from his black despair, chasing away all doubt, and making him feel ashamed of his momentary cowardice. And amidst the revival of his faith, the promptings of pride reappeared also, and raised him aloft with the joy of being the chief, of seeing himself obeyed even to the point of sacrifice. The dream of his power spread out, the evening of triumph came, and he already pictured to himself a scene of simple grandeur, he refusing the power offered to him, and handing over authority to the people when he should be the master.

But he awoke from his dream, startled by the voice of Maheu, who was telling him of the good luck he had met with in catching a magnificent trout, and selling it for three francs. They would have some soup. Étienne then let his mate return to the village by himself, saying that he would follow; and he repaired to Rasseneur's, and after waiting until a customer had gone told Rasseneur plainly that he was going to write to Pluchart to come at once. His mind was made up; he wished to organise a private meeting, for victory seemed certain to him, if the miners of Montsou would enrol themselves in a body in the International.

IV

It was at the Jolly Good Fellow, widow Désir's, that the private meeting was to take place on the Thursday, at two o'clock. The landlady, worked up to a pitch by the hardships inflicted on her children, as she called the miners, was in a perpetual state of choler, especially as custom was departing from her tavern. Never had strike evinced less thirst; even habitual topers remained at home, lest they should be tempted to disobey the watchword given to them to behave quietly. Hence Montsou, teeming with life on fair days, saw its long, silent, mournful high street wrapt in utter desolation. Beer no longer flowed from the taps. At Casimir's and the Progress on the paved highway, the landladies stood in despair on their thresholds, vainly scanning the road; in Montsou itself the whole row of eating-houses and dram shops was deserted from Lenfant's tavern to Tison's; Piquette's and the Severed Head being included on the way. A few mugfuls were still poured out at the Saint-Éloi, frequented by the viewers; but solitude was already settling over the Volcano Music-hall, though the prices there had been lowered on account of the bad times. Briefly, a pall had settled over the whole country, affecting one and all.

'By all that's good and holy!' widow Désir had exclaimed, as she slapped her sides, 'it's the fault of the gendarmes. They may haul me off to prison if they like, but I must play them some trick!'

According to her, all the authorities, all the employers, were 'gendarmes,' this being with her a general term of contempt, in which she included all the enemies of the people. Consequently she hailed Étienne's request with delight; her whole house was at the disposal of the miners; she would lend her ball-room gratuitously and she herself would make out the invitations and despatch them, seeing that the law required that formality. Besides, so much the better if the law did not like it; the law could come and show its face. On the following morning Étienne brought her some fifty letters to sign, which had been penned by such of the men of the village as could write. They were sent to the different delegates and others on whom they could depend. The avowed purpose of the meeting was to discuss the continu-

ance of the strike; but in reality he expected Pluchart, and counted upon a speech from him which would bring about general adherence to the International.

When Thursday morning came and brought no Pluchart with it, Étienne grew uneasy, because the other had telegraphed that he would be with him on Wednesday evening. Was something amiss then? He felt sorry at being unable to have a talk with Pluchart before the meeting took place. As early as nine o'clock he trudged to Montsou, thinking that the engine-wright might have gone there direct, without stopping at the Voreux pit.

'No; I've not seen your friend,' answered widow Désir. 'But everything's ready; come and have a look.'

She took him to the ball-room. Its decorations had remained the same; garlands still dangled from the ceiling with a floral crown of coloured paper in the centre, and gilt cardboard scutcheons still showed the names of saints, male and female, along the walls. But the musicians' stand had been replaced by a table and three chairs in a corner, and a number of wooden benches, ranged obliquely, had been placed in front of them.

'Perfect!' declared Étienne.

'And you know that you're at home here,' observed the widow. 'Shout as much as you like. The gendarmes will have to pass across my body to get into this room.'

In spite of his anxiety he could not help smiling as he looked at her, for she appeared so huge, with a waist that no living man could have encircled. However, Étienne was suddenly surprised to see Rasseneur, followed by Souvarine, walk in; and as the widow left the three together in the large empty ball-room, he exclaimed: 'What! You here already?'

Souvarine, who was doing the night shift at the Voreux pit, for the engine-men were not on strike, had simply come from curiosity. As for Rasseneur, he had for the last two days seemed embarrassed. His large round face had lost its good-natured smile.

'Pluchart has not come yet. I am very uneasy,' added Étienne.

Rasseneur looked away, and muttered between his teeth, 'I'm not surprised; I no longer expect him.'

'How's that?'

Then the tavern-keeper suddenly turned round and stared the other straight in the face, saying defiantly:

'How's that? Because I wrote him a letter also, if you wish to know. And in my letter I begged him not to come. Yes, I think that we ought to manage our own business ourselves without seeking the aid of strangers.'

Étienne, beside himself, trembling with passion, his eyes fixed upon his comrade's, repeated in gasps: 'You did that? You did that?'

'Yes, I did that! And yet you know that I've every confidence in Pluchart. He's of the right sort, sharp and plucky, and one may trust him. But I don't care that much for your ideas, I don't! Politics, government, I snap my fingers at such things! What I want is to see the miner better treated. I worked for twenty years down below with misery and fatigue coming out at every pore, and I've sworn to obtain some relief for the poor beasts of burden that are still there. But I know very well that you won't obtain anything with all your cock-and-bull stories; you'll only aggravate the miner's lot. When hunger compels him to go down again, they'll only treat him worse; the company'll pay him out like a runaway dog brought back to its kennel. And that's what I wish to prevent. Now you know all about it!'

He raised his voice, and thrust his stomach forward, planting himself firmly on his fat legs. And all his patient, sensible nature found vent in words which flowed forth lucid, smooth, and abundant, without an effort. Was it not absurd to imagine that the world could all at once be changed, that the workman would take the master's place, that money would be divided as an apple cut in halves? Thousands and thousands of years would be needed to bring that about perhaps. He would hear of no miracles, for he did not believe in them! The wisest course to take, if they did not want to fall and break their noses, was to march straight on in front of them, claiming such reforms as were possible; in short, gradually improving the condition of the working man at any and every opportunity. He himself would undertake, if he had the management of the matter, to bring the company to better terms; whereas, damn it all! they would end by kicking the bucket if they continued obstinate.

Étienne had let him run on, his own words sticking in his throat from sheer indignation.

'Curse you! have you no blood in your veins?' he thundered at last.

For a moment he looked like knocking Rasseneur down;

and in order not to yield to the temptation he began striding up and down the room, venting his fury upon the benches, amidst which he made himself a passage.

'Have the door shut, at any rate,' remarked Souvarine. 'You need not let everybody hear you.'

And having closed it himself, he quietly sat down on one of the chairs set out for the committee. He had rolled himself a cigarette, and kept watching the two others from the corners of his soft, twinkling eyes with a slight smile playing about his lips.

'It's of no use flying into a passion,' observed Rasseneur, judiciously. 'I at first believed that you had some sound common-sense. You did right enough in telling our comrades to keep quiet, in compelling them to remain indoors, and in using your authority for the maintenance of order. But now you yourself are about to get them into a mess!'

Between each of his mad runs amid the benches Étienne came back to the tavern-keeper, took him by the shoulders, and shook him, hissing his replies in his face.

'But hell and thunder! I mean to be calm. Yes, I preached discipline! yes, I still advise them not to stir! But we're not to be treated like so much dirt! You're lucky to be able to keep cool. But there're moments when I feel myself going crazy.'

This was a confession on his part. He jeered at himself for his novice-like illusions, his religious vision of a city where justice would soon prevail between men united in brotherhood. If one remained waiting with one's arms crossed, one would only see men eating each other like wolves until doomsday. No, no; interference was wanted, or else injustice would eternally prevail; the rich would always be sucking the blood of the poor. No, he could not forgive himself for having once said that politics ought to be kept out of the social question. When he said that he had known nothing; but since then he had read, studied. Now his ideas were ripe, he could pride himself on having a system. Yet, he explained it badly enough, in phrases the confusion of which showed a scrap of each theory that he had successively taken up and discarded. At the summit of everything, however, Karl Marx's theory remained erect—that capital was the result of spoliation, and that it was labour's duty and right to see that this stolen wealth was restored to it. But in practice Étienne had at first been taken with Proudhon's idea

of a mutual credit system, a vast bank of exchange, which would do away with intermediate factors. Then Lassalle's co-operative societies, dowered by the State, and gradually transforming the world into one industrial city, had impassioned him until the difficulty of controlling so vast a scheme had disgusted him with it. Little by little he had arrived at collectivism, and now he demanded that all instruments of labour should be held collectively by one and all. But all this remained very vague; he knew no more than before how to realise this dream, still hampered, as he was, by certain scruples of common-sense and good-feeling, and not daring to enunciate the absolute assertions of sectarians. He had simply come to the point of holding that the first thing to be done was to possess oneself of the government of the country. After that they would see.

'But what has come over you? Why do you want to go over to the *bourgeois*?' he continued violently, once more planting himself before the tavern-keeper. 'You yourself said that it must come to a crash!'

Rasseneur turned somewhat red. 'Yes, I said it. And if things come to a crash you'll find that I'm not a greater coward than the others. But I refuse to march with those who put things in a mess to make themselves a position.'

This time it was Étienne who turned red. The two men had left off shouting. They had become bitter, spiteful, yielding to the influence of their unavowed rivalry. This it was, in reality, which made them exaggerate their views, which filled one with revolutionary fervour and the other with extreme prudence, modifying in spite of themselves their true ideas, and making them fatally assume parts such as one does not voluntarily choose. And Souvarine, who sat listening to them, showed on his fair, girlish face, all the silent contempt he felt, the crushing contempt of a man ready to sacrifice his life obscurely without wishing to be considered a martyr.

'Then I'm to take it that you say all this for me?' asked Étienne. 'You're jealous.'

'Jealous of what?' replied Rasseneur. 'I don't put myself forward as a great man; I don't seek to create a section at Montsou in order to become its secretary.'

The other wished to interrupt him, but he left him no time. 'Be frank! You don't care a straw about the International, but you're burning to be at our head and to play the

gentleman as the correspondent of the famous Federal Council of the North!'

There was a moment's silence. Étienne, quivering with passion, retorted: 'That'll do. I didn't think that I had anything to reproach myself with. I always consulted you, because I knew that you had stood up in the fight here long before me. But as you will suffer nobody to fight by your side, I'll henceforth act alone. And I'll tell you at once that the meeting will take place, even if Pluchart does not come, and that our mates will join the International whether you like it or not.'

'Join the International! join the International!' muttered Rasseneur, 'that remains to be seen. You must first get them to pay their subscriptions!'

'Not a bit. The International gives time to workmen who are on strike. We'll pay later on, and it's from the International that help will come at once.'

This time Rasseneur flew into a rage. 'Well, we'll see about that. As for the meeting, I'll come to it and I'll have my say too. No, I shall not allow you to turn our friends' heads; I'll enlighten them upon their true interests. We'll soon find out from whom they'll take advice; from me, whom they've known for the last thirty years, or from you, who've upset everything amongst us in less than a twelvemonth. No! no! leave me alone! Since you wish it, we'll see who'll crush the other!'

Thereupon he went out, banging the door behind him. The floral garlands fluttered against the ceiling, the gilt scrolls swung against the walls; then deep silence once more fell upon the large room.

Souvarine was still smoking quietly, seated at the table. Étienne, after marching up and down for a while, without speaking, at length poured forth his feelings. Was it his fault if the men had thrown that fat, lazy old beggar over in favour of himself? He disclaimed all attempts at having sought popularity; he could not even account for the way it had all come to him: the friendship of the village, the confidence of his fellow-workmen, the power he wielded over them at that moment. He was indignant that he should be suspected of wishing to get them into trouble to serve his own ambition; he struck his breast and protested that his feelings were all brotherliness.

Suddenly he stopped in front of Souvarine and exclaimed,

'Look here, if I thought that I might be the cause of a friend losing one single drop of blood, I'd be off to America at once!'

The engine man shrugged his shoulders and a smile again played about his lips. 'Blood, blood,' he repeated softly; 'and what if it were spilt? The earth has need of it.'

Étienne had grown calmer by this time; he took a chair and seated himself at the other side of the table. That man's fair face, with its dreamy eyes wildly flashing every now and then with bloodthirsty brilliancy, made him uneasy, and exercised strange influence over his will.

'Tell me what you would do if you were in my place?' he said at last. 'Am I not right in wishing to act? Is not the best thing to join that association?'

Souvarine, after slowly blowing away a whiff of smoke, answered with his favourite formula:

'Oh! so much rubbish! but meanwhile it's better than nothing. Besides, their International will soon be stirring. He is taking a hand in it.'

'Who's he?'

'He!'

He had uttered the word in a low tone and with a kind of religious fervour, glancing the while towards the east. It was of the Master he spoke, of Bakounine the destroyer.

'He alone can give the death-blow,' he continued; 'all your theorists are so many cowards, with their progress and evolution. Before three years are over, the International, under his orders, will crush the old world.'

Etienne had become very attentive. He was eager to educate himself, to understand that religion of destruction on which the Russian but rarely descanted, and then only in vague terms, as if he were anxious not to divulge its mysteries to any one.

'I wish you would explain matters to me,' he said. 'What is your object?'

'To destroy everything. No more nations, no more governments, no more property, no God, no religion.'

'That much I understand. But to what will all this lead?'

'To a new primitive community, a new world, the recommencement of everything.'

'And by what means do you expect to carry this out?'

'By fire, by poison, by the knife. The brigand is the only

hero, the popular avenger, the real revolutionary, who acts without any phrases taken from books. We must have a terrible series of deathblows to frighten the powerful and to awaken the people.'

While speaking, Souvarine had become terrific to look at. A kind of ecstasy made him half rise from his chair, mystic fire burned in his pale eyes, and his delicate hands grasped the edge of the table as if he would have crushed it to atoms. Étienne, terror-stricken, stared at him, and called to mind the stories that had been vaguely told him, of mines dug beneath the Czar's palaces, of police agents struck down by the knife as if they had been so many boars, of Souvarine's mistress, the only woman he had ever loved, hanged at Moscow, one rainy morning, while he, in the crowd, wafted her a last kiss with his eyes.

'No! no!' gasped Étienne, with a sweeping motion of his arms to drive back these abominable visions; 'we haven't got to that here as yet. Assassination, arson—never! It's monstrous, unjust; all our miners would rise as one man to strangle the villain who attempted it!'

Besides, he did not understand, however much he tried. The instincts of his race refused to entertain that sombre dream of the extermination of mankind, mown level with the earth like a field of rye. Besides, what could be done afterwards? How would the world be repeopled? He insisted on an answer.

'Tell me your programme; we others wish to know whither we are going.'

Then Souvarine answered peacefully, with his vacant and dreamy look: 'All arguments about the future are criminal, because they prevent destruction pure and simple, and hamper the progress of the revolution.'

This explanation made Étienne laugh, though his flesh crept. He confessed, however, that there was something in these ideas, the frightful simplicity of which attracted him. But it would be playing too much into Rasseneur's hand if such things were told to the men. They must, above all things, be practical.

Widow Désir proposed that they should have some lunch. They accepted and passed into the bar-room, which was separated from the dancing-hall during the week by a movable partition. When they had finished their omelette and

cheese, the engine-man prepared to leave ; and, as the other sought to detain him :

'What's the use,' said he, 'to hear you all talk a lot of useless nonsense ? I've had enough of it already ; good-bye ! ' And he went off in his gentle and obstinate way, a cigarette between his lips.

Étienne's anxiety had now increased. It was one o'clock ; Pluchart had evidently broken faith with him. Towards half-past one the delegates began to make their appearance, and he had to receive them himself, for he wished to keep a check on every one going in, lest the company should send its habitual spies. He examined each letter of invitation, and took stock of those who presented themselves. Many got in, however, without any such letter ; if Étienne knew them that sufficed, and he gave them admittance. As it struck two, he saw Rasseneur arrive, and leisurely finish his pipe before the counter. This contemptuous composure made him still more fidgety, especially as some wags, such as Zacharie, Mouquet, and others, had come simply in order to have a lark. They did not care a straw about the strike, they thought it fun to be idle ; and while seated at a table, drinking their last coppers away, they chaffed their mates—the serious ones—who were going to get their monkeys up for nothing at all.

Another quarter of an hour went by. The men were growing impatient. Thereupon Étienne, in despair, made a resolute gesture, and was just about to enter the hall when widow Désir, who was on the look-out at the door, shouted :

'Here he comes, your gentleman ! '

It was indeed Pluchart, arriving in a fly drawn by a broken-winded horse. He at once jumped down upon the pavement, looking slim and conceited, with a square head too big for his body. His black frock-coat gave him the appearance of a workman in his Sunday best. For the last five years he had not touched a tool, and he took great pains with himself—with his hair especially. He had become very proud of his success as a public speaker ; but his limbs, nevertheless, remained stiff and loutish, and the nails of his big hands, worn to the quick by labour, refused to grow. Very active, he ministered to his ambition by incessantly beating the country in order to diffuse his ideas.

'Don't scold me ! ' he said, anticipating all questions and reproaches. 'Yesterday I had a conference at Preuilly in the

morning, and a meeting at Valençay in the evening. To-day a lunch with Sauvagnat at Marchiennes. At last I was lucky enough to get a fly; but I'm knocked up, you can tell it by my voice. It doesn't matter though, I'll speak all the same.'

He was just entering the Jolly Good Fellow when he bethought himself of something. 'Hold hard! I'm forgetting the tickets. We should be in a nice pickle without them.'

Then he ran back to the fly, which was already being put up, and took from it a small black wooden box, which he carried off under his arm.

Étienne, beaming with joy, followed him like his shadow, while Rasseneur, quite dismayed, dared not even hold out his hand. But Pluchart was already grasping it, only hastily alluding to the tavern-keeper's letter. What a strange notion that had been of his! Why not hold the meeting? They ought always to hold a meeting when they could. Widow Désir offered the great man some refreshment, but he declined it. He felt much obliged, but he could speak without drinking. Besides, he was in a great hurry; he meant to get on to Joiselle that night in order to arrange some matters with Legoujeux. Thereupon they all entered the ball-room together, Maheu and Levaque, who were late, bringing up the rear. The door was locked behind them so that they might be the safer against intrusion, a proceeding which provoked still greater chaff from the wags.

About a hundred miners were distributed over the benches in the stuffy ball-room, where the tepid exhalations of the last dancing bout still ascended from the floor. There were loud whisperings, inquisitive glances, while the newcomers took their seats. All eyes were fixed on the gentleman from Lille, whose black frock-coat caused a feeling of surprise and discomfort.

Almost immediately however, on a motion from Étienne, a committee was chosen. He called out the names, and the others approved by a show of hands. Pluchart was elected chairman, Étienne and Maheu assessors. There was a shuffling of chairs, while the committee installed itself. For a moment the chairman disappeared, but he had only stooped down to put his black box on the floor underneath the table. When he again showed himself he lightly tapped the table with his hand to claim attention; then he began, in a husky voice—'Citizens—'

A small side door opened, and he was obliged to stop.

It was widow Désir who had come round by way of the kitchen bringing half a dozen mugs of beer on a tray.

'Don't disturb yourselves,' she said; 'but when people talk they get thirsty.'

Maheu took the tray from her hands and Pluchart was able to proceed. He thanked the miners of Montsou for their cordial reception; he apologised for being late, and spoke of his fatigue and his sore throat; after which he called upon Citizen Rasseneur, who had claimed a hearing.

The latter had already taken his stand beside the table close to the mugs of beer. A chair with the seat turned towards him served as a rostrum. He seemed greatly affected, and coughed before beginning in a loud voice; 'Comrades—'

His great influence with the miners was due to the facility of his speech, the unaffected way in which he could address them for hours without getting tired. He indulged in no gestures, but kept lumbering on and smiling, overwhelming, submerging them beneath an avalanche of words until they all cried, 'Yes, yes; that's true, you're right.' But on this occasion, from his very first sentence, he divined the presence of covert opposition. Hence he proceeded very prudently. He only discussed the continuation of the strike, waiting for some applause before venturing to make any attack upon the International. No doubt their own honour forbade them to submit to the terms of the company; but he wished to point out to them the misery, the terrible future which prolonged resistance would entail! And without counselling submission in so many words, he tried to weaken their courage by showing them the villagers dying of starvation and he asked on what resources the partisans of resistance relied. Three or four of his friends tried to express approval of what he said, but the attempt only increased the freezing silence of the majority, who were becoming more and more irritated. Finding it impossible to win them to his views, he got angry. and predicted all kinds of misfortunes if they allowed themselves to have their heads turned by provocations coming from abroad. Two thirds of his listeners then started from their seats in angry excitement and wished to stop him from speaking further, since he insulted them by treating them like children who did not know how to behave. But Rasseneur, lapping his beer at short intervals, kept on speaking amidst the tumult, shouting violently that the fellow was not yet born who would prevent him from doing his duty!

Pluchart had risen from his chair, and having no bell wherewith to quell the noise, he beat the table with his fist, repeating in his husky voice: 'Citizens! citizens!'

He succeeded in obtaining some degree of silence, and on the question being put to the vote, Rasseneur was refused leave to proceed. The delegates who had represented the pits at the interview with the managing director incited the others, all feeling desperate with hunger and worked up to a pitch by all the new ideas which were current. The vote had virtually been arranged beforehand.

'You don't care a rap; you've got plenty of grub!' yelled Levaque, shaking his fist at Rasseneur; while Étienne, leaning forward from behind the chairman, sought to appease Maheu, who, very red in the face, was beside himself with that hypocritical speech, as he called it.

'Citizens,' said Pluchart, 'allow me to say a few words.'

Deep silence fell upon the room while he spoke. His words came with difficulty, he was very hoarse; but he had got used to this, being always on the move, and considering his sore throat part of his programme. Little by little, too, his voice became fuller and he drew from it some pathetic effects. With his arms outstretched and punctuating his periods with a rhythmic movement of the shoulders, he displayed an eloquence akin to that of a Sunday-school teacher, a kind of sermonising way of letting his voice sink at the end of each sentence, the monotonous burr of which ended by inspiring conviction.

And he delivered himself of a speech on the grandeur and the benevolent mission of the International, a speech with which he always began in every locality where he appeared for the first time. He explained the aims of the association—the emancipation of the working classes, and he dilated on the grandeur of its structure: at the base the parish; higher up the province; higher up still the nation; at the very summit humanity itself. His arms kept moving slowly, piling up successive stories; building, as it were, the immense cathedral of the future world. Then came the inner organisation; he read out the statutes, spoke of the congresses, indicated the growing importance of the work, the constant expansion of its programme, which after starting with a simple discussion of wages, had already begun to deal with the liquidation of the social fabric in order to wind up with the suppression of the wage system altogether. There were to

be no more nationalities, the working men of the whole world were to unite in one common demand for justice, to sweep away the corrupt *bourgeoisie* and at last found the great community of freedom, in which he that would not sow should not be allowed to reap! By this time Pluchart's voice had become a roar, and his very breath seemed to flutter the floral garlands dangling from the smoky ceiling, the lowness of which sent his bursts of eloquence flying through the room.

A kind of ground swell stirred the heads of his listeners. Some of the pitmen shouted, 'That's it! We'll join!'

Pluchart went on, however. All this meant the conquest of the whole world before three years were over. And he enumerated the communities already won over to the cause. Adhesions were pouring in from all sides. Never had any nascent religion made so many converts. And, when once they became the masters, they would lay down the law to the employers, who in their turn would find themselves seized by the throat.

'Yes! yes! it's they who'll have to go down then!'

With a gesture Pluchart claimed silence once more. He had now come to the question of strikes. In principle he disapproved them; they did not operate quickly enough, and they aggravated the workman's misery. But, pending something better, whenever they became inevitable, the workman must resolve on them, for they at least struck a blow at capital. And in such cases he showed the International as a very providence towards the men on strike. He quoted examples. In Paris during the strike of the bronze workers, the masters had yielded everything at the mere news that the International was going to send help; in England the International, too, had saved some pitmen on strike by sending home at its own expense a number of Belgians whom the owner of a mine had brought over. It was sufficient to belong to the Association; the companies trembled at the idea; the men themselves entered the great army of workers, resolved to die one for another, rather than remain the bondmen of capitalist society.

Vehement applause interrupted him. He mopped his face with his handkerchief while refusing a mug of beer which Maheu held out to him. When he wanted to go on renewed applause drowned his words.

'That'll do!' he said quickly to Étienne. 'They've had enough. Quick! the tickets!' Then he dived under the table and reappeared with the small black wooden box.

'Citizens!' he shouted, trying to make himself heard above the uproar; 'here are the members' tickets. If your delegates will come up to the table I will hand them to them and they can distribute them. They can be settled for later on.'

Rasseneur sprang forward to protest once more. Étienne bestirred himself, having his own speech to pronounce. The utmost confusion prevailed. Levaque was sparring in the air. Maheu had risen from his seat, and was saying something, though nobody paid any attention to it. And amidst this increase of tumult, the dust rose from the floor, all the dust remaining from the balls, which poisoned the atmosphere with its strong odour. Suddenly, however, the little side door opened once more, and widow Désir appeared, filling the doorway with her bulky figure, and shouting in a thundering voice, 'Hold your tongues, can't you? Here are the gendarmes!'

It was the police commissary of the district who had arrived, somewhat late, to draw up a report and dissolve the meeting. He was accompanied by four gendarmes. For at least five minutes widow Désir had detained them at the door by telling them that she was in her own home, and assuredly had the right to invite as many friends as she liked. But the men of the law had pushed her aside, and so she had now rushed in to tell her lads.

'You must get out this way,' she continued. 'There's a dirty brute of a gendarme in the yard. It doesn't matter, my woodshed opens on a little lane. Look sharp! look sharp!'

The commissary was already pommelling the door; and finding that they would not unlock it, he threatened to break it open. Some spy must have informed him, for he shouted that the meeting was illegal, since a great many miners were there without letters of invitation. In the room itself the confusion increased. They could not run away like that; they had not voted either for adhesion to the International, or for the continuation of the strike. They all wanted to speak at once. The chairman then bethought himself of a vote by acclamation. Arms were lifted in the air and delegates hurriedly declared that they adhered for their absent mates. And that was how the ten thousand miners of Montsou became members of the International.

The stampede was already beginning. In order to cover the retreat, widow Désir had flung herself against the door, which was already being battered in by the butt-ends of the

gendarmes' muskets. The pitmen jumped over the benches and escaped one by one through the kitchen and woodshed. Rasseneur was one of the first to disappear, followed by Levaque, who seemingly forgot the insults he had uttered and was anxious for the offer of a drink to pull him together again. Étienne, after securing the little black box, waited with Pluchart and Maheu, who felt in honour bound to be the last to leave. Just as they were going, the lock of the door gave way, and the commissary found himself confronted by the widow, whose huge figure formed by itself a further barricade.

'Much good may it do you to break everything in my house!' said she. 'You see very well that there isn't a soul here!'

The commissary, a slow coach, with a dislike for the dramatic, simply threatened to march her off to prison. And he went away to draw up his report, taking his four gendarmes with him, amidst the jeers of Zacharie and Mouquet, who, full of admiration for the joke played by their mates, were emboldened to chaff the armed force.

Outside, in the little lane, Étienne, encumbered by the wooden box, bolted along followed by the others. The thought of Pierron suddenly struck him, and he asked why the other had not been seen there. Maheu, without slackening his pace, answered that Pierron was ill: a convenient illness which was due to the fear of being compromised. They asked Pluchart to stop awhile, but the latter declared that he was bound to get to Joiselle as soon as possible, as Legoujeux was there waiting for orders. At this they shouted good-bye to him, never slackening their flight through Montsou for a moment, Words flew about cut in twain by their panting breath. And Étienne and Maheu laughed confidently, feeling certain of their triumph. When the International should have sent help, it would be the company's turn to implore them to go down. And amidst that flash of hope, and that mad scamper of heavy boots resounding on the paved road, there was something else besides, something sombre and fierce, a violence whose fever the winds would assuredly scatter through the villages to the four corners of the countryside.

V

ANOTHER fortnight elapsed, and the first days of January came with cold misty weather which benumbed the far-spreading plain. The wretchedness had grown more intense, the villages were at their last gasp amidst increasing famine. Four thousand francs, sent from London by the International, had scarcely afforded three days' bread. After that nothing had come. The ardent hope thus brought to naught struck down the men's courage. On whom could they now rely since even their brothers abandoned them? They felt themselves lost amidst that terrible winter, cut off from the rest of the world.

On the Tuesday all resources were exhausted in the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty. In vain had Étienne bestirred himself in common with the other delegates; new subscriptions had been opened in the neighbouring towns and even in Paris; collections were made, lectures given, but public opinion, which at first had shown itself interested, had grown indifferent since the strike dragged on amidst calm monotony without any dramatic episodes. The scanty alms barely sufficed to keep the poorest families from starving to death. The others managed to live by pledging their clothes, and selling their household gods piecemeal. Everything went to the brokers' shops—kitchen utensils, furniture, even the wool out of the mattresses. For a moment they thought themselves saved; the small dealers at Montsou, whose business had been almost killed by Maigrat's formidable competition, had offered credit in order to get back custom, and during a week, Verdonck, the grocer, Carouble and Smelten, the two bakers, kept, as it were, open shop. But they could continue no longer; their means did not allow it. The lawyers rejoiced, for all this resulted in a crushing weight of debt, beneath which the miners would groan for a long while to come. This time it was all over; there was no more credit anywhere, not as much as a battered saucepan to dispose of, so they might lie down in a corner and die like curs.

Étienne would have sold his flesh and blood. He had relinquished his salary as secretary, and had even gone to

Marchiennes and pawned his cloth coat and trousers, feeling only too happy to be able to keep the Maheus' pot a-boiling. He had however kept his boots, in order to be steady on his pins, as he put it. His great grief was that the strike had broken out too soon, before the resources of the provident fund had been sufficiently developed. This, according to him, was the sole cause of the disaster, for the men would assuredly triumph over their masters on the day when their accumulated savings would provide them with the means of resistance. And he recalled the remarks of Souvarine, accusing the company of provoking the strike in order to destroy the nascent fund. The sight of the village—of the poor sufferers without food and without fuel—was too much for him. He preferred to go out and tire himself with long walks. One evening, as he was coming back and passing close to the Réquillart pit, he perceived an old woman lying motionless by the side of the road. She was, no doubt, dying from want; and after lifting her into a sitting posture, he shouted to a girl whom he noticed standing at the other side of the wooden palings.

'Oh, it's you,' he said, recognising La Mouquette. 'Just lend me a hand; we must get her something to drink.'

The girl, with the tears welling into her eyes, quickly went indoors, into the shaky tenement in which her father had settled among the ruins. She came out almost immediately with some gin and a loaf. The liquor revived the woman, who, without saying a word, bit into the bread voraciously. She was the mother of a miner living at a village near Cougny, and she had dropped down on her way back from Joiselle, whither she had vainly gone to borrow a ten-sou piece from her sister. When she had finished eating she went off, her head swimming still.

Etienne had remained standing in the waste ground of the Réquillart pit, whose tumble-down sheds almost disappeared beneath the growth of brambles.

'Well! won't you come in and have a drop yourself!' said La Mouquette gaily. And, seeing that he hesitated, she added, 'So you're still afraid of me?'

He then followed her into the place, won over by her laughter. The generous way, too, in which she had given that poor creature bread quite moved him. When they were inside she at once poured out two small glasses of gin. The room was very tidy and clean, and he complimented her upon

it. The family seemed to want for nothing. The father continued his stable work at the Voreux pit; and she herself, in order not to remain idle, had taken a place as laundress, which brought her in thirty sous a day. After all, though a girl may joke with men, she is not necessarily lazy. And whatever her faults, Étienne could but admit that La Mouquette had a good heart.

When he got back to the village, he found some important news awaiting him. It was rumoured that the company might be disposed to some concessions, if the delegates would attempt a second interview with the managing director. At any rate, the viewers had hinted that much. The fact was that, in the struggle which had been entered upon, the mine suffered still more than the miners. On both sides the obstinacy caused damage; while labour died of starvation, capital was destroyed. Every day's idleness cost hundreds of thousands of francs. Every machine that stopped was a machine that died. The plant and rolling stock were spoiling, the tied-up capital disappeared like water soaked up by a sandy marsh. Since the stock of coal had been growing smaller and smaller, customers had talked of sending orders to Belgium; and in this lay a threat for the future, as it were. But what frightened the company above all, what it carefully strove to conceal, was the increasing damage to the galleries and cuttings. The viewers no longer sufficed for the repairs, the propping was giving way in many parts, every hour produced a slip. In a short time the disasters had become so great as to necessitate long months of repairs before fresh output could be thought of. All kinds of stories were already rife in the district. At the Crèvecœur pit, it was said that three hundred yards of traction-road had given way in one lump, barring access to the Five Balls seam. At the Madeleine pit, the Maugrétout seam was crumbling away and filling with water. The company pretended that there was not a particle of truth in all this, until two accidents, coming one immediately after the other, compelled it to admit the facts. One morning, close to La Piolaine, in the ground above the northern gallery of the Mirou pit, there appeared a yawning chasm, due to a slip the night before in the pit itself. And on the following morning, part of the Voreux pit gave way with such a shaking that two houses standing above it almost entirely disappeared.

Étienne and the delegates felt reluctant to risk a second

interview without knowing the intentions of the board of management. Dansaert, whom they interrogated, refused to let himself be drawn out. Certainly, the board was very sorry for the misunderstanding, and everything would be done to bring about a readjustment, but more than that he would not say. At last, they made up their minds to wait upon Monsieur Hennebeau in order that they might not have aught to reproach themselves with, for they did not wish it to be said later on that they had refused the company an opportunity of admitting its errors. But they swore to themselves that they would give way in nothing, but maintain their claims, which were the only just ones.

The interview took place on the Tuesday morning, on the very day when the village was sinking into such deep, black misery. It was less cordial than the first one. Maheu was again spokesman, and explained that his fellow-workmen had deputed him to ask whether the gentlemen of the management had nothing new to say to them. At first Monsieur Hennebeau affected surprise, and replied that no instructions had reached him, and that things could not change while the miners persisted in their detestable revolt. His stern, domineering manner produced so unfavourable an effect that even if the delegates had come with the most conciliatory intentions, this reception would have been sufficient to harden them. However, the managing director thawed somewhat, and suggested mutual concessions. For instance, the miners should accept separate payment for the propping, while the company would increase that payment by the two centimes it was accused of wishing to put in its pocket. He added that he was taking this upon himself, for nothing had been settled; but he flattered himself upon being able to obtain this concession. The delegates refused it, however, and reiterated their claims—the maintenance of the old system, with an increase of five centimes per truckload. Thereupon he confessed that he was empowered to treat with them there and then, and urged them to accept his previous proposal for the sake of their wives and children, who were dying of starvation. But the miners, looking to the ground, stubbornly said no, and again no, with a sullen shake of the head. The interview ended roughly; Monsieur Hennebeau slammed the doors while Étienne, Maheu, and the others, making the pavement ring with the noise of their heavy heels, trooped off, full of the speechless rage of vanquished men driven to extremities.

Towards two o'clock the women of the village, in their turn, tried a last effort with Maigrat. They had only one hope left—to soften that man's heart and extract another week's credit from him. The idea came from La Maheude, who too often took people's kind-heartedness for granted. She prevailed upon the Scorched One and La Levaque to accompany her, but failed with La Pierronne, who excused herself on the pretext of being unable to leave her husband, whose illness conveniently dragged on. Others joined the three, who soon increased to a score. When the *bourgeois* of Montsou saw them coming, taking up the whole width of the road, looking very woe-begone and desperate, they began to feel uneasy. They locked their doors, and one matron even hid her plate. It was the first time they were met in this fashion, and nothing as a rule was of worse augury, for when women began to beat the highroads things usually ended badly.

There was a most violent scene at Maigrat's. At first he admitted them, jeering and pretending to believe that they had come to pay their debts. That was very nice of them, said he, to have arranged among themselves to bring the money in a lump. But as soon as La Maheude spoke up he made a pretence of flying into a great passion. Had they come to make a fool of him? More credit still! Did they want to ruin him? No, not another potato, not even a crumb of bread. And he referred them to Verdonck, the grocer, and to Carouble and to Smelten, the bakers, seeing that they now dealt with them. The women listened in a frightened, humble way, apologising and scanning his face for the least glimmer of pity. Then he began to chaff them, offering the whole of his shop to the Scorched One, if she would have him for her sweetheart. The joke seemed so monstrous that they laughed in spite of themselves. But he soon became extremely coarse and insulting, and finished by pushing them towards the door. As they still insisted and entreated he put one out by the shoulders. The others on the pavement then shouted that he had sold himself to the company, while La Maheude, uplifting both arms, in a burst of revengeful indignation, called upon death, yelling that such a creature did not deserve to eat food.

The return tramp to the village was mournful indeed. When the women entered their homes empty-handed the men looked at them and bowed their heads. It was all over, the

day would end without a mouthful of soup; and the next would drag along in icy gloom, unrelieved by a ray of hope. It had been their own seeking; not one spoke of yielding. This excessive misery made them more obstinate still; they became mute, like animals tracked by the hunter, resolved to die in their lairs rather than come out of them. Who would have dared to be the first to hint at submission? They had sworn to stick together, and stick together they would, as they did down below when one of them lay dying under a mass of fallen rock. It was no more than their duty. The pit had been a good training school wherein to learn resignation. They could easily pinch themselves for a week, seeing that they had swallowed fire and water ever since the age of twelve. Their self-devotion became heightened as by a soldier's pride, the pride of men who gloried in their calling, and who, in their daily struggle against death, were lavish with sacrifice.

At the Maheus' the evening was an awful one. They all kept silent, crouching in front of the dying fire, where smouldered the last lump of shale. After emptying the mattresses of their wool, handful by handful, they had been obliged two days previously to part with their cuckoo clock for three francs, and deathlike silence seemed to have fallen upon the bare room now that the familiar ticking no longer sounded. The only thing remaining on the sideboard was the pink cardboard box, a former present of Maheu's, which his wife valued like a piece of jewellery. The two good chairs were gone; old Jollycorpse and the little ones had to squeeze together on a worm-eaten bench which had been brought in from the garden. And the livid dusk, gathering fast, seemed to intensify the cold.

'What can we do?' repeated La Maheude, huddled up at one corner of the hearth.

Étienne, standing up, was looking at the portraits of the Emperor and Empress stuck against the wall. He would have torn them down long ago but for the family, who defended them from a love of ornament. And he muttered between his teeth: 'And to think that those brutes, who look on while we're starving, wouldn't give us twopence to save our lives.'

'Suppose I took the box?' the woman, looking very pale, suggested, after much hesitation.

But Maheu, seated on the edge of the table with his legs

dangling and his head bent low, suddenly looked up. 'No, I won't have it!'

La Maheude painfully rose and made the round of the room. Was it possible that people could be brought to such a pass as this? Nothing in the cupboard—not a crumb; not a rag to sell, not even an idea how to get a loaf! And the fire, too, was going out! She flew into a passion with Alzire, who, having been sent that morning to pick up some slag about the pit mouth, had come back empty-handed, saying that the company had given orders to stop them. Why had she cared about the company? They wronged no one by picking up a few bits of waste coal! However, the little girl, in despair, told her mother that a man had threatened to thrash her; then she ended by promising to go back on the morrow, come what might.

'And that young monkey, Jeanlin?' shouted the mother. 'Where can he have got to again, I should like to know? He was to have brought back some salad; we could have browsed like the cattle in the fields, anyhow! But you'll see that he won't come home. Last night already he slept out. I don't know what he's about, but he always looks as if he had his own stomach full.'

'Perhaps he picks up coppers on the road,' said Étienne.

This time, quite beside herself, La Maheude brandished both fists: 'If I thought that! My children beg! I'd sooner kill them and kill myself afterwards.'

Maheu had reverted to his crestfallen attitude on the edge of the table. Lénore and Henri, surprised at getting nothing to eat, began to whimper; while old Jollycorpse kept silently and philosophically rolling his tongue in his mouth to cheat his hunger. No one spoke another word; they were benumbed by this aggravation of their misery. The grandfather coughed and spat black, seized once more with rheumatism that was turning to dropsy; the father was becoming asthmatic and his knees were getting dropsical also; the mother and the little ones were suffering from hereditary scrofula and poverty of blood. No doubt all this was owing to their calling, and they did not complain of it, save when want of food threatened to kill them outright. Indeed, folk were already dropping off like flies in the village. Yet something must be done to get some supper. But what could they do, good Lord? Where could they go?

Then in the gathering dusk, whose gloomy sadness was

gradually enveloping the room, Étienne, who had been debating with himself for a few moments, made up his mind in almost heart-broken fashion: 'Wait for me,' he said; 'I'm going somewhere to see what can be done.'

And he went out. The thought of La Mouquette had come to him. She was sure to have a loaf, and would give it willingly. It annoyed him to be obliged to ask her, but he could not leave his friends in trouble.

'I'll go and see also,' said La Maheude in her turn. 'It's too stupid to keep sitting here.'

She opened the door behind the young man and slammed it violently after her, leaving the others mute and motionless amidst the flicker of a bit of tallow candle, which Alzire had just lighted. Once outside she stopped for a moment to reflect. Then she went in to Levaque's.

'I say, I lent you a loaf the other day. If you could give it me back'——

But she stopped short, for the sight that met her eyes was by no means encouraging. The place seemed even more wretched than her own. La Levaque sat fixedly staring at some dying embers, while Levaque, who had been drinking on an empty stomach with some nailers, slept with his head upon the table. Bouteloup, leaning back, was mechanically rubbing his shoulders against the wall, with the perplexity of a good-natured numskull whose savings have been eaten up by others, and who cannot quite make out why he should have to pinch himself.

'A loaf? Ah! my dear!' replied La Levaque. 'Why, I was just thinking of borrowing another from you!' Then, as her husband began groaning in his sleep, she furiously pressed his face to the table.

'Hold your tongue, you pig! It serves you right if you feel ill! Instead of getting those chaps to stand you drink, you would have done better to have borrowed a franc from a friend.'

She went on cursing and swearing amidst all the dirt of her home, which was so utterly neglected by this time that a sickening smell rose from the tiled floor. But the place might go to the dogs for all she cared! Her lad, that scamp of a Bébert, had also disappeared since the morning, and she bellowed that it would be a jolly good riddance if he were never to come back again. After which she declared that she was going to bed. At any rate she'd be warm there.

When La Maheude found herself outside once more she resolutely cut across the gardens towards the Pierrons' house. When she got to the door she heard laughter inside. She knocked, and everything became silent immediately. More than a minute elapsed before the door was opened.

'Oh! it's you!' said La Pierronne, affecting great surprise. 'I thought it was the doctor.' Then, without leaving the other time to speak, she went on, pointing to Pierron, seated before a blazing coal fire: 'He doesn't get on, he doesn't get on a bit. Yes, he looks right enough, but it's inside that he's bad. And he has to be kept warm, and we're burning away all we've got.'

Pierron, indeed, looked jolly enough, with his bright face, and his plump, well-fed body. It was in vain that he breathed hard to sham the invalid. Besides, on coming in, La Maheude had sniffed the savoury smell of stewed rabbit, and she made sure that the dish had only just been taken away. Some bread-crumbs were lying about the table; and, right in the centre of it, her eyes lighted upon a bottle of wine, forgotten in the hurry.

'Mother's gone to Montsou to try to get a loaf,' La Pierronne went on. 'We've been waiting for her ever so long.'

But her voice stuck in her throat; for she had noticed her neighbour's glance, and her own had also fallen upon the bottle. Suddenly recovering herself, she related how she had come by it. The folks of La Piolaine had given it to her for her old man, for whom the doctor had ordered a glass of Bordeaux claret now and then. And she became profuse in her expressions of gratitude. They were very good indeed, were the people at La Piolaine! the young lady especially. She was not in the least proud, and came to their homes, distributing alms herself.

'I know,' said La Maheude; 'I know them.'

Her heart almost leapt to her mouth at the thought that these comforts invariably went to the least poor of them. That kind of thing never failed; the folks at La Piolaine would have carried water to the river. How was it that she had not noticed them in the village? She might have got something out of them herself.

'I came,' she at last said timidly, 'to know whether you are better off than we are. Can you let me have a little vermicelli? I'll make it up in some other way.'

La Pierronne shook her head violently, as if in despair. 'I haven't got a scrap, not as much as a grain of semolina. If mother is so long coming back, it's because she hasn't succeeded. We'll have to go to bed without our supper.'

At that moment a sound as of some one crying came from the cellar, and she rapped on the door with her fist. It was that gad-about Lydie, whom she had locked up to punish her for not coming home till five o'clock, after gadding about, Heaven knew where, the whole day. It was impossible to manage the girl any longer; she was continually disappearing.

However, La Maheude did not go, though La Pierronne had not even asked her to sit down. The roaring coal fire gave her a feeling of comfort, while the idea that there was something to eat hidden away, gnawed at her stomach. The Pierrons had evidently sent the old woman away, and shut the little girl up, in order to devour their rabbit by themselves. However, it was of no use staying there, so all at once she said: 'Good night.'

Outside, darkness had now set in, and the moon, peering now and then from behind the clouds, cast an equivocal light upon the earth. Instead of cutting her way across the gardens again, La Maheude went round despairingly, lacking the heart to go indoors. But along the lifeless frontages every door reeked of famine, and seemed to hide a void. What was the good of knocking? it was 'Starvation and Co.' everywhere. During those long weeks of privation even the fumes of fried onion had departed, that pungent smell which formerly had betrayed the village a mile off in the country. At present there was naught but a musty smell as of empty cellars, the dankness of holes where nothing can live. Snatches of low sobs and muttered curses died away one by one; and, amidst the deep silence, gradually growing more and more oppressive, one could distinguish as it were, the approach of hunger's slumber, the heavy thud of empty bodies falling across their beds, and yielding to the nightmares bred by starvation.

As La Maheude was passing in front of the church she noticed a shadow scudding along. A renewed ray of hope made her hurry also, for she had recognised the priest of Montsou, Abbé Joire, who came to say mass on Sundays in the village chapel. No doubt he had just left the vestry, whither he had gone on some matter of business. Slightly stooping, he was gliding along in his gentle, unctuous way,

like one who wished to be at peace with the whole world. If he had taken this journey at night, it was in order that he might not compromise himself by his presence among the miners. Besides, it was rumoured that he had obtained promotion to a wealthier parish. He had already been seen strolling about with his successor, a lank, lean-looking priest, whose eyes glowed like red-hot coals.

'Sir, sir!' stammered La Maheude.

But he did not slacken his pace. 'Good-night, good-night, my good woman,' he said as he ran off.

She found herself just in front of her door. Her legs refused to carry her any further, and she went in.

No one had stirred during her absence. Maheu was still seated on the edge of the table, almost unconscious of what went on. Old Jollycorpse and the little ones had crept closer together on the bench to get a little more warmth. And they had not exchanged a word. But the candle had by now burnt so low that before long they would be altogether in the dark. At the sound of the door opening the children turned their heads, but on seeing their mother come back empty-handed, they turned their eyes towards the floor again, stifling their sobs, lest they should be scolded for crying. La Maheude resumed her seat by the dying fire. They did not question her—the silence remained unbroken. They all had understood the truth, and thought it useless to tire themselves still further by talking. They were simply waiting in a state of semi-prostration for the last chance of Étienne bringing something. But they almost gave up counting upon any succour as the minutes went by.

When Étienne came back he had with him a dozen cold potatoes wrapt up in a dishcloth. 'That's all I've been able to find,' said he.

At La Mouquette's bread was also lacking, and it was the girl's dinner which she had perforce put into the dishcloth, giving him a smacking good kiss into the bargain.

'No, thanks,' he said to La Maheude, who offered him his share. 'I've had something yonder.'

It was a falsehood, and he looked gloomily at the poor little ones, who threw themselves ravenously upon the food. The mother and father also restrained themselves, so as to leave more for the children, but the old man would have swallowed everything. They had to take a potato away from him to give it to Alzire.

Then Étienne told them that he also had some news. The company, irritated by the obstinacy of the men on strike, was going to annul the engagements of the leaders. It was bent upon war, decidedly. But a still more important rumour circulated. The company boasted of having induced a great many miners to resume work. Next morning the Victory and the Feutry-Cantel pits would have almost their full complement of men, it was said; even the Mirou and the Madeleine pits would have a third of the usual number. The Maheus were exasperated by these tidings.

'By Heaven!' shouted the father, 'if there're any traitors among us we must do for them!' And getting up, yielding to the passion fomented by his sufferings, he continued: 'To-morrow night we'll meet in the forest. As they prevent us from settling our matters at the Jolly Good Fellow, we'll make ourselves at home in the forest.'

This cry awakened old Jollycorpse, who had become drowsy. It was the old rallying cry, it was the old trysting-place where the miners of long ago had gone to plan resistance to the king's soldiers.

'Yes, yes, to Vandame!' he said in his turn. 'I'll go too, if you do!'

'We'll all go. There must be an end to all this treachery and injustice!' exclaimed La Maheude with an energetic gesture.

Étienne decided that word of the meeting should be sent to all the villages. But the fire had now gone out, as at the Levaques', and the tallow candle likewise expired. There was no more coal, no more petroleum, so they had to go to bed in the dark, amidst the bitter cold which nipped them. The little ones were crying.

VI

JEANLIN was cured by now, but his limbs had been so badly set that both limped; and it was a painful sight to see him waddling along like a duck, yet as quickly as of yore, for he possessed all the adroitness of a noisome, predatory creature.

That evening, towards dusk, Jeanlin, accompanied by his

inseparables, Bébert and Lydie, was on the look-out on the road to the Réquillart pit. He had taken up his station on some waste ground, behind some wooden palings, opposite a kind of chandler's shop standing across the road almost at the corner of a narrow path. An old crone who was nearly blind, kept it, and daily displayed three or four sacks of lentils and dried beans, black with dust; but it was an antique, fly-blown specimen of dried cod suspended from the door that Jeanlin was greedily watching with his ferret-like eyes. Twice already had Bébert been despatched to take possession of it. But each time somebody had appeared at the bend of the road; some spoil-sport who prevented them from doing their business in comfort!

A gentleman on horseback turned the corner, and on recognising Monsieur Hennebeau the children squeezed themselves against the palings. Since the strike had begun he was often seen travelling like this along the road, making the tour of the disaffected villages and evincing much quiet courage in assuring himself personally of the state of the country. And never as much as a stone whizzed past his ears; he only met silent workmen who were somewhat slow in touching their caps to him, or else a couple of lovers who did not care a straw about politics, and were only too glad to be left unnoticed. Trotting by on his mare, looking straight before him so as to disturb nobody, he passed along, and whenever he espied a sweethearting couple his own heart swelled with unsatisfied desire, and his eyes grew dim.

No sooner had he passed the children and disappeared from view, erect in the saddle, and buttoned up to the chin in military style, than Jeanlin began to swear again: 'There seems to be no end of people,' said he. 'Look sharp, Bébert! tug away at the tail!'

But two other men came upon the scene, and the lad stifled another oath when he recognised the voice of his brother Zacharie, telling Mouquet how he had found a two-franc piece sewed up in his wife's petticoat. Both made merry over the incident and slapped each other on the back. Then Mouquet started the idea of a grand game of hockey for the morrow. They would start from Rasseneur's at two o'clock and go in the direction of Montoire, near Marchiennes. Zacharie agreed. It was of no use moping about the strike; as they had nothing else to do, they might as well enjoy themselves! And they were just turning the corner of the

road when Étienne, who came from the direction of the canal, stopped them and began to talk.

'Are they going to sleep there?' muttered Jeanlin, exasperated. 'It's getting dark; the old woman's already taking her sacks indoors.'

Another miner was going towards the Réquillart pit. Étienne accompanied him, and as they passed the palings the boy heard them mention the forest. They had been obliged to postpone the meeting till the following night, because they had not had time to inform all the villages in one day.

'I say, did you hear?' murmured Jeanlin to his companions. 'The grand affair is to come off to-morrow. We must be there. We'll make tracks in the afternoon.' And the road being free at last, he despatched Bébert. 'Now for it! One good pull at the tail, and there you are! Look out, for the old witch has got her broom.'

Fortunately for them it was becoming very dark. Bébert, with one bound, flung himself with all his weight on to the codfish, the string of which snapped. Then he scampered off, his spoil flying behind him like a kite, while the two others followed, all three running for their lives. The old woman, very much startled, came out on her doorstep without understanding what had happened and unable to distinguish the little troop disappearing in the gloom.

By degrees these young freebooters had become the terror of the countryside. Like a band of savages they invaded it. In former times they had confined themselves to the enclosure of the Voreux pit, now disporting themselves on the mountains of coal, whence they returned black as niggers, and now playing at hide-and-seek among the stacks of propping, amidst which they lost themselves as in a virgin forest. Then they had stormed the mounds of shale, down which they glided on the most fleshy part of their anatomy, undismayed by the heat of the fires still burning inside; or else they crept among the brambles of the old parts, where they remained all day. And they went on extending their conquests, fighting each other among the piles of bricks, running about the fields, devouring all kinds of roots and herbs there, beating the banks of the canal for every sort of mud-fish, which they gobbled up in a raw state; and even pushing as far as the forest of Vandame, where they gorged themselves with wild strawberries in spring, and with nuts and bilberries in summer. Soon the whole vast plain had become their property.

But what drove them so constantly upon the roads from Marchiennes to Montsou, with the ravenous looks of young wolves, was an increasing predatory craving. Jeanlin remained the leader of these expeditions, setting his troop upon every prey, ravaging onion fields, pillaging orchards, attacking dealers' stalls. In the country itself the miners on strike were accused of these depredations; the existence of an organised band was even rumoured. One day Jeanlin had actually compelled Lydie to rob her mother; he had made her bring him two dozen barley-sugar sticks, which La Pierronne kept in a glass jar on a shelf in her window, and the child, though thrashed within an inch of her life, had not betrayed him, trembling as she did at his authority. The worst was that he reserved to himself the lion's share. Bébert also had to hand him over the spoil he captured, and considered himself lucky if his captain did not slap his face in order to keep the whole of it.

But for some time Jeanlin had been overdoing the thing. He thrashed Lydie, and profited by Bébert's gullibility to get him into all sorts of scrapes, for it amused him to make a fool of that big lad, who was so much stronger than himself, and who could have felled him to the ground at one blow. He despised them both, treated them like slaves, and told them that he had a princess for his sweetheart before whom they were unworthy to appear. And, in fact, for the last week or so, he had been disappearing abruptly, at the end of a street, at the turning of a path, no matter where he found himself, after ordering them with a terrible look to get back to the village. However, he always secured the spoil first of all.

The very same thing happened that evening.

'Give it to me,' he said, snatching the cod from Bébert's hands, when all three stopped at a bend of the road near the Réquillart pit.

Bébert protested. 'I want some of it, you know. It was I who took it.'

'Eh? what?' exclaimed Jeanlin. 'You'll have some if I like, and that won't be this evening, that's very certain; to-morrow, perhaps, if there's some left.'

He began to hustle Lydie, and placed them side by side close to each other, like soldiers on parade. 'Now, you're going to remain for five minutes without moving,' said he, passing behind them. 'Take care; if you dare to turn round

some wild beasts will eat you up. Afterwards you're to go straight home, and if you don't I'll wallop you.'

Thereupon he vanished into the darkness with so light a step that one heard nothing. The two youngsters, as bidden, remained motionless for five minutes without daring to look behind them, lest they should receive a blow from some invisible power. Gradually a deep affection had sprung up between these two in their common terror of their oppressor. But neither one nor the other would have dared to disobey him. When they went off, though the night was very dark, they did not even embrace each other; they trotted along side by side, grieved to the heart, and in fear lest their captain should shower blows upon them from behind.

Étienne had entered the enclosure of the Réquillart pit at about the same time. On the previous evening, when La Mouquette had given him the cold potatoes, she had begged of him to come back, and he had done so. Ashamed and angry with himself for getting to like this girl, who worshipped him as if he were an idol, and ever followed him about, he had come there intending to explain to her that she must not dangle after him any more. Besides, he did not feel inclined for sweethearting; it was not honest to amuse oneself while others were dying of starvation. And as he had not found her at home he had made up his mind to wait for her, and sat watching every shadow that passed.

The entrance to the old pit under the wrecked belfry was half blocked up. An upright, from which swung a piece of roofing, looked like a gallows above the black cavity, and hard by, in some cracked masonry, two trees were growing, a sorb and a plane, that seemed to spring from the bottom of the pit. The nook was one of wild solitude, grass-grown, littered with rotten wood and planted with sloes and hawthorns, in which birds built their nests at springtime. To avoid the cost of keep, the company had for the last ten years talked of filling up this lifeless, unproductive mine; but they were waiting for some fans to be got ready at the Voreux pit, for the ventilating apparatus of the two mines, which communicated one with the other, happened to be installed at the foot of the Réquillart pit, whose former shaft served as a chimney. So the company had simply strengthened the tubbing by some transverse beams, thus barring the shaft, and the upper galleries had been left to take care of themselves, while in the lowest one burnt an enormous brazier, setting up so

powerful a current of air that a hurricane seemed to blow from one end to the other of the adjoining pit. As a measure of precaution, and in order that people might still be able to go up and down, orders had been given to keep the ladders of the shaft in proper condition; only, nobody attended to these instructions, and the ladders were rotting away with damp, and some landings had tumbled to pieces already. Up above, the entrance of the shaft was blocked by a huge tuft of brambles; and as the first ladder had lost some of its rungs, in order to reach those that were still whole one was obliged to swing oneself from a root of the sorb, and drop almost chancewise into the black hole.

Étienne was patiently waiting behind some brambles, when he heard a prolonged rustling among the branches. He at first thought that his presence had frightened away a snake. But the sudden striking of a match surprised him, and he remained lost in amazement, when he recognised Jeanlin, who first lit a candle, and then disappeared, as it were, into the ground. Étienne's curiosity was thereupon so keenly aroused that in his turn he crept to the edge of the cavity. The boy had vanished; only a faint flicker came from the second landing below. For a moment Étienne hesitated, then rolled down also, holding on by the tree roots and fearing that he was perhaps about to fall the whole five hundred and fifty yards of the shaft's descent. However he ended by feeling a rung of the ladder beneath his feet, and thereupon he went down slowly. Jeanlin could have heard nothing, for beneath him Étienne saw the light going down and down, while the youngster's shadow, weird and huge, kept dancing about as he rocked to and fro on his crippled legs. Whenever some of the rungs failed him, Jeanlin made use of his feet, his arms, and even his chin, with all the skill of a monkey. The ladders, eight yards long, succeeded one another, some still solid, and others shaky, rotten, ready indeed to snap asunder; while the narrow landings were dank, moss-grown, and so soft to the tread that one might have thought one was walking on grass. And the lower Étienne went, the more oppressive became the heat from the furnace that purified the air-shaft. Fortunately it had been kept very low during the strike. In ordinary times, when in full blast, it consumed its six tons of coal per day, and one could not have ventured in this wise so near it except at the risk of scorching oneself to death.

'What a little vagabond!' growled Étienne, almost stifled. 'Where on earth is he going?'

Twice already the young man had almost lost his footing. His feet slipped on the damp wood. If he had at least had a candle like the child he would have felt all right. But he knocked against something every minute; his only guide being the faint light that continued to descend beneath him. He had at last got to the twentieth ladder, and yet Jeanlin never stopped. Then Étienne began to count: twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, and still there seemed no end to the ladders. The terrible heat made the young fellow's head throb; he felt as if he were going to drop into a roaring furnace. At last he reached another landing-stage, and there he perceived the candle in front of him making for the end of a gallery. He had climbed down thirty ladders, which meant about seven hundred feet.

'Is he going to lead me much farther?' Étienne wondered, as he watched the other. 'It's no doubt in the stables that he makes himself comfortable.'

But the passage on the left, that led to the stables, was blocked up by a slip. The journey began afresh, more difficult and dangerous still. Some frightened bats fluttered about, and clung to the roofs of the galleries. Étienne was obliged to hurry on in order not to lose sight of the candle. He rushed into the same gallery as the child; but where the latter easily passed with serpent like wriggles, Étienne could not twist without bruising his limbs. This gallery, like all the old passages, had become narrower, was indeed becoming still smaller every day; at certain points it seemed likely to close up altogether. And hereabouts the splintered wood, the propping that had given way, became a constant peril, threatening to cut the young man's limbs in twain or to impale him as he passed on darts as sharp as a sword's point. He could only advance very cautiously, crawling on his hands and knees or even on his stomach, and ever and anon interrogating the gloom with outstretched arm. Suddenly a band of rats rushed over him, covering him from neck to feet with the scamper of their flight.

'Hell and thunder! how much more of it?' he growled, panting for breath and his limbs almost disjointed.

They had fortunately reached the end of their journey. After a thousand yards or more the tunnel suddenly widened, and one came upon a part of the old haulage gallery, which

was in capital preservation and resembled a natural grotto. Étienne was forced to stop, for a few yards in front of him he saw the lad sticking his candle between two stones and settling himself in a tranquil way, with an air of relief, like a man who is glad to be home at last. By some skilful arrangements the place had been transformed into a comfortable shelter. On the ground, in a corner, a heap of hay provided a soft couch; on a stack of props arranged like a table there stood something of everything—bread, apples, and even open bottles of gin. The place was a real robber's cave, containing the accumulated spoil of weeks. Superfluities like soap and blacking, appropriated from sheer love of pilfering, lay all around. And the lad, alone in the midst of his plunder, appeared to contemplate it with enjoyment, like an egotistical brigand.

'I say,' exclaimed Étienne, when he had recovered his breath, 'do you think you're going to fool us all like this? You come down here to gorge, while we're dying of starvation up above.'

Jeanlin, at first greatly startled, began to tremble. But on recognising the young man he soon became composed.

'Will you have some dinner with me?' he asked at last. 'What do you say to a piece of broiled codfish? Wait and you'll see.'

He had not relinquished his hold on the codfish, and now he began to scrape it with a new knife, one of those small dagger-knives, the bone handles of which generally bear a motto. This in the present instance was the simple one of 'Love.'

'You've got a nice knife,' observed Étienne.

'It's a present from Lydie,' answered Jeanlin, neglecting to add, though, that the girl had stolen it by his orders from the stall of a cheap jack who was exhibiting his wares before the tavern of the Severed Head at Montsou.

And, still scraping, he continued with an air of pride, 'Pretty comfortable here in my diggings, isn't it? Much warmer and nicer smelling than up above, eh?'

Étienne had seated himself, desirous of inducing the lad to talk. His anger against him was gone; he felt interested in this little monster, so plucky and persevering in his vices. And, in fact, he began to feel very comfortable himself; the heat was no longer so overpowering; an equal temperature which the seasons could not affect pervaded the place—the

temperature of a tepid bath, whereas the biting December winds were chapping the skins of the poor wretches outside. As the galleries grew older, the evil gases evaporated; all the fire-damp was gone; there remained but the smell of the fermented propping, a kind of ethereal odour, with a spicy suggestion of cloves. The props, moreover, had assumed a curious appearance, a yellowish pallor as of marble, set off by whitish lace-like fringes, a fleecy vegetation, suggesting hangings of silk and pearls. Others were bristling with mushrooms; and about them were white moths, snowy spiders and flies—a colourless insect population that had never seen the sun.

'So you're not afraid down here?' asked Étienne.

Jeanlin looked at him in surprise.

'Afraid of what, seeing that I'm by myself?'

The codfish was scraped at last. Jeanlin lighted a small pile of wood, brought out a gridiron, and began broiling the fish. After which he cut a loaf in halves. It was a very salt meal, exquisite, nevertheless, to a keen appetite.

Étienne had accepted his share.

'I'm no longer surprised at your growing stout while we're getting thin,' said he. 'Do you know that you're behaving like a pig in gorging like this? And the others? You never think of them?'

'Why should I? Why are the others such idiots?'

'You do right, however, to hide yourself; because, if your father knew that you were thieving, he'd lead you a nice dance.'

'Don't the *bourgeois* rob us? Why, you're always saying so yourself. When I took this loaf from Maigrat's, you may be sure that it was a loaf he owed us.'

The young man did not answer; he had his mouth full, and besides, he felt confused. He looked at that urchin with greenish eyes, large ears, and foxy snout. With his dim conscience and savage wiles, he was truly the degenerate outcome of a race drifting slowly back to its pristine animal condition. The mine that had engendered him had done for him by smashing his legs, and he was human no longer.

'And Lydie?' asked Étienne, anew; 'do you bring her down here sometimes?'

Jeanlin burst into contemptuous laughter. 'That chit? Not likely! Girls blab too much.'

And he continued laughing, overcome by his contempt for

Lydie and Bébert. He had never met two such idiots of children. The idea that they took everything he said as gospel fact, and that they had gone away empty-handed while he was regaling himself with broiled codfish, tickled him immensely. And he concluded with the gravity of a little philosopher, 'It's better to be alone. One's sure not to fall out with anybody then.'

Etienne, who had finished his bread, drank a nip of gin. For a moment, however ungrateful it might seem, he asked himself if he ought not to requite Jeanlin's hospitality by taking him aboveground again, and forbidding him to pilfer any more under threat of telling everything to his father. However, on carefully examining this hidden retreat an idea had struck him. Who knew but that one day he might stand in need of it, either for himself or his mates, if things should turn out badly up above? So he contented himself with making the lad swear that he would not stay out at night, as he often did when he got belated in his snug corner; and then, taking a bit of candle, he went off the first, leaving Jeanlin to tidy up the place.

La Mouquette, notwithstanding the bitter cold, sat waiting for him on a log of wood, in despair at his delay. When she caught sight of him she flung her arms around his neck; and it was like plunging a dagger into her heart when he told her that he could not meet her again, explaining as kindly as possible that she compromised him in the eyes of his comrades, and did harm to their political cause. She was surprised at this, but the thought struck her that he was ashamed of her. She did not feel hurt at it, for it was but natural; and she offered to let him slap her face in public, so that everything might seem to be broken off between them. All she asked was that he should see her again; just now and then. But he remained firm, and refused. Still, at the moment when they parted he was willing to kiss her. Strolling along they had then reached the first houses of Montsou, and they were exchanging a farewell embrace with the full moon shining on them, when all at once a woman passed by and started as abruptly as if she had stumbled against a stone.

'Who is it?' asked Étienne, anxiously.

'It's Catherine,' answered La Mouquette. 'She's on her way back from the Jean-Bart pit.'

The woman was going off with her head low, and her legs dragging as if with fatigue. And as the young man looked

after her, he felt grieved at having been seen by her. La Mouqette observed his emotion; and sobbing as she left him she exclaimed: 'Shall I tell you? If you won't care for me, it's because you care for somebody else.'

Next morning there was a clear frosty sky: the weather was splendid; it was one of those bright winter days when the hard ground sounds like crystal beneath one's feet. Towards one o'clock Jeanlin trotted off; but he was obliged to wait for Bébert behind the church, and they almost started without Lydie, whom her mother had again locked up in the cellar. Fortunately she let her out, slinging a basket on her arm, and signifying to her that if she did not bring it back full of dandelions she would lock her up with the rats for the whole night. In great fear, therefore, the little girl wished, first of all, to get her salad. But Jeanlin talked her out of this; they would see to it by-and-by. For a long while his mind had been exercised by Poland, Rasseneur's fat coney. As they passed the Good Luck it so happened that Poland was taking an airing on the pavement. With one bound Jeanlin then clutched it by the ears, popped it into Lydie's basket, and all three of them started off at a gallop. They would have some fun by making the rabbit run like a dog as far as the forest.

They stopped on their way, however, to have a look at Zacharie and young Mouquet, who, after drinking a mug of beer with a couple of mates, were just beginning their grand game of hockey.[1] The stakes were a new cap and a red silk neckerchief, deposited at Rasseneur's. The four players, two by two, bid for the first turn, from the Voreux pit to Paillot's farm, a distance of nearly two miles. It was Zacharie who won the turn, for he bet he would cover the distance in seven hits, whereas Mouquet wanted eight. They set their egg-shaped boxwood ball on the ground, end upwards. All held their sticks, with slanting iron tips, and long handles wound round with waxed string. It was two o'clock when they started. Zacharie at his first hit drove the ball a distance of more than four hundred yards across the beetroot fields. They were forbidden to play in the villages or on the highroads, as persons had been killed there by stray balls. Mouquet, who also was a sturdy player, thereupon plied his

[1] This, of course, is hockey or *crosse* as played in French Flanders and Picardy. In some respects it suggests golf.—ED.

stick so cleverly that he drove back the ball for more than a hundred and fifty yards. And the game went on, the ball being driven forward and backward, whilst both sides ran their hardest, hurting their feet as they stumbled about the frozen furrows of the fields.

At first Jeanlin, Bébert, and Lydie ran behind the players, excited by the splendid strokes. But their thoughts went back to Poland, who was being jolted about in the basket. So, abandoning the players amidst the fields, they took out the rabbit, to try how fast she could go. She decamped, they bounding on behind her, and then there came a chase of over an hour's duration; the three of them hurrying hither and thither, shouting to frighten the animal, and often widely opening their arms, only to close them upon vacancy, when Poland slipped between. Had she not been so fat they would never have caught her again.

While they were panting after the run, some muttered curses made them turn their heads. They had once more fallen in with the players, who were now at their fourth game. From Paillot's farm, they had run on to the Four Ways, thence to Montoire, and now they were making for Cow's Meadow. This made a distance of two leagues and a half in one hour, not to mention stoppages at Vincent's and the Three-Wise-Men, to refresh themselves. Mouquet now had two more strokes to make and his victory seemed certain. But Zacharie, availing himself of his rights with a chuckle, drove back the ball with such skill that it disappeared in a deep ditch, whence Mouquet's partner could not get it out. This was a disaster. All four shouted their loudest, and got quite excited, for the game must be played afresh. From Cow's Meadow to Red Grass Point was less than a mile and a half; they could manage this in five strokes, and afterwards refresh themselves at Lerenard's.

But Jeanlin had an idea. He let the players go off and then took a string from his pocket, which he tied to Poland's left hind leg. That, according to the youngsters, was very great fun. The rabbit ran hobbling in front of them in such an awkward way that they had never laughed so much in their lives. After this they tied the string round Poland's neck, so that she might gallop freely; but, subsequently, as the poor creature grew fatigued, they dragged her behind them, sometimes on her back, then on her stomach, like a little cart. This lasted for more than an hour, and the coney

was gasping for breath, when they quickly put her back in the basket, on hearing the players close to Cruchot's wood.

Zacharie, Mouquet, and the two others raced their miles without any rest save the time they took to gulp down mugs of beer in the taverns which they had marked out as their goals. From Red Grass Point they had gone on to Buchy, thence to the Stone Cross, and on to Chamblay. The hard ground rang under their feet, as they raced after the ball that bounded over the frost-bound soil. It was splendid weather for their game; they only risked breaking their legs. In the dry wintry air their strokes sounded with a 'crack' like rifle shots. With sinewy hands they grasped the long string-bound handles of their sticks, and their bodies swung as if they had to fell an ox; and in this wise they went on for hours from one end of the plain to another, over hedges and ditches, embankments and fences and walls. They needed good lungs and iron joints in their knees. But it was a favourite game of the miners, as it took the stiffness out of their limbs. There were some young fellows of five-and-twenty who covered their ten leagues at the game. But at forty they played no longer; they had grown too heavy.

It struck five; it was getting dusk already. One more turn as far as the Vandame forest to decide the winner of the cap and neckerchief. Zacharie, with his usual jeering indifference about politics, began cracking jokes. It would be fun to drop in amidst the mates over yonder. As for Jeanlin, his aim ever since he left home had been the forest, though he pretended to gambol about the fields. With a gesture full of indignation he threatened Lydie, when she, a prey to remorse and fear, spoke of going back to gather her dandelions. What! were they going to give up the meeting? No, indeed! he wanted to listen to what the old ones might have to say. So he pushed Bébert along; and proposed to enliven the way, as far as the trees, by letting Poland loose again and throwing stones at her to quicken her pace. His unavowed idea was to kill the animal; he was itching to carry it off with him and eat it in his retreat at the Réquillart pit. The rabbit resumed its course, with drooping ears and sniffing nose. But one stone bruised its back, another nearly cut off its tail, and, notwithstanding the deepening dusk, it would have been killed outright, if the three youngsters had not suddenly noticed Étienne and Maheu standing in the middle of a clearing. Thereupon they quickly flung themselves upon

the rabbit and put it into the basket once more. Almost at the same moment Zacharie, Mouquet, and the two others delivered their last stroke, and the ball lighted on the ground at a few yards from the clearing. They had all fallen upon the trysting-place.

Ever since dusk had set in, along the roads and paths of the level plain, there had been a streaming of silent shadows, now flitting along one by one, and now in groups, towards the violet-tinted thickets of the forest. The villages emptied; even the women and children started off as for a stroll in the open air. By this time the roads were getting dark and one could no longer distinguish this crowd, ever pressing towards the same spot; one could only divine it tramping along in confusion, but as if possessed by one soul. Alongside the hedges, amongst the bushes, there was but a slight rustling, a vague whisper as of the voices of the night.

Monsieur Hennebeau, who was just then riding home on his mare, lent ear to those vague sounds. He had met several couples that splendid winter's evening; but he simply took them to be lovers, such as he often met. And he could not again help thinking of his lot and theirs. Willingly would he have starved like them, to be able to begin life afresh with a woman who would have been his alone, who would have loved him with her whole heart. For him life reserved no consolation; he envied the poorest, the most wretched of those he saw. With bowed head he rode homeward slowly, feeling a pang at his heart as he heard the prolonged rustling sounds which arose from the depths of the darkened country, and which to him seemed to be the echoes of lovers' endless kisses.

VII

The meeting was to be held on the Ladies' Sward, a vast clearing which recent cuttings had opened up. It stretched away in a long, gentle slope, girded on all sides by magnificent trees; splendid beeches, whose straight, regular trunks surrounded it as with a white colonnade, relieved by the green of lichens. Some fallen giants were still lying prostrate on the grass, while to the left a huge stack of wood, already sold,

lay waiting to be carted away. The cold had become keener with the dusk, and the frozen moss crackled underfoot. On the ground all was very dark; the high branches showed against the pale sky, where the full moon, rising on the horizon, was about to extinguish the stars.

Nearly three thousand miners had responded to the call; a seething, swarming crowd of men, women and children gradually filled the clearing, and spread out under the trees; and still they came, the mass of heads, steeped in gloom, stretching away through the adjacent plantations. A noise arose like that of some growling hurricane about to sweep through the frozen and motionless forest.

At the top of the slope stood Étienne with Rasseneur and Maheu. It was evident that a quarrel had broken out, for they could be heard every now and then shouting abrupt ejaculations. Close to them some men were listening: Levaque with his fists clenched, Pierron turning his back in despair at having been unable to feign fever any longer. Old Jollycorpse and old Mouque were also there, seated on the stump of a tree and apparently lost in thought. Behind them were the wags, Zacharie, young Mouquet, and others who had come to make sport; while the women, on the contrary, looked very serious, as though in church. La Maheude silently nodded in response to La Levaque's muttered curses. Philomène was coughing, her bronchitis having come back since the beginning of the winter. Only La Mouquette was laughing right merrily, amused at the way in which the Scorched One fell foul of her daughter, a heartless creature, who sent her out of the house while she stuffed herself with rabbit. And Jeanlin having planted himself on the pile of wood, compelling Bébert to follow him, and hauling up Lydie, there they sat all three, overlooking the crowd.

The quarrel had originated with Rasseneur, who wanted to have a chairman and assessors elected in due form. His defeat at the Jolly-Good-Fellow had made him furious; and he had sworn to have his revenge, for he flattered himself that he would regain his former authority, when he was face to face, not with the delegates, but with the whole mass of the miners. Étienne, however, rebelled, thinking it idiotic to elect a committee in the forest. They must act like revolutionists, like savages, since they were being tracked like wolves.

Perceiving that there would be no end to the dispute, he

suddenly made up his mind to get the crowd on his side; and jumping up on the trunk of a tree, he shouted: 'Comrades! comrades!'

The hubbub made by all the people died away in a long murmur, while Maheu stifled Rasseneur's protestations. And Étienne continued in a loud voice:

'Comrades, since they forbid us to speak, since they send gendarmes after us, as if we were so many brigands, it's here that we must come to an understanding! Here we are free, here we are at home; no one will come to impose silence upon us, any more than they can impose silence upon the birds and the beasts!'

A thundering salvo of shouts was his answer. 'Yes, yes; the forest is ours. We've the right to talk, assuredly. Speak on!'

Then Étienne remained for a moment motionless on the fallen tree. The moon, still low on the horizon, as yet only illumined the higher branches; and the crowd remained wrapped in gloom, gradually growing calmer and silent. He stood above it, his body rising like a black bar on the crest of the slope.

Very slowly he raised one arm, and began to speak; but he no longer thundered; his voice had become calm, like that of a mere agent of the people who is giving an account of his mission. He was at last enabled to make the speech which the police commissary had cut short at the Jolly-Good-Fellow. He started with a rapid historical survey of the strike, affecting a kind of scientific eloquence, recounting facts, and nothing but facts. First he mentioned his repugnance to the strike, but it was not the miners' fault: it was the company that had provoked it, with its new tariff about the propping. Next he referred to the delegates' first interview with the managing director, and the evident bad faith of the board of management; then to the second interview, when, by a tardy concession, it had offered to restore the two centimes it had tried to rob them of. That was their present position; he showed by figures how exhausted was the provident fund; he accounted for the money that had been sent them; in a few phrases he excused the International, Pluchart, and the others, for not having done more for them, amidst all that they had to do in order to conquer the world. So their position was becoming worse day by day; the company was dismissing them, and threatening to import miners from Belgium; besides, it

intimidated the weak and had prevailed upon a certain number of pitmen to resume work. Whilst reciting these facts the young man took great care to keep on in the same monotonous key, as if to bring the disastrous position home with greater force; he showed that hunger was victorious, hope dead, and the struggle drawing to a feverish close; and without raising his voice, he concluded abruptly: 'It is in these circumstances, comrades, that you're called upon to take a decision this evening. Do you wish the strike to continue? and if so, what do you propose to do to overcome the company?'

Deep silence fell from the starlit sky. The crowd, scarce visible in the gloom, remained dumb beneath the heartrending effect of those words; one only heard a deep-drawn sigh of despair passing through the leafless trees.

But Étienne was already continuing in an altered voice. And now it was no longer the secretary of the association who spoke: it was the leader, the apostle, the harbinger of truth. Were there men among them sufficiently contemptible to break their word? What! had they suffered as they had done during the last month all to no purpose, and were they to go back to the pits bowing their heads in submission, to begin their life of misery afresh? Was it not better to die there and then in trying to shake off once for all that tyranny of the capitalist, who starved the workman? Were they always to submit to hunger, until hunger should once more impel the quietest among them to revolt? Was not that an idiotic proceeding which could not last for ever? And he pictured them, exploited by the company, saddled with all the losses of the crisis, reduced to cease eating as soon as competition lowered the price of the output. No! the new propping tariff was not acceptable; it was nothing more than disguised cheeseparing: the company wanted to rob each man of the proceeds of an hour's work a day. They could and would stand it no longer; the time was coming when the starvelings, driven to bay, would take justice into their own hands.

For a moment the young man remained with his arms in the air. At the word justice, a quiver had sped through the crowd, and it burst into applause, which rolled along like a rustling of dead leaves. Some voices cried: 'Justice! It is time! Justice!'

Étienne was gradually warming up. He did not possess

Rasseneur's smooth glib eloquence. Words failed him at times; he had to twist his sentences into shape, and in doing so emphasised his efforts by a jerk of the shoulder. But amidst these constant difficulties, he hit upon images of homely energy which carried away his listeners; while his workmanlike gestures, his habit of digging his elbows into his sides and then of suddenly flinging his arms forward with clenched fists, whilst his jaw protruded defiantly, also had a marvellous effect upon his comrades. They all agreed that he did not speak eloquently, but compelled people to listen to him.

'The wage system is only a new form of slavery,' he continued louder still. 'The mine should belong to the miner, like the sea belongs to the fisherman, like the soil belongs to the peasant. Do you hear? The mine belongs to you, to you all who, for a century past, have paid for it with so much blood and misery?'

Then he boldly plunged into the legal question. He endeavoured to recapitulate all the special laws on mines and mining, and he lost himself in doing so. The subsoil, like the soil itself, said he, belonged to the nation; only by some odious privilege the State had granted the monopoly of it to certain companies. And in the case of Montsou, the pretended legality of the concessions was complicated by treaties formerly passed with the owners of the ancient fiefs, according to the old custom of Hainault. All the miners had to do then was to reconquer their own; and with outstretched arms he indicated the whole of the country lying beyond the forest. At this moment, the moon, rising from the horizon and glancing over the topmost branches, shone full upon him. When the crowd, still wrapped in gloom, beheld him thus, steeped in white light and distributing fortune with open hands, it once more applauded vociferously.

'Yes, yes, he is right! Bravo!'

And now Étienne gave rein to his favourite hobby, the assignment of the instruments of labour to the whole collectivity of citizens, as he repeated in one sentence, the barbarism of which tickled him delightfully. The evolution of his mind was now complete. Having started novice-like with the theory of loving brotherliness and the need of reforming the wage system, he had ended with the political idea of suppressing the system altogether. Since the meeting at the Jolly-Good-Fellow, his collectivism, then still humanitarian

and destitute of any precise formula, had attained to a rigid complex programme, each item of which he discussed scientifically. He started with the doctrine that liberty could only be obtained by the destruction of the state. Then, as soon as the people had possessed themselves of the government, reforms would commence: there would be a return to primitive communism; the substitution of a free, equalitarian family system, for the present one, based on notions of morality and used for purposes of oppression; the equality would be absolute, civilly, politically, and economically; there would be guarantees for individual independence, thanks to the possession of and the integral profits yielded by the instruments of labour; and finally, professional and gratuitous education at the cost of the collectivity. This would, of course, entail an entire recasting of old and corrupt society. He attacked marriage and testamentary rights; he regulated the amount of means each might possess; and overthrew the iniquitous monument of dead centuries with a wave of his arm, always the same—the gesture of the reaper cutting down the ripe harvest. And after this, with the other hand, he built up a future humanity, the fabric of truth and justice which would grow amidst the dawn of the twentieth century. When his mind reached this point his reason wavered; there remained to him nothing but the fixed ideas of a sectarian. Scruples of conscience and common-sense were altogether carried away. Nothing appeared to him easier than to create this new world; he had settled everything; he spoke of it all as of a machine which he could put together in a couple of hours; and in speech at any rate he spared neither fire nor blood.

'Our turn has come,' he exclaimed, in a final burst of enthusiasm. 'We're to have power and riches at last!'

Cheers rolled towards him from the very depths of the forest. The moonlight now illumined the whole clearing and sharply outlined the swaying mass of heads as far as the vague depths of the plantations between the gigantic greyish trees. And beneath the frosty sky there rolled an ocean of furious faces, with glittering eyes and open mouths, a sea of men, women and children, famished and incited to the just pillage of the ancient wealth of which they had been dispossessed. They no longer felt the cold; those stirring words warmed them to the marrow of their bones. They were almost lifted from the earth by religious exaltation, feverish

hope like that of the early Christians awaiting the approach of the reign of justice. The meaning of many obscure phrases had escaped them; they could scarcely understand the many technical abstract arguments; but the very vagueness, the very abstract nature of Étienne's words, enlarged the field of promise, intoxicated, blinded them as with a dazzling glow. What a dream! to be the masters, to cease from suffering, to enjoy at last!

'That's it. By Heaven, it's our turn! Death to the masters!'

The women were almost delirious. La Maheude, dazed by the pangs of hunger, had lost her ordinary composure; La Levaque howled; the old Scorched One swung her witch-like arms about, quite beside herself; while Philomène was racked with a fit of coughing, and La Mouquette was so transported that she encouraged the speaker with words of affection. Among the men, Maheu, entirely gained over, had uttered a cry of anger, as he stood between Pierron, who was shaking like an aspen leaf, and Levaque, who was yelling at random; while the wags, Zacharie and Mouquet, still tried to jeer, though evidently ill at ease, and rather astonished that their mate had been able to spout so much without wetting his whistle. But it was Jeanlin on the pile of wood who made most noise, exciting Bébert and Lydie, and brandishing the basket in which poor Poland was at her last gasp.

The clamour began afresh. Étienne tasted the intoxication of popularity. It was his power which he had before him, materialised, as it were, in those three thousand workmen, whose hearts beat in unison with his words. Souvarine, had he deigned to come, would have applauded his own ideas, recognising them one by one, and feeling well pleased with the anarchical progress of his disciple, satisfied with the programme enunciated, save with respect to the education clause, which was mere sentimental nonsense, for undiluted and salutary ignorance was to be the bath in which man would revive his waning strength. As for Rasseneur, he shrugged his shoulders with anger and contempt.

'You'll allow me to speak!' he shouted to Étienne.

The latter jumped from the trunk of the tree. 'Speak; we'll see if they'll listen to you.'

Rasseneur had already taken his place and claimed silence with a movement of his hand. But the tumult was far from abating; his name sped about from the front rows, which

recognised him, to the back ones lost beneath the beeches; and they refused to give him a hearing. He was an overthrown idol, and the bare sight of him angered his erstwhile followers. His facile eloquence, his smooth, good-natured phrases that had charmed them so long, were now regarded as so much lukewarm gruel fit only for cowards. It was in vain that he tried to raise his voice above the uproar, that he tried to take up the thread of his favourite pacifying speech, that he endeavoured to show the impossibility of reforming the world by dint of laws, that he pointed out the necessity of allowing social evolution sufficient time for accomplishment: he was chaffed and hissed, his defeat at the 'Jolly-Good-Fellow' was surpassed, and became more irretrievable. Some men ended by throwing handfuls of frozen moss at him, and a woman yelled in a shrill voice: 'Down with the traitor!'

He was explaining that the mine could not be the property of the miner, as the loom belongs to the weaver. He pronounced himself in favour of the system of profit-sharing; the workman being interested in the business and becoming the child of the house. But a thousand voices repeated: 'Down with the traitor!' and stones began to whistle about his ears.

Then he turned very pale, and tears of mortification started to his eyes. It was the end of his life; twenty years of ambitious influence over his comrades foundered amidst the ingratitude of the crowd. He stepped down from the fallen tree, stricken to the heart, without the strength to continue.

'Ay, laugh if you like,' he stammered to Étienne, who stood by, triumphant. 'I only hope the same will happen to you one day, and happen it will, mark my words!'

Then, as if to disclaim all responsibility for the misfortunes he foresaw, he made one sweeping gesture, and went off alone, across the white, silent countryside.

Prolonged groans followed him, when suddenly, to everybody's surprise, old Jollycorpse was seen on the trunk, trying to make himself heard amidst the uproar. Until then, he and old Mouque had seemed to be absorbed, as usual, in reflections about the things of yore. No doubt, however, he was suddenly taken with one of those fits of loquacity, which now and then the past stirred up within him so violently that reminiscences flowed from his lips for hours. Deep silence

had suddenly fallen upon the throng. They listened to this old man, pale as a spectre in the moonlight; and, as he began recapitulating things which apparently had no immediate bearing upon the question under discussion, long stories which nobody understood, the astonishment increased. He talked of his youth. He spoke of the death of his two uncles, crushed in a slip at the Voreux pit; then he referred to an attack of congestion of the lungs which had killed his wife. Withal he did not abandon the idea he had got hold of, which was that things had never gone on well, and never would. For instance, at one time five hundred of them had met in the forest, because the King would not lessen the hours of work. But he suddenly broke away from this story, to take up that of another strike; he had seen so many of them! They always led to those trees—either here, on the Ladies' Sward, or yonder at the Charcoal Walk, or, farther still, near the Wolf's Gorge. Sometimes it froze; at others it was very warm. One night it had rained so heavily that they were obliged to go back home without saying a word one to another. And then the King's soldiers came, and it always ended in the military firing upon them.

'We held up our hands like this; we swore we would never go down again. Ah! I've sworn it; yes, I've sworn it many a time!'

The crowd was still listening, open-mouthed and ill at ease, when Étienne, who had been watching the scene, jumped upon the fallen tree again, and kept the old man by his side. He had just recognised Chaval in the front row among the pitmen, and the idea that Catherine must also be there had inspired him anew; he felt the need of winning applause in her presence.

'Comrades, you've heard, he's one of the oldest amongst us, that's what he's suffered, and what our children will suffer, if we don't bring matters to a finish with those robbers and executioners.'

He became terrible; never before had he spoken so violently. With one arm he supported old Jollycorpse; he exhibited him like a banner of misery and mourning that cried for vengeance. In swift, curt phrases he went back to the first Maheu; he showed the whole family worn to death in the mine, preyed upon by the company, and more famished than ever after a century of toil; and, in contrast with that family, he showed the well-fed gentlemen of the board of

management, with money exuding at every pore; the whole band of shareholders living for a century also, like kept women, and doing nothing but enjoy themselves. Was it not terrible? A race of men dying from want and privation down below, from father to son, in order that ministers of state might receive bribes and gratuities, that generations of nobles and *bourgeois* might give splendid entertainments or grow fat to bursting at their firesides? He had studied the diseases of miners, and he enumerated them all, giving details of them with sickening minuteness—poverty of blood, scrofula, black bronchitis, stifling asthma, and paralysing rheumatism. These wretches were cast underground as so much food for the engines; they were penned like cattle in the villages; little by little the great companies swallowed them up, regulating a system of slavery, threatening to enrol all the toilers of a nation, millions of hands, in order to swell the fortune of a thousand 'do-nothings.' But the miner was no longer an ignoramus, a brute beast crushed down in the bowels of the earth; an army was springing up from the depths of the pits, a harvest of citizens, whose seed was germinating, and which would burst the earth asunder on some day of magnificent sunshine. Then they would see whether a mining company would any longer dare to offer, after forty years' service, a beggarly pension of a hundred and fifty francs per annum[1] to an old man of sixty who expectorated coal, and whose legs were swollen with dropsy contracted in the cuttings. Yes! Labour would demand an account from Capital, from that impersonal god—a stranger to the workman—who crouched somewhere, in some mysterious tabernacle whence he sucked the life of the starvelings who fed him! They would go yonder, they would end by beholding his face by the glare of the conflagrations fired by their hands, and they would drown him in blood, that noisome hog, that monstrous idol, gorged with human flesh!

He ceased speaking, but his outstretched hand, still pointing into space, designated the enemy, over yonder, he knew not where, from one end of the earth to the other. And this time, the clamour of the multitude was so terrific that the *bourgeois* of Montsou heard it and looked towards Vandame, cowed with fear at the thought of some formidable landslip. Some night-birds rose from the trees into the clear, boundless heavens.

[1] £6.

Étienne wished to come to a decision there and then.

'Comrades, what have you decided? Do you vote for the continuance of the strike?'

'Yes! yes!' bellowed the voices.

'And what measures do you propose? Our defeat is certain if any cowards go down to-morrow.'

The voices answered with a tempestuous roar: 'Death to the cowards!'

'Then you've made up your minds to recall them to their duty; to their sworn promises! Here is what we can do—present ourselves at the pits, win back the traitors by our presence there, and show the company that we're all of one mind, and are prepared to die rather than give in.'

'That's it; to the pits! to the pits!'

While he was speaking, Étienne had looked for Catherine among the pale, anger-stricken faces before him. She was evidently not there. But his eyes constantly fell upon Chaval, who affected to turn everything into ridicule by shrugging his shoulders, stung as he was with envy, and ready to sell himself for a scrap of such popularity.

'And,' continued Étienne, 'if there be any spies among us, let them take care; we know them. Yes, I see some miners of Vandame who have not struck work.'

'Is it for me that you say that?' asked Chaval with an air of bravado.

'For you or for any one else. But, since you take it up, you should understand that those who eat have nothing in common with those who're hungry. You work at Jean-Bart.'

A bantering voice broke in: 'He work! Say rather that he's got a woman who works for him.'

Chaval's blood rushed to his face, and he shouted an oath: 'It's forbidden to work then?'

'Yes!' exclaimed Étienne, 'when one's comrades endure privations for the good of all, it's forbidden to play the egoist and the hypocrite on the side of the masters. If the strike were general, we should have had the upper hand long ago. Not a man at Vandame ought to have gone down when Montsou struck work. The great thing would be for work to cease throughout the region, at Monsieur Deneulin's as well as here. And let me tell you, there's none but traitors at the Jean-Bart pit; you're all traitors!'

At this the crowd around Chaval became threatening;

they shook their fists at him, and cries of 'Down, down with him!' began to rise. He had turned pale; but in his craving to prevail over Étienne, an idea gave him courage.

'Listen to me!' he bawled. 'Come to-morrow to the Jean-Bart pit, and you'll see whether I'm working. We're with you, and I was sent to tell you so. We must put out the fires; the engine-men must strike also. So much the better if the pumps stop! The water will swamp the pits, and everything will go to smash!'

He was furiously applauded in his turn, and from that moment Étienne himself was distanced. Speaker after speaker mounted the fallen tree, gesticulating amidst the noise, and proposing the wildest measures. It was the madness of faith, the impatience of a set of fanatics, who, weary of waiting for a miracle that did not come, had made up their minds to provoke it. Transported by hunger, they 'saw red,' and dreamt of fire and blood, amidst supreme glory, whence universal happiness arose. And the silent moon steeped the rolling sea of heads in light, and the great forest girdled the cry of massacre with profound silence. The frozen moss and grass alone crunched underneath the pitmen's heels; while the beeches, upright and motionless in their strength, with the delicate tracery of their branches showing darkly against the clear sky, neither heard nor saw the miserable wretches frenzied at their feet.

There was a good deal of hustling, and La Maheude suddenly found herself close to Maheu. Both, losing their usual calmness, carried away by the growing exasperation which had been undermining them for many months, approved Levaque, who tried to cap everything by demanding the heads of the engineers. As for Pierron, he had disappeared, but Jollycorpse and old Mouque were both muttering vague violent words which no one was able to understand. From sheer mischief Zacharie asked for the destruction of all churches, while Mouquet, his hockey stick still in hand, struck the ground with it to increase the din. The women in particular had worked themselves into a fury. La Levaque with her arm akimbo fell upon Philomène, whom she accused of having laughed; La Mouquette spoke of kicking the gendarmes, and the Scorched One, who had just angrily slapped little Lydie, on discovering her there with neither salad nor basket, continued striking out into space at all the employers whom she would have liked to have there

at arm's length. At one moment Jeanlin had almost died of fright on Bébert telling him that a truller declared that Madame Rasseneur had seen them steal Poland; but when he had made up his mind that he would slyly let the rabbit loose at the door of the Good-Luck, he bawled louder than ever, opening his knife and brandishing the blade about, quite proud at seeing it flash in the moonlight.

'Comrades! comrades!' hoarsely repeated Étienne, who was becoming quite exhausted by his efforts to obtain a moment's silence in order that they might settle matters. At last he was listened to. 'Comrades! to-morrow morning, at the Jean-Bart pit, is that agreed?'

'Yes, yes, at the Jean-Bart pit! Death to the traitors!'

Then the hurricane roar of those three thousand voices filled the vault of heaven, and died away amidst the pure effulgence of the moon.

BOOK V

I

At four o'clock the moon sank behind the horizon, and the night then became as dark as pitch. Everyone was still fast asleep at Deneulin's; the old brick dwelling-house remained mute and sombre, with doors and windows fastened, at the end of the large neglected garden that separated it from the Jean-Bart pit. On the other side lay the deserted road of Vandame, a large market town, hidden behind the forest, some two miles and a half away.

Deneulin, tired from having passed the best part of the previous day down in the mine, was snoring lustily with his face turned to the wall, when he dreamt that he was being called. He ended by awaking, distinguished a real voice, and ran to the window to open it. One of his viewers was standing in the garden below. 'What is the matter?' asked Deneulin.

'It's a revolt, sir. Half of the men have struck work, and are preventing the others from going down.'

He did not clearly understand, for his head was still heavy with sleep, and the bitter cold numbed him like an icy shower-bath. 'Make them go down, dash it all!' he spluttered.

'It's been going on for more than an hour,' resumed the viewer; 'so we thought we'd better fetch you. You're the only one who may perhaps bring them to their senses.'

'Very well; I'll be down directly.'

He quickly put on his clothes; his mind was clear by this time, and he felt very uneasy. The house might have been robbed; neither the man-servant nor the cook had stirred. But from the other side of the landing there came anxious whispers; and when he left his room the door of that occupied by his daughters opened, and he saw both of them in their white dressing-gowns, hurriedly thrown on.

'What's the matter, father?'

Lucie, the elder, was already in her twenty-third year—a fine, tall, dark girl; while Jeanne, the younger, scarcely nineteen, was small, with golden hair, and a gentle winning grace.

'Nothing particular,' he answered, in order to reassure them. 'But it seems that some noisy fellows are making a disturbance yonder, so I'm going to see.'

They protested however, and would not let him go without first drinking something warm. They were sure that otherwise he would come back ill, as usual. To all of which he objected, giving his word that he could not possibly stop.

'Listen,' said Jeanne at last, putting her arms round his neck. 'Listen; you'll at least take a little glassful of rum and a couple of biscuits: or else I shall remain like this, and you'll be obliged to carry me along with you.'

He was compelled to give way, vowing all the while that the biscuits would choke him. The girls, however, were already going downstairs in front of him, each carrying a candle. In the dining-room they hastened to serve him, one pouring out the rum, while the other ran to the store-room to fetch some biscuits. Having lost their mother while they were still mere children, they had, so to say, brought themselves up alone and scarcely well, spoilt the while by their father. The elder had dreamt of going on the operatic stage, and the younger gave herself up to painting, displaying a bold originality of style that singled her out for notice. But when, through financial embarrassments, retrenchment at home became necessary, these girls, who had seemed extravagant, suddenly revealed themselves as prudent, sharp housekeepers, swift at detecting the slightest mistakes in the tradesmen's accounts. At present, in spite of their cavalier, artist ways, they drew the purse-strings very tight, economised, bargained, turned their dresses, and, in short, managed to keep the house decent in spite of growing penury.

'Eat, papa,' repeated Lucie.

And noticing the sad, silent thoughtfulness into which he relapsed, she herself again became uneasy.

'It is something serious, then, since you look so glum? I say, hadn't we better remain with you at home? They'll do very well without us at that lunch.'

She was alluding to a luncheon party, arranged for that very morning. Madame Hennebeau was first of all to call with her carriage for Cécile at La Piolaine; then she was to

fetch them, and they were all to drive together to the iron-works at Marchiennes, whither they had been invited to lunch by the managing director's wife. This would give them an opportunity to visit the workshops, blast-furnaces, and smelting ovens.

'Of course we shall stay here,' Jeanne in her turn declared.

But their father got angry. 'What next, I wonder? Haven't I told you that it is nothing? Just oblige me by going back to bed, and by being dressed by nine o'clock, as was arranged.'

Then he kissed them both and hurried off. In another moment the sound of his footsteps died away over the frozen ground. Jeanne carefully corked up the rum again, while Lucie put the biscuits under lock and key. The room had the clean frigid aspect of a place where meagre fare is the order of the day. Both girls profited by their early rising to see whether anything had been left about on the previous evening. They found a napkin lying there and decided to scold the servant. Then both went upstairs again.

While taking a short cut across the narrow paths of his kitchen garden, Deneulin thought of his waning fortune, that share in the Montsou mines, that million which he had realised, dreaming of doubling it in a short time, but which at present ran great risk of being lost altogether. He had met with an uninterrupted run of bad luck; huge unforeseen repairs had been necessary, the working of the pit had proved very costly, and then had come the industrial crisis just when he had a chance of getting a return for his money. And now if the strike spread to his own mine he was down for good. He pushed a small door open; the buildings above the pit could be divined in the dark night by an increase of gloom, starred by the glimmering light of lanterns.

Jean-Bart was not nearly so important as Voreux, but the new plant made it 'a pretty pit,' as engineers were wont to say. Not only had the shaft been widened by some five feet or so and sunk to a depth of more than 2,300 feet, but everything, engines and cages and so forth, was brand-new, and in accordance with the latest scientific inventions. Even a kind of elegance was shown in the buildings; the sifting shed had an ornamental wooden frieze, the shaft belfry boasted a clock, the receiving staith and engine-room were rounded off like the apse of a *renaissance* chapel and surmounted by a chimney in spiral mosaic work of black and red

bricks. The pumping machine was installed over the other shaft of the concession, the old Gaston-Marie pit, which was altogether reserved for pumping purposes. Jean-Bart, to the left and right of the hoisting shaft, had but two others, one for the steam fan and one for the ladders.

That morning, as early as three o'clock, Chaval had been first on the spot, inciting his fellow-workmen and persuading them to follow the example of their comrades of Montsou, and ask for a rise of five centimes per truckload. The four hundred pitmen soon flocked into the receiving staith, amidst a tumult of shouts and gesticulations. Those who wanted to go down were barefooted, and carried their lamps and picks or shovels: while the others, still with their clogs on, their jackets thrown over their shoulders on account of the bitter cold, barred the entrance to the shaft. The viewers shouted themselves quite hoarse in trying to restore order and in imploring the malcontents to be reasonable, and to refrain from preventing those who wished to work, from going down.

But Chaval became furious when he noticed Catherine there in trousers and vest, her head wrapped in her blue handkerchief. Before coming to the pit he had roughly told her to remain at home. She, in despair at the stoppage of work, had nevertheless followed him, for he never gave her any money and she often had to pay for the pair of them, so what would become of her, should she no longer earn anything?

'Curse you! what do you want here?' yelled Chaval, whereupon she stammered that she had no income to live on, and wished to work. 'So you set yourself against me, you hussy!' he retorted. 'Get home at once, or I'll kick you home all the way!'

She drew back frightened, but did not leave the spot, having made up her mind to see what turn things might take.

Monsieur Deneulin came up by the stairs of the sifting shed. Though the light of the lanterns was faint, he took in the scene at a glance. He knew them all, hewers, banksmen, truckmen, trammers, and even truller boys. In the newly-built and still clean-looking nave, work had already come to a standstill; the engine, under pressure, was letting off steam at intervals; the cages remained hanging from the motionless cables; the trucks, left just wherever they happened to be, encumbered the iron floor. Scarcely eighty lamps had been taken, the remainder were flaring away in the lamp-

room. But a word from him would doubtless suffice to quell the trouble, and work would be resumed again.

'Well! what's all this about, lads?' he asked in a loud voice. 'What has annoyed you? Just explain it to me, and we'll soon see about it.

As a rule, he showed a kind of fatherly kindness to his workmen, whilst insisting upon a good day's work. Authoritative and even abrupt by nature, he always tried at first to win them over by a commanding kind of good-nature. And he often inspired a deal of sympathy; the workmen particularly respected him as a man of pluck, one who was constantly among them in the cuttings, who was the first to reach a place of danger when an accident was alarming the whole pit. On two occasions, after an explosion of fire-damp, he had been let down into the mine with a rope passed under his armpits, when the most courageous held back.

'Come,' he resumed, 'you're not going to make me regret having answered for your good behaviour. You know that I refused the offer of a detachment of gendarmes. Speak calmly, I'll listen to you.'

They all remained silent, however, embarrassed and drawing away from him. It was Chaval who at last exclaimed, 'Look here, Monsieur Deneulin, we can't go on working like this. We want five centimes more per truckload.'

He seemed surprised.

'Five centimes! What for? Why do you make that demand? I haven't complained of your propping; I haven't tried to impose a new tariff on you like the company at Montsou has done.'

'Perhaps not, but all the same the mates at Montsou are right. They reject the tariff and demand a rise of five centimes, because it's impossible to work properly at the present prices. We want five centimes more, don't we? Speak up, you fellows.'

Some of the others approved Chaval, and the uproar began afresh. Gradually a ring was formed round Monsieur Deneulin.

His eyes flashed fire, he believed in strong government, and his fists clenched, itching to seize one of those men by the scruff of the neck. However, he preferred to discuss the matter in a reasonable way.

'You want five centimes, and I admit that the work is worth them. Only I can't give them to you. If I did it

would simply be all up with me. Try to understand that first of all I must manage to live, in order that you may live also. And I am at the end of my tether; the smallest rise in the cost of the output would topple me over. Remember that two years ago, on the occasion of the last strike, I gave in to you; I was still able to do so then. But that rise has none the less been a disastrous one for me, and during these last two years I have had to struggle on as best I could. To-day I would prefer to give up the whole show at once, rather than find myself unable to pay your wages next month.'

Chaval smiled maliciously as he confronted this master, who so frankly took them into his confidence with regard to his affairs. The others hung their heads, obstinate, unbelieving, unable to realise that an employer did not earn millions by the toil of his workmen.

Thereupon Deneulin continued. He explained his struggle against Montsou, which was ever on the watch, ready to devour him, if he should have the misfortune to fail. It was a fierce competition which reduced him to all kinds of cheeseparing, the more so as the great depth of the Jean-Bart pit increased the cost of raising, for which the thickness of the seams scarcely compensated.

He would never have raised the wages at the last strike if he had not been compelled to follow the example of Montsou, lest his men should leave him. And he threatened them with the morrow: what a beautiful result it would be for them, to pass under the terrible yoke of the Montsou board, should they oblige him to sell out! He did not live on a throne far away, in some unknown region; he was not like one of those shareholders, who are never seen, yet pay managers to shear the miner. He was a master; he risked something besides money: he risked his health, his intellect, his life. The cessation of work would mean death to him, neither more nor less, for he had no stock in hand; and nevertheless was obliged to carry out his contracts. On the other hand, the capital of his plant could not be allowed to lie idle, for in that event how would he be able to honour his engagements? Who would pay the interest on the sums that friends had entrusted to him? It would all end in bankruptcy.

'That's how I stand, my hearties!' he concluded. 'I wanted to convince you. You cannot expect me to murder myself, can you? And whether I give you the five centimes

you ask for, or whether I let you go on strike like the rest, it would be just the same as cutting my own throat.'

He ceased speaking, and growls arose. A number of miners seemed to hesitate, however. Several drew near the shaft.

'Anyhow,' said a viewer, 'let everyone be free to do as he likes. Who're those that wish to work?'

Catherine was one of the first to come forward. But Chaval pushed her back in a fury. 'We're all of one mind,' he shouted. 'I'd like to see the mean beast who'd leave his mates in the lurch!'

After that an understanding seemed impossible. The uproar began afresh; there was a tussle to push the willing men away from the shaft, at the risk of crushing them against the wall. For a moment Deneulin, in despair, endeavoured to restore order by blows, but he realised the useless folly of such a course, and at last drew back. For a few moments he remained in the office of the receiving clerk, seated on a chair, breathless, and so overcome by powerlessness that he could think of no expedient whatever. But at last he grew more composed, and told an inspector to go in search of Chaval; then, on the latter consenting to talk things over, he dismissed the rest with a wave of his hand. 'Leave us by ourselves.'

Deneulin's idea was to turn Chaval inside out. At his very first words he perceived that the pitman was conceited, devoured by jealousy. And thereupon he began to flatter him, and pretended to be surprised that a workman of his ability should thus compromise his prospects. He gave him to understand that for some time already he had singled him out for promotion; and he wound up by offering to appoint him viewer a little later. Chaval stood listening in silence at first, nervously clenching his fists. Ideas chased one another through his brain. If he persisted in bringing about a strike he would never be more than Étienne's lieutenant; whereas a different prospect opened before him, that of becoming one of the chiefs. The heat of pride rose to his head and intoxicated him. Moreover, the Montsou strikers, for whom he had waited ever since early morning, would not come now; something must have prevented them, the presence of soldiery perhaps; so there was only just time to submit. He nevertheless continued to shake his head in sign of refusal; and striking his breast professed to be incorruptible. At last,

without mentioning the appointment he had made with the men of Montsou, he promised to bring his mates to reason, and prevail upon them to go down.

Deneulin remained hidden, as it were, and even the viewers held aloof. For an hour or so Chaval was heard speechifying from a truck in the receiving staith. Some of the workmen hissed him, however; a hundred and twenty went off quite indignant, and persisting in the earlier resolve which he had made them take. It was already past seven o'clock and dawn was rising, the dawn of a day of bright, healthy, frosty weather. And all at once the stir of toil began afresh, the interrupted work was resumed. First of all the engine's driving-rod began to plunge, rolling and unrolling the cables. Then, amidst the uproar of the signals, the descent commenced, the cages filled, plunged down, and came up again; the shaft swallowed its daily ration of trullers, trammers, and hewers, while, on the iron flooring above, the banksmen pushed the trucks along amidst a rumbling like thunder.

'What the devil are you standing here for?' yelled Chaval to Catherine, who was awaiting her turn. 'Just get down at once, instead of loitering about!'

At nine o'clock, when Madame Hennebeau arrived in her carriage with Cécile, she found Lucie and Jeanne quite ready, and looking very elegant in spite of the frequent refurbishing of their costumes. But Deneulin was surprised to see Négrel accompanying them on horseback. What, men were of the party also, then? Whereupon Madame Hennebeau, with her motherly air, explained that she had been frightened by the reports that the roads were full of bad characters. She had, therefore, preferred to take an escort with her. Négrel laughed and reassured them; it was nothing serious, only the threats of some brawlers, not one of whom, however, would even dare to throw a stone at a window. Thereupon, still delighted at his success, Deneulin spoke of the suppressed revolt at the Jean-Bart pit and now professed himself perfectly easy. And on the Vandame road, while the young ladies got into the carriage, they all expressed their delight at the fine weather without divining for a moment that over yonder across the plain a final burst of despair was growing stronger and stronger, that men were on the march, and that the tramp of rebellion could have been heard if they had put their ears to the ground.

'Well! that's agreed then,' repeated Madame Hennebeau.

'You'll come and fetch the young ladies to-night and dine with us. Madame Grégoire has also promised to come for Cécile.'

'You may depend on me,' answered Deneulin.

Then the carriage rolled away in the direction of Vandame. Jeanne and Lucie leant out to send a last smile to their father, who had remained standing at the roadside, while Négrel gallantly trotted on behind.

They crossed the forest, and took the road from Vandame to Marchiennes. As they were nearing the Tartaret plain, Jeanne asked Madame Hennebeau if she knew the Green Hill, and the latter, despite a sojourn of over five years in the district, confessed that she had never been in that direction. They therefore went out of their way to see it. The Tartaret was an uncultivated plain, of volcanic sterility, beneath which a coal mine had been burning for centuries past. The miners of the region even related a legend to the effect that fire had descended from heaven to punish the workers of this pit for all kinds of abominable doings in such wise that they had not even had time to get aboveground, but had ever since remained burning in the depths of that inferno. The dark-red calcined rocks were spotted with alum as with the marks of a leprous disease, and sulphur appeared flour-like at the edges of the fissures. At night, those who were bold enough to peep through those cracks swore that they beheld flames, no doubt the souls of the wretches who were roasting in that internal conflagration. Will-o'-the-wisps galloped on madly, close to the ground; hot vapour reeking of filth and poisonous devil's cookery was for ever steaming forth. And, like a miracle of eternal spring, amidst that accursed Tartaret waste, the Green Hill rose up with its ever verdant swards, its beeches whose branches were never bare, and its fields yielding as many as three harvests a year. It was like a natural conservatory or hothouse, heated by the constant blaze below. No snow ever lay on it. Beside the bare forest trees, that big clump of verdure bloomed that bright December day, without the frost having so much as nipped its edges.

But the carriage was soon rolling away over the plain. Négrel made fun of the legend and told the ladies how a mine often caught fire by the simple fermentation of coal-dust. If they could not master the conflagration it kept on burning for years and years, and he named a pit in Belgium which

had been inundated by diverting the course of a stream towards its shaft. All at once, however, he ceased speaking, for during the last few minutes the carriage had come upon several bands of miners who passed silently, with sidelong glances at the equipage which compelled them to stand aside. They gradually became more and more numerous, and at the little bridge over the Scarpe the horses had to be kept at a walk. What could be taking place that all these people were about? The young ladies began to feel frightened, and Négrel scented some trouble in the quivering country. It was quite a relief when they at last reached Marchiennes. Beneath the sun which seemed to extinguish them, the rows of coke ovens and the towers of smelting furnaces belched forth their smoke, whose everlasting soot rained down from the heavens.

II

At the Jean-Bart pit, Catherine had been working for the last hour, pushing her trucks as far as the relay; but at last she was so thoroughly drenched with perspiration that she felt obliged to stop for a moment to wipe her face.

From the depths of the cutting where he was hewing away with his partners in the piece work they had undertaken, Chaval started as the rumble of the wheels ceased. The lamps were burning badly, and flying ambient coal-dust prevented them from seeing.

'What's up?' he cried.

When the young woman had answered him that she was melting away and that she felt ready to faint, he coarsely upbraided her.

Their cutting was over two thousand three hundred feet below the level, that is to the north, in the first gallery of the Désirée seam, lying nearly two miles from the bottom of the shaft. Whenever that part of the pit was mentioned, the miners of the region turned pale and lowered their voices, as if they were speaking of hell itself. In proportion as the galleries went northward they approached the Tartaret plain and almost penetrated to the conflagration which calcined the rocks above. The cuttings now being worked had an

average temperature of 113 degrees (Fahr.) and one there found oneself almost amidst the flames which the people of the plain could see casting up sulphur and noisome vapours.

Catherine felt so hot at last that she could bear it no longer, but divested herself of every superfluous article of clothes.

'I shall get along better like this,' she thought.

With the stifling sensation she experienced there was mixed a vague fear. During the five days that they had been at work there, she had constantly recalled the tales she had heard in childhood, tales of the trammer girls of yore who were burning beneath the Tartaret plain in punishment for conduct which none dared even specify. No doubt she was too big now to believe in that kind of rubbish; and yet, what could she do, she wondered, if all at once, starting from the wall, she should perceive a girl red like a burning stove, with eyes like flaming coals? The mere idea of this caused her to perspire the more.

The worst was that something besides the immediate neighbourhood of the Tartaret made the heat unbearable in this bottom gallery. It ran parallel to some old works, a very deep abandoned gallery of the Gaston-Marie pit, where ten years previously, a rush of fire-damp had set the seam on fire. This fire was still burning behind a wall of puddled clay built up and kept in constant repair in order to limit the damage. The fire ought to have died out for want of air, but it was no doubt kept alive by unknown currents, and it still heated the clay of the wall like the brickwork of an oven, to such a degree indeed that one was almost scorched when merely passing. And it was alongside this wall, for a length of over a hundred yards, that the haulage went on in a temperature of 140 degrees. After two more journeys, Catherine felt the stifling sensation come over her again. Fortunately, the road was commodious and broad in the Désirée seam, which was one of the thickest in the region. The bed was about six feet deep, and the men were able to work standing. Still, they would almost have preferred to dislocate their necks in exchange for a breath of air.

'I say, are you going to sleep?' howled Chaval, when he no longer heard Catherine moving about. 'A nice treat I'm having of it with you. Will you fill your truck, and be quick about it?'

She was at the bottom of the cutting, resting on her spade; and a kind of daze came over her, as she looked at

the others. She could scarcely see them by the reddish flicker of their lamps, toiling away naked, like the beasts of the field, and so black and so begrimed with sweat and coal-dust, that their nudity caused no embarrassment. Their occupations were hardly distinguishable; you saw but a set of ape-like figures straining to the utmost, a hellish vision of limbs exhausting their strength amidst dull thuds and groans. But they, no doubt, could distinguish her better, for the picks suddenly ceased to strike, and they began to chaff her, while Chaval cried: 'Curse you! will you be moving?'

Catherine by dint of effort refilled her truck, and pushed it along once more. The gallery was too broad for her to use the propping for support; her bare feet bent upon the rails, there seeking a kind of hold, while she advanced very slowly, her arms strained and her body bent in twain. And the moment she reached the clay wall her torture commenced anew, the perspiration burst in large drops from her body like a shower. When she had scarcely made a third of her journey she was drenched, blinded, and coated like the others with black sticky mud.

What was the matter with her that day? She had never felt so weak-limbed before. No doubt there must be a current of foul air. There was not sufficient ventilation down in that distant gallery. One inhaled all kinds of vapours that exuded from the coal with little gurgling sounds, in such abundance at times as almost to extinguish the lamps; without mentioning the presence of fire-damp, about which one did not even trouble, blowing, as it did, under the men's very noses, from one end of the fortnight to the other. She knew the foul air well enough, that deathly air, as the miners called it, compounded down below of heavy gases that asphyxiate, and above of lighter ones that take fire and fell every gang in the pit, hundreds of brave fellows at a single blast. From her very childhood she had swallowed so much of that air that she felt surprised at enduring it with such difficulty; there was a singing in her ears and her throat was on fire.

She still resisted, tried to trundle her truck again, but was obliged to rise erect once more. Then the singing in her ears deafened her. It seemed as if her head were caught in a vice and at last she dropped upon her knees. Her lamp, stuck amidst the coal in the truck, seemed to her to be going out. The idea of turning up the wick kept uppermost in her swimming brain; twice she examined it, and each time that

she placed it before her on the ground she saw it grow paler still, as if it lacked air like herself. And suddenly the lamp went out altogether and everything became wrapped in gloom. A millstone seemed to be whirling in her head, her heart failed her, almost ceased to beat, numbed, in its turn, by the utter exhaustion which rendered her limbs powerless. She fell backwards, and gasped for breath in the asphyxiating air level with the ground.

'Curse her! I think she's skulking again,' growled Chaval.

He stood listening from the top of the cutting, and failed to detect the sound of the wheels.

'Eh! Catherine, you lazy hussy!' His voice died away far down the black gallery, but not a word came in response. 'Do you want me to come and stir you up?' he shouted.

Still nothing moved; the same death-like silence continued. Quite furious, Chaval then came down, and, with his lamp in front of him, ran off so impetuously that he almost stumbled over the girl's body, which was barring the way. He stood staring at her, lost in astonishment. What was the matter with her? Was she playing some trick just to get a little nap? But the lamp which he held over her to glance at her face almost went out. He lifted it up, then held it down once more, and finished by understanding that it was the foul air that nearly extinguished it. Then his violence disappeared all of a sudden, the miner's devotion suddenly sprang up in his heart, in presence of a comrade in danger. He caught up the unconscious girl, holding her as high from the ground as possible, and started off at a gallop, steadying his burden with one hand, and carrying the two lamps with the other. Deep galleries opened before him; and still he ran on, turning now to the right, now to the left, in his search for life in that icy air which the ventilator brought from the plain. At last the sound of water stopped him: it was the gurgling of a spring trickling from the rock. He found himself in a large open space, a lofty haulage gallery which had formerly been the main way from the Gaston-Marie pit. Here the draught of fresh air blew with the violence of a squall, and the cold was so great that he shivered from head to foot when he had gently deposited the girl on the ground, against some propping. She was still unconscious, and her eyes were closed.

'Come, Catherine, dash it all! no nonsense. Hold yourself up a bit that I may dip this into the water.'

He felt frightened at seeing her so absolutely powerless. Nevertheless he managed to dip a rag he had about him in the water and sponge her face with it. She looked like a corpse, already laid beneath the earth, but at last a prolonged quiver passed through her, she opened her eyes, and sighed, 'I'm cold.'

'Well, I'd sooner have that!' exclaimed Chaval, in a tone of relief.

Then he nursed her and adjusted her garments, speaking very kindly as he did so. She had never known him to be so gentle with her. Generally every kind word he spoke was followed by a couple of curses. It would have been so nice to have agreed together! She was overcome with affection, weak as she still felt from her attack, and smiling at him she whispered, 'Kiss me.'

He did as he was asked, then sat down at her side, waiting until she should be able to walk again.

'Look here,' she said, 'you did wrong to shout at me yonder, for in all truth I could hold out no longer. In the cutting the heat is less; but if you only knew how one broils at the bottom of the gallery!'

'Well, of course, it'd be more pleasant under the trees. It's hard work, no doubt, in that part of the mine, poor girl,' he replied.

She felt so grateful at hearing him sympathise with her that she put on a courageous air: 'It all depends how one feels,' she said. 'Besides, the air is positively poisonous to-day. But you'll see by-and-by if I'm a lazybones. When one has to work, one works, isn't that so? I'd sooner die at it than give in.'

Then they remained silent awhile. He had his arm round her waist, and though she felt sufficiently strong to return to the cutting, she lingered there with evident delight.

'But I should like you to be nicer with me,' she continued in a very low voice. 'People are so happy when they love each other a bit.' And her tears flowed softly.

'But I am very fond of you,' he exclaimed; 'you know that well enough.'

She only replied by a shake of the head. There were men who thought only of themselves and who did not care a straw for the happiness of the girls who loved them. And her tears began to flow faster; she was overwhelmed with grief at the thought of the pleasant life that might have been hers, had

she fallen in with another lad, whose arm she would have always felt like this around her waist. Another? A vague image of that other arose before her amidst her increasing emotion. But that was all over; she only wished to live to the end with this one, if he would but refrain from knocking her about as he did.

'Well,' said she, 'you might try to be like this every now and then.' Sobs prevented her from saying more, and Chaval again kissed her.

'Don't be a fool! I promise you that I'll be nice. I'm not worse than another.'

She looked at him and a smile at last broke over her face. Perhaps he was right. Happy women were so seldom met in her class. And though she had not much faith in his promise, she was well pleased at seeing him, if only for a moment, so amiable. Ah! if it could only have lasted!

But three mates who had seen them pass came to ask what was the matter, and they all went back together. It was now close upon ten o'clock, and they breakfasted in a cool corner before beginning work again in the depths of their cutting. They were just finishing their bread, and were about to wash it down with a draught of coffee from their cans, when a noise coming from some of the most distant galleries made them uneasy. What was it? Another accident, perhaps. They rose and ran off. Hewers, trammer girls, and truller boys crossed them at every moment; and no one knew the truth, though all were shouting. Something dreadful had assuredly happened. Little by little the whole mine was growing frightened, panic-stricken shadows ever rushed out of the galleries, and the lamps bobbed up and down and disappeared in the gloom. Where was it? Why did no one say? Suddenly, however, a viewer passed along shouting:

'They're cutting the cables! They're cutting the cables!'

Then panic took possession of them all. A furious gallop along the dark passages ensued. They all lost presence of mind. Why were the cables being cut and who was cutting them, when men were still below? It seemed monstrous. But the voice of another viewer was heard for a moment, and then died away in the distance. 'The men from Montsou are cutting the cables! Everybody must get out!'

When Chaval understood the situation he stopped Catherine. The idea of meeting the men from Montsou up above paralysed him. It had come then, that band which

he already believed to be in the hands of the gendarmes! For a moment he thought of retracing his steps and getting out by way of the Gaston-Marie pit, but the gear there was no longer in working order. He hesitated, cursing, trying to hide his fear and repeating that it was idiotic to run like that. It was not likely that they would be left at the bottom!

But the voice of the viewer resounded anew, drawing nearer. 'Everybody must get out. To the ladders! to the ladders!'

Then Chaval was carried away with his mates. He hustled Catherine, accusing her of not running fast enough. Did she want them both to remain in the pit to die of starvation? for the Montsou brigands were capable of breaking the ladders without waiting until everyone had got out. This abominable supposition ended by upsetting them all. Along the galleries there was a mad race to arrive the first and to get up before the others. Some men shouted that the ladders were broken and that nobody could get out. And when they rushed in terror-stricken groups into the landing vault, a veritable break-neck affair ensued. They sprang towards the shaft, pressing towards the small doorway which led to the ladders, while an old ostler, who had prudently led his horses back to the stable and was accustomed to pass nights in the pit, looked at them with an air of contemptuous pity, certain that he himself would be taken out sooner or later.

'Curse it! will you get up in front of me?' shouted Chaval to Catherine. 'In that way at any rate, I shall be there to catch you if you fall.'

Dazed and suffocated by the run of over three thousand yards, which had once more drenched her with perspiration, Catherine yielded, without understanding, to the movements of the crowd. Then Chaval pulled her so roughly that he nearly wrung her arm from the socket, and she gave a cry of pain. Tears came into her eyes; so he had already forgotten his promise to her. No, she would never be happy.

'Pass in front!' he howled.

But he frightened her too much. If she went up before him, he would be rough with her the whole while. So she resisted, while the crowd of comrades kept pushing them aside. The water filtering through the shaft fell in large drops, and beneath the weight of so many people the boarding of the landing-place shook over the covered sump—a stagnant well, about thirty feet deep. Two years previously a terrible accident, the snapping of a cable, had sent the cage to the bottom of that well, and two men had been drowned.

They were all thinking of this, and felt that they would all leave their skins there, if they remained packed together on the boarding.

'You mule!' cried Chaval, 'get killed then; it'll be a good riddance.' Thereupon he began to climb and she followed him.

From the bottom to the top there were one hundred and two ladders of about three-and-twenty feet apiece, each standing on a narrow landing which occupied the whole width of the shaft with the exception of a square opening which scarcely allowed for the passage of a man's shoulders. It was like a chimney two thousand four hundred feet high, a narrow funnel, in which the ladders were superposed almost vertically in regular stories. It required five-and-twenty minutes for a powerful man to climb those ladders, which were only used in cases of sudden emergency.

At first Catherine went up nimbly and gaily enough. Her bare feet were used to the sharp shale of the galleries, and did not suffer from contact with the square rungs of the ladders which iron rods protected against wear and tear. Her hands, hardened by toil, easily grasped the uprights, though they were large for her. And her thoughts were diverted, she forgot her grief amidst that unforeseen ascent, that long, snake-like file of men, hoisting themselves up three on each ladder, so that the first would have reached daylight while the last were still on the sump. But they had not got as far as that yet. The first ones could not have climbed more than a third of the height. Every one had left off speaking; nothing was audible but the muffled pattering of feet; while the lamps, like so many shooting stars, showed at intervals from the top to the bottom in an ever-lengthening line.

Behind her Catherine heard a truller boy counting the ladders, and this gave her an idea of doing the same. They had already mounted fifteen and were nearing a junction. But at the same moment she got entangled in Chaval's legs. He swore, and bade her take care. Gradually the whole column stopped and became motionless. What was happening? Each suddenly found his voice to inquire and to express his fears. At last somebody shouted that they had better go down again, that the ladders were broken. The fear of all was that they might find themselves before a void. But another explanation ran from mouth to mouth: a hewer had slipped from one of the rungs. Nothing was rightly known, the hubbub prevented them from hearing anything distinctly, and every

one at last began to ask whether they were going to stop there for the night. Finally, without the mystery being explained, the ascent began anew in the same slow, laborious fashion, amidst the pattering of feet and the dancing of lamps. The broken ladders would be found higher up no doubt.

At the thirty-second ladder, just as they were passing a third junction, Catherine felt her arms and legs grow stiff. She had at first experienced a slight pricking like 'pins-and-needles' in the flesh. At present she no longer felt the wood or iron under her feet or in her grasp. A pain which she could not define, but which grew sharper each minute, seemed to set her muscles all aglow. And amidst the giddiness that came over her she recalled a story told by grandfather Jollycorpse, of the times when there was no proper shaft, and when girls of ten brought the coal to the top on their shoulders, up ladders placed without any protection; in such wise that whenever one of them slipped, or whenever a lump of coal fell out of a basket, three or four children went to the bottom head downwards. Meantime the cramps in her limbs became unbearable; she felt that she would never get to the top.

Three fresh stoppages enabled her to regain breath. But the gust of panic which each time descended from above ended by completely unnerving her. Above and below her the panting grew more pronounced; a kind of vertigo came from this interminable ascent, the sickening sensation of which shook her like the others. She felt stifled by the gloom, exasperated by the contact of the walls with her flesh. She quivered also with the dampness, perspiring beneath a rain of big drops that drenched her. They were getting nearer to the level, and that rain came down so heavily as to threaten to extinguish the lamps.

Twice had Chaval addressed her without obtaining any answer. What was she doing just below him that she couldn't answer? She might at any rate tell him if she were holding out. They had been ascending for the last half hour, but so slowly that they had only reached the fifty-ninth ladder. There were still forty-three to climb. Catherine ended by telling him that she was able to hold out. He would have called her lazy if she had admitted her weariness. The iron of the rungs seemed to be entering into the flesh of her feet; she felt as though she were being cut to the bone. At each step she expected her hands to relax their hold upon the uprights, stiff and sore as they were. She was unable to close her fingers, and ever fancied she was going to drop

backward. It was above all the almost vertical position of the ladders that made her suffer, for she was obliged to hoist herself upward by the strength of her wrists with her body pressed close to the woodwork. The panting of the climbers' breath now drowned the pattering of their feet; a great gasp, rendered the louder by repercussion within that narrow space, rose from below and died away in the daylight. Suddenly there was a groan, and exclamations arose: a truller boy had split his skull against a landing-bar.

And still Catherine ascended. They passed the level. The downpour had now ceased and a mist thickened the cavernous air, reeking of old iron and damp wood. She mechanically persisted in counting the ladders in a low voice: eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three; still nineteen to come. Those figures, incessantly repeated, alone supported her by the swing of their rhythm. She was no longer conscious of her movements; whenever she raised her eyes, the lamps seemed to revolve in a spiral whirl. She was bleeding, and felt herself dying; the least breath of wind would topple her over. The worst was that those below were now pushing, that the whole column was rushing upward yielding to the growing anger of fatigue, to a furious craving to behold the sun once more. Some comrades, the first, had already emerged from the shaft; so there were no broken ladders; but the thought that they might yet be smashed to prevent the last comers from getting out when the others were breathing freely up yonder quite maddened them. And as another stoppage occurred, oaths and curses burst forth; all continued to mount, struggling one with another, trying to pass over one another's bodies with the intention of getting out in spite of all.

Then Catherine fell. She called on Chaval in a last desperate appeal. But he did not hear. He was battling, digging his heels into the ribs of his mates to get up before them. And she was rolled about, trampled upon. In her swoon she seemed to dream. It appeared to her that she was one of those little trammer girls of long ago, and that a lump of coal, having fallen from a basket above her, had sent her to the bottom of the pit, just like a sparrow struck by a stone. There remained now only five ladders to climb; the journey had lasted nearly an hour. Catherine never knew how she reached daylight, borne upward on men's shoulders, prevented from falling by the narrowness of the shaft. Suddenly she found herself in dazzling sunshine, amidst a howling crowd that hooted her.

III

At early morn, even before daybreak, a fever of excitement had thrilled the villages, that excitement which now was increasing along the highroads throughout the whole region. But the start agreed upon could not take place; for the news spread that dragoons and gendarmes were beating the plain. It was said that they had come from Douai during the night. Rasseneur was accused of having sold his mates by warning Monsieur Hennebeau. A trammer girl even went the length of swearing that she had seen the footman carrying the message for the soldiers to the telegraph office. The miners clenched their fists, and watched the troops from behind their shutters by the pale glimmer of dawn.

Towards half-past seven, as the sun was rising, another rumour of a nature to reassure the impatient went the rounds. It was all a false alarm, a simple military promenade, such as the general had often ordered since the strike had begun, at the desire of the prefect of Lille. The men on strike detested that functionary, whom they reproached with having deceived them by the promise of friendly intervention, which intervention was confined to making a show of troops at Montsou every week for the evident purpose of keeping them in fear. When, therefore, the dragoons and gendarmes again quietly took the road to Marchiennes, after deafening the villages with the clatter of their horses' hoofs over the frozen ground, the miners jeered at that simpleton of a prefect, whose soldiers showed their heels when things promised to be lively. Until nine o'clock they took matters gaily, standing with peaceful mien outside their cottages and watching the backs of the departing gendarmes. The good folk of Montsou were still asleep with their heads deep in their pillows. At the director's house Madame Hennebeau had just been seen going off in her carriage, leaving Monsieur Hennebeau no doubt busy with his work, for the dwelling, closed and silent, seemed lifeless. There was not a single pit guarded by the military; it was the usual fatal improvidence at the hour of danger, the natural lack of wisdom at the moment of a catastrophe, the very fault that a government is likely to commit when facts call upon it to act intelligently.

And nine o'clock had scarcely struck when the pitmen at last took the road to Vandame, to keep the appointment decided upon the previous night in the forest.

Étienne at once understood that yonder, at the Jean-Bart pit, he would not have the three thousand comrades on which he had counted. Many thought that the demonstration had been postponed, and the worst was that two or three bands, already on their way, would compromise matters if he did not put himself at their head. Nearly a hundred men, who had started before daylight, had been obliged to take refuge under the beeches in the forest while waiting for the others. Souvarine, whom the young man went to consult, shrugged his shoulders. According to him, ten resolute men were worth a whole crowd; and that said, he again plunged into a book which lay open before him. He refused to be one of the party, for the whole business threatened to take a sentimental turn again, when it would have been sufficient to set Montsou on fire, which was a very simple matter. As Étienne went along the tavern passage, he espied Rasseneur seated in front of the fireplace and looking very pale, whilst his wife, who seemed taller than ever in her eternal black dress, was railing at him in polite but cutting words.

Maheu was of opinion that the promise given should be kept. Such an appointment was sacred. Nevertheless night had calmed his fever, and he now feared some misfortune, and explained that it was their duty to go yonder in order to keep their mates within proper bounds. La Maheude approved with a nod of the head. Étienne for his part kept on repeating complacently that before all they must act as revolutionists, but without attempting to take anybody's life. Before starting he refused his share of a loaf which had been given him the night before, with a bottle of gin; but he drained three little glasses of the spirits, just to keep the cold out of him. He even took a flaskful for the same purpose. It was arranged that Alzire should mind the children. As for old Jollycorpse, his legs still being stiff from their exertions of the previous night, he was obliged to keep his bed.

They did not all start together for prudence' sake. Jeanlin had gone off long before. Maheu and his wife departed in a slanting direction, as if bound for Montsou, while Étienne made for the forest, where he wished to join his comrades. On his way he came up with a band of women, among whom he recognised the Scorched One and La Levaque, who were

munching chestnuts provided by La Mouquette. They ate even the skins so that they might fill themselves the more. But in the forest the young man found nobody; the others were at Jean-Bart already. Thereupon he set off at a run and arrived in view of the pit just as Levaque and a hundred others invaded the enclosure. Miners were now flowing in from all sides—the Maheus by the highroad and the women across the fields, all in straggling bands, without leaders or weapons, but naturally converging towards that one spot. Étienne perceived Jeanlin perched upon a hanging gangway, as much at home as in a theatre. He ran faster still, and entered the yards with the foremost ones. They were at this moment scarcely three hundred, all told.

There was some slight hesitation when Deneulin appeared at the top of the staircase that led to the receiving staith.

'What do you want?' he asked, in a loud voice.

After watching the landau, from which his daughters smiled at him, until it was out of sight, he had returned to the pit, seized with a vague uneasiness. Everything, however, was then in good order there; the men had gone down and the coal was coming up in regular fashion. So once more he felt reassured, and was talking with his head viewer when he was apprised of the approach of the men on strike. He then quickly posted himself at a window of the sifting shed, and on seeing the crowd increase and invade the enclosure, he immediately became conscious of his powerlessness. How could he defend those buildings which opened on all sides? He could scarcely gather a score of his workmen round him. He was lost.

'What do you want?' he repeated, pale with suppressed anger, and making an effort to accept the disaster courageously.

There was no end of pushing and growling in the crowd, but at last Étienne stepped forward and said:

'We have not come to do you any harm, sir. But work must cease everywhere.'

Deneulin boldly called him a fool. 'Do you think you'll do me any good by stopping the work at my place? It's the same as if you lodged a bullet in my back. Yes, my men are below, and they'll not come up, unless you murder me first.'

This rough-spoken speech raised a clamour. Maheu had to restrain Levaque, who made a threatening rush, while Étienne still tried negotiation, seeking to convince Deneulin of the lawfulness of their revolutionary action. But the

other replied by claiming the right of every man to work if he chose. Besides, he flatly refused to discuss all such nonsense; he intended to remain master in his own place. He only regretted that he had not got four gendarmes at hand to sweep all that rabble away.

'It's absolutely my own fault, and I deserve it. With fellows of your sort there's only one kind of remedy—armed force. There's the Government which imagines that it can keep you quiet by concessions. But you'll simply knock it over the moment it supplies you with arms.'

Though Étienne was quivering with rage he still contained himself. He even lowered his voice as he said: 'I beg you, sir, give orders for your workmen to come up. I can't answer for my mates. You can prevent a misfortune.'

'No! go to the devil! What do I know of you? You don't belong to my pit. You've no business with me. It's only brigands who overrun the country like this, to pillage everything.'

Loud vociferations drowned his voice; the women were the most violent in insulting him. And he, holding out against them, experienced a kind of relief in frankly venting his feelings as a master. In any case all this meant ruin, so he thought it cowardly to waste his time in useless platitudes. But the number of the others kept on increasing, nearly five hundred were already making for the doorway, and he was on the point of being torn to pieces, when his head viewer violently dragged him back, saying:

'For goodness' sake, sir! It'll be nothing less than a massacre. What is the good of having a lot of men killed for nothing?'

He struggled, he protested in a final cry flung to the crowd:

'You set of thieves, you'll pay for all this when once we get the upper hand again.'

He was led away. A rush had thrown the first of the band against the staircase, the railing of which got twisted. It was the women who were pushing, yelling, gesticulating and egging on the men. The door gave way at once, a door without a lock and only fastened with a latch. But the stairs were too narrow; with such a crush, the mob could not have entered for ever so long, if the tail end of the besiegers had not thought of gaining admission by other openings. From that moment they overflowed on all sides, in the waiting shed, the receiving staith, the boiler-room. In less than five

from ear to ear in the satisfaction he felt at having let such a tempest loose.

This lasted for nearly a quarter of an hour. A few pails of water were thrown on the heaps of coal to finally extinguish them; and thus all danger of fire was averted. But the anger of the crowd had not abated; on the contrary, it had increased. Men came down armed with hammers, the women took up bars of iron, and they talked of knocking in the boilers, smashing the engines, and making an end of the works altogether. Étienne, on being warned, hurried to the spot with Maheu. He himself was growing intoxicated, carried away by this burning fever of revenge. He struggled, nevertheless; implored them to remain calm, now that work had become impossible through the cables being cut, the fires extinguished, and the boilers emptied. But they refused to listen to him, and he was about to be overwhelmed once more, when a tremendous hooting arose outside, at a low door leading to the ladders.

'Down with the traitors! Oh! the dirty mugs! Down with them! down with them!'

The first workmen were coming from below. They stood there for a moment blinking, dazed by the bright daylight. Then they hurried on, trying to reach the highroad and flee.

'Down with the cowards! Down with the false friends!'

The whole band of strikers flocked to the spot. In less than three minutes not one was left in the buildings. The five hundred from Montsou ranged themselves in double file to force the traitors of Vandame to pass between them. And as each miner appeared in the little doorway, with his clothes in rags and covered with mud, the hooting increased and ferocious jokes were indulged in: why that one hadn't got legs three inches long! and that one, just look at his nose, he had lost it from some horrid complaint! and that one too had enough wax in his eyes to light up ten cathedrals! and that other, as tall as a lamp-post, and as flat as a pancake! An extremely plump trammer girl came in for a good deal of the pleasantry. But before long the chaff took a nasty turn and blows seemed likely to fly about, while the poor devils continued to pass, all shivering and silent under the insults heaped upon them, and only too happy when they could at last run out of the enclosure around the pit-works.

'How many more are there?' at last asked Étienne. He was surprised to see no end to the procession; he felt irritated

at the idea that this was no question of a few workmen, driven below by hunger, terrorised by the viewers. They had told him a lie, then, in the forest? Nearly the whole staff of Jean-Bart had gone down. But suddenly a cry escaped him, and he rushed forward, for he saw Chaval standing on the threshold.

'D——! is this the appointment to which you invited us?'

Imprecations burst forth on all sides; there was a rush to get at the traitor. What! hadn't he taken the oath with them the night before? And here he was found below with the others!

'Seize him! To the shaft! to the shaft!'

Chaval, pale with fright, stammered forth a few words and endeavoured to explain. But he was prevented by Étienne, who was now beside himself, seized with the same fury as all the others. 'You wanted to be with us: you shall! Come! quick march, you beastly sneak!'

Another clamour drowned his voice, for Catherine had appeared in her turn, dazzled by the sunlight, frightened at falling amidst those savages. With her legs tired out by the hundred and two ladders they had climbed, and the palms of her hands bleeding from incessant grasping of the uprights, she stood panting for breath, when La Maheude, perceiving her, rushed towards her with uplifted hand.

'Ah, you dirty hussy, you there also! When your mother is starving, you betray her for your bully!'

Maheu held back his wife's arm and prevented the blow from descending. But he shook his daughter, and like her mother, he passionately reproached her with her conduct. Meantime the sight of Catherine had put the finishing touch to Étienne's exasperation, and he kept on repeating: 'Forward! to the other pits. And you must come with us, you dirty pig!'

Chaval had scarcely time to take his clogs from the shed and throw his woollen jersey over his shivering shoulders. They all dragged him along, compelling him to run amidst them. Scarcely knowing what she was about, Catherine also put on her clogs, buttoned up an old man's jacket, with which she protected herself against the cold, and ran behind her lover. She did not want to leave him, for they would surely murder him.

In two minutes the enclosure of the Jean-Bart pit was empty. Jeanlin, who had found a horn, blew some strident notes as if he had been calling a herd of cattle together. The

women—the Scorched One, La Levaque, La Mouquette—tucked up their skirts in order to be able to run the faster; while Levaque, a hatchet in his hand, brandished it as a drum-major wields his stick. Other mates were still coming up; they were nearly a thousand now, all in disorder, running loose on the road, like an overflowing torrent. The exit from the yard was too narrow for them, so they tore down the palings.

'To the pits! Down with the traitors! No more work!'

And then deep silence once more fell upon Jean-Bart. Not a man was to be seen, not a sound to be heard. Deneulin came out of the viewers' room, and, forbidding anyone to follow him, made the round of the buildings. He was very pale, very calm. First of all, he stopped before the shaft, looked up and saw the severed cables, their twisted strands dangling uselessly. The cut of the file had, as it were, left an open wound, showing fresh and bright amidst the black grease. Next he went up to the machine and contemplated the motionless driving-rod, which suggested a limb struck with paralysis. He touched the metal, which was already cold, and the chill made him shudder, as though he had touched a corpse. Then he went down to the boilers, walked slowly to and fro before the extinguished, gaping, flooded furnaces, and struck his foot against the generators which gave out a hollow sound. Yes, it was really all over: his ruin was becoming an accomplished fact. Even if he should repair the cables, even if he should relight the fires, where could he find men? Another fortnight's strike, and he would be a bankrupt. And, in the certainty of his misfortune, he no longer felt any hatred against the Montsou brigands. He was conscious of the complicity of one and all, the generality of errors, century-old. No doubt those men and girls were brutes, but brutes who could not read, and who were starving to death.

IV

And over the low open plain, lying frost-covered beneath the pale winter sun, the mob tramped along, overflowing from the highroad into the beetroot fields on either side.

On reaching the Bulls' Fork Étienne had assumed command. Without stopping he gave orders and organised the march. Jeanlin, at the head, galloped along, playing

barbarous music on his horn. Then in the first ranks were the women, some armed with sticks—La Maheude with will eyes that seemed to seek the promised city of justice in the distance; La Levêque, the Scorched One, La Mouquette, ald keeping step under their rags, like soldiers going to war. In the event of any untoward meeting, they would see whether the gendarmes would dare to strike women. And the men followed in herd-like confusion, in an ever-swelling procession, bristling with iron bars and dominated by Levaque's hatchet, which shone in the sunlight. In the centre, Étienne did not take his eyes off Chaval, whom he forced to march in front of him; while Maheu, looking very sombre, cast frequent glances at Catherine, who was the only woman among the men, and persistently trotted by the side of her lover so that no harm might come to him. Bare heads became dishevelled in the wind; no sound was heard but the clanking of clogs, suggesting the gallop of a herd of roaming cattle, carried along by Jeanlin's wild blast.

But all at once a new cry arose.

'Bread! bread! bread!'

It was mid-day; the hunger born of six weeks' strike awakened in those empty stomachs whose appetite was roused by the mad rush across the fields. The few crusts eaten in the morning, La Mouquette's chestnuts too, were already digested; and hunger's sufferings were added to fury against the traitors.

'To the pits! No more work! Bread!'

Étienne, who had refused to eat his share at the village, experienced an unbearable gnawing sensation within him. He did not complain, but, with a mechanical movement, raised his flask every now and again and swallowed a mouthful of gin, for he quivered to such a degree that he fancied he needed it to carry him through to the end. His face became inflamed, his eyes flashed fire. Nevertheless, he kept his senses about him; he still wished to avoid useless destruction. As they arrived at the Joiselle road, a hewer from Vandame, who had joined the strikers out of spite against his employer, wanted to lead his comrades to the right, and howled:

'To Gaston-Marie! Let's stop the pumps! We'll have Jean-Bart flooded!'

The mob, carried away, was already turning in the direction indicated, in spite of the protest of Étienne, who implored them not to meddle with the water. What was the good of

destroying the galleries? Such action went against his workman's heart, notwithstanding his resentment. Maheu also thought it unfair to wreak one's vengeance on mere machinery. But the hewer kept bawling out his cry for revenge, and Étienne was obliged to shout louder than he:

'To Mirou! There're traitors down below there! To Mirou! to Mirou!'

With a sweep of the hand, he brought the crowd to the left, while Jeanlin, returning to his position at its head, blew his horn louder than ever. For a moment there was great confusion, but Gaston-Marie was that time saved.

And the three miles that separated them from Mirou were covered in a run of about half an hour over the plain. The canal, which lay in that direction, intersected it with a long ribbon of ice. Only the bare trees on the banks, transformed by the frost into giant candelabra, relieved the monotony of that level, uniform expanse which stretched into the very horizon as into a sea. An undulation of the ground hid Montsou and Marchiennes from view; nothing was visible but barren immensity.

As they neared the pit they saw a viewer post himself on a gangway of the sifting shed to receive them. Everybody knew old Quandieu, the oldest of the Montsou viewers, all white of skin and white of hair, who was nearing his seventieth year, and was a real miracle of good health among the miners.

'What have you come here for, you vagabonds?' he cried.

The band stopped. It was no longer with a master, but with a comrade, that they had to deal; and a certain feeling of respect made them restrain themselves before that aged workman.

'There're men below,' said Étienne. 'Make them come up.'

'Yes, there are men below,' answered old Quandieu, 'there are as many as six dozen; the others were afraid of you, you rascals! But I warn you that not one of those below will come up, or you'll have me to deal with!'

Angry words arose, the men pushed, the women advanced. Quickly descending from the gangway, the viewer stood at the gate.

Then Maheu interposed.

'Old chap,' said he, 'it's our right; how can we possibly make the strike a general one if we don't compel our mates to join us?'

The old man stood for a moment without answering.

Evidently his ignorance in matters of coalition equalled that of the hewer. But at last he replied: 'It's your right; I don't say the contrary. But I only know my instructions. I'm alone here. The men are to stay below till three o'clock, and till three o'clock they'll remain there.'

The last words were lost amidst general hooting. Fists were shaken at him and the women were already deafening him by shouting their hardest, while their hot breath blew in his face. But he stood firm, his head erect, his beard and hair as white as snow; and courage so swelled his voice that he could be distinctly heard above the tumult.

'D—— ! you sh'an't pass! As true as the sun is shining down on us, I'd sooner die than let you touch the cables. So don't push, or I'll chuck myself down the shaft before you!'

A shudder ran through the crowd, which drew back, quite staggered. And he continued: 'Where's the pig that can't understand that? I'm only a workman like yourselves. I've been told to take care of the place, and I'll take care of it.'

Intelligence went no farther than this with old Quandieu, with his unbending military obstinacy, his narrow skull, and his eyes dulled by the black melancholy of half a century's work below. The miners looked at him, stirred as by an echo of his words somewhere within them, an echo which spoke of a soldier's implicit obedience, of fraternity and resignation in the hour of danger. He imagined they were still hesitating, and repeated, 'I'll chuck myself down the shaft before you.'

A great counter shock carried off the crowd. They all turned their backs on him, and the gallop began afresh along the straight road stretching amidst the fields. Once more cries arose: 'To Madeleine! To Crèvecœur! No more work! Bread! bread!'

But in the centre, amidst the bustle of the march, a disturbance had taken place. Chaval, it was said, had tried to profit by the tumult to escape. Étienne caught hold of him by one arm, threatening to break his ribs if he found him attempting any underhand trick; and the other struggled, and furiously protested: 'What's all this for? Isn't a man free then? I've been freezing for the last hour, I want to wash myself. Let go of me!'

He was indeed suffering from all the coal-dust which perspiration caused to adhere to his skin, and his jersey scarcely protected him from the cold.

'Get on, or else we'll wash you,' responded Étienne. 'You shouldn't have tried to improve upon things by asking for blood,

They were still on the run, and he ended by turning towards Catherine, who kept up without flagging. It hurt him to have her so close to him, wretched and shivering in her old vest and muddy trousers. She must be dying of fatigue. Still she kept running on.

'You can go, you can,' he said to her at last.

Catherine seemed not to hear. There was only a flash of reproach in her eyes as they met Étienne's. She did not stop. Why did he want her to leave her lover? Chaval was not very gentle with her; he even thrashed her at times. But he was her lover for all that; and it made her furious to think that they were falling upon him by the thousand. She would have defended him, not from any regard for him, but simply from a feeling of pride.

'Be off!' repeated Maheu violently.

Her father's command made her slacken her pace for a moment. She trembled and tears hung on her eyelids. Then, notwithstanding her fears, she came back and resumed her place, still running on. So they ceased to take notice of her.

The crowd crossed the Joiselle road, followed that of Cron for a moment, and then made its way towards Cougny. On that side factory chimneys streaked the flat horizon; and wooden sheds and workshops built of brick, with large dusty windows, followed one after another along the paved highway. The mob passed successively the low cottages of two miners' villages—that of the Hundred-and-Eighty, then that of the Seventy-Six; and at each, at the sound of the horn, at the clamour that came from so many mouths, families left their homes, men, women, and children ran up and joined their comrades. When they reached the Madeleine pit, there were at least fifteen hundred of them. The road here dipped down a gentle slope and the roaring wave of strikers had to sweep round a mound of shale before spreading over the yards.

It was scarcely two o'clock, but the viewers, who had been warned, had hurried on the 'coming up,' so that when the mob arrived the ascent was almost over. There remained, at the most, a score of men, who were just stepping from the cages. They ran off, but were pursued and pelted with stones. Two got beaten and another left the sleeve of his vest in the hands of his assailants. This man-hunt saved the plant; neither the cables nor the boilers were touched. The crowd was already drifting away, making for the next pit.

This one, Crèvecœur, was scarcely five hundred yards

distant from Madeleine. And here again the mob arrived as the colliers were leaving. A trammer girl was seized and whipped by the women, while the men stood looking on and laughing. The trimmer lads got slapped at random, and the hewers ran off, with their ribs black and blue, and their noses bleeding. And amidst this increasing ferocity, amidst this craving for revenge, which turned everybody's head, the cries continued, demanding the death of traitors and proclaiming the hatred of labour underpaid, and the desperation of empty stomachs, eager for bread. They tried to cut the cables, but the files did not bite, and the job seemed too long a one now that they were possessed by the fever of rushing onward, ever onward. Anyhow, in the boiler-room a tap was smashed; and water thrown in bucketfuls into the furnaces made the cast iron grates crack to pieces.

Once outside again, the crowd spoke of going to Saint-Thomas. This was the best disciplined pit; the strike had not affected it. At least seven hundred men had gone down there that morning, and the knowledge of this exasperated the mob. The workers should be received in battle array with sticks, to see how many would remain on the field. But a rumour spread that there were gendarmes at Saint-Thomas, the gendarmes of the morning, about whom there had been so much chaff. How was it known? No one could say. Nevertheless, the crowd grew afraid, and decided for Feutry-Cantel instead. There were at least four hundred sneaks there, so there would be some fun! And excitement took possession of them once more; in a twinkling they were on the road again, clanking their clogs, and roaring: 'To Feutry-Cantel! Feutry-Cantel!' This pit was about a couple of miles away in a bend of the Scarpe valley. They were already climbing the slope of the plaster-works, beyond the road to Beaugnies, when a voice that remained unknown suggested that the dragoons might perhaps be yonder at Feutry-Cantel. Then, from one to the other end of the column it was repeated that the dragoons were there. Sudden hesitation slackened the march; panic gradually swept across that region, lifeless from lack of work, which they had been overrunning since the morning. Why had they not come upon any soldiers yet? The impunity they met with troubled them, as they thought of the repression which must be in store for them.

Though nobody knew whence it came, a fresh cry urged them towards another pit.

'To the Victory! to the Victory!'

Were there neither dragoons nor gendarmes at the Victory, then? No one knew; but they took it for granted that there were none. And making a change of front they descended towards Beaumont, and cut across the fields to the Joiselle road once more. The railway barred their progress, but they crossed it after knocking down a wooden fence. They were drawing near to Montsou now, the slight undulations of the ground gradually disappeared, and at last the ocean of beetroot fields spread right away to the black houses of Marchiennes.

This time they had a journey of over three miles before them. But they were so excited that they did not feel the terrible weariness of their torn, bleeding feet. They had considerably increased in numbers, reinforced by all the comrades they had picked up on their way through the villages. When they had crossed the canal by the Magache bridge and presented themselves at the Victory pit they numbered two thousand. But it had struck three o'clock; the coming up was over and not a man remained below. Their disappointment found vent in useless threats; the only ones whom they were able to treat to a storm of brickbats were some quarrymen, who were just arriving to go down. These stampeded, and the strikers took possession of the deserted pit. In their rage at having no traitor to vent their spite upon, they revenged themselves upon things. An abscess of rancour was bursting within them, an abscess that had swollen and festered gradually. Years and years of starvation now tortured them with a craving for massacre and destruction.

Behind a shed Étienne perceived some truck men who were filling a tumbrel with coal.

'Will you be off?' he shouted. 'Not a lump shall be taken away.'

Under his orders, a hundred strikers hastened to the spot, and the truck men scarcely had time to escape. Some of the men took out the horses, who, prodded with a pitchfork, got frightened, and galloped off, while the rest of the crew, tilting the tumbrel over, broke the shafts.

Levaque had meantime attacked the settleboards with his hatchet, in order to bring down the gangways. They resisted, and he then had the idea of tearing up the rails so as to destroy the iron way from one end of the enclosure to the other. In a short time the whole crowd busied themselves with this work; Maheu, using his iron bar as a lever, forced

the rail chairs. Meanwhile, the Scorched One, dragging the women in her train, invaded the lamp shed, where in a few minutes their sticks littered the floor with the remains of every lamp. La Maheude, beside herself, struck as hard as La Levaque, and they soaked themselves with oil. La Mouquette wiped her hands on her skirt, laughing at being so dirty. Just for a lark, Jeanlin emptied a lamp down her back.

But all this vengeance provided nothing to eat. The cry of hunger became louder still. One great lamentation was heard above all the other sounds: 'Bread! bread! bread!'

It so happened that at the Victory an old viewer kept a canteen. No doubt he had become frightened, for his little shed was deserted. When the women came back, and the men had finished tearing up the rails, they besieged the canteen, whose shutters at once gave way. But they found no bread; the only edibles inside were two pieces of raw meat and a sack of potatoes. During the pillage, however, about fifty bottles of gin were discovered, and the contents of these disappeared like a drop of water, sucked up by sand.

Étienne, having emptied his flask, was now able to refill it. A terrible attack of drunkenness, the intoxication of the famished, gradually turned his eyes bloodshot, and gave a wolfish look to his teeth between his pale lips. All at once he noticed that Chaval had got away in the midst of the hubbub. At this he swore wildly, but some men ran in search of the runaway, and soon found him and Catherine, hiding behind a stack of propping.

'Ah! you dirty villain, you're afraid to compromise yourself!' yelled Étienne. 'It was you who in the forest declared that the engine-men must come out so as to stop the pumps, and now you try to back out of it! Well, curse you! we'll go back to Gaston-Marie, and you shall smash the pump yourself. Yes, curse you! you shall smash it!'

He was drunk, he himself sent his men against this pump, which a few hours previously he had saved.

'To Gaston-Marie! To Gaston-Marie!'

They all applauded the idea, and hurried off; whilst Chaval, seized by the shoulders, dragged, pushed, and hustled, still kept asking them to let him wash himself.

'Be off!' shouted Maheu to Catherine, who had resumed her former place.

This time she did not even draw back, but simply raised her glowing eyes to her father, and continued running on.

Once more did the crowd cut across the bare plain. It retraced its steps along the straight roads and the ever-spreading fields. It was four o'clock; the sun, already low on the skyline, cast long shadows of the furiously gesticulating mob over the frost-bound soil.

They kept clear of Montsou and joined the Joiselle road higher up; and to avoid the round of the Bulls' Fork, they passed under the walls of La Piolaine. The Grégoires had just gone out to call on the notary, before dining at the Hennebeaus', where they were to meet Cécile. The whole property seemed to be asleep, with its avenue of lime-trees deserted, its orchard and kitchen garden stripped bare by winter. Nothing stirred in the house, the closed windows of which were clouded by the hot atmosphere within. And from amidst the profound silence came an impression of material welfare—of downy beds, good cheer, and prudent, happy life, such as the owners indeed lived.

Without stopping, the crowd cast dark glances through the iron gates, and along the protecting walls bristling with broken glass. Then the cry rose once more: 'Bread! bread! bread!'

The only response was the furious barking of the dogs, a couple of great Danes which rose on their hind legs with their jaws open. Behind the closed shutters there were only the two servants, Mélanie, the cook, and Honorine, the maid, who had been attracted by the shouts, and who turned pale with fear at the sight of those savages. They fell on their knees, and fancied themselves dead, when they heard a stone—a single one—shattering a pane of glass in the next window. It was simply some playfulness on the part of Jeanlin, who had manufactured a sling with a piece of cord, and thought he would leave a passing greeting to the Grégoires. He had already begun blowing his horn again, and the band soon disappeared in the distance, though one could still hear its cry: 'Bread! bread! bread!'

They reached Gaston-Marie with their numbers still farther increased. There were now more than two thousand five hundred madmen, smashing everything, sweeping everything before them with the gathering force of a torrent rolling resistlessly on its way. Some gendarmes had passed the pit an hour previously, and had gone in the direction of Saint-Thomas, misdirected by some peasants, and without even taking the precaution to leave a few men on guard. In less than a quarter of an hour the fires were put out, the boilers

emptied, the buildings invaded and devastated. But it was, above all, the pumping engine that here aroused their ire. It was not sufficient that it should stop working when the last puff of steam was gone. They flung themselves upon it as on a living person whose life they wished to take.

'To you the first blow!' repeated Étienne, putting a sledge-hammer into Chaval's hand. 'Look sharp! You swore with the others!'

Chaval trembled and drew back; and in the scuffle that ensued the hammer dropped from his grasp, while the others, without waiting, assailed and demolished the pump with iron bars, brickbats, everything, indeed, that came to their hands. Some even broke sticks upon it. The screw-nuts snapped off, the brass and steel became dislocated like limbs wrenched apart. One tremendous blow from a spade broke the cast-iron body, and the water escaped with a gurgling sound, ending in a last gasp like that of a dying man.

At last the mob found itself outside once more—madly pressing behind Étienne, who still had hold of Chaval.

'Death to the traitor! To the shaft! to the shaft with him!'

The poor wretch, livid with fear, stammered with the stupid obstinacy of his fixed idea, that he wanted to wash himself.

'Wait a bit, if that's all that bothers you,' said La Levaque. 'Look! here's a tub!'

She alluded to a kind of pool, formed by the infiltration of water from the pump. It was white with a thick coating of ice; but they none the less pushed him towards it, broke the ice, and compelled him to dip his head in the terribly cold water.

'Dip your head!' repeated the Scorched One. 'Curse you! if you don't dip, you shall be chucked into it. And now you're going to have a drink; yes, yes! like an animal, with your snout in the trough!'

They made him drink on all fours, laughing the while with cruel laughter. One woman pulled his ears, and another threw a handful of dirt at him. His old jersey no longer held together, it was in shreds. And haggard, he kept stumbling and bucking, trying to get away. Maheu pushed him, La Maheude was among the bitterest against him, both of them thus avenging their old grievances. Even La Mouquette, who, as a rule, remained friendly towards her former sweethearts, upbraided him like a madwoman. But Étienne made her leave off. 'That'll do! There's no need for all of

you to be at him. If you like,' continued he, addressing himself to Chaval, 'we'll settle this matter between ourselves.'

He clenched his fists as he spoke, and his eyes flashed with a murderous fire; his drunkenness was turning into a craving to kill.

'Are you ready? One of us must remain on the ground. Give him a knife. I've got mine.'

Catherine, exhausted, terror-stricken, looked at Étienne. She remembered what he had told her the first day they had talked together; the mad passion he felt to do for somebody the moment he had swallowed his third glass of spirits. It was a desire latent in the poisoned blood he had inherited from his drunken parents. And suddenly she flung herself upon him, slapping him with both hands and shouting full in his face, though she almost choked with indignation: 'Coward! coward! coward! Aren't all these abominations enough? You wish to murder him then, now that he has not even strength left to keep on his legs!'

And she turned towards her father and mother; she turned towards all the others: 'You're a set of cowards! cowards! Kill me with him, then! I'll fly at your faces if you touch him again! Oh! the cowards!'

And she planted herself before Chaval—she defended him, forgetting his blows and the life of misery he had led her, roused by the idea that she belonged to him, and that it was a disgrace to her when they treated him like that. Étienne had turned livid beneath the girl's slaps. At first he had been on the point of strangling her. Then, after wiping his face, with the gesture of a man who by a violent effort tries to sober himself, he said to Chaval, amidst the deep silence: 'She's right, you've had enough. Be off!'

Chaval bolted at once, and the girl trotted off behind. The crowd, dumb-stricken, watched them disappear at a bend of the road. La Maheude alone murmured: 'You did wrong; you ought to have kept him. He's sure to play us some dirty trick.'

But the mob had resumed its march. Five o'clock was on the point of striking. The sun, like a red-hot brazier on the edge of the horizon, cast a fiery glow over the far plain. A pedlar who passed told them that the dragoons were coming down from the direction of the Crèvecœur pit. So they fell back, and the order ran: 'To Montsou! To the director's! Bread! bread! bread!'

V

MONSIEUR HENNEBEAU had placed himself at the window of his own room to see the carriage start which was to take his wife to lunch at Marchiennes. For an instant he watched Négrel trotting beside it; then he quietly returned to his writing-table. When neither his wife nor his nephew enlivened the house with the stir they made, the dwelling seemed empty. It happened that day that not only was the coachman absent, driving madame, but Rose, the new maid, had got leave until five o'clock; and thus the only servants left were Hippolyte, the footman, who mooned about from one room to the other in his slippers, and the cook, who had been terribly busy with her saucepans ever since early morning, preparing for the dinner which her master and mistress were to give in the evening. Thus Monsieur Hennebeau had made up his mind for a good day's work, amidst the deep quietude of the deserted house.

Towards nine o'clock, Hippolyte, though he had received orders to admit nobody, nevertheless ventured to announce Dansaert, who, said he, had some important news to communicate. It was only then that the managing director heard of the meeting on the previous night in the Vandame forest. The particulars were so precise that he listened to the head viewer with a slight smile, his mind dwelling upon Dansaert's relations with La Pierronne, respecting which two or three anonymous letters a week kept him well informed. It was evident that the husband had been talking, and that the wife had repeated everything to the viewer. Monsieur Hennebeau took advantage of the opportunity to hint to Dansaert that he knew everything. And he strenuously recommended prudence, for fear of a scandal. Frightened by these reprimands, Dansaert at first denied, then stammered some excuses, and turned very red. However, he thought himself lucky in getting off so cheaply; for, as a rule, the managing director showed great sternness in all such matters. The conversation then returned to the strike; that meeting in the forest was, after all, nothing but a piece of bravado on

the part of a lot of brawlers; it could not mean anything very serious. At any rate, the villagers would surely not stir for some days yet, owing to the respectful fear with which the military promenade that morning would not fail to inspire them.

When Monsieur Hennebeau was again alone, he debated with himself whether he should send a telegram to the prefect. The fear of uselessly showing anxiety restrained him. He was already angry with himself for his want of foresight, in having said everywhere, and even in writing to the board of management in Paris, that the strike would at the utmost last a fortnight. To his great surprise it had already lasted more than two months; and he was in despair at it. He felt that he was losing reputation every day; he imagined himself compromised, and deemed himself compelled to devise some signal exploit if he wished to be reinstated in the board's favour. He had recently asked for orders in the event of a disturbance, and he expected an answer by that afternoon's post. And he came to the conclusion that it would then be time enough to send his telegrams and to proceed to a military occupation of the pits, if such was the desire of his superiors. According to him, in that case there would be fighting, bloodshed, and murder. Such responsibility troubled him, notwithstanding his habitual energy.

Until eleven o'clock he continued working quietly without hearing a sound in the house save the slight noise which Hippolyte made in polishing the floor of some room overhead. Then all at once he received two telegrams—one announcing the invasion of the Jean-Bart pit by the Montsou mob; the other telling him of the severed cables, of the fires put out, and the general ravages committed. At first he did not understand. Why had the men on strike gone to Deneulin's, instead of wreaking their vengeance on one of the company's pits? Besides, for all he cared, they might destroy Vandame. That would only accelerate the plan of conquest which he had been meditating. At noon, he lunched all alone in the large dining-room, waited on by the silent servant, whose steps he did not even hear. The solitude cast still farther gloom on his mind; he was feeling quite chilled by it when a viewer, who had come in hot haste, was introduced, and told him of the band's march on the Mirou pit. Almost immediately, while he was finishing his coffee, a telegram apprised him of Crèvecœur and Madeleine being threatened in their turn. At

this his perplexity became extreme. The post arrived at two o'clock. Had he better apply for troops immediately, or exercise still farther patience rather than forestall the instructions of the board? He returned to his study, wishing to refer to a note for the prefect, which he had asked Négrel to write out the night before. But he could not lay his hands upon it, and he thought that the young man might have left it in his room, where he often wrote of an evening before going to bed. And without coming to a decision, haunted by the idea of this note, he himself went upstairs to look for it in Négrel's bedchamber.

On entering the apartment, Monsieur Hennebeau was surprised to find it in great disorder. It was no doubt an oversight or a fit of laziness on Hippolyte's part. The room felt close, its warmth still farther increased by the heating apparatus which had been left open. At first, however, Monsieur Hennebeau had only one thought, and went towards a small table littered with papers, hoping to find there the note he wanted. Twice he examined all the documents, one by one; but it was decidedly not there. Wherever could Paul have hidden it?

And as Monsieur Hennebeau came back to the middle of the room, casting a glance at each piece of furniture, he perceived something brilliant that flashed like a star. It was a tiny gold smelling-bottle, which he at once recognised as belonging to Madame Hennebeau. It was the bottle of ether which never left her. At first he could not account for its presence there. Then, however, he turned horribly pale; the truth had flashed upon him.

But all at once he heard somebody speaking. 'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Hippolyte, outside the door; 'I saw you come up.'

Then the servant entered the room, and the sight of its disorder dismayed him. 'Oh! the room isn't done! But then Rose went out, leaving me everything to do.'

Monsieur Hennebeau had hidden the tiny bottle in his hand, gripping it tightly enough to break it.

'What is it you want?' he asked.

'There's another man, sir. He comes from Crèvecœur; he has a letter.'

'Very well! Leave me, and tell him to wait.'

When he had bolted the door, he opened his hand again and looked at the bottle, which had made a red mark on his

skin. Everything was now clear to him; he recalled his old suspicions and understood the truth fully.

He dropped upon a chair and sat staring in front of him, quite overwhelmed. At last a noise aroused him from his reverie; some one was knocking at the door, and trying to open it. He recognised Hippolyte's voice: 'Sir—Ah! the door is fastened.'

'Well, what is it now?'

'It appears there's no time to be lost; the workmen are breaking everything. There are two more messengers downstairs, and there are also some telegrams.'

'That'll do! I'll come in a minute!'

The idea that Hippolyte himself might have discovered the little bottle if he had tidied the room that morning made Monsieur Hennebeau turn icy cold. But, after all, that servant doubtless knew the truth and secretly jeered at him. If he had been so persistent in coming up and disturbing him, it was probably from sheer spite.

Then Monsieur Hennebeau remained motionless, recalling all the sufferings of the past, his marriage with that woman, their speedy misunderstandings, the lovers she had had unknown to him, and the one he had tolerated, as one tolerates a sick person's cravings. Then had come their arrival at Montsou, and his mad hope of curing her and winning her back. Fool that he was, he had foreseen nothing! It was his own doing if Négrel had come to stay with them. And ah! to think of it, he yet loved that woman who had been his wife in name only for so many years already!

The sound of a distant gong made Monsieur Hennebeau start. He recognised what it meant; it was a signal which, according to his orders, announced the arrival of the postman. He rose to his feet and spoke out coarsely in a loud voice, his words escaping from his aching heart in spite of him. 'Ah! I don't care a curse! I don't care a curse for their letters and their telegrams!'

Now he was overcome by a feeling of rage. That woman was a perfect hussy; he sought for the foulest words to hurl at her. The sudden thought of the marriage which she was so calmly arranging between Cécile and Paul completed his exasperation. Was there no longer any passion then, any jealousy even, in her sensual nature? And it was she whom he accused of everything; he almost exonerated the lad, the child who had become her accomplice.

There was a timid knock at the door, and Hippolyte ventured to breathe through the keyhole:

'The postman has just come, sir, and here's Monsieur Dansaert back again to say that they're killing one another.'

'I'm coming down, curse it!'

What should he do to them? Drive them from the house on their return from Marchiennes, like creatures whom he would no longer tolerate beneath his roof? Yes! he would take a stick and turn them into the road. He was now stamping about the room and striking the furniture in his rage and powerlessness. But, suddenly, he fancied he heard Hippolyte returning. A feeling of shame stopped him, and he remained for a moment panting, wiping his forehead, and seeking to stay the fast beating of his heart. Standing before a mirror, he looked at his face, which was so distorted that he scarcely recognised it. Then, as soon as he had gradually resumed his usual expression, by a supreme effort of will, he left the room and went downstairs.

Five messengers were waiting for him below, without counting Dansaert. They all brought him news of the utmost importance with regard to the march of the strikers upon the various pits. The head viewer told him at length what had happened at Mirou—how the works had been saved by the splendid behaviour of old Quandieu. Monsieur Hennebeau listened, nodded, but did not understand a word; his mind had remained in the room upstairs. At last he dismissed them all, saying that he was going to take the necessary measures. When, however, he found himself alone once more, seated before his writing-table, he seemed to fall into a doze, his head between his hands, his eyes covered. His correspondence was there, and at last he looked for the expected reply from the board of management. The lines danced before his eyes. Nevertheless, he finally made out that the members of the board themselves desired some disturbance. Of course, they did not deliberately tell him to make things worse, but they left him to infer that troubles would hasten the end of the strike by provoking energetic repression. After that, he no longer hesitated; he despatched telegrams in every direction—to the prefect at Lille, to the troops at Douai and to the gendarmerie at Marchiennes. This was a relief; he then only had to shut himself up in his private room, and cause a report to be spread that he was suffering from gout. During the whole

afternoon he remained there, receiving nobody, but simply reading the telegrams and letters that continued to pour in upon him. In this way, from a distance he followed the band as it rushed from the Madeleine pit to Crèvecœur, from Crèvecœur to the Victory, and from the Victory to Gaston-Marie. On the other hand, information came to him of the wild marching and countermarching of the gendarmes and dragoons, who, being misdirected on the way, were constantly turning their backs on the pits that were attacked. However, they might all kill each other, and destroy everything; he had resumed his former position. With his head resting on his hands, his fingers over his eyes, he plunged, as it were, into the deep silence of the deserted house, which was only broken now and then by the rattling of the cook's saucepans as she busily prepared her great dinner for that evening.

Dusk was already darkening the apartment, it was five o'clock, when a loud noise suddenly startled Monsieur Hennebeau as he sat there, lost in thought, dazed, inert, with his elbows still among his papers. He thought that the two wretches were returning. But the noise increased, and a terrible cry arose above all the others at the very moment when he drew near the window.

'Bread! bread! bread!'

It was the cry of the strikers invading Montsou, while the gendarmes, believing that an attack on the Voreux pit was imminent, were galloping away from them to occupy it.

Just then, at about a mile and a half from the first houses of Montsou, a little below the junction of the high-road with that of Vandame, Madame Hennebeau and the young ladies had seen the crowd pass by. Their day at Marchiennes had been of the pleasantest; a nice lunch at the house of the director of the ironworks had been followed by a very interesting visit to the workshops and some glassworks near by in order to occupy the afternoon. Then during the homeward journey, amidst the limpid decline of a beautiful winter's day, Cécile, perceiving a little farm near the road, had suddenly fancied a cup of milk. Thereupon they all alighted from the carriage and Négrel gallantly jumped from his horse, while the peasant woman, somewhat flustered by the appearance of her guests, rushed about and talked of putting a cloth on the table before serving the milk. But Lucie and Jeanne insisted upon seeing the cow milked

and they accordingly went into the shed with the cups, making, as it were, a kind of *fête champêtre* of the matter, and amusing themselves greatly with the litter into which they went stepping ankle-deep. Madame Hennebeau, in her matronly, affable way, was also sipping a little of the milk when a strange noise from outside startled her.

'Whatever is the matter?'

The shed, built beside the road, served at the same time as a hay store, and had a large double door for the admittance of carts. As the girls peeped out they were surprised by what they saw on their left—a black mass, a huge crowd of men and women who turned out of the Vandame road, all howling madly.

'The devil!' muttered Négrel, who had gone out to look; 'are our brawlers losing their tempers?'

'Perhaps it's the pitmen again,' said the peasant woman. 'This is the second time they're passing. It appears that things are not right at all; they're the masters of the district.'

She spoke very slowly; watching the effect of her words on the faces of her visitors; and, when she noticed the fear of all, the deep anxiety caused by this encounter, she hastened to conclude: 'Oh! the vagabonds! the vagabonds!'

Négrel, seeing that it was too late to get back to the carriage and drive on to Montsou, ordered the coachman to draw the landau into the farmyard, where it remained hidden behind a shed. He himself tied his horse under the shed, a boy having previously held it for him. When he came back, he found his aunt and the young ladies thoroughly upset, and about to follow the peasant woman, who offered them shelter in her own house. He was of opinion, however, that they would be safer where they were—that no one would come to look for them among the hay. On the other hand the door closed very badly, and was so full of cracks that one could plainly see what went on in the road.

'Come, keep up your courage!' he said. 'We'll sell our lives dearly.'

This jest increased their fear. The uproar grew louder and louder; still, as yet, they could see nothing, save that a kind of hurricane seemed to be blowing along the deserted road like one of those brusque squalls that precede great storms.

'No, no; I don't wish to look,' said Cécile, hiding amongst the hay.

Madame Hennebeau, very pale, and fuming with anger against those people who were spoiling one of her pleasure parties, kept in the rear with a side-look of disgust; while Lucie and Jeanne, although trembling, put their eyes to a crack, anxious to lose nothing of the spectacle.

The thunder-like rumbling came nearer and shook the ground; Jeanlin was the first to appear, blowing his horn.

'Get your smelling-bottles ready; it's the sweat of the people that's passing,' murmured Négrel, who, despite his republican opinions, liked to ridicule the populace when ladies were present.

But his attempt at wit was carried away in the hurricane of gestures and cries. The women had made their appearance, nearly a thousand of them, ragged and dishevelled, their hair flying in the wind. Some held babes in their arms, lifted them on high, brandished them in the air like flags of mourning and vengeance; others, younger, with the round busts of Amazon warriors, flourished sticks; while hideous old hags bellowed so terribly that the veins of their fleshless throats seemed on the point of bursting. And the men followed, two thousand of them, all wound up to the same pitch of fury—trullers, hewers, hurriers—a compact mass that moved like a single block, serried, blended to a degree that one could not distinguish their worn, discoloured trousers and their old woollen jerseys, uniformly coated with mud. Their eyes flashed fire; one could only distinguish their black and open mouths as they sang the 'Marseillaise,' the strophes of which became lost in a confused roar and a great clanking of clogs on the hard ground. Above their heads, amidst the bristling of iron bars, a hatchet passed, carried erect; and this solitary hatchet, which seemed to be the standard of the mob, showed against the clear sky like the sharp profile of the knife of a guillotine.

'What awful faces!' stammered Madame Hennebeau.

'The devil take me if I recognise a single one!' Négrel said between his teeth. 'Where do the brigands come from, I wonder?'

Indeed, anger, hunger, two months of suffering, and that mad march from pit to pit, had changed the erstwhile placid faces of the Montsou miners into open ravenous jaws, like those of wild beasts. At that moment the sun was setting, and its last rays of a deep, sombre purple imparted a sanguinary hue to the immense plain. The road itself then seemed to

swim in blood, and the men and the women continued running past, all gory, like butchers in a slaughter-house.

'Oh! superb!' said Lucie and Jeanne, softly, their artistic feelings stirred by the magnificent though horrible spectacle.

They trembled, however, and drew back towards Madame Hennebeau, who was leaning against a trough. The idea that a glance through the disjointed boarding of that door might suffice to bring about their massacre froze her very blood. Even Négrel turned pale: courageous, as a rule, he could not shake off a dread superior to his will, one of those dreads which come from the Unknown. Meantime Cécile, buried in the hay, did not stir; and the others, notwithstanding their desire to avert their eyes, could not do so, but continued looking.

It was a sanguinary vision of the Revolution which would fatally sweep them all away on some terrible evening of the end of the century. Yes, one evening, the people, having shaken off their bonds, would madly run like this along the highways. And the blood of *bourgeois*, capitalists, employers, drones, all who lived in wealth and luxury, while they, the people, suffered, would drip from their garments. And they would carry heads upon their pikes, and they would sow broadcast the gold taken from broken safes. Yes, there would be the same rags, the same thunder of clogs, the same terrific crowd, with unclean flesh and evil breath, sweeping the old world away in a wild, barbaric rush. Conflagrations would flare; not a stone of the towns would be left atop of another; a return to the savage life of the woods would come after the great debauch, the great junketing, when the poor would fill their pockets by emptying the coffers of the rich. There would be nothing left, not a copper of hitherto existing fortunes, not a title to anything acquired, until the day when, perhaps, a new earth would spring up. Yes, those were the things that were passing along the road, like some force of nature's, and that was the terrible blast which they felt blowing in their faces.

A great cry arose, high above the 'Marseillaise,' 'Bread! bread! bread!'

Lucie and Jeanne squeezed closer against Madame Hennebeau, whose legs were failing her; while Négrel stood before them, as though to screen them with his body. Was it that very evening, then, that olden society would fall to pieces?

However, the crowd was going on its way, and there were only a few loiterers left, when La Mouquette appeared upon the scene. She lingered about, watching for gentlefolks behind their garden-gates, or at the windows of their houses, and whenever she discovered any she turned her back upon them in a horribly offensive manner, by way of expressing her contempt. Then everything disappeared; the living wave rolled towards Montsou along the winding road between the low-fronted houses, gaudily bepainted. The carriage was brought out again, but the coachman dared not undertake to drive his mistress and the young ladies home without damage if the rioters remained in possession of the road. And the worst was that there was none other.

'We must get back, though; dinner is waiting for us,' said Madame Hennebeau, beside herself with anger and fear. 'Those dirty brutes always select a day when I have friends to dinner. What's the use of being kind to such scum?'

Lucie and Jeanne busied themselves with getting Cécile out of the hay, while she struggled to prevent them, believing that the march-past of the savages was still in progress, and repeating that she did not want to see such a sight. At last they all resumed their seats in the carriage. The idea then occurred to Négrel, who had also mounted on horseback, to return home through the little lanes of Réquillart.

'Drive slowly,' he said to the coachman, 'for the road is awful. If any group prevents you from reaching the high-road yonder, stop behind the old pit, and we'll go on foot to the little garden door, while you can put up the carriage and horses anywhere, in the stable of some inn, if necessary.'

They started. In the distance the mob was pouring into Montsou. The inhabitants, since seeing the gendarmes and dragoons pass twice through the town, had been very restless, quite panic-stricken. The most abominable stories circulated. It was rumoured that written notices had been placarded, threatening to rip up the gentlefolks from head to foot. No one had read them, but they were quoted *verbatim* none the less. At the notary's, especially, consternation was at its height, for he had just received an anonymous letter by post, informing him that a barrel of gunpowder had been buried in his cellar, ready to blow him up if he did not declare himself in favour of the people.

The Grégoires, belated in their visit by the arrival of this letter, were discussing it and treating it as the action of some

practical joker, when the strikers' invasion of the town put a finishing stroke to the notary's terror. Still the Grégoires themselves kept smiling, and looked out, pulling a curtain slightly aside, and refusing to admit any danger whatever, certain as they felt that everything would end in a pleasant way. It had only just struck five; so they had plenty of time to wait for the road to become free before crossing the way to dine at the Hennebeaus', where Cécile, who must have come back by now, was no doubt waiting for them. However, nobody else in Montsou seemed to share their confidence; people ran hither and thither, crazy with fear, and doors and windows were hastily closed. They caught sight of Maigrat on the other side of the road, barricading his shop with innumerable iron bars, and looking so pale and trembling so violently that his puny little wife was obliged to fasten the bolts for him.

The strikers had just halted before the managing director's house, and the cry resounded once more: 'Bread! bread! bread!'

Monsieur Hennebeau was standing at his window when Hippolyte came in to close the shutters, lest the panes should be smashed by the stones. He likewise closed all the others on the ground floor, and then repaired to the first story, where one could hear the clicking of the latches and the slamming of the shutters as they were fastened one by one. Unfortunately, the servant could not also close up the bay window of the kitchen in the basement, a troublesome bay window, lighted up very brilliantly by the fires of the range and of the roasting grate.

Monsieur Hennebeau, who wished to see what would happen, mechanically went up to Paul's room, on the second floor. It was capitally situated for the purpose, for it commanded a view of the road as far as the company's yards. He kept behind the lattice shutters, looking down on the crowd. But the room affected him once more, though it was now clean and tidy. All his rage of the afternoon, that terrific battle waged with his feelings amidst the profound silence of solitude, had resulted in utter lassitude. Like that room, his being was already cold again, cleansed of the corruptions of the morning, and reverting to its usual correct bearing. What was the good of a scandal? Was aught changed in his home? His wife simply had a lover the more. The fact was scarcely aggravated by her having chosen this lover from their

own family; indeed this enabled her to keep up appearances. He quite pitied himself as he recalled his mad jealousy. How ridiculously he had acted and spoken! As he had already tolerated misconduct, he might very well continue to tolerate it. It would only be a question of a little more contempt. Yet frightful bitterness filled his mouth; he thought how useless everything was, how eternal were the sufferings of life, and he felt ashamed of himself, he who still adored that woman in spite of all she did.

Beneath the window, however, the howls broke out again with increased violence: 'Bread! bread! bread!'

'The idiots!' muttered Monsieur Hennebeau between his set teeth.

He heard them insult him on account of his large salary; he heard them call him a do-nothing, a fat tyrant, a dirty pig, who gave himself indigestion with eating the best of everything, while workmen died of starvation. The women had caught sight of the kitchen, and set up a chorus of imprecations against the pheasant roasting on the spit, and the sauces, whose savoury smell maddened their empty stomachs. Ah, those dirty *bourgeois*! They'd give them champagne and truffles to fill themselves with!

'Bread! bread! bread!'

'The idiots!' repeated Monsieur Hennebeau. 'Am I any happier than they are?'

Anger arose within him against those people, who did not understand. He would willingly have made them a present of his big salary, to become thick-skinned like them, to be loved for the asking and without after-regrets. Ah! that he could have seated them at his table and stuffed them with pheasant, while he went sweethearting in the fields as they were free to do! He would have given up everything, his education, his material welfare, his comforts, his power as managing director, if but for one day he could only have been some lowly wretch who loved and was loved in return. And he also longed to feel the torments of hunger, to have his stomach empty and his brain in a whirl: perhaps that would have put an end to the everlasting sufferings of his heart and mind.

'Bread! bread! bread!' cried the mob.

Then he got angry, and he furiously shouted amidst the tumult:

'Bread! Does bread alone suffice, you idiots?'

He had enough to eat, and yet his sufferings were killing

him. At the thought of his ravaged home and his life filled with one long agony, his throat contracted, and he gasped like one who is dying. Everything was not as right as should be just because there happened to be bread in the cupboard. Who was idiot enough to place the happiness of this world in the division of wealth? Those dreamy revolutionaries might demolish present-day society and build up another, but they would not add one single joy to the existence of humanity, they would not ease it of one single grief, by cutting for each individual member his regulation slice of bread and butter. Nay, on the contrary, they would extend the misery of the earth; they would one day set the very dogs howling with despair when they had badgered them out of the quiet satisfaction of instinct to lift them into the region of suffering bred from unsatiated passion. No; the only happiness was not to be at all; and if one had to be, then to be a tree, a stone, or rather less still, a grain of sand that cannot bleed beneath the heel of the passer-by.

And, in the exasperation brought on by suffering, tears bedimmed Monsieur Hennebeau's eyes and coursed down his cheeks in burning drops. The gathering dusk was settling over the road when stones began to rattle on the front of the house. Without anger now against those famished wretches, tormented only by the festering wound in his own heart, he continued muttering amidst his tears, 'The idiots! the idiots!'

But the cry of hunger dominated; a loud howl burst forth tempestuously, sweeping all else away.

'Bread! bread! bread!'

VI

Étienne, suddenly sobered by Catherine's slaps, had remained at the head of his comrades. But while he was directing them on Montsou, in a husky voice, he heard within him another one, a voice of reason, which asked in surprise the why and wherefore of all this. He had not meant any of these things to happen; how, then, had it come to pass that, after starting for the Jean-Bart pit with the intention of acting coolly and preventing a disaster, he had gone on from

violence to violence, and was ending the day by besieging the director's house?

For it was he, and no one else, who had just cried 'Halt!' to his comrades. Yet at first he had simply had the idea of protecting the company's yards where the mob had proposed to wreck and pillage everything. And now that stones were crashing against the front of the house, he sought, without being able to find it, some legitimate prey upon which he might throw his men in order to prevent greater calamities. As he was thus standing alone, powerless in the middle of the road, some one called to him from the doorway of Tisson's tavern, the shutters of which were up, the door alone being left unbarred.

'Yes, it's I. Just listen.'

It was Rasseneur. Some thirty men and women, nearly all belonging to the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, who, after remaining at home in the morning, had now come out to get news, had invaded the tavern at the approach of the malcontents. Zacharie occupied a table with his wife, Philomène. Farther on, Pierron and La Pierronne had turned their backs and were hiding their faces. But nobody was drinking; they had simply taken shelter there.

On recognising Rasseneur Étienne turned away, whereupon the other added:

'The sight of me worries you, eh? I warned you; your troubles have begun. You may call for bread as much as you like, but all they'll give you will be lead.'

Étienne then retraced his steps and answered:

'What worries me is that cowards should look on with their arms crossed, while we risk our skins.'

'Is it your idea to sack the place over the way?' asked Rasseneur.

'My intention is to remain with my mates till the finish, even if we all have to perish.'

Then despairingly he joined the crowd again, ready to lie down and die. On the road were three children, busy flinging stones. He gave each of them a vigorous kick, and shouted to the men who were likewise engaged that it was of no use breaking the windows. Bébert and Lydie, who had now joined Jeanlin, were learning how to handle the latter's sling. They each slung a stone in turn, trying who could do the most mischief. Lydie, by an ill-directed shot, had just split the skull of a woman in the crowd; and the two lads were

holding their sides with laughter. Behind them were old Jollycorpse and old Mouque, seated on a bench and looking on. Jollycorpse's swollen legs carried him with so much difficulty that he had had the greatest trouble to drag himself so far. Nobody knew what feeling of curiosity had induced him to come, for his face wore the blank, cadaverous expression of the days when it was impossible to draw a word from him.

No one listened to Étienne now. In spite of his orders, stones continued to rain as before, and he felt surprised and alarmed at the sight of these brutes, unmuzzled by himself, who grew excited so slowly, and yet became so terrible afterwards, so ferociously tenacious in their fury. All the old Flemish blood was in them, turgid and placid, taking months to warm, then blazing out all at once in abominable savagery, never listening to reason, but wildly persevering until utterly drunk with atrocities. In Étienne's own sunny South the crowds flared up more quickly, only they did less mischief. He had to struggle with Levaque in order to secure his hatchet, and he no longer knew how to restrain the Maheus, who were flinging stones with both hands. It was the women who most frightened him—La Levaque, La Mouquette, and others, who were suddenly seized with murderous fury, showing their teeth and nails and howling like so many wolf-hounds, urged on by the Scorched One, whose tall lean figure towered above them.

But there came an abrupt pause; a momentary fit of surprise brought a little of that calm which Étienne's supplications had failed to restore. It was simply that the Grégoires had made up their minds to take leave of the notary, and to cross the road to the managing director's house. They looked so harmless; they seemed to take everything so much as a joke on the part of their worthy miners, whose resignation had fed them and their progenitors for the past century, that the astonished rioters left off throwing stones lest they should hurt that old lady and gentleman, who had tumbled on them from the skies, as it were. They quietly allowed them to enter the garden, to ascend the flight of steps, and to ring at the barricaded door, which no one seemed in a hurry to open. Just then, Rose, the maid, returned from her day's outing, smiling at the angry workpeople, all of whom she knew, for she herself belonged to Montsou; and it was she who, by dint of hammering on the door with her fist, forced Hippolyte to set it ajar. It was high time this was done. Just as the Grégoires

disappeared inside the house, the shower of stones began afresh. Recovering from its surprise, the crowd yelled louder than ever: 'Death to the *bourgeois*! Hurrah for Socialism!'

Rose continued laughing in the hall as if she thought the adventure great fun, and she repeated to the terrified man-servant: 'There's no harm in them. I know them.'

Monsieur Grégoire methodically hung up his hat, and when he had helped Madame Grégoire to take off her warm thick cloak, he said in his turn: 'No doubt they mean no harm. When they have shouted themselves hoarse, they will go home to their suppers with a better appetite.'

At this moment Monsieur Hennebeau came down from the second floor. He had witnessed the whole scene, and now received his two guests in his usual calm and polite way. The pallor of his face alone told of the tears which he had shed. The man within him was mastered, and he remained but a strict business manager, resolved to do his duty.

'You know,' he said, 'the ladies have not yet come back.'

Then, for the first time the Grégoires began to feel uneasy. Cécile had not come back! How could she come back now if the jokes of those miners continued?

'I thought of clearing the approaches to the house,' added Monsieur Hennebeau. 'But, unfortunately, I am alone here, and I do not know where to send my servant for four men and a corporal, who would soon send that rabble to the right about.'

At this, Rose, who was still standing there, again made bold to say in a soft voice: 'Oh, sir! there's no harm in them.'

The managing director shook his head, while the tumult increased outside, and the stones crashed against the front of the house.

'I do not blame them, I rather excuse them; one must be as stupid as they are to think that we are obstinately bent upon their downfall. Only, I am responsible for good order. To think that there are gendarmes about the country, as I have been told, and that since this morning I have been unable to lay my hands on a single one!' Then he paused, and drew aside to make room for Madame Grégoire.

'Pray, Madame,' said he, 'do not stand here; come into the drawing-room.'

But the cook, who had come up from the basement in a

state of exasperation, kept them a few minutes longer in the hall. She declared that she could no longer accept the responsibility of the dinner, for she was still waiting for the crust of the *vol-au-vent* from the pastrycook at Marchiennes. She had ordered it for four o'clock, but the pastrycook evidently was detained on the road by the fear of those brigands. Very likely they had pillaged his hamper. She already pictured the crust of the *vol-au-vent* blockaded behind a bush, besieged, taken by storm, and suddenly swelling the empty stomachs of those three thousand starving wretches who were clamouring for bread. At any rate, her master was warned. As for herself, she would by far prefer to throw her dinner into the fire if it was to be spoilt on account of the revolution.

'Have a little patience,' said Monsieur Hennebeau. 'Nothing is lost as yet. The pastrycook may come.'

And on turning towards Madame Grégoire, and opening the drawing-room door, he was rather surprised to see a man whom he had not noticed in the gathering dusk seated on one of the hall benches.

'Ah! it's you, Maigrat? What is the matter?'

Maigrat had risen, showing his fat sallow face distorted by terror. He had lost the confident bearing born of calm prosperity, and he humbly explained that he had slipped into the director's house to claim aid and protection if the desperadoes should attack his shop.

'But you see that I am threatened myself, and that I have no one to help me,' replied Monsieur Hennebeau. 'You would have done better to stay at home so as to protect your goods.'

'Oh! I've put up the iron bars, and besides, I've left my wife there.'

At this the managing director grew impatient, and did not attempt to hide his scorn. A nice guardian, indeed, was that poor puny creature, whom her husband thrashed within an inch of her life!

'Well, I can do nothing; you must try to hold your own. And I advise you to get back as quickly as possible, for, as you can hear for yourself, they are still asking for bread.'

And, indeed, the tumult had begun anew, and Maigrat fancied he could hear his own name amidst the yells. To get back, however, was no longer possible; they would have butchered him in cold blood. On the other hand, the idea of

his threatened ruin upset him altogether, and he remained with his face pressed to the glazed panel of the door, perspiring, trembling, and watching for the disaster, while the Grégoires passed into the drawing-room.

Monsieur Hennebeau endeavoured to do the honours of his home very quietly. But in vain did he ask his guests to be seated. A gust of terror swept into the closed barricaded room, lighted by two lamps before nightfall, at each fresh shout from outside. Muffled by the heavy hangings, the angry uproar of the crowd rumbled in, becoming more and more disquieting and threatening by reason of its terrible vagueness. They nevertheless tried to converse, constantly returning to this inconceivable revolt. Monsieur Hennebeau expressed his astonishment at having foreseen nothing of it; and his police was so very badly organised that he inveighed against Rasseneur, whose detestable influence he asserted he could recognise from beginning to end. However, the gendarmes would soon arrive, for it was impossible that he could be abandoned like this. As for the Grégoires, they only thought of their daughter—that poor dear who was so easily frightened! Perhaps in presence of the danger the carriage had returned to Marchiennes. For another quarter of an hour they kept anxiously waiting, enervated by the uproar outside, by the drum-like beating of the stones against the closed shutters. The situation was becoming unbearable, and Monsieur Hennebeau was talking of going forth, of driving the brawlers away himself, and of walking to meet the carriage, when Hippolyte rushed into the drawing-room, exclaiming:

'Sir! sir! here's madame; they're killing madame!'

The carriage had been unable to get beyond the lane that led to Réquillart owing to the number of hostile groups; and so Négrel had acted on his idea of walking the last hundred yards or so and getting into the house by way of a small door in the garden wall near the outhouses. The gardener would surely hear them; at any rate, there would certainly be some one to let them in. And things worked very smoothly at first. Madame Hennebeau and the young ladies were already knocking at the little door, when a party of women, who had been told of what was taking place, rushed into the lane. At this everything went wrong. The door was not opened, and in vain did Négrel try to burst it in with his shoulder. The women increased in number, and he feared

being overpowered by them; whereupon he took the desperate course of pushing his aunt and the young ladies before him, intending to make an effort to reach the front entrance through the crowd of besiegers. But this manœuvre resulted in tremendous hustling; the viragoes would not leave them, a howling rabble followed upon their heels, while the greater part of the mob surged from right and left, without as yet understanding what was going on, and simply astonished at seeing a party of ladies in fine clothes in the very midst of the riot. The confusion became such as to lead to one of those blunders which seem inexplicable. Lucie and Jeanne reached the steps and wriggled into the house, the door being held ajar by the lady's maid; then Madame Hennebeau succeeded in following them; and, behind her, Négrel himself at last entered, pushing the bolts into position and feeling convinced that he had seen Cécile go in first of all. She was not there, however; she had disappeared on the way, overcome by such fear and confusion as to turn her back to the house and throw herself into the very midst of the danger.

Immediately the cry arose: 'Long live Socialism! Death to the *bourgeois*! death to them!'

As Cécile was veiled, a few of the women mistook her in the distance for Madame Hennebeau. Others thought her to be a friend of that lady, the young wife of a neighbouring factory-owner, who was detested by his workmen. Besides, it mattered little who she was. It was her silk dress, her fur cloak, even the white feather in her hat, that exasperated the crowd. She smelt nice, she wore a watch, she had the soft skin of a do-nothing, who never touched coal.

'Wait a bit!' howled the Scorched One. 'We'll soon put some lace on your back!'

'It's from us that they steal all those things,' chimed in La Levaque. 'They dress in warm clothes when we're dying of cold. Let's whip her, just to teach her manners.'

This time La Mouquette sprang forward. 'Yes, yes, she must be whipped!'

Then in savage rivalry the women jostled each other, each wanting to strip that daughter of the rich. Surely, she was no better than themselves. There were many rich who were far worse in spite of all their finery. And injustice had lasted long enough. Henceforth the hussies who dared to spend fifty sous on the washing of a mere petticoat should be made to dress like work-women.

Surrounded by these furies Cécile stood trembling, her legs sinking beneath her, while she kept stammering the same words: 'Do not hurt me, pray do not hurt me!'

But suddenly she uttered a wild cry, for two cold hands were clutching at her throat. They were the hands of old Jollycorpse, close to whom the seething rabble had pushed her. He seemed frantic with hunger, maddened by his prolonged misery; it was as if he had suddenly abandoned the resignation of half a century under the influence of some feeling of revengeful rancour. In his time he had saved at least a dozen of his comrades from death, risking his skin amidst fire-damp and falling rocks, but now he suddenly yielded to some unknown impulse, a craving to strangle and murder, born of the fascination that the young girl's white throat seemed to exercise over him. And as on that particular day he had lost his power of speech, he simply tightened his grip, with the air of an old, infirm, ruminating beast.

'No! no!' howled the women, 'strip her! strip her!'

Directly those in the house became aware of the mishap, Négrel and Monsieur Hennebeau boldly reopened the door to rush to Cécile's rescue. But the crowd was now crushing against the iron entrance-gates, and it was no longer easy to get out. A struggle ensued there while the terror-stricken Grégoires appeared at the top of the steps.

'Leave her alone, old 'un! It's the young lady from La Piolaine!' suddenly shouted La Maheude to the grandfather, as she recognised Cécile, whose veil had been torn off by a woman.

On his side, Étienne, maddened by these reprisals against a child, did all that he could to induce the crowd to relinquish its prey. An inspiration came to him; he brandished the hatchet which he had taken from Levaque, and shouted:

'To Maigrat's! There's bread inside there! Let's demolish the whole concern!'

And thereupon he struck the first blow at Maigrat's door with his hatchet. Several comrades followed him, Levaque, Maheu, and others. But the women remained obstinate; Cécile had fallen from old Jollycorpse's hands into the Scorched One's, and she was already being roughly pulled about, when a man on horseback appeared, urging his beast along, and laying about him with his riding-whip on those who did not get quickly enough out of his way.

'Ah! you scoundrels, so you've got to beating our daughters now!'

It was Deneulin, who was coming to dinner as had been agreed. He quickly jumped to the ground, caught Cécile round the waist, and using the other hand to manœuvre his horse, he turned it with extraordinary skill and strength into a living battering ram, striking through the crowd, which retreated before its rearing and plunging. The struggle at the gate continued, nevertheless he passed on, crushing those who could not get out of the way. This unforeseen succour relieved Négrel and Monsieur Hennebeau, who were in great danger, amidst all the oaths and blows. And as the young engineer at last re-entered the house with Cécile, who had fainted, Deneulin, who covered the director with his tall frame atop of the steps, was hit by a stone which nearly dislocated his shoulder.

'That's it,' he exclaimed. 'Break my bones, after smashing my machinery!'

He promptly closed the door. A shower of stones lighted against the woodwork.

'What maniacs! Two seconds more and they would have split my skull. It's no use saying anything to them; they've taken leave of their senses. The only way is to annihilate them.'

In the drawing-room, the Grégoires began crying, as they saw Cécile recover consciousness. She had no hurt, not even a scratch, and her veil was the only thing she had lost. But their terror increased when they perceived Mélanie, their cook, standing before them, and relating how the mob had demolished La Piolaine. Overcome with terror, she had hastened off to inform her employers, and had managed to get in by the half-open doorway during the tumult without being noticed by anybody. In the course of her interminable narrative the single stone slung by Jeanlin, which had smashed one solitary window at La Piolaine, became a perfect cannonade that had cracked every wall. At this, Monsieur Grégoire's ideas underwent a perfect transformation. His daughter was almost murdered, his house was razed to the ground! So it was true, then, that those miners wished him harm simply because he lived in peace on the proceeds of their labour?

Then Rose, the maid, who had brought a towel and some

eau de Cologne, repeated for the third time, 'It's funny, all the same; for there's no harm in them.'

Madame Hennebeau, who sat there looking very pale, recovered but slowly from the shock she had sustained; she only found strength to smile when the others congratulated Négrel. The parents especially were profuse in their expressions of gratitude to the young man, and the marriage seemed as good as settled. Monsieur Hennebeau looked on in silence, going from his wife to that lover of hers whom he had sworn to kill that morning, and then to that young girl, who doubtless would soon rid him of Négrel. He was in no hurry now, however; his only fear was that his wife might fall still lower.

'And you, my little dears?' asked Deneulin of his daughters. 'No bones broken, I hope?'

Lucie and Jeanne had been very frightened, still they felt pleased at having seen all this. They were laughing at it now.

'Ah me!' continued their father, 'it's been a good day's work! If you want a marriage portion you'd better earn one for yourselves; and you need not be surprised if you have to keep me into the bargain.'

He pretended to joke, but his voice shook and his eyes grew dim, when both girls threw themselves into his arms.

At this avowal of ruin Monsieur Hennebeau pricked up his ears. A sudden thought made his face brighten. At last, then, Vandame was about to fall into the company's hands—and this was the hoped-for compensation, the stroke of luck which would restore him to the favour of the board of management. At each calamity that marked his private life he withdrew for consolation into the strict execution of the orders he received; setting his scanty share of happiness in the military discipline amidst which he lived.

But little by little the guests grew calm, and the drawing-room sank into quietude amidst the soft light of the two lamps and the cosy warmth fostered by the carefully-drawn hangings. What was passing out of doors? The brawlers had become silent, the stones no longer crashed against the house-front. Every now and then, however, a dull noise, like the sound of an axe a long way off in some forest, was heard. Desirous of knowing what it might all mean, they returned to the hall to risk a glance through the glazed panel of the door. And the ladies even went upstairs to post themselves behind the lattice shutters on the first floor.

'Do you see that scoundrel Rasseneur on the threshold of the tavern opposite?' said Monsieur Hennebeau to Deneulin. 'I suspected him; he's had a hand in all this.'

It was, however, not Rasseneur, but Étienne who was demolishing Maigrat's shop with his hatchet. And he was ever calling to his comrades and asking them whether the goods inside did not belong to the miners? Had they not the right to take back their own from the thief who had so long been robbing them, and who starved them in obedience to the company's orders? By degrees they all left the director's house and made a rush for the adjacent shop. The cry of 'Bread! bread! bread!' resounded afresh. Bread would assuredly be found behind that door. Ravenous hunger possessed them once more, as if they could not wait another moment for food without expiring on the road. And there was such an onslaught on the door that, at each blow he dealt, Étienne feared he might wound one of his mates.

Meanwhile Maigrat, who had left the hall of Monsieur Hennebeau's house, had at first gone down to the kitchen; but he could hear nothing there, and only imagined the most outrageous attempts against his shop. So he came up again and hid behind the pump outside, whence he distinctly heard the blows on his door, and the threats of pillage with which his name was mixed. It was not mere nightmare, then. If he could not see he could now at least hear; and he listened to the progress of the attack with his ears buzzing. Each blow of the axe pierced his very heart; a hinge must have given way; another five minutes and the shop would be ruined. All this became imprinted on his brain in frightful pictures: the desperadoes throwing themselves upon everything, the drawers broken open, the sacks ripped from top to bottom, everything eaten and drunk, the house itself carried off, nothing left, not even a stick, wherewith to beg his way through the villages. No, he would not let them ruin him like that; he preferred to risk his life. Since he had been standing there he had noticed, at a window in a part of his house that stood at a right angle with the main building, the puny silhouette of his unhappy wife, standing pale and dumb behind the panes of glass. No doubt she was watching the blows, like the poor beaten creature she was. Below her there stood a shed, situated in such a way that from the director's garden one could reach its roof by climbing up some trellis-work. Thence it would not be difficult to crawl along

the tiles as far as the window. The idea of getting back into his house in that fashion now haunted Maigrat, who regretted that he had quitted it. Perhaps he would have time to barricade the shop with furniture; he even thought of other heroic means of defence, such as boiling oil, or burning petroleum, thrown upon the assailants from above. But against this love for his property there were his fears, for he almost choked with cowardice. All at once a more terrible blow from Étienne's axe gave him the necessary courage. Avarice gained the victory; he and his wife would protect their sacks with their bodies sooner than give up a single loaf.

Almost immediately afterwards hooting burst forth:

'Look! look! The tomcat's up there! Cats! cats!'

The crowd had caught sight of Maigrat on the roof of the shed. In his excitement, and notwithstanding his weight, he had climbed the trellis-work with great agility, never troubling about the wood that broke beneath him; and now he was crawling along the tiles, trying to reach the window. But the incline was very steep, and he was hampered by his corpulence and tore his nails. Nevertheless, he would have managed to reach the top had he not begun to tremble with the fear of being stoned; for the crowd, which he could no longer see, continued shouting beneath him:

'Cats! cats! Fetch him down!'

And suddenly both his hands lost their grip; he rolled down like a ball, shot over the gutter-pipe, and fell across the party-wall, so unfortunately that he rebounded into the road, where his skull split against the edge of a kerbstone. His brains were scattered. He was dead. Up above, his wife, pale and indistinct behind the window-panes, was still looking on.

At first there was great stupefaction. Étienne had left off striking, his hatchet had fallen from his hands. Maheu, Levaque, and all the others forgot the shop, turning towards the wall, down which a little streamlet of blood slowly trickled. And the cries ceased; sudden silence spread around in the growing gloom.

Almost immediately afterwards, however, the hooting began once more. The women came rushing to the spot, intoxicated by the smell of blood.

'So there is a God then!' they shrieked. 'Ah! you hog, it's all over with you!'

They surrounded the yet warm body; they laughed and

insulted it, they hurled at it all the long pent-up rancour of their hungry lives.

'I owed you sixty francs; you're paid now, you thief!' shouted La Maheude, who was as furious as any of them. 'You'll never refuse me tick again. Wait a bit! I'll give you something more to fatten you up.' And thereupon she scraped the ground with her fingers, and took two handfuls of earth, which she stuffed into his mouth.

'There! eat away! There! eat, eat, you who used to eat us!'

The insults increased, while the dead man, stretched motionless on his back, seemed to be staring with fixed dilated eyes at the immensity of the heavens whence night was falling. That earth crammed into his mouth was the bread he had refused; and now he would never eat any other bread but that. Starving the poor had not brought him luck.

But the women had other vengeance to wreak upon him. They hovered round his corpse, sniffing like wolves. They were all seeking some outrage, some ferocious act which should give them satisfaction. And suddenly the Scorched One fell upon the corpse, followed by all her companions; they heaped every indignity upon it, they dragged it hither and thither, they stamped on it, they spat on it, they stripped it, they mutilated it even, in abominable fashion, amidst the wildest, the most ferocious glee. And up above, Madame Maigrat did not stir, but beneath the last rays of the setting sun the flaws in the window-panes distorted the expression of her white face, which seemed to be laughing. Beaten as she had been, wronged day by day by her vicious husband whilst she bent from morning till night over the account-books, perhaps she really did laugh as she beheld those furies dancing round the corpse.

Neither Étienne, nor Maheu, nor any of the others had had time to interfere to prevent the frightful savagery of the women; they remained motionless with horror at the sight of those furies. At the door of Tisson's tavern stood Rasseneur livid with indignation, and Zacharie and his wife Philomène stupefied at what they beheld. The two old men, Jollycorpse and Mouque, shook their heads, looking very grave. Jeanlin was the only one who laughed. Meantime the Hennebeaus and their guests had been unable to see what had taken place, for a wall was in their way, and besides the gloom was gathering fast.

Étienne brandished his hatchet again. But the feeling of uneasiness that had gained ground could not be dissipated. That corpse now barred the road and protected the shop. Many had drawn back. Such satisfaction seemed to have appeased them all. Maheu was gloomily looking on, when he suddenly heard somebody whispering in his ear that he had better run. He turned and recognised Catherine, still dressed in her old jacket, black, and panting for breath. With a gesture he drove her from him. He would not listen to her, but threatened to thrash her. Then she made a gesture of despair, hesitated for a moment, and finally rushed towards Étienne: 'Run! run! the gendarmes 'll be here directly!'

But he also drove her from him, insulted her, feeling the blood rush to his face at the recollection of the slaps she had dealt him. But she would not be repulsed; she made him throw away his hatchet, she dragged him along by both arms with irresistible strength.

'I tell you the gendarmes 'll be here directly. Do listen to me! If you want to know the truth, well, Chaval went to fetch them and is bringing them back. I was disgusted and I came to tell you. Run, I don't wish you to be taken!'

And Catherine dragged him along with her at the very moment when a heavy gallop shook the pavement in the distance. Almost immediately a cry broke out: 'The gendarmes! the gendarmes!' The rout, the *sauve-qui-peut*, was so complete that in a couple of minutes the road was free, absolutely cleared, as if swept clean by a hurricane. Maigrat's corpse alone showed blackly on the white ground. At the door of Tisson's tavern there only remained Rasseneur, who, relieved of his anxiety, his face brightening, applauded the easy victory of the sabres; while in Montsou, deserted and wrapped in silence, the teeth of the town folk chattered with fear as they stood perspiring in their closed rooms, never daring to look to ascertain what might be going on. The plain was becoming enveloped in dense gloom; naught but the fires of the coke ovens and smelting furnaces showed against the tragic sky. Nearer and nearer came the heavy gallop of the gendarmes, approaching in a sombre mass. And behind them, placed under their protection, the Marchiennes pastry-cook's little cart arrived at last. Out of it jumped a lad dressed in white, who, with the quietest air imaginable, began to unpack the crust for the *vol-au-vent*.

BOOK VI

I

THE first fortnight of February passed away amidst black, bitter cold, which, without pity for the poor, prolonged the hard winter. The authorities—the prefect of Lille, a general, and a public prosecutor—had scoured the roads once more. The gendarmes had been deemed insufficient; infantrymen had come to occupy Montsou—a whole regiment, whose men were encamped from Beaugnies to Marchiennes. Armed detachments guarded the shafts; soldiers were stationed before every engine. The director's house, the yards of the company, even the dwellings of certain inhabitants of Montsou, bristled with bayonets. Scarcely a sound, save the slow, measured tramp of patrols, was heard along the paved highway. On the mound of shale at the Voreux pit a sentry was posted, overlooking the bare plain, amidst the biting blast. And every two hours the pass-word was exchanged from outpost to outpost, as in an enemy's country.

Work had been resumed nowhere. On the contrary, the strike had spread. The Crèvecœur, Mirou, and Madeleine pits had stopped their output the same as the Voreux; Feutry-Cantel and the Victory lost some of their men every morning. Even at Saint-Thomas, previously unaffected, hands began to grow short. Mute obstinacy had arisen in the presence of that display of force which offended the pride of the miners. The villages amidst the beetroot fields seemed to be deserted. Not a workman stirred, scarcely one was to be met, walking along by himself, and averting his gaze whenever he encountered the military. And beneath the mournful peace, beneath the passive obstinacy, there was but deceptive gentleness, compulsory patient obedience as on the part of a caged wild beast who keeps his eyes on his tamer, and is ready to devour him should he turn his head. The company, which was being ruined by this cessation of work, spoke of engaging some men from the Borinage, beyond the Belgian frontier; but it dared not put

its threat into execution. And so the battle remained in abeyance between the miners who refused to work and the lifeless pit guarded by the troops.

This peace had come on the very morning after the terrible day of riot, but beneath it lay such dread that the greatest possible silence was preserved with regard to the damages and atrocities committed. An inquiry had proved that Maigrat had died from the effects of a fall, and the indignities heaped upon his corpse were but vaguely hinted at. On the other hand, the company did not admit the losses it had sustained any more than the Grégoires cared to compromise their daughter by the scandal of a lawsuit in which she would have had to give evidence. Nevertheless, some arrests had been made, but, as usual, of a few foolish stupefied nobodies who knew nothing. By a comical mistake, Pierron had been taken as far as Marchiennes, with handcuffs upon his wrists, an incident at which his comrades still laughed. Rasseneur had also narrowly escaped being led off between two gendarmes. At the company's offices they had simply confined themselves to drawing up a list of dismissals. In the one village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, Maheu, Levaque, and thirty-four of their comrades had received notice. But severity was reserved for Étienne, who had disappeared since the night of the riot, and had since been sought in vain. Chaval in his hatred had denounced him, but had refused to give the names of others, thanks to Catherine's entreaties, for she wished to save her parents. Days went by, everyone felt that nothing was settled, and the end was awaited by all, amidst unbearable anxiety.

From that time forward the good folks of Montsou awoke every night, their ears ringing with the tolling of an imaginary tocsin, and their nostrils inhaling an odour of gunpowder. But what upset their equanimity more than anything else was the language of their new curé, Abbé Ranvier, the scraggy priest, with eyes like red-hot coals, who had succeeded Abbé Joire. How far they were now from the other's smiling discretion, and desire to remain at peace with the whole world, like the fat, gentle personage he was! Had not Abbé Ranvier taken upon himself to defend those abominable desperadoes who were disgracing the region? Had he not found excuses for the abominations of the men on strike; and violently attacked the *bourgeoisie*, upon whom he cast all the responsibility? It was, said he, the *bourgeoisie* which by despoiling the Church

of its ancient liberties to abuse them itself, had made this world an accursed abode of injustice and suffering; it was the *bourgeoisie* which prolonged all the misunderstandings, which provoked the most terrible catastrophes by its atheism and by its refusal to revert to the traditional brotherly love of the primitive Christians. And he had dared to threaten the rich, he had warned them that if they remained deaf to God's voice, God would assuredly end by placing Himself on the side of the poor. He would strip unbelievers of their wealth, and distribute it among the humble of the earth for the triumph of His glory. The devotees trembled all over at this, and the notary declared that it was so much Socialism of the worst description. They all pictured the priest at the head of a band, brandishing a cross and demolishing the *bourgeoise* society of '89.

However, Monsieur Hennebeau, on being warned of what had occurred, merely shrugged his shoulders and said: 'If he worries us too much, the Bishop will rid us of him.'

While panic blew from one end of the plain to the other, Étienne was dwelling underground, in the den prepared by Jeanlin, in the Réquillart pit. It was there that he had hid himself, and no one believed him to be so near. The quiet audacity of selecting such a refuge, in the mine itself, in an abandoned gallery of the old pit, had baffled all pursuit. Up above, the hawthorns and sloes, growing amidst the decaying woodwork, hid the opening of the shaft. Besides, no one ever ventured there, it was necessary to know the proper manœuvres, to swing oneself from the roots of the sorb-tree, and to drop down fearlessly to the first solid rungs of the ladders. And there were other obstacles which protected the young man; the stifling heat of the shaft, the hundred and thirty yards of dangerous descent, and then the painful crawling on all fours along the narrow galleries, until one reached the brigand-like cavern, filled with loot. He lived there in the midst of plenty, he had found some gin, the remains of the dried cod, provisions of all kinds. The large bed of hay was excellent, and there was not the slightest draught in that equal temperature. Means of illumination were scarce, however, and threatened to fail him. Jeanlin, who had constituted himself his purveyor, and who displayed the discretion and prudence of a savage, only too delighted to baffle the gendarmes, brought him even such things as pomatum, but could not manage to lay his hands upon a single packet of candles.

From the fifth day, Étienne no longer lighted up except in order to take his meals. His food seemed to stick in his throat when he attempted to eat in the dark. That everlasting night, that never-changing gloom, was his great source of suffering. Sleep as he did, in the most perfect security, provided as he was with bread, warm as he felt, never had night ever weighed so heavily on his brain before. It seemed to him even to annihilate his reasoning faculties. He was living on robbery now! Notwithstanding his communistic theories, the old scruples born of education gained the upper hand with him every now and then; whereupon he confined himself to dry bread, even docked his rations. But what was he to do? He was bound to live; his task was as yet by no means fulfilled. Another great shame weighed him down: remorse for his fit of savage drunkenness, the recollection of the gin he had gulped down in the cold air on an empty stomach, and which had made him rush upon Chaval, knife in hand. This memory suggested frightful possibilities from the hereditary evil, the long heritage of alcoholism which no longer let him touch strong drink without exciting homicidal fury. Would he end as a murderer then? When, satiated with violence, he had found himself safe from pursuit in that deep quietude down in the bowels of the earth, he had slept for two days the sleep of a gorged, exhausted brute. And nausea continued, even now he felt cramped, there was a bitter taste in his mouth, and his head swam as if he had indulged in some terrible orgy. A week elapsed; the Maheus, who had been informed of his whereabouts, were unable to send so much as a candle, and so he had to do without a light even when eating.

Étienne remained stretched on his bed of hay for hours together. Vague ideas, which he had never known before, exercised his brain. There was a feeling of superiority which set him apart from his comrades, a kind of self-pride that had grown in proportion as he had educated himself. Never had he reflected so much. He asked himself whence had come his disgust on the day after that furious march to the pits; and he dared not answer himself. There were recollections from which he shrank, the baseness of the desires, the grossness of the instincts he had beheld, and the odour of all the misery borne on the wind. Despite the torment which came to him from want of light, he began to dread the hour of his return to the village. How horrible it was to see all those

wretches living in a heap, herding round the common trough! There was not one with whom he could talk politics seriously; their life was only fit for cattle; there were ever the same pestilential fumes of fried onion to stifle one. He had wished to enlarge their horizon, raise them in some measure to the material welfare and refinement of the *bourgeoisie*, by making them the masters; but how long it would take! He no longer felt courage enough to wait for victory amidst such a hunger-stricken multitude. By degrees his vanity at being their chief, and the constant necessity of thinking for them, estranged him from them, and instilled into him the soul of one of those very *bourgeois* whom he execrated.

One evening Jeanlin brought a bit of candle stolen from a waggoner's lantern; and this proved great relief to Étienne. When the gloom stupefied him, weighing heavily enough on his brain to make him go mad, he lighted up for an instant; then, as soon as he had driven away the horrible nightmare, he extinguished his light, so careful was he of that bit of candle which seemed as necessary to his life as bread. There was a buzzing always in his ears, and he heard the scampers of bands of rats, the creaking of the old proppings, or the faint, faint sound of a spider spinning its web. And with his eyes open on that tepid void, he reverted to his fixed idea—what his mates were doing up yonder. Defection on his part would have appeared to him the most cowardly of all acts. If he thus hid himself, it was in order that he might remain free so as to counsel and act. His long self-communings had determined his ambition. While waiting for some higher mission he would have liked to be as Pluchart was, to throw up work, and to concern himself solely with politics, but alone, and in a cleanly furnished room, under the pretence that brainwork absorbs one's whole vital powers, and requires great tranquillity.

At the beginning of the second week, the lad having told him that the gendarmes believed that he had crossed the Belgian frontier, Étienne ventured to come out of his hole after dark. He wished to get a knowledge of the situation, and find out whether it was advisable to remain obstinate any longer. He feared that the game was lost; before the strike, he had been doubtful of the result, and had simply yielded to the force of events; and now, after intoxicating himself with rebellion, he relapsed into his old doubts and secretly

despaired of making the company yield. But as yet he did not admit as much to himself; anguish took possession of him when he pictured to himself the miseries of defeat, and the heavy responsibility of suffering that would weigh upon him. Would not the end of the strike be the end of his career, the downfall of his ambition, his life relapsing once more into the abasement of pitwork, and the degrading associations of the village? And honestly, without any base mendacious calculation, he endeavoured to regain his faith, to persuade himself that resistance remained possible, and that capital would destroy itself in presence of the heroic suicide of labour.

There was indeed, throughout the district, one prolonged echo of ruin. At night when, like a wolf prowling forth from his lair, he wandered around the black country, he fancied he could hear the crash of bankruptcy from one end of the plain to the other. Along the deserted roads he now only found closed factories, wrapped in the silence of death, their buildings decaying beneath the livid sky. The sugar refineries especially had suffered; both Hoton and Fauvelle, after reducing the number of their hands, had come to grief one after the other. At the Dutilleul flour-mills the last millstone had stopped on the second Saturday of the month; whilst the Bleuze rope-walk, for the manufacture of mine cables, was definitely killed by the obstinacy of the strike. In the neighbourhood of Marchiennes the situation became worse and worse each day: all the fires were extinguished at the Gagebois glassworks; there were constant dismissals of hands at the Sonneville building-yards; only one of the three smelting furnaces was still going, and not a single coke oven threw up its fires to heaven. The strike of the Montsou coalminers, caused by the industrial crisis that had been growing worse for the last two years, had still farther aggravated that crisis. To the various causes of distress, such as the want of orders from America, and the locking up of capital expended in over-production, there was now added the unforeseen failure of the coal supply for such engines as might still be working. This was like the supreme agony, the engines starving for lack of the food which the pits no longer furnished. Frightened by the general uneasiness, the company, in diminishing its output and starving its workmen, had found itself towards the end of December without a lump of coal in its yards. Everything was like a wheel within a wheel, ruin stalked abroad, one failure entailed another, various industries

collapsed, crushing others in their fall, and amid the rapid series of catastrophes counter-blows resounded in the adjacent towns—Lille, Douai, and Valenciennes—where absconding bankers consummated the general ruin.

Often, at a bend of the road, Étienne would stop in the cold night air to listen to the sounds that betokened the decay of the factories. Like a war-horse, he sniffed the air amidst the gloom; joy at the thought of coming chaos possessed him, a hope that daylight would reveal the extermination of the old world, not a fortune left standing, the equalising plane passing along like a gigantic scythe razing everything to the ground. But the pits of the company particularly interested him in that dream of massacre. He resumed his walk, seeing little in the darkness, but visiting them one after the other, and only too happy whenever he noticed some fresh damage. Slips of increasing gravity took place the longer that the abandonment of the traction-ways lasted. Above the northern gallery of the Mirou pit the soil settled down more and more, to such a degree indeed that over a distance of more than a hundred yards the Joiselle road fell in as though there had been an earthquake. The company, without attempting to higgle, for it was only too anxious to put a stop to the rumours raised by these accidents, paid the owners the price they demanded for their vanished fields. Meantime both the Crève-cœur and Madeleine pits, from the very nature of the rock there, became more and more blocked. There were also rumours of two viewers having been buried in a slip at the Victory pit; a part of Feutry-Cantel had been flooded; and it had become necessary to wall in a mile of gallery at Saint-Thomas, where the propping, badly looked after, was giving way on all sides. All this entailed an enormous outlay hour by hour, terrible breaches were made in the shareholders' dividends, a rapid destruction of the pits themselves was threatening; and in the long run it must all end by rendering the famous shares, whose value had increased a hundredfold during the century, virtually worthless.

At such moments, in the presence of those repeated blows, Étienne's hopes revived, and he ended by believing that a third month of resistance would bring down that monster, the lazy glutted beast, crouching yonder like an idol, in the secrecy of its tabernacle. He knew that in consequence of the troubles at Montsou great excitement had seized upon the Parisian press, leading to violent warfare between the semi-official

journals and the opposition prints, accompanied by terrifying stories that were principally directed against the International, which the Empire now dreaded, after giving it every encouragement. The board of management no longer dared to feign deafness, and two of its members had condescended to come down for the purpose of making inquiries. But they did so in a perfunctory way, and three days later returned to the capital, declaring to the world at large that everything was going on favourably. Nevertheless, Étienne had learnt from another quarter that during their stay at Montsou those gentlemen had been assembled with the managing director for hours together, evincing feverish anxiety and absorbed in matters of which those around them were careful to say nothing. And he accused them of merely feigning confidence, and began to treat their departure as a helter-skelter flight; feeling on his side almost certain of final triumph, since those terrible gentlemen had rushed away, abandoning everything.

However, on the following night Étienne relapsed into despair. The company's ribs were too solid to break so easily. It could afford to lose millions for a time; it would regain them later on from the workmen themselves, by docking their bread. That night, having gone as far as the Jean-Bart pit, he divined the truth on being told by a watchman that there was some talk of Vandame being sold to Montsou. It appeared that heartrending distress reigned at Deneulin's—the distress of the well-to-do. The father was quite ill from the consciousness of his powerlessness, aged before his time by pecuniary cares; and the daughters were struggling against the tradesmen and trying to save their last shifts. Folks suffered less in the famished villages than in that middle-class household, whose inmates drank water in private for lack of money to buy wine. Work had not been resumed at the Jean-Bart pit, but it had been absolutely necessary to replace the pumping-engine at the Gaston-Marie; and though this was done with all speed, a partial flooding had already taken place, entailing great expense. Deneulin at last ventured upon a request for a loan of a hundred thousand francs from the Grégoires. Their refusal, however much he had expected it, proved the supreme blow. 'If they refused,' said they, 'it was from affection for him, in order to spare him a useless struggle.' After which they advised him to sell. He still refused to do so, feeling furious at thus being made to pay the costs of the strike. At first

he hoped that he might die, carried off by a fit of apoplexy. But death did not come, and what was he to do? He had to listen to the offers made him. The company haggled with him, depreciated the value of the superb prey, that perfect shaft, newly equipped, where want of funds had alone paralysed the working. He would be lucky if he made money enough out of it to settle with his creditors. For two days he struggled against the members of the board who came to Montsou, furious at the easy, tranquil way in which they profited by his embarrassments, and ever shouting 'No' to them in his powerful voice. At last the affair was left in abeyance; the others returned to Paris, patiently waiting for his last gasp. Étienne scented, as it were, this compensation vouchsafed to the company for the disaster it had met met with; and discouragement came upon him in presence of the invincible power of great capital, which proved so strong in battle that it even fattened upon defeat by devouring the weaker ones that fell at its side.

Fortunately, on the morrow Jeanlin brought him good news. At the Voreux pit the tubbing of the shaft threatened to give way altogether; water was filtering through on all sides; and it had been necessary to set a gang of carpenters to effect some repairs in all haste.

Until then Étienne had avoided the Voreux pit through fear of the everlasting black silhouette of a sentry, posted on the mound of shale overlooking the plain. One could not get away from him; he was there over all, like the colours of the regiment. However, towards three o'clock in the morning, when the sky became overcast, Étienne went to the pit, where some comrades explained to him the bad state of the tubbing. And their idea was that it was urgent to repair it from top to bottom, which would mean closing the pit for at least three months. For a long while he prowled about, listening to the mallets of the carpenters knocking below. His heart rejoiced at this fresh wound that had to be dressed.

Towards daylight, when he was about to get back to his den, he again perceived the sentry on the mound. This time he would assuredly be seen by him. He trudged on, however, thinking of those soldiers, taken from the ranks of the people and armed against it. How easy the triumph of the revolution would have become if the army had suddenly declared for it! It would have sufficed if the workman and the peasant

in the barracks had remembered their origin. That was indeed the supreme peril, the great bogey at which the teeth of the upper classes chattered when they thought of possible defection on the part of the troops. In two hours' time they and the abominations of their iniquitous lives might be swept away. It was already said that whole regiments were infected with Socialism. Was that true? Would the era of justice come by means of the cartridges distributed by the *bourgeoisie*? Suddenly jumping from one hope to another, the young man began to dream of the regiment guarding the pits passing bag and baggage over to the cause of the strike, shooting down the company and its abettors, and at last handing over the mine to the miners.

All at once he perceived that he was ascending the mound of shale, his head buzzing with these thoughts. Why should not he have a chat with that soldier? He might thus ascertain the drift of his ideas. So with an indifferent air he continued to advance, as if gleaning some old bits of propping that remained amongst the boulders. The sentinel remained motionless.

'Nasty weather, mate!' said Étienne at last. 'I think we're going to have some snow.'

The sentry was a little fellow, very fair, with a soft, gentle, pale, and very freckled face. He retained in his blue grey overcoat all the awkwardness of a recruit.

'Yes, I shouldn't wonder,' he replied, softly.

And his blue eyes looked up to the livid sky, to the smoky dawn, whose grime seemed to weigh like lead on the plain in the far distance.

'What idiots they are to stick you up here to freeze every bone in your body!' continued Étienne. 'One would think that they were expecting Cossacks! And there's always a devil of a wind blowing up here.'

The little soldier stood shivering, but did not complain. It is true there was a kind of hut there built of dry stones, in which old Jollycorpse took shelter on the more tempestuous nights; but the soldier's orders were not to quit the summit of the mound for a moment, and he therefore remained at his post, though his hands were so benumbed with cold that they no longer felt the rifle they held. He belonged to the detachment of sixty men which was guarding the Voreux pit; and as this painful sentry duty constantly recurred, he had already narrowly escaped remaining there altogether, his feet frost-

bitten. It was part of his duty, however; passive obedience had ended by benumbing him altogether; and he answered Étienne's questions with monosyllables, uttered in the voice of a child half asleep.

For a quarter of an hour Étienne vainly tried to draw him out about his political opinions. He answered 'Yes' or 'No' without appearing to understand. His comrades had told him that the captain was a republican; as for himself, he had no ideas, and politics did not concern him. If he were ordered to fire he would fire, so as to avoid being punished. The other stood listening to him, yielding to the hatred which the people feel for the army, those brothers whose hearts are changed by the mere fact of wearing red trousers.

'What did you say your name was?' Étienne asked at length.

'Jules.

'And where do you come from?'

'From Plogof, over yonder.'

He stretched out his hand at random. It was in Brittany, he knew nothing more. But his pale puny face became animated and he began to laugh, feeling warmed by the memories which those questions evoked.

'I've still my mother and my sister,' said he; 'of course, they're waiting for me, but they'll have to wait a good bit. When I went off they saw me as far as Pont l'Abbé. We took Lepalmec's horse, and it nearly broke its legs as we came down from Audierne. Cousin Charles was waiting for us with some sausages, but the women cried too much, and they stuck in our throats. Ah! good heavens! good heavens! how far away our home is!'

His eyes were getting dim, though his laughter did not cease. The deserted moor of Plogof, the wild storm-beaten point of the Raz,[1] appeared to him in a halo of sunshine, at the rosy season when the heather blooms. 'I say,' he continued, 'if I've got no bad-conduct marks, do you think they'll give me leave for a month or so in about two years' time?'

[1] The allusion is to the 'Race of Seins,' where the Atlantic rushes furiously between the high promontory where the Breton coast terminates and the Isle of Seins, famous for its legendary Druidical sanctuaries and its vestal priestesses. Ptolemy pronounced 'the point of the Raz' to be one of the ends of the world. The scenery is wild and awe-inspiring. Nowhere can the might and grandeur of the ocean be better appreciated.—ED.

Then Étienne, in his turn, talked of his sunny Provence, which he had left when he was quite a child. But daylight broke, and some snowflakes began to whirl in the leaden sky. And the young man grew uneasy at seeing Jeanlin prowling below, as if amazed at perceiving him up there. At last the lad beckoned to him. After all, what was the good of indulging in that dream of fraternising with the soldiers? Years and years would be required to make that dream reality. Then the futility of his attempt filled Étienne with despair, as if he had really made certain of succeeding. But all at once he understood Jeanlin's gesture: the soldiers were coming to relieve guard. So he went off at a run to hide himself at Réquillart, his heart bursting once more with the conviction of defeat; while the lad, galloping by his side, accused that dirty sweep of a soldier of having called his comrades to fire upon them.

At the top of the mound, however, Jules had remained motionless, dreamily watching the snow which was now falling fast. A sergeant approached with his men, the usual formalities took place, and the heavy steps of the retreating squad resounded as in a conquered country. Although it was now daylight, nothing yet stirred in the villages; the miners remained silent, though inwardly furious, beneath the heel of the military.

II

Snow had fallen throughout the two previous days, but it had ceased to come down that morning, when keen frost had converted the plain into an immense sheet of ice. Thus that black country, with grimy roads, and walls and trees thickly powdered with coal-dust, now showed white, perfectly white, as far as the eye could see. The village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty lay beneath the snow as if it had altogether disappeared. Not the slightest wreath of smoke arose from its chimneys. The fireless dwellings were as cold as the stones on the highway, and there was nothing to melt the thick layers of snow weighing on their tiled roofs. The village seemed to be a mere quarry of white slabs set in the white plain; one might have thought it a vision of a dead village wrapped in its shroud. The patrols passing along the streets had alone left there the muddy imprints of their march.

At the Maheus' the last shovelful of clinkers had been burnt the previous night, and gleaning on the mound of shale was not to be thought of in that terrible weather, when even the sparrows could no longer find the tiniest blade of grass. Alzire, through her obstinacy in searching among the snow with her poor little hands, was dying. La Maheude had been obliged to wrap her in an old piece of blanket while waiting for Doctor Vanderhaghen, at whose house she had already called twice without finding him at home. The servant-maid, however, had promised that the doctor would call at the village before nightfall, and so the mother stood at the window watching for his arrival, while the little invalid, who had insisted on coming downstairs, sat shivering on a chair, under the impression that it was warmer there near the cold fireplace. Old Jollycorpse, whose legs were bad again, sat opposite her, and seemed to be asleep. Neither Lénore nor Henri, who had accompanied Jeanlin in quest of stray coppers from passers-by on the highroad, had yet come home again. Across the bare room Maheu alone paced heavily to and fro, knocking every now and then against the wall with the stupefied air of a wild beast who forgets that he is caged. The petroleum had also run out; but the snow outside remained so white that its reflection vaguely illumined the room, notwithstanding the gathering dusk.

All at once there was a clanking of clogs, and La Levaque, evidently in a great passion, pushed the door open and rushed in. On the very threshold she began shouting to La Maheude: 'So it's you who have been saying things about my lodger and me, is it?'

The other shrugged her shoulders. 'Don't bother me; I never said anything. I don't know what you mean.'

'I've been told that you said it, and that's enough. I'm not going to tell you by whom. You said this and you said that.'

Forthwith La Levaque entered into details of what she had heard.

Quarrels now broke out almost every day in consequence of the everlasting tittle-tattle of the women. Between next-door neighbours rows and reconciliations were of daily occurrence. But never before had a squabble been so bitter. Since the strike, however, hunger had aggravated their grudges against each other; there seemed on all sides to be a kind of craving to come to fisticuffs. An explanation

between two women generally ended in a fight between their husbands.

Just then Levaque himself came on the scene, dragging Bouteloup after him. 'Here he is; let him say if there's any truth in it.'

The lodger then stammered forth his protests; whereupon Levaque began to shake his fist in Maheu's face.

'You know,' said he, 'that kind of thing doesn't suit me. When a man has a wife with a tongue like that, he ought to thrash her. Am I to take it that you believed what she said?'

'But curse it all!' shouted Maheu, beside himself at being disturbed in his misery, 'what's the use of all this tittle-tattle? Hasn't a man enough to do to mind his own business? Just leave me alone, or I'll do for you. First of all, who said that my wife said all this?'

'Who said it? Why, La Pierronne said it.'

At this, La Maheude broke out into a shrill laugh, and went towards La Levaque. 'Oh! La Pierronne said it, did she? Well! I may as well tell you what she said to me.'

After that it became impossible for them to hear their own words. They all got very angry, but finally agreed in casting all the responsibility for the tittle-tattle on La Pierronne. And at last, Maheu, infuriated by some fresh revelation, began to bellow: 'She said that, she said that! Very good, then I'm going to her, and I'll thrash her for her pains!'

He rushed out, followed by the Levaques, while Bouteloup, who had a horror of quarrels, quietly slunk off. La Maheude was on the point of going out as well, when a sudden groan from Alzire stopped her. She thereupon wrapped the blanket more closely round the shivering girl and returned to the window, whence she stared vacantly at the deserted road. Wherever could the doctor have got to?

Meantime there were lively doings at the Pierrons'. Just then La Pierronne had a visitor, Dansaert, the head viewer, and the pair of them were sipping gin and eating biscuits before a blazing fire. Almost immediately after the others had reached the house however, Pierron himself appeared on the scene, and when Dansaert had bolted—anxious as he was to avoid participation in any brawl which might bring him into disfavour with M. Hennebeau—free play was given to wrath and violence.

La Pierronne, conscious of being the handsomest and the most comfortably-situated woman of the village, had assumed a most contemptuous air. 'I said what I said, so just you go to the deuce!' she shouted. 'What's my business to you? What if I can treat myself to a glass and a good fire? You're only jealous, because we put money by!'

Thereupon Pierron got angry also, and backed up his wife. In return he was called a creature of the company, a spy, who did nothing but fetch and carry. The others declared that the good food and drink in which he and his wife indulged were the price of his treason to his comrades. He replied to this by pretending that Maheu had slipped threatening papers under his door; documents on which were a skull and cross-bones, surmounted by a dagger. And, as a matter of course, the quarrel terminated in a desperate fight between the men, as was the case with all the disputes which the women had started ever since starvation had maddened the most gentle. Maheu and Levaque rushed upon Pierron, and belaboured him with their fists until they were separated by a party of neighbours.

Her son-in-law's nose was still bleeding profusely when the Scorched One came home. On being informed of the state of affairs she simply remarked: 'That pig is a disgrace to me.'

Then the street again became deserted; not a shadow fell on the whiteness of the snow. The village relapsed in its death-like immobility, dying of starvation beneath the intense cold.

'And the doctor?' asked Maheu, closing the door behind him, as he returned to his own home.

'He's not been,' answered La Maheude, still standing by the window.

'Have the youngsters come back?'

'No, not yet.'

Then once more Maheu began walking heavily from one end of the room to the other. Sitting stiff in his chair, old Jollycorpse had not even raised his head. Neither did Alzire utter a word; she only tried to avoid trembling in order that she might not grieve her parents too much; but in spite of her determined courage to suffer in silence, she shook so violently at times that one could hear the jerking of her puny little frame against the blanket, while, with dilated eyes, she stared up to the ceiling at the pale reflection of the snow-covered gardens, which illumined the room as with moonlight.

The last stage of misery had now arrived; the house had been stripped bare. The ticking of the mattresses had followed the wool to the brokers' shops; then the sheets had gone, together with all the body-linen that could be sold. One evening they had even sold a pocket-handkerchief belonging to the old man for two sous. Hot tears accompanied the departure of each little household god which it was necessary to part with; and the mother still bewailed the loss of the pink cardboard box, her husband's present which she had one day carried off hidden in her skirts, even as one might carry a child to abandon it on a doorstep. They were now stripped; they had nothing to sell but their worn-out skins, for which nobody would have given a copper. And so they no longer took the trouble to look about them for aid; they knew there was nothing, that the end had come, that they could no longer hope for a candle, or a lump of coal, or a mere potato. And they awaited death to bring them relief, and only repined for the children's sake, revolting at the useless cruelty which fate displayed in striking little Alzire down with illness before killing her with starvation.

'Here he is at last!' said La Maheude.

A dark figure had passed before the window and the door opened. But it was not Doctor Vanderhaghen who entered. Instead of him they recognised the new priest, Abbé Ranvier, who did not seem in the least surprised at the deathlike aspect of the house—without fire, or light, or bread. He had already been to three adjacent dwellings, going from family to family seeking such as might be amenable to his counsel. And he at once explained the purport of his call in his feverish zealous voice.

'Why did you not come to mass on Sunday, my children? You are wrong; the Church alone can save you. Now promise me that you will come next Sunday.'

But Maheu, after looking at him, resumed his perambulations without a word. It was his wife who replied: 'To mass, reverend sir! What for? Does the Almighty think of us? Look at this little one—what has she done to Him that she should be trembling with fever? We hadn't got trouble enough, it seems; it was decided that she must get ill besides, when I haven't even as much as a drop of herb-tea to give her.'

Thereupon the priest, standing before her, spoke at length. He availed himself of the strike, the horrible misery, the

exasperated rancour bred of hunger, with all the ardour of a missionary preaching to savages for the glory of his faith. He said that the Church was with the poor and that one day it would bring about the triumph of justice by calling God's wrath down upon the iniquities of the rich. And assuredly that day would soon dawn, for the rich had sought to usurp the place of God, and had ended by ruling without Him in their impious assumption of power. But if the workmen wished to see a just division of the riches of this world, they must forthwith commit themselves to the hands of the priests, even as lowly and little ones had grouped themselves round the apostles at the death of Jesus. Let them remember what strength the Pope would possess, what an army the clergy would have at its disposal, if they could command the toiling masses! In one week the world would be purged of the wicked; unworthy masters would be driven forth; and at last would come the true reign of God, when everybody would be rewarded according to his deserts—the law of labour regulating universal happiness.

La Maheude, listening, fancied that she could hear Étienne on one of those long-past autumn evenings, when he had predicted the end of their troubles. But she had always been suspicious of the black frocks.

'All that is very well, your reverence,' she said at last. 'But it means, then, that you no longer agree with the masters.' All our other priests used to dine at the director's house, and threatened us with the devil whenever we asked for bread.'

Thereupon the priest started off afresh and spoke of the deplorable misunderstandings between the Church and the people. In veiled ambiguous phrases he censured the town clergy, the bishops, the higher dignitaries of the church, satiated with the pleasures of life, gorged with authority, and making common cause with the liberal *bourgeoisie* in the blind folly that had fallen upon them, without perceiving that this very *bourgeoisie* was dispossessing them of the empire of the world. Deliverance would come from the country priests: they would all rise as one man, and aided by the disinherited would restore the reign of Christ. And he already seemed to be at their head; he drew up his lean bony figure like a leader, an insurgent of the Gospel, and his eyes flashed such fire that they almost lighted up the gloomy room. His ardent sermon carried him beyond himself; he

made use of mystical phrases which the poor could not understand.

'There's no need to waste so much breath,' suddenly grunted Maheu. 'You would have done better to begin by bringing us a loaf.'

'Come to mass on Sunday,' exclaimed the priest. 'God will provide for all!'

Then he went off to Levaque's house to catechise its inmates in their turn, so absorbed in his dream of the final triumph of the Church, so disdainful of sober facts, that he thus ran about the villages, without alms, with empty hands, amidst that army dying of starvation. He was, however, but a poor devil himself, and looked upon bodily suffering as the proper spur to salvation.

Maheu had resumed his tramp up and down; nothing was heard but his regular footfalls, which shook the flooring. All at once, however, there came a sound as of the creaking of a rusty pulley; it was old Jollycorpse expectorating into the empty grate. Then the rhythmical footsteps were heard again. Alzire, in her fever, at last began talking wanderingly in a low voice: she laughed, fancying that it was very warm, and that she was playing in the sunshine.

'Curse our luck!' murmured La Maheude, after touching the child's cheeks, 'she's burning hot now. I expect that pig won't come at all; those brigands have no doubt forbidden him to attend on us.'

She was alluding to the doctor and the company. Nevertheless, she could not restrain an exclamation of joy when she saw the door open once more. But her arms almost immediately afterwards fell to her sides and she remained erect, with a sombre expression on her face.

'Good evening,' softly said Étienne, when he had carefully shut the door behind him.

He often came upon them like this in the darkness of the night. On the second day after his flight the Maheus had become aware of his retreat, but they kept the secret. Nobody else in the village knew exactly what had become of the young man. This surrounded him, as it were, with a kind of legend. Most of the miners continued to believe in him. Mysterious rumours about him were rife; he would reappear, said some, with an army and bags full of gold. They were still religiously awaiting a miracle, the realisation of their ideal, their sudden entry into the city of justice which he had

promised them. Some pretended that they had seen him in a closed carriage, accompanied by three gentlemen, on the Marchiennes road, while others declared that he would still be detained for a few days in England, whither he was said to have gone. At length, however, mistrust raised its head: some jokers accused him of hiding in a cellar with La Mouquette, for his intimacy with that girl had been bruited about, and did him harm. Thus there was slowly growing disaffection, a veering of the most convinced beneath the onslaught of despair. And their number was sure to increase day by day.

'What beastly weather!' he added. 'And how goes it with you? Nothing new? From bad to worse, I suppose. I've been told that little Négrel has gone to Belgium to engage some Borain workmen. If that's the case, we're done for.'

He had been taken with a shudder on entering that icy and gloomy room, to the darkness of which his eyes had to grow accustomed before he could perceive the poor wretches, who he divined were there. He felt, too, a certain repugnance, the kind of discomfort experienced by the workman who rises above his class, refined by study and gnawed by ambition. What misery, what a foul smell, and what herding together! Intense pity brought a lump to his throat. The sight of such agony so unmanned him, indeed, that he sought words to counsel submission.

But Maheu had taken his stand in front of him exclaiming: 'Belgians! they wouldn't dare, the dirty cowards! Let them try to make the Belgians go down, and you see if we don't demolish the pits!'

Somewhat abashed, Étienne nevertheless explained how impossible it was to intervene, pointing out that the troops who were guarding the pits would protect the descent of the foreign workmen. But Maheu clenched his fists, irritated above all, as he said, at feeling those bayonets at his back. So the miners were no longer masters in their own country? They were treated like galley-slaves, driven to work with loaded guns pointed at them. As for himself, he loved his pit; it grieved him much that he had not been down there for the last two months. No wonder, then, that he saw 'red' at the idea of that insult—the engagement of those foreigners. Then, suddenly, the recollection that he had received his own dismissal almost broke his heart.

'I don't know why I'm getting into a passion,' he murmured, 'seeing that I no longer even belong to their concern. When they've driven me from here I can only go and lie down in the road to die.'

'Don't trouble about that!' said Étienne; 'you've only to say the word and they'll take you back to-morrow. Masters don't drive away good workmen.'

He stopped short, astonished at hearing Alzire laughing softly to herself in her delirium. He had previously only noticed the rigid shadow of old Jollycorpse, and the sick child's hilarity frightened him. No, it was too much if even the little ones were dying of it. So in a tremulous voice he spoke out there and then.

'This can't last; we're done for. We'd better give in.'

At this La Maheude, hitherto motionless and silent, exploded, shouting in his face, and swearing like a man: 'What's that you say? It's you who say it!'

He wanted to explain matters, but she would not allow him to speak.

'Don't repeat it, curse you! or, woman as I am, I'll put my mark on your face. Was it for this, then, that we've starved for two months past? Was it for this that I've sold my home? was it for this that my children have fallen ill? We're to be no better off, and all the injustice is to begin again! No! when I think of it, the blood rises in my throat and chokes me. No! no! no! I'd burn everything,' I'd kill everybody, sooner than give in now.'

She pointed to Maheu in the gloom with a sweeping, threatening gesture. 'Listen: if my man goes back to the pit, it's I who'll wait for him on the road, to spit in his face and call him coward.'

Étienne could not see her, but he felt a warmth like the breath of a growling beast of prey. He had retreated, seized with fear, before that outburst of fury, which was his own work. He found her so changed that he no longer recognised her; she, who had always been so moderate, and who had reproached him with his own violence, saying that it was wicked to wish for anybody's death! Yet now she refused to listen to reason, and spoke of killing people. It was no longer he but she who talked politics, who wanted to sweep away the whole *bourgeoisie*, who demanded the republic and the guillotine to rid the world of those robbers, the rich, who fattened upon the labour of the starvelings.

'Yes, I'd flay them with my own hands. We've had enough of it, I should think! Our turn's come; you said so yourself. When I think that the father, the grandfather, and his father, too, all those who've gone before us, have suffered what we're suffering, and that our sons, and our sons' sons, will suffer the same also, it drives me that mad I could take up a knife. We didn't do half enough the other day. We ought to have razed Montsou to the ground, down to the last brick of it. And shall I tell you? I've but one regret—that I didn't let the old 'un strangle that girl from La Piolaine. Why not? They leave hunger to strangle my little ones, don't they?'

Her words fell like hatchet-strokes in the darkness. The narrow closed horizon had refused to expand, and the impossible ideal was becoming poison in the brain of that woman unhinged by suffering.

'You misunderstood me!' Étienne was able to say at last, thinking it well to beat a retreat. 'What I meant was that an understanding ought to be come to with the company. I know that the shafts are going to rack and ruin; so no doubt they would consent to some arrangement.'

'No! no! nothing!' she yelled.

Just then Lénore and Henri came back empty-handed. A gentleman had given them a copper, but as they were always fighting, the girl kicking the boy, the copper had dropped in the snow. Jeanlin, who was with them, had helped them to look for the money, but they had been unable to find it.

'Where's Jeanlin?'

'He went off, mother; he said he had some business to attend to.'

Étienne stood listening, heart-broken. Heretofore, La Maheude had threatened to kill her children if they ever held out their hands for charity. But now she herself sent them on to the highroads. She even spoke of all of them going, of the ten thousand miners of Montsou, taking the staff and the wallet of the beggars of olden time and scouring the terror-stricken country.

Then the anguish grew greater still in the black room. The urchins had come back hungry, they wanted something to eat, and kept asking why nothing was given them. They began to wail and groan and throw themselves on the floor; and ended by rolling over the feet of their dying sister, who

moaned pitifully. Beside herself, their mother slapped them, dealing her punishment haphazard in the darkness. Then, as they still continued to cry for bread, she burst into tears, letting herself drop upon the tiled floor, and taking them in her arms, them and the little invalid. Her tears kept flowing amidst a kind of nervous relaxation, in which she only found strength to continue muttering the same phrase, calling upon death to deliver them. 'Good Lord, for pity's sake take us and make an end of us!' And meantime the grandfather preserved the immobility of an old tree twisted by wind and rain, while the father continued his tramp from the fireplace to the sideboard without even turning his head.

But the door swung open, and this time it was Doctor Vanderhaghen who entered.

'The devil! You won't spoil your eyesights with candlelight. Look sharp, I'm in a hurry.'

As usual, he grumbled, exhausted as he was with work. Fortunately he had some matches about him. Maheu was obliged to light six, one by one, and to hold them so that he might examine the sick child. Taken out of her blanket, she shivered beneath the faint flicker of light, her shrunken body scarcely bigger than that of a bird dying in the snow, so puny indeed that scarcely anything was visible but her hump. She smiled nevertheless, but it was the wild smile of the dying, with her eyes dilated, and her poor little hands clutching at her skeleton breast. And as the mother, choking with tears, asked whether it was reasonable that the only child who assisted her in her work, who was so intelligent and so gentle, should thus be snatched away, the doctor lost his temper.

'There! it's all over. She has died of starvation. And she isn't the only one. I've just seen another close by. You all call me in, but I can do nothing. It's meat you want to cure you.'

Maheu, his fingers burnt, had dropped the last match; and darkness closed in once more upon the little corpse. The doctor went off at a run, and Étienne heard no other sound in the gloomy room save the sobs of the mother who kept on repeating her appeal to death, her lugubrious, never-ceasing lamentation: 'Oh, Lord, it's my turn, take me! Good Lord, take my man, take the others, for pity's sake, that there may be an end of it!'

III

On that particular Sunday Souvarine remained alone with his head against the wall, in his usual place at the Good Luck, from eight o'clock in the evening. Not one miner now knew where to get the necessary copper for a mug of beer; never had the taverns done less business. It was not surprising, therefore, that Madame Rasseneur preserved sullen silence as she sat motionless behind the counter, while Rasseneur, standing before the fireplace, thoughtfully contemplated the ruddy smoke of the coal.

Suddenly, amidst the oppressive quietude of the hot room, three sharp taps on one of the windows caused Souvarine to turn his head. He got up, for he had recognised the signal by which Étienne had more than once already called him, when he happened to see him smoking his cigarette alone. Before the engine-man could get to the door, however, Rasseneur had opened it; and, recognising the newcomer in the light coming from the window, he said to him, 'Are you afraid that I shall round upon you? If you want to talk, you'll be better here than in the road.'

Étienne went in. But he refused the mug of beer which Madame Rasseneur politely offered him. The tavern-keeper was the first to speak again.

'I've long known where you're hiding. If I were a spy as your friends pretend, I could have sent the gendarmes after you a week ago.'

'There's no need to defend yourself from such accusations,' replied the young man. 'I'm perfectly well aware that you're not one of that sort. People may differ in opinions and still respect each other.'

Once more silence fell upon the room. Souvarine had sat down again with his back to the wall, his eyes watching the curling smoke from his cigarette; but his fingers kept fidgeting; they were for ever feeling his knees as if in search of the warm fur of Poland, who had failed to make her appearance that night. Her absence made the Nihilist feel uncomfortable; he seemed to want something without exactly knowing what.

Seated at the other side of the table Étienne at last spoke out

'They're going to resume work to-morrow, at the Voreux pit it seems. The Belgians have come with little Négrel.'

'Yes; they arrived at nightfall,' said Rasseneur, slowly, remaining standing. 'Let's hope there'll be no fighting!' Then, raising his voice, he continued, 'I don't want to begin quarrelling again, but all this is sure to end badly, if you continue to remain obstinate. Look here! your story is absolutely that of your International. I saw Pluchart at Lille, whether I went on business the day before yesterday. The enterprise is dropping to pieces, it appears.'

He gave particulars. The famous association, after winning workmen all over the world to its side by a dash of propaganda, which still terrified the middle classes, was now being devoured, collapsing a little more each day beneath the struggle of various vanities and ambitions. Since the anarchists had obtained the upper hand, driving away the evolutionists of the original scheme, everything had been falling to pieces; the primitive aim, the reform of the wages system, had disappeared amidst the strife of the various sects; and the skilfully planned organisation was being destroyed by hatred of all discipline. One could already foresee the final collapse of that general rising, which had for a moment threatened to sweep old and corrupt society away.

'Pluchart's sick of it,' continued Rasseneur. 'Worse than all, he has entirely lost his voice. Nevertheless he manages to speak, and talks of addressing meetings in Paris. And he repeated to me three times that our strike was done for.'

Étienne, with his eyes turned to the floor, let him have his say, without interruption. On the previous night he had been talking to some of his mates, and had felt a breath of ill-will and suspicion passing over him, those first whiffs of unpopularity which are the forerunners of defeat. He remained sombre, but refused to acknowledge that defeat face to face with one who had predicted that the mob would hoot him in his turn on the day when it would have to avenge the unfulfilment of its hopes.

'No doubt the strike is done for, I know that as well as Pluchart,' he said at last. 'But that was to be expected; we accepted it against our will, we did not think of having done with the company. But people get intoxicated, and foster hopes; and when things turn out badly, they forget that matters could not have been otherwise, they begin to

lament, and end by quarrelling as if they were in presence of some catastrophe fallen from the sky.'

'In that case,' retorted Rasseneur,' 'if you think the game lost, why not try to bring the comrades to their senses?'

The young man looked at him fixedly.

'Look here,' said he, 'that'll do. You've your ideas, I've got mine. I came in to show you that I respect you all the same. But I still think that if we croak under the weight of this trouble, our starved-out carcases will prove more useful to the people's cause than all your policy of prudence. Ah! if one of those pigs of soldiers would only lodge a bullet in my heart, how magnificent it would be to end like that!'

His eyes had grown dim with tears, as he uttered that cry, instinct with the secret desire of the defeated for a refuge where one's troubles will be for ever forgotten.

'Well said!' exclaimed Madame Rasseneur, who, with a look, cast at her husband the whole contempt of her radical opinions.

Souvarine, whose eyes were half closed, and who was still nervously fidgeting with his hands, did not seem to have heard. His fair girlish face, his thin nose, his little pointed teeth assumed a savage expression, amidst his mystical reverie, full of bloody visions. He began to dream aloud; replying in a way to a remark of Rasseneur's respecting the International which he had caught at random during the conversation.

'They're all cowards; but one man was needed to make their machine a terrible instrument of destruction. But will-power is necessary, and nobody has the will, and that is why the revolution will miscarry once more.'

In a tone of disgust he went on to bewail the idiocy of mankind, while the two others listened, disturbed by these somnambulistic confidences, cast as it were to the darkness of the night. In Russia everything was at a standstill; he, Souvarine, was most distressed by the news he had received. His old comrades had all become mere politicians; the famous Nihilists at whom all Europe trembled, sons of popes, of petty middle-class people and shopkeepers, did not look beyond the emancipation of their nation. They seemed to fancy that the deliverance of the world would come with the killing of one despot. When he spoke to them of razing all human-kind like a ripe harvest to the ground, when he so

much as pronounced that childish word republic, he felt that he was not understood, that he made people uneasy, that he had lost caste in their eyes and was regarded as one of the princely failures of revolutionary cosmopolitanism. Still his patriotic heart continued to struggle, and it was with painful bitterness that he repeated his favourite phrase, 'All rubbish! They'll never get out of the mire with their rubbish!'

Then, lowering his voice still more, he spoke in bitter words of his old dream of an universal brotherhood. He had only renounced his rank and fortune to enrol himself among the working men in the hope of seeing a new association of labour in common founded at last. Every sou he had in his pockets had long ago gone to the urchins of the village; he had shown the miners all the affection of a brother, smiling at their suspicions, and winning their hearts by quietly remaining a punctual, if taciturn worker. But, decidedly, fusion was as far off as ever; he remained a stranger to them, with his contempt of all ties and his determination to keep his courage intact and to resist all joys and vanities. And ever since the morning he had been particularly exasperated by the perusal of a scrap of news that was in all the papers.

His voice changed, his eyes sparkled and fixed themselves on Étienne as he addressed him direct: "Can you now understand this? There are those journeymen hatters of Marseilles who have won the grand prize of a hundred thousand francs in the lottery, and who have at once invested it in Government securities, declaring that in future they intend to live in idleness? Yes, that is the idea of all of you —of every French workman—to unearth some treasure or other so as to live on it afterwards in egotism and laziness. You may shout as much as you like against the rich, you lack the courage to hand over to the poor the money which fortune may send you. You will never be worthy of happiness while you have something belonging to yourselves, and while your hatred of the *bourgeois* proceeds from your mad wish to be *bourgeois* in their stead.'

Rasseneur burst out laughing; the idea of the two Marseilles workmen giving up the grand prize seemed to him stupid. But Souvarine became livid; his distorted face assumed a terrifying expression, for he was full of that religious wrath that exterminates people.

'You'll be all mown down, overthrown, flung to pollution,' he exclaimed. 'He will arise, the one who will

annihilate your race of cowards and pleasure-seekers. And, look! you see my hands? Well, if they had the power, they would take the earth like this and shake it till it crumbled to dust, so that all of you might be buried beneath it.'

'Well said!' repeated Madame Rasseneur, in her polite tone of conviction.

Silence reigned once more. Then Étienne again spoke of the Belgian workmen, and questioned Souvarine about the arrangements made at the Voreux pit. But the engine-man, who had relapsed into his dream, scarcely answered. He only knew that cartridges were to be given out to the soldiers guarding the pit. Meantime the nervous twitching of his fingers on his knees increased to such a degree as to make him conscious at last of what they wanted—the soft fur of the favourite coney that acted like a sedative.

'Where is Poland?' he asked.

The landlord laughed anew, while exchanging a glance with his wife. And after an awkward pause, he blurted out:

'Poland? She's being kept warm.'

Since her adventure with Jeanlin, the fat doe had ceased breeding; and to avoid unproductive expense, it had been decided that very day to stew Poland with some potatoes.

'Yes, you had a leg of her this evening. And what's more, you smacked your lips!'

Souvarine did not understand at first. But when he did, he turned very pale, and an expression of mingled disgust and emotion came over him. Two big tears filled his eyes, in spite of all his stoicism, but there was no time to notice them, for all at once the door was violently thrown open, and Chaval appeared, pushing Catherine before him. After intoxicating himself with beer and bravado at all the taverns of Montsou, it had occurred to the rascal to look in at the Good Luck just to show his old pals that he was not afraid of them.

As he came in he said to Catherine: 'Dash it all! I tell you that I mean to have a mug of beer here; and what's more, I'll smash the jaw of the first one who dares to look askance at me.'

Catherine, amazed at the sight of Étienne, turned very pale. When Chaval noticed him, he began to chuckle provokingly. 'Madame Rasseneur,' said he, 'two mugs of beer. We'll drink to the resumption of work.'

Madame Rasseneur served the beer without a word like a

woman who refused to nobody the beverage she retailed. Silence fell upon the room; neither the landlord nor the others stirred.

'I know folk who have said that I'm a spy!' Chaval at last resumed in an arrogant tone. 'I'm waiting for them to repeat it to me face to face, so that we may come to an explanation.' Still nobody replied; the others turned their heads and stared vaguely at the wall. 'There are those who're drones, and those who are not,' he continued, in a still louder voice. 'As for me, I've nothing to hide. I've left Deneulin's dirty concern, and I'm going down to the Voreux pit to-morrow morning with twelve Belgians that have been put under me because people respect me. And if there's anybody who doesn't like it, he can say so, and we'll talk the matter over.'

Then, as his provocations were received with the same contemptuous silence, he rounded upon Catherine. 'Will you drink? curse it all! Drink with me to the death of all the filthy scum who refuse to work!'

She clinked her mug against his, but with so trembling a hand that one could hear the two mugs tinkling. He had taken a handful of silver from his pocket, which he displayed with the ostentation of a drunkard, saying that that sort of thing was earned by the sweat of one's brow, and that he defied the drones to show as much as a ten-sou piece. The attitude of his former comrades exasperated him, and at last he came to direct insults.

'It's at night, then, that the moles come out. It's only when the gendarmes are asleep that one meets brigands!'

Étienne had got up, very calm and resolute.

'Look here,' said he, 'I've had enough of you. Yes, you're an informer. Your money still reeks of some filthy treachery, and it disgusts me to have to touch your vile skin. But never mind! I'm your man for all that. One of us ought to have smashed the other long ago.'

Chaval clenched his fists. 'Ha! ha! it takes a great deal, it seems, to draw you out, you coward! You by yourself, that suits me right enough! and you'll pay for all the dirty tricks you played on me!'

With a supplicating gesture Catherine stepped between them, but there was no need to thrust her back. She herself felt the necessity of the battle, and slowly retreated. Standing erect against the wall, she remained speechless, so paralysed

by anguish that she no longer even shuddered, but simply stared at those two men, who were going to kill one another for her.

Madame Rasseneur merely cleared the counter of its mugs and glasses, lest they should get broken, after which she calmly seated herself on the bench again, without betraying any unbecoming curiosity. Yet it was not right to let two former friends fly at each other like that. Rasseneur persisted in interfering, and Souvarine was obliged to take him by the shoulder, and bring him back near the table, saying: 'This is no business of yours. There is one too many; let the best man live.'

Already, and without waiting to be attacked, Chaval had begun sparring in the air. He was the taller and more alert, and aimed at his foe's face with furious overhand blows from each fist, one after the other, as if he were lunging with a pair of sabres. And he kept on talking, posing, as it were, for the onlookers, and interlarding his talk with insults, which helped to excite him.

'Ah! you dirty beast! I'll have your nose! It's your nose I want, so as to shove it somewhere! Put up your face then, and I'll mash it for the pigs, and we'll see afterwards whether hussies will still run after you.'

Silent, his teeth tightly set, Étienne held his slight figure well together, relying upon his science, his chest and face well covered by his two fists while watching for an opening; whereupon he let fly straight from the shoulders.

At first they did not damage each other much. The wild sparring of the one and the calm watching of the other, only prolonged the struggle. A chair was upset, while their clumsy boots crunched the sand with which the tiled floor was bestrewed. But they grew short-winded at last, one could hear them panting for breath, and their faces reddened as from the heat of braziers within them, whose flames flared forth in their eyes.

'A hit!' howled Chaval; 'trumps on your carcase!' And, indeed, his fist had struck his adversary's shoulder. The latter restrained a groan of pain, and the only sound heard was the muffled bruising of the muscles. Then Étienne retorted by a blow directed straight at Chaval's chest, which would have staved it in had not the other saved himself by one of his goat-like jumps. The blow, nevertheless, caught him in the left side, and so violently as to make him stagger

for a moment, gasping for breath. He became quite furious as he felt his arms losing their power amidst the pain he experienced; bounding forward like a wild beast, he aimed at the other's stomach with his heel.

Étienne avoided the kick, but such was his indignation at this infraction of the rules of fair fight that he could keep silent no longer.

'Stop that, you brute! Keep your feet out of it, or I'll smash your skull with a chair!'

Then the struggle became fiercer still. Rasseneur, disgusted at it, would again have interfered, but for his wife's severe look, which kept him in check. What next? she wondered. As if two customers had not the right to settle a difference in their house. So Rasseneur merely posted himself in front of the grate, lest the combatants should tumble into the fire. Souvarine, in his quiet way, had rolled himself a cigarette; nevertheless, he forgot to light it. Catherine, on her side, remained motionless by the wall; save that her hands had unconsciously clasped her waist, and were tearing her dress to ribbons. She made every effort to refrain from crying out, from causing the death of one or the other, by loudly shouting out her preference. Besides, she was so terrified that it would have been difficult for her to say at that moment whom she did prefer.

Chaval soon grew exhausted, perspiration streamed from him, and he hit out at random. Notwithstanding his passion, Étienne on his side continued guarding himself, warding off nearly every blow. Still, one of his ears was cut, and a nail tore a bit of flesh from his neck, causing him such pain that he also began to swear as he dealt one of his terrible shoulder blows. Once more did Chaval save his chest by a back jump; but, in doing so, he stooped and the other's fist caught him in the face, crushing his nose and bunging up his eye. Blood immediately spurted from his nostrils and his swelling eye turned black and blue. Blinded by the red stream of blood, dazed by the shock to his skull, the wretch was wildly beating the air with his arms, when another blow, this time full in the chest, settled him. There was a dull thud, and he fell heavily on his back like a sack of plaster thrown from a cart. Étienne quietly waited.

'Get up. We'll go on if you want any more.'

Chaval did not reply, but after a few moments of stupefaction, he began to move. He picked himself up with difficulty,

and remained for an instant on his knees, huddled together and fumbling with his right hand in his pocket. Then, having risen to his feet again, he suddenly made a fresh bound, his throat almost bursting with a wild howl.

But Catherine had watched him; and, in spite of herself, a loud cry came from her heart, surprising her, like the avowal of a preference hitherto unknown even to herself.

'Take care! he's got his knife!'

Étienne had only time to ward off the first blow with his arm. The sleeve of his jersey was slit by the thick blade, one of those blades secured by a brass ferrule to a boxwood handle. He had already seized Chaval's wrist, and a terrific struggle began: he feeling that he would be lost if he abandoned his hold, and the other giving terrrible wrenches in his efforts to disengage his hand and strike afresh. Little by little the weapon descended and their rigid arms relaxed. Twice did Étienne feel the cold steel against his skin; and he had to make a supreme effort, and crush the other's wrist in a vice-like grip before the knife dropped from his open hand. Both flung themselves on the floor, and it was Étienne who picked up the weapon and in his turn brandished it aloft. In another moment he had his knees on Chaval's breast and threatened to slit his throat. 'Ah! you traitor! I'll do for you this time!'

A demoniacal voice within him drowned all other promptings. It ascended from the very centre of his being, and kept beating against his brain like a sledge-hammer. It was a sudden thirst for blood, a craving to kill. Never before had the attack shaken him so violently as now; and yet he was not drunk. And he struggled against his hereditary evil, with shuddering despair. At last he achieved victory over himself. He flung the knife behind him, and gasped in a hoarse voice: 'Get up and go!'

This time Rasseneur sprang forward, though he scarcely dared to venture between the two men lest he should receive a blow. He wanted no murder in his house, however, and became so angry that his wife, still sitting erect behind the counter, observed that he was always crying out before he was hurt. Souvarine, whom the open knife had nearly struck in the leg, now made up his mind to light his cigarette. It was all over, then? Catherine stood staring, stupefied before the two men, who were both still alive.

'Go!' repeated Étienne, 'or I'll make an end of you!'

Chaval got up and wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand; and then with his jaws stained red and his eye bunged up, he went off with dragging steps in all the fury of defeat. Catherine mechanically followed him. But at the sight of the girl he drew himself up, and his hatred broke forth in a flood of insults.

'Ah! no, ah! no, as you prefer him, you can stay with him! And don't cross my threshold again, if you value your skin!'

He banged the door behind him. And then profound silence fell upon the warm room, in which no sound was heard but the roar of the burning coal. On the floor nothing remained of the fight save the overturned chair, and a spattering of blood which the sand on the tiles slowly absorbed.

IV.

When they were outside Rasseneur's, Étienne and Catherine for a time walked on in silence side by side. It was beginning to thaw, with a slow, chilly thaw, which seemed to soil the snow without melting it. In the livid sky the full moon could be divined behind some large, dark, ragged clouds, which the wind drove furiously before it at a great height. Below nothing stirred; one only heard a dripping from the roofs, whence big white masses dropped with a soft thud.

Étienne was at a loss what to do with the girl thus thrust upon him; but at last he spoke of taking her to the village, to her parents. With a look of terror, however, she refused the offer. Anything rather than go back upon her parents' hands after having left them in the wicked way she had done! And neither the one nor the other spoke farther on that point; they trudged about at hazard along the roads that were fast changing into quagmires. At first they had gone towards the Voreux pit; then they turned to the right, and passed between the mound of shale and the canal. And as they walked, all the past came back to Étienne; their unavowed passion of former days, their delicacy, the sense of shame that had prevented them from giving way to temptation. Was he, then, still in love with her that he felt so troubled? For a moment it seemed as if the girl's thoughts were similar to his own; but when, after trudging another hundred yards or so without

exchanging a word, Étienne inquired: 'Do you know, at least, where you intend to go? I can't leave you out of doors in such a night as this,' she simply answered: 'I'm going back to Chaval. It's my duty; I mustn't stay away, whatever he said.'

'But he'll thrash the life out of you,' retorted Étienne.

Silence again ensued. Catherine shrugged her shoulders in a resigned sort of way. Chaval would thrash her assuredly, but what of that? When he was tired he would stop. Besides, she was getting used to his blows; she said, to console herself, that eight out of every ten girls fared no better than she did.

They had mechanically taken the road to Montsou, and, as they drew nearer and nearer to it, their intervals of silence became more frequent. It was as if they had not been walking together. He, in spite of his grief at seeing her go back to Chaval, found no word to say to persuade her to the contrary. His heart was breaking, but he had nothing better to offer her than an existence of misery and flight which would end, perhaps, in the bullet of some soldier shattering his skull. Perhaps, after all, then, it was better to suffer what they did suffer without adding another trial thereto. Thus, with his head bowed, he led her back to the man whom he had thrashed; and raised no protest, when, at the corner of the company's yards, a score of paces from Piquette's eating-houses, she stopped him, saying:

'Don't come any farther. If he saw you, it might cause another row.'

Just then the church clock struck eleven: the eating-house was closed, but some rays of light filtered through the cracks in the shutters.

'Good-bye,' she murmured.

She had given him her hand, and he retained it in his own. She was obliged to withdraw it, with a slow effort, in order to leave him. Without looking back she went in by a side door, which was on the latch. But he had not the courage to go away; he remained rooted to the spot with his eyes fixed on the house, uneasy as to what might be happening within. He listened anxiously, expecting to hear the cries of a woman being beaten. The house remained sombre and silent, however—he only saw a light appear at a first-floor window. At last this window was opened, and he recognised the slender form which leant towards the road. Then he

advanced a few steps, and Catherine, in a very low voice, whispered:

Ie hasn't come back yet; I beg of you, go away!'

Étienne went off. The thaw increased, water dropped in showers from the roofs, moisture covered the walls, the palings, the whole confused mass of buildings lost in the gloom. He at first went in the direction of the Réquillart pit, ill with fatigue and grief, and eager to disappear underground. But he thought once more of the Voreux pit, of the Belgian workmen who were going down there, of his mates who were exasperated with the soldiers, and resolved not to tolerate foreigners in their pit. And so once more he trudged along the canal bank amidst the melting snow.

As he neared the mound of shale the moon appeared, shining brightly. He raised his eyes to the sky, watching the clouds driven along by the wind. They became gradually whiter, thinner, semi-transparent, like muddy water, as they passed before the moon; and they succeeded each other so rapidly that the orb of night, if veiled for one moment, reappeared almost immediately, limpid and effulgent. Étienne was lowering his gaze, when something that he saw on the summit of the mound brought him to a standstill. The sentry, benumbed with cold, was walking up and down, taking five-and-twenty steps in the direction of Marchiennes, then turning and walking an equal number in the direction of Montsou. Above his black form one could distinctly see the white glitter of his bayonet, showing clearly against the pallid sky. But what attracted the young man's attention was something behind the shed where old Jollycorpse was in the habit of taking shelter on stormy nights, a moving shadow as of some lurking animal, which shadow by reason of its resemblance to a polecat he immediately recognised as Jeanlin's. The sentry could not see the young brigand, who was evidently up to some mischief, for his grudge against the soldiery did not abate; he had inquired several times when they would be rid of those assassins who were sent with rifles to shoot the people.

For a moment Étienne felt inclined to call out to him, lest he should carry his joke too far. The moon had disappeared, and he had seen the lad pull himself together as if to take a leap; but the moon came forth again, and he beheld him still in a crouching attitude. The sentry came regularly as far as the shed, then turned his back and started off in the

opposite direction. And suddenly, while a cloud was obscuring the moon, Jeanlin jumped upon the soldier's shoulders with the terrific bound of a wild cat; clung to them with his claws; and plunged an open knife into the man's throat. And as the infantryman's horsehair collar proved an impediment, he clutched the handle with both hands, and pressed on it with his whole weight. He had often bled chickens caught near farms in that way. And it was all so rapidly done that only one solitary groan was heard, while the soldier's rifle dropped to the ground with a clanking sound as of old iron. The silvery moon was again shining on high.

Motionless with stupefaction, Étienne still kept looking. His voice died away in his throat. Up above nought was to be seen on the mound, not a shadow stood out against the madly scudding clouds. And when he bounded up the incline he found Jeanlin on all fours, before the corpse which had fallen back with arms outstretched. The red trousers and the grey greatcoat contrasted forcibly with the snow, under the limpid moonlight. Not a drop of blood had flowed, and the knife was still stuck in the soldier's throat up to its very handle.

With a terrible, furious blow Étienne struck the lad down beside the corpse.

'Why have you done this?' he gasped, almost bereft of his senses.

Jeanlin picked himself up, crawled away on his hands, with feline undulations of his lank, lean body; and his large ears, his green eyes, his prominent jaw quivered in the after-excitement of the deed he had just done.

'Curse you! why did you do this?'

'I don't know; I wanted to.'

He got no farther than this in his answer. For the last three days he had 'wanted to.' It worried him; his head hurt him there, behind the ears, because he could not leave off thinking of it. And after all what need was there to make so much fuss about those swinish soldiers, who came to annoy the miners on their own ground? Of the violent speeches delivered in the forest, of the cries for devastation and death bellowed about at the pits, he had remembered half-a-dozen words, which he now repeated like a lad playing at revolution. And he knew nothing more; nobody had incited him to that deed: the idea of it had come by itself, like the idea of stealing onions from a field.

Étienne, terror-stricken by the secret growth of crime in

that child's brain, once more drove him away with a terrible kick. He shuddered at the idea that the military post at the Voreux might have heard the sentry's stifled cry; and he cast an anxious look towards the pit each time the moon appeared between the clouds. But nothing stirred. So he bent over the body, felt its hands, which were gradually getting cold, and listened with the hope that the heart might still be beating beneath the greatcoat. All that remained visible of the knife was its bone handle, on which the gallant motto, the word 'Love,' was engraved in black letters. Then Étienne's eyes wandered from the little soldier's throat to his face, and all at once, he recognised him: it was Jules, the recruit, with whom he had chatted one morning. A great feeling of pity came over Étienne, as he gazed at that fair freckled countenance, with its blue eyes wide open, looking up at the sky, as if seeking the horizon of their native land. Where was that Plogof of which the little soldier had spoken as being yonder, yonder? That storm which tossed the clouds on high had, perhaps, passed over the moor. Two women were possibly standing there—the mother and the sister—holding in their hands their coifs which the wind had blown off and also gazing into the distance, as if trying to guess what the youngster might be doing at that hour those many miles away. They would be waiting for him for ever now. Ah! what an abominable thing it was for poor devils to kill each other for the sake of the rich!

It was necessary, however, that the body should be got out of the way. At first, Étienne thought of throwing it into the canal, but the certainty of its being found there made him change his mind. After that his anxiety became very keen; time was precious, what was he to do? He had a sudden inspiration. If he could only get it as far as the Réquillart pit, he would be able to hide it there for ever.

'Come here,' he said to Jeanlin.

The boy hung back. 'No, you'll only beat me. Besides, I've got something to do. Good night.'

In fact he had made an appointment with Bébert and Lydie in a secret hiding-place, an opening made in the stock of propping at the Voreux pit. They had arranged to stop out all night, in order to be on the spot when the Belgians, who were going down that morning, should get their heads broken. 'Look here,' said Étienne, 'if you don't come I'll call the soldiers, who'll cut your head off.'

The threat having produced its effect on the lad, Étienne folded up his handkerchief, and tightly bandaged the soldier's throat, without, however, withdrawing from the wound the knife which prevented the blood from flowing. The snow was melting, there was neither a stain of blood nor the trace of any struggle on the ground.

'Take hold of his legs.'

Jeanlin did as he was told, while Étienne caught hold of the shoulders, after fastening the rifle to his own back. They went down the mound very carefully and slowly, trying not to disturb the boulders. Luckily the moon was again hidden by the clouds. But when they got to the bottom and began tramping along the canal bank, it reappeared in all its brightness, and it was by the greatest miracle that they passed unnoticed by the soldiers. They hurried along silently, embarrassed by the swinging of the body, obliged to put it down every hundred yards or so. At the corner of the lane leading to the Réquillart pit a sudden noise froze the blood in their veins, and they had only just time to hide themselves behind a wall to avoid a patrol. A little farther on they met a man, but he was drunk, and went his way after insulting them. At last, drenched with perspiration, and so thoroughly upset that their teeth chattered, they reached the old pit.

Étienne had had no illusions about the difficulty of getting the soldier down the shaft. It was a terrible job. First of all Jeanlin, who remained at the top, had to let the body slide down while Étienne, clinging to the overhanging brushwood, accompanied it to help it to pass the first two landings, where some of the rungs of the ladders were missing. After that he had to manœuvre in much the same manner at each successive ladder—namely, to descend first, and then receive the burden in his arms. There were thirty ladders, representing considerably over two hundred yards, during the descent of which the corpse constantly weighed upon him. The rifle too, rubbed against his backbone. He had forbidden the boy to fetch the bit of candle, which he hoarded like a miser. What was the good of it? The light would have only embarrassed them in that narrow space. Nevertheless, when they reached the landing vault, and he began panting for breath, he sent the lad for the candle. He sat down and waited for him in the darkness near the body, his heart beating violently the while.

Directly Jeanlin reappeared with the light, Étienne con-

sulted him, for the boy had explored the abandoned workings, having crawled into crevices where a grown-up person could not possibly pass. And they resumed their march, dragging the body for nearly a mile, through a maze of galleries in ruins. At last the roof got lower and lower, and they found themselves on their knees, beneath a shaky rock, scarcely supported by some half-broken propping. The cavity formed a kind of long box in which they laid the little soldier, as in a coffin, depositing his gun by his side. Then by dint of violent kicking they severed the props, at the risk of being buried by their fall. The rock immediately split; they scarcely had time enough to crawl away on their knees and elbows. When Étienne turned round, impelled by a wish to see what had happened, the settling down of the roof was still in progress, slowly crushing the body under its terrible weight; and soon nothing remained visible but a great mass of earth and rock.

When Jeanlin got back to his own particular corner of the cavern, he stretched himself on the hay, worn out with fatigue, and murmured: 'Well! the youngsters will have to wait for me; I'm going to have an hour's snooze.'

Étienne had blown out the candle, only a small bit of which now remained. He also felt as if every bone in his body was broken, but he was not at all sleepy; painful thoughts assailed his brain as in a fit of nightmare. At last one of them became dominant, torturing him with a question to which he could not reply. Why had he not stabbed Chaval when he had him at his mercy? and why had that child coolly butchered a soldier, of whose very name he was ignorant? All this violently upset his revolutionary beliefs anent the courage to kill and the right to kill. Was he a coward, then? Buried in the hay, the lad had begun to snore, like a drunken man, as if he were sleeping off the intoxication of his murder; and he, Étienne, suffered with loathing and irritation at knowing him there so close. Suddenly he shivered; a breath of fear had passed over him. A sob had seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth. The thought of the little soldier, lying yonder, under the rocks, with his rifle by his side, froze his marrow and made his hair stand on end. It was idiotic, but the whole mine seemed to resound with voices. Then he felt obliged to light the candle again, and only became composed on perceiving by its pale gleam how empty all the galleries were.

For another quarter of an hour he sat musing, still a prey to the same doubts, with his eyes fixed on the burning wick. But at last there was a kind of splutter, the candle went out, and everything relapsed into gloom once more. Then again he shivered and felt inclined to box the boy's ears for snoring so heavily. The proximity of the lad became indeed so unbearable that he hurried away, gasping for fresh air, hastening along the galleries and up the shaft, as if he had heard some shadow panting at his heels.

Up above, amid the Réquillart ruins, Étienne breathed freely. Since he dared not kill, it was but right that he should die; and this idea of death, which had already come to him before, returned with tenfold force, and possessed him like a last hope. To die bravely, to die for the revolution, that would make an end of it all, settle his account, good or bad, and prevent him from ever thinking again. If his mates attacked the Belgians, he would be in the front rank, where there would be every chance of catching a stray bullet. So it was with a firm step that he returned to roam around the Voreux pit. It struck two o'clock. A loud noise of voices came from the viewers' room, in which were posted the soldiers who guarded the pit. The sentry's disappearance had caused a great commotion. The men had gone to wake the captain, and after a careful examination of the spot they had ended by believing in desertion. Watching in the gloom, Étienne remembered the republican captain, of whom the little soldier had spoken. Who knew but what that officer might be prevailed upon to pass over to the people? The troops might then reverse their rifles, and that might be the signal for a massacre of the *bourgeois*. A new dream had got hold of him; he no longer thought of dying, but passed several hours, ankle-deep in mud and drenched by the drizzling thaw, feverish with the hope of still possible victory.

Until five o'clock he watched for the Belgians. Then he discovered that the company had been sharp enough to make them sleep at the pit itself. The descent commenced, and the few strikers from the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, who had been posted as scouts, hesitated about rousing their comrades. It was he who told them of the trick that had been played, and thereupon they hurried away while he remained behind the mound on the towing-path. It struck six; the leaden sky was growing clear, and reddening

with the first streaks of dawn, when Abbé Ranvier turned out of a side-path, his cassock tucked up about his thin legs. Every Monday morning he went to say early mass at a convent chapel on the other side of the pit.

'Good morning, friend,' he cried in a loud voice, after looking the young man full in the face with his flaring eyes.

The latter did not answer. In the distance, between the uprights of the settle-board at the Voreux pit, he had noticed a woman, and he hastened thither, full of anxiety, for he fancied he recognised Catherine. She it was. Ever since midnight she had been toiling along the thawing roads. Chaval, on coming home and finding her there, had driven her away. His brutality had quite dazed her, and she had sat down on a milestone, looking at the house and expecting that he would call her back; for all this seemed impossible to her—he must assuredly be watching, and would call to her to come up when he saw her shivering thus, utterly forsaken, without any one to shelter her.

At the end of a couple of hours she made up her mind to go off. Dying with cold from having so long remained motionless, like a dog thrown into the streets, she turned her back upon Montsou, daring neither to call from the pavement nor to knock at the door. She trudged away by the highroad, with the vague idea of going to her parents. But when she got to the village she felt so ashamed that she rushed past the gardens, lest she should be seen by somebody, notwithstanding the heavy sleep in which the village was wrapped. And afterwards she tramped about anyhow and anywhere, trembling at the least noise, fancying that she would be arrested as a bad character by the gendarmes. Twice she found herself close to the Voreux pit, but was frightened by the loud voices of the soldiers, whereupon she ran for her life, breathless and glancing behind to see whether they were pursuing her. Though the lane leading to Réquillart was always full of drunken men, she at last ventured back to it, with the vague hope of meeting Étienne thereabouts.

Chaval was to go down that morning; and this thought at last brought Catherine to the Voreux pit again, though she felt that it would be useless to speak to him. Everything was at an end between them. Work had entirely ceased at the Jean-Bart pit, and Chaval had threatened to strangle her if she tried to get taken on at Voreux, where he feared that she might compromise him. What was she to do, then? Go

elsewhere, die of starvation? She dragged herself along, bespattered with mud, slipping about in the ruts, her legs sinking beneath her. The thaw had converted the roads into rivers of slush, through which she kept on wading, not daring to look for a stone whereon to rest herself.

At last the dawn rose. Catherine had just recognised Chaval, who was cautiously hugging the mound to get at the pit, when she perceived Lydie and Bébert timidly peeping out of their hiding-place amongst the props. They had spent the night there watching, without daring to go home, since Jeanlin had ordered them to wait for him. And while the latter lay in the Réquillart pit sleeping off the intoxication of his crime, the two children had twined their arms round one another to get more warmth. The wind whistled between the oak and chestnut logs, amidst which they curled themselves up as if in some woodman's abandoned hut. Lydie did not dare tell Bébert of her ill-treatment by Jeanlin, any more than Bébert had the pluck to complain of the slaps with which his captain made his cheeks swell. But Jeanlin was really abusing his power too much; he made them risk their limbs in all kinds of marauding expeditions, and afterwards refused them all share of the spoil. Thus their hearts were bursting with revolt.

All at once, however, while Catherine stood looking at the children, she was startled by a bugle-call. She then rose on tiptoes and saw the soldiers at the Voreux pit taking their rifles. Étienne came running to the spot. Lydie and Bébert jumped out of their hiding-place. And over yonder, in the growing daylight, a band of men and women marched down from the village gesticulating furiously.

V

ALL the entrances to the Voreux pit save one were closed, and the sixty soldiers, with their rifles grounded, barred the only doorway that remained open—that leading to the receiving staith by a narrow staircase, on which opened the viewers' room and the waiting shed. The captain had placed his men in a double row, with their backs to a brick wall, so that they could not be attacked from behind. At first the band of miners who came down from the village kept at a distance. They were thirty at the utmost, and consulted one another

in violent confused phrases. La Maheude, unkempt, with a handkerchief hurriedly tied round her head, had arrived one of the first on the spot, with Estelle still asleep in her arms. In an excited voice she kept on saying:

'Let no one go out or in! We'll catch them like rats in a trap!'

Maheu was nodding approval, when old Mouque happened to arrive from Réquillart. They would not let him pass, despite his struggles and his assertions that his horses wanted their oats, and did not care a straw for the revolution. Besides, a horse had died below, and they were waiting for him to bring it up. Étienne released the old stableman, whom the soldiers allowed to go up to the pit. A quarter of an hour later, when the band, which had gradually increased in numbers, became threatening, a large door on the ground floor opened, and men appeared carrying the dead horse, a pitiful mass still tied up in a net, which they left amidst the pools of melting snow. The astonishment was such that nobody thought of preventing them from going back and barricading the door again. Everybody had recognised the horse by its head, which hung stiff against its flank. They began whispering to each other: 'It's Trumpet, isn't it? It's Trumpet.'

It was indeed Trumpet. Ever since going down, he had failed to acclimatise himself to the place. He remained mournful, as if suffering from the lack of bright daylight. In vain had Battle, the oldest horse of the mine, amicably rubbed his sides, and playfully bit his neck to imbue him with some of his own resignation, acquired by a stay of ten years below. Those caresses only tended to increase Trumpet's melancholy; he quivered beneath the friendly touch of his mate; and both when they met each other and neighed in salutation seemed to bewail their lot—the old one at being unable to remember, and the young one at being unable to forget. Neighbours in the stable, they lived there with lowered heads, breathing into each other's nostrils, and exchanging dreams of daylight, visions of green swards, white glistening roads, and yellow sunshine. Then when Trumpet fell sick on his litter, with perspiration breaking out all over him, Battle began to sniff him despairingly, his snorts not unlike sobs. He found his companion getting cold; the mine was robbing him of his last joy, that friend who had fallen from the skies, as it were, and about whom had clung fresh

wholesome odours which reminded him of his own youth in the open air. He had broken his halter, neighing with fear, when he discovered that the other no longer stirred.

Mouque had been warning the head viewer every day for a week past. But no one at that moment took notice of a sick horse! The gentlemen did not like to have the animals moved. At present, however, they must needs make up their minds to get Trumpet out of the pit. The night before, the old stableman had spent an hour with two men tying him up. Battle was harnessed to drag the body to the bottom of the shaft. The old horse slowly drew his dead companion through so narrow a gallery that every now and then he had to give a jerk at the risk of bruising himself; and, very worried, he shook his head, listening to the prolonged sliding noise made by that carcass going to the knacker's yard. At the bottom of the shaft, when Battle was unharnessed, he mournfully watched the preparations for the ascent; his dead mate was pushed on to some beams above the sump, and the net was slung under a cage. At last the men signalled, and Battle stretched out his neck to see Trumpet start, at first slowly, then speedily vanishing into the gloom, departing for ever up that black hole. And Battle remained with his neck outstretched, his poor feeble brain perhaps dimly remembering certain things of the earth above. But it was all over. His companion would never more see anything, and he himself would be tied in a pitiful bundle like that on the day of his ascent. His legs began to shake, the fresh air coming from the distant fields choked him, and he seemed to be drunk as he heavily trudged back to his stable.

However, in front of the enclosure the miners stood gloomily eyeing Trumpet's carcase. A woman remarked in a low voice: 'After all, a man only goes down if he chooses, but a beast has to go whether he likes it or not.'

But another batch of people now arrived from the village, and Levaque, who marched at its head, followed by his wife and Bouteloup, shouted out:

'Death to the Belgians! No foreigners here! Death! death to them!'

They were already rushing forward, and Étienne had to hold them back. He went up to the captain—a tall, slender young man of about eight-and-twenty, with a sad, determined face—and explained matters to him, trying the while to gain him over to his cause, and watching the effect of his words.

What was the good of risking a useless massacre? Was not right on the miners' side? They were all brothers; they ought to come to an understanding. At the word 'Republic,' the captain could not refrain from making a nervous gesture. Drawing himself up stiffly, however, he suddenly exclaimed: 'Back! back! Do not compel me to do my duty.'

Three times did Étienne begin afresh. Behind him his comrades kept up a threatening, growling noise. The rumour ran that Monsieur Hennebeau was at the pit, and it was suggested that he should be let down by the neck, to see whether he would hew his own coal. But it was a false report; no leading official was there excepting Négrel and Dansaert, who both showed themselves for a moment at one of the windows of the receiving staith. The head viewer kept in the background, however, while the engineer bravely scrutinised the crowd, smiling with that bantering contempt with which he regarded all men and things. However, cries and yells filled the air, and Négrel and Dansaert disappeared. In their stead came Souvarine, who happened to be on duty. He had not left his engine for a single day since the beginning of the strike. He very rarely spoke now, for he had gradually grown absorbed by some fixed idea, which seemed to flash like a steel point from his pale grey eyes.

'Back! back!' repeated the captain in a loud voice. 'I am not here to listen to anything; I have orders to guard the pit and I intend to guard it. Do not push against my men or I shall know how to drive you back.'

Notwithstanding the firmness of his voice, growing anxiety made him turn pale at the sight of the ever-increasing crowd of miners. He was to be relieved at mid-day; but, fearing that he might not be able to hold out till then, he had just sent a truller boy to Montsou for reinforcements.

He was answered with hostile shouts: 'Death to the foreigners! death to the Belgians! We mean to remain masters of our own!'

Étienne drew back with a gesture of despair. The end had come; there remained nothing but to fight and die. And he ceased to restrain his comrades; the crowd rolled up to the little troop of soldiers. There were nearly four hundred miners now; the adjacent villages were emptying, their inhabitants arriving with all speed. And they all repeated the same cry. Maheu and Levaque kept saying furiously to the soldiers: 'Go away; we've nothing against you; go away!'

'This is no concern of yours,' chimed in La Maheude. 'Let us manage our own business.'

La Levaque, who was standing behind her, added in a more violent tone, 'Do you want us to make mincement of you to get past? You've got to take your hook!'

Even Lydie, who had managed to get in the thick of the crowd with Bébert, put in a word in her shrill voice: 'Just look at those pigs of soldiers!'

Catherine, standing a few steps off, looked on, listening with a dazed expression at this renewal of violence, amidst which ill-luck had brought her once more. As if she were not suffering enough already! What fault had she committed then that misfortune should pursue her so constantly? Only the night before, she had still felt unable to understand the anger which the strike provoked. She was under the impression that, when one has one's share of hard knocks, it is useless to go looking for more. But now her own heart seemed to burst with anger; she remembered Étienne's words on those long-past autumn evenings, and she tried to hear what he was now saying to the soldiers. He was calling them comrades, reminding them that they also belonged to the people, and that they ought to be with the people against those who made their profit out of the people's misery.

But a great quiver ran through the crowd, and an old woman emerged from it. It was the Scorched One, terrific to behold in her leanness, for her fleshless neck and arms were bare. And she had rushed to the spot so hurriedly that her grey hair was flowing in the wind and almost blinding her.

'Ah, curse it! I'll not lose my share of this!' she gasped, still out of breath. 'That sneak Pierron had locked me up in the cellar!'

And then, without waiting, she fell upon the soldiers, foaming at the mouth, bellowing forth insults: 'You set of scoundrels! you filthy toads! You lick the boots of your superiors, and can only show pluck against poor folks!'

Whereupon the others joined her and poured forth a flood of abuse. Some few still cried, 'Long live the soldiers! to the shaft with the officer!' But soon only one cry was heard, 'Down with the red trousers!' The infantrymen, who had stood motionless, dumb, and impassive while listening to the appeals of brotherhood, to the friendly attempts to win them over to the miners' side, preserved the same unmoved demeanour beneath this storm of coarse expletives. Behind

them their captain had drawn his sword; and as the crowd pressed more and more against them, threatening to crush them against the wall, he ordered them to cross bayonets. They executed the command, and a double row of bristling steel was lowered to the breasts of the rioters.

'Oh! the scurvy cowards!' yelled the Scorched One, drawing back.

But the miners soon advanced again with fierce contempt of death. A great many women, La Maheudo and La Levaque amongst them, rushed forward, clamouring: 'Kill us, kill us, then! We want our rights.'

Levaque, at the risk of cutting his hands, had clutched at three or four bayonets which he shook and drew towards him as if to wrench them from the rifles. He even twisted them in the strength born of his fury, while Bouteloup, holding back, and angry with himself for having followed his mate, stood quietly looking on.

'There, have a try at me, have a try at me, just to see if you're worth anything!' repeated Maheu, opening his vest, tearing away his shirt, and showing his hairy chest, which bore the tattoo marks of coal. He almost threw himself on the points of the bayonets, obliging the soldiers to draw back, so terrible was his insolence and bravery. One bayonet having accidentally touched his chest, he only became the more furious and sought to make it pierce him.

'Cowards, you dare not. There're ten thousand miners behind us. Yes, you may kill us; you'll still have ten thousand more to kill!'

The position of the soldiers was becoming critical, for they had been strictly ordered to use their weapons only in the last extremity. How were they to prevent these madmen from stabbing themselves? Moreover, the space at their disposal was decreasing, they found themselves driven against the wall, without the possibility of retreating farther. Mere handful of men as they were against the rising tide of miners, they nevertheless bravely held out, and quietly executed the orders curtly given by their captain. The latter, looking sharply about him, his lips tightly set, had but one fear—to see his men lose their patience amidst the insults. Already a young sergeant, a tall, lean fellow, whose scanty moustaches bristled with anger, was wincing in an uneasy manner. Close by a veteran, his face tanned by a score of campaigns, had turned pale on seeing his bayonet twisted like a wisp of straw.

Another, a recruit probably, still smelling of the fields, turned very red each time he heard himself called scoundrel and toad. Meanwhile, the miners' violence did not abate; with outstretched, clenched fists they continued to heap insult upon insult, lashing the soldiers, as it were, with abominable vituperation. Hence, it wanted all the strength of discipline to keep the infantrymen standing thus motionless in proud, sad silence.

A collision seemed certain, when all at once Richomme the viewer appeared behind the troops, showing his white head and good-natured military-looking face upset by emotion. He spoke in a loud voice: 'Curse it! this is becoming idiotic! One can't allow this sort of thing to go on.'

And he flung himself between the bayonets and the miners.

'Mates, listen to me. You know that I'm an old miner myself, and that I've never ceased to be one of you. Well! by all that's holy, I promise you that if they don't deal fairly with you, I myself will fling the truth into the masters' faces. But this is too much; it's of no use going on insulting these brave lads, and trying to get run through into the bargain.'

They listened and hesitated. Unfortunately, little Négrel's sharp-pointed face appeared at the window above. He no doubt feared that he might be accused of having sent a viewer instead of venturing forth himself, and he tried to speak. But his voice was drowned by so terrible a tumult that he had to leave the window again, after shrugging his shoulders. And from that moment Richomme's entreaties that they would listen to him, his repeated declarations that matters ought to be settled between themselves, proved of no avail; he was suspected and repulsed. But he also became obstinate, and remained in their midst.

'By all that's holy, then, I'll get my head broken with you rather than leave you while you behave so idiotically!'

Étienne, whom he begged to aid him in endeavouring to get the others to listen to reason, made a gesture expressive of his powerlessness. It was too late; their number had now increased to more than five hundred. And there were not only those who had come to drive away the Belgians; there were lookers-on, wags and practical jokers, who hoped to get some fun out of the battle. In the centre of a group a little way off Zacharie and Philomène stood looking as if they were at a theatre, so profoundly unconcerned as to the possibilities of the struggle that they had brought their two children,

Achille and Désirée. Then a new gang arrived from Réquillart, among which were Mouquet and La Mouquette. The former at once slapped Zacharie on the back in a jesting way, while his sister, highly excited, flung herself into the foremost rank of the malcontents.

Meanwhile the captain was each minute glancing uneasily in the direction of Montsou. The reinforcements he had asked for did not make their appearance; his sixty men could hold out no longer. However, he had an idea of frightening the crowd. He ordered his men to load. The soldiers obeyed the command, but the agitation only increased; the rioters became yet more bitter and jeering.

'Look at the lazybones! They're going a-shooting!' sneered the women, La Levaque, the Scorched One, and the others. La Maheude, carrying Estelle—who had woke up and was crying—drew so near that the sergeant asked her what business she had there with the poor child.

'What's that to you?' she retorted. 'Fire on it, if you dare.'

The men shook their heads with contempt. No one assuredly believed that they would be fired upon. 'There are no balls in their cartridges,' said Levaque. 'Are we Cossacks, hell and thunder?' yelled Maheu. 'Frenchmen don't fire upon one another.'

Then others shouted that when they were in the Crimea they had not been afraid of lead. And they all continued to throw themselves upon the muzzles of the rifles. If the soldiers had fired at that moment the crowd would have been mown down.

La Mouquette, in the foremost rank, worked herself up to a fury at the thought that the soldiers wanted to run women through, and invented the most abominable insults in order to express her contempt for them. Her behaviour raised a storm of laughter among the crowd. Bébert and Lydie held their sides. All the sightseers and jokers hooted the soldiery; and only Catherine, keeping in the background on a stack of propping, remained silent, overcome by the feeling of hatred that seemed to rise within her.

All at once there was a scramble. The captain, in order to allay the irritation of his men, had made up his mind to effect some arrests. With a jump La Mouquette escaped; but three miners—Levaque and two others—were seized from amongst the most violent, and removed to the viewers' room,

where they were kept under watch. From above Négrel and Dansaert shouted to the captain to come and shut himself and his men in with them; but he would not hear of it. He felt that those buildings whose doors were without locks would be easily taken by storm, and that he might have to suffer the humiliation of being disarmed in them. His small troop was already growling with impatience. Assuredly he could not retreat before that rabble in clogs. Thus the sixty men, almost pinned to the wall, their rifles loaded, faced the band once more.

At first there was a backward movement and profound silence. The rioters seemed to be surprised by that sudden act of energy. But a loud cry arose demanding the prisoners, clamouring for their immediate release. Somebody shouted that their comrades were being butchered inside; and without concerting together, simply carried away by the same impulse, the same craving for revenge, they all rushed to some adjacent stacks of bricks, made from the clayey soil around and baked on the spot. The children brought them one by one, the women filled their skirts with them. Soon everyone had a sufficient provision, and a battle with brickbats commenced.

It was the Scorched One who opened fire. She broke the bricks on her bony knee with her right hand, while with the left she threw the two halves. La Levaque almost put her shoulders out of joint in her endeavours. She was so fat and flabby that she was obliged to draw near in order to throw properly, doing so despite the entreaties of Bouteloup, who pulled her back, hoping to get her away now that her husband was locked up. And they all became very excited. La Mouquette, tired of hurting her fat knees in breaking the bricks, preferred throwing them whole. The urchins themselves entered into line. Bébert showed Lydie how the thing was done. There was a perfect hailstorm of brickbats, falling with a dull thud. And suddenly amidst these furies Catherine also was seen brandishing half-bricks, which she flung with all the strength of her slender arms. She would not have been able to give a reason for her action; but she felt as if she was choking—bursting with a need to murder everybody. Was it not time to end the wretched existence which she had been leading? She had had enough of being beaten and turned out of doors—of wallowing in the muddy roads like a lost dog, without being able to beg even a plateful of soup

from her father, who was starving like the rest of them. Things never got better; on the contrary, they had been growing worse ever since she could remember. So she also broke bricks, and threw them at random, with the sole idea of sweeping away everything—so blinded by a sudden thirst for blood that she did not even notice whose jaws she might be smashing.

All at once Étienne, who had remained standing in front of the soldiers, almost had his skull broken by a brick. His ear swelled. He turned round, and started when he understood that it was from Catherine's feverish hands that the brick had come; and, at the risk of being killed, he did not stir, but remained looking at her. Many others were also standing there in utter forgetfulness of the danger, their hands listlessly hanging by their sides as they gazed at the battle. Mouquet criticised the throws as if he were present at a game of skittles: that one was a well-aimed blow, that other wasn't worth a curse. Thus he went on, laughing and bantering, digging Zacharie in the ribs; while the latter quarrelled with his wife, because he had beaten his two little ones, refusing to take them up on his shoulders in order that they might see. There were many spectators looking on from a distance along the road; and at the top of the slope, at the entrance to the village, old Jollycorpse had just appeared, dragging himself along by the aid of a stick, and now standing motionless and rigid against the coppery sky.

At the first bricks that were thrown Richomme the viewer had once more planted himself between the soldiers and the miners. He entreated the one party, he exhorted the other, indifferent to danger and so moved by despair that big tears ran down his cheeks. But his words were not even heard amidst the tumult; one only saw his thick grey moustaches twitching with emotion.

The shower of bricks became thicker and thicker. The men were following the women's example.

It was then that La Maheude noticed that her husband hung back. He was standing empty-handed and looking very gloomy. 'What's the matter with you?' she cried. 'Are you afraid? Do you wish to see your comrades taken to prison? If I could only get rid of the child I'd show you!'

Estelle, who clung to her neck, crying, prevented her from joining the Scorched One and the others. Seeing that he

appeared not to hear, she pushed some bricks between her husband's feet, 'Curse it all! will you take them or not? Am I to spit in your face before all the world, to put some heart in you?'

Firing up to the roots of his hair, Maheu at once broke some bricks and flung them. She egged him on, bewildered him, bellowing threats of death behind him, and almost stifling her little one as she pressed her to her breast with quivering arms; while he, ever advancing, at last found himself confronted by the rifles.

The small troop had almost disappeared beneath that shower of bricks. Luckily they were mostly aimed too high; the wall was dented in all parts. What was to be done? For a moment the idea of getting inside, of turning back, made the captain's pale face turn scarlet. But such a course was no longer possible; they would be hacked to pieces if they attempted to stir. A brick had just broken the peak of his cap; drops of blood were trickling down his forehead. Several of his men, too, were wounded, and he felt that many were beside themselves with that instinct of self-defence which scatters obedience to orders to the winds. The sergeant had uttered an oath on feeling his shoulder almost dislocated, his flesh bruised by a heavy blow as from a mallet. Three times already had the recruit's skin been grazed; his thumb was crushed, his knee was burning with pain. How long would they have to stand this? Then a brick had ricochetted from the wall and caught the veteran in the abdomen; he turned green with passion, his rifle shook, and he almost levelled it with his long, spare arms. Three times was the captain on the point of ordering his men to fire; but the word stuck in his throat and almost choked him. His ideas, duties, all his beliefs as soldier and man hurtled within him. But the hail-storm of bricks increased in violence. His lips parted, and he was about to cry 'Fire!' when the rifles went off by themselves—three shots first, then five, then a regular platoon fire, and, after an interval, all by itself, one single shot amidst intense silence.

There was general stupor. The soldiers had fired at last; the crowd remained open-mouthed and motionless, scarce believing it. But heartrending cries uprose while the bugle sounded, 'Cease firing.' And then there came mad panic, a stampede as of terror-stricken cattle, a wild flight through the mud,

Bébert and Lydie had fallen upon each other at the first three shots, the girl hit full in the face, the boy with a bullet through his left shoulder. She, struck down as if by lightning, did not even stir. He moved still, and in the convulsions of his agony took her in his arms, as if he wanted to embrace her. And just at that moment Jeanlin came rushing from the Réquillart pit, his eyes still swollen with sleep, as he swayed about amidst the smoke, and saw the other hug his sweetheart and die.

The other five shots had struck down the Scorched One and Richomme the viewer. Hit in the back whilst still entreating his mates, the latter had dropped on his knees; and then falling on one side he lay gasping on the ground, his eyes still moist with the tears he had shed. The old woman, her throat pierced by a bullet, had dropped down stiffly, crackling like a bundle of dry fagots, and muttering a last curse while choked by a rush of blood.

But at that very moment the platoon fire had swept the adjacent ground, mowing down a hundred paces off some of the sightseers who stood in groups laughing at the encounter. A bullet enter Mouquet's mouth and he fell, his jaw shattered, at the feet of Zacharie and Philomène, his blood bespattering their two children. At the same time La Mouquette was struck by two bullets in the abdomen. She had seen the soldiers taking aim, and had flung herself instinctively and from pure kindness of heart in front of Catherine, calling to the latter to take care. She uttered one loud cry as she was hit and then fell backward. Étienne rushed to the spot and wanted to raise her, in order to carry her away; but with a gesture she gave him to understand that it was all over. Then she began to gasp, without ceasing to smile at him and Catherine, as if she felt happy at seeing them there together, now that she was departing.

Everything seemed finished, the shower of bullets had spent itself far and wide, even as far as the village, when the last shot, the one that came all by itself long after the others, rang upon the air.

Maheu, struck in the heart, swung round on himself, and fell on his face in a pool of water blackened by coal-dust. Thoroughly stupefied, La Maheude bent over him.

'Eh! old man, get up. It's nothing, say?'

Embarrassed by Estelle, she had to put the child under

one arm, so as to turn her husband's head round. 'Tell me! where are you hurt?'

His eyes were glassy already, bloody foam oozed from his mouth. She understood the truth—he was dead. Thereupon she remained huddled up in the mud, her little daughter still under her arm like a bundle, whilst she stared in stupefaction at her husband.

The pit was free. With a nervous gesture, the captain had raised his cap, damaged by a stone, and then put it on again. Though livid, he retained his rigid composure as he stood facing the disaster of his life; while his men, with expressionless faces, reloaded their rifles. The scared features of Négrel and Dansaert appeared at the windows of the receiving staith. Souvarine stood behind them, his forehead crossed by a deep furrow, as if the lead-line of his thoughts had become threateningly imprinted thereon. And far away, at the top of the slope, Jollycorpse had not stirred; with one hand he tightly grasped his stick, and with the other shielded his eyes the better to see the butchering of his kin. The wounded groaned, the dead were already getting cold in rigid attitudes, bespattered by the liquid mud of the thaw, and here and there still further blackened by inky stains of coal-dust that showed from among the soiled patches of snow. And amidst those human bodies, all small and stunted, looking wretched indeed with the fleshlessness born of starvation, lay the big carcase of Trumpet, a mass of lifeless flesh, monstrous and mournful.

Étienne had not been killed. He still stood waiting beside Catherine, who had fallen to the ground through fatigue and anguish, when a ringing voice made him start. It was Abbé Ranvier going home after saying his mass, and who with both arms upraised called in prophetic fury for the wrath of Heaven to descend upon the assassins. And he foretold the era of justice, the approaching extermination of the *bourgeoisie* by fire from Heaven, since they had added the last drop to their cup of crime by causing the slaughter of the toilers and the disinherited ones of this world.

BOOK VII

I

THE shots fired at Montsou had resounded as far as Paris with a formidable echo. For the last four days all the opposition journals had waxed terribly indignant, publishing on their front pages the most heartrending accounts of the slaughter. There were altogether five-and-twenty wounded and fourteen killed—among the latter being two children and three women. And there were also the prisoners. For the newspapers Levaque had become a kind of hero; a reply of antique grandeur to the examining magistrate had been ascribed to him. The Empire, struck full in the chest by those few bullets, affected the composure of omnipotence, unconscious as it was of the serious nature of its wound. To listen to its organs of the press the whole affair was simply a collision—to be regretted, certainly—far away in the black country, far away from the Paris asphalt whence public opinion solely emanated. The affair would be forgotten in no time; the company had received official orders to hush it up, and to put an end to this strike, the irritating length of which threatened to become a social danger.

Hence, on the Wednesday morning, three members of the board of management arrived at Montsou. The little town, which, still ill at heart, had not dared to rejoice at the massacre, breathed freely once more, and tasted the delight of having been saved. It so happened, too, that the weather turned fine; there was bright sunshine, that February sunshine which at times makes the lilac bushes bud. All the shutters of the company's offices had been opened; the huge building seemed to revive, and the most hopeful news came forth from it. It was said that the gentlemen of the board, deeply affected by the catastrophe, had hurried to the spot to open their paternal arms to the misguided denizens of the miners' villages. Now that the blow had been dealt, more violently, perhaps, than they had wished, they almost overacted their parts as saviours; they decreed excellent, albeit

tardy, measures. To begin with, they dismissed the Belgians, and made a great stir about this concession to their workmen. After that, the military were withdrawn from the pits, which the crushed strikers no longer threatened. The members of the board also obtained silence on the subject of the sentry who had vanished from the Voreux pit. The country had been thoroughly searched, and neither the man's rifle nor his corpse had been found. Thus the authorities decided to post him as a deserter, though a crime in connection with his disappearance was suspected. In short, the gentlemen from Paris made it their business to attenuate past events in all respects, trembling with fear for the morrow, and thinking it dangerous to proclaim the irresistible savagery of that mob let loose among the rotten timbers of olden society. Moreover, their work of conciliation did not prevent them from dealing successfully with purely business affairs. Monsieur Deneulin had several times been seen entering the offices, where he had had long interviews with Monsieur Hennebeau. The preliminary negotiations for the purchase of Vandame were continuing, and it was currently asserted that Deneulin was about to accept the offers made him.

But what particularly stirred the whole region were some large yellow bills which the members of the board had posted in profusion on the walls. These bills consisted of a few lines set in very bold type. 'Workmen of Montsou' they began, 'we have no wish that the errors, whose sad effects you have been able to see for yourselves during the last few days, should deprive sober and willing miners of their means of existence. We shall, therefore, open all the pits on Monday morning; and when work has been once more resumed, we will examine carefully, and in a cordial spirit, those conditions which there may be occasion to improve. In short, we shall do everything that may be fair and possible.' In one single morning, the ten thousand miners marched past those bills. But not one of them said a word; many shook their heads, while others went off with their wonted shuffling step, without a muscle of their faces having moved.

The village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty had hitherto persisted in its sullen resistance. It seemed as if the blood of their comrades, which had stained the mud around the pit, had barred the way to the survivors. Scarcely half a score of them had gone down as yet: Pierron and similar sneaks, whom the others gloomily enough, but without a gesture or a

threat, watched going and coming. Hence the bills posted on the walls of the church were received with mute distrust. They did not mention a word about the miners who had been dismissed. Would the company refuse to take them on again? And thus the fear of reprisals, and the fraternal idea of protesting against the dismissal of the most compromised, made the others still obstinate. There was something in the business that was not quite clear; it was best to wait and see; they would resume work when the board explained itself more openly. Heavy silence weighed upon the low dwellings; starvation itself was as nothing now; the inhabitants might all die, since death in its most violent shape had passed over their roofs.

But there was one cottage—that of the Maheus—which remained particularly mute and sombre beneath the burden of grief and mourning. Since she had accompanied her husband's remains to the cemetery, La Maheude had scarcely opened her lips. After the battle she had allowed Étienne to bring Catherine, half dead and covered with mud, to the house. Though she undressed the girl, she never spoke a word to her any more than she did to Étienne. The latter now shared Jeanlin's bed at the hourly risk of being arrested. But repugnance for the gloom of the Réquillart pit was such as to make him prefer imprisonment. A shudder ran through his veins at the bare idea of passing the night there after what he had experienced; added to which there was unavowed dread of the little soldier who slept so quietly beneath the rocks. Besides, every now and then he dreamt of imprisonment as of a refuge from the agony of his defeat. But he was not molested by the authorities; he spent hour after hour in thorough misery, not knowing what to do to fatigue his body. At intervals, La Maheude would look at him and the girl with an expression of vindictive anger, as though asking them what business they had there.

Once more they herded together as of old. The days dragged on wearily; there was still no bread, though the chance of dying of starvation once for all seemed to be averted by the scraps picked up right and left, which rendered these miserable creatures the questionable service of keeping them alive. And save that the head of the family was no longer there, nothing was changed in their existence.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, Étienne, whom the sight of that silent woman, La Maheude, filled with despair, left

the house and strolled slowly along the paved street of the village. His inaction, which weighed so heavily upon him, impelled him to take constant walks, with his arms hanging listlessly by his sides and his head drooping, ever tortured by the same thoughts. He had been strolling to and fro like this for half an hour, when a growing feeling of discomfort warned him that his comrades were watching him from their doorsteps. The small remains of his popularity had vanished amidst the smoke from the soldiers' rifles; he could never pass along now without encountering hostile glances which flashed after him. When he raised his head, he saw men staring threateningly and women pushing their little window curtains aside. And beneath those accusations which were still mute, beneath the anger expressed only by eyes dilated, by hunger and tears, he became unnerved, and could no longer walk straight. The unspoken reproaches around him kept on increasing. He became so frightened at the thought of the whole village coming out to taunt him with its misery that he returned to the house, shuddering from head to foot.

However, the scene that awaited him at the Maheus' upset him altogether. Old Jollycorpse was there, seated beside the empty grate and nailed to his chair. Ever since the day of the slaughter, when two neighbours had found him stretched on the ground, with his cane shattered to pieces, and he himself struck down like a tree withered by lightning, he had not budged. And while Lénore and Henri, to gratify their hunger, were noisily scraping an old saucepan in which some cabbage had been boiled on the previous night, La Maheude, drawing herself up to her full height after placing Estelle on the table, was shaking her fist at Catherine.

'Just say that again! just repeat what you said just now!'

The girl had announced her intention of returning to the Voreux pit. The idea of not earning her bread, of being merely tolerated by her mother like a useless animal which was in the way, became each day more unbearable to her. Had it not been for the fear of getting a blow from Chaval she would have gone down on the Tuesday. As it was, she only stammered: 'What's the good of your flying out like that? One can't live without doing something. We'd have bread at any rate.'

But La Maheude interrupted her.

'Look here, I'll strangle the first of you who attempts to

go down. No! no! that would be too much indeed—to kill the father, and to continue imposing on the children! That'll do, I tell you; I'd sooner see you all taken away between six boards, like him who's already gone.'

Her long silence found vent in a furious avalanche of words. A deal of good would Catherine's money be to her! Barely thirty sous a day, to which might be added twenty more if the masters would condescend to find a job for that vagabond Jeanlin. Fifty sous a day wherewith to fill seven mouths! The children were only good to devour soup. As for the old man, assuredly his brain had been damaged somehow in his fall; unless, indeed, his blood had turned at the sight of the soldiers firing on his mates. At all events he had become imbecile.

'Say, old 'un, they've given you the last blow. Though you're solid enough in the wrists, you're done for altogether.'

Jollycorpse stared at her vacantly, without appearing to understand. He remained for hours like that; he had only sufficient sense left to spit in a tinful of ashes that had been placed beside him for cleanliness' sake.

'They haven't said a word about his pension, anyhow,' she continued, 'and I'm pretty certain that they'll refuse it because of our ideas. No! I tell you once more, I've had too much of those people who bring nothing but ill-luck with them.'

'Still, they promise on the bills——' Catherine ventured to say.

'Don't bother me with the bills! They're only so much birdlime to catch us with, so that we may be eaten afterwards. They can be pleasant enough now that they've let daylight into us.'

'But what'll become of us at that rate, mother? They won't let us stay in the village—you may be sure of that.'

La Maheude made a vague and terrible gesture. What would become of them? She did not know; she did not care to think of it because it drove her mad. They would go elsewhere, anywhere. Then, as the noise of the saucepan became unbearable, she fell upon Lénore and Henri and slapped their faces. To make the uproar complete, Estelle, who was crawling over the table, fell from it. To quiet the infant the mother gave it a good shaking, expressing the while a wish that it had been killed on the spot! She spoke of Alzire, and wished the others the same fate. Then all at

once she burst into heartrending sobs, resting her head against the wall.

Étienne, who had remained standing, dared not interfere; he no longer counted for anything in the house—even the children held suspiciously aloof from him. However, the unfortunate woman's tears rent his heart, and at last he gently said: 'Come, come; courage! We'll try to make both ends meet.'

She did not seem to hear; she was simply bewailing her lot in a low endless plaint. 'Is it possible that things can have come to such a pass? Before all these horrors we still got on somehow. We ate dry bread, but at least we were together. What have we done, good Lord! to deserve all this wretchedness, some of us lying in the cold earth and the others only wishing to be there with them? True, we were put to the yoke like cattle, and it wasn't fair that our only share of the profits should be blows; it wasn't fair that we should always be helping to increase the wealth of the rich without a hope of ever tasting the good things of life. The pleasure of living assuredly goes when there's no hope left one. Yes, things could not go on like that; we wanted breathing time. Still, if we could only have foreseen things! Is it possible that we can have become so miserable simply because we wanted justice done to us?'

Heavy sighs welled up in her throat; her voice became choked with the intensity of her grief.

'And then there are the would-be clever ones who promise that things will change for the better if one will only take trouble to make them do so. One gets so wound up with suffering from things as they are that one ends by asking for things that don't exist. I was already building castles in the air. Like an idiot, I dreamt of a life of friendship with everybody! Upon my word! I was in the clouds. And one breaks one's ribs on tumbling back in the mire. It wasn't true; there was nothing of all we fancied here on earth. The only real thing was our wretchedness, and now we get bullets as well!'

Étienne stood listening to this lamentation, every word of which increased his remorse. He was at a loss what to say to calm this woman, who still suffered from her terrible fall from the ideal she had imagined. She had come back to the middle of the room and was looking at him. 'And you,' she said furiously, 'do you also speak of returning to

the pit, after letting us all into the mess? I reproach you with nothing. Only, if I had been in your place, I should already have died of grief at having caused so much evil to my comrades.'

He was about to reply, but after a pause he shrugged his shoulders in despair. What would be the good of giving explanations, which she in the fulness of her grief would not understand? And his own suffering again became too acute, and he returned to the street to resume his purposeless march to and fro.

But there, again, the whole village seemed to be on the watch for him; the men on their thresholds, the women at their windows. The moment he appeared, growling began, the crowd increased in number. The current of resentment had swollen during the last four days, and broke forth at last in a general malediction. The men shook their fists at him, the women spitefully pointed him out to their lads, the old people spat on the ground as they looked at him. It was the reaction that follows defeat, the natural reversal of popularity; execration fanned by all this useless suffering. He paid for the death and hunger that had overtaken them.

Zacharie, who was going to his mother's with Philomène, hustled Étienne as the latter came out. And he jeered spitefully: 'Look! he's getting stout. Other people's skins make one grow fat, it seems!'

La Levaque had already appeared on her doorstep, accompanied by Bouteloup. And she spoke of Bébert, her lad, killed by a bullet. 'Yes, there are cowards who cause children to be massacred,' she cried. 'Let him go and look for mine down in the earth if he wants to give him back to me.'

Her husband, who was a prisoner, was scarcely thought of as a rule. Nevertheless, recollection of him came to her just then, for she continued in a sharp voice, 'A nice state of things it is! Scoundrels are at large while honest men are locked up!'

In his wish to avoid her, Étienne ran up against La Pierronne, who was coming across the gardens. She had hailed as deliverance the death of her mother, whose violence had ever threatened to get them into mischief. And she had not particularly regretted the loss of Pierron's little one, that gad-about Lydie, for it was really a good riddance. Still,

she sided with her neighbours, hoping in that way to effect a reconciliation with them.

'And what about my mother and the girl?' said she. 'Oh, people saw you well enough; you hid yourself behind them when they received the bullets in your stead!'

What was he to do? Strangle La Pierronne and the others? Fight the whole village? For a moment he itched to do so. His blood boiled, and he regarded his comrades as so many brutes. He was irritated at seeing them remain so deficient in intelligence, set of barbarians that they were, blaming him for the logic of facts. What fools! His impotence to master them afresh filled him with disgust. However, he hurried on, as if deaf to all the insults. And soon his progress became a flight: each house hooted him as he passed, people persistently dogged his heels, the whole population heaped curses upon him in voices that became louder and louder as their hatred mastered them. It was he who was the real exploiter, the assassin, the sole cause of their misfortunes. He ran off from the village, pale, maddened by the howling rabble behind him. At last, on the high-road, many gave up the chase, but some persisted, and, at the bottom of the slope, in front of the Good Luck, he met another band coming from the Voreux pit.

Old Mouque and Chaval were there. Since the death of his son and daughter the old stableman had continued to discharge his duties without a word of complaint or regret. But when he saw Étienne, an access of fury suddenly shook him from head to foot, blinding tears welled into his eyes, and a flood of coarse insults gushed from his mouth: 'You pig! You dirty beast! You brute! Wait a bit, you've got to settle with me for my two children; I'll make you pay for them!'

He picked up a brick, broke it in halves, and flung both pieces at him.

'Yes, let's do for him!' jeeringly cried Chaval, who was greatly excited, overjoyed indeed at this opportunity of taking his revenge. 'Each dog has its day. You're in for it now, you dirty toad!'

Then he also assailed Étienne with brickbats. A savage clamour rose in the air, they all took up bricks, broke them in halves, and flung them, pelting Étienne as they had tried to pelt the soldiers. He, stupefied, did not even attempt to flee, but merely tried to avoid the shower of

missiles and to calm them with words. His old speeches, once so warmly applauded, came to his lips again; he repeated the words with which he had intoxicated them at the period when he had held them in hand like an obedient team. But his power had vanished; bricks were his only answer now. His right arm was already bruised, and he was retreating, exposed to great danger, when he found himself brought to bay against the front door of the Good Luck.

Rasseneur had been standing on his threshold for the last minute or so. 'Come in,' said he simply.

Étienne hesitated. It went against his grain to take refuge in there.

'Come in, I'll speak to them,' the other resumed. Then Étienne did as he was bidden, and sought refuge at the further end of the room, while the tavern-keeper barred the door with his broad shoulders.

'Listen, friends, and be reasonable. You know very well that I've never deceived you. I've always advised you to keep quiet, and if you had hearkened to me you would certainly not have been in the mess in which you now find yourselves.'

Rocking his big body to and fro, he continued for a long while in the same strain; giving rein to his facile eloquence, which soothed like tepid water. All his success of former days came back to him, he regained his popularity without an effort, in the most natural of ways, as if indeed his mates had never hooted him, never branded him as a coward, only a month previously. Everything that he said was approved; he was right, they were with him; that was how men ought to speak. They at last broke into frantic applause.

Étienne, in the rear, felt his strength giving way, while bitterness seized upon his heart. He remembered Rasseneur's prediction in the forest, when threatening him with the ingratitude of the mob. What imbecile brutality! what abominable forgetfulness of the services he had rendered! The multitude was, after all, nothing but a blind force that constantly preyed on itself; and amidst his fury at seeing those brutes damage their own cause, there was also despair at his own overthrow, at the tragic finish of his ambitious dreams. What! was it already over, then? He remembered how three thousand breasts had beaten in unison with his own under the beeches. That night he had held his popularity in both hands, those people had belonged to him, he

had felt himself their master. Wild dreams had intoxicated him: Montsou at his feet, Paris in the distance, election as a deputy, the *bourgeoisie* struck down by a speech he would make, the first speech ever delivered in any parliament by a working man. And this was the end of it! He awoke wretched and detested; his people had dismissed him with brickbats.

But Rasseneur's voice arose once more. 'Believe me, violence never did any good. The world cannot be reformed in a day. Those who promised you that they would change everything in the twinkling of an eye are humbugs or scoundrels!'

'Bravo! bravo!' shouted the mob.

Who, then, was the guilty one? This question which Étienne suddenly put to himself completed his discouragement. Were they, then, really his own doing—those misfortunes from which he himself bled; the misery of some, the slaying of others, those women and children reduced to skeletons from lack of bread? The same lamentable vision had come to him one evening before the catastrophe. But an unknown force had then sustained him: he had been carried away with his comrades. He had never really directed them; it was they who had led him, compelled him to do things which he would never have attempted but for the impetus given by the throng behind him. At each act of violence he had been stupefied by the force of events; he had neither foreseen nor desired any one of them. Could he have expected that his faithful partisans of the village would one day stone him? Those madmen lied when they accused him of having promised them a life of good cheer and idleness. And unavowed anxiety at not having risen to the height of his task, the doubts of a semi-educated man, which had always worried him, arose again amidst his attempt at self-justification, the arguments by which he endeavoured to allay his remorse. He now felt that his courage was exhausted; he was no longer even in sympathy with his comrades; he was afraid of them, afraid of that huge, blind, irresistible mass, the people, which passes on like one of nature's forces, sweeping everything away, regardless of rules and theories. A certain repugnance had gradually estranged him from the multitude, a feeling of discomfort born of more refined tastes, an invincible attraction towards a superior class. Just then Rasseneur's voice was once more drowned by enthusiastic

vociferation: 'Long live Rasseneur! he's our man! Bravo! bravo!'

The tavern-keeper closed the door while the band dispersed, and the two men looked at each other in silence. Both shrugged their shoulders; then they took a mug of beer together.

That same day there was a grand dinner at La Piolaine, to celebrate the betrothal of Négrel and Cécile. For the last three days the Grégoires had been having the floor of the dining-room waxed, and the drawing-room dusted. Mélanie reigned supreme in the kitchen, superintending the roasts and stirring the sauces, whose savoury fumes ascended even to the garrets. It had been decided that Francis, the coachman, should assist Honorine at table. The gardener's wife would wash the plates and dishes, and the gardener himself would attend to the gate. Never had a more ceremonious entertainment turned that large, comfortable, patriarchal dwelling upside down.

Everything went off splendidly. Madame Hennebeau behaved charmingly to Cécile, and smiled in a motherly way at Négrel, when the Montsou notary gallantly proposed the health of the betrothed couple. Monsieur Hennebeau also showed himself most amiable; his smiling mien was noticed by the guests. The rumour ran that, having regained the favour of the board of management, he would soon be promoted to the rank of officer of the Legion of Honour, in reward for the energy which he had displayed in quelling the strike. The guests tacitly avoided mentioning the events of the last few days, but there was a kind of triumph in the general joy; the dinner somehow partook of the nature of an official celebration of victory. They were delivered at last; they could eat, drink, and sleep in peace! An allusion was discreetly made to the slain, whose blood had scarcely been absorbed by the Voreux mud; it was a necessary lesson, and the guests were almost moved to tears when the Grégoires added that now every one's duty was to go and heal the wounds in the villages. They themselves had resumed their benevolent placidity of manner, forgiving their brave miners, and already picturing them down in the mines once more, and again giving a good example of resignation. The notables of Montsou, who no longer shook in their shoes, admitted that the wages question required careful and prudent study. As the roast appeared, the sense of victory became complete on

Monsieur Hennebeau reading a letter from the Bishop, in which his grace informed him of the removal of Abbé Ranvier. The whole *bourgeoisie* of the province passionately discussed the doings of that priest who had branded the soldiers as assassins. And at the dessert the notary resolutely declared himself a Free Thinker.

Deneulin was present with his two daughters. Amidst the universal rejoicings he did his best to hide the melancholy of his ruin. That very morning he had signed the transfer of the Vandame concession to the Montsou Company. Driven into a corner, the knife at his throat, he had submitted to the terms of the board of management, abandoning the prey which they had so long hankered after, for so despicably small a sum, in comparison with its worth, that he would barely be able to satisfy his creditors. At the last moment, and as a lucky chance, he had accepted the company's offer to keep him as a divisional engineer, thus resigning himself to superintend merely as a salaried assistant the pit that had swallowed up his fortune. His downfall typified the death-knell of small concerns, the approaching disappearance of individual masters, devoured one by one by the ever hungry ogre of capital, submerged by the rising tide of large companies. He alone paid the cost of the strike; he felt well enough that they were toasting his downfall when they emptied their glasses to Monsieur Hennebeau's promotion; and his only consolation was the plucky behaviour of Lucie and Jeanne, who looked charming in their old gowns made up afresh, and laughed at their ruin like a pair of pretty self-emancipated girls who did not care a straw for money.

When the company went into the drawing-room to drink their coffee, Monsieur Grégoire took his cousin aside, and congratulated him upon the courage of his decision. 'What could you expect?' said he. 'Your mistake was in risking at Vandame the million which you obtained for your share in the Montsou mines. You gave yourself no end of trouble, and now it has melted away in this wretched business, whereas mine, which has not stirred from my drawer, still keeps me comfortably doing nothing, as it will keep the children of my grandchildren.'

II

On the Sunday, Étienne left the village at nightfall. A bright, star-bespangled sky lit up the earth with a bluish twilight. The young man went down towards the canal, and slowly followed its banks, in the direction of Marchiennes. His favourite walk was along this grassy path, running straight beside the artificial waterway, which stretched out like an endless bar of molten silver. As a rule he never met anyone there. But that night he was vexed to see a man coming towards him. Beneath the pale twinkle of the stars the two solitary roamers only recognised each other when they were face to face.

'Oh, it's you!' murmured Étienne.

Souvarine merely nodded his head without answering. For a moment they remained motionless; then they started towards Marchiennes side by side. Each seemed to relapse into his own train of thought, as if very far away from the other.

'Have you read about Pluchart's success in Paris?' asked Étienne at last. 'The paper says that the people waited for him in the street, and gave him an ovation when he came away from that meeting at Belleville. He's all right now, in spite of his hoarseness. Henceforth he'll go as far as he likes.'

The engine-man shrugged his shoulders. He had a thorough contempt for fine speakers—for humbugs who go in for politics as others go in for the bar, namely, to make a fortune by dint of spouting.

Étienne had got to Darwin now. He only knew the great scientist by certain condensed fragments of his writings, published in a volume at five sous. But from the badly digested perusal of this little book he had evolved for himself a revolutionary idea of the struggle for life, the lean devouring the fat, the muscular multitude devouring the flabby *bourgeoisie*. Souvarine got angry, however, and inveighed against the Socialists who accepted Darwin—a mere apostle of scientific inequality whose famous theory of selection was only good for aristocratic philosophers. Nevertheless, his companion persisted, and wanted to argue the matter, putting his own views into an hypothesis. 'Suppose,' said he, 'that present society should no longer exist, that the

very dregs of it were swept away. Very well! Was it not more than likely that the new society which would spring up would be slowly spoiled by the same injustice that prevailed already: that some would be diseased, others in good health, some, more skilful and intelligent, fattening upon everything, and the remainder, stupid and lazy, reduced to slavery again?' But at this picture of eternal misery the engine-man exclaimed in a terrible voice that if justice was not possible with man, it was necessary that man should disappear. So many corrupt societies, so many massacres, until came the extermination of the last living being. And after that silence fell upon them both.

For a long time, Souvarine, with his head drooping, trudged on over the soft grass, so absorbed in his thoughts as to keep on the very verge of the canal, with the confidence of a sleep-walker picking his way alongside the guttering of a roof. Then he suddenly shuddered, as if he had knocked against a phantom. He raised his eyes: his face was very pale; and he said gently to his companion, 'Did I ever tell you how she died?'

'Who?'

'My wife, in Russia.'

Étienne could not restrain a movement of surprise at the unsteadiness of the other's voice, at the sudden desire to unburden himself thus evinced by a man so reticent by nature, so stoically indifferent about others and himself. He only knew that the woman had been Souvarine's mistress, and had been hanged at Moscow.

'The affair miscarried,' continued the Nihilist, his eyes straying over the white water of the canal between bluish colonnades of tall trees. 'We remained for a fortnight in a hole under ground, mining the railway, and after all it was not the Imperial train, but an ordinary passenger one that was blown up. Then they arrested Annouchka, who, disguised as a peasant woman, had brought us bread every day. It was she, too, who fired the match, for a man might have been noticed. I watched the trial for six long days, among the crowd.'

His voice grew husky, and a fit of coughing almost choked him.

'Twice I was on the point of crying out, of climbing over the heads of the people to join her. But what would have been the good of it? A man the less is a soldier the less;

and I guessed well enough that she would disapprove it by the look of her large eyes whenever they met mine.'

He coughed once more.

'I was there on the last day, at the place of the execution. It rained, and the bunglers lost their heads amidst the downpour. It took them twenty minutes to hang four others; the rope snapped, they couldn't finish the fourth one. Annouchka was waiting her turn, standing erect. She could not see me, though she was looking for me in the crowd. So I got up on a milestone, and then she saw me. From that moment we did not take our eyes off one another. When she was dead she still seemed to be looking at me. I waved my hat and went away.'

There was another interval of silence. The white highway of the canal stretched into the endless distance; both men trudged along with hushed steps as if relapsing into their mental isolation. Far away on the horizon the pale water seemed to pierce the sky with a rift of light.

'It was our punishment,' resumed Souvarine in a harsh voice. 'We were guilty in loving one another. Yes, it is better that she should be dead; her blood, shed on the scaffold, will beget heroes. As for me, I have plucked all cowardice from my breast. No, I'll have neither relations, wife, nor friend; nothing that might unsteady my hand on the day when the life of others or my own may be required.'

Étienne stopped, shivering in the fresh night air. He did not attempt to argue, but simply asked: 'We've come a long way. Shall we go back?'

They turned, strolling slowly in the direction of the Voreux pit; and after a moment Étienne added: 'Have you seen the new bills?'

He was alluding to some large yellow posters which the company had placarded that very morning. The management showed itself even more explicit and conciliatory than in the former ones. It promised to re-engage all who might go down the next morning. Everything would be wiped out. Even the most compromised might rely upon pardon.

'Yes, I have seen them,' said Souvarine.

'Well! what do you think of them?'

'What do I think? I think that it's all over. The herd will go down. You're too cowardly, all of you.'

Then Étienne feverishly began to defend his comrades. A man may be brave; a crowd dying of starvation is powerless.

By this time they had reached the Voreux pit; and face to face with the black, huddled mass of buildings, he continued, swearing never to go down again himself; but adding that he would forgive those who did. Then, as a rumour ran about that the carpenters had not had time to repair the propping properly, he wished to know whether it was a fact that the pressure of the soil against the woodwork of the shaft had so bulged the latter that one of the cages rubbed against the side for a depth of fifteen feet. Souvarine, who had become silent again, replied very curtly. He had been on duty the night before; the cage did indeed rub, and the men had received orders to put on double steam in order to pass the spot. However, every one of the chiefs, when told of the matter, made the same grumpy reply; they wanted coal first, they would strengthen the shaft later on.

'Just fancy it giving way!' said Étienne, in a low voice. 'It would be a nasty business.'

With his eyes fixed on the pit, lying in the shade, Souvarine quietly concluded: 'If it does give way, our mates will know it, seeing that you advise them to go down.'

Nine o'clock struck at the church of Montsou; and his companion having said that he was going home to bed, Souvarine added, without even holding out his hand: 'Well! good-bye; I am going away.'

'What do you mean? Are you going away for good?'

'Yes, I've given notice; I'm going elsewhere.'

Étienne, taken aback, deeply affected, looked at Souvarine. It was after a walk of two hours that his friend told him this, and in the most unconcerned manner too, when the bare mention of such an abrupt separation wrung his heart. They had known each other, toiled together; it was sad to think that they were parting.

'You're going away, but where?'

'Somewhere yonder, I don't know exactly.'

'But we shall surely meet again?'

'I think not.'

Both men kept silent, remaining for a moment face to face without finding aught else to say to each other.

'Good-bye, then.'

'Good-bye.'

While Étienne ascended the slope to the village, Souvarine turned on his heels, and came back to the canal bank; and there, all alone, he kept walking to and fro, with bowed head,

so enwrapped in gloom that he was no more than a moving shadow of the night. Every now and then he stopped and counted the strokes of a clock in the distance. When midnight struck he left the bank and went towards the Voreux. At that moment the pit was deserted; he only met a viewer, who was half asleep. They would only get steam up at two o'clock for the resumption of work. Souvarine at once went upstairs to take from a locker a linen jacket which he pretended he had forgotten. A brace, a small strong saw, a hammer, and a chisel were wrapped up in this jacket. Carrying it he came out, but instead of going off by way of the receiving staith he made straight for the narrow passage that led to the ladders. And there, holding his jacket under his arm, he went slowly down the narrow opening, without any light, simply measuring the depth by counting the ladders he descended. He knew exactly where the cage rubbed against the inner tubbing. When he had counted fifty-four ladders, he passed his hand over the sides until he felt the bulging of the woodwork. That was the spot.

With the skill and steadiness of an able workman who has thought out his task beforehand, he set to work. He began by sawing a square out of the partition which separated him from the compartment assigned to the cages. With the aid of some matches, quickly struck and as quickly extinguished, he was able to form an idea of the condition of the tubbing and the repairs it had recently undergone. Between Calais and Valenciennes the sinking of mine-shafts is always attended with great difficulty in consequence of the vast quantity of water collecting below the surface on a level with the lowest valleys. The only way to exclude those streams, to isolate the shafts amidst the lakes whose deep dim billows beat against their sides, is to employ a system of tubbing, or wooden linings, joined like the staves of a barrel. In sinking the Voreux shaft the engineers had been obliged to make two tubbings—one on the higher level, close to the chalk soil, amid shifting sands and whitish clay, full of fissures, and impregnated with water like a sponge; the other on the lower level, directly above the coal-beds, amid yellow sand, as fine as flour, that flowed away fluid-like. It is there that the Torrent is found, that subterranean sea, the terror of the Northern collieries, an ocean with storms and wrecks, an unknown, unfathomable sea, rolling black billows at a depth of more than nine hundred feet below the surface of the earth.

As a rule the tubbing held out under the enormous strain. The only danger arose from the subsidence of adjacent ground, undermined by the constant shifting in abandoned galleries that were getting blocked. The subsidence of the rocks produced at times long cracks, that slowly extended towards the woodwork, which they ended by pushing into the shaft. The great peril, therefore, was subsidence and inundation; the pit filled with an avalanche of soil and a deluge of water.

Souvarine, seated straddlewise in the opening he had made, discovered a very serious flaw in that part of the tubbing. The woodwork was starting from its frame, some of it had almost given way. The water leaked in plenty from the joints, notwithstanding the tarred oakum with which they were caulked. The carpenters, being pressed for time, had merely applied iron binders to the edges, and in so slovenly a way that some of the necessary screws were not even inserted. There was evidently considerable pressure going on behind amidst the sands of the Torrent.

Souvarine began to loosen the screws of the binders with his brace, so that a final pressure might make them all give way. It was a risky job, during which at least a score of times he narrowly escaped overbalancing himself, and falling down the five hundred and eighty feet of space separating him from the bottom. He had to cling to the oaken girders, the uprights between which the cages travelled up and down, and, suspended in the air, as it were, he made his way along the crossbeams that connected them at regular distances. And now he went on, crawling, sitting, lying on his back, resting himself on his elbow, or on a knee, with utter contempt of death. The least breath of wind would have flung him down; and on three occasions he only just had time to clutch hold of something to save himself, but he never as much as shuddered.

He began by examining the spot with his hand, and then set to work, only striking a match when he felt at sea amid the slimy beams. After loosening the screws, he attacked the woodwork itself; and the danger of his position increased. He felt for the key-piece that held all the others; and on finding it he attacked it desperately, piercing, sawing, and peeling it in order to lessen its power of resistance; while through every hole and crack water spurted in small jets, blinding and drenching him with an icy shower. Two

matches went out, all the others got damp, and black night—a bottomless depth of gloom—enveloped him.

From that moment he became furious. The invisible currents, whistling past, intoxicated him; the black horror of this hole, and its beating shower, drove him to a fury of destruction. He attacked the tubbing in haphazard fashion wherever he could, now with his brace, now with his saw, as if seized with a desire to bring the whole down upon his own head. He became as ferocious as if he were plunging his knife into the heart of some being whom he detested. He would kill it at last, that noisome beast, that Voreux pit, whose ever gaping jaw had swallowed so much human flesh! The biting of his tools could be distinctly heard, he stretched himself out, he climbed up, went down, climbed up again, holding on here and there as if by miracle, perching like a night-bird in the framework of a clock-tower.

At last he grew calm, again feeling displeased with himself. What was the use of getting into a passion? And thereupon he drew breath, returned to the ladders, and closed the opening by replacing in position the square that he had sawn out. That would do; he did not want to breed suspicion by causing too much damage, which, if discovered, would be repaired immediately. The brute had its wound, he would see whether it would live another day; and he had left his mark, the horror-stricken world would know that it had not died a natural death. He took time to wrap his jacket properly round the tools, and then leisurely ascended the ladders, and got out of the pit without being seen. The idea of changing his clothes never even occurred to him. It struck three o'clock, and he remained on the road, waiting.

At the same hour Étienne, who had been unable to get to sleep, was startled by a light sound amidst the gloom of the bedroom at the Maheus'. He could distinguish the gentle breathing of the younger children, the snoring of Jollycorpse and La Maheude, while, close by him, Jeanlin gave vent to a series of shrill notes like those of a flute. No doubt what he had heard had been mere fancy, and he was just trying to doze off, when he detected the sound again. It was like the soft creaking of a mattress, as if someone wanted to get up unheard. He thought that Catherine might be ill.

'Is that you, Catherine? What's the matter?' he asked in a whisper.

No answer came; not a sound but the continued snoring

of the others. For the next five minutes nothing stirred. Then the soft creaking began afresh, and this time there could be no mistake. Catherine was getting up.

'Whatever are you about, getting up at this hour?' Étienne asked.

'I'm going back to work at the pit.'

At this the young man was scarce able to control his emotion. But in whispers Catherine explained her reasons to him. She suffered too much from the life of idleness she led and her mother's ever reproachful glances; she preferred running the risk of being knocked about by Chaval down below. If her mother would not accept her money when she brought it home, well, then, she was big enough to live apart and do for herself. 'So there,' she added, 'don't say a word about it, there's a good fellow.'

But he himself had risen in the inky darkness and drawn near her, full of grief and pity. She softly wept, and flung her arms round his neck as he spoke to her, on his side passing his arm around her waist. Their thoughts wandered back to their unhappy love, which had never found content. Was it all over, then? Would they never dare to love one another some day, now that they were free? Surely only a little happiness was needed to dispel that uneasy feeling which prevented them from joining their lives together.

'Leave me,' the girl at last murmured. 'I don't want to light the candle; it might wake mother. It's time for me to start. Do leave me.'

He did not hear her. He was clasping her to his breast, utterly broken down with grief. A wish for peace, for some kind of happiness, came upon him. He pictured himself married to her and dwelling in a small, neat cottage, without any other ambition than that of living and dying there together. He would be content even with dry bread; if there were only enough for one it should be for her. What, after all, was the good of craving for anything else? Was life worth more than that?

She, however, freed herself from his clasp. 'Do leave me, I entreat you.'

Then, in the impulse of the moment, he whispered in her ear, 'Wait a moment; I'll go with you.'

He was himself surprised at having said such a thing. He had sworn that he would never go down again. Whence, then, had come that abrupt decision that had escaped him

without a thought, without a moment's previous consideration? Yet now he felt so tranquil, so completely cured of his doubts, that he persisted in his resolve like one saved by chance who has found the only balm that can heal his wounds. Hence he refused to listen to her when she, thoroughly alarmed, tried to dissuade him from his purpose; for she knew that he was sacrificing himself for her, and feared the reception that he would meet with at the pit. But he professed that he did not care a straw for anything; the bills said that all should be forgiven, and that was sufficient.

'I wish to work; it's an idea of mine. Come, don't make a noise.'

Then, still in the darkness, they hurriedly and silently completed their preparations, taking every precaution to disturb none of the others. Catherine had surreptitiously got her miner's clothes ready the evening before. He took his working garments from the cupboard. The others were all sound asleep, but the narrow landing where the mother lay had to be crossed, and, as luck would have it, they knocked against a chair as they started. The noise awoke La Maheude, who sleepily ejaculated, 'Eh? Who's there?'

Catherine, trembling with fear, stood stock-still, tightly grasping Étienne's hand.

'It's me; don't be uneasy,' he answered. 'I'm going down to get a breath of air. I feel stifled.'

'All right, all right.' And La Maheude dozed off again.

After that Catherine scarcely dared to stir. But they went down at last, and in the room below she divided a slice of bread which she had kept back from a loaf given to her by a lady of Montsou. Then they gently closed the door and went away.

Souvarine was still standing near the Good Luck, at the corner of the road. For the last half-hour he had been watching the miners returning to their work—a confused mass journeying through the gloom with the dull tramp of a herd of cattle. He counted them as butchers count their beasts at the door of the slaughter-house, and felt surprised at their number. Even with all his pessimism he had not foreseen that the number of cowards would be so large. The procession was ever increasing, and he drew himself up, feeling very cold, his teeth firmly set and his eyes very bright. But all at once he trembled. Among the men who were passing him, and whose faces he could not distinguish, he

had recognised one by his gait. And thereupon he stepped forward and stopped him.

'Where are you going?'

Étienne, taken aback, did not answer, but stammered, 'Hallo! So you're not gone yet?'

Then he confessed the truth; he was going back to the pit. No doubt he had sworn that he would never do so; only he could not go on living in idleness, waiting for things that might come about in a hundred years or so. Besides, reasons of his own had decided him.

Souvarine had listened to him, quivering. And suddenly he took him by the shoulder, and pushed him back in the direction of the village.

'Go home! I wish it; you hear me!'

But Catherine drew near and he recognised her also. Étienne protested, declaring that he would allow nobody to judge his conduct, and the engine-man's glance wandered from the girl to his comrade. Then he drew back a few steps, with a gesture of abandonment. When a woman entered a man's heart, the man was done for; he might just as well die. Perhaps a rapid vision of that far-off morning in Moscow came back to him, his mistress hanged, the last tie of his flesh wrenched away, leaving him indifferent to the life of others and to his own. He merely said, 'Go then!'

But Étienne in his embarrassment still lingered there, trying to find a cordial word, so that they might not part thus.

'Then you're still bent on leaving us?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then, give me your hand, old fellow. A pleasant journey, and let there be no ill-will between us.'

The other held out an icy-cold hand. He would have neither friend nor wife.

'Good-bye, and for good, this time.'

'Yes, good-bye.'

And Souvarine, standing motionless in the gloom, watched Étienne and Catherine as they entered the Voreux pit.

III

At four o'clock the descent commenced. Dansaert, installed in the timekeeper's box, close to the lamp-room, took down the name of every workman who presented himself and ordered a lamp to be given to him. He engaged them all without remark, carrying out the promise of the bills. Nevertheless, when he saw Étienne and Catherine at the wicket, he turned scarlet and jumped from his stool. His lips were parting to refuse them admittance, but he decided to rest content with triumphing over the young man. Ah! ah! so the strongest of the strong was humbled to the dust. And the company was worth something after all, since the terrible demolisher of Montsou came back to ask it for bread. Without a word Étienne took his lamp and went up to the mouth of the shaft with the trammer girl.

It was in the receiving staith, however, that Catherine feared the bitter remarks of the men. Just as she was coming in she noticed Chaval standing among a score of others waiting for an empty cage. He strode towards her furiously, but the sight of Étienne stopped him. Then he began to jeer, shrugging his shoulders in an insulting way. But evidently there was jealousy beneath his affected display of contempt, for he quivered and his eyes flashed. As for his comrades, they remained motionless and silent, with their glances turned to the ground. They merely every now and then took a sidelong glance at the newcomers; then, crest-fallen and all their anger departed, they once more gazed fixedly at the mouth of the pit, holding their lamps and shivering in their thin cotton jackets in the draughts that swept through the large shed. At last the cage settled on the bolts. Étienne and Catherine squeezed into a truck, already occupied by Pierron and two hewers. In the next truck Chaval remarked in a loud voice to old Mouque that the management had acted very wrongly in not embracing this opportunity to rid the pits of the scum that polluted them. But the veteran stableman, who had already resigned himself once more to his dog's life, no longer felt angered by the death of his two children. He simply answered by a gesture expressive of a wish to let bygones be bygones. The

cage started and disappeared into the darkness. No one spoke. Suddenly, however, at about two-thirds of the descent, there was a violent jolt. The irons creaked and the men were flung against each other.

'Curse it!' growled Étienne, 'do they want to crush us out of shape? That tubbing'll be the death of us. And yet they say it has been repaired!'

But the cage had passed the obstacle. It was gliding down now amidst so violent a shower that the workmen grew uneasy at the rushing sound. There was evidently a great deal of leakage about the caulking of the joints. Pierron, who had been working there for some days, would not show fear, however, lest it might be considered as an attack upon the company. When he was interrogated he merely answered:

'There's no danger! It's always like that. They've, no doubt, not had time to caulk the cracks.'

The shower was splashing down on their heads; they reached the bottom amidst a perfect deluge. Not one of the viewers had even had the idea to go up by the ladders to examine the matter. The pump would suffice; the caulkers would look to the joints on the following night. In the galleries the resumption of work was attended with some trouble. The engineer had decided that, before the hewers resumed their regular work, the whole of the men should devote the first five days to certain propping repairs which had become urgent. The pit was threatened with slips everywhere; the haulage-ways had suffered so much damage as to require fresh staying over some hundreds of yards. So the men were divided into gangs of ten, each under a viewer, and set to work in the most damaged spots. When they had all come down they were counted. It was found that there were three hundred and twenty-two miners, about half of the ordinary number when the pit was in full work.

Chaval completed the gang of which Étienne and Catherine formed part, and it was not merely by chance. He had kept behind his mates, and forced the viewer's hand at the last moment. This gang was sent to remove a mass of fallen rock that was barring the Eighteen-Inch vein at the end of the North gallery, about a couple of miles away from the shaft. Étienne, Chaval, and five others cleared the rock and soil away while Catherine and two lads rolled it as far as the inclined plane. Not many words were exchanged; the viewer remained constantly with them. Nevertheless Catherine's

two admirers were on the point of coming to blows on her account. While growling that he was well rid of her, Chaval would not leave her alone but hustled her on the sly, in such wise that Étienne threatened him with a thrashing if he did not give over. They devoured each other with their eyes, and had to be separated.

About eight o'clock Dansaert came to give a look at the work. He appeared to be in a very bad temper, and snarled at the viewer. They were not getting on a bit; the propping needed replacing piece by piece as they advanced. In the way the work was being done it wasn't worth a arp! He went off, saying that he would come back with the engineer. He had been waiting for Négrel all the morning, without understanding the cause of his non-appearance.

Another hour went by. The viewer had stopped the clearing away to put his men to the propping of the roof. Even the trammer girl and the lads had left their trucks to bring wood to the spot. In the depths of this gallery the gang was, so to say, at the outposts, isolated, without communication with the other parts. Three or four times strange sounds like the hurrying of feet had made the workmen turn their heads. What was the matter? It sounded as if the other galleries were becoming deserted, as if their comrades were already going up, and in double-quick time, too. But the noise died away in the deep silence. And resuming their work they soon heard nothing but the heavy strokes of their hammers. At last the clearing out was resumed, and Catherine and the boys returned to their trucks.

At the first journey Catherine came back in a fright, saying that there was nobody left at the inclined plane. 'I called out, but no one answered. They're all gone.'

At this the consternation of the ten men was so great that they threw down their tools and took to their heels. The idea of being thus abandoned, of being at the extremity of the pit, so far from the shaft, drove them crazy. They had only kept their lamps, and ran on in a file, the men, the woman, and the children. The viewer himself lost his head, called, and became more and more frightened by the silence, the endless wilderness of galleries. What had happened that they did not meet a single soul? What was the nature of the accident that had driven all the men away? Their terror increased from the uncertainty of their danger. They felt that some disaster was hanging over them, without knowing what it might be.

As they approached the main, a perfect flood barred their farther progress. They were at once up to their knees in water; they could no longer run, but had to wade painfully through the flood, with the thought that in another minute they might be too late.

'D——! it's the tubbing that's given way,' shouted Étienne. 'Didn't I say that we'd leave our lives here?'

Ever since the men had descended that morning, Pierron had noticed the increasing deluge down the shaft. While attending to the trucks with two of his mates he kept raising his head, and his face was bespattered with large drops of water, while his ears buzzed with the rumbling of the tempest up above. But what frightened him most was the sump, the well below, which was ten yards deep, and which he noticed to be filling rapidly. The water was already rising between the wooden boards and flowing on to the iron flooring, which was sufficient proof that the pump no longer sufficed to check the flood. One could hear it panting, as if exhausted with fatigue. Thereupon he warned Dansaert, who only cursed and swore, answering that they must wait for the engineer. He repeated his warning twice without getting any other reply than an angry shrug of the shoulders. Well! what if the water was coming up? What could he do to it?

Old Mouque appeared with Battle, going to his work. He had to hold the old horse with both hands; sleepy as the beast was at ordinary times, he now plunged and kicked, stretching his head towards the shaft and neighing as at the approach of death.

'What's the matter, philosopher? What ails you? Ah! it's because it rains! Never mind, come along, it doesn't concern you.' But Battle shivered all over, the hair of his coat standing on end, and Mouque was obliged to drag him away by force.

Just as they were disappearing at the end of a gallery, a cracking was heard in the air, followed by the prolonged uproar of the fall of some heavy body. A piece of the tubbing had given way, and was coming down a height of a hundred and eighty yards, bounding and rebounding against the sides of the shaft. Pierron and his mates just had time to get out of the way, so that the piece of timber only smashed an empty truck. At the same time a large mass of water spouted forth as if escaping from a burst dyke, and poured down the shaft. Dansaert wanted to go up and see how things

were, but while he was still speaking a second piece of timber came down with a crash. Confronted by this impending catastrophe, he no longer hesitated; but gave orders for the men to go up, and despatched viewers to call them together from the various cuttings.

Then began a terrific scramble. From each gallery the men arrived in bands, running for their lives and storming the cages. They were crushing, killing each other in their eagerness to go up first. A few, who had thought of getting away by the ladders, came back, shouting that the passage there was already blocked. The terror increased after each despatch of the cages. That one had passed; but would the next be equally fortunate, amidst the wreckage with which the shaft was already being encumbered? Up above, the destruction was evidently working its way, for there came a series of distant detonations; stays split in twain, and crashed down amidst the continuous and ever-louder roar of the water. One cage, nearly smashed, had already become useless; it no longer worked between the guides, which doubtless were also broken. The other rubbed so violently against the uprights that the cable would surely snap. Yet there still remained a hundred men or so to go up. They were shrieking, clinging to each other, half drowned and bleeding from self-inflicted wounds. Two met their death by another fall of timber; a third, who had clung to the cage as it went up, dropped from a height of a hundred and fifty feet, and disappeared in the sump.

All the same, Dansaert tried to restore order. He had snatched up a pick and threatened to brain the first man who refused to obey him. He wanted to range them in a file, and shouted that the truckmen should go up last after despatching all their fellow-workmen. But he was not listened to. He had prevented Pierron, who stood by trembling and livid, from being one of the first to go up, and at each successive journey he had to drive him back with a blow. But his own teeth at last began to chatter with fear; another moment and he himself would be swallowed up. Everything was giving way up above, the rush of water was carrying all before it; there was a murderous fall of timber every moment. A few workmen were still trying to reach the shaft, when, mad with fright, he jumped into a truck, and allowed Pierron to get in behind him. The cage went up.

It was at that same moment that the gang to which

Étienne and Chaval belonged arrived at the bottom of the shaft. They beheld the cage disappear and made another desperate effort, but had to retreat before the final collapse of the tubbing. The shaft was blocked up; the cage would not come down again. Catherine burst into sobs; Chaval swore till he almost choked. They were twenty in all; would the swine up above abandon them like that? Old Mouque had leisurely brought back Battle. Both he and the animal, whose bridle he still held, were stupefied by the rapid rise of the inundation. The water was already up to the men's waists. Étienne, speechless, his teeth tightly set, raised Catherine in his arms. And the score of them remained there shrieking, their faces turned upwards; they persisted in staring idiotically at the shaft, at that rapidly closing passage, which was vomiting forth a stream, and whence no help could ever come to them.

When Dansaert reached the top he perceived Négrel hastening to the spot. As ill-luck would have it, Madame Hennebeau had detained the young man that morning to look over some price-lists of wedding presents. It was ten o'clock.

'What's the matter?' he shouted from a distance.

'The pit is lost,' answered the head viewer.

And he began to stammer out the details of the catastrophe, while the engineer shrugged his shoulders incredulously. What nonsense! Was it possible that tubbing could give way like that? He was exaggerating; they would go and look.

'No one has been left below, I hope?'

At this Dansaert became confused. No, nobody. At least as far as he knew. Still, some workmen might have been delayed.

'But, dash it all!' said Négrel, 'why did you come up then? One doesn't leave one's men like that!'

He at once gave orders to count the lamps. Three hundred and twenty-two had been given out that morning; only two hundred and fifty-five had been returned. Still, some men admitted that theirs had remained below; they had dropped from their hands amidst the crush of the panic. Then a roll call was tried, but it was impossible to arrive at the exact number of men. Many miners had run off, others did not answer to their names. Nobody could tell the number of the missing. There might be twenty, there might be forty. One thing became a certainty to the engineer: there were indeed men left below. By leaning over the shaft he could

distinguish their shrieks rising through the wreckage of timber, amidst the noise of the rushing water.

Négrel's first care was to send for Monsieur Hennebeau, and to close the entrances to the pit-yard. But it was already too late for that. The miners who had rushed off to the village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty, as if pursued by the thunder of the falling tubbing, had spread terror among the inhabitants; and bands of women, old men, and children hurried to the spot, sobbing and shrieking. They had to be driven back; a cordon of inspectors received orders to keep them at a distance, for they would have only hindered the workmen. Many of the miners who had come up remained there, dumb-stricken, without any idea of changing their clothes, rooted as they were to the spot, fascinated by fright before that terrible cavern whence they had escaped as if by miracle. The women, distracted, crowded round, interrogating, imploring them to give the names of those below. Was so-and-so still down, and that one and that other? The men did not know; they merely stammered, shivering and gesticulating wildly, as if trying to dispel a horrible vision that still haunted them. The crowd increased rapidly and the roads resounded with lamentations. And, seated upon the ground in old Jollycorpse's hut, on the mound of shale, overlooking the whole, there was a man, Souvarine, who had not gone, and who was looking on.

'The names! the names!' the women still cried in voices husky with sobs.

Négrel appeared for a moment and spoke a few words to them: 'As soon as we know the names we will give them to you,' said he, 'but none is lost; everybody will be saved. I am going down.'

Thereupon the crowd waited in mute anguish; while the engineer, with unaffected bravery, made ready to descend. By his order the cage had been unfastened and replaced by a tub secured to the cable. Feeling certain that the water would extinguish his lamp, he had another one fastened beneath the tub, which would protect it.

The viewers, trembling, their faces pale and distorted, helped in making these preparations.

'You will go down with me, Dansaert,' said Négrel, curtly.

But when he saw them all bereft of courage, when he saw the head viewer reel with fright, he waved him off with a gesture of contempt.

'No, you would only be in my way. I prefer going alone.'

He had already stepped into the tub, which was swinging at the end of the cable; and, holding his lamp with one hand, and the signal rope with the other, he shouted to the brakesman, 'Let go, but gently!'

The engine slowly began to work and Négrel disappeared into the abyss, whence still ascended the shrieks of the abandoned ones. The upper part of the tubbing was still intact. He noticed the satisfactory condition of the woodwork in that part. Suspended in the shaft, he turned round and examined every side: the leakages between the joints were so insignificant that the light of his lamp was not even affected by them. But at a depth of nine hundred feet or so, when he reached the lower tubbing, his light went out as he had expected, and a rush of water filled his tub. From that moment he had nothing to guide him but the hanging lamp which preceded him through the gloom. And, despite his courage, he shuddered and turned pale when confronted by all the horror of the disaster. Only a few pieces of wood were left; the remainder had given way, framework and all. Enormous cavities were forming; the yellow sand, fine like flour, was shifting in masses, while the waters of the Torrent, that subterranean sea, with unknown squalls and wrecks, poured forth even as water pours when a lock is abruptly opened. He descended still farther, lost amidst the voids that increased at every moment, his tub revolving, lashed by the terrible downpour; and by the faint starry light of the lamp below him he fancied he could distinguish the streets and squares of a ruined town, far away in the distance, such was the play of the huge shifting shadows. Human labour was no longer of avail. He had only one hope left—that of trying to save the men who were in peril. The lower he went, the louder became their shrieks. But he was compelled to stop; an insurmountable obstacle barred his way, a mass of timber compounded of snapped crossbeams and shattered partitions all inextricably mixed up with the broken gear of the pump. As he was examining all this, his heart wrung at the thought of having to leave the wretched men below to their fate, the shrieks suddenly ceased. The water had either overwhelmed them or they had fled into the galleries before the rising flood.

Négrel then resigned himself to the necessity of signalling to those above to pull him up. But in another moment he

signalled to them to stop again. He still felt amazed at one thing—the suddenness of the disaster, the cause of which he failed to understand. He wished to solve the mystery, and began to examine the fragments of the tubbing that were still in position. Even from a distance the rents and cuts in the woodwork had puzzled him. His lamp, steeped in moisture, was now dying out; so he preferred to rely upon his sense of touch, and soon acquired a certainty that saw and brace had been used there, in that work of abominable destruction. It was evident that the catastrophe had been planned. He remained thunderstruck, while the last fragments of the tubbing split asunder, and fell with their framework in a final rush that nearly carried him away also. His bravery had vanished; the thought of the man who had done all that made his hair stand on end, froze him with a religious awe for such power of evil, as if, mingled with the gloom, the man were still lurking there, gigantic by the very magnitude of his crime. Négrel shouted, pulled the signal furiously; and it was high time he did so, for, a hundred yards farther up, he noticed that the top tubbing was beginning to move. The joints parted, lost their caulking, and vomited forth streams. It was only a question of hours now; the whole tubbing would give way and the shaft would fall in.

Up above Monsieur Hennebeau was anxiously waiting for Négrel. 'Well! what is it?' he asked. But the engineer, almost choking, did not answer. His strength was failing him.

'It is incredible; no one ever saw the like. Have you examined it?' persisted Monsieur Hennebeau.

The other nodded affirmatively while looking mistrustfully around him. He refused to give an account of the matter in the presence of the few viewers who stood by listening, and dragged his uncle a distance of some ten yards away. Then, not considering himself far enough off, he retreated farther; and finally he whispered in his uncle's ear how the timbers had been pierced and sawn, how the pit had had its very throat cut, and was at that moment giving vent to its last rattle. Turning livid, the director spoke low also, with the instinct that hushes men's voices at the first revelation of some monstrous infamy or crime. It would do no good to appear overcome in the presence of the ten thousand miners of Montsou; they would decide later what should be done. Yet they continued their conversation in whispers,

struck with wonder at a man having had the courage to descend, suspend himself in the void, and risk his life a score of times in order to accomplish that terrible work. They could not understand such mad bravery for the purpose of destruction; notwithstanding the proof they had, they even refused to believe in it, in the same way as people refuse to believe famous stories of prisoners escaping from windows a hundred feet from the ground.

When Monsieur Hennebeau went back to the viewers a nervous twitching distorted his features. With a gesture expressive of despair he gave orders to clear the pit's buildings immediately. It was like a sad funeral procession, a mute abandonment, with backward glances at the great piles of brickwork, deserted and still erect, but which, henceforth, no earthly power could save.

When the director and engineer, who were the last to leave the receiving staith, came down, the crowd greeted them clamorously, with the same obstinate cry: 'The names! the names! Tell us the names!'

La Maheude was there among the women by this time. She remembered the noise she had heard during the night. Surely her daughter and her lodger had gone down together; they must be below; and after shouting again and again that it served them right, that they deserved to remain there, cowards and heartless wretches as they were, she had nevertheless rushed to the spot, and pushed to the foremost rank, where she stood trembling with anguish. Besides, she could doubt no longer; the discussion going on around her with regard to the names made it certain that Catherine and Étienne had gone down. But with regard to others, no conclusion could be arrived at. It was not this one, but another—Chaval, perhaps; yet a lad swore that he had come up with him. La Levaque and La Pierronne, though no one belonging to them was in danger, kept on wailing as loudly as the others. Zacharie, who had been one of the first to come out, embraced his wife and his mother, in spite of his habitual indifference, with tears running down his cheeks. He remained with La Maheude, trembling and evincing unexpected concern about his sister, refusing to believe that she could be below as long as the chiefs had not officially announced the fact.

'The names! For pity's sake, tell us the names!'

Then Négrel, unnerved, said in a loud voice to the

inspectors: 'Do make them hold their tongues! It is enough to break one's heart. We do not know the names!'

Two hours had already gone by. In the first outburst of distraction no one had thought of the other shaft, the old Réquillart one. Monsieur Hennebeau had just announced that an attempt would be made from that side, when a rumour spread like wildfire. Five workmen had escaped from the inundation by climbing the rotten ladders of the discarded shaft; it was said that old Mouque was amongst them, and this caused some surprise, as no one had thought him below. But the tale of the five men who had escaped made the tears flow faster. Fifteen mates had been unable to follow them. They had lost their way, or had been walled in by the falling rock. It was no longer possible to go to their aid, for the water was already thirty feet deep in the Réquillart shaft. All the names were known by now, and the air resounded with wails like those of people being slaughtered.

'Do make them hold their tongues!' repeated Négrel, furiously. 'And see that everybody retires to a distance. Yes, yes, to a hundred yards! There is danger. Drive them away, drive them away.'

The viewers and inspectors had to fight against the poor wretches, who imagined still farther disasters. They were being driven away so that the truth about the number of dead might be hidden from them. The viewers were obliged to explain that the shaft was going to swallow up the pit and everything belonging to it. This announcement struck them dumb with astonishment, and they allowed themselves to be driven back step by step. Nevertheless the cordon that kept them in check had to be doubled; for, in spite of themselves, they crowded forward again and again as if by force of attraction. More than a thousand persons hustled each other on the road; people hastened from every village, and even from Montsou. And the man on the top of the mound of shale—the fair man with the girlish face—continued smoking cigarettes to while away the time, without once withdrawing his bright eyes from the pit.

Then began a period of waiting. It was noon; nobody had had a meal, yet nobody went off. In the overcast sky, of a dirty grey, some coppery cloudlets sailed slowly along. Behind Rasseneur's hedge a big dog kept up a constant, violent barking, provoked by the excitement of the crowd, which had gradually invaded all the neighbouring

ground, forming a circle a hundred yards or so from the pit. In the centre of the empty space were the Voreux buildings. Not a soul had remained there, not a sound came forth, they were deserted. The doors and windows, left wide open, showed the solitude within; a tortoise-shell cat, sniffing danger amidst this abandonment, sprang down a staircase and disappeared. The furnaces were scarcely extinguished, for the high brick chimney still discharged light whiffs of smoke, under the sombre clouds; while the weathercock at the top of the shaft turned to the wind with a sharp grating noise—the only melancholy voice left to those vast buildings, which were about to perish.

At two o'clock there was no change. Monsieur Hennebeau, Négrel, and other engineers who had hastened to the spot, formed a group of black coats and hats in advance of the crowd. Like the others they made no attempt to move, though their legs bent under them with fatigue. They felt feverish, quite ill at being obliged to gaze powerless at such a disaster, and they lowered their voices as if they were standing by the bedside of a dying man. The upper tubbing must have been finally giving way, for they could hear sudden reports, abrupt crashes betokening great falls succeeded by intervals of deep silence. It was the wound ever getting bigger and bigger; the subsidence that had begun below, was ascending, drawing nearer to the surface. Nervous impatience took hold of Négrel; he wanted to see, and he was already stepping forward alone into the terrible void when he was dragged back by the shoulders. What was the good of his going? He could do nothing useful! However, an old miner managed to break through the cordon and galloped up to the waiting-shed; but he soon quietly turned; he had merely gone to fetch his clogs.

It struck three, and still there was no change in the situation. A shower had drenched the crowd, but it had not retreated an inch. Rasseneur's dog had begun to bark again. And it was not until twenty minutes past three that a first shock made the ground tremble. The Voreux buildings shuddered, but kept sturdily erect. A second shock, however, came almost immediately, and a long cry arose from the crowd; the tar-coated sifting shed, after reeling twice, came down with a terrible crash. Under the great strain the boards burst asunder, rubbing so violently one against the other as to emit sheaves of sparks. And from that moment

the ground did not cease to quake; shocks came in rapid succession, telling of subterranean slips, with a rumbling like that of a volcano in eruption. In the distance the dog no longer barked, but raised plaintive howls, as if anxious to forewarn people of the oscillations which it felt coming. And the women, the children, all the people who stood looking on, could not repress a clamorous wail at each of those earthquakes that lifted them from the ground. In less than ten minutes the slate-covered top of the shaft fell in; the receiving staith and engine-room were rent asunder, showing a huge breach. Then the noise ceased; the work of destruction stopped, and profound silence ensued once more.

During a whole hour the Voreux buildings remained like that, half destroyed, as if bombarded by an army of barbarians. No more cries were heard; the widened circle of spectators stood looking on. Beneath the piled beams of the sifting shed, the smashed tilters and battered and twisted sieves could be distinguished. But it was above all at the receiving staith that wreckage accumulated, with showers of bricks, and big bits of walls that crashed to atoms. The iron framework supporting the pulley-wheels had given way; half of it was buried in the pit; a cage had remained suspended in the air; a length of cable swung about like a pendulum; trucks, iron flooring, and ladders were jumbled in an inextricable medley. By a miracle the lamp-room on the left had remained intact, and the rows of bright little lamps could be distinctly seen. And at the end of the engine-room, which had burst asunder, one beheld the engine itself, still resting firmly on its massive support of brickwork, its brasses glistening, its steelwork looking like indestructible muscles, and its huge driving-rod stopped in mid-course, and suggesting the powerful knee of some sleeping giant confident in his strength.

Monsieur Hennebeau, at the end of that hour of respite, felt his hopes revive. The shifting of the soil was probably at an end, and he thought there would be a chance of saving the engine and what remained of the buildings. But he was still opposed to any approach; he wished to wait another half-hour. That anxious waiting became unbearable; revived hope aggravated the anguish; every heart beat faster. On the horizon a dark mist hastened the hour of dusk, a sinister closing in of daylight above the wreckage wrought by that tempest of the earth. For seven hours the crowd had been standing there, without stirring, without eating.

Suddenly, just when the engineers had decided to approach, a supreme convulsion of the earth put them to flight. A series of subterranean detonations burst forth, as if the abyss were being cannonaded by some giant artillery. Above-ground the last structures toppled over, crushing each other in their fall. First, a kind of whirlwind carried away the remains of the sifting shed and receiving staith. The boiler-room next split asunder and vanished. Then the square tower of the pumping engine fell flat on its face, like a man struck down by a bullet. And afterwards came a terrific sight: the gasping crowd saw the engine, already disjointed on its brickwork support, its limbs torn asunder, struggling frantically against death. It started by itself, its driving-rod, its giant knee, moved as if striving to rise; but it perished, crushed to pieces, swallowed up. Nothing but the tall chimney, a hundred feet high, still remained, swaying like a mast in a hurricane. At first it was thought that it would crumble to pieces and be scattered in powder; but all at once it plunged down in its entirety, sucked in by the earth, melting like a colossal candle. It was gone; nothing remained of it above-ground, not even the tip of its lightning-conductor. All was over; the long-drawn, heavy breathing of the noisome brute, crouching in that hollow, gorged with human flesh, had ceased at last. The whole of the Voreux buildings had sunk into the abyss.

Shrieking with terror, the crowd rushed away. The women ran hiding their faces; the men rolled over each other like withered leaves in an autumn gust. They did not want to cry out, and yet they did so, their throats swelling and their arms rising in the air as they beheld the immense cavity that had formed. This cavity, like the crater of an extinct volcano, was fifty feet deep at least, and extended from the road to the canal over a width of five-and-forty yards. The whole of the enclosure had gonea fter the buildings: the gigantic settle-boards, the gangways, with their rails, a complete train of trucks, three waggons, without counting the stacks of wood, a whole plantation of logs, which had been swallowed up like straws. At the bottom one could only see a mass of bricks, iron, plaster, and woodwork, inextricably mixed, coated with mud, pounded down by the force of the catastrophe. The hollow even expanded; cracks extended across the fields. One spread as far as Rasseneur's house, the front of which had split. People asked each other whether the village itself

would escape, and how far they had better go to be safe under that leaden sky which also seemed desirous of crushing the world.

All at once Négrel uttered a heartrending cry. Monsieur Hennebeau, who had slowly retreated, wept aloud. The disaster was not complete yet: a part of the canal bank gave way, and the waters rushed seething and foaming into one of the gaps, like a cataract falling into a deep valley. The mine was drinking in the river; the inundation would now submerge the galleries for years to come. The crater filled at last, and a muddy lake occupied the spot where the buildings of the Voreux pit had stood but a few hours before, like one of those lakes at the bottom of which sleep the cities cursed by Heaven. The silence of terror had fallen upon the crowd: nothing was heard but the rush of the water roaring through the bowels of the earth.

Then, and only then, did Souvarine rise on the quivering mound. He had recognised Zacharie and La Maheude sobbing in the presence of that collapse which must weigh so heavily on the poor wretches down below. He threw away his last cigarette and went off into the night, without as much as a glance behind him. His shadow grew smaller in the distance, until it was lost amid the gloom. He was going yonder towards the unknown; he was going in his quiet way towards extermination, to wheresoever dynamite was to be found to blow up cities and men. And, no doubt, when the *bourgeois*, at their last gasp, hear the pavement of the streets burst asunder beneath their footsteps, it will be his work.

IV

On the very night that followed the catastrophe Monsieur Hennebeau left for Paris. He wished to inform the board of management personally before the papers could even give the news. When he returned next day he was very calm. He had evidently succeeded in exonerating himself from all blame; for his favour, far from waning, seemed on the increase; the decree promoting him in the Legion of Honour was signed twenty-four hours afterwards.

But if the managing director remained safe, the company had received a terrible blow. It was not the few millions it

had lost, but the wound in its flank, the constant fear of what to-morrow might bring forth in the face of such wilful destruction of one of its pits. So terror-stricken were the members of the board that they once more felt the necessity of silence. What would be the good of stirring up that abominable business? Why, even if they discovered the miscreant, why should they make a martyr of him? His dreadful heroism would only fanaticise others, and beget a whole brood of assassins and incendiaries. Besides, the company did not suspect the real culprit; it ended by believing in an army of accomplices, for the officials were unable to admit that a single man could have found courage and strength enough for such a deed. That, in fact, was the thought that haunted the company: the thought of an ever-increasing menace around its pits. The managing director thus received orders to organise a vast system of espionage, and to dismiss without scandal, and one by one, the dangerous men who might have had a hand in the crime. For the present the company confined itself to this task of purification, a resolution which proved its political wisdom.

There was but one immediate dismissal, that of Dansaert, the head viewer. Since all the scandal about him and the Pierrons it had become impossible to keep him. So advantage was taken of his behaviour in the hour of danger, which was likened to the cowardice of a captain abandoning his men. And on the other hand his disgrace was a discreet sop to the miners, who detested him.

Nevertheless, certain rumours had got rife among the public, and the management was obliged to correct the statements of a paper which alleged that a barrel of gunpowder had been fired by the pitmen on strike. Then the engineer sent down by the government concluded, after a rapid survey, that the collapse of the tubbing had simply been occasioned by the pressure of the adjacent soil; and in this respect the company preferred to keep silent and to accept official blame for lack of efficient watchfulness. In three days' time the catastrophe had been reported at length by the Paris press. Everybody talked of the miners dying in the depths of the mine; telegrams about them were published every morning and eagerly read. In Montsou itself the *bourgeois* turned pale and hushed their voices at the mere mention of the Voreux pit. A legend had arisen in connection with the subject which even the most courageous scarcely dared whisper to each other. The whole

region manifested great compassion for the victims; excursions to the collapsed mine were organised, family parties repaired to the spot to treat themselves to the horrible sight of the ruins, which weighed so heavily upon the heads of the poor people buried below.

Deneulin, who had been appointed divisional engineer but a few days previously, had to deal with the disaster by way of inaugurating his functions. He began by forcing the canal back to its bed, for that torrent rushing into the mine aggravated the damage every hour. Works of great magnitude became necessary. He at once set a hundred men to construct a dam, but twice the rush of the water carried everything away. At last his endeavours succeeded, and pumps were soon at work struggling to regain inch after inch of the lost ground.

But the rescuing of the miners down below caused by far the greatest excitement. Négrel had been entrusted with this supreme effort, and there was no lack of hands to assist him. Every miner came to offer his services, impelled by the same brotherly feelings. They forgot the strike; they did not concern themselves about the pay. They would work for nothing; they only asked leave to risk their skins for their comrades who were in the jaws of death. They were all there with tools in their hands, quivering and waiting to be told where to strike. Many who had been ill with fright after the accident, who still shook with nervous fever and were drenched with cold perspiration at the horrible nightmare that haunted them, rose from their beds and showed themselves the most desperate in their desire to fight the earth, as if they had a revenge to take. Unfortunately the first questions that had to be asked in order to effect any good were embarrassing in the extreme: What was to be done? How could they get down? Where should they attack the rock?

Négrel was really of opinion that not one of the poor fellows had survived. The whole fifteen of them had undoubtedly perished either by drowning or suffocation. But in mining disasters it is the invariable rule to regard the missing men as being alive, and it was in that sense that he spoke. The first problem he put to himself was, where could they possibly have sheltered themselves? The viewers and old hands consulted by him were agreed upon one point. Their comrades, in retreating before the rise of the waters, had certainly ascended from gallery to gallery into the highest cuttings, so

that they were no doubt imprisoned at the extremity of some upper gallery, This supposition agreed also with a statement made by old Mouque, whose incoherent narrative also led to the belief that in the terror of their flight the men had separated into small groups, leaving a few on every story of the mine. As to the possible means of getting at the missing pitmen, the opinions of the viewers varied. As the passages nearest to the surface were almost five hundred feet beneath it, the sinking of a shaft was not to be thought of. The only possible means of access seemed to be the Réquillart pit. But unfortunately it was flooded also, and no longer communicated with the Voreux pit; the only parts that remained above the water were a few bits of galleries connected with the first junction. To pump the water out would take years, and so the best thing to do was to visit these bits of galleries to find out whether they were anywhere near the submerged passages, at the end of which the presence of the imprisoned miners was suspected. However, before arriving at this conclusion, much time had been lost in the discussion of impracticable plans.

Négrel now overhauled the dusty archives, and when he had unearthed the old plans of both pits he began to study them in order to decide at which points their search should begin. This study gradually excited him; he also was taken with a fever of devotion, in spite of his habitual indifference to men and things. The first difficulties encountered were in the descent. They had to clear the mouth of the Réquillart shaft, cut away the overhanging brushwood, and repair the ladders. Then the experiments began. The engineer, who went down with ten men, made them knock with their tools against certain parts of the vein which he pointed out to them; and then, amidst profound silence, everyone put his ear to the coal, listening for a distant reply to their knocks. But they visited all the practicable galleries in vain; there was never the faintest echo. Their perplexity then increased. Where should they cut into the seam? In which direction should they go, seeing that there seemed to be no one there? Still they would not give up their search, but became more obstinate in proportion as their anxiety increased.

From the very first day La Maheude arrived every morning at the Réquillart pit. She seated herself on a beam near the shaft, and did not stir from the spot till evening. Whenever a man came out she got up and gave him a questioning look.

Nothing? No, nothing. Whereupon she sat down again, still waiting, her face harsh and determined. Jeanlin also, seeing that they were invading his lair, prowled about with the frightened look of a beast of prey whose depredations are about to be unearthed. He was thinking particularly of the little soldier lying beneath the rocks, and was terribly afraid of the explorers troubling his deep sleep; but that part of the mine, as it happened, was flooded. Besides, the search began more to the left, in the western gallery. Philomène had also come at first by way of accompanying Zacharie, who formed part of the search gang, but she grew weary of catching cold for nothing. So she afterwards stopped at home, passing her days in idleness, indifferent to everything, and coughing from morn till night. Zacharie, on the contrary, knew no rest; he would have eaten up the soil to find his sister. He started up in bed at night shrieking that he heard her, reduced to a skeleton by lack of food and crying out for help, her throat bursting in the effort. He had twice wanted to begin digging without orders, saying that the right spot was there, that he felt it to be so. The engineer would let him go down no longer; still he did not leave the mouth of the shaft whence he was driven; he could not even sit down by his mother and wait in silence. Stirred by a desire to do something, he walked incessantly to and fro.

The third day after the disaster Négrel, giving up all hope, had decided to abandon all further search that evening. At noon, after luncheon, when he came back with his men to make a final attempt, he was surprised to see Zacharie come out of the shaft, flushed with excitement, violently gesticulating, and shouting: 'She's there! she answered me! Come, come quick!'

He had crept down the ladders, notwithstanding the watchman, and swore that he had heard a knock over yonder. in the first passage of the Guillaume vein.

'But we have already tried twice in that spot,' said Négrel incredulously. 'However, we will soon see.'

La Maheude had got up; and she had to be held back, for she wished to go down as well. At last she stood waiting at the edge of the shaft, staring down into the gloomy hole.

Below, Négrel himself struck three blows at intervals; then he applied his ear to the coal, enjoining the greatest silence to the men. But no sound reached him; he shook his head; the poor lad had evidently dreamt it all. Furious

at the disappointment, Zacharie knocked again; and he heard the answer well enough, for his eyes glistened, his limbs shook with joy. Then the workmen one after another recommenced the experiment, and their faces flushed, for they caught the distant reply. The engineer stood lost in amazement; he applied his ear once more, and ended by hearing a sound of aerial lightness, a kind of rhythmic roll, the well-known tattoo of the miner when in danger. Coal has the peculiarity of transmitting sound with crystalline limpidity from a great distance. A viewer who was there estimated the thickness of the block that separated them at no less than five-and-fifty yards. But it seemed as if they could already hold out their hands to their imprisoned comrades, and there was a burst of joy. Négrel had to set them to work at once.

When Zacharie met his mother at the top they rushed into each other's arms.

'You had better not make too sure,' cruelly observed La Pierronne, who had strolled there that day through mere curiosity. 'If Catherine isn't found there, it would grieve you too much afterwards.'

It was true; Catherine might be elsewhere.

'You'd better be off, and mind your own business,' shrieked Zacharie, beside himself with rage. 'She's there; I know it.'

La Maheude had resumed her place on the beam in silence, not a muscle of her face moving. She was simply waiting.

When the story became known in Montsou, crowds flocked to the spot. There was nothing to be seen, but they came all the same and had to be kept at a distance. Below, the men were working day and night. Lest he might meet with some obstacle, the engineer caused three sloping galleries to be opened, all three converging towards the spot where the imprisoned miners were supposed to be. Only one hewer at a time could bring down the coal, owing to the narrowness of the tunnel. He was relieved every two hours, and the coal, placed in corves, was removed by a living chain, which lengthened as the work proceeded. It went on very quickly at first; they advanced twenty feet in one day.

Zacharie had obtained permission to be one of the chosen men entrusted with the work. It was a post of honour eagerly claimed. He got very angry whenever they wanted to relieve him after his prescribed period of work. He cheated his comrades of their turn, and refused to leave off. His

gallery, indeed, was soon in advance of the two others, and he fought the coal so desperately that outside the tunnel they could hear him panting like some forge within. Whenever he came out, grimy and coated with mud, reeling with fatigue, he dropped down like a log and had to be wrapped in a blanket. Then, still reeling, he plunged into the tunnel again, and the struggle recommenced, with terrible blows, stifled groans, and all the victorious fury of massacre. Unfortunately the coal became harder, and he twice broke his pick in his exasperation at no longer advancing so quickly. He also suffered from the heat, which increased at every few feet, and at last became quite unbearable in that narrow hole where the air could not circulate. They had brought a fan worked by hand, but the ventilation remained very bad, and on three occasions they had to drag out hewers who had fainted, overcome by suffocation.

Négrel lived below with his workmen. They brought him down his meals; he sometimes slept for an hour or two on a truss of straw, with a cloak around him. What sustained everyone's courage was the appeal of the unfortunate beings behind that wall, the tattoo which they beat to entreat their deliverers to make haste, and which became more and more distinct. It now sounded very clear, with musical sonorousness, as if struck on a harmonica. It guided the workers; they advanced towards that crystalline sound as one marches in the direction of the guns in battle. Each time a hewer was relieved Négrel came down, knocked, and put his ear to the wall; and each time, so far, the reply had come quick and pressing. There was no longer room for doubt; they were advancing in the right direction, but how desperately slow it was after all! They would never arrive in time. The first two days they had hewn away fourteen yards of coal, but on the third they fell to five and a half; and on the fourth to less than four. The coal was becoming more compact, and so hard that it was with difficulty they advanced two yards a day. On the ninth day, after superhuman efforts, their advance was but a fraction over thirty-five yards, and they calculated that at least another two and twenty had to be traversed. For the prisoners, the twelfth day had begun; twelve times twenty-four hours had gone by without bread, without a fire, in the frigid gloom! The horrible thought of this brought tears to their comrades' eyes, and strained their muscles to the utmost. It seemed impossible that Christians could hold out

longer under such circumstances. Since the day before, the distant knocking had become fainter and fainter; and they trembled lest it should stop altogether.

La Maheude came regularly every morning and seated herself by the mouth of the pit, nursing her little daughter Estelle, who could not be left alone. And in this way she kept herself informed from hour to hour. She followed the progress of the work; she shared the hopes and fears of the men below. Feverish anxiety prevailed among the waiting groups, and as far as Montsou there were endless comments. Every heart in the region seemed to beat in unison with those who were below, in the bowels of the earth.

On the ninth day Zacharie did not answer when he was called at lunch-time to be relieved. He was like mad, and kept striking at the coal and cursing it. Négrel, who would have made him obey, happened to be momentarily absent: indeed, no one was there but a viewer and three miners. And no doubt Zacharie, finding fault with his lamp, worried by its faint flicker that delayed his work, was imprudent enough to open it. The orders to the contrary were, however, very strict, for the air in those narrow, ill-ventilated passages was laden with fire-damp. Suddenly there came a terrible thunderclap and a mass of flame darted from the passage as from the muzzle of a gun loaded with shrapnel. In an instant everything was ablaze: the air from one end of the galleries to the other caught fire like gunpowder. The blazing torrent carried away the viewer and the three men, ascended the shaft, and burst into daylight like an eruption of a volcano, vomiting forth masses of rock and woodwork. The sightseers rushed away; La Maheude got up, clasping her frightened child to her bosom.

When Négrel and his men came back they shook with fury. They stamped upon the earth as upon some hard-hearted mother who killed her offspring haphazard in a mad fit of cruelty. What! they were devoting their lives, making every effort to reach their comrades, and their loss was not enough, there must be more deaths still! When at the end of three long hours of effort and danger they were at last able to make their way into the galleries, the removal of the victims was heartrending. Neither the viewer nor the three other men were dead; but frightful burns covered them, the smell of which was almost unbearable. Moreover, they had, so to say, drunk in the fire; the burns had descended into their throats

and they kept up one continuous shriek, entreating their comrades to put them out of their misery. One of the wounded miners was the man who, during the strike, had shattered the pumping-engine at the Gaston-Marie pit with a final blow of his pick. The hands of the other two still bore traces of the cuts they had inflicted on themselves when breaking the bricks to pelt the soldiers. The crowd, pale and trembling, uncovered their heads as they were borne past.

La Maheude stood erect, waiting. At last Zacharie's body appeared. The clothes were burnt off it: the corpse was merely a black, calcined, unrecognisable mass of carbon. The head, crushed by the explosion, no longer existed. And when the horrible remains had been laid on a stretcher, the mother followed like an automaton, with glaring, tearless eyes. Estelle dozed in her arms as she stalked along, mute and tragic, her hair streaming in the wind. In the village, Philomène stood dazed, her eyes transformed into fountains, tears having at once flowed forth to relieve her. But the mother had already returned to Réquillart with the same tragic step: she had escorted her son, and came back to wait for her daughter.

Three more days went by. The work of deliverance had been resumed amid unheard-of difficulties. Fortunately the approaches had not given way in the explosion of the fire-damp; but the atmosphere was so hot, vitiated to such a degree, as to necessitate the installation of several additional fans. The hewers had to be relieved every twenty minutes. Still they were making headway; at the utmost, two yards and a quarter now separated them from their comrades. But on the other hand they felt heavy at heart, working desperately for mere vengeance sake, for the sounds beyond had ceased, the tattoo with its light rhythm was no longer heard. This was the twelfth day since they had started work, the fifteenth since the catastrophe; and ever since the morning a silence like that of the grave had prevailed.

The fresh accident had increased the curiosity of the good folk of Montsou. The *bourgeois* organised so many excursions that the Grégoires decided to follow the example. They made up a party. They arranged to drive in their carriage to the Voreux ruins, while Madame Hennebeau was to take Lucie and Jeanne thither in hers. Deneulin should show them over the works, and they would all return by way of Réquillart, where Négrel would be able to tell them how far he

had progressed, and whether there was still any hope. They would dine together to wind up the day.

When, towards three o'clock, the Grégoires alighted before the sunken pit they were met by Madame Hennebeau, gowned in dark blue and carrying a parasol to keep off the pale February sunshine. The sky was bright and clear, the air as warm as in spring. Monsieur Hennebeau happened to be with Deneulin, and his wife paid but little attention to the explanations which the latter furnished with regard to the trouble it had taken to dam the canal. However, Jeanne, who always carried a drawing-book, set to sketching, excited by the horror of the subject; while Lucie, seated beside her on the remains of a waggon, uttered exclamations of delight, and thought the whole affair wonderful. The dyke, but half finished as yet, still let the water pass in many places, and the foaming billows rolled over and over until they tumbled like a cataract into the gap left by the vanished pit. Nevertheless this crater was gradually emptying; the waters were sucked in by the soil and falling so that one could see the horrible mire at the bottom. Beneath the soft blue sky of that bright day the whole looked like some gigantic open sewer, with the ruins of an overthrown town melting in its mud.

'And folk come out of their way to see this!' exclaimed Monsieur Grégoire, who was disillusionised.

However, Cécile, feeling gay and happy in the pure air, tripped about merrily and jested, while Madame Hennebeau pouted with disgust, and murmured: 'True, there's nothing very pretty about it.'

The two engineers smiled. They tried to interest the visitors by taking them over the place, explaining the working of the pump and the action of the pile-driver. But the ladies seemed to grow uncomfortable. They shuddered when they were told that the pumps would have to work for six or seven years perhaps, before a new shaft would be sunk and the mine finally freed of water. They preferred to think of something else; those horrors only gave one the nightmare.

'I think that we had better go,' at last said Madame Hennebeau, walking to her carriage.

Jeanne and Lucie pulled wry faces. What, so soon! But the sketch was not finished! They wanted to stay. Their father would take them back in time for dinner. Thus Monsieur Hennebeau alone drove with his wife to Réquillart, for he also wanted to question Négrel.

'Well, you go on, then,' said Monsieur Grégoire. 'We'll follow you directly; we have to call in the village for about five minutes. We shall be at Réquillart almost as soon as you.'

He got into his own carriage with Madame Grégoire and Cécile; and while one vehicle rolled away along the bank of the canal, the other slowly ascended the slope.

It was by a mission of charity the Grégoires proposed to wind up the excursion. Zacharie's death had filled them with compassion for that tragic, sorely-tried Maheu family, of whom the whole district was talking. They did not pity the father, that brigand, that slayer of soldiers, whom it had been necessary to bring down like a wild animal. But the mother interested and touched them, poor woman that she was, who had lost her son after losing her husband, and whose daughter was also a corpse, perhaps, down below. Besides, was there not also a lad crippled by an accident, and a disabled grandfather, in addition to a little girl who had died of hunger during the strike? They did not mean to say that this family had not in part deserved misfortune by reason of its revolutionary spirit. Still, they wished to show how broad and unbiassed was their charity, how desirous too they were of conciliation, by personally carrying a gift to that stricken household. Two carefully prepared parcels were under the seat of the carriage. An old woman showed the coachman the Maheus' cottage, No. 16 in the second row. However, when the Grégoires, carrying their parcels, alighted, they knocked in vain. Even when they beat on the door with their fists no answer came. A lugubrious echo resounded through the tenement, which seemed like a house emptied by death, gloomy, chill, and utterly abandoned.

'There's no one at home,' said Cécile, disappointed. 'What a nuisance! What shall we do with all the things?'

Suddenly the door of the next cottage opened, and La Levaque appeared on the threshold.

'Oh, monsieur! oh, madame! a thousand pardons! Excuse me, mademoiselle! Is it my neighbour you want? She's not at home; she's at the Réquillart pit.'

Without taking breath she told them the story, explaining that people ought to help each other, and so she was taking care of Lénore and Henri to allow of the mother's staying yonder. Her glance having fallen on the parcels, she turned the conversation on her poor daughter, who had been left a

widow, and even made a display of her own wretchedness, her eyes the while glistening with greediness. At last she said, hesitatingly: 'I've got the key, sir, if you and madame wish to go in. The grandfather's there.'

The Grégoires looked at her in amazement. What did she mean by saying that the grandfather was there? No one had answered them. Was he asleep, then? And when La Levaque reluctantly opened the door, the sight that met their eyes kept them rooted to the threshold. Jollycorpse was there all alone, staring straight before him and fixed to his chair in front of the empty grate. All around him the room seemed to have grown much larger, now that it lacked the clock and the polished deal furniture that enlivened it formerly. And on the crude nakedness of the greenish walls nothing remained but the portraits of the Emperor and Empress, whose pink lips smiled with official amiability. The old man did not stir, did not even blink as the light suddenly came in from the open doorway, but sat there with an idiotic look, as if he had not seen the visitors enter. At his feet was a plateful of ashes, serving as a spittoon.

'Don't pay any attention if he isn't extra polite,' said La Levaque, obligingly. 'They say that he's hurt something in his brain. He hasn't spoken a word for a fortnight past.'

All at once Jollycorpse shook from head to foot with a fit of coughing and spat into the plate, still bringing up the coal-dust which seemed to fill his body. And he at once relapsed into immobility. He no longer stirred except to expectorate. Upset and disgusted, the Grégoires nevertheless tried to say a few friendly and encouraging words.

'Well, my poor old fellow, you've got a bad cough,' remarked the father.

Jollycorpse stared at the wall and did not even turn his head. And deep, heavy silence again fell upon the room.

'They ought to make you some barley-water,' added the mother.

But Jollycorpse remained mute and rigid.

'I say, papa,' whispered Cécile, 'they told us, you know, that he was an invalid, but we forgot all about it.'

She stopped short, seemingly very much confused. After placing on the table a piece of soup-beef and two bottles of wine, she undid the second parcel, and drew from it a huge pair of shoes. This was the gift intended for the grandfather, and she stood there bewildered with the shoes in her hand,

contemplating the swollen feet of that poor old man, who would walk no more.

'They come a little late, don't they, old fellow?' said Monsieur Grégoire, trying to enliven the situation. 'Never mind, they'll be useful for all that.'

Jollycorpse, with his terrible face as cold and as hard as stone, did not hear, did not answer.

Cécile stealthily set the shoes on the floor against the wall; but in spite of all her precautions the hobnails clanked, and, do what they would, those huge shoes caused an awkward feeling in the room.

'Oh! he'll not even say as much as "thank you,"' exclaimed La Levaque, who had cast a covetous glance at the shoes. 'You might just as well give a pair of spectacles to a duck, with all respect to you.' Then she rattled on, trying to lead the Grégoires to her own cottage, where she hoped to arouse their compassion for herself. At last she hit upon a pretext. She burst out in praise of Henri and Lénore, who were such nice, sweet children, and so clever, able to answer any questions like a couple of little angels. They would tell the lady and gentleman everything they wished to know.

'Will you come for a moment, my dear?' Grégoire asked his daughter, feeling glad to get out of the place.

'Yes, I will follow you directly,' answered Cécile.

Her parents left her alone with Jollycorpse. What kept her there, trembling and fascinated, was that she fancied she recollected that old man. Where had she seen that square, livid face, tattooed all over with coal? All at once she remembered; she again beheld a furious rabble surrounding her, and felt a pair of icy hands clutching at her neck. Yes, it was he; she had found the man; she stared at his hands, which rested on his knees, the sinewy hands of a workman whose whole strength lies in his wrists, which remain powerful despite old age. And little by little Jollycorpse seemed to wake up and perceive her, and scrutinise her with a gaping look. Blood rushed to his face; a nervous tremor distorted his mouth, whence black saliva dribbled. Mutually attracted, they remained face to face; she all health, plump and fresh, thanks to long idleness and the material welfare of her race; and he dropsical and repulsively ugly, like a broken-down animal of a breed degenerating from a century of toil and starvation.

At the end of ten minutes, when the Grégoires, surprised

at Cécile's long absence, came back to the Maheus' cottage, they raised heartrending shrieks. On the ground lay their daughter, blue in the face, strangled to death. Round her neck was the red imprint of a giant's grip. Jollycorpse, reeling on his lifeless legs, had dropped beside her, powerless to raise himself. His fingers were still bent like claws, and he stared at the Grégoires with an imbecile expression in his dilated eyes. In his fall he had broken his spittoon and the ashes were strewed about, soiling the floor, but the huge shoes still stood safe and sound against the wall.

The circumstances of the murder were never clearly ascertained. Why had Cécile approached him? How had Jollycorpse, nailed, so to say, to his chair, succeeded in clutching her round the throat? It was very evident that when once he had got hold of her he had become desperate, and tightened his grip, stifling her cries, and rolling over and over with her until her death-gasp. Not a sound, not a moan, had reached those in the next house through the thin party-wall. They could but believe in a sudden attack of madness, in some inexplicable temptation to murder at the sight of the girl's white throat. Such ferocity in an infirm old man, who had led a sober, honest life, like an obedient animal, caring nothing about modern ideas, was calculated to bewilder everyone. What was the rancour which had ascended from the depths of his being to his brain? The horror of the thing made one believe in irresponsibility and unconsciousness; it was surely the crime of an idiot.

Meanwhile the Grégoires, sinking on their knees, sobbed bitterly, choking with grief. Their darling girl—the child that in earlier years they had so ardently hoped for, whom they had so tenderly reared and petted, whose slumbers they had watched on tip-toes, whom they had never thought sufficiently well fed, sufficiently plump! It was the foundering of their very life. What was the good of living now that they would have to live without her?

La Levaque was quite out of her senses, 'Oh! the old brute, what has he done?' she shrieked. 'Who would have dreamt of such a thing? And La Maheude, who won't be back until nightfall? Suppose I go and fetch her?'

The father and mother did not answer, annihilated as they were.

'Yes, it'll be better, eh? I'm going.'

However, before suiting the action to the word, La Levaque

looked about her for the shoes. The whole village was rushing to the spot, a crowd was already scrambling before the door. The shoes might be stolen. Besides, there was no longer any man at the Maheus' to wear them. So she carefully smuggled them away. They would just fit Bouteloup.

At the Réquillart pit the Hennebeaus and Négrel long waited for the arrival of the Grégoires. The young engineer, who had come up from the pit, gave the others some particulars of the search; they hoped to reach the prisoners that very evening, said he. But it was certain that they would only find corpses, for the deathlike silence still continued. La Maheude, seated on a beam behind the engineer, was listening, pale as snow, when La Levaque appeared on the spot, and told her of her father-in-law's fine doings. At this she made a gesture of impatience and annoyance. Nevertheless she followed her neighbour.

Madame Hennebeau turned faint at the dreadful tidings. How abominable! that poor Cécile, so lively and so gay but an hour before! Monsieur Hennebeau was obliged to take his wife into old Mouque's shanty for a moment. In his awkward way he unfastened her dress, feeling faint himself at the odour of musk that came from her. When Madame Hennebeau, with tears streaming from her eyes, caught hold of Négrel, who was terrified by that sudden death which nipped his marriage in the bud, the husband looked at them and felt relieved of a great worry. That misfortune arranged everything; he preferred that things should remain as they were, for fear lest his wife should sink still lower.

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At the bottom of the shaft the unhappy abandoned wretches howled with terror. The water was already up to their waists. The war of the torrent deafened them; the final collapse of the tubbing caused them to think that the world had come to an end. What bereft them still farther of their senses was the neighing of the horses shut up in the stables, the terrible never-to-be-forgotten death-cries of animals about to perish. Mouque had dropped Battle's bridle. The old horse remained standing there, quivering in every limb, his eyes dilated and fixed on the ever-rising waters. The landing-

vault was rapidly filling; one could see the greenish tide increasing by the red glare of the three lamps suspended from the roof and still alight. When the animal felt the cold stream drenching his coat he flung up his hoofs, and at a wild gallop disappeared down one of the haulage galleries. Then came a general rout; the men followed the animal. 'We're done for here!' shouted Mouque. 'We must try Réquillart.'

The thought that they might get out by way of the old pit if they could only reach it in time gave them wings. The twenty galloped in a file, hustling each other, holding their lamps above their heads lest the water should extinguish them. Fortunately the gallery sloped upward, so that they were able to go some two hundred yards without being materially gained upon by the flood. Long slumbering superstitions awoke in their terror-stricken souls. They invoked the earth, for it was the earth who was avenging herself, who was pouring forth the blood of her veins like this because they had cut one of her arteries. An old miner stammered half-forgotten prayers, turning his thumbs out the while, to appease the evil spirits of the mine. But at the first junction of the galleries there came a disagreement. The stableman wanted to take to the left, while others swore that the shortest way was to the right. They lost at least a minute.

'Very well, then! go and croak yonder if you like! What's it to me?' shouted Chaval brutally. 'I'm going this way.'

He took the right and two comrades followed him. The others continued to gallop behind old Mouque, who had passed much of his early life down in the Réquillart pit. Still he himself hesitated, not knowing which turnings to take. They were losing their heads; even old hands no longer recognised the passages, whose many mazy windings confused them. Each time a gallery forked they stopped short and deliberated, though prompt decision was imperative. Étienne came last, encumbered by Catherine, whom fear and fatigue had already paralysed. He himself would have turned to the right like Chaval, whom he believed to be in the best road; but at the risk of remaining at the bottom, he had preferred to part from his antagonist. Besides, the confusion continued, many comrades had gone their own ways, and there only remained seven behind old Mouque.

'Put your arms round my neck; I'll carry you,' said Étienne to the young girl, seeing her ready to drop.

'No,' she whispered; 'leave me, I can't go on. I'd as soon die on the spot.'

They were at least fifty yards behind the others, and he was lifting her up notwithstanding her resistance, when all at once the gallery was barred to them: a huge block fell from the roof and separated them from the others. The flood was already soaking the rocky soil, and the latter was giving way on all sides. They were obliged to retrace their steps, and they soon no longer knew in which direction they were going. It was all over. The idea of saving themselves by way of Réquillart had to be abandoned. Their only hope was to reach the upper cuttings, whence they might perhaps eventually be rescued if the water abated. Étienne at last recognised the Guillaume vein.

'All right!' he said, 'I know where we are now. Curse it! we were in the proper road after all; but it's of no use now! Listen, let's go straight on and climb up the chimney.'

The waters were breast-high; they advanced very slowly. So long as they had a light they did not give up all hope. They blew out one of their lamps to save the oil, with the idea of pouring it into the other later on. And they had got as far as the chimney when a noise behind made them turn. Was it some of their comrades who, finding the way barred, were returning also? A terrific panting resounded in the distance. They could not account for the tempestuous noise which approached them, amid a terrific spattering of foam. And they shrieked when they beheld a huge whitish mass emerge from the gloom and make desperate efforts to join them, between the close-set narrow propping, in which it was being crushed. It was Battle. Ever since he had rushed away from the bottom of the shaft he had galloped along the dark galleries. Still he seemed to know his way in that underground city, which he had inhabited for eleven years past. His eyes could see clearly in the perpetual gloom in which he had lived. He galloped on and on, lowering his head, making himself small, passing along the narrow ways, which his big body completely filled. Passage succeeded passage, crossways opened, but Battle did not hesitate. Whither was he going? Over yonder, perhaps, towards the vision of his youth, towards the mill where he was born on the banks of the Scarpe, towards the vague souvenir of the sun, burning aloft like a huge lamp. He wished to live, his brute memory revived, the desire to breathe the air of the

fields once more urged him on straight ahead until he should discover the outlet leading to the warm sky, to the light of day. And revolt got the better of his old resignation; the pit was killing him, after almost depriving him of sight. The pursuing flood whipped his flanks, lashed his crupper. But the more he advanced the narrower became the galleries, the roofs lower, the walls set more closely together. The mine seemed to be contracting around him, as though to seize and strangle him.

Then all at once, as he came close to them, Étienne and Catherine beheld him wedged between some rocks. He had stumbled and broken both forelegs. With a supreme effort he dragged himself a few yards farther; but he could no longer pass, he was forced to remain there—wrapped round, garotted as it were, by the earth. And, his bleeding head stretched forward, his big, blurred eyes still sought a crevice by which to escape. The water was soon splashing over him; he began to neigh, with the prolonged and awful neighing with which his stable companions had already died. Frightful was the spectacle of this old animal, maimed and confined between the rock, instinctively struggling against death in those depths, far away from daylight. His cries of distress continued, and grew hoarser as the flood rose above his mane, and he held up his widely distended mouth. Then he gave one last snort, there was a gurgling as of a barrel being filled, and finally a deep silence.

'For God's sake, take me away,' sobbed Catherine. 'I'm frightened; I don't want to die. Take me away! Take me away!' She had looked death in the face. The falling in of the shaft, the flooding of the pit, nothing had filled her with such horror as Battle's death-agony had inspired. She seemed to hear him still, her ears were buzzing with the noise, and she shuddered from head to foot. 'Take me away! Take me away!'

Étienne had caught hold of her, and was carrying her off. It was high time he did so, for they were drenched to their shoulders as they climbed the chimney. He was obliged to help her, as she no longer had strength to cling to the propping. Three times he thought that she was slipping from his grasp and disappearing in the flood, whose billows seethed behind them. They were able to breathe for a few moments when they got to the first passage which was still open; but the water left them no peace; they had to hoist

themselves up again. And for hours this ascent continued; the flood drove them from passage to passage, forced them to climb higher and higher. When they had reached the sixth story a respite revived their hope; it seemed to them that the water remained stationary. But a more decided rise soon drove them first to the seventh and then to the eighth floor. There only remained one more, and when they reached it they anxiously measured every inch of the rising flood. If it did not cease they were doomed to die like the faithful old horse, crushed against the roofing, with water pouring down their throats.

Meanwhile the crashing of the rock was heard every moment. The whole mine was shaken, its entrails bursting with the flood that gorged it. At the ends of certain galleries the pent-up air exploded with a deafening noise, amidst splitting rocks and upheaved earth. It was the terrifying uproar of subterranean cataclysms, a repetition of the prehistoric battle between the elements when the waters had changed the face of the earth, burying the mountains beneath the plains. And Catherine, dreadfully shaken, almost bereft of her senses amid this continuous collapse, clasped her hands and kept on stammering the same words: 'I don't want to die, I don't want to die.'

Étienne, to reassure her, swore that the water was no longer rising. Their flight had now lasted for at least six hours; help was sure to come. He said six hours without knowing; he no longer had any notion of the flight of time. In reality, a whole day had passed during their ascent of the Guillaume vein.

Drenched and shivering, they tried to settle themselves. She undressed without shame in order to wring her clothes. Then she again put on her jacket and trousers, and left them to dry on her body. As she was barefooted he made her take his clogs. They could wait now; he had lowered the wick of the lamp, which flickered faintly like a night-light. But they began to feel fearful cramps, and became aware of their hunger. Until then they had scarcely known whether they were dead or alive. They had not lunched at the moment of the catastrophe, and they now found their slices of bread soaked and soppy. She had to make him eat his share by force; and, worn out with fatigue, she fell asleep on the cold ground the moment she had swallowed her own. He with the fever of insomnia on him, watched over

her, his head resting on his hands, his eyes staring fixedly.

How many hours went by like that? He could not have told. All he knew was that through the opening of the chimney before him he saw the black, moving water, the monster that stretched out to get at them, reappear. At first there was only a thin line, like a supple snake uncoiling; then it became a big, writhing, crawling serpent advancing towards them until it got so close that the feet of the sleeping girl were soaked. Though anxious enough, he hesitated to awaken her. Would it not be cruel to rouse her from rest, from the unconsciousness which was perhaps lulling her into a vision of daylight and brilliant sunshine? Besides, whither could they flee? By dint of thought he at last remembered that the inclined plane of this part of the vein communicated at one end with that of the upper story. That would be an outlet. Then he allowed Catherine to sleep as long as possible, while on his side he watched the rising flood, waiting until it should drive them away. At last he gently lifted her; she shuddered as she awoke.

'Ah! good heavens! It's true! it's beginning again, good heavens!'

She remembered everything, and cried aloud with fear at finding death so near again.

'No, don't be afraid,' he murmured. 'We can pass, I assure you.'

To reach the inclined plane they were obliged to walk along bending almost double, and once more drenched to their shoulders. And the ascent began afresh, this time yet more dangerous, along that tunnel a hundred yards in length and entirely closed in with woodwork. At first they wished to draw the cable towards them, so as to fix one of the trucks at the bottom; for if the other had come down while they were going up it would have crushed them. But nothing moved; some obstacle no doubt interfered with the mechanism. After that they ventured forward without daring to avail themselves of the cable which was in their way, but tearing their nails from their fingers against the slimy woodwork. He came last, preventing her from falling with his head, whenever she slipped back, her bleeding hands being of little use. Suddenly, however, they knocked against some broken beams that barred the way. Some soil had fallen in, a slip prevented them from going higher. Fortunately a door opened

just there and they entered another passage. The flicker of a lamp in front of them filled them with amazement. A man called out ferociously:

'More clever ones as stupid as myself!'

They recognised Chaval, who was himself barricaded in there by the earth that had fallen across the inclined plane. The two mates who had started with him had fallen on the way with their skulls split. He himself, though injured at the elbow, had mustered up courage to crawl back on his knees to take their lamps and search them for their bread. As he escaped a last slip had blocked up the gallery behind him.

He at once swore to himself that he would not share his provisions with these newcomers who had sprung from the earth, as it were. He would have liked to kill them. When, in his turn, he recognised them, he began to laugh with spiteful delight.

'Ah! it's you, Catherine! You found everything closed, eh? So you came to join your old man. Well! well! we'll see the play out together.'

He pretended that he did not see Étienne. The latter, thoroughly upset by this meeting, made a gesture as if to protect the girl who clung to him. Still, the situation had to be accepted. So he simply addressed Chaval as if they had parted the best of friends an hour previously:

'Have you looked at the end? Is there no outlet by way of the cuttings?'

'Oh! pooh, by the cuttings, indeed!' said Chaval jeeringly. 'They're blocked up also. We're between two walls, in a regular rat-trap. But you can go back by way of the plane, if you're a good diver.'

Indeed, the water was rising; they could hear it beating against the rock. Their retreat was already cut off. And Chaval was right, they were in a trap, in a bit of gallery, obstructed in front and behind by the subsidence of the soil. There was no outlet. They were walled in.

'So you're going to stop,' added Chaval, in a bantering tone. 'Well! it's the best thing you can do, and if you leave me alone I'll not even speak to you. There's still room enough here for two men. We'll soon see who'll kick the bucket first, unless they come to us, which seems rather difficult.'

'If we were to knock they'd hear us, perhaps,' remarked Étienne.

'I'm tired of knocking. There! take this stone, and see if you have any better luck.'

Étienne picked up the piece of sandstone, which the other had already chipped about, and began beating the miners' tattoo, the sustained roll by which the men in danger announce their whereabouts against the vein at the end of the gallery. Then he put his ear to the wall to listen. And he knocked again and again, a score of times, but in spite of his persistency no answer came.

Meanwhile, Chaval coolly affected to put his household in order. First he arranged his three lamps against the wall; only one of them was alight, the others would serve later on. After that he set his two remaining slices of bread on a piece of propping. That was the sideboard; he would hold out at least two days with these, if he kept his appetite in check. He turned to Catherine, saying,

'You know, Catherine, there'll be half for you when you get over-hungry.'

The girl did not answer. It was her crowning misfortune to find herself once more between those two men.

Then their terrible life began. Neither Chaval nor Étienne, squatting on the ground at a few steps from each other, opened their lips. At a hint from the former the latter had blown out his lamp as being a useless luxury. The girl had laid herself down close to Étienne, frightened by the looks which her old swain now and then cast at her. The hours went by without a sound, save the rippling of the still rising water; while from time to time heavy shocks and distant thuds told that the mine was finally settling down. When the lamp got low and had to be opened so that another might be lighted, the fear of fire-damp disturbed them for a moment; but they preferred being blown up there and then to remaining in the dark. However, nothing was blown up; there was no fire-damp. They stretched themselves out again, and the dreary hours went by.

At last a slight stir caused Catherine and Étienne to raise their heads. Chaval had made up his mind to eat; he had cut himself half a slice, and chewed it very leisurely lest he should be tempted to gobble up everything at one sitting. They, racked with hunger, looked at him.

'Are you sure you won't have any?' he at last said to Catherine in his provoking tone. 'You're wrong to refuse.'

She lowered her eyes fearing, lest she should yield, though the torture of hunger brought tears to her eyes. But she understood only too well what he meant; that very morning she had felt his breath on her neck. His old jealousy had returned on seeing her with his rival. So no, she would take none of his bread. She trembled at the thought that if she went near him she would once more set the two men upon each other, there in that narrow cavern, where they were slowly dying. Good heavens! if the end was at hand, let them, at any rate, part as friends! Étienne himself would have starved to death rather than have begged a mouthful from Chaval. The silence was growing oppressive; the weary, monotonous minutes, void of hope, seemed to expand into hours. More than a whole day had already elapsed since they were blocked up together. The second lamp was getting low and they lighted the third. Chaval then started on his other slice, and growled to Catherine,

'Come, you silly, come!'

But Catherine shuddered. In order to leave her free, Étienne had turned his head away. Then, as she did not stir, he said to her in a low voice, 'Go, my child.'

Her pent-up tears flowed forth. She kept on crying, no longer finding enough strength to rise, no longer knowing whether she was hungry, amidst the pain that tortured her. Étienne had risen to his feet, and was walking to and fro, vainly beating the miners' tattoo. He was enraged at having to live his last hours cheek by jowl with that rival whom he detested. They had not even room enough to die alone. Directly he had taken a dozen steps, he was obliged to turn and approach that man again. And she, the wretched girl over whom they were quarrelling, even down in the bowels of the earth! She would belong to the survivor; the other would again rob him of her, if he himself went off first. It was becoming unbearable: hour succeeded hour, and to abominable promiscuity was now added the foulness of the atmosphere. Twice did Étienne fling himself against the rock as if seeking to burst it open with his fists.

Another day went by, and Chaval had seated himself beside Catherine to share his last half-slice with her. She chewed each mouthful painfully, while he made her pay for it with kisses, in his obstinate savage jealousy which impelled him to assert his sway over her in the presence of his rival. She was utterly worn out and helpless, but at last, when he

would have embraced her, she raised a plaintive cry: 'Oh! leave me, you hurt me too much.'

Étienne was standing near, quivering in every limb. With one bound he was beside them, his eyes flashing. 'Leave her alone, curse you!' he cried.

'It's nothing to do with you,' roared Chaval. 'She belongs to me, I believe!' And he took hold of her again, continuing; 'You had better make yourself scarce!'

But Étienne, his teeth tightly set, retorted: 'If you don't let go of her I'll strangle you!'

At this Chaval at once sprang to his feet, for he had understood by the hissing of Étienne's voice that the latter meant to make an end of it once for all. Death seemed to come too slowly for them; one or the other must perish there and then. It was the old struggle beginning afresh, this time in the bowels of the earth, where they would soon be lying side by side. They had not even enough room to use their fists without bruising them against something.

'Look out,' growled Chaval. 'This time I'll do for you.'

At that moment Étienne became quite mad. He felt his blood rushing into his eyes, blinding him as with red vapour. The craving to kill seized upon him and became irresistible —like a physical necessity. He had no will in the matter: it all rose within him and burst forth under the influence of his hereditary taint. He caught hold of a broad, heavy slab of schist in the wall, shook it and wrenched it away. Then, with both hands and herculean strength, he brought it down upon Chaval's head. The latter had no time to jump back. He fell, his face crushed, his skull split. His brains bespattered the roof of the gallery, and a purple stream spurted from the wound. A pool of blood soon collected on the ground, reflecting the smoky flicker of the lamp. Gloom was enveloping the cavern, and that corpse looked like a black heap of shale.

Bending down, Étienne looked at it with dilated eyes. The die was cast then; he had killed. All his struggles confusedly came back to him, all his useless resistance against the poison dormant in his veins, the alcohol slowly accumulated in the blood of his race. He himself had only been intoxicated with hunger; the past drunkenness of his parents had sufficed to cause everything. His hair stood on end at the thought of that horrible murder, and then, in spite of the revolt of his better knowledge, his heart suddenly filled with

joy, the animal joy that springs from the satisfaction of a craving. After that, too, there was a certain feeling of pride, the pride of having been the swifter and stronger. A vision of the little soldier appeared to him, killed by a mere child, his throat gashed with a knife. And now he also had killed.

But Catherine, who had sprung up, uttered a loud cry. 'Good God! he's dead!'

'Do you regret him?' asked Étienne savagely.

She was suffocating, and could only answer in sobs. Then, tottering forward, she flung herself into his arms. 'Oh! kill me too; let us die together!'

She clung desperately to his shoulders, he also clasped her, and for a moment they indeed hoped that they were going to die. But death was in no hurry; their arms dropped to their sides. And then, while she hid her face, he dragged the wretch's body away and flung it down the inclined plane, to clear the narrow space where they were still compelled to live. Life would no longer have been possible with that corpse at their feet. Both started with terror when they heard it plunge down, amid a splashing of foam. Had the water filled that cavity already then? Indeed it had; for they soon beheld it, and some of it overflowed into the gallery.

Then began another struggle. They had got to their last lamp; it cast its final rays on the flood, which rose obstinately without a moment's cessation. First the water reached their ankles, then it wetted their knees. Fortunately the gallery sloped upwards. So they took refuge at the very end, which afforded them a respite for a few hours. But the flood followed them, and at last the water reached their waists. Standing upright with their backs against the rock, they saw it rise higher and higher. Whenever it might reach their lips, it would be all over with them. The flicker of the lamp, which they had hooked to the rock, gave a yellow tinge to the swift rippling of the little waves; but its light grew paler every minute, and they no longer distinguished anything but a semicircular space which ever and ever grew smaller, as if devoured by the gloom that seemed to increase with the flux. And suddenly they were wrapped in total darkness—the lamp had gone out, after a spluttering of its last drop of oil. It was black night, complete and absolute, the night of that sleep beneath the earth in which they would soon be wrapped, without ever more opening their eyes to the light of the sun.

'Curse it!' muttered Étienne. Catherine, as if she felt the darkness seizing hold of her, crept close to him, and in a low voice repeated the miners' saying, 'Death blows out the lamp.'

Nevertheless, their instinct struggled against that threat; a mad desire to live reanimated them. He began violently digging at the schist with the hook of his lamp, while she helped him with her nails. And they thus managed to form a kind of elevated ledge. When they had hoisted themselves up to it, they had to sit with bent backs and dangling legs. The lowness of the roof compelled them to duck their heads. The water only chilled their heels now, but they soon felt the cold at their ankles, then creeping up their legs, and then reaching their knees; rising without respite, and apparently invincible. The rough-hewn ledge was so dank and slippery that they had to press tightly to it lest they should slide down. This was surely the end. How long could they hold out, reduced as they were to this niche, where they dared scarcely breathe, worn out, famished, having neither food nor light? They suffered above all from the darkness, which prevented them from seeing the approach of death. Profound silence reigned around; the mine, glutted with water, no longer stirred. They had no consciousness of anything but the presence of that lake, whose mute flow was ever fed from the farthermost galleries. Hours, all equally sombre, passed and passed, but they could not say how many, more and more misled as they were in their reckoning. Their agony, which should have lengthened the minutes, made them pass more rapidly. They fancied that they had been immured for two days and one night, when in reality three full days had gone by. All hope of deliverance had vanished, nobody knew them to be there, nobody could come to them, even had their presence been known, and hunger would make an end of them, even if the flood were to show any mercy. Once more they had the idea of beating the tattoo, but the stone was lying below the water. Besides, who would hear them? Catherine, already resigned, had pressed her aching head against the vein, when, with a start, she suddenly raised it.

'Hark!' she said.

At first Étienne thought that she was alluding to the ripple of the ever-rising water. He lied, wishing to tranquillise her.

'It's only me you hear. I'm moving my legs.'

'No, no, not that. Over there, listen!'

And she put her ear to the coal. He understood, and did the same. The few seconds of waiting almost suffocated them. Then, a long way off, and sounding very faintly, they heard three knocks, with a long interval between each. But they still doubted; their ears buzzed; perhaps it was only the seam cracking. And they knew not what to knock with in reply.

Étienne had a sudden idea, however. 'You've got your clogs; take them off and knock with the heels.'

She knocked, she beat the miners' tattoo, and again they listened. Yes, it was true enough; they distinctly heard the three knocks a long way off. They began anew at least a score of times, and each time they got an answer. They wept and embraced each other at the risk of losing their balance. At last their comrades were there, and were coming. There was a burst of joy and affection, amidst which the agony of their long wait and the rageful disappointment of their futile appeals were forgotten, as if their deliverers had merely to pierce the rock with their fingers to reach them at once.

'Ah!' she cried gaily, 'how lucky it was that I rested my head there!'

'And what an ear you've got!' said he in his turn. 'I didn't hear a sound.'

From that moment they relieved each other, one of them keeping watch to reply to the faintest signal. They soon distinguished the blows of the pick; their comrades were beginning their work, they were opening a gallery. The slightest sound was eagerly caught. But their joy abated. Laugh as they might to give one another courage, they gradually relapsed into their former despair. At first they had burst into explanations. The comrades were evidently coming by way of the Réquillart pit; the gallery was descending in the direction of the seam; perhaps more than one was being opened, for three men could be heard at work. Then they talked less, and at last kept silent altogether when they began to calculate how enormous was the mass of coal and rock that separated them from their comrades. They continued reflecting without exchanging a word; they reckoned the number of days it would take a man to pierce such a block. No, they would never be rescued soon enough; they would be dead long before the others came. And, despairingly

mournful, no longer daring to exchange a word amidst their increased anguish, it was without hope that they responded to the calls with a rolling beat of the clogs, bereft of hope, and merely obeying the instinctive need of telling the others that they were still alive.

One day, two days went by. They had now been six days below. The water, which had stopped at their knees, neither rose nor abated: and their legs seemed to be melting away in that chilly bath. They could withdraw them for an hour or so; but at the end of that time their position became such torture, they felt such atrocious cramps, that they were compelled to lower them again. Every ten minutes too they had to hoist themselves back on to the slippery rock; jagged bits of coal dug into their backs, they suffered intense and constant pain in their necks from having to keep them bent, in order to avoid smashing their skulls against the roof. And the stifling sensation increased; the air, thrust back by the water, became compressed in the kind of receiver which held them prisoners. Their hollow voices sounded as if coming from a long distance. Their ears buzzed, they heard a furious tolling as of a tocsin, a rush like the stampede of a herd in a hailstorm that never ceased.

At first, Catherine suffered horribly from hunger; her poor, shrivelled hands constantly clutched at her throat; she was racked by pain as if her stomach were being torn away with pincers. Étienne, tortured by the same pangs, was groping feverishly in the gloom, when, close to him, his hands caught at a piece of half-rotten propping. He scraped it into shreds with his nails, and gave a handful to the girl, who gobbled up these shreds voraciously. For two days they lived on the worm-eaten propping; they devoured the whole of it, mad with grief that there was no more, bruising and tearing their hands in their attempt to break into the other props, whose solid fibres resisted. Their martyrdom increased; they became frantic with disappointment at being unable to chew their linen clothes. A leather belt which the young man wore round his waist afforded them some relief. He bit some pieces from it, and she chewed and tried to swallow them. This kept their jaws going, and gave them the illusion of eating. Then, when the belt was finished, they once more turned to their clothes, sucking at them for hours. But these violent crises soon abated, and their hunger became but a deep, numb pain, the

slow progressive collapse of their strength. No doubt they would have succumbed altogether but for the plentiful supply of water. They merely had to stoop and drink from the hollow of their hands, and they did so again and again, parched with such thirst that all the water around them seemed insufficient to quench it. On the seventh day Catherine was stooping as usual for a drink, when her hand came in contact with a dark mass that floated in front of her.

'I say, look! What is it?'

Étienne groped about in the dark. 'I don't know; it feels like the covering of one of the ventilating doors.'

She drank, but as she was raising her hand a second time the dark mass again knocked against it. Then she uttered a terrible cry: 'It's he, great heavens!'

'Who, he?'

'He, you know. I felt his moustache.'

It was Chaval's corpse that had travelled back up the inclined plane, and was carried towards them by the flood. Étienne stretched out his arm to make sure; and then, with a shudder of loathing and fear, withdrew it. Seized with unconquerable nausea, Catherine spat out the water she had in her mouth. It seemed to her as if she had been drinking blood, as if the whole of the deep lake in front of her was formed of that man's blood.

'Wait,' gasped Étienne; 'I'll get rid of him.'

He gave the body a kick, and it floated away. But they soon felt it beating against their legs once more.

'Get away, curse you, get away!'

The third time, Étienne was compelled to leave it there. Some current always brought it back. Chaval would not go off; he seemed determined to remain with them, close by their side. His was a terrible companionship, that still further poisoned the atmosphere. During the whole of that day they refrained from drinking, struggling against their thirst and preferring to die. Only the next morning did their torture prevail over them: then, pushing away the body at each mouthful, they drank in spite of everything. But of what use had it been to split his skull if he were still to thrust himself between them in his obstinate jealousy? Dead though he might be, he would remain there till the end, to prevent them from being alone.

Another day and yet another went by. At each ripple of the water Étienne received a slight knock from the man he

had killed—the gentle nudge of a neighbour to remind him that he was near. Each time he shuddered. He could picture his rival blown out with water, green of flesh, with his red moustaches on his battered face. Then he no longer recollected anything; he had not killed him; the other was simply swimming forward intending to bite him. Catherine now quivered with long fits of weeping, followed by prostration. She ended by falling into unconquerable sleepiness. Étienne kept waking her up, but after muttering a few words she dozed off again without even raising her eyelids. Lest she should be drowned, he passed one arm round her waist. It was he who now replied to the comrades. The strokes of the picks were drawing nearer; he could hear them behind him. But his strength was also failing; he no longer answered with any courage. Besides, what was the use of tiring himself out? Their comrades knew them to be there. The thought that they were coming no longer interested him. Overwhelmed, stupefied by his weary vigil, he for hours became oblivious of what he was waiting for.

At last some slight relief brought them a ray of comfort. The flood abated and Chaval's body drifted away. Their deliverers had been at work for nine days now, and Étienne and Catherine were taking a few steps in the gallery, the first for a long time past, when a terrible shock flung them to the ground. They clung to each other, mad with fear, not understanding the cause, and expecting a further catastrophe. Nothing stirred; the sound of the picks had ceased. Seated side by side in a corner of the gallery, Catherine raised a light laugh.

'It must be nice outside. Come, let's go out.'

At first, Étienne struggled against this fit of delirium. But his own brain caught the contagion; he also lost all consciousness of the reality. Their minds were unhinged, especially that of Catherine, who was burning with fever, consumed by a craving to talk and move about. The buzzing in her ears became the rippling of a brook, the carol of song-birds; she smelt the fragrant scent of crushed flowers; the gloom had disappeared, large patches of yellow floated before her eyes, so large, indeed, that she fancied herself outside in the open air, near the canal, among the corn with a beautiful sunny sky overhead.

'How nice and warm it is, isn't it? Take me in your arms. Let us keep together always, always!'

He took her in his arms and she clung to him with a long tender caress, still talking like a happy loving girl. 'How foolish we were!' said she. 'I loved you from the very first, but you didn't understand, and turned sulky.'

He himself caught the contagion of her folly, and began to banter her.

'Ah, but remember, you beat me once; yes, yes, you slapped both my cheeks.'

'It was because I loved you,' she whispered. 'I did all I could not to think of you. I told myself over and over again that everything was at an end between us; and yet all the while I knew that some day we should come together.'

A cold shudder passed through Étienne; he wanted to shake off this dream; then he slowly repeated:

'Nothing is ever finished; only a little happiness is needed for everything to begin again.'

'So you'll keep me with you this time, won't you?'

She was on the point of fainting, and almost dropped. She was so weak that her very voice died away. Frightened out of his senses, he caught her to his breast. 'Are you in pain?' he asked.

She looked up, surprised. 'No, not at all. Why?'

The question had roused her from her dream, however. Her bewildered eyes tried to pierce the gloom: she wrung her hands, and was seized with another fit of sobbing. 'O God! O God! how dark it is!'

The corn, the smell of flowers, the carol of birds, the large yellow sun, all had vanished; there was nothing but the tumbled and flooded mine, the nauseous gloom, the lugubrious dripping of the water in that cavern where they had been slowly dying for days. This sudden revulsion increased her terror; the superstitions of her infancy came back to her. She beheld the Black Man, the old legendary miner who returned to the pit to wring the necks of all the wicked girls.

'Listen, did you hear?'

'No, there's nothing.'

'Yes, there's the Man of whom I told you. Look! he's there! The earth has let all the blood of the vein loose, to avenge herself because they've cut one of her arteries. And he's there! Don't you see him? Look! he's there, black as night! Oh! I'm afraid! I'm afraid!'

She ceased, shuddering. Then, in a very faint voice, she continued, 'No, it's always the other one.'

'Which other one?'

'He who's with us, he who's no more.'

Chaval's image haunted her, and she talked of him confusedly, telling Étienne of the dog's life he had led her, of the only day when he had been affectionate to her, down in the Jean-Bart pit, and of all the other days of insults and blows. 'I tell you he's coming,' she continued. 'He'll prevent us from staying together! He's getting jealous again. Oh, send him away! Oh, keep me, keep me with you for ever!'

Then, with a bound, she flung her arms round his neck and her lips passionately sought his. The gloom was lifted for her again, she once more beheld the sun, and her rippling loving laughter resounded through the gallery. He, quivering, clasped her to him, responding to her caresses. They loved at last, even in the midst of their despair, even in death.

. . . . . .

Étienne, seated on the ground, always in the same corner, had Catherine upon his knees. She lay there motionless, at full length. Hour after hour went by. For a long while he was under the impression that she was asleep: but when he touched her she felt very cold—in reality she was dead. Still he did not move lest he should wake her. All kinds of ideas, the desire to take her away, the joy of what they would do later on, came to him at times, but so vaguely that he scarcely felt them. He was sinking fast; he only had strength enough to stretch out his hand now and then to make sure that she she was still there, slumbering like a child in her icy rigidity. Everything had vanished, even the dense gloom; he was floating in space; he had no consciouness of either time or place. True, there was a continuous knocking close to his head, knocks which increased in violence as they drew nearer; but at first, benumbed as he was, he had felt too lazy to get up and answer them; and now he no longer knew anything: he only dreamt that Catherine was walking in front of him, that he heard the light clanking of her clogs. Two more days went by, she had not stirred; he mechanically passed his hand over her, tranquillised immediately on finding her so quiet.

All at once Étienne felt a shock. He heard the sound of voices, fragments of rock rolled down to his feet. When he perceived a lamp he wept; his blinking eyes watched the light; in his ecstasy he could not look sufficiently at that reddish point that scarcely relieved the gloom. But comrades carried him away: and he let them pour a few spoonfuls of

beef-tea between his tightly-set teeth. It was only in the gallery of the Réquillart mine that he recognised a face, that of Négrel, the engineer, standing before him; and those two men who despised each other, the revolted workman and the sceptical official, fell into each other's arms, sobbing great gasping sobs in the profound stirring of the common feelings of humanity that were within them. Therein was intense grief at all the misery of generations, all the excess of suffering that may enter into life.

Up above, La Maheude, falling beside Catherine's body, uttered shriek after shriek—long poignant wails that rent the air. Several bodies had already been taken out, and were lying in a row on the ground. There was Chaval, who they thought had been crushed by a fall of rock, a truller lad, and two hewers also knocked out of all human shape, their fractured skulls empty, their bodies swollen with water. Women in the crowd became frantic with terror, tearing their clothes and beating their faces. When, after having taken a little nourishment and becoming accustomed to the light, Étienne was brought out, fleshless like a skeleton, his hair white as snow, the crowd drew back, shuddering at the sight of that old, old man. La Maheude ceased shrieking, to stare at him in a state of stupor, with fixed, dilated eyes.

VI

It was four o'clock in the morning. The somewhat chilly April night was growing warmer at the approach of day. In the limpid sky the stars showed but faintly, while the bright flush of dawn purpled in the east. And over the black country around, still wrapped in sleep, there only passed a slight stir, the vague sound that precedes awakening.

Étienne was briskly stepping along the road to Vandame. He had just spent six weeks in the hospital at Montsou, and though still very wan and thin, he had felt sufficiently strong to leave, and now he was going away. The company, still trembling for the safety of its pits, and carrying out consecutive dismissals, had informed him that it could not keep him in its service. It had offered him, however, a gratuity of a hundred francs, accompanied by the paternal advice that he had better give up mining work, which henceforth would be too

much for him. He had declined the hundred francs. Pluchart, in reply to a letter, had already summoned him to Paris, and enclosed the necessary sum for the journey. So his old dream was being fulfilled. That night, after leaving the hospital, he had slept at the Jolly-Good-Fellow, Widow Désir's. And he had risen very early, wishing to say good-bye to his comrades before taking the eight o'clock train at Marchiennes.

For a moment Étienne halted on the road, which was becoming rosy in the dawn. It did him good to breathe the balmy air of that early spring. There was promise of a splendid morning. Slowly did the day break, the life of the earth rising with the sun. And he walked on, striking his thick cherrywood stick on the ground and watching the distant plain as it emerged from the mists of night. He had seen nobody; La Maheude had come to the hospital once, but had apparently been unable to come again. He knew, however, that the whole village of the Two-Hundred-and-Forty now worked at the Jean-Bart pit, and that she herself had done the same.

Little by little people appeared on the deserted roads. Before long groups of miners constantly passed him, pale and silent. It was said that the company abused its triumph. When the men, after a strike of two months and a half, had returned to the pits, driven thither by want, they had been compelled to accept the propping tariff, that disguised reduction of their wages, which was more hateful than ever now by reason of the blood of their comrades clinging to it. They were robbed of an hour's work, they were made to break their oath that they would not give in, and the perjury forced upon them stuck in their throats like gall. Work, however, had been resumed everywhere—at the Mirou, the Madeleine, the Crèvecœur, and the Victory pits. Amidst the morning mist, on all sides, along the roads still wrapped in darkness, the men tramped on with downcast heads, like cattle driven to the slaughter-house. They shivered in their thin linen clothes, and crossed their arms over their chests as they swayed from side to side, the sandwiches stowed away between their shirts and jackets giving them the appearance of so many hunchbacks. And amidst the march of those mute black shadows, that never laughed, never gave a sideward glance, one could divine that their teeth were set tight with anger, that their hearts were bursting with hatred, and that they only submitted to their fate from want of food.

Their number increased as Étienne drew nearer to the mine. They nearly all tramped on by themselves, those coming in groups walked on in file, weary-looking already, tired of themselves and of others. He noticed one, a very old man, whose eyes flashed like burning coals beneath his livid forehead. Farther on, a young one panted with a sustained growl like that of a hurricane. Many carried their clogs in their hands, and one scarcely heard the fall of their coarsely-stockinged feet on the ground. It was an endless streaming, like the hushed retreat of a beaten army, hurrying along with lowered heads, raging inwardly to resume the struggle and avenge themselves. When Étienne arrived the Jean-Bart pit was emerging from the gloom; the lanterns suspended from the settle-boards still burnt in the gathering dawn. Above the dim buildings a puff of steam rose into the air like a white aigrette delicately tinted with carmine. He went up the stairs of the sifting-shed to reach the receiving-staith.

The descent had commenced; the workmen were trooping up from the waiting shed. For a moment he remained motionless amidst the uproar and bustle: rumbling trucks shook the iron flooring, and wheels turned, paying out the cables, amidst the shouts from the speaking-trumpets, the sounding of gongs, the heavy blows of the signal hammers. And again he found the monster, gobbling its ration of human flesh, the cages coming up and plunging down anew full of men, without a pause, suggesting the facile voracity of some ogre. Since his accident Étienne had felt a nervous horror of the mine. Those plunging cages seemed to wring his very entrails. He was obliged to turn his head away; the sight of the shaft exasperated him.

He did not see a familiar face in the still gloomy shed, which was but faintly illumined by the expiring lanterns. The miners who were waiting there, barefooted, their lamps in their hands, stared at him with big nervous eyes, then bowed their heads and drew back as if ashamed. They, no doubt, knew him; and they no longer bore him any ill-will; on the contrary, they seemed to be afraid of him, and flushed with the thought that he must reproach them with their cowardice. Their demeanour wrung his heart; he forgot that those wretches had stoned him, and once more indulged in the dream of changing them into heroes, of leading the people, that force of nature which devoured itself.

A party of men got into a cage, which disappeared; and then, as others came up, he at last perceived one of his lieutenants during the strike, a worthy fellow, who had sworn to die rather than submit.

'You also!' he murmured, in distress.

The other turned pale, his lips quivered, then with an exculpatory movement of his hands he exclaimed, 'I had no choice—I've a wife.'

And now, in the fresh crowd trooping up from the waiting-shed, he recognised everybody.

'You too! you too! you too!'

And all quivered and stammered huskily: 'I've a mother,' 'I've children,' 'We must have bread.'

The cage was slow in coming up, and they stood waiting mournfully, so pained by their defeat that they avoided looking one at another, and kept their eyes obstinately fixed upon the shaft's mouth.

'And La Maheude?' asked Étienne.

They did not answer. One of them made a sign that she was coming. Others raised their arms, trembling with pity, as if to say: 'Ah! the poor women! What wretchedness was hers!' But the silence remained unbroken, and when their comrade held out his hand to wish them good-bye, they wrung it violently, conveying to him in that mute grip their rage at having been obliged to surrender, and their feverish hope of revenge. The cage had come up, they got in, they glided down, devoured by the abyss.

By this time Pierron had come on the spot with the unprotected lamp of the viewers stuck in his leather cap. For a week past he had been promoted to the foremanship of one of the junctions down below. The miners made way, for his new dignity had made him proud. He was annoyed at seeing Étienne, nevertheless he went up to him, and became easy again when the young man told him of his departure. They stood chatting. His wife, said he, had now taken the Progress tavern, thanks to the protection of the chiefs who showed themselves so kind to her. But breaking off, he began to bully old Mouque, whom he accused of not having sent up the horses' litter at the regulation hour. The old man listened, and bowed his head. Then, before going down, quite upset by this reprimand, he also grasped Étienne's hand, wringing it with a grip which was hot with covert hatred, and quivered with the hope of future revolt. That old hand

which trembled as it touched his own, that old veteran who thus forgave him the death of his children, so distressed Étienne that he watched the other disappear into the shaft without saying a word.

'Isn't La Maheude coming this morning?' he asked Pierron after a few minutes.

At first the latter pretended not to hear him, for it was said that even to talk of the poor woman brought one bad luck. Then, as he was moving away, under the pretence of giving an order, he exclaimed: 'Eh? La Maheude? Here she comes.'

And indeed La Maheude just then came up from the waiting shed carrying her lamp, and clad in trousers and jacket, with a blue kerchief round her head. Moved by the fate of the poor woman, who had been so cruelly dealt with, the company, making a charitable exception in her favour, had allowed her to go down again although she was forty. Perceiving the difficulty, however, of employing her in tramming, they had confided to her charge a hand-fan that had just been established in the northern gallery, in the infernal regions beneath the Tartaret plain, where ventilation had become almost impossible. For ten consecutive hours, her back breaking with fatigue, she stood turning a wheel at the end of a hot tunnel, almost baked the while by an atmosphere of 104 degrees. She earned thirty sous a day!

When Étienne caught sight of her, looking dreadful in her masculine garments, swollen out once more with the moisture of the mine, he was so shocked that he failed to find words with which to explain his going and his desire to bid her good-bye.

She looked at him without listening; and at last she said: 'You're surprised to see me, eh? True enough, I threatened to strangle the first of mine who dared to go down; and now that I'm here myself I ought to strangle myself, oughtn't I? Ah! that would have been done long before now but for the old 'un and the children at home!'

She continued to explain things in a low and broken voice; she did not attempt to excuse herself, she simply told the naked facts: they had almost died of starvation, and she had made up her mind to go down lest they should be sent away from the village.

'How is the old man?' asked Étienne.

'He's gentle and cleanly enough; but his nut has completely gone. They didn't even indict him for his affair, as you know. There was a talk of putting him in a madhouse, but I wouldn't hear of it; I was afraid they'd do for him by dropping a little poison into his soup. Still his affair has done us a great deal of harm, for he'll never get his pension. One of the gentlemen told me it would be morally wrong to give it him.'

'Does Jeanlin work?'

'Yes, the gentlemen have found him a job aboveground. He earns twenty sous. Oh! I don't complain, the chiefs have shown themselves very considerate, as they took care to explain to me themselves. The lad's twenty sous and my thirty make fifty. If there weren't six of us, we might manage to get enough bread. But Estelle eats a lot now, and the worst is, that Lénore and Henri can't go down before another four or five years at the least.'

Etienne could not restrain a gesture of grief.

'They also!' he exclaimed.

The woman's wan face turned scarlet; her eyes flashed fire. But she bent her head, and her shoulders drooped, as if beneath the force of destiny.

'What would you have us do? They after the others. All have left their skins there; it's their turn now.'

She ceased speaking; they had to get out of the way of some trucksmen. The dawn was slowly filtering through the large dusty windows, steeping the lanterns in a greyish light; and the motion of the engine shook the place every three minutes, while the cables coiled and uncoiled, and the cages still and ever carried men below.

'Now then, you loiterers, look sharp!' shouted Pierron. 'Get in, or else we shall never have done to-day.'

La Maheude, at whom he was looking, did not stir. She had already let three cages go down. All at once, as if awaking from a deep sleep, she continued, recollecting Étienne's first words, 'So you're going?'

'Yes, this morning.'

'You're right; it's better to go elsewhere if one can. I'm glad I've seen you again, because you'll know that I've no ill-feeling left against you. There was a time when I could have done for you, after all that dreadful killing business. But one gets the better of such passion, and finds out in the end that

no one is to blame. No; it wasn't your fault; it was everybody's fault.'

She now talked composedly of the dead—of her husband, of Zacharie, of Catherine. Tears only started to her eyes when she mentioned little Alzire. She had again become the calm reasonable woman she used to be, and saw things in their proper light. It would bring the *bourgeois* no luck to have killed so many poor people. They would surely be punished some day, because everything has to be paid for in this world. They—the poor folk—would not even have to meddle with it, the concern would blow up by itself; the soldiers would fire on the masters, as they had fired on the men. And amidst her resignation, bred from generation to generation, amidst the hereditary sentiment of discipline, that made her bend once more, a feeling had arisen within her, a conviction that injustice could not last much longer, and that if the deity of so-called Christianity had ceased to exist another would arise to avenge the poor.

She spoke very low, casting suspicious glances around her. Then, on seeing Pierron approach nearer to them, she added in a louder voice: 'Well, if you're going, you'd better call for your things at home. There are two shirts, three handkerchiefs, and an old pair of trousers.'

'Oh! it isn't worth while,' said Étienne, refusing the few things that had escaped the pawnshop; 'they'll do for the children. When I get to Paris I shall be able to manage.'

Two more cages had been lowered, and Pierron made up his mind to speak out straight to La Maheude. 'I say, they're waiting for you down below! Haven't you finished your jaw yet?'

But she simply turned her back upon him. What did he want to make a fuss about, that sneak who had sold himself? It was no business of his whether she went down or not. The men he had under him hated him like poison already. To spite him she continued standing there, lamp in hand, shivering in the draughts that swept by, notwithstanding the mildness of the weather. Neither she nor Étienne found another word to say. They stood looking one at another, yet their hearts were so swollen with grief that they would fain have said something more.

At last she spoke just to say something. 'You know that Levaque's still in prison, don't you? and that Philomène has gone off?'

'How, gone?'

'Yes, with a pitman from the Pas-de-Calais. I was afraid she would leave her two children on my hands; but, no, she took them with her. What do you think of that for a woman who's in such a state of consumption that she's always spitting blood, and looks too as if every moment would be her last?'

She stood musing for a while, then she continued more slowly, 'And the things that were said about me and you. Do you remember? Well, well, I'm pleased that things were not as the backbiters said, for we should only have been regretting it now.'

'Yes, we should have regretted it,' repeated Étienne simply.

That was all; they said no more. A cage was waiting, she was being angrily called, and threatened with a fine. Thereupon she made up her mind, and shook his hand. Overcome with emotion, he still gazed at her, wrecked and broken down as she stood there, her face wan with care and suffering, her discoloured hair straying from beneath her blue kerchief, and her big body looking quite deformed in the linen jacket and trousers that she wore. Even that last grip of the hand was still like that of his other comrades: a long, silent clasp that bade him God-speed until the day when they should begin afresh. He fully understood it; her eyes told him of her tranquil belief in the revenge of the future. They plainly said, 'We'll meet again soon, and then we'll die or win.'

'What a lazy skulk!' bawled Pierron.

Jostled and pushed, La Maheude squeezed herself into a truck with four others. They signalled that meat was going down, the cage slipped off the bolts, then sunk into the night; and there was no longer aught but the rapid flight of the cable to be seen.

Étienne then turned away. Below, in the sifting-shed, he noticed somebody seated on the floor, with his legs stretched out amidst a thick layer of coal-dust. It was Jeanlin. He had a block of coal between his thighs, and was ridding it of fragments of schist with a hammer. Coated as he was with the black dust, Étienne would never have recognised him had he not raised his apish snout, with small greenish eyes and large prominent ears. With a jeering laugh he struck another blow at the coal, and then disappeared in the black cloud he had raised.

Once outside, Étienne stepped along the road for a moment, absorbed in thought. All sorts of ideas were chasing one another through his brain. But the consciousness that he was in the open, beneath the boundless sky, gained upon him, and he drew a long, deep breath. The sun was rising on the splendid horizon, the whole country round seemed to be awaking joyously. A golden flood rolled from east to west over the far plain. The warmth of life spread out, expanded with a quiver as of renewed youth, in which mingled the sighing of the earth, the carols of the birds, all the murmurs of wood and stream. It was good to live; the old world wished to live another spring.

And, full of hopefulness, Étienne checked his steps, looking to the right and left, amidst the gaiety of the newborn season. He began to think about himself, and felt strong, steeled, ripened by his hard, bitter experience in the mine. His education was finished; he was going forth fully armed, like a methodically trained soldier of the revolution, for he had declared war upon society such as he beheld it. The delight of going to join Pluchart, to become like Pluchart, a leader to whom the people would listen, suggested speeches to him, the phrases of which he already began to arrange. He contemplated enlarging his programme; the refinement which had raised him above his class drove him to a still more bitter hatred of the *bourgeoisie*. He now felt the need of setting a halo of glory around those workmen whose exhalations of misery made him feel so uncomfortable; he would hold them up as the only great, the only impeccable, the sole nobility, the sole power by which humanity might renew its strength. And he already beheld himself in the tribune, triumphing with the people, provided that the people did not devour him.

A lark's song high aloft made him look to the sky. Small pinkish clouds, the last vapours of night, were melting in the limpid blue of heaven, and all at once the faces of Souvarine and Rasseneur vaguely appeared to him. Everything was assuredly bound to go wrong when each individual sought power for himself. For instance, that famous International, which was to have renovated the world, was collapsing through sheer impotence, after seeing its formidable army divide and crumble amidst eternal strife. Was Darwin right then? Was life but a battle in which the strong devoured the weak, in order that the species might

continue and grow in beauty? This question worried him, although he solved it for himself, like a man proud of his knowledge. But a sudden idea dissipated his doubts and delighted him: that of reverting to his old interpretation of the theory the first time he should be speaking in public. If it were absolutely needful that one class should destroy another, did it not stand to reason that the people, still young and full of vitality, would devour the *bourgeoisie*, which was glutted, exhausted with indulgence? New blood would create a new society. And in this expectation of an invasion of barbarians, as it were, regenerating the ancient decaying nations, there reappeared his absolute faith in approaching revolution, the true one this time—that of the workers—one whose conflagration would illumine the end of the century with the purple of dawn, even such as he beheld reddening the sky.

He strode on, dreaming and striking the stones on the road with his cherry-stick; and whenever he glanced around him, he recognised some landmarks. At the Bull's Run he remembered having taken the lead of the rioters, on the day of the sacking of the mines. And now that deathly, brutish, ill-paid labour was being resumed. He fancied he could hear continuous thud-like blows at a distance of two thousand three hundred feet beneath the surface of the earth. They were the blows dealt by the comrades whom he had just seen going down, those grimy comrades who kept striking with mute rage in their hearts. No doubt they had been defeated, they had lost earnings and lives in the struggle; but Paris would not forget the shots fired at the Voreux pit; the very blood of the Empire would flow forth, too, from that incurable wound. Even if the industrial crisis were coming to an end, if the factories were re-opening one after another, war was nevertheless declared, and peace was no longer possible. The pitmen had counted their numbers, they had tried their strength, they had aroused all the toilers of France with their cry for justice. Hence their defeat reassured no one. The *bourgeois* of Montsou, troubled in their very victory by the undefined anxiety that follows every strike, looked behind them to see whether, in spite of all, their death-blow was not coming amid this deep silence. They understood that the revolution would constantly revive, to-morrow, perhaps, with a general strike—the result of agreement between all the workers disposing of provident funds, and able

to hold out for months, by living on mere bread and water. Even this time a blow had been dealt to tottering society, they had heard it crack beneath their footsteps, and they felt that other and other blows would come, until the decrepit shaky structure should fall into an abyss, swallowed up like the Voreux pit itself.

Étienne took the Joiselle road on his left. He there remembered that he had prevented the crowd from flinging itself upon the Gaston-Marie pit. Far away in the clear sunshine he beheld the slated belfries of several shafts: Mirou on the right, Madeleine and Crèvecœur side by side. Work resounded everywhere; the pick-strokes which he fancied he could hear deep below the soil now seemed to beat from one end of the plain to the other. One blow, and yet another, and ever and ever fresh blows beneath the fields, the roads, the villages that stood smiling in the sunlight: all the hidden labour of subterranean prison-houses buried so deeply beneath huge masses of rocks that one had to be aware of its presence there in order to distinguish its painful throbs. And now he began to think that violence, after all, might not accelerate matters; the cutting of cables, the tearing-up of rails, the smashing of lamps, all that was futile! What good had they done by galloping in their thousands like a devastating horde? It dawned vaguely upon him that the law itself might some day prove more terrible. His reason was ripening; he was casting off his rancour. Yes, La Maheude had said rightly enough, with her instinctive common sense, that it would be the supreme blow. They must quietly combine, learn to know each other, gather together in unions, when the laws should allow it. Then, on the day when they felt themselves elbow to elbow, when they found themselves millions of workmen confronting a few thousands of lazy idlers, they would seize upon power and become the masters. Ah! what an awakening of truth and justice! The glutted, crouching deity, the monstrous idol, hidden in the recesses of its tabernacle, in that distant, unknown spot where poor wretches fed it with their flesh, without having ever beheld it face to face, would perish there and then.

But leaving the Vandame road, Étienne turned into the paved highway. On the right he perceived Montsou, sloping down and disappearing in the distance. Before him were the ruins of the Voreux pit, the cursed gap, where three pumps were

working incessantly. Then the other mines appeared on the horizon—the Victory, Saint-Thomas, and Feutry-Cantel; while towards the north, the high towers of the blasting furnaces and the coke ovens smoked in the transparent morning air. Unless he wanted to miss the eight o'clock train, he must hurry on, for he still had six miles to go.

And beneath his feet the deep blows, the stubborn pick-blows, continued. The comrades were all there, he felt them follow him at each stride he took. Was not La Maheude under that beetroot field, with her back bent double? Was it not her panting breath he heard, accompanied by the whizzing of the ventilating fan? Left and right, far and near, he fancied he recognised others beneath the corn, the quickset hedges, and the saplings. The April sun was now high up in the sky, radiant in all its glory, warming the pregnant earth. From her nourishing flanks life sprang forth once more, buds were breaking into leaf, fields throbbed with sprouting grass. Everywhere seed was swelling, lengthening, bursting the earth, in its craving for light and warmth. A flood of sap streamed forth with whispering voice, the sounds emanating from the germs expanded into a long kiss. Again and again, and more and more distinctly, as if drawing nearer to the surface, did the comrades knock. Beneath the hot rays of the sun, on that morning of new youth, it was an echo of this toil which filled the country round. Men were sprouting and rising, a black, avenging army of men who were slowly germinating beneath the furrows, growing up for the harvests of the coming century, and soon that germination would rend the earth.

THE END

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