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A REALISTIC NOVEL.

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ABBÉ MOURET'S TRANSGRESSION.



ALBINE IMPLORING THE ABBÉ TO RETURN WITH HER TO LE PARADOU.

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BY ÉMILE ZOLA

ABBÉ MOURET'S TRANSGRESSION.

A REALISTIC NOVEL.

BY

ÉMILE ZOLA.

Illustrated with Eight Page Engravings.

NEW EDITION.

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NOTE.

"ABBÉ MOURET'S TRANSGRESSION" (*La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*), written in 1874, is perhaps the most powerful and poetic of all M. Zola's tales ; it is that in which fantasy bears the greatest part, and in which *naturalisme* for a while disappears. The opening chapters describe a profligate and almost pagan village in Provence, and here *naturalisme* is at home, and in its proper place. In a "land of ruin and sand," or on arid, bare, and burning soil, there is planted a little community of people relapsing into something worse than savagery. The peasants are all close kin, so close that, among real savages, love and inter-marriages would have been forbidden under pain of death. But the peasants see things differently—

"Year by year
They serve their senses with less shame."

England has many such villages. The priest among these miserable hinds is Serge Mouret, great-grandson of Adélaïde Fouque. He and his sister Désirée are the children of a marriage of cousins : François Mouret married Marthe Rougon, who inherited somewhat of the shaken intellect of Adélaïde Fouque. In Serge Mouret, the half insane temperament of the family has turned to intense asceticism and devotion. His sister Désirée is an "innocent," as people say in the north, a

grown-up woman with the character of a child of eight, and with a half-mad love of all sorts of animals. There are few things in literature more excellently wrought than the description of this strange pair, of the gentle devotee, at once pure and tolerant among his bestial people; of his foil, the coarse and brutal ascetic priest, Archangias; of the old *gouvernante* who waits on Serge and Désirée.

To my mind, the most impressive passage in M. Zola's novels is the mass celebrated by the Abbé Mouret in the empty, ruinous church, which to him is the very House of God. The old housekeeper brings the sacred vessels—with no more respect than if they were her household pots and pans—and hobbles about the church, snuffing the candles. A mischievous chorister boy repeats the responses, and is lost in the unintelligible Latin which he tries to spell. *Orate, Fratres*, cries the priest aloud, turning with uplifted hands to the empty benches. Then he prays at the altar, while the yellow morning sun floods the church, leaving the great daub of the Christ crucified alone in shadow. The rickety old furniture of the confessional creaks, the sounds of the waking world come in; a great tree has thrust its boughs through a broken window; the long weedy grass of the untrodden court peeps through the chinks of the door, and threatens to encroach on the nave. From the boughs of the service tree and through the open window the sparrows begin to peer; they flit in and fly away again, and at last grow bold, and march up the floor to the altar, as when St. Francis preached to the birds. It was Désirée, the idiot girl, who strewed crumbs about the church, that the birds might fly in and have their part, as it were, in the sacrifice rejected by the people. Last, Désirée

herself enters, breaking in upon the celebration with her apron full of chickens. The brown hen has just hatched her brood.

Under the sun of the south, where all life is going on reproducing herself, and men and women have no more shame than the beasts, the purity of the Abbé Mouret is overcome by a strange artifice of his enemy, Nature. A beautiful girl lives in "Le Paradou," the deserted and overgrown park of a Legitimist family. Here the Abbé suffers an injury which deprives him, for a time, of all but the natural man in him, and in the Paradise he lives with the beautiful girl, as our first parents lived in the Garden between the four rivers. "Ils cédèrent aux exigences du jardin;" and M. Zola, too, soon yields to the temptation to spoil his fantastic idyll. We need not follow the scene back into full *naturalisme*, nor watch the scene of the punishment of the bad priest, Archangias. For this book M. Zola compiled "a mountain of notes," and during many months his table was covered with books of devotion. He also attended flower-shows, and "got up" his description of Paradise at these harmless entertainments.—ANDREW LANG, in the *Fortnightly Review*.

Signor De Amicis, in recording a conversation which he had with M. Zola on the subject of the present work, says:—The idea of the monk Archangias, in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, of that comical hooded villain who preached religion in the language of an intoxicated porter, was taken by Zola from a provincial paper, where he read the account of a certain monk, a school-master, who had been condemned for abuse of—force. Certain

queer replies which the accused had given the judges presented the character perfectly complete. While M. Zola was talking of that novel, I could not refrain from expressing to him my great admiration of those splendid pages in which he described the religious ecstasies of the young priest before the image of the Virgin, pages worthy of a great poet.

"You cannot imagine," he replied, "the trouble that that wretched Abbé Mouret cost me. In order to be able to describe him at the altar, I went several times to hear mass at Notre Dame. For his religious education I consulted many priests. No one, however, could give me all the explanations that I needed. I overturned shops of Roman Catholic books, devoured immense volumes on religious ceremonies and manuals for priests in the country, but I still seemed to lack sufficient material for my work. A priest who had abandoned his orders, gave me the necessary information."

ABBÉ MOURET'S TRANSGRESSION.

BOOK I.

I.

LA TEUSE, as she entered the church, rested her broom and her feather-brush against the altar. She had made herself late by starting her half-yearly wash. She went down the church to ring the *Angelus*, limping more than ever in her haste and hustling up against the benches. The bell-rope hung from the ceiling near the confessional, bare, worn, ending in a big knot greasy from handling; and on it she swung her whole bulk with even jumps, and then let herself go with it, whirling in her petticoats, her cap awry, her broad face crimsoned with the heated blood.

Having set her cap straight with a slight pat, La Teuse, breathless, returned to give a hurried sweep before the altar. The dust settled there persistently every day, between the badly fitted boards of the sanctuary floor. Her broom rummaged out the corners with an angry rumble. Then she lifted the altar cover and was sorely vexed to find that the large upper altar-cloth, already darned in a score of places, showed another hole worn through in the very middle; the second cloth, folded in two, was visible, itself so worn, so thin, as to allow the consecrated stone, embedded in the painted wood of the altar, to be seen through it. She dusted the altar linen, yellow with wear, used her feather-brush energetically along the shelf which bore the candlesticks, and against which she leaned the liturgical altar-cards. Then, getting up on a chair, she took their yellow chintz covers off the crucifix and two of the candlesticks. The brass was all tarnished

"Ah well!" softly muttered La Teuse, "they *do* want a clean badly! I must give them a polish up!"

Starting off on one leg, stumping and shaking enough to drive in the stone flags, she went to the sacristy to find the Missal, which she placed unopened on its stand on the Epistle side with its edge to the middle of the altar. Then she lit the two candles. As she went off with her broom, she gave a glance round to make sure that God's house was well kept. The church was drowsily still; the bell-rope only, near the confessional, was still swinging between roof and floor with a long and sinuous motion.

The Abbé Mouret had just come down to the sacristy, a small and chilly apartment, which only a passage separated from his dining-room.

"Good-morning, your reverence," said La Teuse, laying her broom aside. "Oh! you have been lazy this morning! Do you know it's a quarter past six?"

And without allowing the smiling young priest time to reply: "I have got a scolding to give you," she went on. "There's another hole in the cloth again. There's no sense in it. We have only one other, and that I have been ruining my eyes over these three days to mend it. You will leave our poor Lord quite bare, if you go on like this."

The Abbé Mouret, still smiling, said brightly: "Jesus needs not so much linen, my good Teuse. He is always warm and royally received, when He is well beloved."

Stepping towards a small tap, he asked: "Is my sister up yet? I have not seen her."

"Oh, Mademoiselle Désirée has been down a long time," answered the servant, kneeling before an old kitchen dresser in which the sacred vestments were kept. "She is already with her fowls and her rabbits. She was expecting some chicks to be hatched yesterday, and it didn't come off. You can guess her excitement." She broke off here saying:

"The gold chasuble, eh?"

The priest who had washed his hands and was now standing absorbed in the prayer which his lips were murmuring, nodded his head affirmatively. The parish had only three chasubles: a violet one, a black one, and one in cloth-of-gold. The last, used on the days on which white, red or green were prescribed, was therefore in extraordinary esteem. La Teuse lifted it reverently from the shelf covered with blue paper, upon which she laid it after each service: she placed it on the dresser,

cautiously taking off the fine cloths which protected its embroidery. A golden lamb slumbered there on its golden cross, surrounded by broad rays of gold. The gold tissue, frayed at the folds, broke out in little slender tufts; the embossed ornaments were getting tarnished and worn. The house was in a perpetual state of anxiety, of fluttering concern, at seeing it thus going thread by thread. The priest had to put it on almost every day. How on earth could it be replaced—how could they buy the three chasubles it took the place of, when the last gold threads should be worn out?

La Teuse next laid out on the chasuble the stole, the maniple, the girdle, the alb and the amice. But still her tongue ran on while occupied in crossing the stole with the maniple, and in wreathing the girdle so as to trace the venerated initial of the holy name of Mary.

"It is not up to much now, that girdle," she muttered; "you will have to make up your mind to buy another, your reverence. That will not be very hard; I could plait you one myself if I only had some hemp."

The Abbé Mouret made no answer. He was dressing the chalice at a small table, a large old silver-gilt chalice, with a bronze foot, which he had just taken from the bottom of a deal cupboard, in which were kept the sacred vessels and linen, the Holy Oils, the Missals, the candlesticks and the crosses. Over the cup he laid a clean purificator, and on this cloth laid the silver-gilt paten, with a host in it, which he covered over with a small lawn pall. As he was hiding the chalice by pinching the two folds in the veil, made of gold to match with the chasuble, La Teuse exclaimed:

"Stop, there is no corporal in the burse. Last night I took all the dirty purificators, palls, and corporals to wash them—separately, of course, not with the house-wash. By-the-bye, your reverence, I didn't tell you: I have just started it. A fine fat one it will be! Better than the last one."

And while the priest slipped a corporal into the burse and laid the burse on which a gold cross was worked on a gold ground, on the veil, she went on quickly:

"By-the-bye, I forgot! that gadabout Vincent hasn't come. Do you wish me to serve your mass, your reverence?"

The young priest eyed her sternly.

"Well, it isn't a sin," she continued, with her genial smile. "I did serve a mass once, in Monsieur Caffin's time. I serve it better than ragamuffins who laugh like heathens at only a fly

buzzing about the church. I may wear a cap, I may be sixty years' old, and as round as a tub, but I have more respect for our Lord than those imps of boys whom I caught only the other day playing at leap-frog behind the altar."

The priest was still looking at her with disapproving shakes of his head.

"What a hole, this village!" she grumbled. "Not a hundred and fifty people in it! There are days, like this one, when you wouldn't find a living soul in Les Artaud. Even the babies in swaddling clothes are gone to the vineyards! And goodness knows what they do among such vines—vines that grow under the pebbles, as dry as thistles! A perfect wilderness, three miles from any highway! Unless an angel comes down to serve your mass, your reverence, you've only got me, on my honour! or one of Mademoiselle Désirée's rabbits, no offence to your reverence!"

But, just at that moment, Vincent, the Brichets' younger son, gently opened the door of the sacristy. His shock head of red hair and his narrow, glistening, grey eyes exasperated La Teuse.

"Oh! the wretch!" she cried out. "I bet he's just been up to some piece of mischief! Come on, then, you scamp, since his reverence is afraid I shall dirty our Lord!"

On seeing the lad, the Abbé Mouret had taken up the amice. He kissed the cross embroidered in the centre, and for a second laid the cloth upon his head; then lowering it over the collar-band of his cassock, he crossed it and fastened the tapes, the right one over the left. He next put on the alb, the symbol of purity, beginning with the right sleeve. Vincent stooped down and went all round him, adjusting the alb, and taking care that it should fall evenly all round to a couple of inches from the ground. Then he presented the girdle to the priest, who girded it on tightly round his loins, as a reminder of the bonds wherewith the Saviour was bound in His Passion.

La Teuse remained standing, jealous, wounded, struggling to be silent; but so great was the itching of her tongue, that she soon broke out once more:

"Brother Archangias has been. He won't have a single child at the school to-day. He went off again like a whirlwind to pull the brats' ears in the vineyards. You had better see him. I believe he has got something to say to you."

The Abbé Mouret silenced her with a motion of his hand. He had not again opened his lips. He repeated the usual

prayers while he took the maniple, which he kissed before slipping it over his left forearm, as a symbol of the practice of good works, and while crossing on his breast the stole, also kissed, beforehand, the symbol of his dignity and power. La Teuse had to help Vincent in adjusting the chasuble, which she fastened with slender tapes, so that it should not slip off behind.

"Holy Virgin! I have forgotten the cruets!" she stammered, rushing to the cupboard. "Come, look sharp, lad!"

Vincent filled the cruets, phials of coarse glass, while she hastened to get a clean finger-cloth from a drawer. The Abbé Mouret, holding the chalice by its stem in his left hand, the fingers of his right resting on the burse, bowed profoundly without taking off his beretta before a black wooden crucifix hanging over the dresser. The lad bowed too, and then led the way out of the sacristy, bearing the cruets covered with the finger-cloth, followed by the priest, who walked along with downcast eyes, absorbed in devout meditation,

II.

THE church, quite empty, struck the eye with its staring whiteness on this May morn. The bell-rope near the confessional once more hung motionless. The little bracket light, in its stained glass vase, burned like a crimson spot against the wall on the right of the tabernacle. Vincent, having put the cructs on the credence, came back and knelt down below the altar step, while the priest, after paying homage to the Holy Sacrament by a genuflection on the chancel-step, went up to the altar and spread on it the corporal, on the centre of which he then stood the chalice. Then, having opened the Missal, he came down again. Another bend of the knee, and, after crossing himself, aloud, with hands joined before his breast, he began the great divine drama, with a countenance blanched with faith and love.

"Introibo ad altare Dei."

"Ad Deum qui lætificat juventutem meam," gabbled Vincent, squatted on his heels, mumbling the responses of the antiphon and the psalm, while his eyes followed La Teuse as she roved about the church.

The old servant was gazing at one of the candles with a troubled look. Her anxiety seemed redoubled, as the priest, bowing down lowly and his hands once more joined before his breast, recited the *Confiteor*. She restrained herself, and in her turn struck her breast, her head bowed, but still keeping a watchful eye on the taper. For a minute more the priest's voice and the server's stammering tones alternated :

"Dominus vobiscum."

"Et cum spiritu tuo."

And the priest, parting his hands and again rejoining them, said with tender compunction :

"Oremus."

La Teuse could stand it no longer. She stepped behind the

altar and reached the candle, which she trimmed with the point of her scissors. Two large blobs of wax had been already wasted. When she came back again, putting the benches straight and making sure that the holy-water stoups were not empty, the priest was at the altar, his hands resting on the edge of the cloth, praying in subdued tones. He kissed the altar.

Behind him, the little church still looked bleak in the pale light of early morn. The sun, as yet, was only level with the gutter. The *Kyrie Eleisons* rang quiveringly through this sort of white-washed stable with its flat ceiling whose plastered beams caught the eye. On either side, three lofty windows of plain glass, most of them cracked or smashed, let in a raw, chalky light.

The free air of heaven poured in bleakly—laid bare the naked poverty of the God who dwelt in this forlorn village. At the bottom of the church, and above the big door which was never opened and whose threshold was green with weeds, a boarded gallery—reached by a common miller's ladder—stretched from wall to wall. Dire were its creakings on festival days beneath the wooden shoes. Near the ladder stood the confessional, with its open panels, painted a staring lemon colour. Facing it, beside the little door, stood the font—an ex-holy water stoup resting on a stonework pedestal. To the right and to the left, half-way down the church, two narrow altars stood against the wall, surrounded by a wooden balustrade. On the left hand one, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, stood a large gilded plaster statue of the Mother of God, with a regal crown of gold upon her chestnut hair; seated on her left arm she bore the Divine Child, unclothed and smiling, in whose little hand was poised the star-spangled orb of the universe; her feet were moving in the midst of clouds and below them peeped winged angel heads. The right hand altar, used for masses for the dead, was surmounted by a crucifix of painted card-board—a pendant as it were to the Virgin's effigy. The figure of Christ, as large as a child of ten years old, was a terrible representation of His death-throes, the head thrown back, the ribs projecting, the abdomen hollowed, the limbs distorted and besmeared with blood. There was a pulpit, too—a square box ascended by a five-step block—standing near a clock with running weights, enclosed in a case of walnut wood, whose thuds throbbed through the church like the beatings of an enormous heart concealed somewhere beneath the stone flags. All along the nave the fourteen Stations of the

Cross, fourteen coarsely illuminated daubs, framed with black rods, blotched the staring whiteness of the walls with their yellow, blue, and scarlet scenes from the Passion.

"*Deo gratias,*" stuttered out Vincent at the end of the Epistle.

The mystery of love, the immolation of the Holy Victim, was about to begin. The server took the Missal up and bore it round to the left, or Gospel-side, of the altar, taking careful heed not to touch the pages of the book. Each time he passed before the tabernacle he dropped a sort of slanting genuflection which seemed to throw him all askew. Returning to the right hand side once more, he stood upright with crossed arms during the reading of the Gospel. The priest, first making the sign of the cross upon the Missal, next crossed himself: upon his forehead—to declare that he would never blush for the divine word; on his mouth—to show his unchanging readiness to confess his faith; and on his heart—to mark that that heart belonged to God alone.

"*Dominus vobiscum,*" said he, turning round and facing the cold, white church.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo,*" answered Vincent, once more on his knees.

The Offertory recited, the priest uncovered the chalice. One moment he held before his breast the paten containing the host, which he offered up to God for himself, for those present, for all the faithful, living and dead; and then, slipping it on to the edge of the corporal without touching it with his fingers, he took up the chalice and carefully wiped it with the purificator. Vincent had in the meanwhile fetched the cruets from the credence-table, and now presented them in turn, first the wine and then the water. The priest then offered up on behalf of the whole world the half-full chalice, which he replaced upon the corporal and covered with the pall. Another prayer, and he returned to the side of the altar where the server dribbled water over his thumbs and forefingers to purify him from the slightest sinful stain. When he had dried them on the finger cloth, La Teuse—who stood there waiting—emptied the cruet-salver over a zinc pail at the corner of the altar.

"*Orate, fratres,*" exclaimed the priest aloud as he faced the empty benches, extending and reclasping his hands in a gesture of appeal to men of good-will. Turning again towards the altar, he continued his prayer in a lower tone. Vincent

muttered a long Latin sentence in which he got lost. Now it was that, at this very moment, the yellow beams came in through the windows; called by the priest, the sun had come to mass. With his golden sheets of light he lit up the left-hand wall, the confessional, the Virgin's altar, and the big clock.

A gentle creak came from the confessional; the Mother of God, in a luminous halo, her crown and golden mantle dazzling the eye, smiled tenderly with her tinted lips upon the infant Jesus; the heated clock throbbed out the time with quickened strokes. The sun seemed to people the benches with the dusty motes that danced in his beams. The little church, the whitened stable, seemed filled with a glowing throng. Without, were heard the petty sounds that told of the happy waking of rural life, the blades of grass sighing out content, the leaves drying in the warmth, the birds as they pruned their feathers and took a first flit round. The country itself seemed to enter with the sun: for by one of the windows a large service-tree shot up, thrusting branches through the shattered panes and stretching out its leafy buds as if to take a peep within; and through the fissures of the great door appeared the weeds on the threshold, that threatened to encroach upon the nave. Amid all this quickening life, the large Christ, alone, still in the shadow, exhibited his death, the agony of his ochre-daubed and lacquer-bespattered flesh. A sparrow raised himself a moment on the edge of a hole; a glance, and away he flew; but only to reappear almost immediately; with noiseless wing he dropped between the benches before the Virgin's altar. A second sparrow followed; and soon, from all the boughs of the service-tree came down others and calmly hopped about the flags.

"*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus, Deus, Sabaoth,*" said the priest in a low tone, as he stooped over slightly.

Vincent rang the little bell thrice; and the sparrows, scared by the sudden tinkling, flew off with such a mighty buzz of wings that La Teuse, who had just returned into the sacristy, came out again, grumbling:

"The little brutes! they will mess everything. I'll bet Mademoiselle Désirée has been here again with bread-crumbs for them."

The dread moment was at hand. The body and the blood of a God were about to descend upon the altar. The priest kept kissing the altar-cloth, clasping his hands, and multiplying his signs of the cross over host and chalice. The prayers of the

canon of the mass now fell from his lips in a very ecstasy of humility and gratitude. His attitude, his gestures, the inflections of his voice, all expressed his littleness, his emotion at being selected for so great a task. Vincent now came and knelt beside him, lightly lifted the chasuble in his left hand, the bell ready in the fingers of his right; and he, his elbows resting on the edge of the altar-table, the host held in the thumbs and fingers of both hands, pronounced over it the words of consecration: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*. He bowed the knee before it, and as he rose again, raised it slowly as far as his hands could reach, following it upwards with his eyes, while the server, bowed down, rang the bell thrice; and then he consecrated the wine: *Hic est enim calix*, leaning once more upon his elbows; he knelt, he raised the cup aloft, his right hand round the stem, his left upholding its base, following it, too, with his gaze. Again the server rang the bell three times. The great mystery of the Redemption had once more been repeated, once more the adorable Blood had flowed.

"Just you wait a bit," growled La Teuse, as she tried to scare away the sparrows with her shaking fist.

But the sparrows were now fearless. They had come back even while the bell was ringing, and, unabashed, were fluttering about on the benches. Nay, the repeated tinklings even roused them into liveliness, and they answered back with little chirps which crossed the Latin words of prayer, like the rippling laugh of unrestrained urchins. The sun warmed their plumage, and the sweet poverty of the church captivated them. They felt at home, as if in some barn whose shutter had been left open, screeching, fighting, squabbling among themselves over the crumbs they found upon the floor. One went and perched himself on the smiling Virgin's golden veil; another, whose daring put the old servant in a towering rage, made a hasty reconnaissance of La Teuse's skirts. The priest at the altar, absorbed, his eyes fixed upon the sacred host, his thumbs and fore-fingers joined, heeded not the rising May morn flood of sunlight, vegetation, and birds which had covered the nave and overflowed even to the foot of the Calvary where doomed nature wrestled in the death-throe.

"*Per omnia sæcula sæculorum*," he said.

"*Amen*," answered Vincent.

The "Our Father" ended, the priest, holding the host over the chalice, broke it in the centre. Breaking off a particle from one of these halves, he dropped it into the precious blood,

to symbolise the intimate union into which he was about to enter with God. He said the *Agnus Dei* aloud, softly recited the three prescribed prayers, and made his act of abnegation ; and then, his elbows resting on the altar, with the paten beneath his chin, he partook of the two portions of the host at once. After a fervent meditation, with his hands clasped before his face, he took the paten and gathered on the corporal the sacred particles that had fallen from the host, and put them in the chalice. One particle which had adhered to his thumb he removed with his forefinger. He crossed himself chalice in hand, and with the paten once again below his chin imbibed all the precious blood, never quitting with his lips the cup's rim between his three draughts, consuming the divine Victim to the very last drop.

Vincent had risen to fetch the cruets from the credence table. Suddenly the door of the passage leading to the vicarage flew open and swung back against the wall, and through the doorway came a handsome, child-like girl of twenty-two, carrying something hidden in her apron.

"Thirteen of them," she called out. "All the eggs were good." And she opened out her apron and revealed a covey of little shivering chicks, with sprouting quills and beady little black eyes. "Just do look ; aren't they sweet little pets, the darlings ! Oh, look at the little white one climbing on the others' backs ! and the spotted one already flapping his little wings ! The eggs were a splendid lot ; not one addled !"

La Teuse, who was helping to serve in spite of all prohibitions, and was at that moment handing the cruets to Vincent for the ablutions, turned round and said loudly :

"Do be quiet, Mademoiselle Désirée ! Don't you see we haven't finished yet ?"

Through the open doorway came the strong odour of a farm-yard, wafted in in gusts that filled the church with the tainted perfume of a generative ferment floating in the sunlight that was creeping over the altar. Désirée stood there a moment delighted with the little ones she carried, watching Vincent pouring out, and her brother consuming, the purifying wine, that nought of the sacred species should be left within his mouth. She stood there still when he came back to the side of the altar, holding the chalice in both hands, to have poured over his fore-fingers and thumbs the wine and water of the ablution, which he likewise drank. But when the mother hen ran up clucking with alarm to seek her wee ones, and tried to force

her way into the church, Désirée went off, talking to her chicks with all a mother's endearments, just as the priest was wiping the rim and interior of the chalice with the purificator which had just left his lips.

So ended the act of thanksgiving paid to God. For the last time the server removed the Missal, and brought it back to the right-hand side. The priest replaced the purificator, paten, and pall upon the chalice; once more pinched the two large folds of the veil, and on it laid the burse containing the corporal. His whole being was one act of thanksgiving. He besought from Heaven the forgiveness of his sins, the grace of holy living, the reward of an everlasting life. He was overwhelmed by this miracle of love, by this unceasing immolation, which sustained him day by day with the blood and flesh of his Saviour.

Having read the final prayers, he turned round and said : "*Ite, missa est.*"

"*Deo gratias,*" answered Vincent.

And having turned back to kiss the altar, he faced round anew, his left hand on his breast, his right outstretched in a blessing on the church, filled only with the gladsome sunbeams and noisy sparrows.

"*Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus, Pater et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus.*"

"*Amen,*" said the server, as he crossed himself.

The sun had risen higher, and the sparrows were growing bolder. While the priest, reading out from the left-hand altar-card, was announcing the eternity of the Word in the words of the Gospel of St. John, the sun was lighting up the altar, whitening the panels of imitation marble, and swallowing up the flame of the two candles, whose short wicks now looked like two dull spots. The victorious orb enveloped with his glory the crucifix, the candlesticks, the chasuble, the veil of the chalice—all this gold that paled before his beams. And when at last the priest, after taking the chalice in his hands and kneeling once, covered his head and turned from the altar to follow the server, laden with the cruets and finger-cloth, to the sacristy, the orb of day remained sole master of the church. He in his turn was resting on the altar-cloth, kindling into splendour the tabernacle-door, and celebrating there the fertile powers of May. A glow was rising from the stone flags. The plastered walls, the tall Virgin, the great Christ too, all seemed to quiver with a thrill as of shooting sap, as if death had been conquered by the earth's eternal youth.

III.

LA TEUSE hastily put out the candles, but as she lingered to make one last attempt to drive away the sparrows, when she returned to the sacristy with the Missal she no longer found the Abbé Mouret there. Having washed his hands and put away the sacred vessels and vestments, he was now standing in the dining-room, breakfasting off a cup of milk.

"You really ought to prevent your sister from scattering bread in the church," said La Teuse on coming in. "It was last winter she hit upon this queer prank. She said the sparrows were cold, and that God might well give them some food. You see, she'll end by having in all her fowls and rabbits to sleep with us."

"We should be all the warmer," pleasantly replied the youthful priest. "You are always grumbling, La Teuse. Do let poor Désirée pet her animals. She has no other pleasure, poor dear."

The servant stood there grimly in the middle of the room.

"I do believe you yourself wouldn't mind a bit if even the magpies built their nests in the church. You never can see anything, everything seems just what it should be, to you. Your sister is precious lucky in having had you to take charge of her when you left the seminary. No father, no mother. I should like to know who would let her mess about as she does in a farmyard?"

Then softening, she added in a gentler tone :

"To be sure, it would be a pity to cross her. She hasn't a bit of wickedness in her. She's more like a child of ten, although she's one of the finest grown girls in the neighbourhood. And I have to put her to bed, as you know, every night, and send her to sleep with stories, just like a little child."

The Abbé Mouret had been standing, finishing the cup of milk he held between his fingers slightly reddened by the chill

of the dining-room—a large room with painted grey walls, a floor of square stone tiles, and with no furniture beyond a table and a few chairs. La Teuse picked up a napkin which she had laid at a corner of the table in readiness for breakfast.

"It isn't much linen you dirty," she muttered. "One would think you could never sit down, that you are always just about to start off. Ah! if you had known Monsieur Caffin, the poor dead priest whose place you have taken. What a man he was for comfort! Why, he couldn't have digested his food, if he had eaten standing. A Norman he was, from Canteleu, like me. I don't thank him, I tell you, for having brought me to such a wild-beast country. When first we came, O, Lord! how bored we were! The poor priest had had some uncomfortable tales going about him at home. Why, sir, didn't you sweeten your milk, then? Aren't those the two lumps of sugar?"

The priest put down his cup.

"Yes, I must have forgotten, I believe," he said.

La Teuse stared at him and shrugged her shoulders. She folded up in the napkin a slice of brown bread which had also been left untouched on the table. Just as the priest was about to go out, she ran after him and knelt down at his feet, exclaiming:

"Stop, your boot-laces are not even fastened. I cannot imagine how your feet can stand those peasant boots, you're such a little, tender man, and look as if you had been preciously spoilt! Ah, the bishop must have known a deal about you, to go and give you the poorest living in the department."

"But," said the priest, breaking into another smile, "it was I who chose Les Artaud. You are very bad-tempered this morning, La Teuse. Are we not happy here? We have got all we want, and our life is as peaceful as if in paradise."

She swallowed her wrath, and laughed out in her turn, saying:

"Well, you are a holy man, sir. Come and see what a splendid wash I have got. That will be better than squabbling with one another."

The priest was fain to follow, as she might prevent him going out at all if he did not compliment her on her washing. As he left the dining-room he stumbled over a heap of rubbish in the passage.

"What on earth's this?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," said La Teuse in her grimest tone. "It's

only the vicarage coming down. However, you are quite content, you've got all you want. Good heavens! there are holes enough. Just look at that ceiling, now. Isn't it cracked all over? If we don't get crushed one of these days, we shall owe a precious big taper to our guardian angel. However, if it suits you. It's like the church. Those broken panes should have been put in these two years. In winter, our Lord gets frozen with the cold. Besides, it would keep out those little brutes of sparrows. I shall paste paper over them. You see if I don't."

"A capital idea," murmured the priest, "they might very well be pasted over. As to the walls, they are stouter than we think. In my room, the floor has only given way a bit just in front of the window. The house will see us all buried."

Entering the little open shed near the kitchen, to please La Teuse he went into ecstasies over the washing; he had even to dip his fingers into it and feel it. This so pleased the old woman that her attentions became quite motherly. She no longer scolded, but ran to fetch a clothes-brush, saying:

"You surely are not going out with yesterday's mud on your cassock! If you had left it out on the banister, it would be clean now—it's still a good one. But do lift it up well when you cross any field. The thistles tear everything."

And she kept turning him round like a child, shaking him from head to foot with the doughty strokes of her brush.

"There, there, that will do," he said, escaping from her at last. "Take care of Désirée, won't you? I will go and tell her I am going out."

But at this minute a fresh clear voice called out to him:

"Serge! Serge!"

Désirée came flying up, her cheeks ruddy with glee, her head bare, her black locks twisted tightly upon her neck, her hands and arms smothered up to the elbows with manure. She was busy cleaning out her poultry house. When she caught sight of her brother just about to go out with his breviary under his arm, she laughed aloud, and kissed him on his mouth with her arms thrown back behind her to avoid their touching him.

"No, no," she hurriedly exclaimed, "I should soil you. Oh! I am having such fun! You must see the animals when you come back."

And she fled away again. The Abbé Mouret said that he would be back about eleven for his luncheon, and as he started

La Teuse, who had followed him as far as the doorstep, shouted after him her last injunctions.

"Don't forget to see Brother Archangias. And look in also at the Brichets'; the wife came again yesterday about that wedding. Just listen, sir! I met their Rosalie. She'd ask for nothing better than to marry big Fortuné. Have a talk with old Bambousse, perhaps he will listen to you now. And don't come back at twelve o'clock, like the other day. Come, say you'll be back at eleven, won't you?"

But the priest would turn round no more. She went in again, growling between her teeth:

"When does he ever listen to me? Barely twenty-six years old and does just as he likes. To be sure he's an old man of sixty for holiness; but then he has never known life, he knows nothing, it's no trouble to him to be as good as a cherub, the baby!"

IV.

WHEN the Abbé Mouret had got beyond all hearing of La Teusc he stopped, thankful to be at last alone. The church was built on the crest of a low-rising ground, which sloped down gently to the village. With its large gaping windows and bright red tiles, it lay like a deserted sheepfold. The priest turned round and glanced at the vicarage, a greyish building springing from the side of the church; but as if fearful that he might again be overtaken by the interminable chatter that had been buzzing in his ears ever since morning, he struck up again to the right, and only felt safe when at last he stood before the great doorway, where he could not be seen from the vicarage. The front of the church, quite bare and worn by the suns and rains of years, was crowned by a narrow, open, stone belfry, in which the eye was caught by the small bell's black silhouette against the sky, and by the bell rope vanishing through the tiles. Six broken steps, one side half buried in the earth, led up to the lofty, arched door, now gaping with fissures, smothered in dust and rust and cobwebs, and so frailly hung upon its outwrenched hinges that the first light puff would seemingly secure free entrance to the winds of heaven. The Abbé Mouret, who had an affection for this dilapidated door, leaned his back against one of its folding leaves as he stood upon the threshold. From there he could take in the whole country round at a glance. Shading his eyes with his hands he scanned the scene.

Now, in the month of May, an exuberant vegetation burst forth from the stony soil. Gigantic lavenders, juniper bushes and patches of rank herbage swarmed over the threshold, and scattered their dark green clumps as far even as the tiles. The first throb of shooting sap in the tough and matted undergrowth might well topple the church over bodily. At this early hour, when all life was in the full travail of in-

crease, the air was filled with a hum of vivifying warmth, and the rocks quivered with the long and silent effort that upheaved them. But the Abbé failed to comprehend the striking token of nature's painful labour, but thought only that the step was tottering, and leaned against the other side of the door.

Before him stretched the country-side for six miles round walled in by hills whose tawny slopes were blackly studded by pine-woods; a fearfully desolate landscape of arid wastes and of rocky spurs ploughing up the land. The few patches of cultivatable ground, like scattered pools of blood, displayed red fields with rows of lean almond trees, grey-topped olive trees and vine-layers, that striped the ground with their brown stems. It looked as if some huge conflagration had swept by there, scattering the ashes of the forest over the hill tops, consuming all the meadow land, and leaving behind its glare and furnacelike heat in the hollows. Only here and there was a softer note put in by an occasional pale green patch of growing corn. But the landscape generally was wild, without even a threadlet of water, dying of its thirst, and flying away in clouds of dust at the least breath of wind. And in the farthest distance, where the crumbling hills had left a breach, the eye caught a distant glimpse of a fresh and verdant offshoot of the neighbouring valley fertilised by the Viorne, a river flowing down from the gorges of the Seille.

The priest lowered his dazzled glance upon the village, whose few scattered houses straggled away below the church—wretched hovels of rubble and boards, scattered along a narrow path, not a trace of a street. There were about thirty of them. Some were squatted in their muck-heaps, and black with woeful want; others roomier, more cheerful-looking, decked with pinkish tiles. Garden plots, wrested from the stony soil, had been planted with vegetables and enclosed with quickset hedges. At this hour Les Artaud was empty, not a woman was at the windows, not a child wallowing in the dust; naught but groups of fowls going to and fro, ferreting among the straw, and seeking their food up to the very thresholds of the houses, whose open doors gaped pleasantly in the sunlight. A large black dog sat upon his haunches at the entrance to the village as if mounting guard over it.

A gentle languor slowly crept over the Abbé Mouret. The rising sun steeped him in such warmth that he was fain to lean back against the church door, overpowered by a grateful

restfulness. His thoughts were dwelling on that hamlet of Les Artaud, which had grown up there among the stones like one of the knotty growths of the valley. All its inhabitants were related, all bore the same name, so that from their very cradle they were distinguished among themselves by nick-names. An Artaud, their ancestor, had come hither and settled like a pariah in this waste. His family had grown with all the wild vitality of the herbage that sucked its life from the rocky boulders. It had at last become a tribe, a rural community, in which cousinships were lost in the mists of centuries. They intermarried shamelessly and indiscriminately. Not an instance could be cited of any Artaud taking himself a wife from any neighbouring village; girls only occasionally went elsewhere. They were born and they died fixed to that spot, leisurely increasing and multiplying on their dunghills with the irreflectiveness of trees, and propagating from their seed with no definite notion of the world that lay beyond those tawny rocks, in whose midst they vegetated. And yet, already there were rich and poor among them; fowls having at times disappeared, the fowl-houses were closed at night with stout padlocks; an Artaud had killed an Artaud one evening behind the mill. These folks, girt in by that belt of desolate hills, were truly a people apart—a race sprung from the soil, a humanity of three hundred souls beginning early times afresh.

On him still hovered the sombre shadows of the seminary. For years he had never seen the sun. He perceived it not even now, his eyes closed and gazing inwards on his soul, and with no feeling for felon nature save contempt. For a long time, in his hours of devout recollection, when absorbed in meditation, his dream had been of some hermit's desert, of some mountain hole, where no living thing—neither being, plant, nor water—should distract him from the contemplation of God: a dream springing from the purest love, from a loathing of all physical sensation. There, dying to self, and his back turned on the light of day, he would wait till he ceased to be, till he was absorbed in the pre-eminent whiteness of the realms of the soul. To him Heaven seemed all white, with a luminous whiteness as of snowy lilies, as of a dazzling glow of mingled purity and innocence and chastity. But his confessor would unfailingly reprove him whenever he related to him his longings for solitude, his cravings for an existence of God-like purity; and would recall him to the struggles of the Church, and to the necessary duties of the priesthood. Later on, after his

ordination, the young priest had come at his own request to Les Artaud, hoping there to realise his dream of human annihilation. In this desolate spot, on this barren soil, he could shut his ears to all worldly sounds, and enjoy the wakeless life of saints. For some months past, in truth, his existence had been wholly undisturbed, rarely had any thrill of the village-life ruffled him; and even the sun's heat scarcely struck his neck with any added glow as he walked along the paths, his whole being wrapped in Heaven, and never heeding the unceasing reproduction amid which he moved.

The big black dog watching over Les Artaud had determined to come up to the Abbé Mouret, and now sat again upon its haunches at the priest's feet; but the unconscious man remained absorbed in the sweet influences of the morning. The evening before he had begun the devotions of the Rosary, and to the intercession of the Virgin with her Divine Son he attributed the great joy which filled his soul. How despicable now appeared all the good things of the earth! How thankfully he recognised his poverty! When he entered into holy orders, having in one day lost his father and his mother through a tragedy whose fearful details were even now unknown to him, he relinquished all his share of their property to an elder brother. His only remaining link with the world was now his sister; he had undertaken the care of her, stirred by a kind of religious emotion at her weakly mind. The dear innocent thing was so childish, such a very little girl that she recalled to him the poor in spirit to whom the Gospel awards the kingdom of Heaven. Of late however she had somewhat disturbed him, and she was getting too lusty, too full of health, she savoured overmuch of life—but the discomfort was yet of the slenderest. His days were spent in that interior life he had created for himself, and for an entire abandonment to which he had relinquished all. He closed the portals of his senses, and sought to free himself from all bodily needs—he was only a soul enrapt in contemplation. To him nature presented only snares and abominations; he gloried in maltreating her, in despising her, in releasing himself from his human slime. And as the just man must be a fool according to the world, he considered himself an exile on this earth; his thoughts were solely fixed upon the favours of Heaven, incapable as he was to understand how an eternity of bliss could be weighed against a few hours of perishable enjoyment. His reason duped him and his senses lied to him; and if he advanced in virtue it

was by humility and obedience. His wish was to be the last of all and subject to all, that the divine dew might fall upon his heart as upon arid sand ; he considered himself overwhelmed with reproach and with confusion, unworthy of being saved from sin. He no longer belonged to himself—blind, deaf, his flesh all dead. He was God's thing. And from this depth of abjectness to which he would sink himself, a Hosannah would then bear him up above the happy and the mighty into the splendour of a never-ending bliss.

At Les Artaud, the Abbé Mouret had once more experienced, every time he had read the *Imitation*, the raptures of the cloister he so ardently had longed for at one time. No part of him had ever yet rebelled. From the moment that he knelt, he was as perfectly and absolutely forgetful of his flesh, as unresisting and unshaken, as if paralysed by grace. Such ecstasy at God's approach is well known to some young priests : it is a blissful moment when all is hushed, and the only desires are but a boundless craving for purity. From no human creature had he sought his consolations. For he who believes a certain thing to be all in all cannot be troubled : and he did believe that God was all in all, that his humility, his obedience and his chastity were everything. He could remember having heard temptation spoken of as an abominable torture that tries the holiest. But he would only smile : God had never left him. He bore his faith about him thus like a breast-plate protecting him from the slightest breath of evil. He could recall how he had hidden himself and wept for very love ; he knew not whom he loved, but he wept for love, for love of some one afar off : the recollection never failed to move him. Later on he had decided on becoming a priest in order to satisfy that craving for a superhuman affection which was his sole affliction. He could not see where greater love could be. In that state of life were satisfied his being, his inherited predispositions, his youthful dreams, his first virile desires. If temptation must perforce come, he awaited it with the calmness of the unversed seminarist. He felt that his manhood had been killed in him : it gladdened him to feel himself a creature set apart, unsexed, ungrooved, and, like a lamb of the Lord, branded with the tonsure.

V.

THE big church-door was now growing heated with the sun. Gilded flies hummed round a large flower that grew between two of the church-door steps. The Abbé Mouret felt slightly dazed, and was about to move away, when the big black dog sprang forward, barking violently, towards the iron churchyard gate, and a harsh voice called out:

"Hallo, you young rascal! So you stop away from school, and I find you in the churchyard! Oh, don't say no: I have been watching you this quarter of an hour."

As the priest stepped forward he saw Vincent, and a brother of the Christian Schools clutching him tightly by the ear. The lad was suspended, as it were, over the ravine coasting the churchyard, and at the bottom of which flowed the Mascle, a mountain stream whose crystal waters plunged into the Viorne, six miles away.

"Brother Archangias!" softly called the priest, as if to appease the fearful man.

The brother, however, still kept tight hold of the boy's ear.

"Oh, it's you, your reverence?" he growled. "Just you fancy, this young rogue is always poking his nose into the churchyard. I don't know what the mischief he can be up to here. I ought to let him go and smash his skull down there. It would be a good deed."

The lad was dumb, his cunning eyes tight shut as he hung there clinging to the bushes.

"Take care, Brother Archangias," continued the priest, "he might slip."

And he himself helped Vincent to scramble up again.

"Come, my young friend, what were you doing there? You must not go playing in churchyards."

The lad had opened his eyes, and crept away, fearfully, from the brother, and put himself under the priest's protection.

"I'll tell you," he said in a low voice, as he raised his bushy head. "There was a tomtit's nest in the brambles there, under that boulder. Over ten days I've been watching it, and now the little ones are hatched; I came this morning after serving your mass."

"A tomtit's nest!" exclaimed Brother Archangias. "Very well, just you look out!"

He stepped aside, and bringing back a clod of earth off a grave, he flung it up into the brambles, but missed the nest. Another clod, however, more skilfully thrown upset the frail cradle, and precipitated the young birds into the stream.

"Now, perhaps," he continued, clapping his hands to shake off the earth from them, "you won't come roaming here any more, like a heathen; the dead people will pull your feet at night if you go walking over them again."

Vincent, who had laughed at seeing the nest's enforced dive into the stream, looked round him with a strong-minded shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh, I'm not afraid," he said. "Dead folk don't stir."

The churchyard, in truth, was not a place to inspire fear. It was a barren piece of ground with narrow paths smothered with the rank growth of weeds. Here and there a mound upheaved its hump. The white outline of one stone alone, the Abbé Caffin's tombstone, brand-new, upright, could be perceived in the centre of the ground. Save this, all around were only broken-off limbs of crosses, withered box bushes, split and moss-eaten old slabs. There were not two burials a year there. Death seemed to make no dwelling in that waste spot, where La Teuse came every evening to fill her apron with grass for Désirée's rabbits. A gigantic cypress tree, standing near the gate, cast its solitary shadow upon the desert field. This cypress, a landmark visible for nine miles around, was known to the whole country side as the Solitary.

"It's full of lizards," added Vincent, looking at the cracks and chinks of the church-wall. "It would be a lark—"

But he sprang out with a bound on seeing the brother lift his foot. The latter proceeded to point out to his vicar the dilapidated state of the gate, which was eaten up with rust, and had one hinge off, and the lock broken.

"It ought to be repaired," he said.

The Abbé Mouret smiled, but made no reply. Addressing Vincent, who was romping with the dog:

"I say, my boy," he asked, "do you know where old Bam-bousse is at work this morning?"

The lad glanced at the sky.

"He must be at his Olivettes field now," he answered, pointing away to the left. "But Voriau will show your reverence the way. He's sure to know where his master is, anyhow."

And he clapped his hands and called :

"Hie ! Voriau ! hie !"

The big black dog paused a moment, wagging his tail, and seeking to read the urchin's eyes. Then, barking joyfully, he set off down the slope to the village. The Abbé Mouret, and Brother Archangias followed him, chatting with one another. A hundred yards further Vincent surreptitiously left them, and glided up again towards the church, keeping a watchful eye upon them, and ready to bolt behind a bush if they should look round. With adder-like suppleness, he glided once more into the churchyard, that paradise of lizards, nests, and flowers.

While Voriau led the way before them along the dusty road, Brother Archangias was angrily saying to the priest :

"Let be ! sir, they're spawn of damnation, those toads ! They ought to have their backs broken, to make them pleasing to God. They actually grow in irreligion, like their fathers. Fifteen years have I been here, and not one christian have I been able to turn out. The minute they are out of my hands, good-bye ! They think of nothing but their land, their vines, their olive-trees. Not one ever sets foot in church. Brute beasts that struggle with their stony fields ! Just you guide them with the stick, sir, the stick !"

And, recovering his breath, he added with a terrific motion of his hands :

"These Artauds, look you, are like the brambles overrunning these rocks. One stem has been enough to poison the whole district. They cling on, they multiply, they live in spite of everything. Like Gomorrha, nothing short of fire from heaven will clean it all away."

"We should never despair of sinners," said the Abbé Mouret, his interior peace unruffled, as he walked on leisurely.

"But these are all the devil's own," broke in the brother still more violently. "I've been a peasant, too. Up to eighteen I turned the earth ; and later on, when I was at the Training College, I had to sweep, to pluck vegetables, I had all the heavy work to do. It's not their toilsome labour I find fault with. On the contrary, for God prefers the lowly. But the Artauds

live like beasts! They are like their dogs, they never attend mass, and make a mock of the commandments of God and of the Church. They would even commit fornication with their plots of land if they could, so sweet they are on them!"

Voriau, his tail over his back, kept stopping and moving on again as soon as he saw they still followed him.

"There certainly are some grievous abuses going on," said the Abbé Mouret. "My predecessor the Abbé Caffin—"

"A poor specimen," interrupted the brother. "He came here to us from Normandy owing to a disreputable scrape. Once here, his sole thought was good living; he let everything go to the devil."

"Oh, no, the Abbé Caffin certainly did what he could; but I must own his efforts have been all but barren in results. My own are mostly fruitless."

Brother Archangias shrugged his shoulders. He walked on silently a minute. The outlines of his tall bony frame, as it floundered awkwardly along, looked as if clipped out with hatchet-strokes. The sun was beating down upon his neck, shadowing his hard, sword-edged peasant's face.

"Just listen to me, sir," he said at last. "I am too much beneath you to lecture you; but still, I am almost double your age, I know this part, and I feel justified therefore in telling you you will gain nothing by gentleness. The catechism, understand, is enough. God has no mercy on the wicked. He burns them. Stick to that."

As the Abbé Mouret still hung his head and never opened his mouth, he went on:

"Religion is leaving the country-side because she is made out over indulgent. She was respected while she spoke like an unforgiving mistress. I really don't know what they can teach you now in the seminaries. The new priests weep like children with their parishioners. God no longer seems the same. I dare swear that you don't even know your catechism by heart, now?"

But the priest, wounded by this imperiousness with which the brother sought so roughly to dominate him, looked up and said drily:

"That will do, your zeal is very praiseworthy. Haven't you something to tell me? You came to the vicarage this morning, did you not?"

Brother Archangias answered harshly:

"I had to tell you just what I have told you. The Artauds live like pigs. Only yesterday I learned that that Rosalie, old

Bambousse's eldest daughter, is big with child. They all wait for that to get married. For fifteen years I have not known one who did not go amongst the corn before going to church. And yet they laugh and make out that it's the custom here."

"Yes," murmured the Abbé Mouret, "it is a great scandal. I am just on my way to old Bambousse to speak to him about it; it is desirable that they should be married as soon as possible. The child's father, it seems, is Fortuné, the Brichets' eldest son. Unfortunately the Brichets are poor."

"That Rosalie, now," continued the brother, "is just eighteen. The child's school days are none too early for mischief! Not four years since I still had her under me, and she was already a loose fish. I have now got her sister Catherine, an imp of eleven who promises to become even more shameless than her elder sister. One comes across her in every hole with that little wretch, Vincent. It's no good, you may pull their ears till they bleed, the woman always crops up in them. They carry perdition in their petticoats. The creatures are only fit to be thrown on the muck heap, with their poisonous impurities. What a splendid riddance if all girls were strangled at their birth!"

His loathing and his hatred of woman made him swear like a waggoner. The Abbé Mouret, who had been listening to him with unmoved countenance, smiled at last at his rabid utterances. He called Vorian, who had strayed into a field close by.

"There, look there!" cried Brother Archangias, pointing out a group of children playing at the bottom of a ravine, "there are my scum who miss school on the ground of helping their parents among the vines! You may be perfectly certain that jade of a Catherine is among them. See, she's amusing herself with sliding. You'll see her petticoats over her head in a minute. There, didn't I tell you! Till to-night your reverence. Oh, just you wait, you rascals!"

And off he went at a run, his dirty neck-band flying over his shoulder, and his big greasy cassock tearing off the thistles. The Abbé Mouret watched him swoop down into the midst of the knot of children, who scattered like a swarm of scared sparrows. But he had succeeded in seizing Catherine and one boy by the ears, and was leading them back towards the village, clutching them tightly with his big hairy fingers and overwhelming them with abuse.

The priest walked on again. Brother Archangias sometimes

caused him strange scruples ; with his vulgarity and his coarseness, he seemed to him the true man of God, free from earthly ties, submissive in all to Heaven's will, humble, blunt, his mouth filled with coarse abuse of sin. He would feel in despair at not being more successful in casting off his body, at not being ugly, unclean, and swarming with the parasites of saints. Whenever the brother had disgusted him by words of excessive coarseness, or by some overhasty churlishness, he would immediately blame himself for his refinement, his innate shrinkings, as if these were really faults. Ought he not to be dead to all the weaknesses of this world ? This time, too, he smiled sadly as he thought how near he had been losing his temper at the lesson inculcated by the brother. It was pride, it seemed to him, attempting his perdition by making him despise the lowly. But, in spite of himself, he felt relieved at being alone again, at walking gently along reading his breviary, free at last from that grating voice that had disturbed his dream of undefiled devoutness.

VI.

THE road wound on between crumbled boulders, among which the peasants had succeeded in reclaiming here and there six or seven yards of chalky soil, planted with old olive trees. Under the priest's feet, the dust from the deep ruts crackled lightly like snow. At times, as he felt a warmer puff upon his face, he would raise his eyes off his book, as if to seek whence came this soft caress; but his gaze was vacant, straying without perception over the burning sky-line, over the garbled outlines of that landscape breathing of passion as it lay before him in all its dryness, stretched out in the sun in all the abandonment of an impassioned and barren woman. He would lower his hat over his forehead to protect himself against the warm breeze, and tranquilly resume his reading, his cassock raising behind him a dusty cloudlet which rolled along the surface of the road.

"Good morning, your reverence," said a passing peasant to him.

The strokes of hoes along the cultivated strips of ground again roused him from his abstraction. He turned his head and became aware of big-framed, knotty-limbed old men greeting him from among the vines. The Artauds, in Brother Archangias's words, were fornicating with the earth in the sun's full blaze. Sweating brows appeared from behind the bushes, heaving chests were slowly raised, the whole scene was one of ardent fructification, through which he moved with the deliberate pace of ignorance. No trouble of the flesh was roused in him by the great labour of love that was filling that splendid morning.

"Steady! Voriau, you mustn't eat people up!" jestingly shouted a powerful voice, silencing the dog's loud barks.

The Abbé Mourct looked up.

"Oh! it's you, Fortuné?" he said, approaching the edge of the field in which the young peasant was at work. "I was just on my way to speak to you."

Fortuné was of the same age as the priest ; in appearance, a bigly-built, bold-looking, young fellow, with a skin already hardened. He was clearing a small plot of stony heath.

"What about, your reverence?" he asked.

"About what has taken place between Rosalie and you," replied the priest.

Fortuné began to laugh. He must have thought it very funny that a priest should interest himself in such a matter.

"Hang it!" he muttered, "she was willing enough. I never forced her. So much the worse if old Bambousse refuses to give her to me! Why, you saw yourself how his dog was trying to bite me just now; he sets him on at me."

As the Abbé Mouret was about to continue, the old Artaud, called Brichet, whom he had not perceived before, emerged from the shadow of a bush behind which he and his wife were eating. A little man, withered up with age, with a cringing face.

"You must have been told a pack of lies, your reverence," he exclaimed. "The youngster is quite ready to marry Rosalie. The young things have come together; it isn't anybody's fault. Others have done it too, and have got on all right all the same. The matter doesn't rest with us. You ought to speak to Bambousse. He's the one who looks down on us because he's got money."

"It's true; we are very poor," whined his wife, a tall, lachrymose woman, as she, too, got up. "We've only this scrap of ground where the devil seems to have been hailing stones. Not a bite of bread from it, even. Without you, your reverence, living would be impossible."

Brichet's wife was the solitary pious one of the village. When she had been to communion, she would hang about the vicarage, knowing that La Teuse always kept a couple of loaves for her from her last baking. At times she was even able to carry off a rabbit or a fowl given to her by Désirée.

"There's no end to the scandals," continued the priest. "The marriage must take place without delay."

"Oh! at once! as soon as the others are agreeable," said the old woman, alarmed about her periodical presents. "What say you, Brichet? we are not such bad christians as to go against his reverence?"

Fortuné sniggered.

"Oh, I'm quite ready," he said, "and so is Rosalie. I saw her yesterday at the back of the mill. We haven't quarrelled. We stopped there to have a bit of a laugh."

The Abbé Mouret interrupted him :

"Good! I am going now to speak to Bambousse. He is over there, at Les Olivettes, I believe."

As the priest set off, the mother asked him what had become of her younger son Vincent, who had left in the early morning to serve mass. There was a lad now who badly needed his reverence's admonitions. She walked by the priest's side for another hundred yards, bemoaning her poverty, the failure of potatoes, the frost which had nipped the olive-trees, the hot weather which threatened to scorch up the scanty crops. As she left him, she solemnly declared that her son Fortuné always said his prayers, both morning and evening.

Voriau now ran on in front. Suddenly, at a turn in the road, he bolted across the fields. The priest then struck into a small path leading up the slope of a low hill. He was now at Les Olivettes, the most fertile spot in the neighbourhood, where the mayor of the commune, Artaud, otherwise Bambousse, owned several fields of corn, olive plantations, and vines. The dog was now poking his nose into the skirts of a tall brunette, who burst into a loud laugh as she caught sight of the priest.

"Is your father here, Rosalie?" asked the latter.

"Yes, just across there," she said, pointing with her hand and still smiling.

Leaving the portion of the field she had been weeding, she walked on before him. Her recent pregnancy only showed itself in a slight rounding of her hips. She walked with the vigorous springiness of a hard-working woman, with her head unshielded from the sun, her neck all sun-burnt, from which straggling black hairs stood out like those of a horse's mane. Her hands, stained green, exhaled the odour of the weeds she had pulled up.

"Father," she called out, "here's his reverence asking for you."

And there she remained, brazen-faced, her features still gleaming with the sly smile of a shameless animal. Bambousse, a stout, sweating, round-faced man, left his work and met the priest with a jest upon his lips.

"I'd take my oath you are going to speak to me about the repairs of the church," he exclaimed, as he clapped his earthy hands. "Well, then, your reverence, I can only say no, it's impossible. The commune hasn't got the coin. If the Lord provides plaster and tiles, we'll provide the bricklayers."

This rustic attempt at a sceptical joke made him burst into

a huge guffaw. He slapped his thighs, coughed, and almost choked himself.

"It was not for the church I came," replied the Abbé Mouret. "I wanted to speak to you about your daughter Rosalie."

"Rosalie? What has she done to you, then?" inquired Bambousse, his eyes blinking.

The peasant girl was staring boldly at the young priest, gloating over his white hands and slender, feminine neck, trying to make him redden. He, however, bluntly and with unruffled countenance, as if speaking of something quite indifferent, continued :

"You know what I mean, old Bambousse. She is in the family way. She must get married."

"Oh, that's it!" muttered the old man, with a bantering look. "Many thanks for the message, sir. The Brichets sent you, didn't they? Mother Brichet goes to mass, and you give her a helping hand to marry her son—all very fine. But, I've got nothing to do with that. It doesn't suit me. That's all."

The astonished priest represented to him that the scandal must be stopped, that he ought to forgive Fortuné, as the latter was willing to make reparation for his transgression, and that, lastly, his daughter's reputation demanded a speedy marriage.

"Ta, ta, ta," replied Bambousse, "what a lot of words! I stick to my daughter, understand that. All that's got nothing to do with me. A beggarly pauper, that Fortuné, without a brass farthing. What an easy job, if one could marry a girl by only going with her. Hang it! at that rate we should have all the young things marrying off morning and night. Thank the Lord! I'm not worried about Rosalie: everybody knows what has happened to her; it doesn't make her bandy-legged or hump-backed, and she can get married to any one in the neighbourhood she likes."

"But her child?" interrupted the priest.

"The child—it isn't here yet, is it? Perhaps it may never come. If she has the youngster, we can see about it."

Rosalie, perceiving the turn the priest's efforts were taking, thought it proper here to ram her fists into her eyes and whimper. She even let herself fall upon the ground, displaying there her blue stockings drawn over her knees.

"Shut up, will you, you hussy!" howled her father in a rage. And he proceeded to revile her in the coarsest terms, which made her laugh silently into her clinched fists.

"If ever I catch you with your buck, I'll tie you together and show you like that to everybody. You won't shut up! Just wait a minute, you jade!"

He picked up a clod of earth and threw it violently at her. Lying only an arm's length away, the clod burst upon her knot of hair, crumbling down her neck and smothering her in dust. Dizzy from the blow, she sprang up with one bound and fled, sheltering her head between her hands. But Bambousse was quick enough to hit her again with two more clods: the first only grazed her left shoulder, but the next caught her full on the base of the spine, and with such force that she fell upon her knees.

"Bambousse!" cried the priest, as he wrenched from him a handful of stones he had just picked up.

"Let me alone, your reverence," said the peasant. "It was only soft earth. I ought to have thrown these stones at her. It's easy to see you don't know girls. Hard as nails, all of them. I might duck that one in the well, I might break all her bones with a cudgel, and still she'd go back to her slut's ways! But I've got my eye on her, and if I catch her! Well, they are all like that."

He took comfort in a suck of wine from a big flat bottle, encased in wicker-work, which lay warming on the heated ground. And breaking once more into his burly laugh:

"If I had a glass, sir, I would offer you some with pleasure."

"Then," again asked the priest, "this marriage?"

"No, it can't be, I should get laughed at. Rosalie is a stout wench. She's worth a man to me. See, I shall have to hire a lad the day she goes off. We can have another talk about it after the vintage. Besides, I don't want to be robbed. Give and give, say I. What do you think?"

Another long half-hour did the priest remain there preaching to Bambousse, speaking to him of God, plying him with all the reasons suited to the circumstances. The old man had resumed his work; he shrugged his shoulders, jested, growing more and more obstinate. At last, he broke out:

"Confound it! If you asked me for a sack of corn, you would give me money. Why do you want me to let my daughter go for nothing?"

Much discomfited, the Abbé Mouret left him. As he went down the path he saw Rosalie rolling about with Voriau, under an olive tree, laughing at the dog's licks upon her face. Her petticoats flying, her arms whirling, she kept saying:



ABBÉ MOURET CHECKING OLD RAMBOUSSE'S VIOLENCE TOWARDS
ROSALIE.

"You're tickling me, you big stupid. Leave off!"

When she perceived the priest, she made an attempt at a blush, settled her clothes, and put up her fists once more to her eyes. He, on his part, sought to console her by promising to attempt fresh efforts with her father, adding that she ought, in the meantime, to obey him and refrain from all intercourse with Fortuné, so as not to further aggravate her sin.

"Oh, now," she said softly, with an unabashed smile, "there's no danger, as the mischief's done."

Her meaning failed to reach him; he held before her the picture of hell, where all wicked women burn. And then he left her, his duty done, his soul once more possessed with that serenity, which enabled him to move, without the least agitation, amid the corruptions of the flesh.

VII.

THE morning was becoming scorchingly hot. From the time the first fine weather began, the sun would kindle a furnace-like glare in this huge rocky amphitheatre. By the sun's height in the sky the Abbé Mouret perceived that he had only just time if he wished to be in by eleven o'clock and escape a scolding from La Teuse. Having finished his reading of the breviary and concluded his negotiations with Bambousse, he now stepped out swiftly homewards, his eyes scanning the church, a grey spot in the distance—and the black rigid outline of the big cypress-tree, the Solitary, standing out against the blue sky. Drowsy with the heat, he dreamily considered the exceeding richness with which he intended that evening to decorate the Lady chapel for the devotions of the month of Mary. Before him stretched the road with a soft treading carpet of dust, of dazzling whiteness.

At the Croix-Verte, as the Abbé was about to cross the road leading from Plassans to La Palud, a gig coming down the hill compelled him to step aside behind a heap of stones. As he crossed the open space a voice called out to him :

"Hallo, Serge, my boy !"

The gig had pulled up and from it a man leaned over. The priest recognised an uncle of his, Doctor Pascal Rougon, or Monsieur Pascal, as the Plassans poor folk, whom he attended for nothing, briefly styled him. Although barely over fifty, his hair was already snowy white ; his big beard and abundant locks encircled a face whose regular features were full of benevolent delicacy.

"And you potter about in the dust at this hour of the day ?" he said jokingly, as he stooped to grasp the Abbé's hands. "You're not afraid of sun-stroke ?"

"No more than you are, uncle," laughingly answered the priest.

"Oh, I have the hood of my trap. Besides sick folk won't wait. People die at all times, my boy." He went on to tell him that he was now speeding on his way to old Jeanbernât, the steward of Le Paradou, who had had an apoplectic stroke the night before. A neighbour of his, a peasant on his way to Plassans market, had summoned him.

"He must be dead by this time," he continued. "However we must always make sure. Those old demons are always jolly tough livers."

He raised his whip, but the Abbé Mouret stopped him.

"Stay! what o'clock do you make it, uncle?"

"A quarter to eleven."

The Abbé hesitated; already he seemed to hear La Teusc's terrible voice in his ears, bawling out to him that luncheon was getting cold. But he plucked up his courage and added swiftly:

"I'll go with you, uncle. The unhappy man may wish to reconcile himself to God in his last hour."

Doctor Pascal could not restrain a roar of laughter.

"What, Jeanbernât!" he said, "ah, well! if ever you convert him! Never mind, come all the same. The sight of you is enough to cure him."

The priest got in. The doctor, apparently regretting his jest, displayed an affectionate warmth of manner, chattering to his horse from time to time. Out of the corner of his eye he observed his nephew inquisitively, with the keen look of a scientist making notes. In short, kindly sentences he enquired about his life, his habits, the peaceful happiness he enjoyed at Les Artaud. And at every satisfactory reply, he would murmur as if to himself in a reassured tone:

"Come, so much the better, just as it should be!"

He displayed peculiar anxiety about the young priest's state of health. Greatly surprised, the latter assured him that he was in splendid trim and had neither fits of giddiness, or of nausea, nor headaches whatsoever.

"Capital, capital," reiterated his uncle Pascal. "In spring, you see, the blood is active. But you are sound enough. By-the-bye, I saw your brother Octave at Marscilles last month. He is off to Paris, where he is to get a fine berth in a high class business. The young beggar, a nice life he leads."

"What life?" innocently enquired the priest.

To avoid a reply the doctor chattered to his horse, and went on:

"In fact, everybody is well, your aunt Félicité, your uncle Rougon, and the others. Still that does not hinder our needing your prayers badly. You are the saint of the family, my lad; I rely upon you to save the whole lot."

And he went on with his flippant jests, but with such good humour, that Serge found himself at last bandying jokes.

"You see, there are some among the lot whom it won't be easy to lead to Paradise. Some nice confessions you'd hear, if all came in turn. I can do without their confessions, I follow them at a distance, I have got their records at home with my botanical specimens and my doctor's notes. Some day, I shall be able to make wondrously interesting pictures. We shall see, we shall see!" He was forgetting himself, carried away by a youthful enthusiasm in the pursuit of science. A glance at his nephew's cassock pulled him up short.

"As for you, you're a parson," he muttered; "you did well, a parson's a very happy man. You were very keen on it, I suppose? And so now you stick to being good. Well! you would never have been satisfied elsewhere. Your parents, starting like you, have done nothing but evil, and still they are unsatisfied. It's all logically perfect, my lad. A priest completes the family. Besides, it was inevitable. Our blood was bound to run to that. So much the better for you, you have had the most luck."

Correcting himself, however, with a strange smile, he added:

"No, it's your sister Désirée who has had the best luck."

He whistled, whipped up his horse, and changed the conversation. The gig had climbed a somewhat steep slope, and was now threading its way through desolate ravines; it reached at last a tableland, where the hollow road coasted a lofty endless wall. Les Artaud had disappeared; they found themselves in the heart of a desert.

"We are getting near, are we not?" asked the priest.

"This is Le Paradou," replied the doctor, pointing to the wall. "Have you not been this way before, then? We are not three miles from Les Artaud. A splendid property it must have been, Le Paradou. The park wall this side alone is quite a mile and a half long. But for over a hundred years it's all been running wild."

"There are some fine trees in it," observed the Abbé, as he looked up in astonishment at the luxuriant masses of foliage jutting over.

"Yes, that part there is very fertile. In fact, the park is a

regular forest embosomed in the bold rocks which surround it. The Mascle, too, rises there ; four or five springs I have heard mentioned, I think."

In short, clipped sentences, interspersed with irrelevant digressions, he went on to relate the story of Le Paradou, according to the current legend of the country-side.

In the time of Louis XV., a great lord had erected a magnificent palace there, with enormous gardens, ponds, trickling streams, and statues—a miniature Versailles hidden away among the stones, under the full blaze of a Southern sun. But he had spent there but one season with a lady of bewitching beauty, who must have doubtless died there, as none had ever seen her leave. Next year the mansion was destroyed by fire, the park doors were nailed up, and the very loopholes of the walls became filled with mould ; and thus, since that remote time, not a glance had penetrated that vast enclosure which covered the whole surface of one of the plateaux of Les Garrigues.

"There can be no lack of nettles here," laughingly said the Abbé Mouret. "Don't you find that the whole wall reeks with damp, uncle?"

A pause, and he asked :

"And whom does Le Paradou belong to now?"

"Faith, nobody knows," the doctor answered. "The owner did come here once, some twenty years ago. But he got so scared at this adders' nest that he has never turned up since. The real master is the care-taker of the place, that old oddity, Jeanbernat, who has managed to find quarters in a lodge where the stones still hang together. There it is, see, that grey building over there, with its windows all smothered in ivy."

The gig now passed by a lordly iron gate, ruddy with rust, and lined inside with a layer of boards. The wide, dry moats were black with brambles. A hundred yards further on was the lodge inhabited by Jeanbernat. It stood within the park, which it overlooked on one side. But the old keeper had apparently blocked up that side of his dwelling ; he had cleared a narrow garden by the road ; and there he lived, facing southwards, and his back turned upon Le Paradou, seemingly unaware of the immensity of verdure that stretched away behind him.

The young priest jumped down, looking inquisitively around, and questioning the doctor who was hurriedly fastening the horse to a ring fixed in the wall.

"And this old man lives here all alone in this out-of-the-way nole?" he asked.

"Yes, quite alone," replied his uncle, adding, however, the next minute :

"Well, he has a niece with him he had to take in, a queer girl, a regular savage. We must hurry. The whole house looks deathlike."

VIII.

THE house seemed wrapped in slumber as it stood there stilly in the mid-day sun, with its Venetian shutters closed, and its ivy mantle filled with the hum of the large flies that swarmed all over it right up to the roof tiles. A sense of blissful quiet floated round this sunny ruin. The doctor opened the door of the narrow garden, which was enclosed by a lofty quick-set hedge; and there in the shadow of a wall, they came upon the tall, erect frame of Jeanbernât, standing calmly smoking his pipe, motionless and mute, watching his vegetables grow.

"What, are you up then, you humbug?" exclaimed the astounded doctor.

"So you were coming to bury me, were you?" growled the old man harshly. "I don't want anybody. I bled myself."

He stopped short as he caught sight of the priest, and assumed so threatening an expression that the doctor hastened to intervene.

"This is my nephew," he said; "the new vicar of Les Artaud—a good fellow, too. Devil take it, we haven't run all this way at this hour of the day to come and eat you, old Jeanbernât."

The old man calmed down a little.

"I don't want any shavelings here," he grumbled. "They're enough to make one croak. Mind, doctor, no priests and no physics when I go off, or we shall quarrel. Let him come in, however, as he is your nephew."

The Abbé Mouret, struck dumb with amazement, could not utter a word. He stood there in the middle of the path scanning the strange appearance of the solitary, his face burnt like a brick, and his limbs all dried up and twisted like a bundle of ropes, and bearing the burthen of his eighty years with a scornful contempt of life. When the doctor attempted to feel his pulse, his ill-humour broke out afresh.

"Do leave me in peace ! I bled myself with my knife, I tell you. It's all over, now. Who was the beast of a peasant who disturbed you ? The doctor here, and the priest, why not mutes too ! Well, it can't be helped, people will be fools. That won't prevent us from having a drink, however."

He fetched a bottle and three glasses, and stood them on an old table which he brought out into the shade. He filled up the glasses to the brim, and insisted on clinking them. His anger had melted into a mood of jeering cheerfulness.

"It won't poison you, vicar," he said. "A glass of good wine isn't a sin. Upon my word, this is the first time I ever clinked a glass with a cassock, no offence to you. That poor Abbé Caffin, your predecessor, always refused to argue with me. He was afraid."

He gave vent here to a hearty laugh, and went on :

"Just fancy, he had pledged himself to prove to me that God exists. So, whenever I met him, I defied him to do it ; but he always sloped off chop-fallen, I can tell you."

"What, God does not exist !" cried out the Abbé Mouret, roused from his dumbness.

"Oh ! just as you please," mockingly replied Jeanbernard. "We'll begin together all over again, if it's any pleasure to you. But I warn you, I am a tough dab at it. There are some thousands of books, in one of the rooms upstairs, which were rescued from the fire at Le Paradou : all the philosophers of the eighteenth century, a whole heap of old books on religion. I've learned some fine things from them. This twenty years I've been reading. Marry ! you'll find you've got some one who can talk, your reverence."

He had risen, pointing with a slow wave of his hand to all the surrounding horizon, to the earth and to the sky, and repeating solemnly :

"It's all nothing, nothing, nothing. When the sun is snuffed out, all will be at an end."

Doctor Pascal nudged the Abbé Mouret with his elbow. He was curiously observing the old man through his half-closed eyes, nodding approvingly to induce him to talk.

"So you are a materialist, old Jeanbernard ?" he enquired.

"Oh, I am only a poor man," replied the old man, relighting his pipe. "When the Count de Corbière, whose foster-brother I was, died from a fall from his horse, his children sent me here to look after this park of the Sleeping Beauty in order to get rid of me. I was sixty years old then, and I thought I was

about done. But death forgot me ; and I had to make myself a burrow. If you live all alone, look you, you get to see things in rather a queer fashion. The trees are no longer trees, the earth puts on the ways of a living being, the stones seem to tell you tales. A parcel of rubbish, in fact. I know some secrets which would fairly stagger you. Besides, what do you think there is to do in this devil of a desert ? I read the old books ; it was more fun than hunting. The count, who used to curse like a heathen, was always saying to me : 'Jeanbernat, my boy, I fully expect to meet you again in hell, so that you can serve me as well down there as you have up here.'

Once more he made that sweeping wave of his hand all round the horizon, as he added :

"You hear, nothing ; there's no such thing. It's all foolery."

Doctor Pascal began to laugh.

"A pleasant piece of foolery, at any rate," he said. "Jeanbernat, you are a deceiver. I suspect you are in love in spite of your affectations of surfeit. You were speaking very tenderly of the trees and stones just now."

"Oh, no, I assure you," murmured the old man, "I have done with that. At one time, it's true, when I knew you first and used to go out herborising with you, I was stupid enough to love all sorts of things I came across in that huge liar, the country. Fortunately, the old volumes have killed all that. I only wish my garden was smaller ; I don't go out into the road, not twice a year. You see that bench ? That's where I spend all my days, just watching my salad-herbs grow."

"And what about your rounds in the park ?" broke in the doctor.

"In the park !" repeated Jeanbernat, with a look of profound surprise, "Why, it's more than twelve years since I set foot in it ! What do you suppose I could do inside that cemetery ? It's too big. It's a bore to see nothing but those trees without end, moss everywhere, broken statues, and holes fit to break your neck at every step. The last time I went in there, it was so dark under the trees, there was such a stink of wild flowers, and such queer breezes blew in the paths, that I felt almost afraid. So I have shut myself up to prevent the park coming in here. A patch of sunlight, three feet of lettuce before me, and a big hedge shutting out all the horizon, why, that's more than enough for happiness. Nothing, there's what I'd like, nothing at all, something so narrow that nothing

outside could disturb me. Seven feet of earth, if you like, just to be able to croak on my back."

He struck the table with his fist, and suddenly raised his tones to call out to the Abbé Mouret :

"Come, just another glass, your reverence. The devil's not at the bottom of the bottle."

The priest felt ill at ease. He felt himself powerless to lead back to God this singular old man, whose reason seemed to him to be strangely disordered. He remembered now certain bits of gossip he had heard from La Teuse about the Philosopher, as the peasants of Les Artaud dubbed Jeanbernat. Scraps of scandalous stories were vaguely floating in his memory. He rose, with a sign to the doctor, in his wish to leave this house, where he seemed to inhale an odour of damnation. But, in spite of his inward fear, a strange feeling of curiosity made him linger. He remained there, walking to the end of the garden, throwing a searching look round the vestibule, as if to see beyond it, behind the walls. And, as he came back again, he looked for some hole, some glimpse of that sea of foliage he knew must be near, by the mighty murmur that broke upon the house, like the sound of waves.

"And how is the little one? well?" asked the doctor, taking up his hat.

"Pretty well," answered Jeanbernat. "She's never in. She often disappears all day long—still, she may be in the upstairs rooms."

He raised his head and called out :

"Albine ! Albine !"

With a shrug of his shoulders, he added :

"Yes, my word, she is a caution, the quean. . . Till next time, vicar. I'm always at your disposal."

The Abbé Mouret, however, had no time to accept the Philosopher's challenge. A door had suddenly opened at the end of the vestibule ; and a dazzling breach was made in the black darkness of the wall, through which beamed a vision of a virgin forest, a bewildering depth of enormous woodland, in a rain of sunbeams. Amid that sudden flood of light the priest's eyes clearly caught some distinctive details in the far background : a large yellow-flower in the middle of a lawn, a sheet of water, falling from a lofty rock, a colossal tree filled with a swarm of birds ; and all this drowned, lost, blazing amid such a flood of verdure, such a riotous luxuriance of vegetation, that the whole horizon seemed

one great burst of bloom. The door banged to, and everything vanished.

"Ah! jade!" cried Jeanbernât, "she was again in *Le Paradou*!" Albine was laughing on the threshold of the vestibule. She wore an orange coloured skirt, and a large red kerchief fastened round her waist, which made her look like a pranked-out gipsy. And she went on laughing, her head thrown back, her throat swelling with mirth, pleased with her flowers, wild flowers plaited into her fair hair, fastened to her neck, her bodice, and her bare, slender, golden arms. She seemed like a large, strongly perfumed nosegay.

"Ay, you are a beauty!" growled the old man. "You smell of grass enough to poison one—Would anyone think she was sixteen, that doll!"

Albine was unabashed, however, and laughed still more heartily. Doctor Pascal, who was her great friend, let himself be kissed by her.

"So you are not frightened in *Le Paradou*?" he asked her.

"Frightened? What of?" she said, opening her eyes wide in astonishment. "The walls are too high, no one can get in—There's only myself. It is my garden, all my very own. A fine big one, too. I haven't found out where it ends yet."

"And the animals?" interrupted the doctor.

"The animals? Oh! they would not hurt, they all know me well."

"But it is very dark under the trees?"

"Faith! there's shade: if there were not any, the sun would burn my face up—It is very pleasant in the shade among the leaves."

She flitted about, filling the narrow garden with the rustle of her skirts, and scattering around the pungent odour of green growth which clung to her. She had smiled at the Abbé Mouret without a trace of shyness, and seemed in no way disturbed by the astonished look with which he observed her. The priest had stepped aside. This fair-haired maid, with oval face, glowing with life, seemed to him to be the mysterious and weird offspring of the forest he had caught a glimpse of but now in that sheet of sunlight.

"I say, I have got some blackbird nestlings, would you like to have them?" Albine asked the doctor.

"No, thanks," he answered laughingly. "You must give it to the vicar's sister, who is very fond of pets. Good-day, Jeanbernât"

Albine had, however, fastened on the priest.

"You are the vicar of Les Artaud, aren't you? You have got a sister? I'll go and see her. Only you must not speak to me about God. My uncle will not have it."

"Don't bother, be off," exclaimed Jeanbernat shrugging his shoulders. Bounding off like a goat she disappeared, dropping a shower of flowers behind her. The slam of a door was heard, and from the back of the house came bursts of ringing laughter, which rolled away and faded in the distance like the scampering rush of some mad animal let loose among the grass.

"You see, she will end by sleeping in *Le Paradou*," muttered the old man with indifference.

As he saw his visitors off, he added :

"If you should find me dead one of these fine days, doctor, just do me the favour of pitching me into the muck-pit there, behind my vegetables. Good-evening, gentlemen."

He let the wooden barrier which closed the hedge fall to again. The house assumed once more its air of blissful calm, as it lay in the light of the noon-day sun, wrapped in the hum of the big flies that swarmed over the ivy even to the roof tiles.

IX.

THE gig rolled back once more along the hollow road skirting Le Paradou's interminable wall. The Abbé Mouret, wrapped in silence, scanned with his upturned eyes the monster boughs which stretched out over and beyond the wall, like the arms of giants hidden there. The park seemed to him full of sound : of the rustling of wings, of the quivering of leaves, of branches snapping at some furtive bound, of mighty sighs that bowed the young shoots—it was as if a vast breath of animated life were sweeping over the summit of a land of trees. At times, as he caught a bird-like note that seemed to him like a human laugh, the priest would turn his head, as if somewhat restless.

"A queer girl!" said his uncle as he eased the reins a little. "She was nine years old when she took up her quarters with that old heathen. Some brother of his who ruined himself, in what, I can't remember. The little one was at school somewhere when her father killed himself. She was quite a little lady, up to reading, embroidering, chattering and strumming on the piano. And such a flirt! I have seen her appear with open-worked stockings, embroidered skirts, frills, cuffs, a heap of finery. Ah, well! the finery didn't last long!"

He laughed. A big stone nearly upset the gig.

"If I don't leave a wheel in this beast of a road!" he muttered. "Hold on, my boy."

The wall had not yet ended: the priest still listened.

"As you may well imagine," continued the doctor, "Le Paradou, what with its sun, its stones, and its thistles, would eat up a whole outfit every day. Three or four mouthfuls, that's all it made of all the little one's beautiful dresses. She used to come back naked. Now she dresses like a savage. To-day she was rather presentable; but sometimes she has scarcely anything except her shoes and chemise. Did you hear her? Le Paradou is hers. The very day after, she came, she took

possession of it. She lives in it; jumps out of the window when Jeanbernat locks the door, bolts off in spite of all, goes off nobody knows where, buries herself in some invisible burrows known only to herself. She must have a fine fling in that wilderness."

"Hark, uncle!" interrupted the Abbé Mouret. "Isn't that some animal running behind the wall?"

Uncle Pascal listened.

"No," he said after a minute's silence, "it is the rattle of the trap on the stones. No, the child doesn't play the piano now. I believe she does not even know how to read. Just picture to yourself a young lady gone back to a state of unrestricted scampdom, turned out to play on a deserted island. My word, if ever you get to know of a girl to be brought up, I advise you not to entrust her to Jeanbernat. He has a most primitive way of letting nature alone. When I ventured to speak to him about Albine he answered me that we must not prevent trees from growing as they will. He says he is for the normal development of constitutions. All the same, they are very interesting, both of them. I never come in the neighbourhood without paying them a visit."

The gig was now emerging from the hollowed road. At this point the wall of Le Paradou turned and wound along the crest of the hill sides, as far as the eye could see. As the Abbé Mouret was in the act of turning round to have a last look at that grey-hued barrier whose impenetrable austerity had at last begun to annoy him, the rustle of boughs violently shaken was heard from the top of the wall where a clump of young birch trees seemed to bow in greeting to the passers-by.

"I knew some animal was running behind the wall," said the priest.

But here, although nobody could be seen, and nothing in the air above save the birches rocking more and more violently, they heard a ringing voice call out amid bursts of laughter:

"Good-bye, doctor! good-bye, vicar! I am kissing the tree, and the tree is sending my kisses to you."

"Hallo! it is Albine," exclaimed Doctor Pascal. "She must have followed the trap and at a run. The jumping over bushes is no bother to her, the little elf."

And he in his turn shouted out:

"Good-bye, my pet! How tall you must be to bow like that."

The laughter grew louder, the birches bowed still lower, scattering their leaves around even as far as the gig.

"I am as tall as the trees ; all the leaves that fall are kisses," replied the voice now mellowed in the distance, and so musically melting into the rippling whispers from the park, that a thrill ran through the youthful priest.

The road grew easier. On coming down the slope Les Artaud came again in sight in the midst of the scorched up plain. When the gig reached the turning to the village, the Abbé Mouret declared that he could not think of his uncle's driving him back to the vicarage. He jumped down, saying :

"No, thanks, I prefer walking : it will do me good."

"Well, just as you like," at last answered the doctor. With a clasp of the hand, he added :

"Goodness ! if you had only parishioners like that old dummy of a Jeanbernard, you wouldn't be often disturbed. However, you yourself wanted to come. And mind you keep well. At the very slightest ache, night or day, send for me. You know I attend all the family for nothing. Good-bye, my boy."

X.

THE Abbé Mouret felt more at ease when he found himself again alone, walking along the dusty road. These stony fields brought back to him his dream of austerity, of an interior life passed in a desert. All along that sunken road the trees had let fall upon his neck a vexatiously cool moisture which now the burning sun was drying. The lean almond trees, the poor corn crops, the weakly vines, on either side of the road, soothed him and delivered him from the confusion into which the over-lusty atmosphere of Le Paradou had thrown him. Amid the blinding glare that flowed down from heaven over this bare land, Jeanbernât's blasphemies no longer cast even a shadow. A thrill of keen pleasure ran through him as he raised his head and caught sight of the Solitary's motionless bar-like outline and the pink patch of the church's tiles.

But, as he walked on, a fresh anxiety beset the Abbé. La Teuse would give him a fine reception; now his cold luncheon must have been waiting for him nearly two hours. He pictured to himself her terrible face, the flood of words with which she would greet him, the angry clatter of kitchen ware which he would hear the whole afternoon. When he had got through Les Artaud, his fear became so lively that he hesitated, and, seized with trepidation, asked himself if it would not be better to go round and go in through the church. But, while he deliberated, La Teuse herself appeared on the doorstep of the vicarage, her cap all awry and her hands on her hips. With drooping head and shoulders he had perforce to climb the slope under that gaze, pregnant with a storm, whose weight he seemed to feel already on his shoulders.

"I believe I am rather late, my good Teuse," he stammered, as he turned the path's last bend.

La Teuse waited till he stood quite close before her. She then gave him one furious glance right into his eyes, and, with-

out a word, she turned round and stalked before him into the dining-room, clumping with her big heels and so rigid with ire that she hardly limped at all.

"I have had so many things to do," began the priest, beginning to be scared by this dumb reception. "I have been running about all the morning."

But she cut him short with another look, so fixed, so angered, that he felt as if his legs were broken under him. He sat down, and began to eat. She waited on him in the sharp, mechanical manner of an automaton and all but breaking the plates with the violence with which she put them down. The silence grew so awful that he was unable to swallow his third mouthful, quite choked with emotion.

"My sister has had her luncheon?" he asked. "Quite right of her. Luncheon should always take place all the same whenever I am kept out."

No answer. La Teuse stood there waiting to clear away his plate as soon as he should have emptied it.

Feeling then he could not possibly eat with that pair of implacable eyes crushing him, he pushed his plate away. This angry gesture acted on La Teuse like a blow from a whip and roused her from her obstinate stiffness. She fairly jumped.

"Ah! that's how it is!" she exclaimed. "There you are again, losing your temper! Very well, I am off; you can pay my fare, and I can go back home. I have had enough of Les Artaud, and your church, and everything else!"

She took off her apron with trembling hands.

"You must have seen that I didn't wish to say anything to you. A nice life, indeed! It is only tumblers who do it, sir! This is eleven o'clock, ain't it! Arn't you ashamed of sitting at table when it's almost two o'clock? It's not like a christian, no, it is not like a christian!"

And, taking up her stand before him, she went on:

"Well, where do you come from? whom have you seen? what business can have kept you? If only you were a child you would have the whip. A priest is out of place on the roads in the blazing sun like tramps without a roof to put over their heads. A fine state you are in, with your shoes all white and your cassock smothered in dust! Who will brush your cassock for you? Who will buy you another one? Speak out, will you; tell me what you have been doing! My word! if everybody didn't know you, they would get to think queer things about you. Well, do you want me to tell you? Very well, I won't

put a finger on the kitchen-fire. When people lunch at such hours they can do everything."

The Abbé Mouret, his mind relieved, let the storm blow over. At the old servant's wrathful words he experienced a kind of relaxation of his nervous system, as it were.

"Come, my good Teuse," he said, "you will first put your apron on again."

"No, no," she cried out, "it's all over, I am going."

But he got up and laughingly tied the apron himself round her waist. She struggled against him and stuttered:

"I tell you, no! You are a wheedler. I can see through your game, I see you want to send me to sleep with your sugary words. Where did you go? We'll see afterwards."

He sat down again to table delightedly like a man who has gained a victory.

"First, I must be allowed to eat. I am dying with hunger."

"No doubt," she murmured, her pity moved. "Is there any common sense in it! Would you like me to fry you two eggs? It would not take long. Well, if you have had enough. And everything is cold! And I had taken such pains with your chops! Nice they are, now! They look like old shoe-leather. Luckily you have not got a tender tooth like that poor Monsieur Caffin. Yes, you have got some good points, I don't deny it."

She waited on him with all a mother's care, chattering away in this fashion. After he had finished she ran to the kitchen to see if the coffee was still warm. She frisked about and limped most outrageously in her delight at having made it up with him. As a rule the Abbé Mouret fought shy of coffee which always upset his nervous system, but on this occasion to ratify the conclusion of peace he took the cup she brought him. But she sat down opposite him and repeated gently, like a woman tortured by curiosity:

"Where have you been, your reverence?"

"Well," he answered with a smile, "I have seen to the Brichets, I have spoken to Bambousse."

Thereupon he had to relate to her what the Brichets had said, what Bambousse had decided, and how they looked, and where they were at work. When he repeated to her the answer of Rosalie's father,

"Of course!" she exclaimed; "if the youngster died her condition would go for nothing."

Clasping her hands with a look of envious admiration: "How you must have chattered, your reverence! More than

half the day to get such a fine result ! You took it easy coming home ? It must have been devilish hot on the road ? ”

The Abbé, who had risen by this time, made no answer. He had been about to speak of Le Paradou and ask for some information about it. But a fear of being flooded with eager questions, and a kind of unavowed faint feeling of shame, made him keep silence on his visit to Jeanbernât. He cut short all her questions by asking :

“Where is my sister, by-the-bye ? I don’t hear her.”

“Come along, sir,” said La Teuse beginning to laugh and laying a finger on her lips.

They went into the next room, a country drawing-room, hung with a faded wall-paper of large grey flowers, and furnished with four horse-hair covered armchairs, and one sofa. On this sofa lay Désirée asleep stretched out at full length and resting her head on her clenched hands. Her skirts hung down, laying bare her knees, and her upstretched arms, naked to the elbow, displayed the finely developed outline of her bosom. She was breathing somewhat heavily through the half-parted lips, which just revealed her teeth.

“Lord, isn’t she sleeping sound ? ” whispered La Teuse. “She hasn’t even heard you pitching into me just now—Well, she must be precious tired. Just fancy, she was cleaning up her yard till nearly noon. And when she had had something to eat, she came and dropped down here like a shot. She has not stirred since then.”

The priest gazed lovingly at her for a moment. “We must let her have as much rest as she wants,” he said.

“Of course. Isn’t it a pity she is such an innocent ! Just look at those big arms ! Whenever I dress her I always think of what a fine woman she would have made. Ay, she would have brought you some splendid nephews, sir. Don’t you think she is like that stonè lady in Plassans corn-market ? ”

She spoke thus of a Cybele, lying stretched out on sheaves, the work of one of Puget’s pupils, which was sculptured on the pediment of the market. Without replying, the Abbé Mouret gently pushed her out of the room, and begged her to make as little noise as possible. Till evening, therefore, a perfect silence settled on the vicarage. La Teuse was finishing her washing in the shed. The priest, seated at the bottom of the narrow garden, his breviary fallen on his lap, was absorbed in pious meditation, while the blossoming peach trees showered their pink petals around.

XI.

WHEN it was about six o'clock, there came a sudden wakening. The noise of doors opening and closing, accompanied by bursts of laughter, shook the whole house. Désirée appeared, her hair all down and her arms half bare, calling out :

"Serge ! Serge !"

And catching sight of her brother in the garden, she ran up to him and sat down for a minute on the ground at his feet, begging him to follow her :

"Do come and see the animals ! You haven't seen the animals yet, have you ? If you only knew how beautiful they are now !"

She had to beg very hard, for the yard rather scared him. But when he saw that the tears were coming into Désirée's eyes, he yielded. She threw herself on his neck in a puppy-like burst of sudden glee, laughing more than ever without attempting to dry her cheeks.

"Oh ! how nice you are !" she stammered as she dragged him off. "You shall see the hens, the rabbits, the pigeons, and my ducks which have got fresh water, and my goat, whose room is as clean as mine now. I have got three geese and two turkeys, you know. Come quick. You shall see all."

Désirée was now twenty-two years old. Brought up in the country by her nurse, a peasant of Saint-Eutrope, she had grown up anyhow. Her brain void of any serious thoughts whatever, she thrived on the fatness of the soil and the open air of the country ; all the powers of development were lavished on her flesh, and she grew into a lovely animal—white, with rosy blood and firm skin. She was not unlike a high-bred donkey endowed with laughter. Although dabbling about from morning till night, her delicate hands and feet, the supple outlines of her hips, the urban refinement of her maiden body remained unimpaired ; she seemed in truth a creature apart—neither lady nor peasant—a maiden nourished by the soil, with the broad shoulders and narrow forehead of a youthful goddess.

Her weak intellect was doubtless the cause of her sympathy with animals. She was never happy except with them ; she understood their language far better than that of mankind, and looked after them with a mother's affection. Her reasoning powers were deficient, but she had instead an instinct which put her on a footing of intelligence with them. At their very first cry of pain she knew what ailed them ; she would hit upon dainties on which they would greedily pounce ; a single gesture from her would quell their squabbles. She seemed to know their good or evil character at a glance ; and related such long tales about the tiniest chick, and with such an abundance and minuteness of detail, as to astound those to whom one little chicken was exactly like any other. Her farm-yard had thus become a country, as it were, over which she reigned the absolute mistress ; a country complex in organisation, disturbed by revolutions, peopled by beings the most diverse, whose annals were known to her alone. So accurate was her faculty of instinct that she would note the addled eggs in a nest and would foretell the number of young in a litter of rabbits.

When, at sixteen, she had attained her puberty, Désirée had not had the attacks of giddiness or sickness like other girls. She acquired the frame of a full-grown woman, had better health than ever, and burst her clothes by her magnificent development of flesh. Thenceforth she possessed a rounded, freely-swaying bust, the broad hips of an antique statue, all the growth of a vigorous animal. One could have said that she sprang from the mould of her poultry-yard, that she absorbed the sap with her sturdy legs, as white and firm as young trees. And amidst all this plenitude, not a carnal desire came to disturb her. She found a continuous satisfaction in feeling this swarm of animals around her. Everything exhaled a generating flood in the midst of which she savoured the joys of fecundity. Something within her found satisfaction in the laying of her hens ; she put her does to the buck with the laughter of a beautiful girl whose passions were thereby appeased ; whenever she milked her goat, she experienced the delights of a pregnant woman. Nothing was healthier. She innocently gorged herself with the odour and warmth of life. No depraved curiosity actuated her in this care for reproduction, in the presence of the cocks clapping their wings, of the mothers giving birth to their young, of the goat infecting his tiny shod. She preserved her tranquillity of a beautiful

animal, her clear glance, devoid of all thought, happy at seeing her little world multiply, feeling as it were an enlargement of her own body, becoming fecundated, identified with all these mothers to such a point, that she was like the common, the natural mother, dropping an engendering sweat from her fingers without the faintest emotion.

Since Désirée had been living at Les Artaud, she had passed her days in complete beatitude. At last she was satisfying the dream of her life, the only desire which had tormented her amidst her weak-minded puerility. She had a poultry-yard, a nook all to herself, where she could breed animals to her heart's content. She almost entirely buried herself there, building the rabbit-hutches with her own hands, digging out the pond for the ducks, knocking in nails, fetching straw, allowing no one to assist her. All La Touse had to do was to wash her afterwards. The poultry-yard was situated behind the cemetery; and Désirée had often to jump over the wall, and run about among the graves after some fowl whom curiosity had led astray. Right at the end was a shed where were placed the fowl-house and the rabbit-hutches; to the right was a little stable for the goat. But all the animals lived together; the rabbits ran about with the fowls, the goat would take a foot-bath in the midst of the ducks, the geese, the turkeys, the guinea-fowls and the pigeons, all fraternising together in the company of three cats. Whenever she appeared at the wooden fence which prevented all these animals from entering the church, a deafening uproar would greet her.

"Eh! can't you hear them?" said she to her brother, as they reached the dining-room door.

But, when she had admitted him and closed the gate behind them, she was assailed so violently that she almost disappeared. The ducks and the geese, opening and shutting their beaks, tugged at her skirts; the greedy hens jumped up and pecked her hands, the rabbits squatted on her feet and then bounded up to her knees; whilst the three cats sprang on her shoulders, and the goat bleated in its stable at being unable to reach her.

"Leave me alone, do! all you animals!" cried she with a hearty sonorous laugh, and feeling tickled by all these feathers, these claws, and these beaks rubbing up against her.

But she did not attempt to free herself. As she often said, she would have let herself be eaten up, it seemed so sweet to her to feel all this life disporting about her and making her as

warm as an eider-down quilt. At last one cat obstinately persisted in remaining perched on her back.

"It's Moumou," she said. "His paws are like velvet." Calling her brother's attention to the yard she proudly added :

"See, how clean it is !"

The yard had indeed been swept out, washed and raked over. But the disturbed water and the forked up litter exhaled an odour so fetid and so powerful, that the Abbé Mouret began to choke. The dunghill was heaped up against the cemetery wall in an enormous smoking mound.

"What a heap, eh?" continued Désirée, and leading her brother into the pungent vapour, "I put it all there myself, nobody has helped me. Go on, it isn't dirty. It cleans. Look at my arms."

She held out her arms, which had merely been dipped into a pitcher of water—regal arms they were, superbly rounded, flourishing like plump white roses in that bed of dung.

"Yes, yes," gently said the priest, "you have worked hard. It's very nice, now."

He began moving towards the wicket, but she stopped him.

"Do wait a bit ! You shall see them all. You have no idea—" • So saying, she dragged him before the rabbit-house under the shed.

"There are young ones in all the hutches," she said and clapped her hands in glee.

Then she proceeded to explain to him at great length all about the litters. He had to crouch down and flatten his nose against the wire netting, while she gave him minute details about them. The mother does, with huge restless ears, eyed them askance, panting and motionless with fear. Here, in one hutch, he saw a hairy cavity at the bottom of which was crawling a living heap, a dusky indistinct faint mass heaving with one great breath like a single body. Close by some young ones, with enormous heads, ventured as far as the edge of the hole. A little farther off, they were stronger; they looked like young rats, ferretting about, leaping, their rump cocked up and spotted by the white knoblet of their scut. Others showed the sportive antics of babes: white ones with pale ruby coloured eyes, black ones with eyes like berries of jet. Now a scare would make them bolt off swiftly, revealing at every leap their slender paws reddened by urine. Then they would squat down all in a heap, so closely packed that their heads could no longer be seen.

"It is you they are frightened at," Désirée kept saying. "They know me well."

She called them and drew some bread-crust from her pocket, the little rabbits became more confident and kept sidling up one by one with puckered noses and standing up against the netting. She kept them like that a minute to show her brother the rosy down upon their bellies, giving then her crust to the boldest one. Upon this the whole of them flocked up, sliding and squeezing up without any quarrel. Three little ones were at one moment all nibbling the same piece of crust, others would fly, and would lean against the wall to eat in peace, while their mothers at the back would remain snuffing distrustfully and refuse the crusts.

"Oh! the greedy little things!" exclaimed Désirée. "They would eat like that till to-morrow morning! At night, even, you can hear them crunching the leaves they have overlooked in the day-time."

The priest stood up, but still she had not tired of smiling on her dear little ones.

"You see the big one there, the one that's all white with black ears—Well! he dotes on field poppies. He is very good at picking them out from the other weeds—The other day he got the colic. It touched him up under his hind legs. So I took him and kept him warm in my pocket. Since then he has been quite frisky."

She poked her fingers through the meshes of the netting and stroked their backs.

"Wouldn't you say it was satin?" she continued. "They are dressed like princes. And ain't they smart! Look, there's one who is always cleaning himself. He wears his paws. If you only knew how funny they are! I don't say anything but I see all their little games. That grey one looking at us, for instance, used to hate a little doe which I had to put somewhere else. There were some terrible scenes between them, too long to tell you. Well, the last time he gave her a drubbing, when I came up in a rage, what do you think I saw? That rascal lying mum at the back there as if he was just at his last gasp. He wanted to make me believe that it was he who had to complain of her."

She interrupted herself to apostrophise the rabbit.

"Yes, you may listen to me; you're a rogue!" And turning towards her brother,

"He understands all I say," she said softly, with a wink.

The Abbé Mouret could stand it no longer, so overpowered by the heat that emanated from the litters. The life that crawled under the hair plucked from those mothers' bellies, exhaled a powerful emanation which began to make his temples ache. Désirée, as if becoming slowly intoxicated, was growing brighter, pinker, and plumper.

"But there's nothing to take you away!" she cried out; "you always seem to be going off. And, my little chicks! They were born last night."

She took out some rice and threw a handful down before her. The hen gravely stalked up clucking to her little band of chickens who followed her, chirping and scampering madly like birds that are scared. When they were fairly in the middle of the scattered rice the hen pecked away cagerly, and threw down the grains she cracked, while her little ones were busily pecking away. They were half-naked and bullet-headed, with eyes sparkling like steel needles, and their beaks so queerly set on, their down so quaintly ruffled up, that they looked like penny toys. Désirée laughed with enjoyment at the sight of them.

"Little loves they are!" she stammered out.

She took up two of them, one in each hand, and smothered them with a storm of kisses. And then the priest had to inspect them all over, while she coolly said to him:

"It isn't easy to tell the cocks. But I never make a mistake. This one is a hen, and this one is a hen too."

She put them down again on the ground. The other hens were now coming up to eat the rice. A large yellow cock with flaming plumage followed them, lifting his large foot with majestic caution.

"Alexander's getting splendid," said the Abbé, to please his sister.

Alexander was the cock's name. He looked up at the young girl with his fiery eye, his head cocked up and tail outspread, and then came and installed himself by her skirts.

"He is very fond of me," she said. "Only I can touch him. He is a good cock. He has fourteen hens, and never a single clear egg do I find in all the nests— Do I, Alexander?"

She stooped; the cock did not fly from her caress. A rush of blood seemed to kindle his comb; flapping his wings, and stretching out his neck, he burst into a long-drawn crow, like the blast from a brazen throat. Four times he crowed, and was answered by all the cocks of Les Artaud in the distance. Désirée was greatly tickled at her brother's startled looks.

"He is an ear-splitter, isn't he?" she said. "He has a stunning voice. But he's not vicious, I assure you. The hens, if you like, are— You remember the big speckled one, the one that used to lay yellow eggs? The day before yesterday she hurt her foot. When the others saw the blood they seemed to get quite mad. They all followed her, pecking at her and drinking her blood, so that by the evening they had eaten up her foot. I found her with her head behind a stone, the idiot saying nothing, and letting herself be devoured."

The remembrance of the fowls voracity made her laugh. She calmly related other cruelties of theirs; young chickens whose rumps and entrails had been devoured, and of which she had only found the neck and wings; a litter of kittens eaten up in the stable in a few hours.

"You might give them a human being," she continued, "and they'd finish him. And aren't they tough livers! They get on very well with a broken limb even. They may have wounds, holes in their bodies big enough to shove your fist into, and still they will gobble their victuals. That's what I like them for; their flesh grows again in two days, their bodies are always as warm as if they had a store of sunshine under their feathers. When I want to give them a treat, I cut them up some raw meat. And worms! Wait, you'll see how they love them."

She ran to the dunghheap, and picked up, without a trace of disgust, a worm she found there. The fowls darted at her hands; but she amused herself with their greediness by holding the worm high up above them. At last she opened her fingers. The fowls hustled each other and pounced upon the worm; then one of them fled with it in her mouth, pursued by the others; it was thus snatched and retaken many times until one of them, with a mighty gulp, swallowed it altogether. At that, they all stopped dead, their heads thrown back, their eyes on the alert for another worm. Désirée felt happy, called them by their names, and talked pettingly to them. The Abbé Mouret fell back a step or two before this exhibition of intensely voracious animalism.

"No, I am not at all comfortable," he said to his sister, when she tried to make him feel the weight of a fowl she was fattening. "It always makes me uneasy to touch live animals."

He tried to smile, but Désirée taxed him with cowardice.

"Ah well, what about my ducks, and my geese, and my turkeys? What would you do if you had all those to look after?"

Ducks are dirty, if you like. Do you hear them shaking their bills in the water? And when they dive, you can only see their tails sticking straight up like ninopins—Geese and turkeys, too, are not easy to manage. Isn't it fun to see them waddling along with their long necks, some quite white and others quite black? They look like ladies and gentlemen. I should not advise you to trust your finger to them, now. They would swallow it nicely, at one gulp. But my fingers they only kiss, see!"

Her words were cut short by a joyous bleat from the goat, which had at last broken open the badly closed door of the stable. Two bounds and the animal was close to her, bending its forelegs, and affectionately rubbing its horns against her. To the priest its face, with its pointed beard, and obliquely set eyes, seemed to wear a diabolical grin. But Désirée caught it round the neck, kissed its head, played and ran with it, and talked of sucking it. She often did so, she said. When she was thirsty in the stable, she would lie down and suck it.

"See, they are full of milk," she added, lifting the animal's huge dugs.

The Abbé's eyes dropped as if some obscene thing had been just shown him. He could remember seeing once, in the cloister of Saint-Saturnin at Plassans, a stone gargoyle, representing a goat copulating with a monk. Ever since, he had always looked on goats—girl-like in their whims and infatuations, stinking of he-goats, and offering their teats to all comers—as creatures of hell, reeking with lechery. His sister had only been allowed to get one after weeks of begging. And whenever he came there, he would shun all contact with the animal's long silky coat, and guard his cassock from the touch of its horns.

"All right, I'll let you go now," said Désirée, becoming aware of his growing discomfort. "But you must just let me show you something else, first. Promise not to scold me, won't you? I have not said anything to you about it, because you would not have allowed it. If you only knew how pleased I am."

She clasped her hands, and laid her head upon her brother's shoulder entreatingly.

"Another piece of folly," he murmured, unable to refrain from smiling.

"You won't mind, will you?" she continued, her eyes

glistering with delight. "You won't be angry?—He is so pretty!"

She ran to open a little low door under the shed. A small pig bounded into the middle of the yard.

"Oh! isn't he a cherub?" she exclaimed with a look of profound rapture as she saw him leap out.

It was a delightful little pig, quite pink, his snout washed by greasy slops, and a gummy rim round his eyes from incessant routing in his trough. He trotted about, hustling the fowls, rushing to gobble up whatever was thrown them, pervading the small yard with his sudden turns and twists. His ears flapped over his eyes, his snout snorted on the ground; with those slender feet of his he resembled a toy animal on wheels. And, from behind, his tail looked like the bit of string to hang it up by.

"I won't have this beast here!" exclaimed the priest, terribly put out.

"Oh, Serge, dear old Serge," begged Désirée again, "don't be nasty— See, what a harmless little thing he is! I'll wash him, I'll keep him very clean. La Touse went and had him given her for me. We can't send him back now— See, he is looking at you, he smells you. Don't be afraid, he won't eat you."

She broke off, seized with an irresistible fit of laughter. The little pig had blundered in a dazed fashion into the goat's legs, and tripped her up. He was now careering madly round, squeaking and rolling, and scaring all the denizens of the poultry yard. To quiet him Désirée had to get him an earthen pan full of dish-water. In this he wallowed up to his ears, and dabbled and grunted, while quick quivers of delight thrilled through his rosy skin. And his tail, uncurled, hung limply down.

The sound of this foul water being stirred about, put a crowning touch to the Abbé Mouret's intense disgust. Ever since he had been in there, he had been feeling more and more choked, his hands, and chest and face were burning. His head had grown more and more giddy. At this moment his senses were assailed by the heated stench of the fowls and rabbits, the lecherous odour of the goat, and the greasy staleness of the pig, all mingled in one pestiferous empyreuma. He seemed to breathe an atmosphere laden with the effluvia of generation, and too heavy for his maiden shoulders to support. It seemed to him that Désirée had grown taller, her hips larger, that her arms were waving wildly, and that her skirts were sweeping

along the ground and stirring up the powerful odour which was now overpowering his senses. He had only just time to open the wicket. His feet stuck to the stone flags still dank with manure, and he felt as if held fast in the earth's firm clasp. Then suddenly the remembrance of Le Paradou came back unbidden to him, with its huge trees, its black shadow and its penetrating perfumes.

"There, you are quite red now," Désirée said to him as she joined him outside the wicket. "Aren't you pleased to have seen everything?— Do you hear the noise they are making?"

On seeing her leave, the animals threw themselves against the trellis work and emitted piteous cries. The little pig, especially, was uttering prolonged whines like a saw being sharpened. Désirée, however, curtsied to them and kissed her finger-tips to them, laughing at seeing them there all in a heap, like lovers of hers. Then, hugging her brother, as she accompanied him to the garden, with a blushing face she whispered into his ear:

"I should so like a cow."

He turned to look at her, with a quick gesture of disapproval.

"No, no, not now," she went on hurriedly. "We'll talk about it again later on— There would be room in the stable. A lovely white cow with red spots. You would soon see what nice milk we should have. A goat becomes too little in the end— And when the cow has a calf!"

She skipped and clapped her hands with glee: to the priest she seemed to have brought the poultry-yard with her in her skirts. He left her, therefore, at the end of the garden, sitting in the sunlight on the ground before a hive, whose bees buzzed like golden berries round her neck, along her bare arms and in her hair without attempting to sting her.

XII.

BROTHER ARCHANGIAS dined at the vicarage every Thursday. As a rule he came early to talk over parish matters. It was he who, for the last three months, had kept the Abbé posted in all the affairs of the valley. This Thursday, while waiting till La Teuse should call them, they strolled slowly before the church. On relating his interview with Bambousse, the priest was surprised to find that the brother thought the peasant's reply quite natural.

"The man's quite right," said the Ignorantin.* "You don't give away your chattels like that. Rosalie is no great bargain, but it's always hard to see your own daughter throw herself away on a pauper."

"Still," rejoined the Abbé Mouret, "a marriage is the only way of stopping the scandal."

The brother shrugged his big shoulders and laughed aggravatingly.

"Do you think you'll cure the neighbourhood with this marriage?" he exclaimed. "Before another two years Catherine will be in the family-way; then others will follow suit, all will go the same way. As they end by being married, they snap their fingers at everyone. These Artauds flourish in bastardy: it is their natural evil. There is only one possible remedy as I have told you before: wring all the girls' necks if you do not want the country poisoned. No husbands, your reverence, but a good thick stick!"

Calming down a bit, he added:

"Let everyone do with their own as they think best."

He went on to speak about fixing the hours for the catechism classes. The Abbé Mouret, however, only replied abstractedly, his eyes dwelling on the village at his feet, bathed in the light of the setting sun. The peasants were wending homewards, dumbly, with the dragging steps of wearied oxen returning to

* A popular name in France for a christian brother.

their sheds. Before the tumble-down houses women stood calling out to one another and carrying on bawling conversations from door to door, while groups of children filled the roadway with the noise of their big clumsy shoes, as they grovelled and rolled and pushed each other about. An odour of humanity ascended from that heap of tottering houses, and the priest fancied himself once more in Désirée's poultry-yard watching the ceaseless and ever-increasing propagation of animals. Here, too, he found the same procreative heat, the same incessant travail, which had so unpleasantly affected him. Since morning his mind had been running on that episode of Rosalie's pregnancy, and now his thoughts returned to it, to the foul features of existence, the offshoots of the flesh, the enforced reproduction of their species sowing men broadcast like grains of wheat. The Artauds, like a herd penned in between the four hill ranges which formed their horizon, procreated and spread more thickly over the land with every female generation.

"See," cried out Brother Archangias, interrupting himself to point to a tall girl dallying with her lover behind a bush, "there is another slut over there!"

He shook his long black arms at this couple and made them flee. In the distance, over the crimson fields and naked rocks, the sun was dying in one last flare of flame. Gradually night came on. The heated fragrance of the lavender grew cooler on the wings of the light evening breeze now rising. From time to time a heavy sigh fell on the ear as if that fearful land, utterly consumed with ardent passions, had at length grown calm under the soft grey rain of twilight. The Abbé Mouret, hat in hand, enjoyed the chillness; once more he felt the falling shade bring peacefulness upon his soul.

"Your reverence! Brother Archangias!" cried La Teuse. "Come quick! The soup is on the table."

It was cabbage soup, its smoking steam filling the vicarage dining-room. The brother seated himself and fell to, slowly emptying the huge plate La Teuse had just put down before him. He eagerly devoured it, his throat clucking audibly as the food fell into his stomach. His eyes were riveted on his spoon; not a word broke from him.

"Isn't my soup good, then, your reverence?" asked the old servant. "You are only fiddling with your plate."

"I am not a bit hungry, my good Teuse," the priest replied smilingly.

"Good gracious! how can you wonder at it when you go on

as you do!— You would have been hungry, if you hadn't lunched at past two o'clock."

Brother Archangias, tilting into his spoon the last few drops of soup remaining in his plate, said gravely :

"You should be regular in your meals, your reverence."

Désirée, having also sedately and silently finished her soup, rose and followed La Teuse to the kitchen. The brother left alone with the Abbé Mouret, cut himself long slices of bread, which he swallowed while waiting for the next dish.

"So you had a long round to-day, then?" he asked.

But before the priest could reply the sounds of steps, of exclamations, of ringing laughter, broke out at the end of the passage, in the direction of the yard. A short altercation apparently took place. A flute-like voice which thrilled the Abbé rose in vexed and hurried tones which died away in a burst of merry glee.

"What can it be?" he said, rising from his chair.

Désirée bounded in again, carrying something hidden in her gathered-up skirt. She burst out excitedly,

"Isn't she queer? She wouldn't come in at all. I caught hold of her skirt; but she is so awfully strong she got away from me."

"Who on earth is she talking about?" asked La Teuse, running in from the kitchen with a dish of potatoes, with a piece of bacon lying across them.

The young girl sat down, and with the utmost cautiousness drew from under her skirt a blackbird's nest with three wee nestlings slumbering in it. She laid it on her plate. The moment the little birds felt the light, they stretched their feeble necks and opened their crimson beaks to ask for food. Désirée clapped her hands, enchanted, and seized with strange emotion at the sight of these hitherto unknown creatures.

"It's that Paradox girl!" exclaimed the Abbé suddenly, remembering La Teuse had gone to the window.

"So it is," she said. "I might have known that grasshopper's voice— Oh! the gipsy! Look, she's stopped there to spy on us."

The Abbé Mouret drew near. He, too, thought he could see Albine's orange-coloured skirt behind a juniper bush. But Brother Archangias, in a towering passion, raised himself on tiptoe behind him, and stretching out his fist and wagging his churlish head, thundered out :

"The devil fly away with you, you robber's daughter! I

will drag you right round the church by your hair if ever I catch you coming and casting your evil spells here !”

A peal of laughter, fresh as a breath of night, burst from the path, followed by a sound of lightly running steps and the swish of a dress sweeping across the grass like the rustle of an adder. The Abbé Mouret standing at the window, followed afar a light gleam gliding through the pine trees like a moonbeam. The puffs of breeze wafted in from the open country were laden with that penetrating perfume of verdant vegetation, that scent of wildflowers which scattered from Albine's bare arms, lithe frame, and streaming tresses.

“An accursed soul, that ! a regular child of perdition !” growled Brother Archangias below his breath as he rescaled himself at the dinner table. He fell greedily upon his bacon, swallowing his potatoes whole instead of bread. La Teuse could not persuade Désirée to finish her dinner. That big baby was lost in ecstasy over the blackbird nestlings, asking questions, wanting to know what food they eat, if they laid eggs, how the cockbirds could be known.

The old servant, however, was troubled by a shrewd suspicion, and taking up a stand on her good leg, she looked the young vicar in the face.

“So you know the Paradou people ?” she said.

Thereupon he told the truth simply, and related the visit he had made to old Jeanbernat. La Teuse exchanged scandalised looks with Brother Archangias. At first she answered nothing, but went round the table, limping frantically and stamping hard enough with her heels to split the flooring.

“You might have spoken to me of those people these three months past,” said the priest at last. “I should have known at any rate what sort of people I was going to call upon.”

La Teuse stopped short as if her legs had just been shattered.

“Don't tell lies, sir,” she stuttered, “don't tell lies, you will only make your sin still worse— How dare you say I haven't spoken to you of the Philosopher, that heathen who is the scandal of the whole neighbourhood ? The truth is you never listen to me, when I talk. It all goes in at one ear and out at the other— Ah, if you did listen to me, you'd spare yourself a good deal of trouble !”

“I, too, have spoken to you about those abominations,” affirmed the brother.

The Abbé Mouret lightly shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I didn't remember it,” he said. “It was only when I

found myself at Le Paradou that I fancied I recollected certain tales— Besides, I should have gone to that unhappy man all the same as I thought him in danger of death.”

Brother Archangias, his mouth full, struck the table violently with his knife, crying :

“Jeanbernat is a dog ; he ought to die like a dog.” Then, seeing the priest about to protest he cut him short :

“No, no, for him there is no God, no penitence, no mercy. I would rather throw the host to the pigs than carry it to that scoundrel.”

He helped himself again to potatoes, his elbows on the table, his chin in his plate, chewing furiously. La Teuse, her lips pinched, quite white with anger, contented herself with saying drily :

“Let it be, his reverence will have his own way. He has secrets from us now.”

Silence reigned. For a moment one heard nothing but the noise of Brother Archangias working his jaws, accompanied by the extraordinary rumbling of his gullet. Désirée, with her bare arms round the nest in her plate, her face bent, smiling to the little ones, talking to them slowly and softly in a chattering of her own that they seemed to understand. •

“People say what they have done, when they have nothing to hide,” suddenly cried La Teuse.

And then silence reigned again. What exasperated the old servant was the mystery the priest seemed to make about his visit to Le Paradou. She looked upon herself as a woman shamefully deceived. Her curiosity smarted. She walked round the table, not looking at the Abbé, not addressing anybody—comforting herself with soliloquy.

“That’s it ; that’s why we have lunch so late ! We go gadding about till two o’clock in the afternoon. We go into such disreputable houses that we don’t even dare tell what we’ve done. And then we tell lies, we cheat everybody.”

“But,” gently interrupted the Abbé Mouret, who was forcing himself to eat a little more to prevent La Teuse getting crosser than ever, “nobody asked me if I had been to Le Paradou, I have not had to tell any lies.”

La Teuse went on just as if she had never heard him.

“Yes, we go ruining our cassock in the dust, we come home rigged up like a thief. And if some kind person takes an interest in us, and questions us for our own good, we shove her about and treat her like a good-for-nothing woman, whom we

can't trust. We hide like a sly person, we'd rather die than breathe a word ; we're not even considerate enough to enliven one's home by relating what we've seen."

She turned to the priest, and looked him full in the face.

"Yes, you take that to yourself. You are a close one, you're a bad man !"

Here she fell to crying : the Abbé had to soothe her.

"Monsieur Caffin used to tell me everything," she moaned out.

She soon grew calmer. Brother Archangias was finishing a big piece of cheese, apparently quite unruffled by this scene. In his opinion the Abbé Mouret really needed being kept straight, and La Teuse was quite right in making him feel the reins. He emptied a last glass of the weak wine, and threw himself back in his chair to digest his meal.

"Well now," finally asked the old servant, "what did you see at Le Paradou ? Tell us, at any rate."

The Abbé Mouret smiled and related in a few words the strange manner in which Jeanbernat had received him. La Teuse, overwhelming him with questions, broke out in indignant exclamations. Brother Archangias clenched his fists and brandished them aloft.

"May Heaven crush him !" said he, "and burn both him and his witch !"

In his turn the Abbé endeavoured to glean some fresh particulars about the people at Le Paradou, and listened intently to the brother's monstrous narrative.

"Yes, that little devil came and sat down in the school. It's a long time ago now, she might have been about ten, then. Of course, I let her come ; I thought her uncle was sending her to prepare for her first communion. For two months she utterly revolutionised the whole class. She made herself worshipped, the minx ! She knew all sorts of games, and invented all sorts of finery with leaves and shreds of rags. And what a head-piece, too, like all those children of hell ! She was the top one at catechism. And one fine morning, the old man burst in in the middle of our lessons. He was going to smash everything, and shouted that the priests had taken his child from him. We had to get the rural policeman to chuck him out. As to the little one, she'd bolted. I could see her through the window in a field opposite laughing at her uncle's frenzy. She had been coming to school for the last two months without his even suspecting it. He regularly scoured the country after her."

"She's never taken her first communion?" exclaimed La Teuse below her breath with a slight shudder.

"No, never," rejoined Brother Archangias. "She must be sixteen now. She is growing up like a brute beast. I have seen her running on four legs in a thicket near La Palud."

"On four legs," muttered the servant, turning towards the window with a fresh access of anxiety.

The Abbé Mouret attempted to express some doubt, but the brother burst out:

"Yes, on four legs! And she was jumping like a wild cat, with her petticoats tucked up and her thighs all showing. If I had only had a gun I could have knocked her over. We kill beasts more pleasing to God than her. Besides, everyone knows she comes catterwauling every night round Les Artaud. She howls like a brute in heat. If ever a man falls into her claws, she wouldn't leave him a scrap of skin on his bones, I know."

His hatred of womankind boiled over. He banged the table with a blow of his fist, and poured out his wonted abuse of it.

"The devil's in their bodies. They stink of the devil in their legs, their arms, their stomachs, everywhere. And that's what bewitches the fools."

The priest nodded approvingly. Brother Archangias's outrageous violence, and La Teuse's gossiping tyranny were like stripes whose tingling smart he often felt upon his shoulders. He took a pious delight in wallowing in lowliness in these hands full of homely obscenities. He seemed to see the peace of Heaven behind this contempt of the world, this blackguardising of his whole nature. It was a delicious mortification to inflict upon his body, a stream in which he delighted to drag his susceptible feelings.

"There's only filth in them," he muttered as he folded up his napkin.

La Teuse began to clear the table. She was about to remove the plate on which Désirée had laid the blackbird's nest.

"You are not going to bed there, I suppose, mademoiselle," she said. "Do leave those nasty brutes."

Désirée, however, defended her plate. She covered the nest with her bare arms, no longer smiling but cross at being disturbed.

"I hope those birds are not going to be kept," exclaimed Brother Archangias. "It's unlucky. You must wring their necks."

And he proceeded to stretch out his big hands, but the young

girl rose and stepped back quivering, and hugging the nest to her bosom. She stared fixedly at the brother, her lips raised like a wolf about to bite.

"Don't touch the little things," she stammered. "You are ugly." With such singular contempt did she emphasise this word that the Abbé Mouret started as if the brother's ugliness had just struck him for the first time. The latter contented himself with grumbling growls. He had always had an inward hatred for Désirée, whose lovely animal development offended him. When she had left the room, still walking backwards, and never taking her eyes off him, he shrugged his shoulders and ground between his teeth some abusive obscenity which no one heard.

"She had better go to bed," said La Teuse. "She would only bore us by-and-by in the church."

"Has any one come yet?" asked the Abbé Mouret.

"Oh, the girls have been outside there a long time with armfuls of boughs. I am just going to light the lamps. We can begin whenever you like."

A few seconds later she could be heard swearing in the sacristy because the matches were damp. Brother Archangias, left alone with the priest, inquired sourly :

"For the month of Mary?"

"Yes," replied the Abbé Mouret. "The last few days the girls about here were hard at work and couldn't come as usual to decorate the Lady Chapel. So the ceremony was postponed till to-night."

"A nice custom," muttered the brother. "When I see them all putting up their boughs, I feel inclined to throw them down, to make them confess their misdeeds before touching the altar. It's a shame to allow women to rustle their dresses so near the holy relics."

The Abbé made a deprecating gesture. He had only been at Les Artaud a little while, he must follow its customs.

"Whenever you like, sir, we're ready!" called out La Teuse. But Brother Archangias detained him a minute.

"I am off," he said. "Religion is not a girl that it should be put into flowers and laces."

He walked slowly to the door. Once more he stopped, and lifting one of his hairy fingers added :

"Beware of your devotion to the Virgin."

XIII.

ON entering the church the Abbé Mouret found nine or ten strapping young girls awaiting him with boughs of olive, laurel and rosemary. Few garden flowers grew on the rocks of Les Artaud, and the custom was to decorate the Lady altar with a persistent verdure which lasted throughout the month of May, and to which La Teuse would add a few wallflowers whose stems reposed in old decanters.

"Will you let me do it, your reverence?" asked La Teuse. "You are not used to it— Come, stand there in front of the altar. You can tell me if the decorations please you."

He consented, and it was she who really directed the arrangements. She got up on a pair of steps and bullied the girls as they came up to her in turn with their leafy contributions.

"Not so fast, now! Do give me time to fix the boughs. We can't have all these bundles coming down on his reverence's head— Come on, Babet, it's your turn. What's the good of staring at me like that! Fine rosemary yours is, my word! it's as yellow as a thistle. I suppose all the donkeys in the place have been messing on it!— You next, La Rousse. Ah, well, that is splendid laurel! You got that out of your field at Croix-Verte, I know."

The girls laid their branches on the altar, on which they dropped a kiss; and there they lingered for a while, handing up their branches to La Teuse. The sly look of devotion they had assumed on stepping on to the altar-steps was quickly dropped, and soon they were laughing, digging each other with their knees, bending their hips upon the altar's edge, and thrusting their bosoms against the tabernacle itself. Over them the tall Virgin in gilded plaster bent her tinted face, and smiled with her rosy lips upon the naked Jesus she bore upon her left arm.



PEASANT GIRLS AND LA TEUSE DECKING THE ALTAR OF THE VIRGIN.
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"Bless me, Lisa!" cried La Teuse, "sit on the altar while you're about it! Just pull your petticoats down, will you? Aren't you ashamed of showing your legs like that?—If any one of you lolls about I'll lay her boughs across her face.—Can't you hand me the things quietly?"

Turning round, she asked:

"Do you like it, sir? Do you think it will do?"

She had converted the space behind the Virgin's statue into a verdant niche, whose leafy sprays projected on either side, forming a bower as it were, and drooping over in front like palm leaves. The priest expressed his approval, but ventured to remark gently:

"I think there ought to be a cluster of more delicate leaves up above."

"No doubt," grumbled back La Teuse. "But they will only bring me laurel and rosemary—I should like to know who has brought a scrap of olive. Not a blessed one, you bet! They are afraid of losing a single olive, the heathens?"

Here Catherine, however, came up to the altar step laden with an enormous olive bough which completely hid her.

"Oh, you've got some, you baggage!" continued the old servant.

"Naturally," someone exclaimed, "seeing she stole it. I saw Vincent breaking it off while she kept a look out."

Catherine flew into a rage and swore it was not true. She turned round, and thrusting out her auburn head through the leafy screen she still tightly held, she proceeded to lie with marvellous stolidity and invented quite a long story to prove that the olive bough was really hers.

"Besides," she added, "all trees belong to the Blessed Virgin."

The Abbé Mouret was about to intervene, but La Teuse inquired sharply if they wanted to make game of her and keep her arms up aloft all night, and proceeded to fasten the olive bough up firmly. Catherine, in the meanwhile, holding on to the steps behind her, and mimicking the clumsy manner in which the servant turned her huge bulk about with the help of her good leg. Even the priest could not forbear a smile.

"There," said La Teuse as she came down and stood by his side to get a good view of her work, "there's the top done—Now we will put clumps between the candlesticks, unless you would prefer a garland all along the altar shelf."

The priest decided in favour of big clumps.

"Come on, then, let's go ahead," continued the old servant, once more clambering up the steps. "We can't go to bed here. —Just kiss the altar, will you, Miette? Do you fancy you are in your stable? Your reverence, do just see what they are up to over there? I can hear them laughing like lunatics."

One of the two lamps being raised and the dark end of the church lit up by its light, three of the girls were discovered romping and shoving each other about under the gallery; one of them had stumbled and pitched head foremost into the holy water stoup, and this had so tickled the others that they were rolling on the ground to laugh at their ease. They all came up to the priest sheepishly with downcast eyes, apparently considering a scolding rather good fun, their swinging hands slapping against their hips.

But the measure of La Teuse's wrath was filled when she suddenly perceived Rosalie ascending the altar like the others with a bundle of boughs in her arms.

"Get down, will you?" she cried to her. "You are a cool one, and no mistake, my lass!—Hurry up, off with your bundle."

"What for, I'd like to know?" boldly said Rosalie. "You can't say I have stolen it."

The other girls drew closer, feigning innocence and exchanging sparkling glances.

"Clear out," repeated La Teuse, "you have no business here, do you hear?"

And then, losing her scanty patience, she let out a very coarse epithet, which caused a titter of delight among the peasant girls.

"Well, what next?" said Rosalie. "Do you know what the others do? You didn't go and look, perhaps?"

She burst into a fit of sobbing, threw down her boughs, and let the Abbé lead her aside and give her a severe lecture. He had already tried to silence La Teuse; for he was beginning to feel uneasy amidst those strapping shameless wenches with armfuls of foliage who filled the church. They were pushing forward right up to the altar step, and enclosed him with a belt of living woodland, wafting in his face a rank perfume of aromatic shoots, exhaling, as it were, from the limbs of these sturdy workers.

"Let's make haste, be quick!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands lightly.

"Goodness knows. I would rather be in my bed," grumbled

La Teuse. "It's not so easy as you think to fasten up all these bits of boughs."

Finally, however, she succeeded in putting up lofty plumes of foliage between the candlesticks. She folded up the steps, which were laid behind the high altar by Catherine. She had nothing more to do now except to make two great clumps for the sides of the altar table. The last bundles of boughs were enough to complete the display, and as there were still some branches left, the girls strewed them all over the sanctuary floor right up to the wooden communion rails. The Lady Altar looked now like a grove, a background of shrubs, with a verdant lawn before it.

La Teuse then resigned her leadership to the Abbé Mouret, who ascended the altar steps, and clapping his hands again lightly, said :

"Young ladies, to-morrow we will continue the devotions for the month of Mary. Those who may be unable to come ought at least to say their Rosary at home."

He knelt down, and the peasant girls, with a mighty rustle of their petticoats, sank down and seated themselves on their heels. They accompanied his prayers with a confused muttering, with here and there a giggle; one of them, feeling herself pinched from behind, burst out with a scream, which she attempted to stifle with a sudden fit of coughing, and this seemed such exquisite fun to the others that they lingered a minute after the Amen, their faces resting on the stone flags, writhing with suppressed merriment.

La Teuse dismissed these harumscarums; while the priest, after crossing himself, remained absorbed before the altar, apparently heedless of what was going on behind him.

"Come now, clear out," muttered the old woman. "You're a pack of good-for-nothings, who can't even respect God. It's shameful, it's unheard of, for girls to roll about on the ground in church like beasts in a meadow— What are you doing there, La Rousse? If I see you pinching any one, you'll have to deal with me! Oh, yes, you may put out your tongue at me, I'll tell his reverence all about it. Out with you, out with you, you minxes!"

She drove them slowly before her, running and hobbling round them frantically. She had succeeded in getting every one of them outside, when she caught sight of Catherine calmly installed in the confessional with Vincent, and eating something or other with the utmost enjoyment. She turned them

out promptly. As she stretched out her head outside the church, before closing the door, she saw Rosalie throw her arms round the shoulders of Fortuné who had been waiting for her : the two vanished in the darkness towards the cemetery amid a faint sound of kisses.

"And such creatures come up to our Lady's Altar!" she stuttered as she shot the bolts. "The others are no better, I am sure. They're all of them trulls, the ones that came to-night with their boughs, just for a bit of fun and to get kissed by the lads when they leave! To-morrow not one of them will put herself out of the way; his reverence will have to say his *Aves* by himself— We shall only find the jades who have got assignations."

She thrust the chairs back into their places, and looked round to see that nothing suspicious was lying about, before going up to bed. In the confessional she picked up a handful of apple parings which she threw away behind the high altar. She also found a bit of ribbon torn from some cap and a lock of black hair, which she made up into a small parcel upon which to open an inquiry. With these exceptions, the church seemed to her quite tidy. The bracket lamp of the sanctuary had oil enough for the night, and as to the flags of the choir they could do without washing till Saturday.

"It's nearly ten o'clock, sir," she said, drawing near the priest still kneeling. "You might as well come up now."

He made no answer, but only bowed his head gently.

"All right, I know what that means," continued La Teuse. "Another hour will still find him on the stones there, giving himself a stomach-ache. I'm off, as I shall only bore him. All the same, I can't see much sense in it, eating one's luncheon when others are at dinner, and going to bed when the fowls get up!— I bore you, don't I, your reverence? Good-night. You're not at all reasonable!"

She made ready to go: but came back first to put out one of the two lamps, muttering that such late prayers were ruination in oil. At last she really did go off, after brushing with her sleeve the altar-cloth of the high altar, which seemed to her grey with dust. The Abbé Mouret, his eyes uplifted, his arms tightly clasped against his breast, remained alone.

XIV.

IN the light of the single lamp, burning amid the mass of verdure on the altar of the Virgin, great floating shadows filled the church at either end. From the pulpit a dusky sheet of gloom projected to the rafters of the ceiling. The confessional was now a dark mass under the gallery, and assumed the strange outline of a ruined sentry-box. All the light, softened and tinted as it were by the green foliage, rested slumberingly upon the great gilded Virgin, who seemed to be descending with queenly mien, borne upon the cloud round which gambolled the winged heads of angels. The sight of that round lamp, gleaming amid the boughs, suggested the idea of the pallid moon rising over the edge of a wood, and casting its light upon a regal apparition, a princess of Heaven, crowned in gold and clothed with gold, come there to air the nakedness of her Divine Infant in the mysterious depths of the woodland avenues. Between the leaves, along the lofty tufts, within the large oval cradle, drowsily glided star-like beams, like the milky rain of light that filters through the bushes on moonlight nights. Indistinct sounds and creakings came from the two dusky ends of the church; the large clock on the left of the chancel throbbed slowly with the heavy breathing of a slumbering machine. And that radiant vision, the mother with slender bands of chestnut hair, as if reassured by the nocturnal quiet of the nave, came lower and lower, scarce bending the blades of grass in the clearings under the gentle flight of her cloudy chariot.

The Abbé Mouret gazed on her. This was the hour when he most loved the church. He forgot the woeful figure on the cross, the victim bedaubed with ochre and lacquer, gasping out his life behind him in the chapel of the Dead. His thoughts were no longer distracted by the garish light from the windows, the lively stir of morning coming in with the sun. by outdoor

life, by the sparrows and the boughs invading the nave through the shattered panes. At that hour of night, Nature died, the shadows hung the whitened walls with crape, the nightly chill fell upon his shoulders like a salutary penance-shirt. He could now be wholly swallowed up in the supremest love, and no sparkling flicker of a ray of light, no breeze or scent, no buzzing of an insect's wing, could withdraw him from his delight of loving. Never had his morning mass afforded him the super-human joys of his nightly prayers.

With quivering lips, the Abbé Mouret gazed at the lofty Virgin. He could see her coming towards him from the depth of her green cradle in ever-increasing splendour. No longer did it appear a flood of moonlight billowing across the tree-tops. She seemed to him clothed with the sun, and advancing in majesty, glorious, colossal, and so all-powerful that he was tempted at times to cast himself face downwards to shun the flaming splendour of that opened gate of Heaven. Then, in that adoration of his whole being, which caused the words to die silently upon his lips, the remembrance returned of Brother Archangias's final words, like the recollection of a blasphemy. The brother often reproved him for this especial devotion to the Virgin, which he declared was a veritable robbery of devotion to God. In his opinion it enervated the soul, put religion into petticoats, and created a state of sentimentalism quite unworthy of a strong man. He had a grudge against the Virgin for her womanhood, her beauty, her maternity; he was constantly on his guard against her, possessed by an inward fear of ever feeling himself tempted by her gracious mien, of succumbing to her seductive sweetness. "She will lead you a nice dance!" he had cried out one day to the young priest, for in her he saw the commencement of a human passion, an inclination to revel in the pleasures of that lovely chestnut hair, large bright eyes, and mystery of 'he garments that fell from head to foot. His was the blunt rebellion of a saint roughly parting the Mother from the Son, and asking as He did: "Woman, what have we in common, thou and I?" But the Abbé Mouret thrust away such thoughts, prostrated himself, and endeavoured to forget the brother's harsh and coarse attacks. He was wholly enrapt in the immaculate purity of Mary, which withdrew him from the depth of lowliness in which he sought to bury himself. Whenever alone before the great golden Virgin, in his heated fancy he could see her bending down for him to kiss those

bands of hair; he became once more so young, so good, so strong, so just and filled with a life of love.

The Abbé Mouret's devotion to the Virgin dated from his early youth. When quite a child, somewhat shy and fond of shrinking into corners, he took pleasure in the thought that a lovely lady was watching over him: that two blue eyes, so sweet, ever smilingly followed him about. Often, when he felt at night a light breath of air glide across his hair, he used to say that the Virgin had come and kissed him. He had grown up under this womanly petting care, in an atmosphere filled with the rustle of a divine skirt. From the age of seven, he satisfied the cravings of his tender affection by expending all the pence he got in the purchase of pious picture-cards, which he jealously concealed that he alone might enjoy them. Never was he tempted by the pictures of Jesus and the Lamb, of Christ on the Cross, of God the Father, with a mighty beard, stooping over the brink of a bank of clouds; his preference was ever for the winning portraits of Mary, with her narrow, smiling mouth and delicate outstretched hands. By degrees he had made quite a collection of them all—of Mary between a lily and a distaff, Mary carrying her child like an elder sister, Mary crowned with roses, Mary crowned with stars. He had thus a family of lovely young maidens, alike in their attractiveness, in their sweetly gracious countenance, and so youthful in the features peeping from their veils, that in spite of their title of "the Mother of God," he felt no awe of them, though of such exalted rank.

They seemed to him his own age, such little girls as one would wish to meet with, little girls of Heaven such as little boys who die at seven years old have for eternal playmates in some nook of Paradise. But even at this early age he was self-contained; and he grew up without betraying the secret of his religious love, penetrated with the scrupulous bashfulness of adolescence. Mary grew up with him, always a year or two older than himself, as should always be the case with one's chiefest friend. When he was eighteen, she was twenty; she no longer kissed his forehead in the night, but stood a little further from him with folded arms, chastely smiling, and ravishingly sweet. And he—he only named her with bated breath, and felt as if his heart would faint away each time the cherished name passed his lips in prayer. His dream was now no more of childish games within the garden of Heaven, but of a continual contemplation before that white countenance, whose perfect purity he would not have sullied

even with a breath. From his own mother even he concealed the strength of his love for Mary.

A few years later, at the seminary, his beautiful affection for her, seemingly so just, so natural, was disturbed by inward qualms. Was the cult of Mary necessary for salvation? Was he not robbing God by surrendering to Mary a part, the greater part, of his love, his thoughts, his heart, his entire being? Perplexing questions these, but the inward struggle only increased his passion and riveted his bonds. For then he dived into all the subtleties invented by his affection, and found unheard of joys in discussing the lawfulness of his feelings. In the books of devotions to the Virgin he found himself excuses, joyful raptures, and a wealth of arguments which he would go over in prayerful meditation. From them he learned to be the slave of Jesus in Mary; to go to Jesus through Mary. He would cite all kinds of proofs, he would discriminate, he would draw inferences. Mary, whom Jesus had obeyed on earth, should be obeyed by all mankind; Mary still preserved her maternal power in Heaven, where she was the chief dispenser of God's treasures, the only one who could beseech Him, the only one who allotted the heavenly thrones; Mary was but a mere creature before God, but raised thus up to Him became the human link between Heaven and earth, the intermediary of every grace, of every mercy; and thus his conclusion always was that she should be loved above all else in God himself. Another time, he attempted more arduous problems in theology; the Holy Ghost, for instance, sealing the Vase of Election, making of the Virgin Mother an everlasting miracle offering its invisible purity to the devotion of mankind; she was the Virgin overcoming all heresies, the irreconcilable foe of Satan, the new Eve of whom it was foretold that she should crush the serpent's head, the august Gate of grace, by which the Saviour had already entered once and through which he would come again at the Last Day.

This misty prediction foretelling a greater part for Mary would throw Serge into a dreamy imagining of some immense expansion of divine love. This entry of a woman into the jealous and cruel heaven of the Old Testament, this figure of whiteness at the feet of the awesome Trinity, appeared to him the very grace itself of religion; it alleviated the dread inspired by things of faith, and proved his refuge when mazed amid the mysteries of dogma. And having thus proved to himself, point by point, that she was the way to Jesus—easy, short, perfect, and certain—he surrendered himself anew to her, wholly and

without the shadow of a vexing doubt: he strove to be her true devotee, dead to self and abjectly submissive.

O that hour of divine voluptuousness! The books of devotions to the Virgin burned between his hands. They spoke to him in a language of love fragrant as incense. Mary seemed no longer the young maiden veiled in white, that stood a foot or two away from his bedside. She came forward surrounded by the splendour in which John saw her, clothed with the sun, having the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She perfumed him with her sweet savour, inflamed him with a longing for Heaven, and consumed him with the ardent glow of the stars flaming on her brow. He threw himself before her and called himself her slave. No word could be sweeter than that of slave reiterated by his trembling lips, and which he relished even more and more as he continued to cast himself at her feet—to become her thing, a trifle in her sight, the dust lightly brushed by her azure gown. With David he exclaimed: “Mary is made for me,” and with the Evangelist he added: “I have taken her for my all.” He called her “my beloved mistress.” Words failed him and he fell into the prattle of a child or lover, his breath breaking with the intensity of his passion. She was the Blessed among women, the Queen of Heaven glorified by the nine Choirs of Angels, the Mother of Predilection, the Treasure of the Lord. Living imagery unrolled itself before him, in which she seemed to him an earthly paradise of virgin soil, with beds of flowering virtues, green meadows of hope, impregnable towers of strength, and smiling dwellings of confidence. And again she was a fountain sealed by the Holy Ghost, a shrine and dwelling-place of the Holy Trinity, the Throne of God, the City of God, the Altar of God, the Temple of God, and the World of God. And he walked in that garden, in its shade, its sunlight, beneath the enchanting foliage of its trees; he sighed after the water of that Fountain; he dwelt within Mary’s beauteous precincts—resting, hiding, heedlessly straying there, drinking in the milk of infinite love that fell drop by drop from that virginal bosom.

Every morning, on rising in the seminary, he greeted Mary with a hundred bows, his face turned towards the quarter of the sky visible from his window. Every evening he bade her a similar farewell, his eyes fixed upon the stars. Often, when thus gazing out on the fine bright nights, when Venus gleamed golden and dreamy through the tepid atmosphere, he forgot himself and like a softly uttered song would fall from his lips

the *Ave maris Stella*, that tender hymn which unrolled before his eyes a distant azure land, and a tranquil sea scarce wrinkled by a gentle ripple, and lit up by a smiling star, a very sun in size. He recited too, the *Salve Regina*, the *Regina Cæli*, the *O gloriosa Domina*, all her prayers and all her canticles. He would read the Office of the Virgin, the books of holy folk written to her honour, or the little Psalter of St. Bonaventure, with such devout tenderness, that he could not turn the leaves for tears. He fasted and mortified himself, that his afflicted flesh might be offered up to her. Ever since the age of ten he had worn her livery—the holy scapular, the twofold image of Mary sewn on two squares of cloth, whose warmth upon the skin of chest and back thrilled him with delight. Later on, he also took to wearing the little chain in token of his loving slavery. But his greatest act of love was ever the Angelic Salutation, the *Ave Maria*, in his heart the most perfect of prayers. "Hail, Mary—" and he saw her advancing towards him, "full of grace, blessed amongst women;" he cast his heart at her feet for her to tread on it in sweetness. He multiplied and repeated this salutation in a hundred ways, and racked his mind for some more efficacious one. He would say twelve *Aves* to commemorate the crown of twelve stars that encircled Mary's brow; he would say fourteen of them in remembrance of her fourteen joys; another time he would recite seven decades of them in honour of the years she lived on earth. For hours the beads of his Rosary would glide between his fingers. Then, again, on certain mystically set days, he would launch into an endless muttering of the Rosary.

When alone in his cell, and free for love, he knelt upon the floor, all the garden of Mary and its lofty flowers of chastity blossomed around him. Between his fingers glided the Rosary's wreath of *Aves*, intersected by *Paters*, like a garland of white roses mingled with the lilies of Annunciation, the blood-hued flowers of Calvary, and the stars of the Coronation. He would walk closely down those fragrant paths, stopping with each of the fifteen decades of *Aves*, and dwelling on its corresponding mystery; he was beside himself with joy, or grief, or triumph, according as the mystery belonged to one or other of the three series—the joyful, sorrowful, or glorious. An incomparable legend, a history of Mary, a complete human life, with all its smiles and tears and triumph, which he lived over again from end to end in a single moment. And first he entered into the joyfulness of the five glad Mysteries steeped in

the calm of dawn. These were—the Archangel's salutation and fertilising ray gliding down from heaven, fraught with the adorable ecstasy of the spotless union; then the visit to Elizabeth on a bright, hope-laden morn, when the fruit of Mary's womb for the first time stirred and thrilled her with the shock at which mothers blench; the lying-in in a stable at Bethlehem, and the long string of shepherds come to pay homage to her Divine Maternity; the new-born babe carried into the Temple on the arms of her who bare him, and who, still weary already smiled in her joy at offering her child to God's justice, to Simeon's embrace, to the desires of the world; and lastly, Jesus at a later age revealing Himself before the doctors, in whose midst He is found by His anxious mother, now proud and comforted.

Then, after such a morning lighted with tenderness, it seemed to Serge as if the sky were suddenly overcast. His feet now trod on brambles, the Rosary beads grew galling to his fingers; he cowered with horror at the five Mysteries of Sorrow: Mary in agony with her Son in the garden of Olives, suffering with Him the stripes of the scourging, feeling on her own brow the rending gashes of the crown of thorns, bearing the fearful weight of His Cross, and dying at His feet on Calvary. These inevitable sufferings, this harrowing martyrdom of the queen he worshipped, and for whom he would have shed his blood like Jesus, roused in him a shuddering repulsion which ten years' practice of the same prayers and the same devotions had been unable to weaken. But as the beads flowed on, the darkness of the Crucifixion was suddenly rent asunder, and the resplendent glory of the five last Mysteries burst forth in all the brightness of a cloudless sun. Mary was transfigured, and seeing the hallelujah of the Resurrection—the victory over Death and the eternity of life—with outstretched hands, and dazed with admiration, she was present at the triumph of her Son ascending into Heaven on golden clouds, fringed with purple; she gathered the Apostles round her, and, as on the day of her conception, felt the flaming glow of the Spirit of Love as he came down in tongues of fire; she, too, was carried up to Heaven by a flight of angels, on whose white wings she was borne aloft like a spotless ark, and tenderly put down amid the splendour of the heavenly thrones; and there, as her supreme glory, in the light of a splendour so dazzling that the sun was quenched, God crowned her with the stars of the firmament. Impassioned love has but one word. In reciting the string of a hundred and fifty *Aves*.

Serge had not once repeated himself. That monotonous murmur, those same recurring words, like the "I love you" of all lovers, assumed each time a deeper meaning; and over it he lingered, with this solitary Latin sentence held endless converse, and learned to know Mary through and through, until the last bead of his Rosary slipping from his hand made his heart grow faint with the thought of parting from her.

Many a night had the young man spent in this way. Day-break found him still murmuring his prayers. It was the moon, he would say, to cheat himself, that is making the stars wane. His superiors had to reprove him for those night-watches, which left him worn-out, and with a face as white as if he had been losing blood. On the wall of his cell had long hung a coloured engraving of the Sacred Heart of Mary. In it the Virgin, smiling placidly, threw open her bodice, and revealed a crimson fissure, in which burned her heart, pierced with a sword, and crowned with white roses. This sword tormented him beyond measure, and afflicted him with that intolerable horror of suffering in woman, the very thought of which scattered all his pious submissiveness to the winds. He craved it, and left only the crowned and flaming heart, half torn from that exquisite flesh, as an offering to him. It was then he felt himself beloved. Mary was giving him her heart, her living heart, as it throbbed in her bosom, and dripping with her rosy blood.

It was no longer a mere devotional picture he had before him, but a material entity and prodigy of affection which compelled him, when praying before the engraving, to open out his hands to receive with reverence the heart that leaped from that unspotted bosom. He could see it, hear it beat; and he was loved, that heart was beating for himself! His whole being then became infatuated; he suffered from a craving need to kiss that heart, to be melted in it, to lie beside it within the depths of that open breast. Her love for him was an active one, desiring him to be near her, and wholly hers in the eternity to come; her love was efficacious, ever pre-occupied about him, watching over him everywhere, guarding him from the smallest breach of his fidelity to her. She loved him tenderly, more than the whole of womankind together, with a love as blue, as deep, and as boundless as the sky itself. Where could he ever find so delightful a mistress? What earthly caress could be compared to the air in which he moved, the breath of Mary? What wretched union or filthy enjoyment could be weighed against that everlasting flower of desire which grew unceasingly,

and yet was never over-blown? And the *Magnificat* would forthwith exhale from his mouth like a cloud of incense. He sang the joyful song of Mary, her thrill of joy at the approach of her Divine Spouse. He glorified the Lord who overthrew the mighty from their thrones, and who sent Mary to him, the poor destitute child, dying of love on the icy floor of his cell.

And when he had given up all to Mary—his body, his soul, his earthly goods, and spiritual chattels—when he stood before her stripped of all, and all his prayers exhausted, there welled from his burning lips the Virgin's litanies, with their reiterated, persistent, impassioned appeals of direct need for heavenly succour. He fancied himself clambering up a flight of stairs of pious yearnings, of which he gained one step at each bound of his heart. And first he called her "Holy." Next he would call her "Mother most pure, most chaste, amiable, and admirable." And with reinvigorated ardour he would proclaim sixfold her maidenhood, cooling his parched mouth with that name of "Virgin" associated in his mind with ideas of power, goodness, and fidelity. And as his heart drew him higher up the steps of light, a strange voice proceeding from his veins spoke within him and burst into dazzling flowers of speech. He yearned to melt away in fragrance, to be spread around in light, to expire in a sigh of music. As he named her "Mirror of justice," "Temple of wisdom," and "Source of his joy," he could see himself pale from ecstasy in that mirror, kneeling on the warm flagstones of that temple, quaffing intoxication in mighty draughts from that source.

Again he would transform her, indulging yet more freely his tender craze to attain a still closer union with her. She became a "Vase of honour, chosen of God," a "Bosom of election," in which he desired to prose out his being, and slumber there forever. She was the "Mystical Rose,"—a great flower which bloomed in Paradise, composed of the angels clustering round their queen—so fresh, so fragrantly scented, that he could inhale its perfume from the depth of his unworthiness with a joyful swelling of his sides which stretched them to bursting. She became changed into a "House of Gold," a "Tower of David," and a "Tower of Ivory," of inestimable richness, whiter than swansdown, and of lofty, large, and rounded form, which he would have encircled with his outstretched arms as with a girle of submissiveness. She stood on the distant skyline as the "Gate of Heaven," a glimpse of which he caught behind her shoulders as a puff of wind threw back the folds of her veil. She rose in

splendour from behind the mountain in the waning hour of night, a "Morning Star of help to travellers astray, a very dawn of Love." And when he had ascended to this height—scant of breath, yet still unsatiated—he could only further glorify her with the title of "Queen," with which he nine times hailed her, as with nine parting waves from the censer of his soul. And then his canticle died away joyfully in these last ejaculations of triumph: "Queen of virgins, Queen of all the saints, Queen conceived without sin!" She ever above him, shone in splendour; and he, on the topmost step, only reached by Mary's intimates, remained there yet another moment, swooning amidst the subtle dizzy air around him; too far as yet to kiss the edge of that azure robe, feeling himself about to fall, but with the same endless longing to ascend again and seek that superhuman pleasure.

How many times after the Virgin's litany, recited in common in the chapel, had the young man found himself with breaking knees and addled head as if from some great fall! And since his departure from the seminary, the Abbé Mouret had grown to love the Virgin still more. He paid her that impassioned cult which savoured to Brother Archangias of heresy. In his opinion she was to save the Church by some magnificent prodigy whose near appearance would entrance the world. She was the only miracle of our impious age—the blue-robed lady showing herself to little shepherds; a form of whiteness gleaming forth by night between two clouds; her veil trailing on the peasants' thatches. Whenever Brother Archangias coarsely asked him if he had ever caught sight of her, he only smiled and tightened his lips as if to keep his secret. Truth to say, he saw her every night. She no longer seemed a playful sister or a lovely, pious maiden; she wore a bridal robe, with white flowers in her hair; and beneath her drooping eyelids, from her moistened eyes, fell hopeful glances beaming on his cheeks. He could feel that she came before him, that she promised him to delay no longer; that she said to him, "Here I am, take me!" Thrice a day, as the *Angelus* rang out—at break of dawn, in the fullness of mid-day, and at the gentle fall of twilight—he bared his head and said an *Ave* with a glance around as if seeking to see if the bell were not at last announcing Mary's coming. He was twenty-five. He awaited her.

During the month of May the young priest's expectation was fraught with joyful hope. La Teuse's grumblings he no longer paid the slightest attention to. If he remained so late praying

in the church, it was because he entertained the mad idea that the great golden Virgin would at last come down from her pedestal. He stood in awe of this Virgin, however, so like a princess in her mien. He did not love all the Virgins alike, and this one inspired him with supreme respect. She was, indeed, the Mother of God, and had the fertile development of form, the majestic face and the strong arms of the Divine Spouse bearing Jesus. It was thus, he pictured her to himself, standing in the midst of the heavenly court, the train of her regal mantle trailing among the stars; she was too far above him, this Virgin, and of such exceeding might that he would be shattered into dust were she to deign to cast her eyes upon him. She was the Virgin he sought in his days of yielding weakness, the austere Virgin who restored his inward peace with an awesome glimpse of Paradise.

This night the Abbé Mouret remained on his knees for over an hour in the empty church. With folded hands and his gaze fixed on the golden Virgin rising planet-like amid the mass of verdure, he sought to bury himself in the drowsiness of ecstasy and to still the wayward sensations which had so strangely moved him that day. But he failed to glide into the dozing slumber of prayer with the delightful ease he knew so well. Despite the gloriousness and purity of Mary's self-revelment, still her motherhood, her bust rounded by maturity, and the naked child she bore upon her arm, disquieted him; they seemed to him a repetition in Heaven of the overflowing growth of procreation through which he had been moving since the morning. Like the vines of those stony slopes, like the trees of Le Paradou, like the human head of those Artauds, Mary, too, suggested the breaking forth and begetting of life. Prayer came but slowly to his lips, and distractions caused his mind to wander. He perceived things he had never seen before—the gentle wave of that chestnut hair, and the rounded swell of that rose-washed throat. She had to assume a sterner air and overwhelm him with the splendour of her sovereign might to bring him back to the unfinished sentence of his broken prayer. Her golden crown, her golden mantle, all the golden sheen which endowed her with the seeming of a dread princess, succeeded finally in crushing him into slavish submissiveness, and his prayer once more flowed evenly, while his mind was wrapped in exclusive adoration.

In this state of ecstatic trance he slumbered wakefully till eleven o'clock, heedless of his aching knees, he fancied himself

raised aloft and rocked like a sleepy child, and yielded to the restful quiet, though conscious of some unknown load of care weighing down his heart. Deeper shadows filled the church around, the lamp was growing dim, and the lofty sprays of leafage darkened the Virgin's varnished face. When the clock, about to strike, rasped out a hollow whine, a shudder thrilled through the Abbé Mouret. He had not felt the chill of the church strike upon his shoulders, and now he was shivering from head to foot. As he crossed himself one recollection swiftly flashed across his senses, just waking from their stupor—the chattering of his teeth recalled to him the nights he used to spend on the floor of his cell before the Sacred Heart of Mary, when his frame would be quivering with fever. He rose up painfully, sorely self-dissatisfied. Generally, he would leave the altar untroubled in his flesh and with Mary's sweet breath still fresh upon his brow. This night, however, he felt as if his throbbing temples were bursting—his prayer had not profited him—for, save a transient alleviation, he still felt again the burning glow which had been rising in his heart and brain since morning. When he reached the sacristy door, he turned and mechanically raised the lamp to gain a last glimpse of the Virgin. But she was shrouded in the deep shadows falling from the roof beams, buried in the foliage, and all he caught was the gleam of the golden cross upon her crown.

XV.

THE Abbé Mouret's bedroom, which occupied a corner of the vicarage, was of vast size, and pierced on two sides by two huge square windows; one of these windows opened above Désirée's farm-yard; the other overlooked the village, the valley beyond, the belt of hills, and the whole landscape. The yellow-curtained bed, the walnut chest of drawers, and the three straw-bottomed chairs seemed lost below that lofty ceiling with its whitewashed joists. A faint tartness, the somewhat musty odour of old country houses, floated up from the ruddled floor that glistened bright as ice. On the chest of drawers a tall statuette of the Immaculate Conception interposed its soft grey form between porcelain vases which La Teuse had filled with white lilac.

The Abbé Mouret put down his lamp on the edge of the chest of drawers before the Virgin. He felt so unwell that he determined to light the vine-stem fire laid in readiness. He stood there, tongs in hand, watching the kindling fire which lighted up his face. The house beneath slumbered in unbroken stillness. The silence filled his ears with its hum, which grew into the sound of whispering voices. Slowly and irresistibly these voices mastered him and increased the feeling of anxiety which had almost choked him several times during the day. What could be the cause of such mental anguish? What could this unknown trouble be which had slowly grown within him and now become so unbearable? He had not fallen into sin. It seemed but yesterday that he left the seminary with all his ardent faith, and so fortified against the world that he moved among men seeing God alone. And, suddenly, he fancied himself in his cell at five o'clock in the morning, the hour for rising. The deacon on duty passed his door, striking on it with his stick, and calling out the regulation summons—

"Benedicamus Domino!"

"*Deo Gratias!*" answered he half asleep, with his eyes still swollen with slumber.

And he jumped out on to his strip of carpet, scrubbed himself, made his bed, swept his room, and refilled his tiny pitcher. He enjoyed setting about this small piece of domestic work while the morning air sent a shivering thrill throughout his skin. He could hear the sparrows in the plane-trees of the courtyard, getting up with him with a deafening hubbub of wings and notes—their way of saying their prayers, thought he. Then he went down to the meditation room, and stopped there for half an hour after his prayers, to con that reflection of Ignatius: "What profits it a man to gain the whole world if he lose his soul?" A subject, this, fertile in good resolutions, which made him renounce all earthly goods, and dwell on that fond dream of a desert life, beneath the solitary wealth of a vast blue sky. Ten minutes passed, his bruised knees grew so painful that his whole being slowly swooned into an ecstasy, in which he saw himself a mighty conqueror and master of an immense empire, flinging down his crown, breaking his sceptre, and trampling under foot unheard of wealth, chests of gold, floods of jewels, rich stuffs embroidered with precious stones, to go and bury himself in another Thebais, clothed in a woollen serge that rasped his back. The mass snatched him from these heated fancies, upon which he looked back as a beautiful reality which might have been his lot in ancient times; and then, his communion made, he chanted the psalm for the day unconscious of any other voice but his, whose crystal purity rang out so clearly that he could follow its flying course till it reached the ear of the Lord.

When he returned to his room he went up step by step, as advised by St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. His gait was slow, his looks collected and his head bowed as he walked along, finding joy ineffable in complying with the most trifling regulations. Next came breakfast. He loved to see the rows of hunks of bread and glasses of white wine, for he felt hungry and cheerful. He would say, for instance, that the wine was truly Christian—a more daring allusion to the water which the bursar was taxed with putting in the bottles. But still his gravity at once returned to him on coming in to lectures. He took down notes upon his knees, while the tutor, resting his hands on the edge of his rostrum, talked away in familiar Latin, dashed with an occasional word in French, when at fault for a better. A discussion would then follow, in which the

students would argue in a strange jargon, with never a smile upon their face. Then, at ten o'clock, there came a twenty minutes' reading of Holy Writ. He fetched the Sacred Book, a volume richly bound and gilt edged. Having kissed it with especial reverence, he read it out bareheaded, bowing every time he came across the name of Jesus, Mary, or of Joseph. From this second meditation he emerged ready to endure for the love of God another spell of kneeling, even longer than the first. He avoided resting on his heels for a single second even. He delighted in that examination of conscience, lasting for three-quarters of an hour. He racked his memory for sins of his, and fancying himself at last damned for forgetting to kiss the two pictures on his scapular the night before, or having gone to sleep upon his left side—abominable faults to him which he would have willingly redeemed by wearing out his knees till night; yet happy faults, in that they kept him busy, and without which he would have no occupation for his unspotted heart, lulled, as he was, by the life of purity he led.

He would come into the refectory, as if his breast had been relieved of some great crime. The seminarists on duty, with their cassock sleeves tucked up, and blue canvas aprons, brought in the vermicelli soup, the boiled meat cut into little squares, and the helpings of joint and French beans. Then followed a terrific rattling of jaws, a gluttonous silence, a furious clatter of forks, only broken by greedy glances at the horse-shoe table, where the heads of the seminary eat tenderer meats and drank more ruddy wines; and all the while the greasy voice of some loud-lunged peasant's son would dominate this hubbub by braying forth, with neither stops nor sense, some devout reading, letters from missionaries, episcopal pastorals, or articles from religious papers. To this he listened as he ate. These polemical fragments, these narratives of distant travels surprised, nay, even frightened him, with their revelation of bustling, boundless field of action beyond the seminary walls, of which he had never dreamed. Eating was still unchecked when the wooden clapper announced the recreation hour. The recreation-ground was a sandy yard, in which stood eight big plane trees, which in summer cast cool shadows around. On the south side rose a wall, seventeen feet high, and bristling with the ends of broken bottles, above which the only visible parts of Plassans was the steeple of St. Mark, rising like a stony needle against the blue sky. To and fro he slowly paced the court from end to end with a group of

his fellow-students in single file ; and every time he turned again to face the wall he eyed the spire rising among the unfettered clouds, and representing to his mind the tower of the whole earth. Noisy groups were hot in discussion round the plane trees ; friends would pair off in the corners under the spying glance of some director concealed behind his window-blind. Tennis and skittle matches would be quickly formed to the great discomfort of quiet loto players lounging on the ground before their card-board squares, which some overthrown bowl or ball would smother in sand. At the sound of the bell, the noise grew still, a crowd of sparrows rose from the plane-trees, the breathless students betook themselves to their lessons in plain-chant with folded arms and hanging heads. And thus his day closed in peacefulness ; he returned to his work ; then, at four o'clock, he had his afternoon meal, and repeated his everlasting walk in sight of St. Mark's spire. Supper was marked by the same rattling of jaws and the droning voice concluding the morning reading. After this he went into the chapel to attend night prayers, and finally betook himself to bed at a quarter past eight, first sprinkling his bed with holy water to ward off all evil dreams.

How many delightful days like these had he not spent in that ancient convent of old Plassans, saturated with an old-time aroma of piety ! Five years the days had followed one another, flowing on with the unvarying murmur of limpid water. In this hour came back a thousand little moving details. He remembered the purchase of his first outfit with his mother, his two cassocks, his two waist sashes, his half-dozen bands, his eight pairs of socks, his surplice, and his three-cornered hat. And how his heart did beat that mild October evening when the seminary door first closed behind him ! He was then but twenty, come after his school years, seized with a yearning to believe and love. The very next day he had forgotten all as if fallen into a long sleep in that big, silent house. He saw once more the narrow cell in which he had lived through his two years as student of philosophy—a little hutch with only a bed, a table, and a chair, divided from the other cells by badly fitted board partitions, in a vast hall containing about fifty similar little dens. He saw again the cell he dwelt in three years more while in the theology class—a larger one, with an arm-chair, a dressing-table, and a book-case—a happy room filled with the fancies evoked by his faith. Down those endless passages, up those stairs of stone, in all sorts of nooks, he

had had sudden inspirations and unexpected aid. From the lofty ceilings fell the voices of guardian angels. Not a flagstone in the halls, not a stone in the walls, not a bough of the plane-trees, which did not speak to him of the enjoyments of his contemplative life, his lisps of tenderness, his slow initiation, the favours vouchsafed in return for his gift of his liberty, all that happiness of a divine first love.

On such and such a day, on awaking, he had beheld a bright flood of light which had steeped him in joy. Another evening as he closed the door of his cell he felt his neck grasped so lovingly by warm hands that on regaining consciousness he found himself on the ground weeping and choked with sobs. Again, at other times, especially in the little archway leading to the chapel, he had allowed supple arms to grasp him and lift him up. All Heaven was then taken up with him, moved round him, and imparted to his lightest actions, even to the satisfaction of his lowest wants, a peculiar emanation, an astonishing perfume, which always seemed to cling faintly to his clothes, to his very skin. And again, he remembered the Thursday walks. They used to leave at two o'clock for some verdant nook within three miles from Plassans. Oftenest they sought a meadow corner on the banks of the Viorne, where gnarled willows steeped their leaves in the stream. But he saw nothing—neither the big yellow flowers in the meadow, nor the swallows sipping as they flew, grazing the little river's even surface. Till six o'clock, seated in groups beneath the willows, his comrades and himself recited the Office of the Virgin in common, or read in pairs the "Little Hours," the book of prayers recommended, but not enjoined, to young seminarists.

The Abbé Mouret smiled as he stirred the burning embers. His only recollection of the past was one of undiminished purity, of perfect obedience. He had been a lily whose sweet scent had charmed his masters. He could not recall a single evil deed of his. He had never taken advantage of the absolute freedom of those walks, when the two prefects in charge went off to have a chat with a parish priest in the neighbourhood, to have a smoke behind a hedge, or to hurry off and drink beer with some friend. Never had he hidden a novel under his mattress, nor put bottles of aniseed cordial in his night-stool. For a long time, even, he had no suspicion of all the sinfulness around—of the wings of chicken and the cakes smuggled in in Lent, of the guilty letters brought in by the servers, of the abominable conversations carried on in whispers in certain

corners of the court-yard. He had wept hot tears the day he first perceived that few among his fellows loved God for His own sake. There were peasants' sons there who had taken orders through their terror of conscription, sluggards dreaming of a career of idleness, ambitious youths already agitated by the vision of the staff and mitre. And when he found the world's obscenities reappearing at the altar's very foot, he withdrew still further into himself, giving himself still more to God to console Him for His forsaken state.

He did recollect, however, that he had crossed his legs one day in class, and that, when the tutor reproved him for it, his face had become fiery red, as if he had committed some indecency. He was one of the best students, never arguing, and learning his texts by heart. He could prove the existence and eternity of God by proofs drawn from Holy Writ, the opinion of the fathers of the Church, and the universal consensus of all mankind. This kind of reasoning filled him with an unshakable certainty. During his first year of philosophy, he worked at his logic course so earnestly that his tutor checked him, remarking that the wisest were not the holiest. In his second year, therefore, he carried out his study of metaphysics as a regulation duty, forming but a very small fraction of his daily duties. He felt a growing contempt for science; he wished to remain ignorant, in order to preserve the humility of his faith. Later on, he only followed the lectures on Rorbacher's "Ecclesiastical History" from submission; he ventured as far as Gousset's arguments, and Bouvier's "Theological Course," without daring to take up Bellarmin, Liguori, Suarez, or St. Thomas Aquinas. In Holy Writ alone he found a passionate delight. In it he found all desirable knowledge, a tale of infinite love which should be sufficient instruction for all men of good-will. He would only adopt the dicta of his teachers, ridding himself through them of all troublesome inquiry, not requiring such rubbish to learn to love, accusing books of stealing the time which should be devoted to prayer. He had even succeeded in forgetting his years of college life. He no longer knew anything, and was now simplicity itself, a child brought back to the lisps of his catechism.

Such was the manner in which he had ascended step by step to the priesthood. And here his recollections thronged more quickly on him, softened, still warm with heavenly joys. Each year he had drawn nearer to God. His vacations were passed in holy fashion at an uncle's, in confessions every day and com-

munions twice a week. He would lay fasts upon himself, and hide boxes of rock-salt inside his trunk, and kneel with bared knees on these for hours together. In recreation time he remained in chapel, or went up to the room of one of the directors, who related him pious and extraordinary stories. Then, as the fast of the Holy Trinity drew nigh, he was rewarded beyond all measure and overwhelmed by the stirring emotion which pervades all seminaries on the eve of ordinations. This was the great festival of all, when the sky opened to allow the elect to rise another step. For a fortnight before he imposed a bread and water diet on himself. He closed his window blinds so as not to see the daylight at all, and prostrated himself in the gloom to beg of Jesus to accept his sacrifice. The last four days he suffered torturing pangs and terrible scruples, which would force him from his bed in the middle of the night to knock at the door of the strange priest giving the Retreat—some barefoot Carmelite, or often a converted Protestant with some wonderful story attached to him. To him he would make at great length a general confession of his whole life in a voice choked with sobs. Only absolution quieted him, and refreshed him as if he had just enjoyed a bath of grace.

On the morning of the great day, he felt wholly white; and so vividly was he conscious of his whiteness that he seemed to himself to be shedding light around him. Then the seminary bell rang out its clear-toned notes, while all the scents of June—the stocks in blossom, the mignonnette and heliotropes—came over the lofty courtyard wall. In the chapel were waiting the parents in their best attire, and so deeply moved that the women sobbed behind their veils. Next came the procession up the church—the deacons about to receive their priesthood in golden chasubles, the sub-deacons in dalmatics, those in minor orders and the tonsured with their surplices floating on their shoulders and their black berettas in their hands. The organ rolled its flute-like notes carolling a canticle of joy. At the altar, the Bishop was officiating, staff in hand, assisted by two canons. All the Chapter were there, the priests of all the parishes thronged thick amid a dazzling wealth of apparel and the flaming sheen of gold enkindled by the broad band of sunlight falling from a window in the nave. The epistle over, the ordination began. At this very hour, the Abbé Mouret could remember the chill of the scissors when he was marked with the tonsure at the beginning of his first year of theology. It had made him slightly hudder. But the tonsure then was very small, hardly

as big round as a two-sou piece. Later, with each fresh order conferred on him, it grew and grew until it crowned him with a white spot as large as a big Host. And the organ's hum grew softer, and the censers dropped with a silvery tinkling of their slender chains, releasing a cloud of white smoke, which unrolled itself in lace-like folds. He could see himself, the tonsured youth in his surplice, led to the altar by the master of ceremonies; there he knelt and bowed his head down low, while the bishop, with his golden scissors, snipped off three locks—one over his forehead, and the other two near his ears. Yet another year, and he could see himself again in the chapel, filled with incense, receiving the four minor orders: led by an archdeacon, he went to the main doorway, closed the door with a bang, and opened it again, to show that to him was entrusted the care of churches; he rang a small bell with his right hand, in token that it was his duty to call the faithful to the divine offices; he then returned to the altar, where fresh privileges were conferred upon him by the bishop—that of singing the lessons, of blessing the bread, of catechising children, of exorcising the evil spirit, of serving the deacons, of lighting and extinguishing the candles.

And next came back the memory of the following ordination, more solemn and more dread, amid the same strains of the organ, whose roll sounded like God's own thunder: that day he wore the sub-deacon's dalmatic on his shoulders, he bound himself for ever by the vow of chastity, he trembled in every pore, despite his faith, at the terrible *Accedite* from the bishop, which put to flight his two comrades, blanching by his side. His new duties were to serve the priest at the altar, to prepare the cruets, sing the epistle, wipe the chalice, and carry the cross in processions. And, at last, he passed in procession once more into the chapel, in the radiance of a June sun: but this time he walked at the very head of the procession, with an alb and girdle, his stole crossed over his breast, his chasuble falling from his neck; all but fainting with supreme emotion, he could perceive the pallid face of the bishop giving him the priesthood, the fulness of the ministry, by the threefold laying of his hands. And after making his oath of ecclesiastical obedience, he felt himself uplifted from the stone floor, when the prelate's voice uttered the Latin form: "*Accipe Spiritum Sanctum: quorum remisieris peccata remittuntur eis, et quorum retineris, retenta sunt.*"

XVI.

THIS evocation of the deep joys of his youth had given the Abbé a touch of feverishness. He no longer felt the cold. He put the tongs down and walked towards the bedstead as if about to go to bed, but turned back and leaned his forehead against a window-pane, looking out into the night with sightless eyes. Could he be ill? Why did he feel such languidness in all his limbs, and his blood burn in every vein? On two occasions he had had, while at the seminary, similar attacks—a sort of physical irritation which made him most unhappy; one day, indeed, he had to go to bed in raving delirium. And then he thought of a young girl possessed by evil spirits, whom Brother Archangias stated he had cured with a simple sign of the cross when she fell down like a shot before him. This recalled to him the spiritual exorcisms which one of his teachers had formerly recommended to him: prayer, a general confession, frequent communion, choosing a wise confessor who should have great authority on his penitent's mind. And then, without any transition, and with a suddenness which astonished himself, he saw in the depths of his memory the round face of one of his old friends, a peasant, who had been a choir boy at eight years old, whose expenses at the seminary were paid by a lady who watched over him. He was always laughing, he rejoiced beforehand at the anticipated little advantages of his career; twelve hundred francs of stipend, the vicarage at the end of a garden, the presents, the invitations to dinners, the little profits from the weddings, and baptismal and burial fees. He indeed must be happy in his parish.

The feeling of melancholy regret evoked by this recollection surprised the priest extremely. Was he not happy, too? Up to this day he had regretted nothing, wished for nothing, envied nothing. Even as he searched into himself at that very moment he failed to find in himself any cause for bitterness.

He believed himself to be the same as in the early days of his deaconship, when the obligative reading of his breviary at certain stated hours, had filled his whole days with continuous prayer. No doubts tormented him; he prostrated himself, before the mysteries, he could not understand; he sacrificed his reason, which he despised, with the greatest ease. When he first left the seminary, he was rejoiced at finding himself a stranger among his fellowmen, no longer to walk like them, his head borne differently, possessed of gestures, words and opinions of a being apart. He had felt himself effeminised, more nearly angelic, washed of his sex, of his virile odour. He felt almost proud of no longer belonging to his species, of having been brought up for God and carefully purged of all human grossness by a jealously watchful system of education. Again, it seemed to him as if for years he had been dwelling in holy oil, prepared with all due rites, which had steeped his flesh in incipient blessedness. Certain organs of his had little by little dissolved and disappeared, his limbs, his brain, had grown impoverished and lost material substance, to become filled with soul, with a subtle vapour which, at times, intoxicated him and dizzied him as if the earth had suddenly failed beneath his feet. He displayed the fears, the unwillingness, the open candour of a cloistered maiden. He sometimes remarked with a smile that he was continuing his childhood, under the impression that he was still quite little, with the same sensations, the same ideas, the same opinions. At six years old, for instance, he knew as much of God as at twenty-five, in prayer the inflexions of his voice were still the same, and he felt a childish joy in folding his hands quite correctly. The world still looked to him the world he saw in former days when his mother led him by the hand. He had been born a priest, and a priest he had grown up. Whenever he displayed before La Teuse some proof of the grossest ignorance of life, she would stare him in the face, astounded, and remark with a strange smile that "He was Mademoiselle Désirée's brother all over."

In all his existence he could only recall one shock of shame. It happened in the last six months at the seminary, between his deaconship and priesthood. He had been ordered to read the work of the Abbé Craisson, superior of the great seminary at Valence: "*De rebus venereis ad usum confessoriorum.*" He had risen from this book terrified and choked with sobs. This profoundly learned treatise on man's conscience, exhibiting all man's abomination and diving into the most monstrous cases of

unnatural passions, brutally violated all his virginity of body and mind. He was forever befouled, like a bride initiated in a moment into the brutalities of love. And every time he heard confessions, he inevitably recurred to this catechism of shame. And though the obscurities of dogma, the duties of the ministry and the death of every free agent did not shake his calmness, his happiness at being God's child alone, yet, in spite of himself, he retained the fleshly commotion of the filth he had to stir—he was conscious of an ineffaceable spot, deep down somewhere in his being, which might one day grow larger and cover him with mud.

The moon was rising behind Les Garrigues. The Abbé Mouret, burning more and more with fever, opened the window and leaned upon his elbows, to feel upon his face the coolness of the night. He could no longer remember at what time exactly this illness had seized him. He remembered, however, that in the morning, while saying his mass, he was quite calm and restful. It must have been later, perhaps during his long walk in the sun or while he shivered under the trees of Le Paradou, or while suffocating in Désirée's poultry-yard. And then he lived over the day again.

Before him stretched away the vast plain, still more direful to view beneath the pallid light of the slanting moonbeams. The olive-trees and almond-trees showed like spots of grey, amid the chaos of big rocks as far as the sombre row of hills on the skyline. The scene was one of broad belts of shade, battered ridges, blood-hued earthy pools in which the stars seemed to contemplate themselves, patches of chalky light, like cast-off women's garments, uncovering forms steeped in gloom and stretched in slumber in the hollow folds of ground. At night this glowing country assumed a strange, impassioned, weltering, appearance. It slumbered with uncovered bosom, distorted frame, dislocated hips, and spread limbs, while mighty, steaming sighs exhaled from it like strong aroma of a sweating sleeper. It was as if some mighty Cybele had fallen on her back, with upstarting bosom, and with the moon upon her body, glutted with the sun's glowing embraces and dreaming still of fecundation. Far away, all along that giant body, the Abbé Mouret's eyes followed the path to Les Olivettes, a narrow, pale riband stretching away like a waving stay-lace. He could hear Brother Archangias turn up the young girls' petticoats and whip them till the blood came, spitting in the older girl's faces, redolent himself as an insatiable he-goat. He could see Rosalie laughing

in her hands with that look upon her face of a lecherous animal, while old Bambousse hurled clods of earth and smote her on her hips. There, too, he thought, he still was well, his neck barely heated by the lovely morning air. He could feel a constant quivering behind him, that confused hum of life, which he had faintly heard since morning when the sun, midway in his mass, had entered by the shattered windows. Never, as at this hour of the night, had the country around troubled him, with its giant breast, its yielding shadows, its gleams of ambered skin, its lavish goddess-like nudity barely hidden beneath the silvered gauze of moonlight.

The young priest lowered his eyes, and gazed upon the village of Les Artaud. The village lay weighed down by the heavy slumber of weariness, in the absolute nonentity of peasants' sleep. Not a light: the battered hovels showed like dusky heaps, seamed by the white stripes of the cross lanes swept by the moonlight. Even the dogs were surely snoring on the thresholds of the closed doors. Had the Artauds, perhaps, poisoned the air of the vicarage with some abominable plague? Behind him, he could hear ever growing the vaporous emanation whose increasing nearness so sorely pained him. Now, he could hear a sound as of the trampling of a flock, a whiff of dust which reached him steeped with the emanations of a herd of beasts. The thoughts he had had that morning recurred to him when dwelling on that handful of men beginning early ages over again, and springing up between those naked rocks like a handful of thistles sown by the winds; he felt himself looking on at the hatching of a race. When he was a child, nothing amazed and frightened him more than those myriads of insects which he saw gush forth on raising certain damp stones. The Artauds, even when asleep, resting with aching backs, shrouded in shadow, disturbed him with their slumber, he could recognise their breath in the air he breathed. He would have liked to have nothing but rocks below his window. The hamlet was not dead enough; the thatched roofs bulged like bosoms; through the gaping cracks in the doors came sighs, faint creaks, and hums of living silence, which revealed the presence in that den of a multiplying litter, beneath the night's dusky cradling. No doubt it was that smell alone which was making him feel sick. And yet he had often inhaled it as strong without feeling any other need than to refresh himself in prayer.

With sweating temples he proceeded to open the other window,

craving colder air. Below him, to his left, lay the cemetery, with the Solitary's lofty rod-like cone, whose shade was unstirred by a single breeze. From the empty field rose up an odour of a newly mown meadow. The great grey wall of the church, that wall full of lizards and planted with wall-flowers, gleamed colder in the moonlight—one of its large windows glistening with panes like plates of steel. The sleeping church could have no other life in it at this hour than the extra-human life of the God in the Host enclosed within the tabernacle. He thought of the bracket lamp's yellow glow swallowed up in gloom, and was tempted to go down once more, to ease his ailing head amid those deep shadows, free from every stain. But a strange feeling of terror held him back; he suddenly fancied, while his eyes were fixed upon the moonlit panes, that he saw the church illuminated from within by a furnace-like glare, the dazzling blaze of a festival of hell, in which whirled the month of May, the plants, animals, and the girls of Les Artaud, madly clasping trees with their bare arms. Then, as he leaned over, he saw Désirée's poultry-yard, black with gloom and smoking. He could not clearly see the rabbit-hutches, the fowls' roosting-places, or the ducks' house. It was all one big mass heaped up in stench, sleeping with the same pestiferous odour. From under the stable-door came the acrid smell of the goat; and the little pig, stretched upon his back, snorted thickly near an empty porringer. From the brazen throat of the big yellow cock Alexander rang out a crow, which awoke in the distance, one after another, the impassioned calls of all the village cocks.

Suddenly a recollection flashed upon the Abbé Mouret. The fever whose pursuit he heard had struck him in Désirée's farm-yard, when looking at the hens still warm from laying, and of the rabbit-does plucking the down from their bellies. And here the feeling of a breathing on his neck was so distinct that he turned to see at last who was seizing him thus by the back of his head. And he recalled Albine bounding out of Le Paradou, and the door that slammed to upon the vision of an enchanted garden; he recalled her racing along the interminable wall, following the gig at a run, and throwing birch leaves to the breeze as kisses; he recalled her, again, in the twilight, laughing at the oaths of Brother Archangias, her skirts grazing along the path, like a little cloud of dust bowled along by the evening breeze. She was sixteen; how strange she looked, with her slightly elongated face; she savoured of the open air, of grass, of earth. And so accurate was his recollection of her

that he could see a scratch upon one of her supple wrists, a rosy scar upon the white skin. Why did she laugh like that as she looked at him with her blue eyes? He was engulfed in her laughter as in a billowing flood of sand, resounding from every atom of his flesh; he inhaled it, felt it vibrate within himself. Yes, all his evil state came from that laughter which he had quaffed.

In the middle of the room, with both windows open, he stood and shivered, and seized with a fright which made him hide his face in his hands. Was this, then, the ending of the whole day; this evocation of a fair girl, with a slightly drawn face and eyes of blue? And the whole day came in through the two open windows. In the distance—the glow of those red lands, the ardent passion of those big rocks, the olive-trees springing up amid the stones, the vines twisting their arms by the roadside; nearer—the steam of human sweat borne in upon the air from Les Artaud, the musty odour of the cemetery, the fragrance of incense from the church, tainted by the scent of greasy-haired wenches; there came in, too, a muck-heap steam, the sloppy fumes of the poultry-yard, and the suffocating ferment of animal germs. And all these vapours poured in in one asphyxiating gust, so offensive and so rapid in expansion as to choke him. He closed his senses, and tried to subdue them into nothingness. But still before him Albine reappeared like a tall flower, flourishing and beautified in that soil. She was the natural blossom of all this corruption, delicate in the sun opening the young bud of her white shoulders, so glad of living that she leaped from her stem and darted upon his mouth, scenting him with her long-drawn laughter.

A cry broke from the priest. He had felt a burning touch upon his lips. Like a burning stream it had flowed throughout his veins. And then, in search of refuge, he threw himself on his knees before the figure of the Immaculate Conception, exclaiming, with folded hands:

“Holy Virgin of Virgins, pray for me!”

XVII.

A TENDER smile wreathed the lips, marked by a dash of crimson, of the Immaculate Conception on the walnut drawers. Her form was small and wholly white. Her long white veil, falling from head to foot, had only an imperceptible thread of gold around its edge. Her gown, draped in long straight folds over a sexless body, was clasped around her neck—that flexible neck which was its only revelation. Not a single lock of her chestnut hair peeped forth. Her countenance was rosy, with clear eyes, upturned to Heaven: her hands were clasped—rosy, childlike hands, whose finger tips were seen beneath the folds of her veil, above the azure scarf which seemed to fasten round her waist two streaming ends of the firmament. Of all her woman's charms, not one was bared, except her feet, ecstasically naked, treading the mystical sweet-briar. And from the nakedness of her feet sprung golden roses, like a natural efflorescence of her two-fold purity of flesh.

“Virgin most faithful, pray for me!” despairingly uttered the priest.

This Virgin had never distressed him. She was not a mother yet; her arms did not hold Jesus out to him, her bust did not yet present the rounded outlines of fertility. She was not the Queen of Heaven descending, crowned with gold and clothed in gold, like a princess of the earth, borne in triumph by a flight of cherubim. This one had never assumed a mien of dread; had never spoken to him with the austere severity of an all-powerful mistress, whose very sight should bow all foreheads to the dust. He could dare to look on her and love her, without a fear of being moved by the gentle wave of her chestnut hair; her feet alone excited his affection, those darling feet which blossomed like a garden of chastity in too miraculous a manner for him to dare satisfy his longing to cover them with kisses. She scented his room with her lily-like fragrance. She was the

silver lily planted in a golden vase, precious, eternal, impeccable purity. Within the white veil, so closely drawn round her, could be nothing human—only a Virgin flame, burning with ever even glow. At night when going to bed, in the morning as he woke, he could see her there, still wearing that same ecstatic smile. He undressed himself before her, as before his own modesty, without the least constraint.

"Mother, most pure, Mother, most chaste, Mother, ever-virgin, pray for me!" he stammered, affrightedly, clinging to the Virgin's feet, as if he heard Albine's running footfalls behind his back. "You are my refuge, the source of my joy, the temple of my wisdom, the tower of ivory in which I have shut up my purity. I put myself into your unspotted hands, I beseech you to take me, to cover me with a corner of your veil, to hide me beneath your innocence, behind the hallowed rampart of your garment—so that no fleshly breath may come upon me there. I need you, I die without you, I shall feel for ever parted from you, if you do not bear me away in your helpful arms, far from hence into the glowing whiteness wherein you dwell. O Mary, conceived without sin, annihilate me in the depths of the immaculate snow that falls from your every limb. You are the miracle of eternal chastity. Your offspring has sprung from a very beam of grace, like some wondrous tree, unsworn by any germ. Your son, Jesus, was born of the breath of God; you yourself were born without your mother's womb being stained, and I would believe that this virginity goes back thus from age to age in an endless unwittingness of flesh. Oh! to live, to grow up outside the profligacy of our senses! Oh! to multiply, to bring forth children, without this abominable necessity of sex, only by the contact of a celestial kiss!"

This despairing appeal, this cry of purified longing, calmed the young priest's fears. The Virgin—wholly white, and her eyes turned heavenward—appeared to smile more tenderly with her thin red lips. With a softened voice he went on:

"I should like to be a child once more. I should like to be always a child, walking in the shadow of your gown. When still quite little, I clasped my hands in uttering the name of Mary. My cradle was white, my body was white, my every thought was white. I could see you distinctly, I could hear you calling me, I went to you in the light of a smile over scattered rose-petals. And nought else did I feel or think, I lived just enough to be a flower at your feet. No one ought to grow up. You would have around you only fair-haired heads,

a crowd of children who would love you with pure hands, unsullied lips, tender limbs, without a stain, as if come forth from a bath of milk. To kiss a child's cheek is to kiss its soul. Only a child can say your name without befouling it. In later years, our mouth gets tainted and reeks of our passions. Even I, who love you so much, and have given myself to you, I dare not at all times call on you, for I do not wish to let you come in contact with the impurities of my manhood. I have prayed and chastised my flesh, I have slept in your keeping, and lived in chastity; and yet I weep to see that I now am not yet dead enough to the world to be your betrothed. O Mary! adorable Virgin, why can I not be only five years old—why could I not remain the child who glued his lips to your pictures? I would take you to my heart, I would lay you by my side, I would clasp and kiss you like a friend—like a girl of my own age. I would have your close garment, your childish veil, your blue scarf—all that youthfulness, which makes you like an elder sister. I would not try to kiss your locks, for hair is a naked thing which should not be seen; but I would kiss your bare feet, one after the other, for nights and nights together, until my lips shall have shredded the golden roses of their petals, those mystical roses of our veins."

He stopped, waiting for the Virgin to look down upon him and brush his forehead with the edges of her veil. But the Virgin remained enwrapped in muslin up to her neck and fingernails and ankles, wholly Heaven's own.

"Well, then," he went on more crazily still, "grant that I become a child again, O kindly Virgin! Virgin most powerful. Grant that I may be only five years old. Take my senses, take my manhood. Let a miracle sweep away all the man that has grown up within me. You reign in Heaven, nothing is easier to you than to blast me, wither up my organs, make me sexless, powerless for evil, and so bereft of all my strength as to be evermore unable to raise my little finger without your leave. I wish never to feel my nerves again, nor my muscles, nor the beating of my heart, nor the working of my desires. I want to be a thing—a white stone at your feet, on which you will leave but a perfume; a stone that will not move from where you cast it, earless and eyeless, content to be beneath your heel, unable to think of foulness with the other wayside stones! Oh! then what bliss for me! I shall reach without an effort and at a bound my dream of perfection. I shall at last proclaim myself your true priest. I shall be what all my studies, my

prayers, my five years of slow initiation have been unable to make me. Yes, I reject life ; I say that the death of my kind is better than the continual abomination which propagates it. Everything is stained by this defect. Everywhere its universal stench is tainting love, the bridal chamber, the cradle of the new-born babe, and even the flowers expanding in the sun and the trees bursting into bud. Earth is steeped in this impurity, whose slightest drops spring forth again in growths of shame. But that I may be perfect, O Queen of angels, harken to my prayer, and grant it ! Make me one of those angels with only two great wings behind their cheeks ; I shall no more have a body, no longer any limbs ; I will fly to you if you call me. I shall be nought else but a mouth to utter your praises, a pair of spotless wings to cradle you in your journeys through the heavens. Oh, for death ! death ! Virgin, most venerable, grant me the death of all ! I will love you for the death of my body, the death of all that lives and multiplies. I shall consummate with you the sole marriage my heart cares for. I will rise upwards, ever higher and higher, till I have reached the brasier in which you shine in splendour—a mighty planet, an immense white rose, whose every petal glows like a moon, a silver throne from which you beam with such a blaze of innocence that Heaven itself is all lit up by the gleam of your veil alone. Every hue of whiteness—of early dawns, of the snow on inaccessible peaks, of barely opened lilies, of the water of hidden, unknown springs, of the milky sap of plants untouched by the sun, of maidens' smiles, of the souls of children dead in their cradle—is showered on your white feet. And then I will rise to your lips like a subtle flame ; I will enter into you by your half opened mouth, and the bridal will be fulfilled, while the archangels are thrilled by our joyfulness. Oh, to be maiden, to love in maidenhood, to keep amid the sweetest kisses one's maiden whiteness ! To have all love stretched on the wings of swans, in a sky of purity, in the arms of a luminous mistress whose caresses are delights of the soul ! Oh, there is the perfection, the superhuman dream, the yearning which shatters my very bones, the joys which bear me up to Heaven ! O Mary, Vessel of election, castrate my humanity, make me a eunuch among men, that you may fearlessly surrender to me the treasure of your maidenhood ! ”

And the Abbé Mouret, with chattering teeth and felled by fever, swooned away on the floor.

BOOK II.

I.

CALICO curtains carefully drawn across the two large windows lit the room with the filtered whiteness of breaking day. This room was lofty and vast, and was fitted up with old Louis XV furniture, painted white with red flowers on a leafy ground. On the pier, above the doors on either side of the alcove, faded paintings still displayed the rosy bellies and hams of groups of flying Cupids, whose games it was now impossible to follow. But the wainscotting with its oval panels, the folding doors, the rounded ceiling (once sky-blue and framed in a bower of scrolls, medallions and knots of flesh-coloured ribands), had all faded to the softest grey, a grey that preserved the tenderness of that wilted paradise. Opposite the windows the large alcove, receding beneath curly banks of clouds which plaster Cupids drew aside—leaning over, head downwards, as if to fix their saucy stare upon the bed—was closed, like the windows, by coarsely hemmed calico curtains, whose simplicity looked strange in this room still warmed with a far off scent of luxurious comfort.

Seated near a side-table on which a kettle bubbled over a spirit-lamp, Albine intently watched the alcove curtains. She was dressed in white, her hair gathered up in an old lace kerchief, her hands drooped wearily as she kept her watch with the serious look of youthful womanhood. A faint breathing, like the breath of a slumbering child, could be heard in the deep silence of the room. She grew restless, however, after a few minutes, and could not resist stepping lightly towards the alcove and lifting the corner of one of the curtains. On the edge of the big bed lay Serge, apparently asleep, with his head resting on his doubled arm. During his illness his hair had lengthened and his beard had grown. He looked very white, his eyes and his lips were very pallid.

Albine, much moved, was about to let the curtain fall again.

"I'm not asleep," said Serge in the lowest of tones.

He lay perfectly still with his head on his arm, without stirring even a finger, as if overwhelmed by delightful weariness. His eyes had slowly unclosed; his breath blew lightly on his hand, raising the golden down of his fair skin.

"I heard you, dear," he murmured again. "You were walking on tip-toe."

His endearing epithet enchanted her. She went up to his bed and crouched down beside it to bring her face on a level with his.

"How are you, dear?" she asked.

And in her turn she tasted the sweetness of that word "dear," which now passed her lips for the first time.

"Oh! you are well now," she continued. "Do you know, I used to cry the whole way home when I had to come back with bad news of you. They told me you were delirious, and that your dreadful fever, if it did spare you, would destroy your reason. Oh, didn't I hug and kiss your uncle Pascal when he brought you here to recruit your health!"

She tucked in the bed-clothes for him like a mother.

"Those burnt-up rocks over there, you see, were no good to you at all. You want trees, and coolness, and quiet. The doctor, fancy, hasn't even told a soul that he was hiding you away here. That's a secret between himself and those who love you. He thought you were lost. Nobody will ever disturb you, you may be sure of that! Uncle Jeanbernard smokes his pipe by his lettuce bed. The others will get news of you on the sly. Even the doctor isn't coming back; I am now your doctor. You don't want any more physic, it seems. What you want now is to be loved; do you see?"

He seemed not to hear her, his head as yet was void. His eyes, although his head remained motionless, kept wandering inquiringly round the room, and it struck her that he was fidgeting as to his whereabouts.

"This is my room," she said. "I have given it to you. Isn't it a pretty one? I took the finest pieces of furniture out of the lumber attic, and then I made those calico curtains to prevent the daylight dazzling me. And you're not putting me out a bit. I shall sleep on the second floor. There are three or four empty rooms there still."

Still he looked worried.

"You're alone, dear?" he asked.



THE ABBÉ. AFTER A LONG ILLNESS, AWAKES AND FINDS
BESIDE HIM.

"Yes; why do you ask that?"

He made no answer, but muttered wearily:

"I have been dreaming, I am always dreaming. I hear bells ringing, and that tires me."

Remaining silent awhile, he went on:

"Go and shut the door, bolt it; I want you to be alone, quite alone."

When she came back with a chair in her hand and sat down by his pillow, he looked as gleeful as a child and kept on saying:

"Now, nobody can come in. I shall not hear those bells any more. When *you* are talking to me, it rests me."

"Do you want anything to drink?" she asked.

He made a sign that he was not thirsty. He looked at Albine's hands with such an astonished, delighted gaze, that she stretched one out and laid it smilingly on the edge of his pillow. Then he let his head glide down, and rested his cheek upon that small, cool hand, saying, with a light laugh:

"Ah! it's as soft as silk. It feels just as if it was sending a cool breeze all through my hair. Don't take it away, please."

Then came another long spell of silence. They gazed on one another with loving kindness—Albine calmly scanning herself in the convalescent's eyes, Serge apparently listening to some faint whisper from the small, cool hand.

"Your hand is so nice," he said once more. "You can't fancy what good it does me. It seems to come right into me, and take away all the pain in my limbs. It's like being soothed all over, a relief, a cure."

He rubbed his cheek softly on it, with growing animation as if come back at last to life.

"You won't give me anything nasty to drink, will you? You won't worry me with all sorts of remedies? Your hand is quite enough for me. I have come here for you to put it there under my head."

"Dear old Serge," softly said Albine, "how you must have suffered."

"Suffered? yes, yes; but it's a long time ago. I slept badly, I had such frightful dreams. If I could, I'd tell you all about it."

He closed his eyes a moment and strove hard to remember.

"I can see nothing but black," he stammered. "It is very odd, I have just come back from a long journey. I don't even

know now where I started from. I had fever, I know, a fever that raced through my veins like a wild beast. I have it, now I remember. The whole time I had a nightmare, in which I seemed to be crawling along an endless underground passage: and every now and then I had an attack of intolerable pains, and then the passage would be suddenly walled up; a shower of stones fell from overhead, the side walls would close in, and there I stuck, panting mad to get on beyond; and then I would bore into the obstacle in my path, and batter away with feet and fists, and skull, despairing of ever being able to get through the ever increasing mound of rubbish. At other times, I had only to touch it with my finger and it would vanish altogether: I could walk freely along the widened gallery, weary only from the severity of my attack."

Albine tried to lay a hand upon his mouth.

"No, it doesn't tire me to talk. I can talk into your ear here, you see. I feel as if I was thinking and you could hear me. The queerest point about this underground journey was that I hadn't the faintest idea of turning back again; I got obstinate, although I had the thought before me that it would take me thousands of years to clear away a single heap of the wreckage. It seemed a fated task, which I had to fulfil under pain of the greatest misfortunes. So, with my knees all bruised and my forehead bumping against the rock, I had a kind of anguished conscientiousness in working away with all my might to get there as quickly as I possibly could. Get where? I don't know, I don't know."

He closed his eyes and dreamily thought and sought for a clue. Then with a careless pout, he took refuge again in Albine's hand and said laughingly:

"I say, how silly; I am a child."

But the young girl, to see if he really was wholly hers, questioned him and led him back to the confused recollections he had tried to summon up. He could remember nothing, however; he was truly in a happy state of childhood. He fancied himself born the day before.

"Oh! I am not strong enough yet," he said. "My furthest recollection is of a bed which burned me all over, my head rolled about on a pillow like a pan of live coals, and my feet got worn away with always rubbing up against each other. I was very bad, I know. I seemed to be having my body changed, as if I was taken all to pieces, and put together again like a broken machine."

He laughed again at his simile, and continued :

"I shall be all new again. My illness has given me a fine cleaning. But what was it you were asking me? No, nobody was there. I was suffering all by myself at the bottom of a black hole. Nobody, nobody. Beyond that, nothing, I can see nothing. Let me be your child, will you? You shall teach me how to walk. I can see nothing else but you, now. Much I care for what isn't you, dear. I can't remember, I tell you. I came, you took me, and that is all."

And restfully and pettingly he said once more :

"How warm your hand is now; it is as nice as the sun. Don't let us talk any more. It makes me hot."

A chilly hush fell over the large room from the blue ceiling. The spirit-lamp had just gone out, and the thread of steam from the kettle grew finer and finer. Albine and Serge, their heads side by side upon the pillow, gazed at the large calico curtains drawn across the windows. Serge's eyes, especially, were drawn to them as to the white source of all the light. He bathed in it as in diluted sunshine graduated to his weakened strength. He could tell that the sun lay behind that yellower gleam upon a corner of the curtain, and that very fact was enough to make him feel himself again. A far-off rustle of leaves came upon his listening ear, and on the right-hand window the greenish clean-cut shadow of a lofty bough awoke in him a restless dream of the forest he could feel so near.

"Would you like to have the curtains opened," asked Albine, misunderstanding his steady gaze.

"No, no," he hastily replied.

"It's a fine day; you would get the sunlight and see the trees."

"No, please don't. I don't want to see anything outside. That bough there tires me out with its waving and its rising, just as if it was alive. Leave your hand here, and I will go to sleep. All is white now— It's so nice."

And he calmly fell asleep, while Albine watched by him and blew upon his face to make his slumber cool.

II

ON the morrow the fine weather had broken, and it rained all day. Serge's fever returned, and he spent a day of suffering, his eyes fastened despairingly upon the curtains through which the light now fell dim and ashy-grey as in a cellar. He could no longer see a trace of sunshine, and he looked in vain for the shadow that had scared him, the shadow of that lofty bough which was engulfed in the fallow mist of the pouring rain, and whose disappearance seemed to him to have carried away with it all the forest. Towards evening he became slightly delirious and cried out to Albine that the sun was dead, that he could see all the sky, all the country bewailing the death of the sun. She had to soothe him like a child, promising him the sun, telling him it would come back again, that she would give it him. But he also grieved for the plants. The seeds, he said, must be suffering below ground, waiting for light to come again; they had nightmares too, they too dreamed they were crawling along an underground passage, hindered by mounds of ruins, struggling madly to reach the sunlight. And he began to weep and sob out in lowered tones that winter was a disease of the earth, that he should die with the earth, unless the spring healed them both.

For three days more the weather was truly frightful. Floods burst upon the trees with the distant boom of an overflowing river. Gusts of wind rolled along and beat against the windows with the headlong violence of enormous waves. Serge had insisted on Albine's hermetically closing the shutters. By the lamp-light he was no longer troubled by the gloom of the pallid curtains, he no longer felt the greyiness of the sky glide in through the narrowest cracks, and flow up to him like a cloud of dust about to bury him. An increasing apathy crept upon him as he lay there with shrunken arms and pallid features, his weakness growing as the earth without grew more ailing. At

times, when the clouds were inky black, when the bending trees cracked again, and the earth trailed its blades of grass under the pouring stream like the hair of a drowned woman, he all but ceased to breathe, and seemed to be passing away, shattered himself by the hurricane. But at the first gleam of light, at the tiniest speck of blue between two clouds, he breathed again, and drunk in the soothing calm of the drying leaves, the whitening paths, and the fields quaffing their last gulp of water. Albine, too, began to long for the sun; twenty times a day would she go to the window on the landing to scan the sky, delighted at the smallest spots of white, harassed at any dusky masses, copper-tinted and laden with hail, dreading lest some over-sable cloud should kill her dear patient. She talked of sending for Doctor Pascal, but Serge would have no one, saying:

"To-morrow we shall have sunlight on the curtains, and I shall be well again."

One evening when his state was most alarming, Albine gave him her hand for him to rest his cheek upon. But when she saw it gave him no relief she wept to find herself powerless. Since he had fallen back into the lethargy of winter she had felt herself too weak to drag him unaided from the nightmare in which he was struggling. She needed the assistance of spring. For she herself was fading away, her arms frozen and her breath scant, unable to breathe life into him. For hours together she would roam to and fro in the vast dismal room, and as she passed before the mirror she saw herself darkening in it, and thought herself looking hideous.

One morning, however, as she raised his pillows, not daring to try as yet the broken spell of her hands, she fancied she caught again the smile of that first day on the lips of Serge, whose neck she had just grazed with her finger-tips.

"Open the shutters," he said faintly.

She thought him still delirious, for an hour before she had only seen a gloomy sky on looking out from the landing.

"Hush, go to sleep, dear," she answered sadly; "I have promised to wake you at the very first ray— Sleep on, there's no sun out yet."

"Yes, I can feel it, its light is there. Open the shutters."

III.

AND there the sunlight was. When Albine had opened the shutters, behind the large curtains, the genial yellow glow once more warmed a patch of their white stuff. Serge sprang up, sitting in his bed, on catching sight again of the shadow of the bough, the branch that heralded his return to life. All the re-arisen earth, with its wealth of verdure, its waters and its rim of hills, was there in that greenish blur that quivered with the faintest breath of air. No longer did it harass him, and he greedily watched it rocking, craving the fortifying powers of the vivifying sap it foretold to him. Albine, with bounding heart, exclaimed as she supported him in her arms:

"Ah! dear old Serge, the winter is over— Now we are saved."

He lay down again, his eyes already brighter and his voice more clear.

"To-morrow I shall be very strong. You shall draw the curtains. I want to see everything."

But on the morrow he was seized with childish fear. He would not hear of the windows being opened wide. "By-and-by," he muttered, "later on." He was fearful, he dreaded the first beam of light that would strike upon his eyes. Night came on, and still he had been unable to make up his mind to look upon the sun. He remained thus all day long, his face turned towards the curtains, watching on their transparent tissue the pallor of morn, the glow of noon, the violet tint of twilight, all the hues, all the emotions of the sky. There were pictured even the quivering imparted to the warm air by the strokes of a bird's wing, even the delight of the earth's odours throbbing in a sunbeam. Behind that veil, behind that phantasm of the mighty life without, he could hear the coming up of spring. He felt even stifled at times when the rush of new earthy blood came upon him over strongly, in spite of the curtain barrier.

The following morning he was still asleep when Albine, hurrying his recovery, cried out to him :

"Serge! Serge! here's the sun!"

She swiftly drew the curtains and threw open the windows wide. He raised himself and knelt upon his bed, suffocating, swooning, his hands tightly pressed against his breast to keep his heart from breaking. Before him lay the broad sky; everywhere he looked on blue, a boundless blue; and in it he washed away his sufferings, he yielded to its gentle rocking, and drank from in it sweetness, purity and youth. The bough alone, whose shadow he had noted, jutting across the window and stained the azure sea with its vigorous growth of green; and even this was too great a trial for his invalid fastidiousness, wounded even by the defiling forms of the swallows flying in the sky. It was his birth. He uttered little involuntary shrieks, as he felt himself flooded in light, washed by waves of heated air, and a whirling, whelming torrent of new life flowing within him. With outstretched hands he sank and fell back upon his pillow in a swoon of joy.

What a happy, delicious day that was! The sun was coming in from the right, away from the alcove. All the morning Serge watched it creeping onward. He could see it coming to him, yellow as gold, chipping off the angles of the antique furniture, frolicking in corners, at times gliding to the ground like the end of some rich stuff unrolled. It was a slow, deliberate advance, a fond mistress drawing nigh and stretching out her golden limbs, lengthening towards the alcove with a rhythmic motion, with a voluptuous lingering which roused a mad longing for her possession. At length, towards two o'clock, the sheet of sunlight left the last armchair, climbed along the bed clothes and spread over the bed like loosened locks of hair. To its glowing fondling Serge surrendered his wasted hands: his eyes half-closed, he could feel fiery kisses thrilling through every finger; he lay in a bath of light, in the embrace of a glowing orb. And when Albine leaned over smiling,

"Let me be," he stammered out, his eyes quite closed, "don't hold me so tightly now. How do you manage to hold me like this in your arms?"

And then the sun crept down the bed again and slowly retreated to the left. Serge now watched it once more bend and settle on chair after chair, with a regretful pang that he had not kept it to his breast. Albine still sat upon the side of the bed, and the two, an arm round each other's neck, watched the

sky grow slowly paler. At times a mighty thrill seemed to make it blanch with some sudden shock. Serge's languid senses now wandered over it more freely and detected in it exquisite tints he had never dreamed of. It was not all blue, but a rosy blue, a lilac blue, a tawny blue, a living flesh, a vast and spotless nakedness heaving like a woman's bosom in the breeze. At every glance into space he found a fresh surprise—unknown nooks of sky, coy smiles, bewitchingly rounded outlines, and in the depths of peeping paradises, gauzy veils concealing the mighty, glorious forms of goddesses. And with limbs lightened by his sufferings he winged his way amid this shimmering silk, in this stainless down of azure ether; his sensations rose above his sinking being. The sun sank lower and lower, the blue melted into purest gold, the sky's living flesh still gleamed fair, steeping slowly in all the hues of gloom. Not a cloud—only a gradual disappearance like a maiden to her rest, a disrobing only revealing a gleam of modesty in the distant sky. The broad sky lay locked in slumber.

"Oh, the dear baby!" exclaimed Albine, as she looked at Serge who had fallen asleep upon her neck at the same time as the sky.

She laid him down in bed and shut the windows. Next morning, however, they were opened at break of day. Serge could not live now without the sunlight. His strength was growing, he was getting hardened to the gusts of fresh air which sent the alcove curtains flying. Even the field of blue, the everlasting blue, began to pall upon him. He grew weary of being a swan-like whiteness endlessly swimming on the heaven's limpid lake. He came to wish for a pack of black clouds, some crumbling of the skies, to break the monotony of this vast purity. And as his health returned, he felt cravings for more vivid sensations. He spent hours in gazing at the verdant bough: he would have liked to see it grow, expand, throw out its branches even on his bed. It no longer sated him, but only roused his longings by speaking to him of those trees whose deep-sounding call he heard although their very crests were hidden from his sight. There came upon him an endless whispering of leaves, the chattering of running waters, the fluttering of wings—one mighty, long-drawn, quivering voice.

"When you are able to get up," said Albine, "you shall sit at the window. You shall see the lovely garden!"

He closed his eyes and murmured gently:

"Oh! I can see it, I hear it; I know where the trees are where there's water, where the violets grow."

And then he added :

"But I can't see it clearly, I see it without any light. I must be very strong before I can get as far as the window."

At times, when she thought him asleep, Albine would vanish for hours. On coming in again, she would find him burning with impatience, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. He would call out :

"Where have you been?"

And take hold of her arms, and feel her skirts, her bodice and her cheeks.

"You smell of all sorts of nice things. Come, you have been walking on the grass?"

She would laugh and show him her shoes wet with dew.

"You have been in the garden! you have been in the garden!" he would exclaim delightedly. "I knew it. When you came in you seemed like a large flower. You bring in the whole garden in your skirt."

He would then keep her by him, inhaling her like a nosegay. Sometimes she came back with briars, leaves, or bits of wood entangled in her clothes. These he would remove and hide them under his pillow like relics. One day she brought him a bunch of roses. He was overcome to tears. He kissed the flowers and went to sleep with them in his arms. But when they faded, he felt so keenly grieved that he forbade Albine to gather any more. He preferred herself, who was as fresh and as balmy; she never faded, she always retained the fragrance of her hands, the fragrance of her hair, the fragrance of her cheeks. At last he would send her himself into the garden, bidding her not come back in less than an hour.

"And in that way," he said, "I get sunlight, I get fresh air, I get roses till to-morrow."

Often, when he saw her coming in out of breath, he would cross-examine her. Which path had she taken? Had she wandered through the trees, or had she gone round the meadow sides? Had she seen any nests? Had she sat down behind a bush of sweetbriar, or under an oak, or in the shade of a clump of poplars? And when she answered him, and tried to describe the garden to him, he would put his hand upon her mouth.

"No, no," he said gently. "I am wrong. I don't want to know. I would rather see it myself."

And then he would fall back upon his dreamy musings on the enchanting verdure he could feel only a step away. For

several days he lived on those dreams alone. At first, he said he had perceived the garden much more distinctly. But as he gained strength, his dreamy imagining grew marred by the surging blood warming his veins. His uncertainties multiplied. He could not tell now whether the trees were on the right, whether the water flowed at the bottom of the garden, or whether some great rocks were not piled below his windows. He talked softly of this all to himself. On the slightest fact he would trace wondrous plans which the song of a bird, the creaking of a bough, the scent of a flower, would make him modify, planting in one spot a thicket of lilac, substituting in another more remote flower-beds where had been a lawn. Every hour he designed a new garden, much to the amusement of Albine, who would say to him, in fits of laughter, whenever she surprised him at it :

"That's not it, I assure you. You can't have any idea of it. It's more beautiful than all the beautiful things you ever saw. Don't go racking your head about it. The garden's mine, and I will give it to you. Be easy, it won't run away."

Serge, who had been so afraid of the light, felt some trepidation when he found himself strong enough to go and lean his elbows on the window-sill. He said again : "To-morrow, dear," every evening. He would turn away in his bed with a shudder when Albine came in exclaiming that she smelled of hawthorn, and that she had scratched her hands in burrowing a hole through a hedge to bring him in all its odour. One morning, however, she took him up suddenly in her arms, and, carrying him to the window, held him up and forced him to look out and see.

"What a coward you are !" she exclaimed with her fine ringing laugh.

Exultingly, waving her hand round every portion of the landscape, she exclaimed, with a look that teemed with loving promise :

"Le Paradou ! Le Paradou !"

Serge, breathless, voiceless, gazed upon it,

IV.

A SEA of verdure—before, to right, to left, everywhere around—a sea that rolled its billowing surge of leaves as far as the horizon, unhindered by a single house, or screen of wall, or dusty road. A desert, virgin, hallowed sea, laying bare its wild sweetness in the innocence of solitude. The sun alone came thither, weltering in the meadows in a sheet of gold, threading the paths with the frolicsome scamper of its beams, drooping through the trees its fine-spun flaming locks, sipping from the springs with an amber lip that thrilled the water as it steeped. Beneath this flaming bloom the vast garden ran riot like some delighted animal let loose at the world's end, far from everything and free from everything. Such a prodigal luxuriance of foliage, such an overflowing tide of green, that from end to end it all seemed hidden, flooded, drowned in it. Everywhere, nothing else but slopes of green, stems springing up like fountains, curling stumps, woodland curtains hermetically closed, mantles of creepers on the ground, and flights of giant boughs swooping down on every side.

Beneath this tremendous luxuriance of vegetation even a lengthy scrutiny could barely make out the bygone plan of Le Paradou. In the foreground, hemmed in, as it were, by an immense amphitheatre, apparently lay the flower garden with its fountains now sunken and dry, its stone balustrades shattered, its flights of steps all warped, and its statues overthrown, whose whiteness gleamed from the depths of the dusky stretches of turf. Farther back, behind the blue line of a sheet of water, stretched a maze of fruit-trees; farther still rose a towering wall of woodland, its dusky, violet depths streaked with bands of light—a forest once more virgin, an endless stretch of bossy tree-tops spotted with yellow green, pale green, and vivid green.

On the right, the forest scaled the hills, dotting them with

little clumps of pine-trees, and died away in straggling under-wood, while a huge barrier of barren boulders, heaped together like the crumbled wreckage of a mountain, shut out all view beyond ; flaming growths cleaved the rugged soil, and monstrous plants lay motionless in the heat, like drowsing reptiles : a silvery streak, a foamy splash that glistened in the distance like a cloud of pearls, betrayed a waterfall, the source of those tranquil streams that flowed so lazily past the flower-garden. Lastly, on the left, flowed the river through a vast stretch of meadowland, in which it parted into four streamlets, fitfully winding beneath the rushes, between the willows, behind the giant trees ; in the furthest distance, grassy patches prolonged the freshness of the low land, a landscape washed in a bluish haze, a gleam of daylight melting slowly into the verdant blue of the sunset. Le Paradou—its flower-garden, forest, rocks, streams, meadows—filled the whole breadth of sky.

“Le Paradou !” stammered Serge, stretching out his arms as if to clasp the whole garden to his breast.

He tottered, Albine had to seat him in a chair. There he sat for two whole hours without opening his lips, his chin resting on his hands, intently gazing. At times, his eyelids fluttered and a flush mantled on his cheeks. Slowly he looked, profoundly amazed. It was all too vast, too complex, too overpowering.

“I cannot see, I cannot understand,” he cried, stretching out his hands to Albine with a gesture of uttermost weariness.

The young girl came and leaned over the back of his arm-chair. Taking his head between her hands, she compelled him to look again, while she softly said :

“It’s all our own. Nobody will ever come in. When you are well again, we will go for walks in it. We shall have room enough for walking all our lives there. We’ll go wherever you like— Where would you like to go ?”

He smiled.

“Oh ! not far,” he murmured. “The first day only two steps beyond the door. I should be sure to fall— See, I’ll go over there, under that tree close to the window.”

Gently she persisted :

“Would you like to go into the flower-garden ? You shall see the wilderness of roses—they have overrun everything, even the old paths are all covered with their clusters— Or would you like the orchard better, which I can only crawl into on my hands and knees, the boughs are so bowed down with

fruit? We'll go even farther still, if you feel strong enough. We'll go as far as the forest, right into the depths of shade, far, far away; so far that we'll sleep out when night comes on us unaware— Or else, some morning, we can get to the top of those rocks up there. You'll see some plants which make me quake; you'll see the springs, such a shower of water! What fun it will be to get the spray all over our faces! But if you prefer walking along the hedges, by the side of a brook, we must go round by the meadows. It is so nice under the willows in the evening, at sunset. One can lie down on the grass and watch the little green frogs hopping on the rushes."

"No, no," said Serge, "you weary me, I don't want to go so far— I will only go a couple of steps, more than enough."

"And even I," she still went on, "I have not yet been able to go everywhere. There are lots of nooks I don't know. I have walked and walked in it for years, and still I feel sure there are unknown spots around, places where the shade must be cooler, the turf softer— Listen, I have always fancied there must be one especially in which I should like to live for ever. I know it's somewhere about; I must have passed it by, or perhaps it's hidden so far away that I have never even got as far, with all my perpetual walks— We'll look for it together, Serge, wont we? and live there."

"No, no, do be quiet," stammered the young man. "I don't understand what you are saying. You're killing me."

For a moment she let him sob in her arms, troubled and wretched at her inability to find any words to soothe him.

"Isn't Le Paradou, then, as beautiful as you had fancied it?" she asked at last.

He raised his face and answered:

"I don't know. It was quite little, and now it's growing bigger and bigger— Take me away, hide me."

She led him back to bed, soothing him like a child, lulling him with a fib.

"There, there! no, it's not true, there is no garden. I only told you a story. Go to sleep, dear."

V.

EVERY day she made him sit like this at the window in the cool hours of morning. He began to attempt a few steps about his room, leaning on the furniture. Rosy tints appeared upon his cheeks, his hands were losing their waxy transparency. But, while thus regaining health, his senses were paralysed by a stupor which reduced him to the vegetative life of some luckless being, born only the day before. He was nothing but a plant, his sole perception was the air which floated around him. Too poor in blood to expend himself externally, his state was one of continuous self-concentration clinging to the soil and allowing his body to imbibe all the sap. It was a second conception, a slow hatching, in the warm egg of spring. Albine, remembering certain words of Doctor Pascal, felt terrified at seeing him remain in this state, guileless and dull as an infant boy. She had heard it said that certain maladies, when cured, left insanity behind them. And she spent hours in gazing on him and trying her utmost as mothers do to make him smile at her smiles. But as yet he had not laughed. When she moved her hand across his eyes, he never saw, he never followed the shadow. Even when she spoke to him, he barely turned his head slightly towards the sound. She had but one consolation: he thrived splendidly, he was quite a fine child.

A whole week more she lavished the tenderest care on him. Patiently she waited for him to grow. And as she marked various symptoms of awakening perception, her fears subsided and she began to think that time might make a man of him. When she touched him he started slightly. Another time, one night, he broke into a feeble laugh. The following day, when she had seated him at the window, she went down into the garden, and proceeded to run about in it, calling to him all the time. She would vanish under the trees, flit across the sunny patches, and come back breathless and clapping her

hands. At first he could not see her, his wavering eyes failed to follow her. But as she kept starting off again, perpetually playing at hide-and-seek, and reappearing behind each bush, his glance was at last able to follow the white gleam of her skirt ; and when she came up suddenly and stood with up-raised face below his window, he stretched out his arms and seemed to beg that he might come to her. She came upstairs again, and embraced him exultingly.

"Ah! you saw me, you saw me!" she cried. "You would like to come into the garden with me, would you not?— If you only knew how wretched you have made me these last few days, with your stupid ways, never seeing me or hearing me!"

He listened to her, but apparently with some slight sensation of pain that caused his neck to shrink timorously aside.

"You are better now, however," she went on. "Well enough to come down whenever you like— Why don't you say anything? Have you lost your tongue? Oh, what a baby! See if I shall not have to teach him how to talk!"

And thereupon she really did amuse herself by telling him the names of the things he touched. He could only stammer, reiterating all the syllables, and failing to utter a single word plainly. She now began to walk him about the room, holding him up and leading him from the bed to the window—quite a long journey. Two or three times he almost fell down on the way, at which she laughed. One day he fairly sat down on the ground, and she had all the trouble in the world to get him on his feet again. Then she made him undertake the round of the room, letting him rest by the way on the sofa, the arm-chair and chairs—the tour of this little world taking up a good hour. At last he was able to venture a few steps alone. She would stand before him with outstretched hands, and move backwards, calling him, so that he should cross the room in search of her supporting arms. If he sulked and refused to walk, she would take the comb from her hair and hold it out to him like a toy. Then he would come to her and sit still in a corner for hours playing with her comb, gently scratching his hands with its teeth.

One morning, she found him up. He had already succeeded in opening one of the shutters. He was attempting to walk about without leaning on the furniture.

"Good gracious, we are active this morning!" she exclaimed gleefully. "Why, he will be jumping out of the window

to-morrow if he has his own way— So you are quite strong now, eh ?”

Serge's answer was a childish laugh. His limbs had regained all their adolescent strength, but without rousing a single more perceptive sensation within him. Day after day, he spent the whole afternoon gazing out on Le Paradou, pouting like a child seeing whiteness only, hearing only the vibration of sounds. He still retained the ignorance of urchinhood—his touch as yet so innocent that he failed to tell Albine's gown from the covers of the old armchairs. His wide-open eyes still stared witlessly ; his movements still displayed the wavering hesitation of limbs not knowing how to reach their goal ; his state was one of incipient existence, purely instinctive, without the pole of middle consciousness. The man was not yet born.

“That's right, you'll act the silly, will you?” muttered Albine. “We'll see.”

She took off her comb, and held it out to him.

“Will you have my comb?” she said. “Come and fetch it.”

When she had got him out of the room, by retreating before him all the way, she put her arm round his waist and helped him down each stair, amusing him, as she put her comb back, tickling his neck with the ends of her hair, so that he remained unaware that he was going downstairs. But, when he was in the hall, he grew frightened at the darkness of the passage.

“Just look !” she cried, and threw the door wide open.

It was like a sudden dawn, a curtain of shadow snatched aside, revealing the joyousness of early day. The park expanded and extended, verdantly limpid, freshly cool, and deep as a spring. Serge, entranced, stood still upon the threshold, moved with a hesitating longing to feel his feet upon that luminous lake.

“Anyone would think you were afraid of wetting yourself,” said Albine. “Don't be frightened, the ground is safe enough.”

He had ventured to make one step, and was astonished at the soft resistance of the gravel. This first touch of earth had given him a shock, an elastic rebound of drooping life, and for a moment he stood erect, his frame expanded, and his breath grew deep.

“Come now, be brave,” insisted Albine. “You know you promised me to take five steps. We'll go as far as the mulberry tree there under the window— There you can rest.”

He took a quarter of an hour to make those five steps. At every trial he stopped as if he were tearing up the roots that held him to the ground.

The young girl, pushing him along, said laughingly :

"You look just like a walking tree."

Making him lean his back against the mulberry tree, in the rain of sunlight falling from its boughs, she bounded off and left him, calling out to him not to stir. Sitting there with drooping hands, Serge moved his head slowly round, his eyes sweeping the park before him. A scene of terrestrial childhood surrounded him ! The pale shades of green were steeped in a milk of youth, and flooded with a golden halo. The trees were still in infancy, the flowers were as tender-fleshed as babes, the streams were blue with the artless blue of lovely, wide-opened eyes. Every leaf revealed a bewitching awakening.

Serge's gaze had fixed itself upon the yellow breach, that wide path made in front of him through a dense mass of foliage ; at the very end, in the east, meadows steeped in gold looked like the luminous field on to which the sun was coming down ; and he waited for the morn to take that path and come flowing up to him. He could feel it coming in a warm breeze, so faint at first as to barely brush across his skin, but rising little by little and growing ever brisker till he thrilled all over. He could taste it coming, with a savour more and more marked, bringing him the healthful bitterness of the open air, holding to his lips a feast of sugared aromatics, acid fruits, and milky shoots. He could inhale it, coming with the perfumes it had culled upon its way—the scent of earth, the scent of the shady woods, the scent of heated plants, the scent of living animals, a whole posy of scents powerful to dizziness. He could hear it coming with the rapid flight of a bird skimming over the grass, waking all the garden from its silence, giving voice to all he touched, and filling his ears with the music of things and beings. He could see it coming from the end of the path, from the meadows steeped in gold, with rosy countenance, and a look so bright as to light its way with a smiling gleam, no bigger in the distance than a spot of daylight, but in a few swift bounds become the very splendour of the sun. And the morn flowed up and beat against the mulberry tree, where Serge was leaning back. Serge was born in the childhood of the morn.

"Serge ! Serge !" called out Albine, lost to sight behind the

high shrubs of the flower garden. "Don't be afraid, I am here."

But Serge had no more fear. He was being born anew in the sunshine, in that unsullied flood of light which inundated him. He was born anew at twenty-five, his senses hurriedly unclosed, enraptured with the mighty sky, the joyful earth, the miracle of loveliness lying around him. This garden, which only the day before he knew not, afforded him a boundless delight. Everything filled him with ecstasy, even the blades of grass, the stones in the paths, the invisible breaths of air that flitted over his cheeks. His whole body entered into the possession of this bit of nature, and embraced it with its limbs; his lips drank it in, his nostrils inhaled it; he carried it in his ears, and hid it in the depths of his eyes. It was his own. The roses of the flower garden, the lofty boughs of the dense forest, the rocks resounding with the waterfall, the meadows planted by the sun with his cars of light, were his. And then he closed his eyes, and gave himself the keen delight of slowly opening them to have the dazzle of a second waking.

"The birds have eaten all the strawberries," said Albine, disconsolately, running up to him. "See, I have only been able to find these two!"

But she stopped short a few steps off, heart-struck and gazing at Serge with rapturous astonishment.

"How beautiful you are!" she cried.

She drew a little nearer; she stood there, absorbed in him, murmuring:

"I have never, never seen you yet."

He had certainly grown taller, larger. Clothed in some loose-fitting garment, he stood erect, still somewhat slender, with finely moulded limbs, square chest and rounded shoulders. His head was slightly thrown back, and poised upon a snowy neck, rimmed with brown behind, which had now regained its flexible play.

Health and strength and power were on his face. No smile transgressed the calm repose of that grave and tender mouth, those firm-fleshed cheeks, the large nose, the grey, exceeding clear, commanding eyes. The long locks that thickly covered all his head fell upon his shoulders in jetty curls; while a slender growth of hair, through which gleamed white skin, curled crisply upon his upper lip and chin.

"Oh! how beautiful, how beautiful you are!" lingeringly

repeated Albine, crouching at his feet, and gazing up at him with loving eyes. "But why look so grim now? Why don't you speak to me?"

Still he stood and made no answer. His eyes were far away, and he never even saw the child at his feet. He spoke to himself in the sunlight, and said :

"How good the light is !"

And that utterance thrilled forth like a vibration of the sunlight itself. It fell in the silence with the faintest of whispers like a musical sigh, a quiver of warmth of life. For several days Albine had never heard his voice, and now it too, like himself, had altered. It seemed to her to swell through the park more sweetly than the melody of birds, more imperious than the wind that bends the boughs. It reigned, it ruled. All the garden heard, though but a faint and passing breath, and all the garden thrilled with the joyousness it bore.

"Speak to me," implored Albine. "You have never spoken to me like that. When you were upstairs in your room, whenever you were not dumb, you talked the silly prattle of a child. How is it I no longer know your voice? Just now I thought your voice had come down from the trees, that it reached me from every part of the garden, that it was one of those deep sighs that used to worry me at night before you came. Listen, everything is keeping silence to hear you speak again."

But still he failed to recognise her presence. Tenderer grew her tones.

"No, don't speak if it tires you. Sit down by my side, and we will remain here on the turf till the sun begins to wane. And look, I have found two strawberries. Such trouble I've had too ! The birds eat them all. One's for you, both if you like ; or we can share them, and taste each of them. You shall thank me, and I shall hear you."

He would not sit down, and refused the strawberries which Albine threw away pettishly. She did not open her lips again. She would rather have seen him ill, as in those earlier days when she gave him her hand for a pillow, and could feel him coming back to life with the cooling breath she blew upon his face. She cursed the returning health which made him stand before her in the light like a youthful, careless god. Would he then be ever thus, with never a glance for her? Would he not be healed still more, and come at last to see her and love her? And she dreamed of being once again his healing remedy, and of accomplishing by the sole power of her

little hands the cure of that second childhood. She could clearly see that a flame was lacking in the depths of his grey eyes, that his was but a pallid beauty like that of the statues fallen among the nettles of the flower-garden. She rose and clasped him round the waist again, breathing on his neck to rouse him. But this morning Serge never even felt the breath that lifted his silky beard. The sun got low, it was time to go indoors. On reaching his room, Albine burst into tears.

After this morning the invalid took a short walk in the garden every day. He went past the mulberry tree, as far as the edge of the terrace, where the wide flight of broken steps descended to the flower garden. He grew accustomed to the open air, each bath of sunlight infused fresh vigour. A young chestnut tree sprung from some fallen seed between two stones of the balustrade, burst its buds with resin, and unfolded its leafy fan with far less vigour than he. One day, indeed, he had attempted to descend the steps, but his strength failed him, and he sat down on one of them among the dandelion which had grown up between the cracks in the stone flags. Below, to the left, he could see a small wood of roses. It was thither he contemplated going.

"Wait a little longer," said Albine. "The perfume of the roses is too strong for you yet. I have never been able to sit long under the rose-trees without feeling exhausted, light-headed, and with a sweet longing to cry. Don't be afraid, I will lead you to the rose-trees, and I shall weep, for you are making me very sad."

VI.

ONE morning, at last, she succeeded in helping him to the foot of the steps, trampling down the grass before him with her foot, and clearing him a way through the briars, whose supple arms barred the last few steps. Then slowly they entered the wood of roses. It was indeed a very wood, with thick groves of tall standard roses expanding leafy clumps as big as trees, with thickets of enormous rose bushes impenetrable as copses of young oaks. Formerly there had been there the most marvellous collection of plants it was possible to see. But since the flower garden had been deserted and neglected, everything had run wild, and a virgin forest had risen there, a forest of roses overrunning the paths, flooded with wild offshoots, and mingling all the varieties to such a degree that roses of every scent and hue seemed to blossom on the same stem. Creeping roses displayed mossy carpets on the ground, while climbing roses clung to other rose bushes like greedy ivy plants, and tapered upwards in spindles of verdure, letting fall at the lightest puff a shower of their loosened petals. Natural paths had defined themselves through the wood—narrow footways, broad avenues and enchanting covered walks in which one strolled in the shade and scent. These led to glades and clearings, under bowers of small red roses, and between walls hung with small yellow roses. Some sunny nooks gleamed like green silken stuff, embroidered with conspicuous spots; other shadier corners preserved the calm seclusion of an alcove, an aroma of love, the balmy warmth of a posy languishing on a woman's bosom. From the rose bushes, filled with songful nests, came whispering voices.

"We must take care not to lose ourselves," said Albine, as she entered into the wood. "I lost myself once, and the sun had set before I was able to free myself from the bushes which caught me by the skirt at every step."

They had barely walked a few minutes, however, before Serge, utterly worn out with fatigue, wished to sit down. He stretched himself upon the ground, and fell into a deep slumber. Albine sat musing by his side. They were on the edge of a glade, at the opening of a narrow path which stretched far away through the wood, striped with sunlight flashes, and opened on the sky through a narrow opening round and blue. Other little paths honeycombed the clearing with leafy recesses. The glade was formed of such a wealth of branches, a confused mass shooting up with thorns, that dense sheets of foliage were caught aloft, and hung there stretching from shrub to shrub, like the flaps of an aerial tent. Through these lacc-like shreds only imperceptible pin-holes of daylight could be seen, like an azure sieve letting the light come through in an impalpable dust of sunshine. And from the vaulted roof, like chandeliers, hung stray branches, thick clusters held by the green thread of a stem, armfuls of flowers reaching to the ground, all along some torn portion of the leafy ceiling, trailing like the tattered remnant of a curtain.

Albine meanwhile was gazing at Serge asleep. She had never seen him so utterly prostrated in body as now, his hands lying open on the turf, and his face deathly. So dead was he to her, she thought she could kiss his face without his even feeling her kiss. And sadly, absently, she busied her hands with shredding all the roses within her reach. Above her head drooped an enormous sheaf, grazing her hair and dropping roses on her twisted locks, her ears and neck, throwing over her shoulders a mantle of roses. Higher up, under her fingers, the roses rained down large and tender petals exquisitely moulded, with the faintly flushed purity of hue of a maiden's bosom. The roses like a living snowfall already hid her in the grass. The roses climbed her knees, covered her skirt and smothered her up to her waist; while three stray rose-leaves, which had fluttered on to her bodice, just above her bosom, looked like three glimpses of its bewitching bareness.

"Oh! the lazy fellow!" she murmured, feeling bored and picking up two handfuls of roses which she threw in Serge's face to wake him.

He did not stir, but lay dully stretched with roses stopping up his eyes and mouth. This made Albine laugh. She stooped and fervently kissed both his eyes, and kissed his mouth, blowing as she kissed to scatter the rose leaves; but these re-

mained upon his lips, and she broke into a still more ringing laugh, intensely amused at this flowery carressing.

Serge slowly raised himself. He gazed at her with a stare of amazement, as if startled at finding her there. He asked her :

"Who are you? where do you come from? what are you doing here beside me?"

And still she smiled, transported with delight to mark this wakening of his senses. He seemed at last to remember, and continued with a gesture of happy confidence :

"I know, you are my love, flesh of my flesh, you are waiting for me to take you in my arms, that we may be one for ever. I was dreaming of you. You were in my breast and I gave you my blood, my muscles, my bones. I felt no pain. You took half my heart so tenderly that I felt a keen inward delight at thus dividing myself. I looked about to see if I had anything better or more beautiful to give you. You might have carried off everything, and still, I should have thanked you. And I woke when you went out of me. You left through my eyes and mouth; ay, I felt it. You were all warm, all fragrant, so sweet that it was the thrill from your body that has made me sit up awake."

Albine listened to his words with ecstasy. At last he saw her; at last his birth was accomplished, his cure begun. With outstretched hands she begged him to go on.

"How have I managed to live without you?" he murmured. "No, I did not live, I was like a slumbering animal. And now you are mine! and you are no one but myself! Listen, you must never leave me; for you are my very breath, and you would rob me of my life. We will remain within ourselves. You will be in my flesh even as I shall be in yours. The day I ever leave you, may I be accursed, may my body wither like a useless and evil weed!"

He seized her hands, and exclaimed in a voice quivering with admiration :

"How lovely you are!"

Albine's skin, in the falling dust of sunshine, was milky white, and faintly gilded by the sunny sheen. The shower of roses round her, on her, steeped her in rosy pink. Her golden hair, loosely held together by her comb, decked her head with a setting orb, and covered the nape of her neck with the riotous straggling of its last flaming locks. She wore a white dress, which left her bare, so closely flexible it was, uncovering arms,

and breast, and knees. She showed her stainless skin blooming unabashed as a flower, musky with a goodly fragrance. Her frame was slender, not too tall, and supple as a snake's, with softly rounded and voluptuously expanding outlines, instinct with the grace of a budding form still steeped in childhood, already swelling with puberty. Her oval face, with its narrow brow and rather full mouth, beamed smilingly with the tender, living light of her blue eyes. And yet she was grave, too, her cheeks unruffled, her chin plump—as naturally lovely as are the trees.

"And how I love you!" said Serge drawing her to himself.

They were wholly one another's now, clasped in each other's arms! They did not kiss, but held each other round the waist, cheek against cheek, united, dumb, delighted with their oneness. Around them bloomed the roses with a mad, amorous blossoming, full of crimson and rosy and white laughter. The living flowers as they opened seemed to bare their nakedness, like corsets revealing the treasures of the bosoms beneath. Yellow roses were there scattering the golden skins of barbarian maidens, straw-coloured roses, lemon-coloured roses, sun-coloured roses—every shade of necks ambered by the glowing skies. Further on, the flesh grew tenderer of texture, the tea-roses looked bewitchingly moist and cool, displayed the secrets of their modesty, hidden parts not often seen, fine as silk and faintly tinged with the blue network of veins. Beyond, a smiling life of rosy pink burst into bloom: the rosy white, barely tinged with a dash of lake, snowy as the foot of a maid dabbling in a spring; the pale pink, more subdued than the warm whiteness of a peeping knee, than the glow with which a youthful arm irradiates a wide sleeve; the striking pink, like blood gleaming below satin, bare shoulders and bare hips, all a woman's nakedness bathed in light; the bright pink with buds like bosoms, flowers like half opened lips, exhaling a warm breath of perfume. And the climbing roses, the tall bush roses with their shower of white flowers, clothed all these roses, all this flesh with the lace-work of their clusters, and the innocence of their flimsy muslin; while, here and there, roses dusky as the lees of wine, black and bleeding, gashed this bridal purity like passion's wounds. Verily, a bridal—the bridal of the fragrant wood, the virginity of May brought to the fertility of July and August; a first unknowing kiss culled like a nosegay on the wedding morn. Even in the grass, moss roses,

clad in flowing garments of green wool, awaited the advent of love. Flowers rambled all along the sun-streaked path, and faces were pushed forward to invite the passing breezes. Each and every smiling charin gleamed under the spreading tent of this glade. Not a flower that bloomed the same: the roses differed in the fashion of their wooing. Some would only consent, shyly and with blushing heart, to reveal a peeping glimpse of bud, while others—with unlaced busts, panting, opened wide—looked all disarrayed and all consumed with their infatuation for their own bodies. There were tiny beauties, pert and gay, fling off cockade in cap; enormous ones, bursting with sensuous charms, and plumply rounded as portly Sultanas; impudent hussies, too, coquettishly unbosomed, flaunting their powdered petals; and virtuous maids demurely donning the low-necked garb of irreproachable citizens; and high-bred ladies, graceful, decorously original, contriving attractive deshabilles. The cup-like roses offered their perfume as in a precious crystal; the drooping, urn-shaped roses let it drip drop by drop; the round, cabbage-like roses exhaled it with the even breathing of slumbering flowers; the budding roses tightly locked their leaves and only yielded as yet the faint sigh of their maidenhood.

"I love you, I love you," softly repeated Serge.

Albine, too, was a tall rose, a pallid rose opened since the morning. Her feet were white, her knees and arms were rosy pink, her neck was fair of skin, her throat and bosom bewitchingly veined, pale and exquisite. She exhaled a pleasing fragrance, proffered lips that offered in a coral cup a perfume still faint and cool. Serge inhaled her, and pressed her to his breast. Albine laughed.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you're not hurting me, you may take me altogether."

Serge was entranced at the sound of that laugh, pealing like a bird's rhythmic melody.

"What, that lovely song is yours?" he said. "It is the sweetest I ever heard. You are indeed, my joy."

And then she broke into a louder burst of ringing laughter in rippling scales of high-pitched, keen, flute-like notes that melted in slackening, deeper tones. It was an endless laugh, a long drawn cooing, a ringing burst of triumphant music celebrating the voluptuous delight of awakening love. And everything—the roses, the fragrant wood, the whole of Le Paradou—gleamed with smiles in that laugh of woman just

born to beauty and to love. Till now, the vast garden had lacked one charm—a winning voice to be the living mirth of trees and streams and sunlight. Now, the vast garden was endowed with the charm of laughter.

"How old are you?" asked Albine, ending her song in a faint and dying note.

"Nearly twenty-six," answered Serge.

She was amazed. What! he was twenty-six! He, too, was astonished at having made that answer so glibly, for it seemed to him that he had not yet lived a day—an hour.

"And you, how old are you?" he asked in his turn.

"Oh, I am sixteen."

And she broke into laughter again, quivering from head to foot, repeating and singing her age over and over again. She laughed at her sixteen years with a fine-drawn laugh that flowed with a rhythmic trilling like a purling streamlet. Serge gazed closely at her, amazed at the laughing life that transfigured the child's face. He scarcely knew her now with those dimples in her cheeks, the bow-shaped curving of her lips between which peeped the rosy moistness of her mouth, and her eyes like fragments of sky kindling with the rising of a sun. In throwing back her head, she sent a glow of warmth through him with her laughter-swelling chin leaning on his shoulder.

He put out his hand, and fumbled mechanically behind her neck.

"What do you want?" she asked.

And suddenly remembering, she exclaimed:

"My comb! my comb! that's it."

She gave him her comb, and let fall her heavy tresses. A cloth of gold suddenly unrolled and clothed her to her hips, and some locks flowing over her breast, gave the finishing touch to her truly regal raiment. At the sight of this sudden blaze, Serge uttered an exclamation; he kissed each lock, and burned his lips in this sunset-like refulgence.

Albine now relieved herself for her long silence, and chatted and questioned unceasingly.

"Oh, how wretched you made me! You didn't take any more notice of me, and day after day I found myself useless and powerless, worried out of my wits like a good-for-nothing. And yet, the first few days I had done you good. You saw me, and spoke to me. You don't remember, do you, when you were lying down, and used to go to sleep on my shoulder, and murmur that I did you good?"

"No!" said Serge, "no, I don't remember it. I have never seen you before. I have only just seen you for the first time—lovely, radiant, never to be forgotten."

She clapped her hands impatiently, exclaiming:

"And my comb? You must remember how I used to give you my comb to keep you quiet when you were a little child again? Why, you were looking for it just now."

"No, I don't remember. Your hair is like fine silk. I have never kissed your hair before."

With some vexation she related certain details about his convalescence in the room with the blue ceiling. But he only laughed at her, and at last closed her lips with his hand, and said, with restless weariness:

"No, be quiet, I don't know; I don't want to know any more. I only just woke up, and found you there, covered with roses. That is enough."

And he drew her once more to his arms, and held her there long, dreaming aloud, and murmuring:

"Perhaps I have lived before. It must have been a long, long time ago. I loved you in a painful dream. Your eyes were blue, your face a little long, and you seemed a child. But your hair was carefully hidden under a linen cloth, and I never dared remove that cloth, because your locks were terrible, and would have made me die. To-day your locks are the very sweetness of yourself. They preserve your scent, and surrender to me all your pliant beauty between my fingers. When I kiss them, when I bury my face in them like this, I drink in your life."

He kept passing the long curls through his hands, and pressing them against his lips, as if to squeeze from them all Albine's very blood. After an interval of silence, he continued:

"It's strange, before one's birth, one dreams of being born. I was buried somewhere. I was very cold. I could hear all the life of the world outside buzzing above me. But I shut my ears despairingly, for I was used to my gloomy den, and enjoyed some fearful delights in it, and I never even sought to free myself from the heap of earth weighing down my chest. Where could I have been then? Who was it gave me light?"

He struggled to remember, while Albine now waited in fear and trembling lest he should remember. Smiling, she took a handful of her hair and wound it round the young man's neck, fastening him to herself. This playful act roused him from his musings.

"You're right," he said, "I am yours, what does the rest matter? It was you, was it not, who brought me out of the earth? I must have been under this garden. What I heard were your steps rattling the little pebbles in the path. You were looking for me, you brought down on my head the songs of birds, the scent of pinks, the warmth of the sun. I thought you would find me at last. I have waited a long time for you. But I never expected that you would give yourself to me without your veil, with your hair undone—that terrible hair which has become so gentle."

He drew her on his lap, and laid her across his knees, placing his face beside hers.

"Do not let us talk any more. We are alone forever. We love each other."

And thus they lingered innocently in each other's arms; a long, long time they lay forgetfully. The sun rose higher; a hotter dust of light fell from the lofty boughs. The yellow and white and crimson roses were now only a ray of their delight, one of their ways of smiling to each other. They had certainly caused buds to open around them. The roses crowned them, threw garlands round their hips. And the scent of the roses grew so penetrating, so strong with loving emotion, that it seemed to be the scent of their breath itself.

Then Serge put Albine's hair up again. He lifted it in handfuls with delicious awkwardness, and stuck her comb askew in the enormous knot heaped upon her head. And she looked bewitching, indeed. Rising from the ground he held out his hands to her, and supported her waist as she got up. The pair still smiled in silence, and slowly went down the path.

VII.

ALBINE and Serge entered the flower garden. She watched him with tender anxiety, fearing lest he should overtire himself, but was reassured by his light laugh. He felt himself strong enough to carry her wherever she liked. When he found himself once more in the full sunlight, he breathed a sigh of contentment. At last he lived ; he was no longer that plant subject to the terrible woes of winter. And how he was moved with tender gratitude. Had it been within his power, he would have spared Albine's tiny feet even the roughness of the paths ; he dreamed of carrying her clinging round his neck like a child, being lulled to sleep by her mother. Already he watched over her with a guardian's watchful care, thrusting aside the stones and brambles, jealous lest the breeze should waft a fleeting kiss on those darling locks which were his alone. She nestled against his shoulder, and, her heart filled with serene content, yielded herself to his guidance.

And Albine and Serge strolled on together in the sunlight for the first time, a balmy fragrance floating from them in their wake, and thrilling with a keen quiver of delight the path on which the sun had unrolled a golden carpet under their feet. Between the tall flowering shrubs they passed like an ecstatic vision of such wondrous charm that the very by-paths entreated their presence from afar, and greeted them with a murmur of admiration like crowds hailing long-expected liege-lords. They formed one sole supremely lovely being. Albine's snowy skin was only the whiteness of Serge's browner skin. Slowly they passed along clothed with sunlight—nay, themselves the sun—worshipped by the lowly bending flowers.

A tide of impassioned emotion now stirred the garden to its depths. The old flower garden escorted them—that vast field with a century's untrammelled growth, that nook of Paradise sown by the winds with the choicest flowers. The blissful

peace of Le Paradou, slumbering in the broad sunlight, prevented the degeneration of species. It could boast of a temperature ever equable and a soil which every plant had enriched through many a cycle to thrive therein in the silence of its vigour. Its vegetation was enormous, magnificent, luxuriantly untended, full of erratic forms decked with blossoming monstrosities, unknown to the spade and watering-pot of gardeners. Left to herself, free to grow unshamedly, nestled in the depths of that solitude protected by natural shelter, nature grew madder in her riot with every spring, indulged in mighty pranks and amused herself by offering to herself with every season strange nosegays not meant for any hand to pluck. A rabid fury seemed to urge her to overthrow whatever the effort of man had made; rebelliously she pushed forward a straggling mob of flowers into the paths, attacked the rockeries with the ever-rising mossy tide, and knotted round the necks of the marble statues the flexible cords of her creepers with which she threw them down; she shattered the stonework of the fountains, steps, and terraces with the shrubs driven through them; slowly, creepingly, she spread over and conquered even the smallest cultivated plots, moulding them to her fancy, and, as her ensign of rebellion, planting on them some wayside spore, some lowly weed transformed by her into a gigantic growth of verdure. In days gone by, the flower garden, tended by a master passionately fond of flowers, displayed in its flower beds and trim borders a wondrous wealth of choice flowers. Now the same plants could still be re-discovered, but perpetuated and expanded into such numberless families, and scampering in such mad fashion throughout the whole garden, that the old parterre was now but a riotous mob, a shrubby school crowding to the very walls, a mysterious haunt, where intoxicated nature had hiccups of verbena and pinks.

Though to outward seeming, Albine appeared to have entirely given her weaker self to the guidance of Serge, to whose shoulder she clung, it was she who led him. She took him first to the grotto. Deep within a clump of poplars and willows, in the surface of a rocky mound, gaped a cavern, rugged and shattered, in a basin heaped with fallen boulders, with tiny rills of water trickling between the stones. The grotto was completely lost to sight beneath the swarming mass of vegetation that stormed its surface. Below, row upon row of pollyhocks barred all entering, as it were, with a trellis-work of red, yellow, mauve and white-hued flowers, whose

stems were hidden among the colossal bronze-green nettles, calmly exuding their blistering poison. Above them, a mighty rushing swarm of leaping, climbing creepers; balmy star-spangled jasmine wistarias with their delicate lacework leaves; dense ivy, chiselled like varnished metal; lithe honeysuckle, laden with pale coralline clusters; amorous clematis reaching out its arms all tufted with white aigrettes. And, among them twined and interlaced, yet other slenderer plants, binding them together closer and closer, weaving of them a fragrant woof. Nasturtiums, bare and green of skin, gaped their mouths of ruddy gold; scarlet runners, tough as whipcord, lit up scattered spots with the glow of their gleaming sparks; bind-weeds expanded their heart-shaped leaves and with their thousand of little bells rang a silent peal of exquisite colours; like swarms of settling butterflies, the sweet-peas closed their pale red or rosy wings, ready to let themselves be borne away by the first breath of breeze. A boundless wealth of leafy locks shot with a shower of flowers, overflowing on every side and straying away in mad dishevelment, that called up the image of some giant prostrate maiden throwing back her head in a spasm of passion, amid the streaming shower of her magnificent hair, spread abroad like a pool of perfumes.

"I have never dared to venture into all that darkness," Albine murmured gently to Serge.

He urged her on and carried her over the nettles. A great boulder stood in the grotto, so he held her up for a moment or two in his arms, that she might be able to put her head through the opening that yawned widely a few feet from the ground.

"There is," she whispered, "a marble woman lying all her length in the stream. The water has eaten her face away."

Then he, too, in his turn wanted to look. He pulled himself up by the strength of his wrists. A cold breeze played upon his cheeks. In the pale light that made its way through the hole, he saw a woman's form lying amidst the reeds and the duckweed. It was on its back and was naked to the waist. The thighs were concealed beneath some drapery. The statue must have been lying there for a hundred years, and it was slowly perishing. The clear water which flowed over it had worn the face into a smooth expanse of marble, a mere white surface without a feature remaining; while the two breasts, raised out of the water by what appeared

a continued effort, were still quite perfect, and life-like, and seemed throbbing even yet with the joys of some old delight.

"She isn't quite done for, yet," said Serge, getting down again. "One day we will come and get her out of there."

But Albine, who was a little afraid, led him away. They passed out again into the full light of day and the rank luxuriance of the flowers. They wandered along through a wilderness of blossom, capriciously and at random. Their feet trod upon a carpet of lovely plants, which had once neatly fringed the walks with their dwarfish growth, but which now spread themselves about in wild profusion. In succession they trod ankle-deep through soft pink fly-catchers and silky tufts of carnations, and clumps of melancholy-looking blue forget-me-nots. Further on they forced their way through thickets of giant mignonnette, which towered up to their knees and bathed them in a sea of perfume, and then they turned aside and went on through a patch of lilies, that they might escape treading upon a wide expanse of violets, so delicate looking that they feared to press them with their lightest step. But soon they found themselves surrounded on all sides by these frail flowers, and they could no longer avoid them; so with wary and gentle steps they passed over their sweet fragrance. Beyond the violets they came upon a mass of lobelias, gemmed with their pale mauve blossoms; of tinted lycopodiums, of the blue-cupped nemophelas and yellow soapwort, and red and white gilliflowers, weaving themselves into a rich tapestry, and stretching ever onwards before the young couple a curtain of brightest beauty, to gladden them and forbid all thought of weariness or fatigue on their first walk together. But the violets were ever re-appearing; real seas of violets that spread and rolled all round them, shedding the sweetest perfumes beneath their feet.

Albine and Serge quite lost themselves. Thousands of plants, higher than themselves, towered up in walls around them and enclosed narrow paths which the young couple found a great joy in threading. These paths twisted and turned at sharp and sudden angles, and wandered about through a dense growth of all kinds of flowering plants; ageratums, with their sky-blue tufts; wood-ruffs, with their soft musky perfume; brazen-throated mimuluses, blotched with bright vermillion; lofty phloxes, crimson ones and white ones, shooting up their distaffs of flowers for the breezes to spin; red flax with filaments

fine as hair; chrysanthemums like golden moons, glimmering with short faint rays, tinted with white and violet and rose. The young couple surmounted all the obstacles that lay before them and continued their way through the two walls of verdure. To the right of them sprang up the slim dittany and the centranthus, draped with its snowy blossoms, and the greyish houndstongue, in each of whose tiny flower-cups gleamed a dew-drop. To their left was a long row of columbines of every variety; white ones, pale rose-coloured ones, and some of deep violet hues, almost black, that seemed draped in mourning robes, and from whose lofty stems drooped blossoms that were plaited and goffered like crape. As they advanced further on, the character of the hedges changed. Enormous larkspurs now thrust up their flower-rods around them, and tawny snapdragons, and the schizanthus with its slender leaves and fluttering flowers that looked like sulphur-coloured butterflies' wings splashed with a soft lake. Campanulas shot up their blue bells to all heights, some of them even towering over the tall asphodels. In one corner was a giant fennel that reminded them of a lace-dressed lady spreading out a sun-shade of sea-green satin. Then the two suddenly found their way completely blocked. It was impossible to advance any further; a mass of flowers and a thick jungle of plants entirely stopped all further progress. The bottom of this barrier was formed of acanthuses, from the midst of which sprang up scarlet geums, and clarkias, with great white carved crosses, that looked like the insignia of some barbarous order. Higher up still bloomed rosy viscarias, yellow leptosiphons, and white colinsias; while the lagurus contrasted its dusty green bloom with the glowing colours that surrounded it. Towering up over all these were scarlet fox-gloves and the slim flower stalks of the blue lupins, forming over all a sort of Oriental rotunda gleaming with crimson and azure; out of which rose, like a surmounting dome of dusky copper, the ruddy leaves of a colossal castor-bean.

As Serge reached out his hands to try and force a passage. Albine stopped him and begged him not to injure the flowers. "You will break the stems and crush the leaves," she said, "Ever since I have been here, I have always taken such care never to hurt one of them. Come along here and I will show you the pansies."

She made him turn round and she took him off along narrow paths to the centre of the parterre, where, once upon a time, great basins had been hollowed out. But these had now fallen

into ruin, and were nothing but gigantic flower baskets, fringed with stained and cracked marble. In one of the largest of them, the wind had sown a wonderful colony of pansies. Their velvety blossoms seemed almost like living faces, with bands of violet hair, and yellow eyes, and paler tinted mouths and chins of a delicate flesh colour.

"When I was younger they used to make me quite afraid," murmured Albine. "Look at them. Couldn't you think that they were thousands of little faces looking up at you from the ground? And they turn, too, all in the same direction. They might be a lot of buried dolls sticking their heads out of the ground."

She led him on still further. They went to look at all the other basins. In the next one a crowd of amaranthuses had sprung up, whose monstrous crests Albine had always shrunk from touching, with their resemblance to huge bleeding caterpillars. Another basin was filled with balsams of all colours, whose seeds cracked off with dry little snaps. Then, in the midst of a ruined fountain, there flourished a colony of splendid carnations. The moss-covered spout was buried in a mass of white ones; and parti-coloured ones thrust up, between the chinks of the marble, a bright medley of blossom; while from the mouth of the lion, from which formerly the water-jets spouted, an immense crimson carnation now shot out so vigorously that the decrepit old lion seemed to be spouting out blood. Where had once been a lake, on whose surface swans had glided, there now flourished a thicket of lilacs, beneath whose shade wallflowers, and verbenas, and convolvuluses sheltered their delicate tints, and dozed away, all redolent of perfume. "We haven't seen half of the flowers yet," said Albine, proudly. "Over yonder there are such huge ones that I can quite bury myself amongst them like a partridge in a corn field."

They went in the direction Albine indicated. They tripped down some steps, from whose overturned urns still gleamed the violet fires of the irises. All down the steps there grew a string of gilliflowers, like a trickling stream of gold. The two sides were flanked with thistles, that shot up like green candelabra, twisted and curved into quaint shapes, and strangely chiselled into the semblance of birds' heads, with all the fantastic elegance of Chinese incense-burners. Between the broken balustrades sedums drooped their pale foliage in dew-gleaming masses of yellowish green.

At the foot of the steps another parterre spread itself out, dotted over with box-trees that were vigorous as oaks; box-trees which had once been carefully pruned and clipped into balls and pyramids and octagonal columns, but which were now revelling in an unrestrained freedom of untidiness, and breaking out into ragged masses of greenery, through which were visible blue patches of sky.

Albine led Serge straight on to a spot that seemed to be the graveyard of the flower-garden. There the scabious mourned, and processions of poppies stretched themselves out in line, with death-like odour, and unfolded their heavy blossoms of feverish brilliance. Sad anemones clustered in weary throngs, pallid and infected by some maleficent breath. Thick-set daturas spread out their purplish horns, from which insects, weary of life, sucked a fatal poison. Marigolds buried beneath their choking foliage their writhing starry flowers, that already reeked of putrefaction. And there were other incitements to melancholy there in the fleshy ranunculuses, with their rusty tints, and the hyacinths and tuberoses that suffocated themselves with their own asphyxiating emanations. But it was the cinerarias that were most conspicuous, crowding thickly in their mourning robes of violet and white. In the middle of this gloomy spot a mutilated marble Cupid still remained standing, smiling beneath the covering of lichens which overspread his youthful nakedness, while the arm that once held his bow lay low amongst the nettles. Then Albine and Serge passed on through a rank growth of peonies, which reached up to their waists. The white flowers fell to pieces as they passed through, with a rain of snowy petals that was cooling and refreshing to their hands, like the heavy drops of a thunder shower, while the red ones grinned at them with their apoplectic faces. Next they passed along through a field of fuchsias, growing in dense and vigorous shrubs, that delighted them with their countless bells. Then they went on through purple veronicas and fields of geraniums, blazing with all the fiery tints of a brazier, which the puffs of wind seemed to be ever fanning into fresh heat. They forced their way through a jungle of irises, tall as reeds, which shot up clusters of flowers that gleamed in the full daylight with all the brilliance of burning torches. Then they lost themselves in the midst of a forest of sunflowers, with stalks as thick as Albine's wrist, darkened and obscured by rough leaves large enough to form a bed for a little child, and peopled by giant star-like faces that

gleamed and shone like so many suns. From this they passed into another forest, a forest of rhododendrons so teeming with blossom that the branches and leaves were completely hidden, and nothing but the clustering flowers could be seen far as the eye could reach.

"Come along; we haven't got to the end yet," cried Albine. "Let us push on."

But Serge stopped. They were now in the midst of an ancient ruined colonnade. The shafts of the columns formed inviting seats as they lay prostrate amongst the primroses and periwinkles. Further away, among the columns that still remained upright, other flowers were growing in wild profusion. There were groves of tulips with brilliant cups like painted china; thickets of calceolarias, dotted with crimson and gold; expanses of zinnias, like great wrinkled Easter-daisies; petunias, with petals like soft cambric through which rosy flesh tints gleamed, and stretching fields of other flowers whose names they did not know, glittering, far as they could see, beneath the sun in a motley brilliance that was mingled with the soft green of their leaves.

"We shall never be able to see it all," said Serge with a smile, motioning with his hand to the far distance. "It would be very nice to sit down here, amongst all this sweet perfume."

Just at their side there was a large patch of heliotropes growing, whose vanilla-like breath permeated the air with a velvety softness. They both sat down upon one of the fallen columns, in the midst of a cluster of magnificent lilies which had shot up there. They had been walking for more than an hour. They had wandered on from the roses to the lilies, passing, in their way, through forests of all kinds of blossoms. The lilies offered them a calm quiet haven after their lovers' ramble through the perfumed solicitations of the luscious honeysuckle, the musky violets, the verbenas that breathed out the warm scent of kisses, and the tuberoses that panted with voluptuous passion. The lilies, with their tall slim stems, shot up round them like a white pavilion and sheltered them beneath their snowy cups, gilt with the gleaming gold of their slender pistils. And there they rested, like betrothed children, wrapped round with completest purity; shut in, as it were, in an ivory tower of impregnable modesty, where all their love was perfect innocence.

Albine and Serge lingered amongst the lilies till evening. They felt so happy there, and seemed to break out into a new life. Serge felt that his last trace of fever had left him,

while Albine grew quite pale, with a milky paleness untinted by any rosy hue. They were quite unconscious that their arms and necks and shoulders were naked, and their straying unconfined hair troubled them not at all. They laughed merrily one at the other, with a frank open laugh, and found an innocent joy in clasping each other. The expression of their eyes remained limpid and untroubled as clear spring-water, and not the least carnal impulse mounted up to sully its purity. Their cheeks were velvety as scarcely ripened fruit, and they felt no temptation to taste their sweetness. When they left the lilies, their feelings were those of children of ten years old; and it seemed to them that they had met each other in that garden that they might be friends for ever and amuse themselves with perpetual play. And as they returned through the parterre, the very flowers seemed to bear themselves discreetly, as though they were glad to see the children so happy and would do nothing that might corrupt them. The forests of peonies, the masses of carnations, the carpets of forget-me-nots, the curtains of clematis no longer spread round them their suggestions of voluptuousness, but lulled by the soft evening air, they slumbered in a child-like purity, as unstained and serene as their own. The pansies looked up at them and nodded, as though they recognised them as companions, and, as Albine's white skirt brushed by it, the languid mignonnette seemed to glance at them with pitying compassion and held its breath lest it should fan their passion too prematurely into life.

VIII.

AT dawn the next day, Serge called Albine. She slept in a room on the upper floor, where he never thought of intruding. He looked up at her window and saw her throw open the shutters as she sprang out of bed, and they both laughed merrily as their eyes met.

"You must not go out to-day," said Albine, when she came down. "We must stay indoors and rest. To-morrow I will take you a long, long way off, to somewhere where we can have a very jolly time."

"But shan't we grow tired of stopping here?" protested Serge.

"Oh, dear no! I will tell you stories."

They passed a delightful day. The windows were thrown widely open, and all the beauty of the Paradou came in at them and rejoiced the young pair that sat in the room. Serge took possession of that delightful room, where he imagined he had been born. He insisted upon seeing everything, and upon having everything explained to him. The plaster Cupids who were sporting round the alcove amused him so much and filled him so full of fun that he mounted on to a chair to tie Albine's belt round the neck of the smallest of them, a little bit of a man who was turning somersaults, his head on the ground, and that portion of the body which is usually used for sitting upon cocked up into the air. Albine clapped her hands, and said he looked just like a cockchafer led by a string. Then, as though seized by an access of pity, she said, "No, no, let him go. It prevents him flying." But it was the Cupids painted over the doors that especially attracted Serge's attention. He fidgeted himself at not being able to make out what they were playing at, for the paintings had grown very dim and faint. Helped by Albine, he dragged a table up to the wall, and they both mounted upon it. Albine began to explain to him:

"Look, now, at those who are throwing flowers. Under the flowers you can see nothing but three naked legs. I seem to remember that when first I came here I could make out a lady lying down. But she has been gone now for a long time."

They examined all the panels in turn, without these lovely indecencies suggesting the least impure thought to them. The pictures, which were spotted and pitted like patched faces of the eighteenth century, were so faded and indistinct that little more could be distinguished than the knees and elbows of bodies that sighed and panted in voluptuous pleasure. The too indelicate details which had, apparently, delighted the eyes of that ancient passion, a lingering odour of which yet breathed in the alcove, had disappeared under the influence of the fresh air so completely, that the room, as well as the park, might be said to have been restored to a state of virginity beneath the serene glories of the sun.

"Oh! they are nothing but little boys playing," said Serge, as he got off the table. "Do you know how to play at 'hot cockles?'"

There was not a game that Albino did not know how to play at. But, for "hot cockles," at least three players are necessary, and that made them laugh. But Serge protested that they got on too well by themselves ever to want a third there, and they swore that they would always remain just by them two selves.

"We are so completely alone here; we cannot hear a sound," said the young man, lolling on the couch. "And all the furniture has such a pleasant smell of oldness. It's as comfortable and snug as a nest. We ought to be very happy in this room."

The young girl shook her head gravely.

"If I had been at all timid," she murmured, "I should have been very much frightened at first. That is one of the stories I want to tell you. The people in the neighbourhood told it to me. Perhaps it isn't true, but it will serve to amuse us, at any rate."

She came and sat down by Serge's side.

"It is years and years ago since it all happened. The Paradou belonged to a rich lord, who came and shut himself up in it with a very beautiful lady. The gates of the mansion were kept so tightly closed, and the garden walls were built so very high, that no one was ever able to catch sight even of the end of the lady's petticoats."

"Ah! I know," Serge interrupted; "the lady was never seen again."

And as Albine looked at him in surprise, a little annoyed to see that he knew her story already, he added in a low voice, apparently a little surprised himself:

"You told me the story before, you know."

She said she had not; but then she seemed to change her mind, and allowed herself to be convinced. But that did not prevent her from finishing her tale in these words:

"When the lord went away, his hair was quite white. He had all the gates barricaded up, so that no one could get inside and disturb the lady— It was in this room that the lady died."

"In this room?" cried Serge. "You never told me that— Are you quite sure that it was in this room she died?"

Albine seemed a little disturbed and put out. She repeated to him what every one in the neighbourhood knew. The lord had had the pavilion built for the reception of this unknown lady, who looked like a princess. The servants employed in the mansion said afterwards that he spent all his days and nights there. Often, too, they saw him in one of the walks, guiding the tiny feet of the mysterious lady towards one of the densest and darkest coppices. But not for all the world would they have ventured to play the spy upon the pair, who would sometimes keep out in the park for weeks together.

"And it was she who died!" repeated Serge, who felt touched with sorrow. "And you have taken her room; you use her furniture, and you sleep in her bed."

Albine smiled.

"Ah! well, you know, I am not timid. Besides, it is so long since it all happened. You said, you know, what a delightful room it was."

Then they both dropped into silence, and glanced, for a moment, towards the alcove and the lofty ceiling, and the corners, shrouded in a grey gloom. That faded furniture seemed to speak to them with a silent tongue of that old and past-away love, and a gentle sigh seemed to breathe through the room.

"No, indeed," murmured Serge, "one could not feel afraid here. It is too peaceful and calm."

Albine edged herself closer up to him as she said:

"But there is something else that only a few people know

about, and that is, that they discovered in the garden a certain spot where perfect happiness was to be found, and there they afterwards spent all their time. I have been told that by a very good authority. It is a cool, shady spot, hidden away in the midst of an impenetrable jungle, and it is so marvellously beautiful that anyone who reaches it forgets all else in the world. The poor lady must have been buried there."

"Is it anywhere about the parterre?" asked Serge, curiously.

"Ah! I cannot tell, I cannot tell," said the young girl, with an expression of despair. "I know nothing about it. I have searched everywhere for it, but I have never been able to find the least sign of this happy clearing— It is not amongst the roses, nor the lilies, nor the violets."

"Perhaps it is hidden somewhere away amongst those mournful-looking flowers, where you showed me the figure of a boy standing up, with his arm broken off."

"No, no, indeed."

"Perhaps, then, it is within that grotto, near that clear stream, where that great marble woman, without a face, is lying."

"No, no."

Albine seemed to reflect for a moment. Then, as though speaking to herself, she went on to say:

"As soon as ever I came here, I began to hunt for it. I spent whole days in the Paradou, and ferreted about in all sorts of out-of-the-way green corners, just to have the pleasure of sitting for an hour in that happy spot. What mornings have I wasted in groping under the brambles and rummaging about in the most far-away nooks of the park! Oh! I should have known it at once, that enchanted retreat, with its mighty tree that shelters it beneath a canopy of foliage, with its carpet of sleek turf, soft and smooth as silk, and with its protecting walls of tangled greenery, which the very birds themselves cannot pierce!" She raised her voice, and threw one of her arms round Serge's neck, as she continued:

"Tell me, now; shall we two together search for it? We shall surely find it. You, who are strong, shall push aside the heavy branches, while I will crawl underneath and search everywhere. When I grow weary, you can carry me, and you can help me to cross the streams. If we happen to lose ourselves, you can climb up the trees and try to discover our way again. Ah! and what a joy it will be for us to sit, side by side, in that happy clearing beneath that green canopy! They say that there one feels the joy of a whole lifetime in a single

IX.

THE next morning, Albine was anxious to start by sunrise upon the grand expedition which she had planned the night before. She beat her feet gleefully on the ground, as she said that they would not come back before nightfall.

"Where are you going to take me to?" asked Serge.

"You will see, you will see."

But he seized her by the hands and looked at her earnestly in the face.

"You must not be foolish, you know. I don't want you to go hunting for this glade of yours, or for the tree, or for the grassy couch where one droops and dies. You mustn't do it. It is forbidden, you know."

She blushed slightly and protested that she had no such idea in her head. Then she added:

"But if we should happen to come across them, just by chance, you know, and without really looking for them, you wouldn't be vexed with me, would you? Else you must love me very little."

They set off. They went straight on through the garden, without stopping to watch the flowers wake up and unfold themselves, all dripping after their dewy bath. The morning sky was delicately tinged with rosy tints, and seemed to smile like a beautiful child, just opening its eyes on its snowy pillow.

"Where are you taking me to?" repeated Serge.

But Albine only laughed and would not answer. Then, when they reached the stream which ran through the garden at the end of the flower-beds, she halted in great distress. The water was swollen with the late rains.

"We shall never be able to get across," she murmured. "I can generally manage it by taking off my shoes and stockings and tucking up my skirts; but, to-day, the water would come up to our waists."

They walked for a moment or two along the edge, hoping to find some fordable point ; but the young girl said it was hopeless ; she knew the stream quite well. Once there had been a bridge across, but it had fallen in, and had strewn the bed of the stream with great blocks of stone, amongst which the water rushed along in foaming eddies.

"Get on to my back," said Serge.

"No, no ; I'd rather not. If you were to slip, we should both of us get a famous wetting. You don't know how treacherous those stones are."

"Get on to my back," repeated Serge, "you had really much better."

This tempted her. She stepped back for a spring, and then jumped up, like a boy, so high that she found herself astride Serge's neck. She felt him tottering, and cried out that she was not safely seated and that she would get down again. Then, after two more attempts, she managed to settle herself securely on Serge's back. These preparations seemed to amuse them mightily.

"When you are quite ready," said Serge, "we will start. Now, hold on tightly. We are off."

And, with three light strides, he crossed the stream, scarcely wetting even his toes. In mid-stream, however, Albine thought that he was slipping. She broke out into a little scream, and hugged herself tightly round his neck. Serge, however, sprang forward, and landed her safely on the fine sand on the other side of the stream, quite calm and collected again, and highly delighted with this novel kind of game. He ran along with her on his back for some distance. She clucked him on with her tongue, and guided him to the right or left by some threads of hair which she had pulled from her head.

"Here," she said, "here we are," and she tapped him gently on the cheeks.

She jumped to the ground ; while he, hot and perspiring, leaned his back against a tree to get his wind. Then Albine began to scold him, and threatened that she would not nurse him if he made himself ill again.

"Stuff," he cried, "it's done me good. When I have grown quite strong again, I will carry you on my back for whole mornings. Where are you taking me to ?"

"Here," she said, as she seated herself beneath a huge pear-tree.

They were in the old orchard of the park. A thick haw-

thorn hedge, a real wall of greenery, broken, here and there, by gaps, separated it from the garden. It was a forest of fruit-trees, which no pruning-knife had touched for an age. Some of the trees had been strangely warped and twisted and bent out of their upright position by the storms which had raged over them; while others, bossed all over with enormous knots and boles, and eaten away into great holes and hollows, seemed only to maintain their hold on the soil by the grasp of the giant ruins of their bark. As you stood amongst them, the trunks looked like twisted pillars supporting a roof of greenery which sometimes ran along over narrow cloisters, and sometimes suddenly spread itself out and covered-in light and delicately-tinted halls, and sometimes swept down almost to the ground and left scarcely room for anyone to pass under it. Round each of these colossal trees, a crowd of wild and self-sown saplings had grown up, spreading out their growing branches in a wild entanglement. In the greenish light which filtered through the foliage, the only sound that broke the deep silence of the orchard was the dull thud of the fruit as it fell to the ground, snapped off by the wind.

There were patriarchal apricot trees, which blossomed gaily, and bore fruit plentifully in their old age; and though dead and decayed, perhaps, on one side, and hampered by a mass of lifeless wood on the other, they were so youthful and full of life, that everywhere the rough bark was greened over by vigorously growing shoots. There were cherry trees, that formed complete towns with houses of several stories, that threw out staircases and shot out their branches into floors big enough to hold half a score of families. Then there were the apple trees, with their twisted limbs, like huge old cripples with gnarled and knotted bark, greened and stained with the lichen-growth. There were smooth pear trees, that shot up mast-like with long slender spars. There were rosy-blossomed peach trees, that won for themselves a place amid this teeming growth as pretty maids do amidst a human crowd by dint of their bright smiles and gentle persistence. Some of the trees had been formerly trained as espaliers, but they had broken down the low walls which had once supported them, and now spread themselves abroad in wild confusion, freed from the trammels of the trellising, broken fragments of which still adhered to some of the branches. They grew now just as they listed, and retained no traces of their earlier neatness, beyond dragging about with them in their present disorderly state the

splintered emblems of their former gentility and elegance. From tree to tree, and from branch to branch, vine-wreaths hung and twined themselves in clustering festoons. They sported and revelled in their gay greenery amongst the boughs and foliage of the fruit trees, and circled the weather-worn heads of the giants of the orchard with bacchanal crowns of pale, sun-shine-tinted green. Towards the left, the trees were not so thickly planted; and the light-foliaged almonds allowed the sun's rays to pass freely through them and ripen the low-lying pumpkins, which looked like moons that had tumbled out of the skies on to the earth. Near the edge of a stream which flowed through the orchard grew various kinds of melons, some scarred and roughened with knotty warts, and some smooth and shining, and perfectly oval as ostrichs' eggs. At every step their progress was barred by gooseberry bushes, gemmed over with their limpid fruit. Hedges of raspberry canes shot up like wild brambles, while the ground was quite carpeted with strawberry plants teeming with ripe berries which exhaled a slight odour of vanilla.

But the enchanted corner of the orchard was still further to the left, by a tier of rocks which there began to soar upwards. When you got there, you found yourself in a veritable land of fire, in a natural hot-house, where all the sun's power seemed to be concentrated. At first, you had to make your way through huge, ungainly-looking fig trees, stretching out their grey branches like arms that have grown weary of lying still. Next you passed on through a thicket of arbutus trees, and a clump of giant box trees, whose scarlet berries gave them the appearance of maize plants decked out with knots of crimson ribbon. Then there came a jungle of madder, and azeroles, and jujube trees, which the pomegranates skirted round with their never-fading verdure. The fruit of the latter, big as a child's fist, was scarcely set yet; and the purple blossoms, fluttering at the ends of the branches, looked like the palpitating wings of the humming birds, which do not bend down the shoots on which they alight. Lastly, there was a forest of orange trees and citrons growing vigorously in the open air. Their straight trunks stood like rows of brown columns, while their shining leaves outlined themselves against the blue of the sky, and covered the ground with a net-work of light and shadow. There were charms in the shade of this orchard in comparison with which those of any European orchard seem colourless and insignificant; the warm beauty of the sunlight filtering through the

clouds of gleaming gold-dust ; the glad certainty that the foliage would always wear its bright greenery ; the penetrating perfume of the blossoms, and the more subdued fragrance of the fruit ; all these helped to fill the body with the soft languor of tropical lands.

"And now, let us go and get something to eat," cried Albine, slapping her hands together. "It must be at least nine o'clock, and I am very hungry."

She had got up from the ground. Serge confessed that he, too, would find some food very acceptable.

"You goose !" she said, "you didn't understand, then, that I brought you here to breakfast. We sha'n't die of hunger here. We can help ourselves to all there is."

They went along under the trees, and, pushing aside the branches, made their way to where the fruit seemed to hang thickest. Albine, who was leading the way, her skirts tucked away between her legs, turned round, and, in her flute-like voice, asked of her companion :

"What do you like best ? Pears, apricots, cherries, or currants ? I had better warn you that the pears are still green ; but they are very good all the same."

Serge decided upon having cherries. Albine said it would be a good thing to begin with them ; but when she saw him foolishly beginning to scramble up the first cherry tree he saw, she made him go along for another ten minutes through a frightful entanglement of branches. The cherries on this tree were small and good for nothing ; the cherries on that were sour ; those on another would not be ripe for at least a week. She knew all the trees.

"Stop, let us climb up into this one," she said at last, as she stopped at the foot of a tree, so heavily laden with fruit, that the clusters of cherries hung down towards the ground, like strings of coral beads.

Serge settled himself comfortably down between two branches and began his breakfast. He no longer paid any attention to Albine. He imagined she was in another tree, a few yards away, when, happening to cast his eyes down towards the ground, he saw her lying calmly on her back beneath him. She had thrown herself down there, and was eating away without troubling herself to use her hands, plucking off with her teeth the cherries which dangled over her mouth.

When she saw that she was discovered, she broke out into a peal of laughter, and leapt up from the grass like a fish taken



DR. W. G. G. G.

ALBINE AND ABBÉ MOURET IN THE CHERRY TREE AT LE PARADOU.

out of the water. Then she turned herself over on to her breast, and, crawling along on her elbows, gradually made the circuit of the tree, snapping up the fattest cherries as she went along.

"They tickle me so," she cried. "See, there's a beauty just fallen on to my neck. They are so deliciously fresh and juicy. They get into my ears, into my eyes, into my nose, everywhere. They are much sweeter down here than up there."

"Ah!" said Serge, laughing, "you say that because you daren't climb 'p."

She lay silent with indignation.

"Daren't!—I!—" she stammered.

Then, gathering up her skirt, she fastened it in front to her waist, without perceiving that she was exposing her thighs to view, and grasping tightly hold of the tree, she pulled herself up the trunk with a single effort of her strong wrists. Then she stepped lightly along the branches, scarcely using her hands to steady herself. She had all the agile nimbleness of a squirrel, and made her way from branch to branch, while seeming scarcely to touch them with her feet, and maintaining her equilibrium only by the swaying poise of her body. When she had nearly reached the top of the tree, standing upon a frail branch, which shook dangerously beneath her weight, she cried—

"Now you see whether I daren't climb."

"Come down at once," implored Serge, full of alarm for her. "I beg of you to come down. You will be injuring yourself."

But, enjoying her triumph, she began to mount still higher. She crawled along to the extreme end of the branch, grasping its leaves in her two hands to maintain her hold.

"The branch is going to break," cried Serge, thoroughly frightened.

"Let it break," she answered, with a laugh; "it will save me the trouble of getting down again."

And the branch did break, but only slowly, and with such deliberation that, as it gradually settled down towards the ground, it let Albine slip down upon it in a very gentle fashion. She did not appear to be in the least degree frightened; and, as she lay down again upon her back, she gave her half-naked thighs a shake, as she said—

"That was really nice. It was quite like being in a carriage."

Serge had jumped down from the tree to be ready to catch

her in his arms. As he stood there, quite pale from the fright he had had, she laughed at his alarm. "One tumbles out of trees every day, but there is never any harm done. Look more cheerful, you great stupid! Stay, just wet your finger and rub it upon my neck. I have got a scratch there."

Serge wetted his finger and touched her neck with it.

"There, I am all right again now," she cried, as she bounded off with a wild leap. "Let us play at hide and seek, shall we?"

She was to hide first. She disappeared, and presently from the depths of greenery, which only she knew, and where Serge could not possibly find her, she cried out, "Cuckoo, cuckoo." But this game of hide and seek did not put any stop to their onslaught upon the fruit trees. Breakfasting operations were carried on in all the nooks and corners where the two big children hunted after each other. Albine, while she was gliding along beneath the branches, would stretch out her hand to pluck a green pear or fill her skirt with apricots. Then in some of her lurking places she would come upon such rich discoveries as would make her careless of the game, and contented merely to sit down upon the ground and occupy herself with eating. Once she lost sound of Serge's movements. So, in her turn, she set about seeking him; and she was surprised, almost vexed, when she discovered him seated under a plum-tree, a plum-tree of whose existence she herself was ignorant, and whose ripe fruit had a delicious musky perfume. She blew him up soundly. Did he want to eat everything himself, that he hadn't called to her to come as well? He pretended to know nothing about the trees, but he evidently had a very fine scent to be able to smell out all the good things. She was especially indignant with the poor tree itself—a stupid tree which no one knew of, and which must have come up in the night on purpose to put people out. Serge, so long as she stood there pouting, did not pull a single plum. Then it occurred to him to shake the tree violently. A shower, a regular hail, of plums fell. Albine, standing in the midst of the downfall, received plums on her arms, plums on her neck, plums on the very tip of her nose. Then she could no longer keep back her laughter; and, as she stood in the midst of the deluge, she cried out, "Stop! stop!" and then squatting upon the ground and compressing herself into the least possible space, she enjoyed greatly this hail of the small round balls of fruit which fell all round her as she squatted there, her hands and her mouth widely opened, and her eyes

tightly closed. The morning was passed in the wild youthful gambols natural to a couple of young scapegraces turned loose in the Paradou. Albine and Serge spent whole hours in childish play, scampering up and down, shouting and sporting with each other, without their innocent bodies feeling one carnal impulse. Their feeling for each other was the good-fellowship of two rollicking scapegraces, who might, perhaps, later on, think of kissing each other on the cheek when the trees should no longer tempt them with their dessert. And with what a delicious spot for their first adventure had Nature here provided them!—a cave of greenery, with such undiscoverable hiding-places and paths, along whose whole windings it was never possible to be serious, while the very hedges seemed to teem with influences fertile of boisterous laughter. The park presented, in this happy orchard, an infancy of bushes which suggested wild gambols, a maturity of shade provocative of hunger, and an old age of well-grown trees, teeming, like kindly grandfathers, with sweet dainties. Even in the depths of the green-mossed recesses, beneath the broken tree-trunks which compelled them to creep the one behind the other, in the leafy alleys, so narrow that Serge laughingly linked himself on to Albine's naked legs, they never succumbed to the perilous reveries of silence. No slightest shadow of trouble touched them in this happy wood.

And when they had grown weary of the apricot-trees and the plum-trees and the cherry-trees, they ran beneath the slender almond-trees; eating the green almonds, scarcely yet as big as peas; hunting for strawberries in the grassy carpet, and regretting that the melons were not already ripe. Albine finished up by setting off running as fast as she could go, pursued by Serge, who could not overtake her. She rushed amongst the fig-trees, leaping over their heavy branches, pulling off the leaves as she sped along to throw them behind her in her companion's face. In a few strides she had cleared the clumps of arbutus, plucking and tasting their red berries as she rushed on; and it was in the jungle of madders and azeroles and jujube-trees that Serge lost her. At first he thought that she was hiding behind a pomegranate-tree; but it was two clustering blossoms which he had mistaken for the rosy roundness of her wrists. Then he scoured the clump of orange-trees, rejoicing in their beauty and perfume, and thinking he must have penetrated into some fairy's palace. In the midst of them he caught sight of Albine, who, not believing

him to be so near, was energetically poking about and gazing searchingly into the depths of greenery.

"What are you looking for there?" he cried. "You know very well that that is forbidden."

She sprang up hastily, and blushed slightly, for the first time that day. Then sitting down by the side of Serge, she told him of the fine times there would be when the oranges were ripe. Then the wood would be all golden and gleaming with those round stars, whose tawny fires shot through the arching green.

Then, when they had really set off on their way home, she halted at every wild-growing fruit tree, and filled her pockets with sour pears and little bitter plums, saying that they would be good to eat on their way. They were a hundred times better than anything they had tasted before. Serge was obliged to swallow some of them, in spite of the grimaces he made at each bite. They got back quite done up, but very happy, and with sides aching from their continuous laughter. That evening Albine had not the courage to ~~wopc~~ to her own room, and she slept at Serge's feet, lying ~~across~~ his bed and dreaming that she was still climbing up trees, and munching, in her sleep, the wild fruit which she had hidden, under the coverlet, by her side.

X.

A WEEK later there was another expedition to the park. They had planned to extend their rambles far beyond the orchard, striking out to the left through the large fields watered by the four streams. They would travel on several miles over the thick grass, and they could live on fish, if they happened to lose themselves.

"I will take my knife," said Albino, holding up a broad-bladed peasant's knife.

She crammed all kinds of things into her pocket: string, bread, matches, a small bottle of wine, rags, a comb, needles. Serge took a rug, but by the time they had got past the lime-trees and had reached the ruins of the chateau, he found it such an incumbrance that he hid it beneath a piece of fallen wall.

The sun was hotter even than before, and Albino had delayed their departure by her extensive preparations. In the heat of the morning they stepped along side by side, almost quietly and steadily. They actually managed to get along for twenty paces at a time without stopping to laugh. They began to talk.

"I never can wake up," began Albino. "I slept so soundly last night. Did you?"

"Yes, indeed, very soundly," replied Serge. She went on to say.

"What does it mean when you dream of a bird that talks to you?"

"I don't know. What did your bird say to you?"

"Oh, I have forgotten. It said all kind of things very plainly, and many of them sounded very comically. Stop, look at that big poppy over there. You sha'n't get it, you sha'n't get it!"

And she sprang forward towards it; but Serge, thanks to

his long legs, outstripped her and plucked the poppy, which he waved about victoriously. Then she stood with her lips tightly compressed, saying nothing, but feeling a strong inclination to cry. Serge threw down the flower. Nothing better to do occurred to him. Then, to make his peace with her, he said :

"Would you like to ride on my back ? I will carry you like I did the other day."

"No, no."

She pouted a little, but she had not gone on for thirty steps, when she turned round, her face breaking out into smiles. A bramble had caught hold of her dress.

"I thought it was you, who were treading on my dress on purpose. It won't let me go. Come and unfasten me. When she was released, they walked on again, side by side, very quietly. Albine pretended that it was much more amusing to stroll along in this fashion, like steady grown-up people. Far away, in front of them, stretched wide grassy expanses, broken here and there by the tender foliage of willow thickets. The grass looked soft and downy, like so much velvet. It was a deep green, except where it died away in the distance into lighter tints, till in the far-off horizon, it assumed a bright golden glow beneath the burning sun. The willow-clumps seemed like pure gold, bathed in that tremulous brilliance of sunshine. Dancing dust-specks fringed the points of the grass-blades with quivering aureoles of light, and, every now and then, as the light breezes swept over the free expanse, the meadow-plants mingled themselves in their vegetable caresses. Dotted over the nearer fields were clusters of white daisies, which sprang up in teeming and wild confusion, like a crowd of holiday-makers, and lighted up with their gay brightness the deeper tones of the grass. The buttercups thrust up their golden bells, which seemed as though the touch of a fly's wing would set them tinkling. Great lonely poppies burned here and there with their fiery cups, and, further away, fringed round the gleaming ponds till they looked like vats all purple with wine. Big blue-bottle flowers swayed their fragile blossoms and threatened to fly away altogether at every breath of air. Then there were, under their feet, patches of woolly feather-grass, of the fragrant meadow-sweet, of the hairy trefoil, of trembling-grass, and many other meadow plants and grasses. The sainfoin shot out its long fine filaments; the clover unfurled its clear green leaves, the plantain brandished its forest of spears, the lucerne spread itself out in soft beds, like a green

ciderdown broidered with purple flowers. To the right, to the left, in front, everywhere, there spread over the level plain a peaceful and placid ocean of greenery, slumbering beneath the still wider stretch of sky. Here and there, in this vast expanse of prairie, the vegetation took a limpid tint of blue, as though it were reflecting the colour of the sky above it. Albine and Serge stepped along over the meadow-lands, with the lush grass reaching up to their knees. It was like wading through a pool whose waters flowed round their calves. Now and then, indeed, they did find themselves floundering through real streams, and heard the gurgling of their waters as they flowed on beneath the thick grassy growth. Sometimes they tramped through placid-looking lakes, that seemed to slumber in their shallow basins, all green with short grass, whose waters scarcely reached their ankles. As they walked along together, their joy found expression not in wild gambols, as in the orchard a week before, but rather in loitering and in revelling in the purity and beauty of the scene, which seemed to calm down in them the tumultuous exuberance of early youth, while the long grass itself protested against a too hasty progress, and twisted and knotted itself round their feet. Albine turned aside and placed herself next to a tall reed which reached up to her chin. She excelled it in height only by her head. For a moment or two she stood there in silence, then she called out to Serge.

"Come here, it is just like a bath. It is all over water."

Then she gave a jump and scampered off without waiting for him to come, and they both walked along the bank of the first stream which barred their onward course. It was a shallow tranquil brook that flowed between two green banks of wild cress. It flowed on so placidly and gently along its slightly sinuous course that its surface reflected, like a mirror, the smallest reed that grew near its borders. Albine and Serge walked along by the side of this stream, whose onward motion was slower than their own, for a long time before they came across a tree that flung a shadow upon these idle waters. As far as their eyes could reach, they saw the brook naked and bare of shade, unfolding its curving reaches on its grassy bed, while it seemed to bask and slumber in the full sunlight like a half uncoiled blue serpent. At last they reached a clump of three willows. Two of them had their roots in the stream; the third was set a little backward. Their trunks, rotten and crumbling with age, were covered with all the bright foliage of youth. The shadow they cast was so slight as scarcely to be perceptible upon the

water that shone so brightly in the sunlight. Just at this point, the surface of the stream, which, both above and below, was so smooth and unruffled, was flecked with a transient rippling of its limpid current, as though it were expressing its surprise at finding itself even thus slightly obscured. Between the three willows the meadow land very gradually sloped down and jutted out into the stream, and some crimson poppies had rooted themselves in the crevices of the decaying old trunks. The foliage of the willows looked like a tent of greenery fixed upon three stakes by the water's edge, in the midst of a grass-grown desert.

"This is the place," cried Albino, "this is the place;" and she glided beneath the willows.

Serge sat down by her side, his feet almost in the water. He glanced round him, and said—

"You know of everything, of all the best spots. You might almost think this was an island, ten feet square, right in the middle of the sea."

"Yes, indeed, we are quite to ourselves," she replied, as she gleefully drummed the grass with her fists. "It is altogether our own, and we are going to do everything ourselves." Then, struck by a brilliant idea, she sprang towards him, and with her face close to his, asked him, with a burst of joy—

"Will you be my husband? I will be your wife."

He was delighted at the notion, and replied that he would gladly be her husband, laughing even more loudly than she had done herself. Then Albino suddenly became grave, and assumed the anxious air of a housewife.

"You know," she said, "that it is I who will have to give the orders. We will have breakfast as soon as you have laid the table."

She laid her commands upon him in an imperious fashion. He was to stow away all the various articles which she extracted from her pockets in a hole in one of the willows, which she called the cupboard. The rags supplied the household linen, while the comb represented all the toilette necessities. The needles and string were to be used for mending the explorers' clothes. The provision for the inner man consisted of the little bottle of wine and the few crusts which she had saved from yesterday. She had, to be sure, the matches, by whose aid she intended to cook the fish they were going to catch.

When Serge had finished laying the table, the bottle of wine

in the centre, and the three crusts grouped round it, he hazarded the observation that the fare seemed to be scanty. But Albine shrugged her shoulders with feminine superiority. She waded into the water, and said in severe tones,

"I will catch the fish; you can watch me."

For half an-hour she exerted herself strenuously in trying to grab hold of the little fishes with her hands. She had gathered up her petticoats and fastened them together with a few inches of string. She advanced quietly into the water, taking the greatest care not to disturb it, and then, when she had stepped quite close to some tiny fish, that lay lurking between a couple of pebbles, she bent down her bare arm, made a wild grasp, and then brought her hand up again with nothing in it but sand and gravel. Serge broke out into noisy explosions of laughter. This brought her back to the bank again, angry and indignant, and she told him that he had no business to laugh at her.

"But," he went on to ask, "how are we going to cook your fish when you have caught it? There is no wood about."

That put the final stroke to her discouragement. Besides, the fish in this stream didn't seem to be good for much; so she came out of the water, and didn't trouble herself to put on her stockings again. She ran through the long grass, with her bare legs, to get dry; and it so tickled the soles of her feet as to quickly restore her to a state of joyous laughter again.

"See," she broke out, suddenly, "here is some pimpernel. It is so very good. Now we shall have a feast."

Serge was ordered to gather a heap of the pimpernel and to put it upon the table. They ate it with their crusts. Albine declared that it was much better than nuts. She assumed to herself the position of mistress of the establishment, and cut Serge's bread for him, for she would not trust him with the knife.

"I am the mistress," she replied seriously to all his incipient attempts at resistance.

Then she made him put away in the "cupboard" the few drops of wine that remained at the bottom of the bottle. He was ordered, too, to sweep the grass, so that there might be a path made between the dining-room and the bed-room. Albine went to bed first, saying, as she lay down at full length,

"We are going to sleep, now, you know. You must lie down by my side, quite close to me."

He lay down as he was ordered. They both lay down very stiffly and rigidly, touching each other from the shoulders

to the feet. Their hands were thrown back over their heads. They found, indeed, this disposition of them embarrassing and awkward, but they did not know what else to do with them. They maintained an unruffled gravity. They stared up into the air, their eyes wide open, saying that they were asleep, and that it was very nice.

"You see, when people are married, they keep warm," murmured Albine. "Don't you feel how hot I am?"

"Yes, indeed, you are like an eider-down. But you oughtn't to talk, because we are asleep. It isn't proper to talk."

They preserved silence for a long time, still maintaining their serious demeanour. They had turned away their heads from each other, separating by almost imperceptible degrees, as if the warmth of each other's breath had discommoded them. Breaking the silence which had grown up between them, Sergo exclaimed :

"I love you very much."

It was love without sexual feeling, love previous to sexual feeling; that instinctive love which wakens in the bosoms of little men of ten years old at the sight of a white-robed baby-girl. The meadow-lands, spreading round them all open and free, dissipated the slight fear each felt for the other. They knew that they lay there, seen of all the plants and grapes, and that the blue sky looked down upon them through the light foliage of the willows, and the thought was pleasant to them. The willow canopy over their heads was a mere open screen and secluded them no more than if Albine had just hooked up the skirt of her dress as a slight shelter. The shade it cast was so imperceptible that it breathed into them none of the languors that some dim coppice might have done, and inspired them with none of the inclinations and desires that might have assailed them in some dim grotto or deep-shrouded alcove of greenery. From the far-off horizon a light refreshing breeze swept its soft coolness over this grassy sea, swelling here and there into waves of flowers; while, at their feet, the stream, another child, as it were, like themselves, flowed idly along, and its gentle babbling sounded to them like the far-away laughter of a companion. Ah! happy solitude, so tranquil and placid, in which nakedness could show itself with the adorable effrontery of ignorance, and remain unconscious of shame! For these two, the patch of green, in the midst of the wide-spreading meadow-lands, that served them for their first bed, was imbued with all the innocence of the infant's cradle.

"There, that's enough," said Albine, getting up, "we've been in bed long enough."

Serge seemed a little surprised at this speedy termination of their sleep. He reached out his arm and grasped hold of Albine's petticoat, as though he was going to pull her down towards him again; but she dropped down on her knees by his side, laughing and asking:

"What do you want? what do you want?"

He didn't know what he wanted. He gazed up at her, and grasped her elbows. Then, for a moment, he seized hold of her by the hair, which made her cry out. When she had freed herself from him, and had again risen upon her feet, he buried his face amongst the grass where she had lain, and which still retained the warmth of her body.

"Yes," he said, "it's time to get up," and he rose from the ground.

They scoured over the meadow-lands till evening began to fall. They paid a visit to their garden. Albine walked on in front, seeming to sniff the air like a young dog, and saying nothing; always in search of the happy glade, although where they were there were none of those big trees of which her thoughts were full. Serge indulged in all kinds of clumsy pieces of politeness. He rushed forward so hastily to bend aside the tall reeds and grasses, that he nearly tripped himself up, and almost tore Albine's arm from her body as he tried to assist her to jump over the brooks. Their joy was great when they came to the three other streams. The first flowed over a bed of pebbles, between two rows of willows, which so closely joined each other that the two children thought they would be able to clamber across upon the branches. Serge, however, having speedily tumbled into the water, which did not rise higher than his knees, took Albine in his arms and carried her across to the opposite bank, and so saved her from the least wetting. The next stream flowed gloomily along beneath a lofty canopy of foliage, dragging itself listlessly along with gentle rustling and creaming ripples, like the satin train of some thought-wrapt lady. It was a deep, still, and rather dangerous looking current, but a fallen tree that stretched across it from side to side served them as a bridge, and, sitting astride this, their feet dangling in the water, they safely conveyed themselves to the opposite bank. It was the last stream which delayed them the most, and at which they lingered longest. It bounded along, sportively as themselves, staying

its speed here and there in curving bays, and breaking out into a laughter of merry ripples as it sped through piles of big stones, and then calming itself into a sudden quietness as it passed beneath the arching shade of some thicket of arbutus trees. It exhibited all the phases and varieties of human life, as it sped along variously over soft sand and rocky boulders, over sparkling pebbles and greasy clay, which the leaping frogs disturbed into yellow puddle. Albine and Serge made a pretty mess of themselves here. They took off their shoes and stockings and walked homewards along the bed of the stream, in preference to remaining on the bank. At every little island that divided the current they called a halt, and landed there. They took temporary possession of them all, and lay down beneath the shade of towering canes and lofty reeds, which seemed to have grown there expressly to afford a shelter for shipwrecked adventurers. They had a delightful progress, and amused themselves immensely by the diversion which the stream afforded them, while the beauty of its banks charmed them, and its merry-flowing current seemed to still further exhilarate them.

Serge observed that Albine, all the time they were splashing along through the stream, seemed to be constantly on the lookout for something, and scanned with searching eye the banks, the little islands, and even the lilies that lolled lazily on the surface of the water. Once he was obliged to go and pull her out of a large colony of these latter, whose broad leaves the motion of the stream had wrapped tightly round her legs. He said nothing, but merely shook his finger at her. At last, they got home again, delighted with their day's outing, walking along, arm-in-arm, like a couple of lovers after a holiday. They looked at each other, and thought one another handsomer and stronger than they had seemed to be before, and their laughter had a very different ring from that with which it had sounded in the morning.

XI.

"ARE we never going off again?" asked Serge some days later.

And when he saw Albine shrug her shoulders with a slightly weary kind of air, he added, in a teasing kind of way, "You have got tired of looking for your tree, then?"

They joked about the tree all the day and made fun of it. It didn't exist. It was only a nursery-story. Yet they both spoke of it with a slight feeling of awe. They settled that the next day they would go to the far end of the park and pay a visit to the great forest-trees which Serge had not yet seen. When the morning came, Albine refused to take anything along with them. They breakfasted before starting and did not set off till late. The heat of the sun, which was then great, made them feel languid, and they sauntered gently along, side by side, carefully availing themselves of all sheltering shades. They lingered neither in the garden nor the orchard, through which they had to pass. When they gained the shady coolness that reigned beneath the foliage of the big trees, they dropped into a still slower pace; and, without a word, but with a deep sigh, as though it were a welcome relief to them to escape from the full glare of day, they pushed on into the mellow light of the forest's depths. Then, when they had nothing but cool green leaves about them, and no glimpse of the park, that far away lay sweltering in the sun, reached them, they looked at each other and smiled, with a feeling of vague uneasiness.

"How nice it is here!" murmured Serge.

Albine nodded her head. A choking sensation in her throat prevented her speaking. Their arms were not round each other's waists, as was their general wont, but swung loosely by their sides, as they walked along without touching each other, and their heads were bent slightly towards the ground.

Serge saw tears trickling down Albine's cheeks and mingling themselves with the smile that played round her lips. He stood

still and exclaimed: "What is the matter with you? Are you in pain? Have you hurt yourself?"

"No, I'm all right. Don't you see I'm smiling? I don't know how it is, but the scent of all these trees forces tears into my eyes."

She glanced at him for a moment, and then went on to say:

"Why, you're crying too! You see you can't help it."

"Yes," he murmured, "all this deep shade affects me somehow. It seems so very peaceful and quiet here that it makes one feel a little sad. But you must tell me, you must indeed, if there is anything to make you really unhappy. I have not done anything to annoy you, have I? you are not vexed with me, are you?"

She assured him that she was not. She was quite happy, she said.

"Then why are you not enjoying yourself more? Shall we have a race?"

"Oh! no, we won't race," she said, disdainfully, with the assumed air of a quite grown-up person. And when he went on to suggest other amusements, such as bird-nesting or gathering strawberries or violets, she snubbed him by saying a little impatiently:

"We are too big for that sort of thing. It is childish to be always playing. Aren't you satisfied to walk on quietly by my side?"

And she stepped along so prettily, that it was, indeed, pleasure enough for him simply to hear the pit-pat of her little boots as they fell upon the hard soil of the path. Never before had the picturesqueness of her figure struck him so strongly, as she stepped lightly along, her skirts swaying airily behind her, in answer to her onward motion. It was a lasting happiness simply to see her thus walking sedately along by his side, and he was ever discovering some new charm in her lissom form.

"You are right, quite right," he said, "this is really the best. I would walk along by your side to the end of the world, if you wished it."

A little further on, however, he stopped and asked her if she was not tired, and hinted that he would not be at all sorry to have a rest himself.

"We might sit down just for a few minutes," he suggested, hesitatingly.

"No," she said, "I don't want to do."

"We could lie down, you know," he went on, "in the grass, like we did the other day. We should be quite warm and comfortable."

"No, no ; I don't want to do so."

And she sprang suddenly forward, scared and frightened at the masculine arms which offered to circle her waist. Serge called her a tiresome little stupid, and tried to catch her again. But when he laid upon her just the light touch of his finger, she cried out with such an expression of pain that he drew back with alarm and astonishment.

"I have vexed you !" he said.

She did not reply for a moment, surprised, herself, at her cry of fear, and already smiling at her own alarm.

"No ; leave me alone and don't bother me. What could we do, if we did sit down ? It is nicer to go on walking ;" and she added, in a grave tone, though she tried to appear as if she were speaking jestingly :

"You know that I have my tree to look for."

Then Serge began to laugh, and offered to help her in her search. He conducted himself very gently and tenderly that he might run no risk of again alarming her, for he saw that she was even yet trembling, though she had resumed her slow walk by his side. What they were contemplating was forbidden, and could bring them no luck ; and he, like her, felt filled with a delightful awe, which thrilled through him at every sigh and moan of the forest trees. The perfume of the foliage, the soft green light which filtered through the leaves, the soothing silence that lay around them, filled them with a tremulous excitement, as though the next turn of the path might lead them to some perilous happiness.

They walked along under the cool trees for hours. They retained their formal and reserved attitude towards each other, and scarcely exchanged a single word, though they never left each other's side for a single moment, and clung closely together through all the dim greenery of the forest. At first their way lay through a jungle of brushwood, with trunks no thicker than a child's wrist. These they pushed aside, and opened out a path for themselves through the tender shoots and branches, which pricked and tickled their eyes with their brushing leaves. The undergrowth closed up again behind them, and left no sign of their track visible, and they struggled on, going where chance directed them, quite ignorant of where they were, and leaving no trace of their progress, save the passing

quiver of the shaken branches. Albine, who had grown weary of not being able to see three steps in front of her, was delighted when they found themselves free of this vast jungle, whose end they had long been trying to discover. They had reached a little clearing, from which several paths struck out in various directions. Fringed with green hedges, these lanes of foliage opened out around them, twisting in this direction and in that, now turning back upon themselves and now shooting straight forward, and now running into and intersecting one another in odd and capricious fashion. Albine and Serge climbed up to look over the hedges. They were in no great haste, and would willingly have stayed where they were, lost in the mazy windings of those narrow green lanes, and pleasuring themselves by walking continually on without getting anywhere, if they had not caught a distant glimpse of the lofty forest trees. To these they directed their steps, and passed beneath their shade, solemnly and with a touch of sacred awe, as though they had been entering some cathedral-doors. The straight lichen-stained trunks of the mighty trees, of a dingy grey, like discoloured stone, towered up loftily into the heavens, and presented the appearance of a vast forest of columns. In places they separated from each other, and formed themselves into wide naves and narrower aisles, whose supporting pillars seemed in the far distance to be delicately slender, finely carved and chiselled, and everywhere permeable to the blue heavens around them. A religious silence reigned beneath these giant arches, and the ground beneath them lay hard as stone in its nakedness, for not a blade of green smiled upon it, and its only covering was a dusty litter of mouldering leaves; and the children's feet rang upon it as they passed along through this natural temple, whose majestic solitude filled them with awe.

Here, indeed, if anywhere, would be the hiding-place of that much-sought tree, beneath whose shade perfect happiness made its home. Under the soft influence of the subdued light that streamed through those mighty arches, they felt that they could not now be far away from it. The trees seemed to be animated with kindly feelings towards them, and to be filled with strength and silence and happy restfulness. They looked at each one of them, and felt that they loved them all; and they awaited from their majestic tranquillity that revelation which should show to them the way by which they, too, might enter upon all the unruffled bliss of strong and perfect life. The maples, the ashes, the hornbeams, the dogwood-trees, towered up

in all the quiet calm of conscious strength, mighty giants that they were, the fall of one single one of which would have sufficed to wreck and destroy a whole corner of the forest. There were elms there with colossal trunks, whose majestic branches, rich in sap, were scarcely veiled by the light cluster of their small airy leaves. The birches, the alders, delicate as sylphs, swayed their slim forms in the breezes, while the soft wind played with their foliage that streamed like the locks of some mighty goddess, already half metamorphosed into a tree. The planes shot up their regular columns, from whose glossy bark fell scaly fragments. But it was the oaks who were the monarchs of all—the mighty oaks, branching out squarely from their sturdy trunks, and thrusting out conquering arms that barred from all around them the sun's approach; Titan-like trees, which, when hurled to the ground by the thunderbolts of heaven, still looked, as they lay prostrate on the earth, unconquered and defiant. Could it be one of those colossal oaks? or, was it one of those lovely planes, or one of those maiden-pale birches, or one of those creaking elms? Albine and Serge still plodded on, quite ignorant of the direction they were taking, and completely lost amongst the crowding trees. For a moment they thought they had found what they sought, in the midst of a group of walnut trees, whose thick foliage cast such a dark cold shadow, that they quite shivered beneath it. Further on, they felt another thrill of emotion and excitement as they came upon a little forest of chestnut trees, greened over with moss, and thrusting out big strange-shaped branches, on which you might have built a whole village in the air. Going on still further, Albine caught sight of a clearing, towards which they both ran hastily. Here, in the midst of a carpet of fine turf, a locust tree grew like a very ruin of greenery, a foliaged Babel, whose wreck was covered with the strangest-looking growth. Stones that had been sucked up from the ground by the mounting sap, still remained adhering to the trunk. The upper branches bent themselves down to earth again, and, taking root, surrounded the parent tree with lofty arches and with a colony of new trees that was ever increasing. Upon the bark, torn and seamed with bleeding wounds, the fruit-pods were ripening, for the mere effort of bearing seed strained the old monster's skin till it split. They walked slowly round it, and explored the avenues formed by its arching branches, and stared at the gaping cracks in its naked roots. Then they pushed on again

not having yet recognised the presence of that supernatural happiness which was the object of their quest.

"Where have we got to?" asked Serge.

Albine did not know. She had never before been in this portion of the park. They were now in the midst of a thicket of cytissus and acacias, whose clustering blossoms exhaled a sweet heavy perfume. "We are quite lost," she laughed. "I don't know these trees at all."

"But," said Serge, "the garden must come to an end somewhere. When we get to the end, you will know where you are, won't you?"

"No," she answered, stretching out her hands, as if to express the immense extent of the place.

They fell into silence, and the consciousness of the vastness of the park seemed to fill them with a pleasure greater than it had ever done before. They felt a thrill of joy at knowing that they two were alone in the midst of this wide-spreading place, so far-reaching that even they themselves could not guess at its limits.

"Well, well," said Serge, gaily, "we must make up our minds that we are lost. You are not afraid, are you?"

"Not a bit. There's no one except you and me in the garden. What do you suppose I should be afraid of? The walls are very high, and, though we can't see them, will keep us quite safe, you know."

He was standing quite close to her, and he murmured very gently,

"But a little time ago you were afraid—of me."

She looked straight in his face, perfectly calm, and without the least faltering in her glance.

"You made me feel unhappy," she replied, "but you are different now. Why should I be afraid of you?"

"Then you will let me hold you like this. We will go and sit down under the trees."

"Yes, you may put your arm around me, it makes me feel happy. And we'll walk slowly, won't we, so that we may not find our way again too soon?"

He had passed his arm round her waist, and it was thus that they sauntered beneath the shade of the great forest trees again, under whose arching vaults these big children, in whose hearts first love was gradually dawning, passed on with still more lingering steps. Albine said she was feeling a little tired, and leaned her head on Serge's shoulder. Neither of them

spoke of sitting down. They did not want to do so, they would have felt disturbed and uneasy. Besides, what pleasure could a rest on the grass give them compared with the sweet pleasure they experienced in walking along in this close union? The fabulous tree was quite forgotten. The only thing they cared to search for was each other's face, that they might smile in one another's eyes. And it was the trees, the maples, the elms, the oaks, with their soft green shade, that prompted their first confessions of love.

"I love you!" whispered Serge, while his breath stirred the golden hair that clustered round Albine's temples.

He tried to think of something else to say, but he could only repeat,

"I love you! I love you!"

Albine heard him with a soft smile of pleasure. The music of her heart was in accord with his.

"I love you! I love you!" she sighed, with all the sweetness of her soft young voice.

Then, lifting up her blue eyes, in which the light of love was dawning, she asked,

"How much do you love me?"

Serge reflected for a moment. The forest was wrapped in a holy calm, and the light steps of the young pair awoke gentle echoes in its vaulted naves.

"I love you beyond everything," he answered. "You are more beautiful than all else I can see when I open my window in the morning. When I look at you, I want nothing more. If I could have you only, and nothing else, I should be perfectly happy."

She lowered her eyes, and let her head fall back upon his shoulder. "I love you," he went on. "I know nothing about you. I don't know who you are, or where you come from. You are neither my mother nor my sister; and yet I love you so much that I have given you my whole heart, and have kept none of it for anyone else. Listen, I love those lips of yours, soft and satiny; I love your mouth with its rose-sweet breath; I love your eyes, in which I see my own love reflected; I love even your eyelashes and those little veins which blue the lily-whiteness of your temples. Ah! yes, I love you, Albine. What can I say more than that I love you?"

"And I love you, too. You are strong, and tall, and handsome. I love you, Serge."

For a moment or two they remained perfectly silent in an

ecstasy of happiness. It seemed to them that they were surrounded by an atmosphere of soft music, that their own words were breathed out of some soft, sweet organ which they could not see. They sauntered dreamily on, circling each other's waists, and threaded an aimless way amidst the mighty trees. Far away, through the long vista of the colonnades of trunks, they caught a glimpse of the rays of the setting sun.

"And why do you love me?" asked Albine again.

He only smiled, and did not answer her immediately; then he said,

"I love you because I have seen you. That is why. Now that we have met, we are bound to love each other. It seems to me that I could not go on living if I did not love you. You are my very soul and the breath of my life."

He bent his head, speaking almost as though he were in a dream.

"I didn't understand it at all at first. It grows on one with one's own growth. One has to get tall and strong before one finds it all out. You know we have always loved each other in some fashion, but we didn't speak of it. One is foolish and timid when one is very young. Then, one fine day, it all becomes clear, and it bursts out. Now, we have nothing else to do but to love each other. It is our whole life."

Albine's head was bent down, her eyes were tightly closed, and she scarce drew her breath. Serge's caressing words had thrown her into a silent ecstasy of love.

"You really love me? Really, really?" she murmured, without opening her eyes.

Serge remained silent, troubled that he could find no words to express to her the force of his love. His eyes wandered over her rosy face, which lay tranquilly upon his shoulder, with all the quiet restfulness of sleep. Her eyelids were soft and tender as softest silk. Her lips were curved in a bewitching bow, round which a sunny smile was playing, and her brow of snowy white lost itself in the waves of her golden hair. He would have given his life to be able to utter the word which was on his tongue, but which he could not pronounce. Again he bent over her, and seemed to consider on what sweet spot of that fair face he should whisper the supreme syllables. But he said nothing, and breathed only a little sigh. Then he kissed Albine's lips.

"Albine, I love you!"

"I love you, Serge!"

Then they were silent again, thrilled and quivering with their first kiss. She had opened her eyes quite widely again. He was standing with his lips bending slightly over hers. They looked at each other without a blush. They felt they were under the influence of some sovereign power. It was like the realisation of a meeting long dreamed of, in which they should be grown-up and tall, heart beating with heart, and be forever joined the one with the other. For a moment they glanced at each other with a wondering look, and then raised their eyes to the solemn vault of greenery above them, as though they were wondering what the quiet trees might be thinking of them. But, beneath the serene complacency of the forest, they soon yielded themselves up to all the merry gaiety of a pair of young lovers, screened from all obtrusive gaze.

"Tell me how long you have loved me. Tell me everything. Did you love me that day when you lay sleeping upon my hand? Did you love me when I fell out of the cherry tree, and you stood at the bottom, stretching out your arms to catch me, and looking so pale? Did you love me when you took hold of me round the waist in the meadows to help me to jump over the streams?"

"Hush, dearest, and let me speak. I have always loved you. And you, you loved me long ago, didn't you?"

Until the evening closed round them, they lived upon that one word "love," in which they seemed to be constantly finding some new sweetness. They dragged it into all their sentences, and ejaculated it inconsequentially, merely for the pleasure they found in pronouncing it. They had found their way again, or rather they had stumbled upon it, for they had not been paying the least attention to where they were going. As they left the forest, the evening had fallen, and the moon was rising, round and yellow, over the dusky foliage. It was a delightful walk home through the midst of the park, with that sympathetic and discreet luminary peering at them through the leaves of the great trees. Albino said the moon was surely following them. The night was warm and soft, and the sky was spangled with bright stars. Far away behind them they could hear the rustling of the breezes through the forest trees, and Serge listened, and said :

"They are talking about us."

As they passed along through the parterre, they were wrapped round by an atmosphere of sweetest perfumes ; the perfume of odorous flowers at night, which is richer and more penetrating

than during the day, even as the respiration of a sleeper is deeper than the breath of a waking man.

"Good night, Serge."

"Good night, Albine."

They clasped each other by the hand on the landing of the first-floor, without entering the room where they usually wished each other good night. When he was alone, Serge sat on the edge of his bed, and listened to Albine's every movement in the room overhead.

XII.

For the next few days Albine and Serge experienced a feeling of confusion and uneasiness in each other's presence. They avoided all allusion to their walk beneath the trees. They had not again kissed each other, nor repeated their confession of love. It was not any feeling of bashfulness or reserve which had sealed their lips upon the subject of their love, but rather a fear of doing anything which might possibly interfere with their present happiness. When they were apart, they lived upon the recollection of each other; the image of the other was ever present in the mind of each of them, and they constantly called up the memory of those happy hours which they had spent, with their arms round each other's waists, and lips caressing lips. The constraint which they had imposed upon themselves ended by throwing them both into a feverish abstracted condition. They looked at each other with sad heavy eyes, and talked, in a melancholy mood, of things that did not interest them in the least. Once, after a long interval of silence, Serge said to Albine in a tone that was full of anxiety :

"Are you ill?"

But she shook her head as she answered :

"No, no. It is you who are not well, your hands are quite hot."

The thought of the park filled them with feelings of vague uneasiness which they could not understand. They felt that danger for them lurked in every turn and by-path, and that traps and pitfalls lay open there into which they might fall to their hurt. They never spoke about these disquieting thoughts, which were holding them apart as though they were each other's foes, but every now and then they were plainly to be read in some timid and nervous look. However, one morning Albine ventured, after much hesitation, to say to Serge :

"It is foolish of you to keep always in-doors. You will make yourself ill again."

Serge laughed rather petulantly, and made a gesture of denial.

"We have been everywhere," he said in a subdued voice, "we know all the garden by heart."

Albine shook her head, and, in tones that sank almost to a whisper, said :

"No, indeed. We don't know the rocks, and we have never been to the springs. It was there that I warmed myself last winter. There are some places where the stones seem to be actually alive."

The next morning, without having said another word on the subject, they set out together. They climbed up to the right, behind the grotto where the marble woman lay slumbering. As they began to mount up on the lowest stones, Serge said :

"We must see everything. If we had missed that, it might have vexed us afterwards."

The day was very warm, and the air close and thundery. They had not ventured to clasp each other's waists ; but stepped along, one behind the other, quite overcome with the heat. Albine took advantage of a widening of the path to let Serge go on in front of her ; for the warm impact of his breath troubled her, and the knowledge that he was just behind her, pressing close on to her skirts, disquieted her. All around them the rocks towered up in mighty masses ; and their shelving surfaces here and there spread out into huge stone tablelands, on which a scanty vegetation struggled to maintain itself. Round about grew bushes of golden gorse and clumps of sage and thyme and lavender and other balsamic plants, and the sour-berried juniper trees and the bitter rosemary, whose strong scent almost made them dizzy. Here and there the path was hemmed in by hedges of holly, that grew in quaint forms and patterns like cunningly wrought iron-work, with gratings of blackened bronze and beaten iron and polished copper, teeming with elaborate ornament and rose-like flowers. Before they could reach the springs, they had to pass through a pine-forest. Its shadow seemed to weigh upon their shoulders like lead. The dry needles crackled beneath their feet, and flew up in a cloud of resinous dust which burned their lips.

"This garden of yours doesn't make itself very agreeable just here," said Serge, turning round and addressing Albine.

They smiled at each other. By this time they had reached

the springs. The sight of these clear waters soothed them. They did not hide themselves away beneath a covering of verdure, like springs that bubble up on flat plains, which set a thick foliage growing around them that they may slumber idly away beneath its protecting shade. These shot up in the full light of day from a basin in the rock, and not a single blade of grass mingled its green tint with the clear blue of the water. Away below them, the sun was beating against the sand which breathed out a tremulous haze of heat. The spring-waters rushed out from the basin in a stream of purest white, and sped along, bounding about with all the gladness of a child's play, and then leapt suddenly over the side of the rock, assuming in their fall the form and hue of a woman's breast of snow-white flesh.

"Dip your hands in," cried Albine, "the water is icy cold."

They cooled and refreshed their hot hands in it and threw it over their faces. They lingered on there amidst the steamy haze which rose up from the moist ground round the springs, and spread a misty veil across the sun's glare.

"Look," cried Albine; "look, there is the garden, and there are the meadows and the forest."

They turned and looked at the Paradou all spread out beneath their feet.

"And you can't see," she added, "the least sign of the wall. The whole country belongs to us, right up to the sky."

By this time, their arms had, almost without their being aware of it, slipped themselves confidently round each other's waists. The coolness of the springs had soothed down their feverish disquietude. But just as they were going away, Albine seemed to recall some old memory, and she led Serge back again, saying:

"Down there, below the rocks, I once saw the wall a long time ago."

"But there is nothing of the kind to be seen," replied Serge, turning a little pale.

"Yes, yes; it must be behind that avenue of chestnut trees at the other side of those bushes."

Then, feeling Serge's arm tremble as it pressed her waist more closely, she added:

"But perhaps I am mistaken; yet I seem to remember that I came suddenly upon it as I left the avenue. It stopped my way, and was so high that I felt a little afraid. And a few steps further on, I came upon another surprise. There was

an enormous hole broken through it, out of which I could look and see the whole country outside."

Serge looked at her with an expression of anxious supplication in his eyes. She gave a little shrug of her shoulders to reassure him, and went on to say :

"But I stopped the hole up, I did. Don't be alarmed ; I have told you that we are quite alone, and we are. I stopped it up at once. I had my knife with me, and I cut down some brambles and rolled up some big stones. I would defy even a sparrow to force its way through. If you like, we will go and look at it one of these days, and then you will be satisfied."

But he shook his head. Then they went away together, still holding each other by the waist ; but they had grown anxious and uneasy again. Serge gazed sideways down upon Albine's face, and she felt distressed and her eyelids trembled beneath his glance. They would both have liked to go down again at once, and so escape the uneasiness of a longer walk together. But, in spite of their inclinations, and as though impelled by some stronger power, they skirted a rocky cliff and reached a piece of table-land, where once more they were bathed in the full sunlight. They no longer breathed the soft and languid perfumes of aromatic plants, the musky scent of thyme, and the sweet fragrance of lavender. Now they were treading under foot a foul-odoured growth ; worm-wood with its bitter penetrating smell ; dew that reeked like putrid flesh ; and the hot valerian, all clammy with its aphrodisiacal exudations. Mandragoras, hemlocks, hellebore, belladonna, poured out their emanations, and made their heads swim with a dizzy giddiness till they reeled and tottered one against the other.

"Shall I hold you up?" asked Serge of Albine, as he felt her leaning heavily upon him.

He circled her tightly with both his arms, but she struggled out of his grasp, gasping and breathing heavily.

"No ; you choke me," she said. "Leave me alone. I don't know what is the matter with me. The ground seems to be giving way under my feet. I feel as if I were going to be ill."

She took hold of his hand and laid it upon her breast. Then Serge turned quite pale. He was feeling even more overcome than she was. Tears sprang up in the eyes of them both as they saw each other thus ill and troubled, and knowing no remedy for the evil which had fallen upon them. Were they going to die here of this mysterious suffocating faintness?"

"Come away and let us sit down in the shade," said Serge. "It is these plants which are poisoning us with their noxious odours."

He led her gently along by her finger-tips, for she shivered and trembled when he just touched her wrist. It was beneath a widely-spreading cedar that they sat down, whose level branches, that reached out nearly a dozen yards from the trunk, formed a protecting roof above them. Behind it a group of quaint-looking conifers shot up into the air; cypresses, with their soft flat foliage that looked like heavy lace; firs, straight and solemn, soaring up like ancient druidical pillars, still blackened with the blood of sacrificed victims; yews, with their silver-fringed robes of gloom; evergreen trees of all kinds, with their thick-set foliage and leathery greenery, splashed here and there with yellow and red, and so tough and thick that they lost none of their crispness beneath the scorching sun. There was a weird-looking araucaria that stood out conspicuously and strangely with its regularly-spreading branches, that seem like writhing arms of knotted snakes, and bristled up their imbricated leaves like the scales of an excited serpent. Beneath these heavy shadows, the warm air lulled them to a voluptuous drowsiness. Not a breath stirred the soft atmosphere of this cool retreat, and the odorous trees exhaled a perfume like the love scents of the East, the perfume that breathed from the painted lips of the Shunamite woman.

"Aren't you going to sit down?" said Albine.

And she slipped a little aside to make room for him; but Serge stepped back and remained standing. Then, as she renewed her request to him to come and sit by her, he dropped down upon his knees, a little distance away, and said, softly:

"No, I am feeling so feverish, I should make you hot. If I wasn't afraid of making you ill, I would take you in my arms, and clasp you so closely and tightly that we should no longer feel any pain."

He dragged himself along upon his knees nearer to her.

"Oh! to have you in my arms! to have you lying close against my breast! It is all I ever think of. In the night I awake and find myself clutching at empty space, starting up from dreams in which I held you in a tight embrace. At first I would only take you tenderly by your finger-tip, and then, by degrees, I would slowly and gradually take possession of your whole being, until there was nothing left of you that wasn't mine, from your feet to the lashes that fringe your eyes. I would keep you for

ever and never let you go. Oh! the thrilling joy to possess her one loves? My very heart would leap out and mingle itself with yours!"

He crept still nearer to her. If he had reached out his hand, he could have touched the edge of her skirts.

"But, somehow, I feel so far away from you. There seems to be some wall built up between us which I cannot beat down with all the power of my clenched fists. And yet I am quite strong again to-day; I could catch you up in my arms and swing you over my shoulder, and carry you off as though you belonged to me. And yet that wouldn't satisfy me. I shouldn't have got what I want; I shouldn't have got the whole of you. When my arms are round you, they seem to be only clasping a mere fragment of you. Where is your whole being, in all its entirety, hidden away, that I may go and search for you there?"

He had let himself drop down upon his elbows, and was lying almost prostrate upon the ground, in an attitude of deep adoration. He breathed a kiss upon the hem of Albine's skirt. The girl sprang suddenly up, as though it was her flesh that had received the kiss. She hid her brow beneath her hands, and seemed painfully excited and distressed.

"Don't! don't! I beg of you. Let us go on."

She did not hurry away. She let Serge follow her as she walked slowly on, buried in a nervous abstraction, her feet stumbling against the naked tree-roots, and her hands still clasped round her head, as though to check the excitement that thrilled her. When they came out of the little wood, they walked for a little distance over the ledges of rocks, round which clustered and grew a lush colony of fleshy plants. They seemed a crawling, writhing mass of the hideous, nameless monsters that people a nightmare; some shaped like huge spiders and caterpillars, some squatting like monstrous woodlice, with hairless gleaming skin; others tufted with filthy, matted hairs, and sprawling out behind them sickly limbs, aborted legs, and shrivelled, palsied arms; others were puffed and swollen out into horrid dropsical bellies; while some again had spines bossed all over with hideous humps, and others lay massed and piled together like skeletons heaped up in some uncovered charnel-hole. Mamillarias lay crowded together there like a crawling swarm of greenish tortoises, pitted over with loathsome pimples, and hideously bristling with long hairs that were stiffer than iron. The echinocactuses looked

like nests of writhing and knotted vipers. The echinopses showed nothing but humped bosses, excrescent growths budding out with reddish bristles, and looked like huge insects that had rolled themselves up into balls. The opuntias spread out their carrion-like leaves, powdered over with yellowish spikes that resembled swarms of microscopic bees. Gasterias sprawled about like great spiders turned over on their backs, with long, black, speckled, and striated legs. Groups of aloes unfolded their languid leaves of every possible tint of green, pale green and vivid, yellowish green and greyish, brownish green, dashed with ruddy tones, and deep green, fringed with pale gold. The shapes of their leaves were as varied as their tints. Some were broad and heart-shaped, others were long and narrow like sword-blades; some were bristling with spikey thorns, while others looked as though their edges had been cunningly hemmed. There were giant ones, in lonely majesty, with flower-stalks that towered up aloft like poles wreathed with strings of rosy coral, and there were tiny ones clustering thickly together, breaking out all over into little fleshy blossoms, that gleamed and quivered like vipers' tongues.

"Let us go back to the shade," begged Serge. "You were quite comfortable and easy there, and I will lie at your feet and talk to you."

It was frightfully hot where they were. It seemed as though the sun had seized hold of the shadowless ground, and was straining it to his blazing breast. Albine grew faint in the great heat, and could scarcely stand. She turned to Serge, and, in a languid and nerveless whisper, bid him support her.

The moment they felt each other's touch, they fell mingled in a close embrace, lip to lip, without even a word. They felt, as they clung to each other, a vague sensation of soaring on and on through limitless space, as though some mighty roc had sprung up from beneath them, and was carrying them ever upward. Their hands wandered and strayed over each other's face and neck, and groped down and fumbled about in their clothing. But this perilous contiguity brought them such keen anguish that they tore themselves apart almost immediately, half frenzied with unsatisfied desire. They rushed away, each in a separate direction. Serge did not stop running till he had reached the pavilion, and had thrown himself down upon his bed, his brain on fire, and sick despair in his heart. Albine did not come back till after nightfall, after having almost wept

her eyes out in a secluded corner of the garden. It was the first time that they had not returned together, tired with the very pleasure of their long wanderings. For three days they were very silent and reserved, and felt very unhappy and disquieted.

XIII.

THE park was entirely their own. They had taken sovereign possession of it. There was not a single corner of it that was not theirs to use as they willed. For them only the thickets of roses put forth their blossoms, and the garden breathed out its sweet soft perfume, which lulled them to sleep as they lay at night with their windows wide opened to the scented air. The orchard provided them with food, piling up Albine's skirts with its sweet ripe fruits, and spread over them the protecting shade of its perfumed boughs, as they sat at their happy breakfasts in the early morning. Away in the meadows, the grass and the streams were all theirs ; the grass, which stretched out their kingdom to such boundless distances, spreading out before them its endless silky carpet, and the streams, which were ever one of their greatest joys, with their bright purity and gurgling freshness, in which they loved to abandon themselves with all the sportiveness of youth. The forest, too, was entirely theirs, from the mighty oaks, which ten men could not have spanned, down to the slim birches, which a child might have snapped ; the forest, with all its trees and shadow, with all its avenues and clearings, its hidden grottoes of greenery, of which the very birds themselves were ignorant ; the forest was wholly theirs, to use it as they willed, and to serve them as a giant canopy, beneath which they might shelter from the noon-tide heat their new-born love. They reigned undisputed over everything, over the rocks and the springs, even over that gruesome corner of ground that teemed with such a hideous growth, and which had seemed to sink and give way beneath their unsteady feet, but which they yet loved even more than the soft grassy couches of the garden, for the strange thrill of passion they had there felt.

In front of them, behind them, to the right of them and to the left, all was theirs. They had reduced it all into

possession, and, as they walked onwards, they passed through a world of nature that was friendly towards them, which knew them, and smiled a kindly greeting to them, as they went along, and devoted itself to their pleasure, like the faithful and submissive servitor it was. The sky, too, with its vast vault of blue stretching far away over their heads, was theirs to enjoy. The walls, indeed, could not shut it in, but their eyes could revel in its beauty, and it formed no small part of their joy in living; rejoicing and triumphant during the day-time with the golden sunlight, and at night flecked and spangled with the thick-strewn glitter of the stars. Every moment of the day, it was an abiding delight to them, its expression changing and varying like the phases of a human face. In the early morning it was pale as a maiden just risen from her slumber; at noon, it was flushed and radiant with a longing for fruitfulness, and in the evening it lay quiet and breathless in the languid tenderness of its happiness. Its expression was ever varying. In the evenings, at their hour of parting, it was especially a joy and a delight to them. The sun, as he hastened along towards the horizon, found himself ever greeted by a fresh smile. Sometimes he disappeared in the midst of a serene calmness, unflecked by a single cloud, sinking gradually beneath a golden sea. At other times he sped along, circled round with crimson glories, and faded away, veiled in a gleaming haze, beneath fiery waves that flashed and burned across the skies like the tails of gigantic comets, whose radiant heads lit up the peaks of the lofty forest trees. Then, again, he would softly sink to rest through shores of rosy sands and far-reaching banks of blushing coral, putting out his fiery rays one by one, till all were gone; and then, some other night, he would glide away soberly and demurely, disappearing behind a heavy cloud, like the grey hangings of some curtained alcove, through which the eye could see nothing but a rosy flush, like the blush on the cheek of a sleeping maiden. Sometimes, on the other hand, he would rush to his couch in a wild tumult of passion, rolled round with white shapes that gradually crimsoned beneath the embraces of his fiery disc, and finally disappeared with him below the horizon in a confused chaos of gleaming, struggling forms.

It was only the plants which had not made their submission. Albine and Serge passed along like monarchs through the kingdom of animals, who rendered them humble and loyal obeisance. As they walked in the garden, swarms of butterflies rose up and flitted about to pleasure their eyes, brushed against

them with their quivering wings, and followed in their train like living sunbeams or flying blossoms. In the orchard, they were greeted by the birds that were banquetting high up in the fruit-trees. The sparrows, the chaffinches, the golden orioles, the bullfinches, led them to where the ripest fruit was hanging, scarred and seamed by their hungry beaks; and while they sat astride the branches and breakfasted, the birds twittered and sported round them like a crowd of children at play, and did not even hesitate to come and plunder the fruit that dangled beneath their very feet. Albino found a constant amusement in the meadows in catching the little green frogs with eyes of gold, that lay squatting amongst the reeds, absorbed in quiet and peaceful contemplation; while Serge poked the crickets out of their hiding-places with long straws, and tickled the stomachs of the grasshoppers to make them sing. He collected insects of all colours, blue ones, red ones, yellow ones, and set them creeping upon his sleeve, where they gleamed and glittered like buttons of sapphire and ruby and topaz.

Then there was all the mysterious and secret life of the streams; the grey-backed fishes that threaded the quiet waters, the eels that betrayed their presence by the slight quivering of the water-plants, the young fry, like a pinch of blackish sand, that the slightest sound sent hurrying away, the flies and beetles with their long legs that wrinkled and ruffled into tiny circling ripples the stagnant surface of the broad silvery pools; all this silently teeming life drew them to the water and made them love to sit on the banks of the stream and dangle their naked legs in its current, and revel in the ceaseless flow of these millions of existences. At other times, when the day was hot and languid, they would betake themselves beneath the voiceful shade of the forest and listen to the serenades and music of the birds, the clear fluting of the nightingales, the silvery bugle-notes of the tomtits, and the far-off accompaniment of the cuckoos. They gazed with delight upon the swift rush of the pheasants, which glittered and shone like suns amidst the branches, and they stayed their steps as some troop of young roe-bucks bounded past them, or a couple of grave deer crossed their path, slackening their easy trot to look at them. On other days, they would climb up amongst the rocks, when the sun was blazing in the heavens, and find a pleasure in watching the swarms of grasshoppers which their footsteps had scared up from the scented beds of thyme, or the snakes

that lay uncoiled beneath the parched bushes, or the lizards that sprawled over the red-hot stones and followed them with fearless eyes. Of all this life that teemed round them in the park, Albine and Serge had only become fully conscious since the day when a single kiss had awakened into being the life that stirred within themselves. Now they perceived it as they had never done before, and sometimes it seemed to confuse them and disquiet them, speaking to them in a language which they could not understand, and whispering to them solicitations with which they did not know how to comply. They grew troubled at the sight of all this life around them, at all the tenderness and soft callings to one another of the birds and animals, at all the perfumes and soft shadows of the flowers and trees, and they felt hurt and vexed with each other, without knowing why. And yet throughout the whole park they experienced nothing but a loving familiarity. Every plant and every animal was their friend. All the Paradou was one great caress.

Before they had come there, for a whole century the sun had reigned over it in lonely majesty. The garden, then, had known no other master; it had beheld him, every morning, scaling the boundary wall with his slanting rays, and at every noon-tide it had seen him pouring out his vertical heat on the panting soil; and then, at evening, it had kissed him good-night, as he sank beneath forest foliage on the other side. And so the garden had no shyness; it welcomed Albine and Serge, as it had so long welcomed the sun, as pleasant companions, with whom there was no fault to be found. The animals, the trees, the streams, the rocks, all lived in an unrestrained state of nature, and spread out all their beauties naked and open to the day, knowing nothing of secrecy or shame, but revelling in all the primitive innocence of the world's first days. This sweet secluded spot seemed to wear a smothered smile at the timid fears of Albine and Serge, and grew every day more languishing and tender for their encouragement; spreading out beneath their feet couches of silkiest turf, and bending down and arching over its green branches into secluding and sheltering canopies beneath which they might hide their love. That the two young people had not yet mingled in close embrace was because they found a pleasure in still dallying with their desires, while they solaced themselves by exchanging clumsy kisses that echoed through the trees like the twitterings of two angry birds.

The soft voluptuousness thrilled them with a vague wretchedness, and inspired them with a kind of anger against the garden. That afternoon when Albine had wept so bitterly after their lingering saunter amongst the rocks, she had moaned out to the Paradou, which seemed to her to be so full of life and passion :

“If you really love us, oh ! why, why do you make us so miserable ?”

XIV.

THE next morning Serge barricaded himself up in his room. The perfume from the garden irritated him. He drew the calico curtains closely across the window to shut out all sight of the park. Perhaps he thought he would recover all his old serenity and calm if he shut himself off from all that greenery, whose shade sent such passionate thrills quivering through his body.

In the long hours they spent together, Albine and he never now spoke of the rocks or the streams, of the trees or the sky. The Paradou might no longer have been in existence. They strove to forget it. And yet they were all the time quite conscious of its presence on the other side of those slight curtains, vast and far reaching. The scented breezes forced their way in through the interstices of the window frame, and the many voices of nature penetrated the closed sashes. All the teeming life of the park seemed to be laughing and chattering and serenading them beneath their window. Then their cheeks would pale and they would raise their voices as they forced themselves to talk and try to drown the music of the outside world.

"You haven't noticed," said Serge one morning during these uneasy intervals, "that painting of a woman over the door there, have you? It is like you."

He laughed noisily as he finished speaking. They both turned to the paintings and dragged out the table once more alongside the wall, nervously desirous of occupying themselves.

"Oh! no," murmured Albine. "She is much stouter than I am. But one can't see her very well; she is lying in such a queer position, with her head downwards."

Then they gazed at the painting in silence. It was stained and decayed with age, and they had not noticed it before. It was an apparition of tender flesh, springing out of the grey wall; a re-embodied wraith, that seemed gradually to assume

shape and substance again beneath the influence of the summer heat. It was a woman lying clasped in the embrace of a stag-footed faun. They could plainly distinguish the clinging arms, the melting bosom, the lissom waist of this tall naked girl, taken unawares there on her bed of flowers, strewn for her by young cupids, who, sickle in hand, ever renewed with fresh blossoms her rosy couch. They could see, too, the straining arms of the faun and the throbbing of his panting breast. But, at the other end of the painting, there was nothing to be seen save the girl's two feet, shooting up into the air like two pink doves. "No," repeated Albine, "she is not like me, she is very plain."

Serge said nothing. He looked at the girl and then at Albine, as though he was comparing them. Albine pulled up one of her sleeves as far as her shoulder, as if to show that her arm was whiter than that of the pictured girl. Then they both subsided into silence again, and gazed at the painting, not daring to put into words the questions that rose to their lips. Albine's dark blue eyes centred themselves for a moment on Serge's grey ones, in which a fiery light was glowing.

"You have got all the room painted again, then?" she cried, as she jumped down from the table. "These people look as though they were all coming to life again."

They began to laugh, but their merriment had an unquiet ring about it; and they cast hasty glances at the frisking cupids, who were sporting there in utter nakedness. They went through all the paintings again, impelled by a spirit of something very like bravado, staring at each panel and directing each other's attention to limbs and members which were certainly not there the month before. There were supple backs that bent beneath the clinging pressure of sinewy arms; legs that broke off at the hips; women's breasts clutched in men's embraces; and grasping arms that circled nothing but emptiness. The plaster cupids that sported in the alcove seemed less observant of the restraints of modesty than they had done before; and Albine no longer spoke of them as children at play, and Serge ventured on none of his former hypotheses. They grew gloomy and silent, secretly wishing that the paintings could suddenly recover all their lost brilliance and distinctness, and feeling irritated and troubled at the later coatings which now concealed the pictured indecencies. These voluptuous survivals, however, were sufficient to reveal to them the art of love.

Albine suddenly started, and fled away from Serge, whose

heated breath she felt panting against her neck. She threw herself down on the couch, murmuring :

"They frighten me, now. The men look like robbers, and the women have the fainting eyes of people who are being murdered."

Serge sat down in a chair, a little distance away from her, and began to talk about other matters. They were both of them feeling languid and tired, as though they had just come back from some long walk. They were a prey, too, to a vague uneasiness and sense of disquiet, as though they felt that the painted forms were examining and criticising them. The trooping cupids seemed to be springing out of the panelling in a sheen of voluptuous flesh, and to be casting flowers around them with shameless antics, while they threatened to tie them close together with their blue ribbons, like the two lovers in the corner of the ceiling. The series of pictured couples that represented the story of the great naked girl and her faun lover, from the faun's lying-in-wait behind a rose bush, to the girl's surrender in the midst of the piled-up blossoms, seemed to be all bursting into warm life. Were they all going to step down from their panels and crowd round them? Already they seemed to be able to hear their panting sighs, and to feel their breath that filled the room with a perfume of an ancient voluptuousness.

"It's quite suffocating, isn't it?" sighed Albine. "It doesn't seem to have done any good letting in the fresh air; the room is as close and as musty as ever."

"The other night," said Serge, "I was awakened by such a penetrating perfume, that I called out to you, thinking you had just come into the room. It felt just like the soft warmth of your hair when you braid it with heliotropes. At first it used to seem to be wafted to me from a distance, and was like the lingering memory of a perfume; but now I can't sleep for it, and it is so strong and penetrating that it quite stupifies me. The alcove grows so hot, too, in the evenings that I shall be obliged to lie on the couch."

Albine laid her fingers on her lips, and whispered,

"It is the dead girl—she who once lived here."

They went off to sniff the odorous air of the alcove, with a forced gaiety, but feeling really very serious and troubled. Certainly never before had the alcove breathed out so disquieting a perfume. The walls seemed to be still echoing with the faint rustling of perfumed skirts; and on the floor two satin slippers still sighed out, by the bed-side, their odorous frag-

rance. On the head-board of the bed itself Serge thought he could trace the imprint of a little hand, which had left behind it a clinging scent of violets. Over all the furniture the phantom presence of the dead girl still lingered fragrantly.

"Sec, this is the chair where she used to sit," cried Albine; "there is the scent of her shoulders in the back of it yet."

She sat down in it herself, and bid Serge drop down on his knees and kiss her hand.

"You remember the day when I first took you in and said, 'Good day, my dear lord!' But that wasn't all, was it? You kissed my hands when the door was closed. There they are again, my hands. They are yours to take."

Then they tried to resume their old gaiety, that they might forget the Paradou, whose joyous murmurs they heard ever rising outside, and might no longer think of the pictures nor yield to the languor-breathing influences of the alcove. Albine pulled a mocking face at Serge, and leaned back in her chair, laughing at the foolish figure he presented as he sprawled at her feet.

"You stupid thing," she said, "clasp me round the waist, and say pretty things to me, since you are supposed to be in love with me. Don't you know how to set about making love?"

But as soon as he grasped her and pressed her to him with eager impetuosity, she began to struggle, and freed herself from his embrace, panting and disturbed.

"No, no; don't touch me, leave me alone. I can't bear it. I feel as though I were choking in this room."

From that day they felt the same kind of fear of that room as they already had of the garden. Their one remaining harbour of refuge had now become a place to be shunned and dreaded, as a spot where they could no longer find themselves together without eyeing each other with secret and troubled glances. Albine scarcely ever ventured now to enter it, but just lingered by the threshold, with the great door opened widely behind her to afford her an immediate retreat. Serge inhabited it in solitude, a prey to a sickening restlessness, sleeping on the couch and vainly trying to abstract himself from the languid influence of the souging park and the haunting fragrance that still lingered round the ancient furniture. At night the painted nakedness thrilled him with passionate dreams, of which he retained in the morning no other memorial than an excited disquietude. He believed that he was falling ill again, and he felt that, for his complete restoration, it was

necessary that his being should expand itself into some supreme amplitude, and be glutted with some wholly perfect satisfaction which he knew not where to seek. Whole days he remained there in silence, his eyes red and swollen, never rousing himself except when a gentle thrill quivered through him as Albine entered the room to visit him. At these times they would remain lingering opposite to each other, gazing at one another sadly, and uttering only a few whispered words, which seemed to choke them. Albine's eyes were even redder than Serge's, and were filled with an imploring gaze. A week later on, Albine's visits to Serge never exceeded a few minutes in duration. She seemed to shun him. When she came into the room, she appeared quite abstracted, and remained standing, hurrying quickly away again. When he questioned her about this change in her demeanour towards him, and reproached her for her unfriendliness, she turned away and avoided replying to him. He never could get her to tell him how she spent the days that she passed apart from him. She would only shake her head, and talk about being very idle. If he pressed her more closely, she would hurriedly rush out of the room, just wishing him a hasty good-night as she disappeared through the door. He often noticed, however, that she had been crying. He observed, too, in her expression the varying phases of a hope that never fulfilled itself, and the perpetual struggling of a desire that was wild to be satisfied. Sometimes she seemed overwhelmed with melancholy, and she went about with sad countenance and dragging steps, like one who had no longer any pleasure in living. At other times she was wreathed with perpetual smiles, and her face shone with an expression of triumphant hope. Then the next day she would sink again into an abyss of desperation, to soar up afresh on the morrow on the pinions of renewed hope. But she could not conceal from Serge that she was suffering from great weakness, and was overwhelmed with a lassitude that seemed to deprive her of all strength and energy. Even in the few moments they spent together she could not always prevent her head from nodding, or keep herself from dropping off into a kind of waking sleep.

Serge had ceased to question her, recognizing that she was unwilling to reply to him; and, when she entered his room, he contented himself with merely casting an anxious glance at her, while he feared that some evening she would no longer have the strength to come to him. What could she do to reduce herself to this state of fatigue and exhaustion? What was the

struggle perpetually going on within her that brought about these alternations of joy and despair? One morning he started at the sound of a light foot-fall beneath his window. It could not be a roe that was venturing out in this manner. It must be Albine who was wandering about in the Paradou without him. It was the Paradou that filled her with all those hopes and fears and inward wrestlings, and inspired her with that weary lassitude which was killing her. He guessed well what she was searching and groping for out there, in the woody depths all alone, and without a hint to him; with all the silent obstinacy of a woman who is bent on carrying out some fixed idea. After that, he used to listen for her step. He dared not draw aside the curtain and follow her with his eyes as she hurried along through the trees; but he felt a strange pleasure, not unmixed with sadness, in listening to the direction she took, whether she turned to the right or to the left, or whether she went straight on through the flower-beds. In the midst of all the noisy life of the park, amidst the sighing chorus of the trees and the rustling of the streams and the ceaseless melody of the birds, he could distinguish the gentle pit-pat of her little boots, so that he could have told whether she was stepping along on the gravel of the river-beds, or on the crumbling mould of the forest, or on the naked hardness of the rocks. In time, he even learned, from the sound of her footsteps, whether she came back elated with hope or depressed with melancholy. As soon as he heard her step on the staircase, he hurried away from the window, for he would not have had her know that he had thus followed her from afar in her wanderings. But she must have guessed it, for she always afterwards, with a peculiar expression in her eyes, told him all where she had been.

"Stay in-doors, and don't go out," he begged of her, with clasped hands, one morning when he saw her still unrecovered from the fatigue of the previous day. "You make me so very anxious about you."

She hastened out of the room, appearing vexed. The garden, now that it echoed Albine's light foot-falls, seemed to have a more depressing influence than ever upon Serge. The pit-pat of her little boots was still another voice that called out to him; an imperious voice whose summons stole ever more assertingly upon him. He closed his ears and tried to shut out the sound, but the distant foot-falls still echoed to him in the throbbings of his heart. And when she came back, in the evening, it was

the whole park that came back with her, with all the memories of their walks together and of their young love, slowly dawning in the midst of a conniving nature. She seemed to have grown taller and graver, mellowed and matured by her solitary rambles. There was nothing left in her of the frolicsome child, and he would sometimes bite his lips and grind his teeth when he looked upon her and beheld in her such an object of desire.

One day, about noon, Serge heard Albine returning in hot haste. He had restrained himself from listening for her steps when she went away. Usually, she did not return till late in the day, and he sat there, wondering at her impetuous haste, speeding straightly along and forcing her way through the branches that barred her way. As she passed beneath his window, he heard her laugh. As she mounted the stairway, he heard her panting so heavily that he almost thought he felt her hot breath streaming into his face. She threw the door wide open, and cried out :

"I have found it!"

Then, she sat down, and repeated softly in a voice that quivered from breathlessness :

"I have found it! I have found it!"

Serge laid his fingers hastily upon her lips, and nervously stammered out :

"Don't tell me anything about it, I beg of you. I want to know nothing of it. It will kill me, if you speak of it."

Then she kept silence, her eyes gleaming with a bright light, and she pressed her lips tightly together, lest the words should spring out in spite of her. She stayed in the room till evening, trying to meet Serge's glance, and imparting to him silently, when their eyes met, something of that which she had discovered. Her whole face beamed with radiance. She exhaled such a delicious odour, and was so brimming with life, that the whole air seemed impregnated with her, and Serge, as he breathed, felt that he was absorbing her very self into him. She was invading and permeating him through all his senses, and he struggled restlessly against this gradual invasion of his being.

The next morning, she returned to his room, as soon as she was up.

"Aren't you going out?" he asked, conscious that his resolution would fail before her continued presence.

"No," she said; she wasn't going out any more. In proportion as she shook off and recovered from her fatigue and

weariness, he felt her becoming more strongly imperious and triumphant. Soon she would be able to take him by the hand and drag him to that grassy couch, whose soft silence was so rapturously eloquent. But, to-day, she did not trouble him with solicitations, but contented herself by keeping him seated on a cushion at her feet. It was not till the next morning that she ventured to say :

"Why do you go on shutting yourself up here? It is so very pleasant under the trees."

He rose up from her feet, and stretched out his arms with a supplicating gesture. She broke into a laugh, and said :

"Well, well, then, we won't go out, since you had rather not. But this room has such a strange scent, and we should be much more comfortable in the garden. It is very wrong of you to have taken such a dislike to it."

He had settled himself down at her feet again in silence, his eyes half-closed and his features quivering with a thrill of passionate emotion.

"We won't go out," she repeated, "so don't trouble yourself. But, do you really prefer these pictures to the grass and flowers in the park? You know how beautiful we used to think them, when we used to wander about there together. It is these paintings which make us feel so unhappy. They distress us by always looking at us and watching us."

As Serge gradually leaned more closely against her, she passed her arm round his neck and pressed his head back upon her knee, and murmured in soft low tones :

"There is a little corner there I know, where we might be so very happy. There would be nothing to trouble us there, and the fresh air would cool your feverishness."

Then she stopped, as she felt him quivering beneath her touch. She was afraid lest a too pointed expression might fill him again with all his old fears. She was gradually conquering him and subjugating him by the caressing gaze of her blue eyes, which she kept constantly playing upon him.

His own eyes were now unclosed, and he rested there quietly and serenely with his head upon her knee, his features undisturbed by a single racking tremor.

"Ah! if you only knew!" she breathed softly into his ear. Then she grew bolder as she saw that he continued to smile. "It is all a lie; it is not forbidden," she murmured. "You are grown-up now and ought not to be afraid. If we went there, and any danger threatened me, you would protect me,

wouldn't you? You could carry me off on your back, couldn't you? I shouldn't be the least afraid if I had you with me. Look how strong your arms have grown. What is there for anyone with such big strong arms as yours to be afraid of?"

She caressed him beguilingly as she spoke, stroking his hair and neck and shoulders with her hand.

"No, it is not forbidden," she went on. "That is only a story for children, and was invented, long ago, by some one who didn't want to be disturbed in the most charming spot in the whole garden. I feel quite sure that as soon as you sat down on that grassy carpet, you would be quite happy and well again. Then, indeed, we shall know everything, and shall feel ourselves to be the real masters. Do what I want you to do, and come with me."

He shook his head, but without any sign of being vexed, and as though he were merely being teased. Then, after a short silence, grieved to see her pouting at his refusal, and longing for her to caress him once more, he opened his lips and said:

"Where is it?"

She did not answer him immediately. She seemed to be gazing at something afar off.

"It is away over yonder," she murmured at last. "I cannot explain to you clearly. You have to go through a long avenue, and then to turn to the left, and then again to the left. We must have passed by it at least a score of times. You might look for it for ever without finding it, if I don't go with you to show you where it is. Though I could find my way to it quite straight, I could never explain it to you."

"And who took you there?"

"I don't know. That morning the trees and plants seemed to drive me there. The long branches pushed me on from behind, the grass sloped itself before me invitingly, and the paths seemed to open themselves out in front of me. And I believe the animals themselves helped to lead me there, for I saw a stag trotting on before me as though he wanted me to follow; while a swarm of bullfinches flitted on from tree to tree, and warned me with cries when I was tempted to take the wrong direction."

"And is it very beautiful?"

Again she did not reply to his question. A deep ecstasy filled her eyes; and, when she was able to speak again, she said:

"Ah! so beautiful that I could never tell you the half. I was so filled with its charm that I was conscious only of some supreme joy, which I could never name nor understand,

that seemed to pour itself out from the leaves and to spring up from the grass. And then I ran back here to take you along with me that I might not revel in all the happiness of sitting beneath that shade without you by my side."

Then she clasped her arms round his neck again, pouring out hot supplications to him from lips that pressed themselves closely to his own.

"Oh! you will come!" she sobbed out; "you must come; you will make me so miserable if you don't. I have been looking forward to it and wishing for it so long, with an anxious desire that has increased day by day, and, if you disappoint me now, you will make me very wretched. You can't want me to be miserable. And even if you knew you would die there, even if that shade should be fatal to both of us, would you be able to hesitate or cast a regretful look behind? We should lie down there together at the foot of the tree, and sleep on quietly for ever, clasped in one another's arms. Ah! would it not be bliss, that?"

"Yes, yes, indeed!" he stammered out, carried away by the infatuation of passionate desire.

"But we shall not die," she continued, raising her voice, and smiling seductively; "we shall live to love each other. It is a tree of life, a tree whose shadow will make us grow stronger and more perfect and complete. You will see that all will now go happily with us. You will be able to hold me and clasp me in such a complete and clinging embrace as you have dreamed of, so that not one tiny spot of my body will lie apart from yours. Ah! then, I think, some blessed joy will descend down upon us from heaven! Will you come?"

His face paled, and his eyelids quivered, as though some too powerful a light were beating against them.

"Will you come? will you come?" she cried again, her voice vibrating with deeper passion than before. She had already half risen to her feet.

He sprang up and followed her, with tottering steps at first, but he threw his arms round her waist, feeling that he could endure no separation from her. He went where she went, carried along in the warm fragrance that streamed from her hair. And as he thus followed on a short step behind her, she turned round upon him a face so radiant with love, and lips and eyes so passionately tempting, that, at their call, he would have followed her anywhere, trusting and unquestioning as a dog.

XV.

THEY went down and out into the garden without the smile fading from Serge's face. He only saw the greenery around him as it was reflected from the clear depths of Albine's eyes. As they approached, the garden seemed to break out into a rippling laugh, and a murmur of content rolled on from leaf to leaf and from bough to bough to its furthest ends. It had been hoping and expecting for days and days to see them thus, with arms clinging close round each other, making their peace again with the trees and searching for their strayed love on its grassy beds. A hushed and solemn breath sighed through the branches, and the afternoon sky was drowsy with heat; the plants raised up their bowing heads to watch them pass.

"Listen," whispered Albine. "They drop into silence as we come near them; but, over there, where they are expecting us, they are telling each other the way they must lead us. I told you we should have no trouble about it, for the trees will direct us with their spreading arms."

The whole park did, indeed, seem to be impelling them gently on. Behind them a barrier of brushwood bristled up and barred them from any return in the direction from which they had come; while, in front of them, the grassy lawns spread themselves out so invitingly, that they glided spontaneously along their soft slopes, without a thought of choosing their own way.

"And the birds are coming with us, too," Albine said. "It is the tomtits this time. Don't you see them? They are skimming along over the hedges, and they stop at each turning to see that we don't lose our way. Ah! if we could only understand what they are saying, we should hear them bidding us to hasten quickly on."

Then she added:

"All the living things in the park are coming along with us. Can't you hear them? There is a deep rustling that follows close behind us. It is the birds in the trees, the insects in the grass, the deer and the roebucks in the coppices, and even the little fishes splashing the quiet water with their beating fins. Don't turn round, or you will frighten them. Ah! I am sure we have a rare train behind us."

They still walked on, without feeling the least fatigue. Albine spoke only to charm Serge on with the music of her voice, while Serge obeyed the slightest pressure of her hand. They didn't know in the least where they were going, but felt quite certain of finding themselves eventually where they wished to be. And as they went along, the garden seemed to assume a graver and more subdued air; the sighing of the branches died away, and the streams hushed their plashing waters, and the birds and the beasts and the insects fell into silence. All around them was filled with a solemn soundlessness and straining expectation.

Then, instinctively, Albine and Serge raised their heads. Just in front of them they beheld a colossal mass of foliage; and, as they lingered for a moment, a deer bounded on into the midst of the greenery, gazing at them with its sweet soft eyes.

"It is there," said Albine.

She led the way on, her face again drooping downwards, drawing Serge with her, and they disappeared through the still quivering leaves, and all grew quiet again. They passed on into the midst of a delicious peace and calm.

In the centre there stood a tree buried in so dense a foliage that they could not recognise its species. It was of giant girth, with a trunk that seemed to breathe like a living breast, and far-reaching boughs that stretched protecting arms around it. It towered up there beautiful, strong, virile, and fruitful. It was the *doyen* of the garden, the father of the forest, the pride of the plants, and the beloved of the sun, whose earliest and latest beams smiled daily on its summit. From its green vault all the joys of creation poured themselves forth; the fragrance of flowers, the music of birds, gleams of golden light, the wakeful freshness of dawn, the slumbrous warmth of the evening twilight. So rich was its flow of sap that it broke through the very bark and bathed the trunk with its virile exudations. Its presence was the sufficing and sufficient joy of the clearing. The other trees built up around it an impenetrable wall, which isolated it in a sanctuary of silence and twilight. There was

nothing to be seen there but a mass of greenery, not a scrap of sky, not a glimpse of horizon ; nothing but a swelling rotunda, thickly draped with the leaves' green silkiness, reaching to the mossy velvet that lay thick and soft upon the ground. It looked, as it burst upon their sight, like the clear green crystal of some spring-fed pool or the surface of a silvery mere, slumbering beneath reflected reeds. The colouring and the perfumes, the sounds and the motions there, were all vague and indeterminate, lulled into a drowsy languor, that seemed almost faintless, by the perfect and absorbing joy of the place. The close warmth of a recessed alcove, the glimmer of a summer's night, as it broods over the naked shoulder of some fair girl, a gentle sighing sound, soft and low as the whispers of her lover, clung to and sighed through these motionless branches, unstirred by the slightest zephyr's breath. It was a hymeneal solitude, thronged with mingling beings ; an empty chamber, where one felt that in some curtained recess, Nature lay panting and satiated in the clinging embrace of the sun. Ever and anon the great tree's limbs strained and groaned like a woman in labour, and the fertile sweat which burst through its bark poured itself more bounteously upon the surrounding turf, breathing out exhalations of desire and permeating the air with a voluptuous languor.

Then the tree, with its shade and its grassy carpet and girdle of thick coppice, swooned and waxed faint with the very fulness of pleasure. Albino and Serge stood there in an ecstasy of joy. As soon as the tree had received them beneath its sweet shade, they felt themselves at once eased of all the anxious disquiet which had so long been distressing them. All these fears and distrusts which had made them avoid each other, all those fierce wrestlings of spirit which had torn and wounded them, without their being conscious of what they were really struggling and contending with, vanished and left them in perfect peace. An unbroken calm and secure confidence pervaded them, and they abandoned themselves unhesitatingly to the joy of being with each other in that lonely and secluded nook, so completely hidden and concealed from the outside world. Without suspecting what the influence of the garden was goading them on to, they gave free scope to their tender emotions for each other, and waited, calm and undisturbed, till the tree should make its revelation. And the tree filled them with such an ecstasy of love that the whole clearing seemed to disappear, and to leave them wrapped in an atmosphere of perfume.

"The air is like ripe fruit," murmured Albine.

And Serge whispered in low tones,

"The grass seems to be so full of life and motion, that I could almost think I was treading upon your dress."

She spoke in a subdued voice, full of solemn emotion. No sentiment of curiosity impelled them to raise their heads and examine the tree. The consciousness of its majesty weighed heavily upon them. Albine's eyes asked if she had at all overrated the enchantment of its greenery, and Serge answered with two crystal tears that trickled down his cheeks. The joy that filled them there was one that could not be expressed in mere words.

"Come," she whispered in his ear, in a voice that was softer than a sigh.

And she glided on in front of him, and lay down at the very foot of the tree. Then, with a fond smile, she stretched out her hands to him; while he, still standing upright, grasped them in his own with a responsive smile. Then she drew him slowly towards her. He dropped down by her side. Then he quickly clasped her tightly to his breast, and this embrace filled them with joy.

"Ah! you remember," he said, "that wall which seemed to have grown up between us and to be separating us. Now there is nothing between us to keep us apart—you are not unhappy now?"

"No, no," she said; "very happy."

They both dropped into silence. A delicious emotion of serene and unruffled joy pervaded them. Serge caressed with his hands the whole length of Albine's body, as he said,

"Your face is mine; your eyes, your mouth, your cheeks. Your arms are mine, from your shoulders to the tips of your nails. Your feet are mine, your knees are mine; every bit of your body is mine." Then he kissed her lips, and her eyes, and her cheeks. He kissed her arms, with quick short kisses, from her fingers up to her shoulders. He poured upon her a perfect torrent of kisses that streamed down upon her like a heavy rain, hot as a summer shower, deluging her neck, her bosom, her lips, her sides. It was a gradual taking possession of her, which left not the least little vein that marked its blue line against her rosy flesh unconquered and unpossessed.

"I take you to give you myself in return," he said. "I give my whole self up to you for ever, for now I feel and know that you are my mistress, my queen, whom on my knees I must

worship. I am here only to obey you, to lie at your feet, to anticipate your wishes, to shelter you with my reaching arms, to drive away from you with my breath the floating leaves that may trouble your tranquillity. Oh! let me disappear and be absorbed in your being; let me be the water you drink, the food you eat! You are my only goal. Since first I woke up in the midst of this garden, you have been ever before me; I have grown up that I might be yours. Ever, as my end, my recompense, have I looked forward to one day winning your favour. You dazzled me in the sun-glow with the sheen of your golden hair; you were ever to me a promise that, through you, I should some day know all the mysteries and necessities of creation, of this earth with its trees, and its waters, and skies, and the last supreme secret is yet unrevealed. I belong to you; I am your slave, and I will hearken to you and obey you, with my lips pressed to your feet." He said this, bowed to the ground, adoring the woman. Albine, filled with a pleased pride, allowed herself to be adored. She yielded up her fingers, her bosom, her lips, to Serge's rapturous kisses. She felt herself a queen as she saw him, who was so strong, bending himself so humbly before her. She had conquered and subjugated him, and held him there at her mercy. With a single word she could dispose of him. She recognised her full omnipotence as she heard all the garden breaking out into joyful chorus at her triumph, and supporting her with its gradually-swelling pæan.

Serge could only stammer out spasmodic ejaculations of rapture, for he was intoxicated with the sweetness of his hot kisses.

"Ah!" he murmured, "I should like to hold you in my arms, and keep you there forever; even to die with you, clinging closely together. If we could fly off together, we two, somewhere, I shouldn't care where—"

They dropped prone to the ground, speechless, and breathless, their brains dizzy and giddy. Albine had just strength enough to raise her finger, as though to bid Serge listen.

It was the garden which had plotted and willed their sin. For weeks and weeks it had been conniving at and encouraging the gradual growth of their passion, and on this supreme day it had lured them to this alcove of greenery. Now, it turned itself into a tempter, whose every voice spoke of love. From the flower-beds was wafted the fragrance of the languid blossoms, and a soft sighing, which whispered of the pleasures of

the roses and the love-joys of the violets ; and never before had the heliotropes plied their senses with so voluptuously-soliciting a perfume. In the soft airs which stole up from the orchard, impregnated with the exhalations of the ripened fruit, the vanilla of the apricots, and the musk of the oranges, there lurked a luscious suggestion of fecundity. The meadows burst out into fuller notes, that gathered up the million sighs of the sun-kissed grass, and the multitudinous love-plaints of the passioning legions that lay melting in the soft caresses of the rivulets and the tremulous nakedness of the streams, on whose banks the willows palpitated and drowsed in the fulness of desire. The forest strained with the mighty passion of the oaks ; and the marriage music of the ashes and the birches, of the horn-beams and the planes, pealed, like organ strains, through the foliaged sanctuaries ; while the bushes and the young coppices revelled in youthful sportiveness, like a throng of lovers pursuing each other, and pulling one another down into the hollows and fosses, and giving themselves up to love and pleasure with much crunching and snapping of branches. And in this universal coupling and mingling, the sobs and groans of the fiercest embraces came borne from far-away by the rocks, where the stones broke out into swelling passion beneath the burning heat, and the spiky plants loved in a tragic fashion of their own, and refused all consolation and assuagement from the springs that bubbled up near them, which were themselves all hot with the love of the bright luminary who had come down into their bed.

"What are they saying?" asked Serge, half swooning. "What do they want us to do, that they seem to be begging of us in this way?"

Albine, without speaking, strained him to her bosom. The voices were growing more distinct and articulate. The animals, in their turn, now cried out to them to love each other. The grasshoppers grew faint with the passion of their songs ; the butterflies brushed them with their tiny kisses and pulsating wings. The sparrows indulged themselves in their passing caprices, like amorous Sultans in the midst of their harems. In the clear waters of the streams, the swooning fish brought forth their spawn, and the frogs croaked out their melancholy love-notes, glutting themselves in the hideous embraces of their mysterious passion beneath the dim green of the reeds. From the depths of the forest the nightingales rippled with pearly love-chants, and the stags belled, so mad with concupiscence,

that they fell motionless from exhaustion by the side of their almost gutted dams. On the rocky ledges, at the foot of the scanty bushes, the snakes, knotted together in couples, kissed softly ; while the spines of the great lizards, brooding over their eggs, quivered with a gentle hum of ecstacy. From every sweet corner, from the sunlit open, from the shades of the foliage, there went up an animal scent, reeking and warm with the universal rut. All this teeming life was in the thrills of procreation. Under every leaf an insect conceived ; in every tuft of grass a family was being begotten. The flies, as they skimmed through the air, clinging one to the other, only searched for a settling-place where they might perform the rites of generation. The little specks of invisible life which swarmed through space, the very atoms themselves of matter, were all vibrating with desire, and mingling themselves in pairs. The ground quivered with a voluptuous tremor, and the whole park was one great act of fornication. Then, at last, Albine and Serge understood. Serge spoke not a word, but he strained Albine in his arms more vehemently than ever. The fatality of procreation pressed them round. They yielded to the necessities of the park. The tree whispered into Albine's ear the syllables which mothers murmur softly to brides on their wedding-night.

Albine surrendered herself. Serge possessed her.

The whole garden lost itself with the young couple in a supreme cry of passion. The trunks of the trees swayed and bent, as though impelled by the strength of a mighty wind, the plants broke out into a rapturous sobbing, and the fainting blossoms breathed out their very soul from their gaping lips. In the sky itself the clouds lay faint and motionless in the sun's embrace, radiant with superhuman rapture. The animals, and the trees, and the plants, and the birds, and the rest of Nature's legionaries, who longed and yearned to see these two young people enter into the fulness of living, had triumphed, and the whole park rang with glad applause.

XVI.

WHEN Albine and Serge recovered again from the delirium of their happiness, they smiled at each other. They were returning, hand in hand, from a world of bliss, and descending to earth again from ethereal heights of beatitude. Then they pressed each other's hands in gratitude for their great joy.

"I love you, Albine."

"Serge, I love you."

And never before had those syllables "I love you" had for them so supreme a meaning. They expressed everything, explained everything. For a time, of whose length they took no count, they lay there, in a delicious quiet, still straining and clasping each other. They felt that they had now attained the perfect fulness of life. The joy of generation pervaded them, putting them on an equality with the creative powers of the world, and making of them, indeed, acting forces on the earth. And there was mingled with their happiness, the consciousness of a law worked out, the placid conviction of an end logically reached, step by step.

Clasping Albine once more in his strong arms, Serge said,

"I am quite cured and well, now; you have given me your own strength."

Albine, yielding herself fully to his embrace, replied,

"Take all that I have; take my life itself."

They felt steeped to the lips in the plenitude of life. Serge, in possessing Albine, had at last awakened to consciousness of his virility and muscular energy, and the lusty promptings of his heart; a knowledge which his tardy adolescence had hitherto lacked. Now he felt himself to be complete and whole. He recognised that his senses were sharper, his intelligence more comprehensive. When he rose up from the ground, his feet planted themselves more firmly on the ground, his chest expanded, his gait and demeanour were prouder and more confident. He took Albine by the hands and raised her to her feet. She trembled, and he was obliged to support her.

"Don't be afraid," he said ; "it's you I love."

It was she, now, who had become the suppliant. She drooped her head upon his shoulder, glancing up at him with an air of anxious scrutiny. Would he never bear her a grudge for that which she had there led him to do? Would he not, one day, reproach her for that hour of adoration in which he had called himself her slave?

"You are not vexed with me?" she asked timidly.

He smiled, and stroked her hair, patting it with his fingers. Then she went on to say,

"You will let me stay like this, in your arms, won't you, for I can't walk without you? I will make myself so small and light, that you will scarcely know I am there. I feel as though I couldn't walk alone just now."

Then she grew very serious and added,

"You must always love me ; and I will be so very obedient and do whatever you wish. I will yield up everything to you, even my most secret desires."

Serge felt still more brimming with strength, as he saw her so humble and fondling. He asked of her, "Why are you trembling so? What have I done to frighten you?"

She did not answer him, but gazed almost sadly upon the tree and the green foliage and the grass that still bore the imprint of their forms.

"Foolish child !" he said, laughingly ; "are you afraid that I shall be angry with you for what you have given me? There can be nothing wrong in that. We have loved one another as we were meant to love. I could kiss the prints which your feet have left in leading me here, as I do kiss the lips which tempted me and the bosom which has just completed the cure which those pretty soft little hands of yours—do you remember?—commenced."

She shook her head. Then, turning aside her eyes, that she might not see the tree, she said, in a low whisper,

"Take me away !"

Serge led her away, pacing slowly. He gave one last grateful look at the tree and thanked it. The shadows in the clearing were growing darker, and a gentle shiver ran through the foliage. When they emerged from the wood and caught sight of the sun, still shining brightly in the horizon, they felt easier and more collected ; especially Serge, who seemed to read a new meaning in every plant and animal. Everything around him seemed to bend down before him and pay homage

to his love. The garden was now nothing more than an appanage to Albine's beauty, and it seemed to have grown larger and fairer in the love-kisses of its rulers.

Albino's joy, however, was still disturbed and unquiet. She would suddenly check her laughter and set herself to listen anxiously.

"What is the matter?" asked Serge.

"Nothing," she replied, casting furtive glances hastily behind her.

They did not know in what out-of-the-way corner of the park they were. Usually to have lost themselves in their capricious wanderings only served to amuse them and make them merry; but, to-day, it seemed to fill them with disquiet and anxious embarrassment. By degrees they quickened their pace, and buried themselves more and more deeply in a thick jungle of bushes,

"Don't you hear?" questioned Albine, nervously, stopping suddenly and breathing heavily.

Serge listened intently, a prey, in his turn, to the anxiety which Albine could no longer conceal.

"All the coppice seems full of voices," she continued. "It sounds as though there were people mocking at us. Listen! Wasn't that a laugh that sounded from that tree? And over yonder, the grass seemed to murmur something as I brushed it with my dress."

"No, no," he said, wishing to reassure her, "the garden loves us; and, if it said anything, it would not be to vex or annoy us. Don't you remember all the sweet words which sounded through the leaves? You are nervous and fancy things."

But she shook her head and murmured,

"I know very well that the garden is our friend. It must be some one who has broken into it. I am certain I hear some one. I am trembling all over. Oh! do take me away and hide me somewhere, I beseech you." They resumed their steps again, looking narrowly at every tree and bush, and imagining that they saw faces peering out at them from behind every trunk. Albine was certain, she said, that there were steps pursuing them in the distance.

"Let us hide ourselves," she supplicated.

She turned quite scarlet. It was a new-born modesty, a sense of shame which laid hold of her like a fever, and stained the snowy whiteness of her flesh, where never yet had the troubled blood surged confusedly. Serge was alarmed at seeing

her thus crimsoning, her face full of trouble and her eyes brimming with tears. He tried to fold her in his arms again and to soothe her with a caress; but she slipped away from him, and, with a hopeless and sad gesture, bade him remember that they were no longer alone. Her blushes grew deeper as her eyes fell upon her disordered dress, which discovered the nakedness of her arms and neck and breast. Her shoulders shuddered beneath the touch of her fallen hair. She tried to fasten it up, but then desisted, fearing to uncover the nakedness it hid. The rustling of a branch, the slightest fleck of an insect's wing, the softest breath of air, made her tremble and shiver, as though she were in the lustful grasp of some invisible hand.

"Calm yourself," implored Serge, "there is no one here. You are as crimson as though you had a fever. Let us rest here for a moment. Do; I beg of you."

She had no fever at all, she said, but she wanted to get back as quickly as possible, so that no one might see her and laugh at her. And, ever increasing her speed, she plucked from the bushes, as she hastened along, handfuls of leaves, with which she strove to hide her nakedness. She fastened into her hair a branch of mulberry, and twined leaves of bind-weed round her arms, tying them to her wrists, and she circled her neck with a collar of laurustinus sprays, so long and drooping that they hid her breast beneath a veil of leaves.

"Are you going to a ball?" asked Serge hoping to make her laugh.

But she only passed on to him the leaves which she still continued to gather, saying to him in low tones, full of alarm,

"Don't you see that we are half naked?"

Then he, too, in his turn, grew ashamed, and fastened the leaves into his gaping clothes.

They could find no way out of the labyrinth of bushes, but suddenly, at the end of the path, their progress was blocked by great tall grey mass. It was the wall.

"Come away! come away!" cried Albine.

She tried to drag him away; but they had not gone twenty steps before they again came upon the wall. They ran along by the side of it, possessed by an alarming dread. It stood there, gloomy and stern, without a break in its surface. Further on, where it fringed a meadow, it seemed suddenly to fall away. A great breach opened into it on to the neighbouring valley like a huge window. It must have been the same hole

of which Albine had once spoken, which she said she had blocked up with brambles and stones. The brambles were still lying there, but the stones had been thrown some distance away, and the breach seemed to have been widened by a furious hand.

XVII.

"Ah! I felt sure of it," cried Albine, in accents that breathed a hopeless despair. "I begged you to take me away. Serge, I beseech you, don't look through it."

But Serge, almost in spite of himself, stood rooted by the breach, gazing out upon the open country. Down below them, on the skirts of the plain, the setting sun was flooding with gold the village of Les Artaud, and making it seem like a vision bursting out from the twilight which was already wrapping in gloom the neighbouring fields. They could plainly distinguish the houses that ran irregularly along the street; the little yards with their piled up dunghills, and the narrow gardens planted with vegetables. Higher up, the great cypress in the graveyard spread out its mournful branches, and the red tiles on the church glowed like a brazier, while the clock peeped down on them with its dingy face, and the old vicarage at the side threw open its doors and windows to the evening air.

"For pity's sake," sobbed Albine, "don't look out, Serge. Remember that you promised you would always love me. Ah! will you ever love me again really, now? Stay, let me cover up your eyes with my hands. You know it was my hands that cured you. You won't push me away."

He put her from him gently. Then, while she fell down and clung to his legs, he passed his hand across his face, as though he were wiping from his brow and eyes some last lingering traces of sleep. It was over there, then, that that unknown world lay, that strange land of which he had never dreamed without a vague disturbing fear. Where had he seen this country? From what dream was he awakening, that he felt such a keen anguish racking his frame and swelling up in his breast till it almost choked him? The village was breaking out into life at the close of the day's work. The men were coming home from the fields, their jackets thrown over their shoulders, with weary gait; the women, standing by their door, were beckoning to them to hasten on; while the children, in noisy groups, drove

along the fowls, pelting them with pebbles. In the churchyard a couple of scapegraces, a young lad and a girl, were creeping along under the shelter of the wall, on their hands and knees, to escape notice. Swarms of sparrows were going to roost beneath the eaves of the church ; and, on the steps of the vicarage, a blue calico petticoat had just appeared, of such spreading dimensions as to quite block up the door

" Oh ! he is looking out ! he is looking out ! " sobbed Albine. " Listen to me. It was only just now that you promised to obey me in everything. I beg of you to turn round and to look upon the garden only. Haven't you been very happy in the garden ! It was the garden which gave me to you. Think of the happy days it has in store for us, what lasting bliss and enjoyment, now that we have learned all the joy that lies beneath its shade ! Instead of all this, it will be death that will force its way in through that hole, if you don't quickly escape and take me with you. See, there are other people out yonder ; they will all come and thrust themselves between us. We were so quite alone and secluded, so well guarded and protected by the trees ! Oh ! the garden, it is our love ! Look at the garden, I beg of you on my knees ! "

A quivering tremor thrilled through Serge's frame. He began to recollect. The past was re-awakening. Far off, he could distinctly hear in the village the stir and sound of life. Those peasants, those women and children, surely he knew them. There was the mayor, Bambousse, returning from Les Olivettes, calculating how much the approaching vintage would be worth ; there were the Brichets, the husband crawling along, and the wife moaning with misery. There was Rosalie flirting with big Fortuné behind a wall, and inviting him to kiss her. He recognised, too, the pair of young rogues in the churchyard. They were that mischievous Vincent and that bold hussy Catherine, catching the big jumping grasshoppers amongst the tombstones. Yes, and it was Voriau, the black dog, that they had with them, helping them, and ferreting about in the dry grass, and sniffing at every crack in the old stones. Under the eaves of the church the sparrows were twittering and bickering before going to roost. The boldest of them kept flying down and entering into the church through the broken windows, and, as he followed them with his eyes, he recollected all the noisy fuss they used to make underneath the pulpit and on the step by the altar rails, where there were always crumbs put for them. And that was La Teuse there, on the vicarage doorsteps, in her blue calico-

dress, looking fatter than ever. She was turning her head to smile at Désirée, who was coming up from the yard, laughing noisily. Then they both of them vanished in-doors, and Serge, giddy with all these revived memories, stretched out his arms towards the village.

"It is all over now," sobbed Albine, as she sank down fainting amongst the trampled brambles. "You will never love me again now."

She gave herself over to weeping, while Serge stood rooted by the breach, eagerly straining his ear to catch the slightest sound that might be wafted up from the village. The bell in the church-tower began to sway, and through the quiet evening air the three chimes of the *Angelus* floated up to Le Paradou, soft and silvery. The bell, in its turn, had now awakened into life.

"O Lord!" cried Serge, falling on his knees, quite overcome by the emotion which the soft notes of the bell had excited in him.

He bent himself down towards the ground, and the three consecutive chimes of the *Angelus* seemed to echo through his heart. The bell, too, seemed to be growing louder in its tone. Its soft sound summoned up before him all his old life, his pious childhood, his happy days at the seminary, and his first Masses in the burning valley of Les Artaud. He had always heard it speaking to him as it was doing now. He recognised and remembered every inflection and note of that sacred voice, which used so constantly to be falling upon his ears, like the grave and gentle voice of a mother. Why had he been so long without hearing it? Had Mary taken him and carried him off far away into those happy green fastnesses, where its sound could not reach? He must have recollected it, if the bell's notes had reached him. As he bent his head still lower towards the earth, the contact of his beard with his hands made him start. He could not recognise his old self in this long silky beard. He twisted it about in his fingers, and fumbled about in his hair to find the bare circle of the tonsure, but it had grown thickly over his head, and the tonsure was buried beneath a heavy growth of curls that clustered from his brow to the nape of his neck.

"Ah! yes, you are right," he said, casting a look of despair upon Albine. "We have sinned, and we have merited some terrible punishment. But I, indeed, I did not hear the threats which sounded in your ears through the branches."

Albine tried to clasp him in her arms, as she sobbed out, "Get up, and let us escape together. Perhaps even yet there is time for us to love each other."

"No, no; I haven't the strength. I should stumble and fall over the smallest pebble. Listen to me. I am afraid of myself. I know the man that dwells in me. I have murdered myself, and my hands are red with my own blood. If I went away with you, you would never see aught in my eyes save tears."

She kissed his wet eyes, as she answered passionately, "What does all that matter? Do you love me?"

He was feeling too terrified to answer her. A heavy step grated on the pebbles at the other side of the wall. Albine had not been mistaken. There was, indeed, someone there, disturbing the quiet of the woodlands with jealous inquisition. Then Albine and Serge, overwhelmed with a sense of shame, made as though they would hide themselves behind a bush. But Brother Archangias, standing in front of the breach, had already seen them.

The brother stood for a moment in silence, clenching his fists. Albine was clinging round Serge's neck, and he looked at them with the disgust of a man who has almost stepped into some filthy ordure.

"This is what I expected," he ground out from between his teeth. "I guessed that they had hidden him here."

He strode forward a few steps, and cried out:

"I see you. I see that you are naked. It is an abomination. Are you a brute beast to go coursing through the woods with this female? She has led you far astray, has she not? She has besmeared you with filthiness, and you are all hairy like a buck. Tear off a branch wherewith to smite her on the back."

Albine, with a voice quivering with passion, sobbed out, "Do you love me? Tell me that you love me."

But Serge, with bowed head, kept silence, though he did not drive her from him.

"Fortunately, I have found you," continued Brother Archangias. "I discovered this hole. You have disobeyed God, and have slain your own peace. Hence forward, for ever, temptation will gnaw you with its fiery tooth, and you will no longer have your old ignorance of evil to help you to combat against it. It is this drab who has tempted you to your fall, is it not? Do you not see the serpent's tail writhing amongst her hair? The mere

sight of her shoulders is sufficient to make one vomit with disgust. Leave her. Do not touch her, for she is the beginning of hell. In the name of God, come away from this garden."

"Do you love me? Oh! do you love me?" reiterated Albine.

But Serge thrust her away from him, as though he were, indeed, scorched and burned by her naked arms and shoulders.

"In the name of God! In the name of God!" cried the brother, in a voice of thunder.

Serge stepped towards the breach in the wall. As soon as Brother Archangais had, with rough violence, dragged him out of Le Paradou, Albine, who had fallen, half fainting, to the ground, with hands wildly stretched out towards the love which was deserting her, rose up again, choking with sobs. She hurried away, and vanished amongst the trees, lashing their trunks with her streaming hair.



**BROTHER ARCHANGIAS COMMANDING ABBÉ MOURET TO LEAVE
ALBINE AND LE PARADOU.**

BOOK III.

I.

AFTER he had said the *Pater*, the Abbé Mouret bowed to the altar, and went to the Epistle-side. Then he came down, and made the sign of the cross over big Fortuné and Rosalie, who were kneeling, side by side, before the altar-rails.

"*Ego conjugo vos in matrimonium, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.*"

"*Amen*," responded Vincent, who was serving the mass, glancing curiously at his big brother out of the corner of his eye.

Fortuné and Rosalie bent their heads, affected by a slight feeling of emotion, although they had been nudging each other with their elbows while they knelt, trying to make one another laugh. Vincent went to get the basin and the sprinkler. Fortuné placed the ring in the basin, a thick ring of solid silver. When the priest had blessed it, sprinkling it in the shape of a cross, he returned it to Fortuné, who slipped it on to Rosalie's finger. Her hand was still discoloured with green grass-stains, which the soap had not been able to remove.

"*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,*" the Abbé Mouret murmured again, giving them a final benediction.

"*Amen*," responded Vincent.

It was early morning. The sun was not yet shining through the big windows of the church. Outside they could hear the noisy twitterings of the sparrows in the branches of the service tree, whose foliage almost blocked-up the window. La Teuse, who had not had time before to clean the church, was now dusting the altar, and craning herself up on her plump leg to wipe the feet of the Christ that was daubed over with ochre and lacquer, and arranging the chairs as quietly as possible; all the time bowing and crossing herself, as she followed the service, but not

losing one single sweep of her brush. Quite alone, at the foot of the pulpit, was mother Brichet. She was praying in a very demonstrative fashion. She kept on her knees, and repeated the prayers in such a loud whisper that it sounded as if a noisy swarm of blue-bottle flies had taken possession of the nave of the church.

At the other end, near the confessional-box, Catherine was holding in her arms a baby in long-clothes. It began to cry, and she was obliged to turn her back upon the altar, and hold it up, and amuse it with the bell-rope, which dangled just over its nose.

"*Dominus vobiscum*," said the priest, turning round, and spreading out his hands.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo*," responded Vincent.

Just at this moment three great girls came into the church. They were too shy to go far up, and stood, pressing one against another, and craning their heads forward to get a view of what was going on. They were three friends of Rosalie, who had just dropped in for a minute or two on their way to the fields, curious to hear what his reverence would say to the bride and bridegroom. They had great scissors hanging at their waists. They stole along and hid themselves behind the font, pinching each other, and twisting themselves about in ungainly contortions, and trying to choke their bursts of laughter with their clenched fists.

"Well," whispered La Rousse, a magnificently-built girl, with copper-coloured skin and hair, "I hope they won't quarrel when it's all over."

"Hush! old Bambousse is right," murmured Liza, a short dark girl, with gleaming fiery eyes; "when one has vines, one looks after them one's self. Since his reverence has desired to marry Rosalie, he can very well do it by himself."

The other girl, Babet, who was hump-backed, tittered. "There is mother Brichet. She is always here," she said. "She prays for the whole family. Listen, do you hear how she is sighing and buzzing? All that will be something in her pocket. She knows very well what she is about, I can tell you."

"She is playing the organ for them," said La Rousse.

Then they all three burst out into a laugh. La Teuse, in the distance, threatened them with her brush. At the altar, the Abbé Mouret was preparing to communicate. As he went from the Epistle-side towards Vincent, that he might wash his thumb and fore-finger, Lisa said more softly:

"It will soon be over. He will begin to talk to them directly."

"Oh! then," said La Rousse, "big Fortuné will still be able to go to his work, and Rosalie won't lose her day's pay at the vintage. It is very convenient to be married so early in the morning. He is looking very sheepish, that great Fortuné."

"Poor fellow," murmured Babet, "it tires him, keeping so long on his knees. You may be sure that he has never knelt for so long since his first communion."

Then their attention was suddenly distracted by the baby that Catherine was dangling in her arms. It wanted to get hold of the bell-rope. It was quite blue with rage, and stretched its little hands out frantically, almost choking itself with crying.

"Ah! there is the youngster," said La Rousse.

The baby broke out into still louder wailings, and writhed and contorted itself as though it were possessed by an evil spirit.

"Put it to your breast and let it suck," said Babet to Catherine.

Catherine lifted up her head, and began to laugh, with the shamelessness of the ten-year-old little minx she was.

"This is not at all amusing," she said, giving the baby a shake. "Be quiet, then, will you, little pig! My sister has left me to take care of it."

"Naturally she has," said Babet, mischievously. "You could scarcely expect her to give the brat to his reverence to nurse."

At this sally, La Rousse almost fell over in a fit of laughter. She leaned against the wall, holding her splitting sides with her hands. Lisa threw herself against her and attempted to soothe her by pinching her back and shoulders. Babet laughed with a dry, deformed kind of laugh, like herself, that grated harshly out of her tightly-drawn lips like the sound of a saw.

"If it hadn't been for the little one," she went on, "his reverence wouldn't have got his holy water. Old Bambousse had made up his mind to marry Rosalie to young Laurent, of Figuières."

"Yes, indeed," said La Rousse, laughing; "do you know what old Bambousse did? He used to throw lumps of earth at Rosalie's back to prevent the little one coming."

"He's a very fine one, for all that," said Lisa. "The lumps of earth seem to have agreed with him very well."

As they all three broke out into a wild burst of noisy merriment, they saw La Teuse limping furiously towards them. The three girls grew suddenly alarmed, and stepped back, and subsided into perfect sedateness.

"Hussies!" hissed La Teuse. "Is it here you come to talk your indecencies? Aren't you ashamed of yourself, La Rousse? You ought to be there, on your knees, before the altar, like Rosalie. I will throw you outside if you stir again. Do you hear?"

La Rousse's copper cheeks were tinged with a rising blush, and Babet glanced at her figure and tittered.

"And you," continued La Teuse, turning towards Catherine, "just you leave that baby alone. You are pinching it on purpose to make it scream. Don't tell me you are not. Give it to me."

She took the child and hushed it in her arms for a moment, and then laid it upon a chair, where it went to sleep, peacefully as a cherub. The church subsided into a solemn quietness, disturbed only by the chattering of the sparrows on the service-tree outside. At the altar, Vincent had carried the missal to the right, and the Abbé Mouret had just folded the corporal and laid it within the burse. He was now saying the concluding prayers with a solemn earnestness, which neither the screams of the baby nor the noisy giggling of the three girls had been able to disturb. He seemed to hear nothing of them, but to be wholly absorbed in the prayers which he was offering up to Heaven for the happiness of the pair whose union he had just blessed. The sky, this morning, was grey with a hazy heat, which veiled the sun. Through the broken windows a russet vapour streamed into the church, betokening a stormy day. Along the walls the gaudily-coloured pictures of the Stations of the Cross glared, crudely pathetic with their bright reds and blues and yellows. At the bottom of the nave the dried wood-work of the gallery creaked and strained: and the overgrown grass by the steps thrust through the doorway its ripening straw, all alive with little brown grasshoppers. The clock, in its wooden case, made a whirring noise in its chest, as though it were clearing its throat, and then grated out the stroke that sounded half-past six.

"*Ite, missa est,*" said the priest, turning round to the congregation.

"*Deo gratias*," responded Vincent.

Then, after having kissed the altar, the Abbé Mouret again turned round, and murmured over the bent heads of the newly married couple the final benediction :

"*Deus Abraham, Deus Isaac, et Deus Jacob vobiscum sit*—" and his voice died away into a gentle whisper.

"Now, he's going to address them," said Babet to her two friends.

"He is very pale," observed Lisa. "He isn't a bit like Monsicur Caffin, whose fat face seemed to be always on the laugh. My little sister Rose says that she daren't tell him anything when she goes to confess."

"All the same," murmured La Rousse, "he's not a bad sort of man. His illness has aged him a little, but it seems to suit him. He has very big eyes, and those two lines at the corners of his mouth make him look like a man. Before he had the fever, he was too much like a girl."

"I believe he's had a great trouble of some sort," said Babet. "He looks just as though he were pining away. His face is deadly pale, but how his eyes glitter! When he droops his eyelids, he looks just as though he were doing it to extinguish the burning fire in his eyes."

La Teuse shook her brush at them.

"Hush!" she hissed out, so energetically that it sounded just as if a blast of wind had broken into the church. The Abbé Mouret had recovered himself. He began, in a voice that was full and distinct :

"My dear brother, my dear sister, you are joined together in Jesus. The institution of marriage is the type of the sacred union between Jesus and His Church. It is a bond which nothing can break ; which God wills shall be eternal ; and man may not sever those whom Heaven has joined. In making you flesh of each other's flesh, and bone of each other's bone, God teaches you that it is your duty to walk together through life side by side, a faithful couple, along the paths which He, in His omnipotence, shall appoint for you. And you must love each other with a God-like love. The slightest ill-feeling between you will be a disobedience to the Creator, Who has joined you together as a single body. Remain, then, for ever united, after the likeness of the Church, which Jesus has espoused, in giving to us all His body and blood."

Big Fortuné and Rosalie listened attentively, with their noses peaked up with an inquisitive air,

"What does he say?" asked Lisa, who was a little deaf.

"Oh! he says what they all say," answered La Rousse.
"He has a glib tongue, like all the priests have."

The Abbé Mouret went on with his address, his wandering eyes gazing over the heads of the pair who were kneeling before him, and seeking a shadowy corner of the church. By degrees, his voice sank, and his tones quivered as he uttered the words which he had formerly learned by heart from a manual intended for the use of young priests. He turned himself slightly towards Rosalie, and went on with his address, interpolating hesitating, passionate phrases, when his memory temporarily failed him :

"My dear sister, submit yourself to your husband, as the Church submits itself to Jesus. Remember that you must leave everything to follow him, like a faithful hand-maiden. You must give up father and mother, and cleave only to your husband, that, in obeying him, you may obey God also. And your yoke will be a yoke of love and peace. Be his comfort, his happiness, the sweet perfume of his days of strength, the support of his days of weakness. Let him find you, as a grace, ever at his side. Let him have but to reach out his hand to find yours grasping it. It is thus that you must step along together, never parting the one from the other; and, in the carrying out of the divine laws, you will accomplish your own happiness. Oh! my dear sister, my dear daughter, your humility will bear sweet fruit; it will give birth in your home to all the domestic virtues, to the joys of the hearth, and the prosperity of a God-fearing family. Have for your husband the love of Rachel, the wisdom of Rebecca, the constant fidelity of Sarah. Tell yourself that a pure life is the source of all happiness. Pray to God each morning that he will give you the strength to live as a woman who respects her responsibilities and duties; for the punishment you would otherwise incur is terrible; you would lose your love. Oh! to live loveless, to tear flesh from flesh, to belong no more to the one who is half of your very self, to live on in pain and agony, bereft of the one you have loved! In vain would you stretch out your arms to him; he would turn away from you. You would yearn for happiness, but you would find in your heart nothing but shame and bitterness. Hear me, my daughter, it is in your own conduct, in your obedience, in your purity, in your love, that God has established the strength of your union."

As the Abbé spoke these words, there was a burst of laughter

at the other end of the church. The baby had just woke up on the chair where La Teuse had laid it. But he was no longer in a bad temper, and was laughing merrily to himself, having kicked aside his long-clothes, and shaking his rosy little feet in the air. And it was these little feet of his that were making him laugh.

Rosalie, who was beginning to find the priest's allocution a little tedious, turned her head round, and smiled at the baby. But, when she saw it kicking about on the chair, she grew alarmed, and cast an angry look at Catherine.

"Yes, you can look at me as much as you like," said Catherine. "I'm not going to take it any more. It would only begin to cry again."

And she turned away and went to ferret in an ant-hole in a broken corner of one of the stones in the flooring under the gallery.

"Monsieur Caffin didn't go on talking so long," said La Rousse. "When he married Miette, he only gave her two little taps on the cheek and told her to be good."

"My dear brother," resumed the Abbé Mouret, turning towards big Fortuné, "it is God who, to-day, gives you a companion, for he does not wish that man should live alone. But, if He ordains that she shall be your servant, He demands from you that you shall be to her a master full of gentleness and love. You shall love her, because she is part of your own flesh, of your own blood, and your own bone. You will protect her, because God has given you strong arms only that you might stretch them over her head in the hour of danger. Remember that she is entrusted to you, and that you cannot abuse her submission and weakness without committing a sin. Oh! my dear brother, what a proud happiness should be yours! Henceforth, you will no longer live in the selfish egotism of solitude. Every moment will come to you bearing a delightful duty. There is nothing better than to love, unless it be to protect those we love. Your heart will expand; your manly strength will increase a hundredfold. Oh! to be a support and stay, to have a love given into your keeping, to see this girl losing herself in your existence and saying, 'Take me and do with me what you will! I trust myself wholly to you!' And may you be accursed if you ever abandon her! That would be a most craven desertion which God would assuredly punish. From the moment she gave herself to you, she became yours for ever. Take her to your arms, and let her not slip to the

ground, till she must go there to remain. Give up everything, my dear brother—"

But here the Abbé's voice trembled, and broke down so completely from emotion, that nothing more could be heard than an indistinct and unintelligible murmur. He had quite closed his eyes, and his face was deathly white, and his voice betokened so deep a distress that big Fortuné himself began to cry, without knowing why.

"He hasn't recovered yet," said Lisa. "It is wrong of him to fatigue himself. See, there's Fortuné crying!"

"Men are softer-hearted than women," murmured Babet.

"He spoke very well, all the same," remarked La Rousse. "These priests think of a lot of things that wouldn't occur to any one else."

"Hush!" cried La Teuse, who was already preparing to extinguish the candles.

But the Abbé Mouret still stammered on, trying to utter a few final sentences.

"It is for this reason, my dear brother, my dear sister, that you must live in the Catholic Faith, which alone can ensure the peace of your hearth. Your families have taught you to love God, to pray to Him every morning and evening, to look only for the gifts which His mercy—" He could not go on. He turned round to take the chalice off the altar, and retired, with bowed head, into the vestry, preceded by Vincent, who almost let the cruets and napkin fall, in trying to make out what Catherine was doing at the bottom of the church.

"Oh! the heartless creature!" said Rosalie, who left her husband to go and snatch up her baby in her arms. The child laughed. She kissed it, and re-arranged its long dress, all the while threatening Catherine with her fist. "If it had fallen," she cried out, "I would have boxed your ears for you, nicely."

Big Fortuné now came slouching along. The three girls stepped towards him, with compressed lips.

"See how proud he is now," murmured Babet to the other two. "It was in the hay behind the mill that this good-for-nothing gained old Bambousse's money. I used to see him every night creeping along under the little wall with Rosalie."

Then they giggled, and big Fortuné, standing there in front of them, giggled even louder than they did. He pinched La Rousse, and let Lisa jeer at him. He was a stolid young man and cared nothing for anybody. He had grown weary of the priest's address.

"Hallo! mother!" he called out in his loud voice. But mother Brichet was begging by the door of the vestry. She stood there, tearful and wizen, before La Teuse, who was slipping eggs into the pocket of her apron. Fortuné didn't seem to feel the least sense of shame. He just winked and said:

"She is a knowing old lady, my mother, and the priest likes to see people in his church."

Rosalie had now grown calm again. Before leaving the church, she asked Fortuné if he had begged his reverence to come and bless their room, according to the custom of the country. So Fortuné ran off to the vestry, striding heavily along through the church, just as if it were a field. He reappeared again quickly, saying that his reverence would come. La Teuse, who was scandalised at the noise all these people made, who seemed to think they were in a public street, tapped her hands gently together, and pushed them towards the door.

"It is all over," she said; "go away and get to your work."

She thought they had all gone, when her eye caught sight of Catherine, whom Vincent had joined. They were both bending anxiously over the ants' nest. Catherine was poking a long straw into the hole so violently, that a swarm of frightened ants rushed out on to the floor. Vincent said they must get right to the bottom before they could find the queen.

"Ah! you young scoundrels!" cried La Teuse, "what are you after there? Can't you leave the poor little things alone? That is Mademoiselle Désirée's ants' nest. She wouldn't be very well pleased if she saw you."

Then the two children hurried hastily away.

II.

THE Abbé Mouret had returned in his cassock and with bare head to kneel at the foot of the altar. In the grey light that streamed through the window, his tonsure looked like a great pale stain on his hair, and the back of his neck was slightly shrugged as though he felt the cold. He was praying earnestly, his hands tightly clasped together, and was so absorbed in his devotions that he did not hear the heavy footsteps of La Teuse, who was hovering about him, without daring to disturb him. She seemed to be grieved at seeing him so evidently troubled there on his knees. Once, for a moment, she thought that he was in tears. She went behind the altar to keep an eye upon him. Since his return, she had never liked to leave him in the church alone, having found him, one evening, lying in a dead faint upon the ground, with icy lips and clenched teeth, like a corpse.

"Come in! mademoiselle," she said to Désirée, who was poking her head through the vestry-door. "He is here yet, and he will lay himself up. You know you are the only person he will listen to."

"It is breakfast-time," she replied softly, "and I am very hungry."

Then she sidled up to the priest, very gently. When she was quite close to him, she took him round the neck and kissed him.

"Good morning, brother," she said. "Do you want to make me die of hunger this morning?"

He turned up to her a face so overwhelmed with sadness, that she kissed him again, on both his cheeks. He seemed to be waking up from a trance of agony. Then he recognised her, and tried to put her gently away from him, but she kept hold of one of his hands and would not let it go. She would scarcely let him cross himself. She insisted upon taking him away with her.

"Come ! come ! as I am very hungry. You must be hungry yourself, as well."

La Teuse had laid out the breakfast at the bottom of the little garden, beneath two great mulberry trees, whose spreading branches formed a sheltering roof over them. The sun, which had at last succeeded in dissipating the stormy-looking vapours of the early morning, was pouring out his warm rays upon the beds of vegetables, while the mulberry-trees cast a wide shadow over the rickety table, on which were laid two cups of milk and some thick slices of bread.

"You see how nice it looks," said Désirée, delighted at breakfasting in the fresh air.

She was already cutting off great pieces of the bread, which she ate with immense appetite. As she saw La Teuse still standing in front of them, she said,

"Why don't you come and have something to eat?"

"I am going to, presently," the old servant answered. "My porridge is getting warmed."

Then, after a moment's silence, looking with admiration at the girl's hearty appetite, she said, addressing herself to the priest :

"It is quite a pleasure to see her. Doesn't she make your reverence feel hungry ? It ought to make you eat, just to look at her."

The Abbé Mouret smiled as he glanced at his sister. "Yes, yes," he murmured ; "she goes on famously, and gets fatter every day."

"That's because I eat," she said. "If you would eat, too, you would get fat. Are you ill again ? You are looking very melancholy. I don't want to have it all over again, you know. I was so very lonely when they took you away from me to cure you."

"She is quite right," said La Teuse. "You don't behave with common sense, your reverence. You can't expect to be strong, living, as you do, on two or three crumbs a-day, just as though you were a bird. That won't make you any blood ; and that's why you are so pale. Don't you feel ashamed of yourself for keeping as thin as a nail when we are so fat ; we who are only women ? People will begin to think that we gobble everything up and leave you nothing but the empty plates."

Then both La Teuse and Désirée, brimful of health and strength, scolded him affectionately. His eyes were very large and bright, but destitute of all animation. He smiled gently.

"I am not ill," he said; "and I have nearly finished my milk."

He had drunk two little mouthfuls, and had not even touched the bread.

"The animals," said Désirée, thoughtfully, "seem to get on more comfortably than human beings do. The fowls never have head-aches, have they? And the rabbits grow as fat as ever one wants them to be. And you never saw my pig looking melancholy."

Then, turning towards her brother, she went on with an air of great amusement:

"I have called it Matthew, because it is so like that fat man who brings the letters. It is growing so big and strong. It is very unkind of you refusing to come and look at it. You will come and see it some day, won't you?"

While she was thus talking to him, she had laid hold of her brother's share of bread, and was gnawing away at it with her strong white teeth. She had already finished one piece, and was beginning the second, when La Teuse became aware of what she was doing.

"That doesn't belong to you, that bread! You are actually stealing his food from him!"

"Let her have it," said the Abbé Mouret gently. "I shouldn't have touched it myself. Eat it all, my dear, eat it all."

Désirée had fallen for a moment into confusion, with her eyes fixed upon the bread, and was struggling to check her rising tears. Then she began to laugh, and finished the bread. She went on with her remarks:

"My cow is never as sad as you are. You were not there when uncle Pascal gave it me, making me promise to be a good girl, or you would have seen how pleased and happy it was when I kissed it for the first time."

She strained her ear in a listening attitude. A cock crowed in the yard, and a great uproar followed, with flapping of wings and cackling and harsh cries, and the whole yard seemed to be in a state of panic and commotion.

"Ah! you know, she must be in calf now. I took her to the bull at Béage, three leagues from here. It isn't everywhere that there is a bull. Then, when they were together, I waited to watch."

La Teuse shrugged her shoulders, and looked across at the priest with an expression of annoyance.

"It would be much better, mademoiselle, if you were to go

and quiet your fowls. They all seem to be murdering one another."

But Désirée went on with her story.

"The people laughed ; but I don't see what there was to laugh about. It was all quite natural. It is necessary that mothers should have little ones, isn't it? Tell me, do you think she will have a little one?"

The Abbé Mouret made a vague gesture. His eye-lids fell before the clear gaze of the young girl.

"Come! come! Run along with you," said La Teuse. "They are eating each other up."

The uproar in the yard had now become so great that she scampered off with a great rustling of her petticoats ; but the priest called her back.

"The milk, my dear ; you have not finished the milk."

He reached out his cup to her, which he had scarcely touched. She came back and drank off the milk without the slightest scruple, in spite of La Teuse's angry look. Then she set off again and ran along to the poultry-yard, where they heard her reducing the fowls to order and peace again. She had sat down in the midst of them, and was gently humming to them, as though she were trying to lull them to sleep.

III.

"Now my porridge is too hot!" grumbled La Teuse, who had just returned from the kitchen with a basin, from which a wooden spoon was projecting.

She placed herself in front of the Abbé Mouret, and began to eat her porridge from the edge of the spoon, very cautiously. She wanted to enliven the Abbé and to draw him out of the melancholy moodiness which lay upon him. Ever since he had returned from Le Paradou, he had said that he was cured and well again, and he never complained. Often, indeed, he smiled in so soft and sweet a fashion, that his fever seemed to have doubled his saintliness, at least so thought the villagers. But, at intervals, he had fits of gloomy silence, and appeared to be racked by torturing pains, which it required all his strength and determination to bear uncomplainingly; and he was torn by silent paroxysms, which, for hours at a time, left him stupified and a prey to frightful inward struggles, whose violence was only betrayed by the agonized sweat that streamed down his face. At such times La Teuse persistently refused to leave him, overwhelming him with a flood of gossip, till he had gradually recovered his tranquillity and overcome the mental disquietude that was racking him. On this particular morning, the old servant attacked him with greater energy than usual, and poured out an amazing volume of talk; while, all the time, she continued her wary manœuvres with the spoon that threatened to burn her tongue.

"Indeed, you have to live among a lot of wild beasts to see such goings-on. Would anyone ever think in a decent village of being married by candlelight? It shows what a poor sort these Artaud folk are. When I was in Normandy, I have seen weddings that threw everyone into commotion for a couple of leagues round. They would feast for three days. The priest would be there, and the mayor, too; and at the marriage of one

of my cousins, all the firemen came as well. And didn't they have a fine time of it! But to make a priest get up before sunrise and marry them before even the chickens have left their roost! There's no sense in it. If I had been your reverence, I should have refused to do it. You haven't had your proper sleep, and I shouldn't be surprised if you have caught cold in the church. It is that which has upset you. It would be better to marry brute beasts than that Rosalie and her ugly lout, with their brat that dirtied one of the chairs. You ought to have told me when you were feeling poorly, and I would have brought you something warm. Eh! your reverence, speak to me!"

He told her, in a feeble voice, that he was quite well, and only needed a little fresh air. He had just leaned himself against the wall and was breathing quickly, and seemed quite faint and overcome.

"Very well," went on La Teuse, "just do as you like. Go on marrying people when you haven't the strength for it, and when you know quite well that it will upset you. I knew how it would be; I told you so yesterday. And if you took my advice, you wouldn't stay where you are. The smell of the yard is bad for you. It stinks frightfully just now. I can't think how Mademoiselle Désirée can go on messing about there. She is singing away, and doesn't seem to mind it at all. Ah! that reminds me of something I want to tell you. You know that I did all I could to keep her away when the cow took the bull; but she is like you, obstinate, and will only go her own way. Fortunately, however, for her, she's been none the worse for it yet. She delights to be amongst the animals and their young ones.—Now, your reverence, do be reasonable. Let me take you to your room. You must go and lie down and rest for a little. What, you don't want to! Very well, then, so much the worse for you, if you are laid up." And in her angry indignation, she hastily swallowed a big spoonful of porridge, at the risk of burning a hole in her throat. She rattled the handle of the spoon against the bowl, muttering and grumbling to herself.

"There never was such a man known! He would die rather than say a word. Ah! he knows how to keep silent. I have known that for a long time. It doesn't want very much cleverness to guess the rest. Well! well! let him keep it to himself. I daresay it is better."

La Teuse was jealous. Doctor Pascal had had a tremendous

fight with her to get her patient away at the time when he had considered the young priest's case quite hopeless if he were left at the vicarage. He had explained to her that the sound of the bell would aggravate and intensify his fever, and that the images of saints, with which his room was full, would fill his brain with hallucinations, and that a complete change and entirely new surroundings, in which he could regain his strength, freed from all old associations, were absolutely necessary for him. But she only shook her head, and said that nowhere would her "dear child" find a better nurse than herself. However, she had ended by yielding. She had even resigned herself to see him go away to the Paradou; protesting strongly, nevertheless, against this selection of the doctor, which astonished her. She preserved a strong feeling of hatred for Le Paradou. She was wounded and hurt by the silence which the Abbé Mouret maintained as to the time he had remained there. She had frequently laid all sorts of unsuccessful traps to ensnare him into talking of it. This morning, exasperated at seeing him look so frightfully pale, and at his being so obstinately bent upon suffering in silence, she ended by rattling her spoon in the basin, and crying:

"You should go back over there again, your reverence, if you were so happy there. I daresay there is some one there who would look after you better than I do."

It was the first time she had ventured upon a direct allusion to her suspicions. The blow was so painful, that the priest could not check a slight cry, as he lifted up his grief-racked countenance. Then La Teuse's kindly heart was filled with regret.

"Ah!" she murmured, "it is all the fault of your uncle Pascal. I have told him so lots of times. But these clever men are so obstinate in their own ideas. There are some of them who would kill you, just for the sake of rummaging in your body afterwards. It made me so angry that I would never speak of it to anyone. Yes, your reverence, you have me to thank that no one knew where you were; I was so angry about it. When the Abbé Guyot, from Saint-Eutrope, who took your place during your absence, came to say mass here on Sundays, I told him some pretty stories. I said you had gone to Switzerland. I don't even know where Switzerland is. Well! well! I don't want to say anything to pain you, but it is certainly over there that you got your trouble. Very finely they've cured you indeed! They would have done much better if they had

left you with me. I shouldn't have been likely to have turned your head."

The Abbé Mouret, whose brow had again drooped downwards, said nothing. La Teuse had seated herself upon the ground a few yards away from him, trying to catch his eye. She went on again in her motherly way, delighted at the complacent manner in which the Abbé received her scolding.

"You would never let me tell you about the Abbé Caffin. As soon as I began to speak of him, you always made me stop. Well, well; the Abbé Caffin had had his troubles in my part of the world, at Cantelar. And yet he was a very holy man, with an irreproachable character. But, you see, he was a man of very delicate taste, and liked soft pretty things. Well, there was a young girl who was always haunting him, the daughter of a miller, whom her parents had sent to a boarding-house. Well, then, to put it shortly, that happened which was likely to happen; you understand, don't you? When the story got about, all the neighbourhood were very indignant with the Abbé. They searched for him everywhere to stone him. He managed to escape to Rouen, and he went to pour out his grief to the Archbishop. Then they sent him here. The poor man was quite sufficiently punished by being made to live in this hole of a place. Afterwards I heard of the girl. She had married a cattle-dealer, and is very happy." La Teuse was delighted in having been allowed to tell her story, and saw in the priest's silence and quietude an encouragement to go on with her gossiping. She sidled a little nearer to him and said:

"He was very friendly with me, that good Monsieur Caffin, and often spoke to me of his sin. It won't keep him out of heaven, I'm sure. He can rest quite tranquilly out there under the turf, for he never harmed anyone. For my part, I can't understand why people should get so angry with a priest when he goes a little wrong. It was so natural. Not that it wasn't wrong and likely to anger God; but it wasn't so bad as thieving; and, when he had confessed his sin, he was free of it. Isn't it so, your reverence, that when one truly repents, one is saved in spite of one's sins?"

The Abbé Mouret slowly raised his head. By a supreme effort he suppressed all signs of the agony that was torturing him. Though his face was still very pallid, he managed to say in a firm voice,

"One should never sin; never! never!"

"Ah! sir," cried the old servant, "you are too proud and

reserved. It is not a nice thing, that pride of yours. If I were in your place, I would not harden myself like that. I would talk of what was troubling me, and not try to rend my heart in pieces by a sudden wrench. You should reconcile yourself to the separation gradually. But, instead of that, you won't even allow people's names to be uttered. You forbid them to be mentioned. It is as though they were dead. Since you came back, I have not dared to tell you the least bit of news. Well, well, I am going to speak now, and I shall tell you all I know ; because I see quite well that it is all this silence that is preying upon your heart."

He looked at her sternly, and lifted his finger to silence her.

"Yes, yes," she went on, "I have news from over yonder, very often indeed, and I am going to tell it to you. To begin with, some one there is no happier than you are."

"Silence! silence!" said the Abbé Mouret, who summoned up all his strength to attempt to leave the room.

La Teuse got up and barred his way with her enormous bulk. She was angry, and cried out :

"There, you see, you want to be off already. But you are going to listen to me. You know quite well that I am not too fond of the people over yonder, don't you? If I talk to you about them, it is for your own good. Some people say that I am jealous. Well, one day I mean to take you over there. You would be with me, and you need not be afraid of any harm happening. Will you go?"

He motioned her away from him with his hands, and said, with an undisturbed countenance :

"I know nothing. I wish to know nothing. There is high mass to-morrow. You must see that the altar is made ready."

Then, as he walked away, he added, smilingly :

"Don't make yourself uneasy, my good Teuse. I am stronger than you imagine. I shall be able to cure myself without anyone's assistance."

He disappeared, bearing himself calmly and unconcernedly, and having complete control over his emotions. His cassock, as he went along, rustled peacefully against the borders of thyme. La Teuse, who had remained rooted for a moment or two to the place where she was standing, picked up her basin and wooden spoon, grumbling and muttering to herself. She ground out her words from between her teeth, and accompanied them with sundry shruggings of her big shoulders.

"He pretends to be quite unconcerned and to care nothing about it, and tries to believe that he is differently made from other men, just because he is a priest. The truth is that he is very firm and determined. I have known some of them who wouldn't have had to be wheedled so long. He is quite capable of crushing his heart, just as one would crush a flea. It is the Almighty who gives him his strength."

She went back to the kitchen and saw the Abbé Mouret standing by the gate of the farm-yard. Désirée had stopped him there to make him feel the weight of a capon which she had been fattening for several weeks. He told her, with a pleasant smile, that it was very heavy, and the big girl chuckled with glee.

"The capons, too, crush down their hearts like fleas," La Teuse broke out; "but then they can't help themselves, and they get no credit by living irreproachably."

IV.

THE Abbé Mouret passed his days at the vicarage. He shunned the long walks he used to take before his illness. The scorched soil of Les Artaud, the heat of the valley where only the curling vines grew, distressed him. Twice, in a morning, had he made the attempt to go out and read his breviary as he strolled along the road ; but he had not got beyond the village before he was obliged to return, overcome by the perfumes and the sun's heat. It was only in the evenings, in the cool twilight air, that he ventured to saunter a little on the terrace, in front of the church, which led to the grave-yard. In the afternoons, to fill up his time, and to satisfy his craving for some kind of occupation, he had imposed upon himself the task of pasting over with paper the broken panes of the church windows. For a week this had kept him mounted on a ladder, arranging his paper panes with great exactness, cutting them out with all the delicacy of embroidery, and laying on the gum with scrupulous care to avoid all droppings on the paper.

La Teuse stood at the foot of the ladder and watched him. Désirée told him that he must not fill up all the windows, or else the sparrows would not be able to get through ; and, to please her, the priest left a pane or two in each window unfilled. Then, when these repairs were completed, he was seized with the ambition of decorating the church, without summoning to his aid either mason or carpenter or painter. He would do it all himself. This sort of handiwork would amuse him, he said, and help to bring back his strength. Uncle Pascal encouraged him every time he came to the house, and assured him that the exercise and fatigue were better for him than all the drugs in the world. And so the Abbé Mouret began to stop up all the holes in the walls with plaster, and to drive fresh nails into the altar with his big hammer, and to crush and mix paints that he might put a new coating on

the pulpit and confessional-box. It was quite an event in the neighbourhood, and they talked of it for a couple of leagues round. The peasants used to come and stand gazing, with their hands behind their backs, at his reverence at his work. The Abbé himself, with a blue apron tied round his waist, and his hands all soiled with his labours, found an excuse, in the demands which this hard work made upon him, for not leaving his own grounds. He spent his days in the midst of his repairs, and was more tranquil than he had been before; almost cheerful, indeed, as he forgot the cuter world with all its trees and sunshine and warm breezes, the thought of which used to trouble him so much.

"Your reverence is very lavish when the parish hasn't to find the money," said old Bambousse, who came round every evening to see how the work was getting on.

The Abbé Mouret spent on it all his savings. Some of his decorations, indeed, were so funny and awkward that they would have excited the smiles of many people. The stonework soon proved too much for him; so he had to content himself with patching up the tower as far as a man's height from the ground. La Teuse mixed the plaster. When she talked of repairing the vicarage as well, which, she said, she was continually fearing would topple down on their heads, he told her that he did not think he could manage that, and that a regular workman would be necessary for it; a remark which caused a hot disagreement between them. La Teuse said it was quite ridiculous to go on ornamenting the church, where no one slept, while all the time their bed-rooms were in such a crazy condition, that she was quite sure they would all be found, one of these mornings, lying crushed to death beneath the fallen rafters.

"I shall bring my bed here, and put it behind the altar," she grumbled. "I feel quite terrified sometimes at night."

But when the plaster was all used up, she said no more about repairing the vicarage. The painting which the priest executed quite delighted her. It was the chief charm of the improvements. The Abbé, who had nailed up a wainscoting of thin planks, found a pleasant amusement in daubing this woodwork over with a bright yellow, using a large brush. He found, in this use of his paint-brush, a gentle equable see-saw sort of motion, which seemed to soothe him. When everything was quite yellow, the pulpit, the confessional-box, the altar rails, even the clock-case itself, he ventured to attempt to grain

portions of the high-altar in imitation of marble. Then, growing bolder, he painted it every bit over. The high-altar, glistening with white and yellow and blue, was considered perfectly superb. People who had not been to mass for fifty years streamed into the church to see it.

When the paint was dry, the Abbé Mouret determined to edge the panels with a brown beading. So, one afternoon, he set himself to work at it, wishing to get it done that evening; for the next day, as he had reminded La Teuse, there was to be high mass. La Teuse was there, arranging the altar. She had already placed upon the credence the candlesticks and silver cross, the porcelain vases filled with artificial roses, and the laced napkin which was only used on great festivals. The beading, however, proved so difficult of execution, that it was not completed till late in the evening. It was growing quite dark as the Abbé was finishing the last panel.

"It will be really too beautiful," said a rough voice from the midst of the grey gloom which filled the church.

La Teuse, who had knelt down to get a better view of the Abbé's brush as it glided along his rule, started with alarm.

"Ah! it is Brother Archangias," she said, turning round. "You came in by the vestry? You gave me quite a turn. Your voice seemed to sound from under the floor."

The Abbé went on with his work, after having greeted the brother with a slight nod of his head. The brother remained standing in silence, with his fat hands clasped in front of his cassock. Then, shrugging his shoulders, as he observed the scrupulous care which the priest bestowed upon getting the beading perfectly straight, he repeated:

"It will be really too beautiful."

La Teuse started again.

"Dear me!" she said, "I had quite forgotten you were there. You ought to cough before you speak. You have a voice that seems to come on one with a start, like a dead person's."

She got up on to her feet, and stood a little way back to admire the Abbé's work.

"Why too beautiful?" she asked. "Nothing can be too beautiful when it is done for the Almighty. If his reverence had the gold, he would have done it with gold, I'm sure."

When the priest had finished, she hastened to change the altar-frontal, taking the greatest care not to smudge the beading. Then she carefully arranged the cross and the candle-

sticks and the vases. The Abbé Mouret had gone to lean against the wooden screen which divided the choir from the nave, by the side of Brother Archangias. Not a word passed between them. Their eyes were fixed upon the silver crucifix, which, in the increasing gloom, still retained some glimmer of light on the feet and the left side and the right temple of the crucified Christ. When La Teuse had finished, she came down towards them, her face beaming with pleasure.

"Doesn't it look lovely?" she asked. "Just you see what a crowd there will be at mass to-morrow! Those heathens will only come to God's house when they think He is well-to-do. Now, your reverence, we must do as much for the Blessed Virgin's altar."

"Waste of money!" growled Brother Archangias.

La Teuse frowned and looked indignant; and then, as the Abbé Mouret continued silent, she led them both before the altar of the Virgin, pushing them and dragging them by their cassocks.

"Just look at it, now! It is too shabby for anything, now that the high altar is so bright and smart. It looks as though it had never been painted at all. I scrubbed it hard this morning, but it was no use. I couldn't get the dirt off. It is quite black; it is filthy. Do you know what the people will say about you, your reverence? They will say that you care nothing about the Blessed Virgin; that's what they'll say."

"Well?" queried Brother Archangias.

La Teuse looked at him, half suffocated with her indignation.

"It would be an abomination," she muttered. "The altar is like a neglected tomb in a graveyard. If it were not for me, the spiders would spin their webs across it, and the mould would grow over it. From time to time, when I can spare a bunch of flowers, I give it to the Virgin. All the flowers in our garden went to her once."

She had mounted up before the altar, and took up two withered bunches of flowers, which had been left there, forgotten.

"See! it is just as it is in the graveyards," she said, throwing them down at the Abbé Mouret's feet.

He picked them up, without replying. It was quite dark now, and Brother Archangias stumbled about amongst the chairs and nearly fell. He growled and muttered some angry-sounding sentences, in which the names of Jesus and Mary recurred. When La Teuse, who had gone for a lamp, returned into the church, she asked the priest:

"Am I to put the brushes and pots away in the attic, then?"

"Yes," he answered. "I have finished. We will see about the rest later on."

She walked away in front of them, carrying all the things with her, and keeping silence, lest she should say too much. The Abbé Mouret had kept the two withered bunches of flowers in his hand, and Brother Archangias said to him, as they were passing the farm-yard:

"Throw those things away."

The Abbé went on for a few steps further, with downcast brow, and then he throw the flowers on to a dung-heap.

V.

THE brother, who had already had his meal, stayed there, sitting astride an overturned chair, while the priest dined. Since the return of the latter to Les Artaud, the brother had thus spent most of his evenings at the vicarage; but never before had he conducted himself so rudely. His heavy boots scraped against the floor, his voice thundered through the house, and his fists pounded themselves against the furniture, whilst he related the whippings he had administered that morning to the little girls, or indulged in moralisings after formulas as stern and uncompromising as bludgeon-blows. Then, growing weary of this, he suggested that he and La Teuse should have a game at cards. They played perpetually "Beggarmy-neighbour," which was the only game that La Teuse had ever been able to learn. The Abbé Mouret would smilingly watch the first few cards, and would then gradually sink into a deep reverie, and remain for hours quite unconscious and oblivious of the threatening glances of Brother Archangias.

That evening La Teuse was feeling so cross and put-out, that she had talked of going to bed, as soon as the cloth was removed. The brother, however, wanted his game of cards. He caught hold of her shoulders and made her sit down, so roughly that the chair creaked beneath her. He began to shuffle the cards. Désirée, who hated him, had gone off with her dessert, which she generally took up with her every evening to eat in bed.

"I will have the red cards," said La Teuse.

Then the struggle began. La Teuse at first won some of the brother's best cards. Then two aces fell together on the table.

"Here's a fight!" she cried, with wild excitement.

She threw down a nine, which rather alarmed her, but as the brother, in his turn, put down only a seven, she picked up

the cards triumphantly. At the end of half-an-hour, she had only two aces once more, and the chances were equalised. A quarter-of-an-hour later she had only one ace left. The knaves and kings and queens were being perpetually captured and re-captured.

"It is a splendid game," said Brother Archangias, turning towards the Abbé Mouret.

And when he saw him sitting there, so completely absorbed and abstracted in his reverie, with such a gentle smile playing round his lips, he roughly raised his voice.

"Why, your reverence, you are not paying any attention to us! It isn't very polite of you. We are only playing on your account. We were trying to amuse you. Come and watch the game. It would do you more good than dozing and dreaming away there. Where were you just now?"

The priest started. He said nothing, but tried to force himself to attend to the game, his eye-lids quivering all the while. The play went on vigorously and with great excitement. La Teuse won her ace back, and then lost it again. On some evenings they would fight in this way over the aces for four hours, and at last would go off to bed, quite angry at not having been able to bring the contest to a decisive issue.

"There! I've just remembered it!" cried La Teuse, suddenly, and fearing greatly that she was going to be beaten. "His reverence has to go out to-night. He promised that big Fortuné and Rosalie that he would go and bless their room, according to the custom. Make haste, your reverence! The brother will go with you."

The Abbé Mouret had already risen from his chair, and was looking for his hat. Brother Archangias kept hold of his cards and seemed irritated.

"Oh! don't bother about it," he said. "What does it want to be blessed for, that pig-sty of theirs? For what are they going to do in it, forsooth? It is a custom that you should do away with. A priest doesn't want to go sticking his nose among the sheets of newly married couples. Stop where you are, and let us finish the game. It is much the best thing to do."

"No," said the priest, "I promised to go. These good people might feel hurt if I didn't. You stay here and go on with your game till I come back."

La Teuse looked at Brother Archangias very uneasily.

"Yes, indeed, I will stay here," he cried. "It is really too absurd."

But before the Abbé Mouret could open the door, he rose from his seat to follow him, throwing his cards violently down upon the table. He turned back and said to La Teuse :

"I should have won. Leave the cards as they are, and we will play the game out to-morrow."

"Oh! they are all mixed now," answered the old servant, who had lost no time in shuffling them all up together. "Did you suppose that I was going to put them away under a glass case? And, besides, I might very well have won, for I still had an ace left."

A few strides brought Brother Archangias up to the Abbé Mouret, who was walking along the narrow path that led to the village. The brother had imposed upon himself the task of keeping a watch over the Abbé's movements. He played the spy upon him perpetually, accompanying him everywhere ; or, if he could not go himself, sending, in his stead, one of the lads in his school. He said, with that terrible laugh of his, that he was "God's gendarme." And, in truth, the Abbé seemed like a prisoner over guarded by the black shadow of the brother's cassock ; a prisoner who was considered dangerous and likely to lapse into fresh crime if he were allowed to escape for a moment from surveillance. He was watched with all the spitefulness of a jealous old maid, combined with the minute zealotry of a gaoler who stretches his precautions even to excluding a ray of light from falling through the chinks of the prison-house. Brother Archangias was always on the watch to keep out the sunlight, to keep even a whiff of the outside air from entering, and to guard his prison so well that nothing from outside might gain access to it. He noted the slightest weakness of the Abbé, and divined his tender thoughts and crushed them pitilessly and silently, as though they were poisonous vermin. The priest's intervals of silence, his smiles, his starts and tremblings, the palings of his brow, were all noted by the brother. But he never spoke openly to him of his sin. His mere presence was a sufficient reproach. The manner in which he uttered certain phrases gave them all the stinging keenness of biting lashes. With a mere gesture he expressed all his contempt for the sin's filthiness. Like a betrayed husband, who tortures his wife with pointed allusions, only intelligible to themselves, he never spoke of the scene in the Paradou. He contented himself by suggesting it by some word or phrase, when he wanted to crush and annihilate the Abbé, at times when the latter seemed inclined to assert his independence.

It was nearly ten o'clock. The villagers had mostly retired to rest, but from a brightly lighted house at the far end, near the mill, there still issued noisy sounds of merriment. Old Bamousse had given up a corner of his house to his daughter and son-in-law, keeping the best rooms for his own use. They were drinking a last toast, while they waited for the priest.

"They are all drunk," growled Brother Archangias. "Don't you hear what a row they are making?"

The Abbé Mouret made no reply. It was a lovely night. The sky was clear and blue, and the distant valley lay like a sleeping lake in the bright moonlight. The curé slackened his pace to more fully enjoy the beauties of that softly-lighted scene, and he now and then stopped altogether as he came upon some unbroken expanse of light, which lay before him like a sheet of water. The brother hurried along with his big strides, grumbling at him and calling him on.

"Come along! come along! It isn't good to be loitering about outside at this time of night. You would be much better in bed."

But, just as they were entering the village, he stood quite still in the middle of the road. He glanced up towards the heights, where the white lines of the roads lost themselves in the black patches of the pine-woods, and seemed filled with uneasy suspicion, like a dog that scents danger.

"Who can it be coming down there so late?" he murmured. But the priest, who neither saw nor heard anything, was now, in his turn, anxious to press on.

"Stay! stay! there he is," said Brother Archangias rapidly. "He has just turned the corner. See! he is in the moonlight now. You will be able to see him quite plainly, directly. It is a tall man, with a stick."

Then, after a moment's silence, he said, in a grating voice, choked with anger,

"It is he, the scoundrel! I felt sure it was!"

And then, as the new-comer drew near to them, the Abbé Mouret saw that it was Jeanbernât. In spite of his eighty years, the old man put his feet down with such force, that his heavy-nailed boots struck sparks from the flint-stones on the road. He walked along upright as an oak, without the aid of his stick, which he carried across his shoulder like a musket.

"Ah! the villain!" stammered the brother, still standing quite stationary. "May the devil light all the blazes of hell under his feet!"

The priest, much distressed and despairing of making his companion come on, turned round to continue his journey, hoping that, by pressing quickly on to the Bambousses' house, he might manage to avoid Jeanbernât. But he had not taken five strides onwards, before he heard the mocking voice of the old man just behind his back.

"Stop! stop, sir, wait for me. Are you afraid of me?"

And as the Abbé Mouret stopped, he came up to him, and went on to say:

"Ah! those cassocks of yours are tiresome things, aren't they? They prevent your getting along too quickly. It's such a fine clear night, too, that one can recognise you a long way off. When I was right away at the top of the hill, I said to myself, 'Surely that is the little priest down there.' Oh! yes, I have very good eyes yet. How is it that you never come to see me now?"

"I have had so much to do," murmured the priest, who was very pale.

"Oh! there's no compulsion; and every one is free to please himself. I only want you to know that I don't bear you any grudge for being a priest. We wouldn't even mention your God. It's all the same to me. The little one thinks that it is I who prevent your coming. I said to her 'the priest is an idiot,' and I think so, indeed."

He spoke in the coolest and most unconcerned manner, pretending not to notice the presence of Brother Archangias; but as this latter broke out into an angry grunt, he added,

"Hallo! sir, so you bring your pig out with you?"

"Take care, you blackguard!" hissed out the brother, clenching his fists.

Jeanbernât pretended to recognise him, and raised his stick.

"Hands off!" he cried. "Ah! it's you, croaker! I ought to have known you by your smell. We have a little account to settle together. I have sworn that I will cut off your ears in the middle of your school. It will amuse the children you are poisoning."

The brother fell back before the raised staff, a flood of abuse rising up to his lips; but he stammered and could not find words in which to express himself.

"I will set the police after you, scoundrel!" at last he broke out. "You spat in the church; I saw you. You infect with your deadly contamination the poor people who merely pass your door. At Saint-Eutrope you made a girl miscarry by

forcing her to chew a consecrated wafer which you had stolen. At Béage you went and dug up the bodies of little children and carried them away on your back for your own abominable purposes. You are the disgrace of the country. Whoever strangles you will gain Heaven for the deed."

The old man listened with a sneer, twirling the whilc his stick between his fingers. Between the periods of the brother's flow of abuse, he kept ejaculating in low tones,

"Go on, go on; relieve yourself, you viper. I will break your back for you by-and-by."

The Abbé Mouret tried to interfere, but Brother Archangias pushed him away, saying,

"You are led by him yourself! Didn't he make you trample upon the cross? Deny it, if you can!"

Then turning again to Jeanbernât, he went on: "Ah! Satan, you must have chuckled when you held a priest in your grasp! May Heaven curse those who abetted you in that sacrilege! What was it you did, that night, while he slept? You came and moistened his tonsure with your saliva, that his hair might grow more quickly. Did you not? You breathed upon his chin and his cheeks that his beard might grow a hand's-breadth in one night. You rubbed all your poison into his body, and you breathed into his mouth the lasciviousness of a dog, and made him hot with concupiscence. You turned him into a brute-beast, Satan!"

"He has gone mad," said Jeanbernât, leaning his stick back on his shoulder. "He quite bores me." The brother waxed bolder, and thrust his fists under his nose.

"And that drab of yours!" he cried, "it was you who thrust her, stark-naked, into the priest's bed." Then he suddenly sprang backwards, with a shriek, for the old man's stick, swung with all his strength, had just broken itself against his back. He retreated a little further and picked up, from a heap of stones by the side of the road, a piece of flint twice as large as a man's fist, and threw it at Jeanbernât's head. It would have split his forehead open, if he had not bent down. Then Jeanbernât, too, crossed over to a heap of stones, and gathered some; and between the two heaps a terrible combat began, and there was a regular hail of flints. The moon was shining very brightly, and their shadows fell black and distinct upon the ground.

"Yes, yes, you thrust her into his bed!" repeated the brother, mad with rage. "And you put a crucifix beneath the

mattress, that their filthiness might pollute it. Ah! you are astonished that I know all about it! You are hoping for some monstrous result from that pairing. Every morning you make the thirteen signs of hell over the belly of your drab, that she may bring forth Antichrist. You long for Antichrist, villain! May this stone blind you!"

"And may this one bung your mouth up!" retorted Jeanbernat, who was now quite calm again. "Is he cracked, the silly fellow, with all these stories of his? Shall I have to break your head for you, before I can get along on my way? Is it your catechism that has turned your brain?"

"Catechism, indeed! Do you know the catechism which is taught to the damned and accursed ones like you? Yes, I will show you how to make the sign of the cross—This is for the Father, and this for the Son, and this for the Holy Ghost. Ah! you are still standing. Wait a bit, wait a bit. Amen!" And he threw a handful of small pebbles at him, like a volley of grape-shot. Jeanbernat, who was struck upon the shoulder, let the stones he was holding fall to the ground, and quietly stepped forwards, while Brother Archangias picked up two fresh handfuls from the heap, blurting out—

"I am going to exterminate you. It is God who wills it. God is acting through my arm."

"Shut up, will you!" said the old man, grasping him by the nape of the neck.

Then there was a short struggle in the road, all bright with the moon's rays. The brother, finding himself the weaker of the two, tried to bite. The sinewy limbs of Jeanbernat were like coils of rope that pinioned him so tightly that he could almost feel them cutting into his flesh. He panted and ceased to struggle, meditating some treachery. When the old man got him down under him, he said, scoffingly—

"I have a good mind to break one of your arms, and so break the God you prate of. You see that it isn't He who is the stronger, but that it is I who am exterminating you—now I am going to cut your ears off. You have tried my endurance too far."

He drew his knife calmly from his pocket. The Abbé Mouret who had several times previously vainly attempted to assuage the combatants, now interposed such strenuous opposition to this scheme of the old man, that he consented to defer the operation for the present.

"You are acting foolishly, sir," he said. "It would do

this scoundrel good to be well bled ; but, since it seems to displease you, I will wait a little longer ; I shall be meeting him again in some quiet corner."

And as the brother broke out into an angry growl, the old man cried, threateningly—

"If you don't keep quite still, I will cut them off at once!"

"But," said the priest, "you are sitting on his chest ; get up and let him breathe."

"No, no ; he would begin with his tomfoolery again. I will give him his liberty when I go away, but not before. I was telling you, sir, when this good-for-nothing interrupted us, that you would be very welcome down there. The little one is mistress, you know ; I don't attempt to interfere with her any more than I do with my salad-plants. All that kind of thing comes by nature, and it is only fools like this croaker here who see any harm in it. Where did you see anything wrong, scoundrel ? It was yourself who imagined it, villain that you are!"

And he gave the brother another shaking.

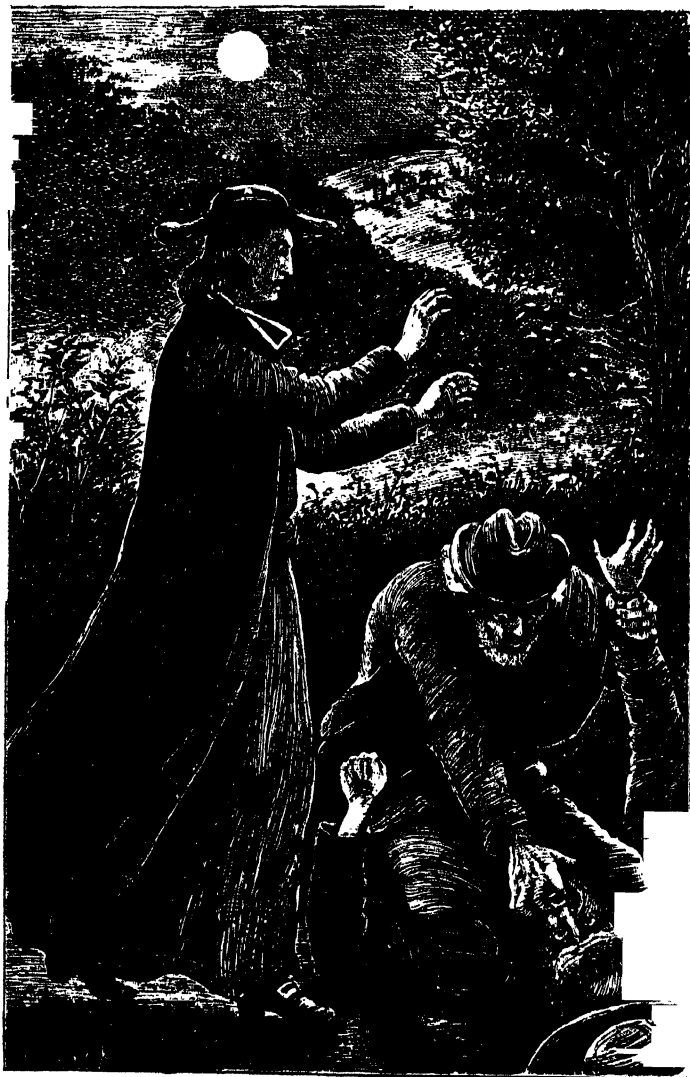
"Let him get up," begged the Abbé Mouret.

"By-and-by. The little one has not been easy in her mind for a long time. I did not notice anything myself, but she told me ; and now I was on my way to tell your uncle Pascal, at Plassans. I like the night for walking ; it is quiet, and one is not delayed by meeting people. No, no, the little one is not at all well."

The priest could not find a word to say. He trembled, and his head sank down.

"It made her so happy to look after you," continued the old man. "As I smoked my pipe, I used to hear her laugh. That was quite sufficient for me. Girls are like the hawthorns ; when they break out into blossom, they have done all that they can do. Well, now, you will come, if your heart prompts you to it. I am sure it would please the little one. Good night, sir."

He got up slowly, keeping a firm grasp of the brother's wrists, fearing some treacherous attack. Then he proceeded on his way, with his swinging steady strides, without once turning his head round. The brother silently crept to the heap of stones, and waited till the old man was some distance off. Then, with both his hands, he began flinging stones again with mad violence—but they fell harmlessly upon the dusty road. Jeanbernat did not condescend to notice them, but went on his way, upright as as a tree, through the clear night.



ABBÉ MOURET BEGGING JEANBERNAT TO RELEASE BROTHER
ARCHANGIAS.

"The accursed one!—may Satan seize him!" shrieked Brother Archangias, as he hurled his last stone. "An old scoundrel, that the least touch ought to upset! But he is baked in hell's fire. I smelt his claws." He stamped in his impotent rage on the scattered stones. Then he suddenly attacked the Abbé Mouret. "It is all your fault," he said; "you ought to have helped me, and, between us, we could have choked him."

At the other end of the village, the noise in the Bambousses' house was greater than ever. The clinking of the glasses on the table could be distinctly heard. The priest resumed his steps without raising his head, and made his way towards the flood of bright light that streamed out of the window. The brother followed him, gloomy and sulky; his cassock soiled with dust, and one of his cheeks bleeding from a stone-cut. Then, after a short interval of silence, he asked, in his harsh voice: "Will you go?"

And as the Abbé Mouret did not answer, he added: "Take care! You are lapsing into sin again. Just meeting this man has been sufficient to send a thrill through your whole body. I saw you there, standing in the light of the moon, pale as a girl. Take care! take care! Do you hear me? Another time God will not pardon you—you will sink down into the lowest abyss of filthiness. Ah! miserable piece of clay that you are! It is filthiness which is mastering you!"

Then, at last, the priest raised his head. Big tears were streaming from his eyes, and it was in heart-broken accents that he spoke.

"Why do you speak to me in this way?— You are always watching me, and you know my ceaseless struggles. Do not suspect me, and leave me strength to overcome myself."

These simple words, steeped, as they were, in silent tears, sounded, in that soft night air, so pregnant with supreme grief, that even Brother Archangias himself, in spite of all his harshness, felt touched. He made no reply, but merely shook his dusty cassock, and wiped his bleeding cheek. When they reached the Bambousses' house, he refused to go inside. He sat down, a few yards away, on the body of an overturned old cart, where he waited for the Abbé with a dog-like patience.

"Ah! here is his reverence!" cried all the company of Bambousses and Brichets.

They all filled their glasses again. The Abbé Mourét was compelled to take one, too. There had been no regular wedding-

feast ; but, in the evening, after dinner, a ten-gallon jar had been placed upon the table, which they were making it their business to empty before going to bed. There were ten of them, and old Bambousse was already obliged to turn the jar upside down to persuade the thinnest little stream of red liquor to trickle from it. Rosalie, in a very larkish frame of mind, was dipping the baby's chin into her glass, while big Fortuné was making the tour of the room, lifting up the chairs with his teeth. All the company passed into the bedroom. Custom required that the priest should there drink the glass of wine which had been poured out for him. It brought good luck, and prevented quarrels in the household. In Monsieur Caffin's time, it had always been a very merry ceremony, for the old priest loved a joke ; and he had gained a reputation for the skilful way in which he could drain his glass, without leaving a single drop at the bottom of it ; and the Artaud women pretended that every undrained drop meant a year less of love for the newly-married pair. But with the Abbé Mouret they dare not joke so freely. However, he drank off his wine at one gulp, which seemed to please old Bambousse very much. Old mother Brichet looked longingly at the bottom of the glass, where a drop or two of liquid still remained. One of the uncles, who was in the rural police, was standing by the bedside, making very broad jokes, at which Rosalie, whom Fortuné had already pushed down on her back on the mattress, and was fondling there, tittered loudly. And when they had all succeeded in making some indelicate jest, they went back into the parlour. Vincent and Catherine had remained there by themselves, and, as the others came back, Vincent was standing upon a chair, clasping the enormous jar in his arms, and draining the last drops into Catherine's gaping mouth.

"We are very much obliged to your reverence," said old Bambousse, as he led the priest back into the parlour. "Well, now, you young couple, are you quite satisfied? Ah! the scapegraces, if anyone imagines that they are going to employ themselves, by-and-by, in saying *Paters* and *Aves*— Well! well! Good-night, and pleasant dreams to you, your reverence."

Brother Archangias rose up slowly from his seat on the cart.

"May the devil," he murmured, "pile hot coals over them, and roast them!"

He did not open his lips again. He stuck to the Abbé

Mouret till he reached the vicarage. There he waited till the door was closed again before going away ; and, even then, he twice looked round to make sure that the Abbé was not coming out again. When the priest got into his bedroom, he threw himself down on his bed in all his clothes, clasping his hands to his ears, and burying his face in the pillow, that he might shut out all sound and sight, and he fell into a deep and death-like slumber.

VI.

THE next day was Sunday. As the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross fell on a high mass day, the Abbé Mouret desired to celebrate the festival with especial solemnity. He was filled with an extraordinary devotion for the Cross, and he had replaced the image of the Immaculate Conception in his bedroom with a great crucifix of black wood, before which he spent long hours in adoration. To exalt the Cross, to plant it before him, surrounded with glory and honour, and supreme over everything else, was the one aim and object of his life, and it gave him strength and fortitude to struggle and to suffer. He dreamed, sometimes, of hanging up there, in Jesus' place, his head crowned with thorns, the nails driven through his hands and feet, and his side torn with the spears. What a craven coward he must surely be to complain so much of an imaginary trouble, when his God bled there from His whole body, and yet preserved ever on His lips the blessed smile of the Redemption ! And if, in the fulness of his misery, he offered up his trouble as a sacrifice, he ended by falling into a state of ecstasy, and believing that the blood was really streaming from his brow and side and limbs. They were hours, these, of some sort of comfort to him, for he fancied that all his impurities were flowing forth from his wounds. He bore himself with the heroism of a martyr, and longed to be called upon to suffer the most frightful tortures, that he might bear them without a groan.

In the early dawn he knelt before the crucifix, and grace came upon him abundantly as dew. He made no straining effort after it, but simply fell upon his knees, and he received it into his heart, and felt permeated with it to his inmost marrow in sweetest and most refreshing fulness. The day before, he had prayed for it in agony, and it had not come. It remained for a long and weary time deaf to his tortured supplications, and then, when he simply clasped his hands, in quiet child-like

fashion, it flowed freely to his solace and comfort. It came upon him this morning like a benediction, an unruffled serenity, an absolute trusting faith. He forgot all about his troubles of the previous days, and wholly surrendered himself to the triumphant joy of the Cross. He seemed to feel that he was being wrapped in an armour so impregnable, that all the world's most deadly blows would glide off harmlessly from it. When he came down from his bedroom, he stepped along with a serene air of victory. La Teuse was astonished, and went to find Désirée, that he might kiss her; and both of them clapped their hands, and said that they had not seen him looking so well for the last six months.

But it was in the church, at the high mass, that the priest felt that he had fully re-won the divine grace. It was a long time since he had approached the altar filled with an emotion of such melting love; and he was constrained to keep his lips glued to the altar to restrain an outburst of weeping. It was a solemn high mass. Rosalie's uncle, the rural policeman, sang amongst the choir in deep bass tones, whose rumbling rolled through the low nave like hoarse organ notes. Vincent, robed in a surplice much too large for him, which had formerly belonged to Abbé Caffin, swung an old silver censer, and was vastly amused by the tinkling of the chains; swinging it to a great height, that he might make copious clouds of smoke, and glancing behind him every now and then to see if he had succeeded in making anyone cough. The church was almost full. His reverence's painting had been a great attraction, and everybody wanted to see it. The full morning sun filtered through the paper panes, and lighted up the brightly painted walls, on which the women's bonnets cast shadows that resembled swarms of huge butterflies. The artificial flowers, with which the altar was decorated, seemed almost to possess the moist freshness of newly gathered natural ones; and when the priest turned round to bless the congregation, he felt himself swayed by an even stronger emotion than before, as he saw his church so beautiful and so full, and so steeped in music and incense and light.

After the offertory, a buzzing murmur ran through the peasants. Vincent had turned his head round towards the congregation inquisitively, and, by so doing, had almost let all the charcoal in his censer fall on the priest's chasuble. And, wishing to excuse himself, as he saw the Abbé looking at him with an expression of reproof, he murmured:

"It is your reverence's uncle, who has just come in."

At the bottom of the church, standing by one of the slender wooden pillars that supported the gallery, the Abbé Mouret perceived Doctor Pascal. He was not wearing his usual cheerful and slightly scoffing expression. He had taken off his hat, and seemed disturbed and put out, and he followed the service with evident impatience. The sight of the priest at the altar, his devotion, his calm demeanour and the perfect serenity of his countenance, appeared to gradually increase his irritation. He could not prevail upon himself to stay till the end of the mass, but left the church, and went away to walk up and down by his horse and gig, which he had fastened to one of the vicarage gates.

"Will that nephew of mine never have finished censuring himself?" he asked of La Teuse, who was just coming away from the vestry.

"It is all over now," she replied. "Won't you come into the drawing-room? His reverence is unrobing. He knows you are here."

"Well, unless he was blind, he couldn't very well help it," growled the doctor, as he followed La Teuse into the cold-looking room, with its stiff furniture, which she pompously described as the drawing-room.

He paced up and down the room, from one end to the other. Its air of gloomy coldness seemed to increase his feeling of irritation. As he strode through the room he kept striking the well-worn horse-hair chair-seats with his stick, and they sounded hard and dead as stone. Then, tired of pacing about, he went and stood in front of the mantel-piece, in the centre of which a gaudily painted image of Saint Joseph occupied the place of a time-piece.

"Ah! here he comes at last," he said, as he heard the sound of the door opening.

As he stepped to meet the Abbé he said:

"Do you know that you have made me listen out half a mass? It is a very long time since that has happened to me. But I was very anxious to see you to-day. I have something to say to you."

Then he stopped, and looked at the priest with an expression of surprise. Neither of them spoke.

"You are quite well, eh?" at last said Doctor Pascal, in a different voice.

"Yes, I am very much better than I was," replied the Abbé

Mouret, with a smile. "I did not expect you before Thursday. Sunday is not your day for coming. There is something you want to tell me?"

But Uncle Pascal did not make an immediate answer. He went on looking at the Abbé. The latter was still fresh from the influence of the church and the mass. His hair was still fragrant with the smell of the incense, and in his eyes still shone the joy of the Cross. His uncle shook his head, as he read in his face this expression of triumphant peace.

"I have come from Le Paradou," he said, abruptly. "Jean-bernat came to fetch me there. I have seen Albine, and she disquiets me. She is in need of much careful treatment."

He kept his eyes keenly fixed upon the priest, as he spoke, but he could not see so much as an eye-lid quiver.

"She took great care of you, you know. Without her, my boy, you might have been, by this time, in one of the cells at Les Tulettes, with a strait waistcoat on. Well, well, I promised that you should go and see her. I will take you with me. It will be a farewell meeting, and she is anxious to say good-bye to you."

"I can do nothing more than pray for the person of whom you speak," said the Abbé Mouret, softly.

And as the doctor gave way to an impulse of anger, bringing down his stick heavily upon the couch, he added calmly, but in firm tones:

"I am a priest, and can only help with prayers."

"Well! well! I suppose you are right," said Uncle Pascal, dropping down into a rickety armchair, "and it is I who am an old fool. Yes, indeed, I wept quite like a child, as I came on here alone in my gig. That is what comes of living amongst a lot of old books. One learns a lot from them, but one makes a fool of oneself in the world. How could I guess that it would all turn out so unhappily?"

He got up from his chair and began to pace about again, looking troubled and ill at ease.

"Well, I suppose I ought to have known. It was all quite natural. And in your position, it is a disgrace; for you are not as other men. But I can assure you that otherwise you would never have recovered. It was she alone, with what she did for you, that could have saved you from madness. There is no need for me to tell you what a state you were in. It was one of my most wonderful cures. And now I can't take any pleasure in it, for it is killing the poor girl!"

The Abbé Mouret remained standing, perfectly calm, his face radiating all the unruffled serenity of a martyr which nothing that man could do could disturb.

"God will have mercy upon her," he said.

"God ! God !" murmured the doctor below his breath. "Ah ! He would do better not to interfere. We might manage the matter if we were left to ourselves."

Then, raising his voice, he added :

"I had considered everything so carefully—and yet, what a mess I have made of it ! You would stay there, I thought, for a month to recover your strength, and the shade of the trees and the cheerful chatter of the girl and her bright youthfulness would quickly bring you round. And then you, on your side, it seemed to me, would do something to reclaim the poor child from her wild ways ; you would civilize her, and, between us, we should turn her into a young lady, for whom, by-and-bye, we should find a suitable husband. It seemed such a perfect scheme. And how was I to guess that that philosophizing old Jeanbernat would never stir an inch away from his lettuce-beds ? Well ! well ! I myself, indeed, never left my own laboratory. I had such pressing work there. And it is all my fault ! Ah ! I am a very stupid bungler !"

The atmosphere of the room seemed to be choking him, and he felt that he must go out into the fresh air. He began to look busily about for his hat, which, all the while, was stuck on his head.

"Good-bye ! good-bye !" he stammered out ; "I must be off. So you won't come ? Do, now, for my sake ! You see how miserable and upset I am. I swear to you that she shall go away immediately afterwards. That is all settled. My gig is here ; you might be back in an hour. Come, do come, I beg of you."

The priest made a sweeping gesture ; such a gesture as the doctor had seen him make before the altar.

"No," he said, "I cannot come."

Then, as he accompanied his uncle out of the room, he added :

"Tell her to go on her knees and to pray to God. God will hear her as He heard me, and He will comfort her as He has comforted me. There is no other means of peace."

The doctor looked him full in the face, and shrugged his shoulders, as he said :

"Good-bye. You are quite well now, and have no further need of me."

But, as he was unfastening his horse, Désirée, who had heard his voice, came running up. She was extremely attached to her uncle. When she was younger he would listen to her childish prattle for hours without showing the least sign of weariness. And, even now, he still did his best to spoil her, and manifested the greatest interest in her farm-yard, often spending a whole afternoon with her amongst her fowls and ducks, smiling on her with his bright clever-looking eyes. He seemed to consider her as something far superior to other young girls. So, to-day, she flung herself round his neck, in an impulse of affection, as she cried :

"Aren't you going to stay and have some breakfast?"

But he kissed her and said he could not remain, and unfastened her arms from his neck with a somewhat uneasy air. She laughed merrily at him, and clasped her arms round him again.

"Oh ! but you must," she persisted. "I have got some eggs that have only just been laid. I have just been looking at the nests, and there are fourteen eggs this morning. And, if you will stay, we will have a fowl, the white one, that is always quarrelling with the others. When you were here on Thursday, you know, it picked that great spotted hen's eye out."

But her uncle persisted in his refusal, and seemed put-out by her clinging embrace, from which he could not extricate himself. Then she began to skip round him, crying :

"Yes ! yes ! you must stay, and we will eat it up."

Her uncle's vexation could no longer resist her blandishments, and he smiled at her. She seemed so full of life and health and sincerity, and so brimming with a frank and natural merriment. He clasped her by the wrists as she continued skipping gleefully about him, and said :

"No, dear ; not to-day. I have to go and see a poor girl who is ill. But I will come some other morning. I promise you faithfully."

"When ? when ?" she persisted. "On Thursday ? The cow, you know, is in calf, and she hasn't seemed at all well these last two days. You are a doctor, and you ought to be able to give her something to do her good."

The Abbé Mouret, who was standing silently by, could not restrain a slight laugh. The doctor got up merrily into his gig, as he said :

"All right, my dear, I will attend to your cow. Come and let me kiss you. Ah ! how healthy and sweet you taste ! And

you are worth more than anyone else in the world. Ah ! if everyone was like you, what a delightful place this earth would be ! ”

He set his horse off with a cluck of his tongue, and went on talking to himself, as the gig rattled along down the hill.

“ Yes, yes ! there should be nothing but animals. Ah ! if they were all mere animals, how happy and gay and strong they would be ! It has gone well with the girl, who is as happy and contented as her cow ; but it has gone badly with the lad, who is in torture beneath his cassock. A little too much blood, a little too much nerves, and the whole life is wrecked ! True Rougons and true Macquarts those children there ! The tail-end of the stock—its final degeneration.”

And, urging on his horse, he drove up the hill that led to Le Paradou at a trot.

VII.

SUNDAY was a busy day for the Abbé Mouret. He still had vespers before him, which he generally said to empty seats, for even mother Brichet herself did not carry her devotion so far as to go to church in the afternoon. Then, at four o'clock, Brother Archangias brought the little rogues from his school to say their catechism to his reverence. This lesson sometimes spun itself out to a great length, and, when the children showed themselves quite intractable, La Teuse was called in to frighten them with her broom. On this particular Sunday, about four o'clock, Désirée found herself quite alone in the vicarage. As she was feeling a little bored, she went out to gather some food for her rabbits in the churchyard, where there were some magnificent poppies, of which rabbits are immensely fond. She went down on her knees between the grave-stones to gather the juicy leaves on which her animals feasted so greedily.

"Oh! what lovely plantains!" she cried, stooping down before the Abbé Caffin's tombstone, delighted with the discovery she had made.

And there were, indeed, some magnificent plantains there, spreading out their broad leaves by the stone. She had just finished filling her apron, when she fancied she heard a strange noise behind her. There was a rustling of branches and a grating of small pebbles, as though some one were trying to climb up from the deep channel which bordered one side of the graveyard, and at the bottom of which flowed the Mascle, a stream which came down from the high lands of Le Paradou. But the ascent was so rough and impracticable that Désirée imagined it was only a lost dog or a straying goat. She walked quickly forwards to the edge, and, as she looked over, she was amazed at seeing in the midst of the brambles a girl bounding up the rocky ascent with an extraordinary agility.

"I will come and give you a hand," she said. "You may very easily break your neck there."

The girl, as she saw she was observed, started back timidly, as though she were going down again, but after a moment's hesitation, she ventured to take the hand that was held out to her.

"Oh! I know who you are," said Désirée, with a beaming smile, letting her apron fall that she might grasp the girl by the waist. "You once gave me some blackbirds, but they all died, poor little dears. I was so sorry about it. Wait a bit, I know your name, I have heard it before. La Teuse often mentions it when Serge isn't there; but she has told me that I am not to repeat it. I shall remember it directly!"

She tried to recall the name, and grew quite grave in the attempt. Then, when she had succeeded in calling it back to her recollection, she became quite gay and lively again, and seemed to find a great pleasure in repeating the name and dwelling upon its musical sound.

"Albine! Albine!—What a sweet name it is! At first I used to think you must be a tom-tit, because I once had a tom-tit with a name very like yours, though I can't remember exactly what it was."

Albine did not smile. Her face was very pale, and there was a feverish gleam in her eyes. A few drops of blood trickled from her hands. When she had recovered her breath, she said very rapidly:

"No! no! leave it alone. You will only stain your handkerchief. It is nothing but a scratch. I didn't want to come by the road, as I should have been seen—I preferred coming along the bed of the stream—Is Serge there?" Désirée did not feel at all shocked at hearing the girl utter her brother's name so familiarly and with an expression of subdued passion, and she replied that he was in the church hearing the children say their catechism.

"You must not speak loudly," she added, putting her finger up to her lips. "Serge has forbidden me to talk loudly when he is catechizing the children, and we shall get into trouble if we don't keep quiet. Let us go into the stable—shall we? We can talk better there."

"I want to see Serge," said Albine, simply.

Désirée cast a hasty glance at the church, and then whispered in low tones:

"Yes, yes; Serge will be finely caught. Come with me.

"We will hide ourselves, and keep quite quiet. We shall have some fine fun!"

She had picked up the leaves which had fallen out of her apron, and went out of the graveyard and stole back to the vicarage, telling Albine to hide herself behind her and make herself as inconspicuous as possible. As they stealthily glided through the farm-yard, they caught sight of La Teuse, who was crossing over to the vestry, but she did not appear to notice them.

"There! there!" said Désirée, quite delighted, as they stowed themselves away at the far end of the stable; "keep quite quiet, and no one will know that we are here. There is some straw there for you to lie down upon."

Albine seated herself on a truss of straw.

"And Serge?" she asked; "where is he?" persisting in her one fixed idea.

"Hush! hush! or they will hear you. When he claps his hands together, it will be all over, and the children will go away— Listen! he is telling them a tale."

They could just hear the Abbé Mouret's voice, which reached them through the vestry-door, which La Teuse had doubtless just opened. It came to them like a solemn whisper, a quiet, holy murmur, in which they could distinguish the name of Jesus thrice repeated. Albine trembled. She sprang up as though she would rush away to that beloved voice whose caressing accents she so well knew, when all sound of it suddenly died away, cut off by the closing of the door. Then she sat down again, and seemed to give herself up to patient waiting, her hands clasped tightly together, and her clear eyes gleaming with the intensity of her thoughts. Désirée was lying at her feet, gazing up at her in innocent admiration.

"How beautiful you are!" she whispered. "You are like an image that Serge used to have in his bedroom. It was quite fair like you are, with great curls floating about the neck; and the heart was quite bare and uncovered, just in the place where I can feel yours beating— But you are not listening to me. You are looking quite sad. Shall we play at something? Would you like to do?"

Then she stopped short, holding her breath and crying out between her teeth:

"Ah! the wretches! they will make them find us out!" She had brought her apron filled with leaves with her, and her animals were taking it by assault. A flock of fowls had

surrounded her, clucking and calling to each other, and pecking at the leaves. The goat pushed its head slyly under her arm, and began to eat the green stuff. The cow itself, that was tethered to the wall, strained at its cord and poked out its nose, kissing her with its warm breath.

"Oh! you thieves!" cried Désirée, "it is for the rabbits, and not for you! Leave me alone, won't you! You, there, will get your ears boxed, if you don't go away; and you will have your tail pulled if I catch you at it again. The wretches! they will be eating my hands soon!"

She drove the goat off, and frightened the fowls away with her feet, and brayed the cow's nose with her hands. But the animals only came back with increased persistence, and attacked her more greedily than before, quite surrounding her and tearing open her apron. She whispered softly to Albine, as though she were afraid the animals might hear her.

"Aren't they amusing, the dears? Watch them eat."

Albine looked on with her serious eyes.

"Now, now, be good," Désirée went on; "you shall all have some, but you must wait your turns. Now, you great big Lisa, you shall begin. Eh! how fond you are of plantain, aren't you?"

The great big Lisa was the cow. She slowly munched a handful of the juicy leaves which had grown by the Abbé Caffin's tomb. A slight string of foam hung down from her mouth, and her great brown eyes shone with an expression of quiet enjoyment.

"There! now it's your turn," continued Désirée, turning towards the goat. "You are fond of poppies, I know; and you like the flowers best, don't you? The buds that shine in your teeth like red-hot butterflies. See, here are some splendid ones; they came from the corner at the left hand, where there was a burial last year." And, as she spoke, she gave the goat a bunch of scarlet flowers, which the animal ate from her hand. When there was nothing left in her grasp but the stalks, she pushed these between its teeth. Behind her the fowls were desperately pecking away at her petticoats. She threw them the wild chicory and the dandelions which she had gathered amongst the old stones that were ranged alongside the church-walls. The fowls quarrelled and disputed so noisily over the dandelions, with such scratchings and flapping of wings and cluckings, that the other fowls in the farm-yard heard them. And then there came a general invasion. The great yellow.

cock, Alexander, was the first to appear ; he seized a dandelion and tore it in two, without attempting to eat it ; he crowed out a summons to the hens who were still outside to come and eat. Then a white hen strutted in, and then a black one, and then a whole crowd of others, who hustled each other, and trod on one another's tails, and ended by pouring in like a wild flood of feathers. Behind the fowls came the pigeons, and the ducks and the geese, and, last of all, the turkeys. Désirée laughed loudly at seeing herself surrounded by this noisy, squabbling mob.

"This is what always happens," she said, "every time that I bring any green-meat from the grave-yard. They nearly kill each other to get at it ; they must find it very nice."

Then she made a fight to keep a few handfuls of the leaves from the greedy beaks which wagged all round her, saying that something must really be kept for the rabbits ; and that she was very, very cross with them all for being so gluttonous, and that they should have nothing but dry bread in future. But she was obliged to give way. The geese tugged at her apron so violently that she was almost pulled down upon her knees, and the ducks gobbled away at her ankles. Two of the pigeons had lighted upon her head, and some of the fowls were fluttering about her shoulders. They were quite wild at the scent of the green-meat, the fat plantains, the crimson poppies, and the milky dandelions, rich with some of the life of dead mortals. She laughed loudly, and felt that she was on the point of slipping down, and letting go her last two handfuls, when a terrible grunting dispersed all the fowls in a state of extreme panic.

"Ah ! it is you, my great fat darling," she said, quite delighted ; "eat them up, and set me at liberty."

The pig waddled in ; but it was no longer the little animal of former days—pink as a newly-painted toy, with a tiny little tail, like a bit of string ; but a fat wobbling creature, ready to be killed, round as a monk's belly, and with a back all bristling with rough hairs, that sweated with fatness. His stomach had grown quite yellow from his habit of sleeping on the manure heap. Waddling along on his shaky feet, he charged, snout foremost, amongst the scared fowls, and so left Désirée at liberty to escape, and take the few scraps of green-meat, which she had so strenuously defended, to the rabbits. When she came back, all was at peace again. The geese were lazily swaying their long necks about, looking stupid and sancti-

monious ; the ducks and turkeys were wobbling along by the wall with an ungainly limp, while the fowls were quietly clucking and pecking at invisible grains on the hard ground of the stable-floor ; and the pig, the goat, and the big cow, were drowsily winking their eyes, as though they were gradually falling asleep. Outside, it had just begun to rain heavily.

"Oh ! there's a storm coming on !" cried Désirée, throwing herself down on the straw. "You had better stay where you are, my dears, if you don't want to get wet through."

Then she turned to Albine and added :

"How stupid they all look, don't they ? They only wake up just to eat !"

Albine still remained very silent and reserved. The merry laughter of the pretty Désirée as she struggled amidst that sea of greedy necks and gluttonous beaks, which tickled her and kissed her, and seemed bent on devouring her very flesh, seemed to have turned Albine still paler than she was before. So much gaiety, so much vitality and boisterous health made her despair. She strained her feverish arms to her lonely breast, that was dried up and parched by the desertion of her lover.

"And Sergo ?" she asked her again, in the same clear persistent tone.

"Hush !" said Désirée. "I heard him just now. He hasn't finished yet— We were making a pretty disturbance a bit since ; La Teuse must surely have grown quite deaf this afternoon— Let us keep quite quiet now. I like to hear the rain fall."

The rain beat in at the open door, splashing down in big drops on to the threshold. The restless fowls had ventured out for a moment or two, but they quickly retreated back again to the shelter of the stable ; where, indeed, all the animals were taking refuge, and clustering round the girl's skirts, except three ducks who were enjoying a quiet walk in the rain. It was growing very warm amongst the straw. Désirée pulled two big trusses together, and made a bed of them, and lay down at full length. She felt extremely comfortable, and gave herself up entirely to a soft dreamy kind of happiness.

"It is so nice," she murmured. "It is so nice. Come and lie down, too, like me. It is so springy and soft, all this straw ; and it tickles me so funnily in the neck. And when you rub against it, it seems to be running all up your legs, just as if a swarm of mice were scampering away under your petticoats."

And she laughed out merrily, slapping her hands down on each side of her, as though she were frightening the mice away. Then she lay still, with her head pressed against the straw, and her knees raised into the air.

"Do you roll about in the straw at home?" she asked. "There is nothing I am fonder of— Sometimes I tickle myself on the soles of my feet. That is very funny, too— Tell me, do you ever tickle yourself?"

But just at this moment, the great yellow cock, who had been gravely stalking up towards her, seeing her lying down, jumped upon her breast.

"Get away with you, Alexander! get away!" she cried. "What a tiresome creature he is! I can't even lie down without his perching himself upon me— You are too rough, and you scratch me with your claws. Do you hear me, sir? I don't want you to go away, but you must be good, and not peck at my hair."

Then she troubled herself no further about him. The cock still maintained his position, every now and then glancing inquisitively at the girl's chin with his gleaming red eye. The other birds were all beginning to cluster round her. She had a good wriggle amongst the straw, and was now lying lazily on her back at full length, her arms stretched out.

"Ah! how jolly it is," she said; "it is really too nice, for it makes me feel so sleepy. The straw always makes me drowsy. Serge doesn't like it. Perhaps you don't either. What do you like? Tell me, and then I shall know."

She was gradually growing drowsier. For a moment she opened her eyes widely, as though she were looking at something, and then her eye-lids fell with a tranquil smile of content. She seemed to be asleep, but at the end of a few minutes she opened her eyes again, and said:

"The cow is going to have a young one— That will be so nice, and will please me more than anything."

Then she went off into a deep sleep. The fowls had ended by perching on her body, and she was buried beneath a wave of living plumage. The hens were brooding over her feet. The geese stretched their soft downy necks over her legs. The pig lay against her left side, while, on the right, the goat poked its bearded head under her arm-pit. The pigeons were roosting and nestling all over her, on her hands, and her breasts, and her shoulders. And there she lay asleep, in all her rosy freshness, kissed by the cow's warm breath, and pressed by the weight of

the big squatting cock, with his gleaming comb and quivering wings, whose yellow breast burned against her dress like a fiery caress.

Outside, the rain was falling less heavily. A straggling sunbeam, escaping from the edge of a cloud, gilded the fine drops that still continued to fall. Albine, who had remained perfectly still, watched Désirée sleeping, the pretty girl who could find a pleasure in rolling about in the straw. She wished that she, too, could slumber away so peacefully, tired out with pleasure, just because a few straws had tickled her neck. She felt envious and jealous of those strong arms and that well-developed breast, of all that fleshly vitality, and those purely animal emotions, which made that plump girl the tranquil easy-minded sister of the great red and white cow. She was dreaming there of being beloved by the yellow cock, and that she, too, loved, just as the trees send out shoots, quite as a matter of course, and with no feeling of shame, simply opening out their veins to the passage of the sap.

By this time the rain had quite ceased. The three vicarage cats filed out into the yard one after the other, keeping close to the wall, and taking the greatest precautions not to wet their feet. They poked their heads into the stable, and then stalked straight on to the sleeping girl, and lay themselves down, purring, close by her, pressing themselves to her warm flesh. Moumou, the big black cat, curled itself up close to her cheek, and began to gently lick her chin.

"And Serge?" murmured Albine, quite mechanically. What was it that kept them apart? Who was it that prevented them being openly happy together? Why could she not love him, and why could she not be loved, freely and in the broad sunlight, as the trees lived and loved? She did not know; but she felt that she had been abandoned, and that she had received a lasting wound. And now she felt herself possessed by a longing that would not be quieted, by a very necessity, indeed, of clasping once more her love within her arms, of concealing him somewhere, and revelling again in his caresses. She rose up onto her feet. The vestry-door had just been opened again. There was a sound of hands being clapped together, followed by the noisy rush of a swarm of children clattering their heavy boots against the stone flags. The catechising was over. She glided gently out of the stable, where she had been waiting for an hour and more in the warm reek that streamed in from the farm-yard.

As she slipped quietly along through the passage that led to the vestry, she caught sight of La Teuse's back, who was going to her kitchen, but fortunately she did not turn her head. Certain, now, of not being seen and stopped, she softly closed the door, keeping firmly hold of it with her hand, that it might make no noise.

She was in the church.

VIII.

At first, she could see no one. Outside the rain had begun to fall again in fine close drops. The church looked very grey and gloomy. She passed along behind the high-altar, and walked on towards the pulpit. There was nothing to be seen in the middle of the nave, except the disordered seats where the children had been sitting during the catechizing. In all this emptiness, the dull sound of the swaying pendulum fell penetratingly on her ear. She went down the church to knock at the confessional-box, which she saw standing at the other end. But, just as she was passing by the Mortuary Chapel, she caught sight of the Abbé Mouret bending before the great bleeding Christ. He did not stir, thinking that it was only La Teuse who was putting the chairs in order behind him.

Albine laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Serge," she said, "I have come to find you."

The priest raised his head with a tremulous start. His face was very pale. He remained on his knees and crossed himself, while his lips still quivered with the words of his prayer.

"I have been expecting you," she continued. "Every morning and every evening I looked out to see if you were not coming. I have gone on counting the days till I could keep the reckoning no longer. Ah! for weeks and weeks— Then, when I grew sure that you were not coming, I set out and came here. I said to myself: 'I will fetch him away with me.' Give me your hand and let us go."

She stretched out her hands to him, as though to help him to rise. But he only crossed himself anew. He still continued his prayers as he looked at her. He had succeeded in calming his first excitement. From the Divine grace which had been streaming around him since the early morning, like a celestial bath, he absorbed a superhuman strength.

"It is not right for you to be here," he said, gravely. "Go away. You are aggravating your sufferings."

"I suffer no longer," she said, with a smile. "I am quite well again; I am cured, now that I see you once more— Listen! I made myself out worse than I really was, to induce them to go and fetch you. I am quite willing to confess it now. And that promise of going away, of leaving the neighbourhood, you didn't suppose I should have kept it, eh? No, indeed, unless I had carried you away with me on my shoulders. The others don't know it, but you must know that I cannot live anywhere but at your side."

She grew quite cheerful again, and drew close to the priest with a caressing expression, not appearing to notice his perfectly cold and austere demeanour. She seemed to be growing impatient at his silence, and she clapped her hands together, crying:

"Come, Serge; make up your mind and come. We are only losing time. There is no necessity to think so much about it. There is no difficulty about it; it is quite simple; you will just come along with me— If you don't want anyone to see you, we will go along by the Mascle. It is not very easy walking, but I managed it all by myself; and, when we are together, we can help each other— You know the way, don't you? We go through the church-yard, and then down the bank of the stream, and then we have nothing to do but to follow its course right along to the garden. And it is so quiet and shut up from everybody down there by the stream. No one can see us, and there is nothing but brambles and big round stones. The bed of the stream is nearly dry. As I came along, I thought: 'By-and-by, when he is with me, we shall step easily along together, clasping each other's waist.' Come, Serge, be quick; I am waiting for you."

The priest did not appear to hear her. He had betaken himself to his prayers again, and was asking heaven to grant him the courage of the saints. Before entering upon his last struggle, he was arming himself with the flaming sword of faith. For a moment he had feared he was wavering. He had wanted all a martyr's courage and endurance to remain firmly kneeling there on the flag-stones, while Albine was calling him, and each word of hers echoed in his breast. His heart leapt out towards her, and his blood surged passionately through his veins, filling him with an intense yearning to clasp her in his arms and kiss her sunny hair. Her mere breath had awakened

in him all the memory of their former loves, of the vast garden, of their sauntering strolls beneath the great trees and all the sweet joy of their companionship.

But the Divine grace poured itself down upon him more abundantly, and the torturing strife lasted but a moment; and then his blood flowed free of all carnal desires, and not an atom of gross humanity defiled its current. He was God's, and God's only.

Albine touched him again on the shoulder. She was growing uneasy and anxious.

"Why don't you speak to me? You can't refuse to come with me; you won't, will you? Be sure that I shall die if you do. But no! you can't; it is impossible. We lived together once, and we must never be separated. Twenty times, at least, have you given yourself to me. You bid me take you wholly, to take each one of your limbs, your breath, your very life itself— I couldn't have dreamt it all, could I? There is not an atom of all your body that you have not given over to me; not a hair in your head which is not mine. There is a mole on your left shoulder; I have kissed it, and it belongs to me. Your hands are mine. For days and days have I held them clasped in mine. Your face, your lips, your eyes, your brow, all, all are mine, and I have lavished my love upon them. Do you hear me, Serge?"

She stood upright there before him, full of a proud assertion. She reached out her hands to him as she repeated in louder tones:

"Do you hear me, Serge? I tell you you are mine."

Then the Abbé Mouret slowly rose to his feet. He leaned against the altar, and said:

"No. You are mistaken. I belong to God."

He was permeated with a calm serenity. His shorn face seemed like that of some marble saint, utterly unruffled by any fleshly impulse. His cassock fell round him in straight folds like a black winding-sheet, concealing all the outlines of his body. Albine dropped back at the sight of this mournful-looking apparition of her former love. She missed his thick beard and his flowing curls. And in the midst of his closely shorn locks she saw the pallid circle of his tonsure, which disquieted her like some mysterious evil, as it spread out there, like a cankering wound that would eat away all memory of the happy days they had spent together. She could not recognise the hands that had once been so warm with soft caresses, nor the

son neck that had once so rippled with gay laughter, nor the strong firm feet, whose quick trot had carried her along to the deep recesses of the woodlands. Could this, indeed, be the same strong youth she had known before, with the soft down gleaming on his naked breast, his skin scorched and brown by the sun's rays, his every limb quivering with strong vitality? Could it possibly be he with whom she had lived in such close communion only so short a time ago? Now, he seemed fleshless and lifeless; his hair had fallen away from him, and all his virility had dried and withered up beneath that womanish gown, which seemed to have left him sexless.

"Oh! you frighten me," she murmured. "But did you think that I was dead, that you have put on mourning? Take off that black thing, and put on a blouse. You can tuck up the sleeves, and we will catch the cray-fishes. Your arms used to be as white as mine."

She reached out her hand to his cassock, as though she would tear it off him; but he repelled her with a gesture, without touching her. He looked at her, and strengthened himself against temptation by never letting his eyes slip away from her. He seemed to him to be taller. She was no longer the little capegrace, with her bunches of wild-flowers, breaking out into shrieks of wild laughter, nor the loving maiden in her white kirts, gracefully poising her slender form as she sauntered ingeringly along by the green hedges. Now, there was a velvety bloom upon her lips, and her hips were gracefully rounded, and her breasts billowed out in rich fulness. She was a woman now, with her long oval face that seemed to speak of fecundity. Within her swelling sides vitality slumbered. Her cheeks glowed in the soft perfection of their luscious maturity.

The priest, bathed in the voluptuous atmosphere that seemed to breathe from all this feminine ripeness, felt a torturing pleasure in defying the caresses of her coral lips, the tempting gleam of her eyes, the witching charm of her heaving breasts, and all the intoxicating emanations which seemed to pour from her at every movement. He even pushed his temerity so far as to search out with his gaze those places he had once so hotly kissed, her eyes, her lips, her narrow temples, soft assatin, and her silky gleaming neck. And never, even when he was hanging close clasped in Albine's embrace, had he ever tasted pleasure so sweet as he now felt in thus martyring himself, and looking boldly in the face the love he refused. At last, fearing this might be only some new lure of the flesh, he dropped his eyes, and said, very gently :

"I cannot hear you here. Let us go out ; if you, indeed, persist in adding to the pain of both of us. Our presence in this place is a scandal. We are in God's house."

"God !" cried Albine, in hot excitement, suddenly transformed into all her old uncivilised wildness. "God ! Who is He ? I know nothing of your God. I want to know nothing of Him if He has stolen you away from me, who have never harmed Him. My uncle Jeanbernard was right when he said your God was only an invention to frighten people, and make them cry. You are lying ; you love me no longer, and that God of yours does not exist."

"You are in His house now," said the Abbé Mouret, sternly. "You blaspheme. With a breath He can turn you into dust."

She laughed with proud disdain, and lifted up her hands to heaven in defiance.

"Ah ! then," she said, "you prefer your God to me. You think He is stronger than I am, and you imagine that He will love you better than I did. Oh ! but you are a child, a foolish child. Come, leave all these follies, and we will return to the garden together, and love each other, and be free and happy. Ah ! that is life !"

This time she succeeded in throwing her arms round his waist, and she tried to drag him away. But he quickly broke loose, quivering and trembling, from her embrace, and pressed close to the altar again.

"Go away !" he stammered out. "If you still love me, go away. O Lord, pardon her, and pardon me, too, for thus defiling this Thy house. If I went with her beyond the door, I might, perhaps, falter and go away with her. Here, in Thy presence, I am strong. Grant that I may remain here, to protect Thee from insult."

Albine remained silent for a moment. Then, in quiet tones, she said :

"Well, well, let us stay here, then. I want to talk to you. You cannot, surely, be so cruel. You will not let me go away alone. Oh ! do not begin to excuse yourself. I will not lay my hands upon you again, since it seems to distress you. I am quite calm again now, am I not ? Let us talk quietly, as we used to do in those old days when we lost our way, and did not hurry ourselves to find it again, that we might have the more time to talk together."

She smiled, and continued :

"I don't understand much about these things myself. My uncle Jeanbernat used to forbid me to come to church. He would say to me, 'Silly girl, what do you want to do in a stuffy building when you have got a garden to run about in?' I grew up quite happy and contented. I used to look in the birds' nests without even taking the eggs. I did not even pluck the flowers, for fear of hurting the plants; and you know that I could never torture an insect. Why, then, should God be angry with me?"

"It is your duty to acknowledge Him, to pray to Him, and to render Him the constant worship which is His due," answered the priest.

"Ah! will it please you if I do?" she said. "Will you forgive me, and love me again? Well, well, I will do all that you wish me. Tell me about God, and I will believe in Him, and worship Him. All that you tell me shall be a truth which I will listen to on my knees. Have I ever had a thought that was not your own? Ah! we will begin our long walks again; and you shall teach me, and make of me whatever you will. Say 'yes,' I beg of you, dear Serge."

The Abbé Mouret pointed to his cassock.

"I cannot," he said. "I am a priest."

"A priest!" she repeated after him, the smile dying out of her eyes. "My uncle says that priests have neither wife, nor sister, nor mother. Ah! that is true, then. But why did you ever come? It was you who took me for your sister, for your wife. Were you deceiving me then?"

"I have sinned," he murmured.

"When I saw you so free and unrestrained," the girl went on, "I thought you were no longer a priest. I believed that all that was done with, that you would always remain there with me, and for my sake.— And now, what do you expect me to do, that you have robbed me of my whole life?"

"What I do," he replied; "to kneel down, and not rise up again till God pardons you, even if you die on your knees."

"Are you a coward, then?" she exclaimed passionately, her lips curved in scorn.

He trembled, and answered her not. He was shaken by a paroxysm of torturing agony, but he prevailed over it, and remained unmoved. He held his head erect, and there was even the play of a shadowy smile about his trembling lips. Albine kept her eyes fixed defiantly upon his for a moment;

then, carried away by a fresh burst of passion, she broke out :

"Well, answer me. Accuse me ! Say it is I who have come to tempt you ! That will be a fine thing to do ! Speak, and say what you can for yourself. Strike me if you like. I should prefer your blows to your standing there stiff and motionless as a corpse. Is there no blood in your veins ? Have you no spirit ? Do you hear me calling you a coward ? Yes, indeed, you are a craven and a coward. You should never have dared to love me, since you dare not be a man. Is it that black robe of yours which holds you back ? Tear it off ! When you are naked, perhaps you will remember yourself again."

The priest slowly repeated his former words.

"I have sinned. I had no excuse for my sin. I confess my fault, without hoping that you will pardon it. If I tore off my cassock, I should tear my very flesh, for I have given myself wholly to God, soul and body. I am a priest."

"And I ! what is to become of me ?" cried Albine.

He looked unflinchingly at her.

"May your sufferings be reckoned against me as so many sins ! May I be eternally punished for that desertion of you which is obligatory upon me ! It will be only just and righteous. All unworthy though I be, I pray for you each night."

She shrugged her shoulders. Her anger seemed to have cooled down, and she appeared to be almost pitying him.

"You are mad," she murmured. "Keep your prayers. It is you yourself that I want. But you will never understand me. And there were so many things I wanted to tell you. But you stand there and irritate me with your chatter of another world. Come now, and let us try to talk sensibly. Let us wait for a moment till we are calmer. You cannot dismiss me in this way, I cannot leave you here. It is your being here that makes you so corpse-like and your flesh so cold that I dare not touch you. We won't talk any more just now. We will wait a little."

She ceased speaking, and went a few steps aside, examining the little church. The rain was still gently pattering against the windows ; and the cold cheerless light seemed reeking with moisture, as it fell upon the walls. Outside, there was not a sound, save the monotonous plashing of the rain. The sparrows were crouching for shelter under the tiles, and the service-tree stretched out its deserted branches, all drenched

and dripping. Five o'clock struck, grated out, stroke by stroke, from the wheezy chest of the clock; and then the silence seemed to grow deeper and more profound. The scarce dried painting gave to the high altar and the wood-work an appearance of gloomy neatness, like some convent-chapel where the sun never shines. The nave seemed to groan with a grievous agony, splashed with the blood that flowed from the limbs of the great Christ; while, along the walls, the fourteen scenes of the Passion perpetually repeated their awful story, tawdry in yellows and reds, and reeking with horror. Life seemed to be in its last agonies there, in those deadly throes and on those altars that resembled tombs in the midst of all that vault-like emptiness. Everything seemed to tell of death and gloom, of terror and anguish and nothingness. A faint scent of incense still lingered there, like the last expiring sigh of some dead girl, hurriedly buried away under the flag-stones.

"Ah," said Albine, at last, "how sweet it used to be in the sunshine! You remember, don't you— One morning we walked along by a hedge of tall rose-bushes, to the left of the flower-garden. I remember the very colour of the grass, almost blue, shot with green. When we got to the end of the hedge, we turned and walked back again, so sweet was the perfume of the sunny air there. And we did nothing else, all that morning, but just saunter up and down by that hedge of roses; twenty paces forwards and then twenty paces back. It was so sweet and charming that you wouldn't leave it. The honey-bees buzzed round us; and there was a tom-tit that never left us, skipping along with us from branch to branch. You whispered to me, 'What a blessed thing is life!' Ah! our life there! it was the green grass, and the trees, and the sky, and the sun, amongst which we lived all glorious and radiant."

She mused dreamily for a moment or two and then continued:

"Ah! yes, our life was *Le Paradou*. How vast it used to seem to us! Never were we able to find the end of it. The sea of leaves rolled on its rustling waves far as the eye could reach. And then all that glorious blue overhead! Ah! there we were free to grow and to roam about and to pleasure ourselves at our will, without let or hindrance. All was ours!"

She stopped for a moment, and pointed to the low walls of the church.

"But, here, you are in a grave. You can't stretch out your

hand without hurting it against the stones. The roof hides the sky from you and blots out the sun. It is all so small and confined that your limbs grow stiff and cramped as though you were buried alive."

"No," said the priest. "The church is wide as the world."

She waved her hands towards the crosses, and the dying Christ, and the pictures of the Passion.

"And you are living in the midst of death and dyings. The grass, the trees, the springs, the sun, the sky, they are all groaning around you."

"No, no; all revives again, purifies itself and mounts back again to the source of light."

He was standing quite erect, with flashing eyes. He had quitted the altar, feeling that he was now invincible; permeated and filled, as he was, with a faith that mocked at all temptation. He took Albine's hand, talking calmly to her, as though she had been his sister, and he led her away to the sad pictures of the Stations of the Cross.

"See," he said, "what our God has suffered— Jesus is beaten with a scourge. Look! His shoulders are naked; His flesh is torn; His blood flows down His back— Jesus is crowned with thorns. Tears of bloody sweat trickle down His gashed brow. His temple gapes open with a bleeding wound— Jesus is insulted by the soldiers. His murderers have scoffingly thrown a purple robe round His shoulders, and they spit upon His face and strike Him, and press the thorny crown deep into His flesh."

Albine turned away her head, that she might no longer see the crudely painted pictures, where lake-coloured wounds gaped in the ochre flesh of Christ. The purple robe round His shoulders seemed like a shred of His own tawny skin.

"Why suffer? why die?" she said. "Oh Serge, if you would only think of it all again! You told me, that morning, that you were tired. I knew that you were only pretending, because the air was quite fresh and cool and we had only been walking for a quarter of an hour. But you wanted to sit down that you might hold me in your arms. Right away in the orchard there was a cherry tree—you remember it, don't you?—that stood by the edge of a stream, which you never could cross without finding it necessary to kiss my hands, with soft little kisses that ran all up my arms and shoulders right to my lips. The time for cherries was over, and so you devoured my lips. It used to make us feel so sad to see the

flowers fading, and one day, when you found a dead bird in the grass, you turned quite pale, and clasped me tightly to your breast, to hold me safe from the grasping clutch of earth."

The priest led her along in front of the other "Stations."

"Hush! hush!" he cried, "and look still on these. Bow yourself down in grief and pity— Jesus falls beneath the weight of His cross. The ascent of Calvary is very weary. He has dropped down upon His knees. He does not stay even to wipe the sweat off His brow, but rises up again and continues His sad journey— Jesus again falls beneath the weight of His cross. At each step He totters and falters. This time He has fallen on His side, so heavily that He lies there for a moment quite breathless. His torn hands have let go their hold of the cross. His bruised and aching feet leave blood-stained prints behind them. An agonizing weariness overwhelms Him, for He carries upon His shoulders the sins of the whole world."

Albine gazed at the pictured Jesus, arrayed in a blue skirt, and lying prostrate beneath the cross, whose black tones intersected and stained the gold of the aureole. Then, drooping her eyes, she said,

"Oh! those meadow-paths! Have you no memory left, Serge? Have you utterly forgotten all about those soft grassy walks across the meadows, and through the seas of greenery? That afternoon I am telling you of, we had only meant to stay out for an hour; but we went wandering on and on, till the stars came out above our heads, and still we wandered on. Ah! how velvety it was, that endless carpet, soft as finest silk. It was just like a green sea whose gentle waters lapped us round. How well we knew where those beguiling paths that led nowhere, were taking us to! They were taking us to our love, to the joy of living in a close clinging embrace, to the full knowledge of bliss. We came back, feeling not the least weariness or fatigue; you were lighter and more full of energy than when we had started, because you had poured out upon me all your caresses, and I had not been able to give you them all back."

With hands that trembled with anguish, the Abbé Mouret pointed to the remaining "Stations."

"Jesus is nailed to the Cross. Under the blows of the hammer the nails pierce their way through His out-spread hands. A single nail is sufficient for His feet, whose bones give out a cracking sound. He, Himself, while His flesh quivers

and thrills, fixed His eyes upon heaven and smiles—Jesus is crucified between two thieves. The weight of His body increases horribly His wounds. From His brow, from His limbs, a bloody sweat streams down. The two thieves insult Him, the passers-by mock at Him, and the soldiers cast lots for His raiment. And the shadowy darkness grows deeper and the sun hides himself. Jesus dies upon the cross. He utters a piercing cry and gives up the ghost. Oh! terrible death! The veil of the temple is rent in twain from top to bottom. The earth quakes, the stones are broken, and the graves open."

He dropped down upon his knees, his voice choked with sobs, and his eyes fixed upon the three crosses of Calvary, where writhed the chalky-hued bodies of the crucified, hideously death-like in that crudely daubed picture. Albine turned her back to the paintings that she might not see them.

"One evening," she said, "I lay through all the long gloaming with my head upon your lap. It was in the forest, at the end of that great avenue of chestnut-trees, through which the setting sun was shooting a parting beam of glory. Ah! what a loving good-night he seemed to be bidding us! He appeared to be lingering to gaze at us with a kindly smile ere he said his last good-bye. The sky grew slowly greyer. I told you merrily that it was taking off its blue dress, and putting on its gold-flowered robe of black to go out for the evening. You seemed to be anxiously waiting for the shadowy darkness, impatient even of the sun's presence, longing so much for us to be alone together.

"And it was not night that came on, but a discreet softness, a veiled tenderness, a sequestered seclusion, like the dim shade of one of those leafy arbours where one may hide one's self for a moment or two with the certainty of emerging again, at the other end, into the cheering fulness of the broad light. That evening the calm clearness of the twilight gave promise of a splendid morrow.

"When I saw that it did not grow dark so quickly as you were wishing it to do, I pretended to go to sleep. I may confess it to you now, but I was not really sleeping when your warm kisses fell upon my eyes. I felt them all, and tried to keep myself from laughing. You drank up all my breath in your kisses. And then, when the darkness really came, it was one long caress. The trees, then, were no more asleep than I was. At night, don't you remember, the flowers breathe out a stronger perfume." She looked at him, still keeping on his knees, while

the tears streamed down his face, and then, seizing him by the wrists, she pulled him on to his feet, exclaiming passionately :

"Oh ! if you knew it all, you would bid me carry you off ; you would fasten your arms round my neck, lest I should go away without you. Yesterday I had a longing to see the garden again. It seems greater than ever, vaster and more unfathomable. I discovered new scents, so softly aromatic that they brought tears into my eyes. In the avenues I was bathed in streams of filtering sunlight that thrilled me through and through with longing desire. The roses spoke to me of you, and the bullfinches were amazed at seeing me alone. All the garden broke out into sighs. Oh ! come ! do come, Serge ! Never has the grass spread itself out into softer couches. I have marked with a flower the deep sequestered bower where I am longing to take you. It is in the midst of a thick tangle of brushwood ; a little opening into the greenery, just large enough for a bed. As one lies there, one can hear all the teeming life of the garden, with its trees and streams and sky. The earth's very breathing will softly lull us. Oh ! come ! come ! and we will love one another in the midst of that universal loving !"

But he pushed her back from him. He returned to the Mortuary Chapel and stood in front of the great painted cardboard Christ, big as a ten-year-old boy, that writhed in horribly realistic agony. There were real iron nails driven into the limbs of the figure, and the wounds gaped open in the torn and bleeding flesh.

"Oh ! Jesus, Who hast died for us," he cried, "convince her of our nothingness. Tell her that we are but dust, rottenness and damnation. Ah ! grant that I may hide my head in a hair-cloth and rest my head against Thy feet and stay there, motionless, till I rot away in death. The earth will no longer exist for me. The sun will no longer shine. I shall see nothing more, feel nothing, hear nothing. Nothing in all this miserable world will come to abstract my soul from its adoration of Thee."

He was rising gradually into a state of exaltation. He stepped towards Albine, with upraised hands. "You said rightly. It is death that is present here ; death that is before my eyes ; death that delivers and saves from all rotting decay. Hear me ! I renounce life, I wholly refuse it and spit upon it. Those flowers of yours stink, your sun blinds, your grass makes lepers of them that lay themselves down upon it, your garden is a charnel-heap where all rots and putrifies. The earth sweats with abomination. You imagine but vain lies when you

talk of love and light and gladsome life in the depths of your palace of greenery. There is nothing there but black darkness. Those trees of yours exhale a fatal poison which transforms men into beasts ; and your hedges are charged with the venom of serpents ; your streams pour down infection and pestilence in their blue waters.

"If I could snatch away from that world of nature you prate of its kirtle of sunshine and its girdle of greenery, you would see it cowering in all its hideous nakedness like a *mogèra*, in corpse-like loathsomeness, rotting away with disease and vice. And even if you were truly come to me, with your hands filled with pleasures and gratifications, and could, indeed, carry me away to a bed of roses where I might lie down and be lulled with dreams of Paradise, I would tear myself free the more desperately from your embrace. There is war between us ; war eternal and implacable. See ! the church is very small ; it is poverty-stricken and uncomely ; its confessional-box and pulpit are made of common deal, its font of poor plaster, its altars of four plain boards which I have painted myself. But what of that ? It is yet greater than your garden, greater than the valley, greater, even, than the whole earth. It is an impregnable fortress which nothing can ever break down. The winds, the sun, the forests, the ocean, all that is, shall in vain assault it ; it will stand upright and unshaken for ever.

"Yes, let all the dense jungles tower up loftily and shake their serried arms of thorns, let all the humming legions of insects swarm out of their holes in the ground and come and gnaw at its walls ; the church, ruinous and crazy though it may seem, will never falter and fall before the invasion of life. And do you know what will happen, one day ? The tiny church will grow and spread to such colossal size and will fling down such a mighty shadow, that all that nature you chatter of will be crushed and pressed to death. Ah ! yes, to death, universal death, while Heaven will open its bosom over the curse-stricken ruins of the world to receive the souls of the faithful !"

As he screamed out the last words, he thrust Albine forcibly towards the door. Her face was death-like in its pallor, and as the Abbé Mouret ceased speaking, his voice choked with gasping sobs, she said very quietly and coldly,

"It is all over, then ? You drive me away—yet, for all that, I am your wife. It is your own deed which has made *meso*. And God, since He permitted that, will not punish us eternally."

As she crossed the threshold, she lingered for a moment, and added :

“ Listen ! Every day, at sunset, I go to the end of the garden, to the place where the wall is broken in. I shall wait for you there.”

And then she disappeared. The vestry-door fell back with a sound like a deep sigh.

IX.

THE church was perfectly silent, except for the murmuring sound of the rain, which had begun to fall heavily again. Left alone in this absolute solitude, the priest's anger subsided, and he even felt himself thrilled with a gush of tender emotion; and it was with a face streaming with tears, and a frame shaken with sobs, that he went once more to throw himself on his knees before the great Christ. A torrent of excited thanksgiving burst from his lips.

"Oh! my God, thanks be to Thee for the help which Thou hast graciously bestowed upon me. Without Thy divine grace I should have hearkened unto the promptings of my flesh, and I should have miserably yielded myself up again to my sin. It was Thy grace that girded my loins; it was Thy grace that was my armour, my courage, the support of my soul, that kept me from falling, from the least slip. Oh! my God, Thou wert in me; and it was Thy voice that spoke in me, for I no longer felt the cowardice of the flesh. I could have cut asunder my very heart-strings. And now, oh! God, behold my heart all torn and bleeding. No longer does it belong to any one, save to Thee only. To give it to Thee, have I wrenched it away from all worldly affection. But think not, oh! my God, that I take any pride to myself for this victory. I know that without Thee I am nothing; and I humbly cast myself prostrate at Thy feet."

He sank fainting upon the steps of the altar, unable to utter another word, while his breath panted from his half-opened lips like steamy puffs of incense. The out-pouring of the divine grace bathed him in an ineffable ecstasy. He was absorbed in introspection, searching for Jesus in the recesses of his being, in that sanctuary of love which he was ever making ready for His worthy reception. And Jesus was present there. The Abbé knew it and recognised it from the fulness of the sweet

influences which permeated him. Then he joined with Jesus in spiritual converse, and was, for the time, snatched up from earth, and spoke mouth to mouth with his God. He sighed out the verse from the "Song of Solomon," "My beloved is mine, and I am his: He feedeth his flock among the lilies, until the day be cool, and the shadows flee away." He pondered over the words of the "Imitation;" "It is a great art to know how to talk with Jesus, and it requires much prudence to keep Him near one." And then, with adorable condescension, Jesus came down to him, and whispered to him of his needs and his happinesses, and his hopes. Their confidences were not less affectionately touching, than those of two friends, who, after a long separation, meet once more, and go quietly apart together to some lonely secluded spot; for Jesus, during these hours of His divine condescension, deigned to be the Abbé's friend, his best, most faithful friend, who would never forsake or betray him, and who would give him, in return for a little love, all the treasures of eternal life.

To-day, the priest was loath for this sweet converse to be broken off; and six o'clock sounded through the silent church, while he still listened to the words of his Lord. It was an outpouring of the whole soul, an utterly unreserved confession, unimpeded by restraints of words, an effusion straight from the heart, that poured itself forth without thought or intention. The Abbé Mouret told everything to Jesus, as to a God who had come down in all the intimacy of the most loving tenderness, and who would listen to all he told Him. He confessed that he still loved Albine; and he was surprised that he had been able to speak sternly to her and to drive her away, without his whole heart breaking out into revolt. It astonished him; and a smile of soft amazement passed over his face, as though it was some wonderful miracle he had seen performed by another. And Jesus told him that he must not be astonished at that, and that the greatest saints were often merely unconscious instruments in the hands of God. Then the Abbé gave expression to a doubt. Had he not lost merit in seeking refuge in the cross and even in the Passion of his Saviour? Had he not shown himself to be of but little courage, since he had not dared to fight without assistance? But Jesus showed Himself kindly tolerant and excusing, and He told the Abbé that man's weakness was God's continual care, and that He especially loved those poor weak suffering souls, to whose assistance He went, like a friend to the couch of a sick companion.

Was it a sin, for which he should be damned, to love Albine? No; if his love was clean of all fleshly taint, and added another hope to his desire of eternal life. And next, then, how was he to love her? In silence; without a word spoken to her, without a step taken towards her; simply allowing his pure affection to breathe out a sweet odour, grateful and pleasing to heaven. And then the Abbé went on to dwell upon Albine's beauty. She had hair that was fair and golden as an angel's; and was very pale and white, with great soft eyes, like those of the aureoled saints. And as he talked, Jesus seemed to grow silent, though a smile still played upon His face. She was grown much taller. She was like a queen, with her swelling breasts and splendid shoulders. Oh! to clasp her round the waist, were it only for a second, and to feel her shoulders drawn close in a clinging embrace! The smile on the divine face paled and died away altogether, as a star sinks and falls beneath the horizon. The Abbé Mouret was left alone now. Ah! had he not shown himself too hard-hearted? What need was there to have driven her away without one single word of affection, since Heaven allowed him to love her?

"I do love her! I do love her!" he cried out, quite loudly, in a distracted voice, that rang through the church.

He thought he saw her still standing there before him. She was stretching out her arms towards him; and he felt that to make her his, so desirable did she seem to him, that he could break all his oaths and protestations. He threw himself on her breast, without a thought of the reverence due to the place he was in, and he clasped her to him, taking possession of her in a shower of kisses. It was before her, now, that he bent his knee, imploring her mercy, and beseeching her to pardon all his unkindness. He told her that, at times, a voice which was not his own, spoke through his lips. Could he himself ever have treated her harshly? It was the voice that was not his that had repelled her. It could not, surely, be he himself, who had never been able, without emotion, to touch a single hair of her head. Ah! yes, he had really driven her away. The church was quite empty! Whither should he hasten to find her again, to bring her back, while he wiped away her tears with kisses? The rain was streaming down more violently than ever. The roads could be nothing but rivers of mud. He pictured her to himself as struggling against the storm, tottering by the edges of the dykes, her clothes soaked through and through, and sticking to her skin. No! no! it could not

have been himself; it was that other jealous voice that had had the cruelty to wish to slay his love.

"Oh! Jesus!" he cried, in his desperation, "be merciful to me and give her back to me!"

But his Lord was no longer with him. Then the Abbé Mouret seemed to wake up with a start, turning horribly pale. He understood it all. He had not known how to keep Jesus with him. He had lost his friend, and had been left defenceless against the powers of evil. Instead of that inward light, which had shone so brightly within him, and in whose brilliance he had received his God, he was now groping in utter darkness and foul vapours that maddened his body. Jesus had withdrawn His grace when he left Him, and he, who since the early morning, had been so strong with heaven-sent help, now felt himself utterly miserable and abandoned, and weak and helpless as an infant. How frightful was his fall! How galling its bitterness! To have struggled so heroically, to have remained unshaken, invincible, implacable, while the tempter stood actually before him, in all her warm life, with her swelling breasts and superb shoulders, and spreading round her an atmosphere redolent of love and passion; and then to have fallen shamefully, to have panted and throbbed with abominable desire, when she had disappeared, leaving behind her but the echo of her skirts, and the lingering perfume of her white neck! Now, these mere recollections of her, sufficed to make her all powerful and for her influence to remain rampant in the church.

"Jesus! Jesus!" cried out the priest, once more, "return, come back to me; speak to me once again!"

But Jesus remained deaf to his cry. For a moment or two, the Abbé Mouret raised his arms wildly to Heaven in supplication. His shoulders cracked and strained beneath the wild violence of his praying. But soon his hands fell down again by his side, in utter weariness and discouragement. Heaven shut itself up in one of those hopeless silences which suppliants can tell of. Then, once more, he sat down on the altar-steps, utterly heart-crushed and with ashen face, pressing his elbows tightly against his sides, as though he were trying to crush down his flesh into as small proportions as possible.

"My God! Thou desertest me!" he murmured. "Nevertheless, Thy will be done!"

He said not another word, but sat there, panting breathlessly, like a hunted beast that cowers motionless, in fear of the hounds

Ever since his sin, he had thus seemed to be made the sport of the divine grace. It denied itself to his most ardent prayers ; it poured itself down upon him, unexpectedly and refreshingly, when he had lost all hope of winning it for long years to come. At first he had been inclined to be rebellious at this dispensation of heaven, complaining like a betrayed lover, and demanding the immediate return of that consoling grace, whose kiss made him so strong. But afterwards, after unavailing outbursts of angry indignation, he had learned to understand that humility profited him most and could alone enable him to endure the withdrawal of the divine assistance. Then, for hours and days, he would humble himself and wait in all lowliness for the comfort which came not. It seemed all in vain that he threw himself unreservedly into the hands of God, that he annihilated himself before Him, and wearied himself with the intense earnestness of his prayers. He could not perceive God's presence with him ; and his flesh, breaking free from all restraint, rose up in rebellious desire, and the prayers that trembled on his lips turned themselves into stammering uncleannesses. It was a slow agony of temptation, in which the weapons of faith fell, one by one, from his faltering hands, and in which he lay utterly inert and passive in the clutch of passion, and contributed, trembling all the while, to his own ignominy and disgrace, without the courage to raise his little finger to attempt to free himself from the thralldom of sin.

Such was the experience of his life now. He had felt all the forms of sin's attacks. Not a day passed that he was not made trial of. Sin assumed a thousand guises, and assailed him through his eyes and ears, flew boldly at his throat, or leaped treacherously upon his shoulders, or stole torturingly into his marrow. Every day his sin presented itself to him, and he beheld again Albine's nakedness, dazzling as the sunshine, lighting up the green depths of *Le Paradou*. He never ceased to see her, save in the rare moments when the divine grace willed that his eyes should be closed against the glamour of her warm caresses. He buried his haunting temptation within his own consciousness, as though it were some disgraceful disease. He wrapped himself round with an unbroken silence, which no one could prevail upon him to break, filling the vicarage with his martyrdom and resignation, and driving *La Teuse* to exasperation, and making her, when his back was turned, shake her fist at heaven.

He was alone now, and need take no care to disguise his

shame. Sin had just struck him such an overwhelming blow, that he had not strength left to move from the altar-steps, where he had fallen. He remained there, in sighs and groans, parched up with agony and incapable of a single tear. He thought of the calm unruffled life that had once been his. Ah! the perfect peace, the utter confidence of his first days at Les Artaud! The path of salvation seemed such an easy and straight one then! He used to smile at the very mention of temptation. He lived in the midst of wickedness, without having any knowledge of it, without fearing it, certain of being able to withstand it. He was a model priest, so pure and chaste, so inexperienced and innocent in God's sight, that God led him by the hand like a little child.

Now, all that child-like innocence was dead. God had visited him in the morning, and then had tried him. Temptation was henceforth to be his life upon earth. Now that full manhood and sin had come upon him, he was to be engaged in a perpetual struggle. Could it be that God really loved him more now than before? The great saints have all left torn fragments of their flesh upon the thorns of the way of sorrow. He tried to gather some consolation from this consideration. For each tearing of his flesh, for each racking of his bones, he tried to assure himself of some exceeding great recompense. Ah! then, no infliction that heaven could now visit him with would be too heavy. He began even to look back with scorn on his former calm serenity, on his old unruffled fervour, which sent him on to his knees with a mere girlish enthusiasm, and left him ignorant even of the pressure of the hard stones. He tried his ingenuity in discovering pleasure in suffering, in wrapping himself round with it, and hugging it closely to him. But, even while he was pouring out his thanks to God, his teeth chattered with terror, and the rebellious promptings of his blood cried out to him that this was all a vain pretence and a lie, and that the only happiness worth desiring was to lie clasped in Albine's arms, behind some green hedge amongst the flowers of Le Paradou.

However, he had put aside Mary for Jesus, and had sacrificed his heart that he might subdue his flesh, hoping to implant some virility in his faith. Mary disquieted him too much, with her smoothly braided hair, her outstretched hand and girlish smile. He could never kneel before her, without drooping his eyes, for fear of catching sight of the edge of her dress. Then, too, he accused her of having treated him too softly and

tenderly. She had kept him sheltered so long within the folds of her robe, that he had allowed himself to slip from her arms to those of a human love, without being conscious of the change of his affection. He thought of all the stern ungentleness of Brother Archangias, of his refusal to worship Mary, and of the scornful glances he used to cast upon her. He, himself, in his despair of ever rising to a similar height of disdain, had contented himself with simply leaving her, hiding her images and deserting her altar. But the remembrance of her still lay fresh in his heart, like some love that, though unavowed, is ever present. Sin, with a sacrilege whose utter horror made him shudder, made use of her to tempt him. When he still invoked her assistance, as at times of irrepressible emotion he still did, it was Albine that showed herself to him beneath the white veil and the blue robe that was knotted round the waist, and with the golden roses at her feet. All the representations of the Virgin, the Virgin with the royal mantle of cloth-of-gold, the Virgin crowned with stars, the Virgin visited by the Angel of the Annunciation, the calm, peaceful Virgin, between a lily and a spinning-wheel, all suggested Albine to him, with their smiling eyes or delicately curved mouth, or softly rounded cheeks. His sin had destroyed for him Mary's virginity.

At last, by a supreme effort, he drove out the female element from his worship, and sought refuge in Jesus, and even His gentle mildness was sometimes a source of disquietude to him. What he wanted was a jealous God, an implacable God, the God of the Old Testament, girded with thunder, and manifesting Himself only to chastise a terrified world. He had done with the saints and the angels and the Mother of God; and he bowed himself down only before God Himself, an omnipotent Master, who demanded from him his every breath. He felt the hand of this God laid crushingly upon him, holding him helpless at his mercy through space and time, like a guilty atom. Somehow, to feel that he was nothing, that he was damned, to dream of hell, to wrestle vainly against hideous temptations, was a satisfaction to him. From Jesus, he took only the cross. He felt a passionate devotion for the cross, the cross that such countless lips have sought solace in kissing. He took up the cross and followed Jesus. He pressed it heavily upon him, and sought to bear the full burden of it; and it was a great joy and satisfaction to him to fall down beneath its weight, and, with broken back, to stumble along with it on his knees. In it he beheld the source of strength for the soul, of joy for

the spirit, the consummation of virtue and the perfection of holiness. In it every good thing was concentrated; to die, clinging to it, was the end to be most devoutly desired. Suffering and death were words that sounded ceaselessly in his ears, as the end and goal of mortal desire. And, when he nailed himself to the cross, he had the boundless consolation of the love of God. It was no longer, now, upon Mary that he lavished a filial tenderness or a lover's passion. He loved, for love's mere sake, with an absolute abstract love. He loved God with a love that lifted him out of himself, out of all else, and wrapped him round with a dazzling radiance of glory. He was like a torch that burns away in a blaze of light. And when he thought of death and longed for it, it seemed to him only as a great impulse of love.

What had he done amiss, then, or what had he omitted to do that he should have done, that he was being so sorely tempted? He wiped away with his hand the perspiration that streamed down his brow, and reflected that, that very morning, he had made his usual self-examination without finding in himself any great guiltiness. Was he not leading a life of great austerity and severity? Did he not love God solely and blindly? Ah! how he would bless His Holy Name, if He would only restore peace to him, considering him now sufficiently punished for his transgression! But, perhaps, that sin of his could never be expiated. And, in spite of himself, his mind reverted to Albine and Le Paradou, and all its obtrusive memories. At first, he tried to make excuses for himself. He had fallen, one evening, senseless upon the ground, stricken with brain fever. For three weeks he lay in unconsciousness. His blood surged furiously along his veins, and raged within him like pent-up water that had broken its banks. His whole body, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, was so scoured and renewed and wrought afresh by the mighty labourings of his disease, that he had sometimes thought he could hear the very hammer blows that nailed his bones together again. Then, one morning, he had awakened, feeling like a new being. He was born a second time, freed of those twenty-five years which had successively laid their weight upon him. His childhood's devotions, his education at the seminary, the faith of his early priesthood, had all vanished, swept away and carried off, and their place was bare and empty. In truth, it could be hell alone that had thus made him ready for the reception of evil, disarming him of all his old weapons, and making of his

body a mere couch of languor and softness, where sin could readily enter and lie down.

And he, in perfect unconsciousness of it all, unknowingly surrendered himself to the gradual approach of evil. When he had re-opened his eyes in *Le Paradou*, he had felt himself swathed once more with infancy, with no memory of the past, no knowledge of his priesthood. He experienced a gentle pleasure, a glad feeling of surprise at thus beginning life afresh, as though it were yet all new and strange to him, and would be a delight for him to learn and become familiar with. Oh ! the delightful apprenticeship, the charming observations, the delicious discoveries ! *Le Paradou* was one vast happiness, and hell, in placing him there, knew full well that he would be quite defenceless. Never, in his first youth, had he found such a luscious sweetness in the development of his body. That first youth of his, when he thought of it now, seemed quite black and gloomy, and to have been passed far away from the sunlight, quite thankless and poor and worthless.

But at *Le Paradou* how joyfully had he hailed the sun ! How admiringly had he gazed at the first tree, at the first flower, at the tiniest insect he had seen, at the most insignificant pebble he had picked up. The very stones charmed him. The horizon was a never-ending amazement. One morning, he remembered, when his eyes were bathed in the soft clear light, and his nostrils drank in the breath of the jasmine and his ears rejoiced in the carolled melody of the lark, he was affected with such a thrill of soft emotion, that his limbs lost all their power to move, and he lay nerveless and silent. He had found a lasting joy in observing each slightest outburst of life and vitality. And then the morning when Albine was born by his side, in the midst of the roses ! As he thought of it, an ecstatic smile broke out on his face. She burst out into life like a star that was necessary to the sun's existence. She illuminated everything, made everything clear and intelligible. She was the completion of all.

Then he thought of all their walks and rambles through the far-spreading *Le Paradou*. He remembered the soft hair that streamed behind her neck as she ran on before him. She exhaled such a delicious scent, as her skirts swayed to and fro, with a gentle rustling sound that seemed like caresses. And when she clasped him in her naked arms, supple and curving as snakes, he half expected to see her, so slight and slender she was, twine herself round his body and drop asleep there,

wrapped close to his flesh. It was she who used to walk on first. She led him through winding paths, where they loitered and dallied, that their walk might last the longer. And it was she who instilled into him his love of nature; and it was by watching the loves of the trees and plants that he had learned to love her, with a love that was long, indeed, in bursting into life, but whose full sweetness they at last tasted one evening beneath the sap-reeking shade of the giant tree. It was there that they reached the end of their journey. Albine, throwing herself down on to the ground, her hair streaming round her head, reached out her arms to him, and he seized her to him in a clinging embrace. Oh! to clasp her and possess her once again! to feel his frame thrilled with fertility, to create life, to be a God!

The priest broke out into a hollow-sounding groan. Then he sprang hastily up, as though he were stung, and then flung himself down again. Temptation had just sharply assailed him. Into what filthiness were his recollections going to lead him? Did he not know, only too well, that Satan avails himself of all sorts of wiles and tricks to insinuate his serpent-head into the soul, even while it is absorbed in self-examination and introspection? No! no! he had no excuse. His illness was in no sort of way an authorization for his sinning. It was his duty to have set a strict guard over himself, and to have sought God anew upon recovering from his fever. And he, on the contrary, had found a pleasure in wallowing in the lusts of the flesh. And what a frightful proof he had now of the vileness of his inclinations, when he was not even able to make confession of his sin without again committing it in imagination. Would he never be able to silence the filthy promptings within him? He thought wildly of scooping his brains out of his skull that he might no more be able to think, and of opening his veins that his lustful blood should no more torment him. For a moment he buried his face within his hands, shivering and concealing every atom of his flesh, as though he feared that the beasts that prowled round him would infect him with the heated breath of their temptation.

But his thoughts would stray on, in spite of himself, and his blood pulsed wildly from his heart. His eyes, though he closed them with his clenched fists, beheld in the darkness the lissom lines of Albine's form, pencilled in fire. Her naked bosom shone dazzlingly like a sun. Every effort that he made to press the vision from his sight only made her shine out with

increased brilliance. She gleamed before him with inviting gestures and arms that stretched themselves alluringly towards him, extorting from him a wild groan of agony. Was God, then, utterly abandoning him, that he seemed so destitute of all refuge from temptation? And, in spite of all his efforts to control his thoughts, he again enacted in imagination every detail of his sin with horrible precision. He saw again every tiny blade of grass that thrust itself up by Albine's skirts; he saw the little thistle-flower that was fastened in her hair, against which he remembered that he had pricked his lips. Even the very scent of the crushed grass exhaled itself again before him, and the distant sounds he had heard that day made themselves heard now; the repeated call of a bird, then an interval of hushed silence, then a sigh floating through the trees.

Why did not Heaven strike him dead with its lightning at once? It would have been less cruel. He abandoned himself to his abominable thoughts with a trembling joy; and he shuddered while he heard again in his heart the wicked words he had spoken at Albine's feet. Their echoes were now accusing him before the throne of God. He had acknowledged that girl as his sovereign mistress. He had yielded himself up to her as her slave, kissing her feet, and longing to be the water she drank, and the bread she ate. He began to understand now why he could no longer control himself. God had given him over to the woman. But he would chastise her and scourge her till she let him go. It was she who was the slave; she, with her impure filthy flesh, to which the Church should have denied a soul. He braced himself together, and shook his fists at the vision of Albine; but his fists unclenched themselves, and his hands glided along her naked shoulders in a loving caress, and his lips, just now breathing with hot anger against her, sealed themselves to her fallen hair, stammering out wild words of passionate adoration.

The Abbé Mouret opened his eyes again. The burning apparition of Albine had vanished. It was a sudden and unexpected solace. He was able to weep now. The tardy tears flowed refreshingly down his cheeks, and he drew his breath slowly and quietly, still fearing to move, lest the Evil One should again grip him by the neck, for he yet thought he heard an angry snarl behind him. He found such a soothing pleasure in the cessation of his sufferings that he forgot himself in the quiet enjoyment of it.

Outside, the rain had ceased. The sun was setting in a vast crimson glow, which spread across the windows like curtains of rose-coloured silk. The church was quite warm and bright in the glory of the sinking luminary. The priest poured out a vague thanksgiving to God for the respite He had been pleased to vouchsafe to him. A broad ray of light, like a beam of gold dust, streamed through the nave, and illuminated the interior of the church, the clock, the pulpit, and the high-altar. Perhaps it was, the priest thought, the divine grace that was returning to him, heaven-sent along this path of radiance. He watched with interest the little atoms that sped up and down, with enormous rapidity, through the length of the ray, like a crowd of busy messengers ever hastening with news from heaven to earth. A thousand lighted candles would not have filled the church with such a splendour. Curtains of cloth-of-gold seemed to be hung behind the high-altar; and the ledges seemed to gleam with the sheen of jewels. The chandeliers glittered with dazzling branches, the censers burned with an ember-glow of gems, and the vases gleamed like fiery comets, and round all there seemed a rain of luminous flowers in the midst of delicate lace-work, embroidered cloths, bouquets, and garlands of roses, from whose expanding petals dropped showers of stars.

Never had he even dreamed of such magnificence for his poor church. He smiled, and thought how, if he could retain all that splendour there, he would arrange it with the best effect. He would have preferred to see the curtains of cloth-of-gold hung a little higher up; the vases, too, wanted more careful distributing; and he thought that the flowers might be arranged to greater advantage, the bouquets being tied up more neatly, and the garlands being more regularly shaped. How wondrously magnificent it all was! He was the pontiff of a church of gold. Bishops, princes, princesses, arrayed in royal mantles, crowds of devotees, with heads laid prostrate on the ground, were coming to visit it, and were encamping in the valley, waiting for weeks before the door till they should be able to enter it. They would kiss his feet, for even his feet had turned to gold, and would have miraculous powers. The golden bath mounted up to his knees. A golden heart was beating within his golden breast, with so clear and musical a pulsation, that the waiting crowds outside must be able to hear it. Then a feeling of overweening pride seized upon him. He was an idol. The golden beam mounted still higher, the high-altar was all ablaze with glory, and the priest grew

certain that the divine grace was in truth returning to him, so filled was he with an inward joy and satisfaction. The fierce snarl behind him grew gentle and coaxing, and he felt on his shoulder only a soft velvety pressure, as though some giant cat were lightly caressing him.

He still pursued his dreaming reverie. Never before had circumstances appeared to him under such a favourable light. Everything seemed quite easy to him now, and he felt full of strength and resolution. Since Albine was waiting for him, he would go and join her. It was quite right and natural. The previous morning he had married Fortuné and Rosalie. The Church did not forbid marriages. He saw them again as they knelt before him, smiling and nudging each other while his hands were held over them in benediction. Then, in the evening, they had shown him their bed. Each word that he had spoken to them echoed loudly in his ear. He had told Fortuné that God had sent him a companion, because He did not wish man to live alone, and he had told Rosalie that she must cleave to her husband, never leaving him, but ever being his obedient helpmate. He said the same things to himself about Albine and himself. Was she not his companion, his obedient helpmate, whom God had sent to him that his manhood might not wither up in lonely solitude? Besides, they had been joined the one to the other. He felt surprised that he had not understood and recognised it all at once, and that he had not gone away with her, as his duty plainly demanded that he should have done. But he had quite made up his mind now; he would certainly join her in the morning. He could get to her in half an hour. He would go through the village, and take the road up the hill; it was much the shortest way. He could do what he liked; he was the master, and no one would presume to say anything to him. If anyone saw him, he would order them, with a gesture, to bend down their heads. He would live with Albine. He would call her his wife. They would be very happy together.

The golden stream mounted still higher, and played amongst his fingers. He was immersed in a bath of gold. He would take away the altar-vases to ornament his house, and he would keep up a fine establishment, paying his servants with fragments of the chalice, which he could tear with his fingers without great difficulty. He would hang his marriage-bed with the cloth-of-gold that draped the altar; and he would give his wife for jewels the golden hearts and chaplets and crosses that

hung round the necks of the Virgin and the saints. The church itself, if another storey were added, would make them a palace. God would make no objection, since He had allowed them to love each other. And, besides, what did God matter? Was it not he who was now God, with the people kissing his golden miracle-working feet?

The Abbé Mouret rose to his feet. He made that sweeping gesture of Jeanbernat's, that wide gesture of negation, that took in everything as far as the horizon.

"There is nothing, nothing, nothing!" he said. "God does not exist."

A mighty shudder seemed to quiver through the church. The terrified priest turned deadly pale and listened. Who had spoken? Who had uttered blasphemies? Suddenly the velvety caress, whose gentle pressure he had felt on his shoulder, turned fierce and savage: sharp talons seemed to be rending his flesh, and once more he felt his blood streaming forth. He still remained on his feet, struggling against the sudden attack. He cursed and reviled the triumphant sin that sniggered and grinned round his temples, wherein all the hammers of the Evil One recommenced their battering. Why had he not been on his guard against his wiles? Did he not know full well that it was his way to glide softly up with gentle steps that he might seize his opportunity of driving his keen cutting blade into the very vitals of his victim?

His anger waxed hot and furious as he thought how he had been entrapped, like a mere child. Was he destined, then, to be ever hurled to the ground, with sin sitting victoriously on his breast? This time he had actually denied his God. It was all one fatal descent. His fornication had destroyed his faith, and then dogma had tottered and fallen down. One single suggested doubt of the flesh, backed up by its abominable pleadings, had sufficed to sweep away heaven. The divine ordinance irritated him; the divine mysteries made him smile. Then other temptations had pressed round him with their assailing lures; gold, power, unrestrained liberty, an irresistible longing for pleasure and enjoyment, for luxury and wealth and high-estate. And God was to be robbed for it. His vessels were to be broken up to support a woman's impurity. Ah! yes, indeed, he was truly damned, now. Nothing could make any difference to him now. Sin held him completely in its clutch. It was useless to struggle further. The monsters who had prowled round him, were battenning on his vitals now. He puffed out his sides

that he might feel their bite more keenly, and he abandoned himself to them with a hideous satisfaction. He shook his fists at the church. No! he believed no longer in the divinity of Christ; he believed no longer in the sacred Trinity; he believed in nothing but himself, and his muscles and the appetites of his body. He wanted to live. He felt the necessity of being a man. Oh! to speed along through the open air, to be lusty and strong, to owe obedience to no jealous master, to fell his enemies to the ground, to carry off the fair maidens that caught his fancy! He would break out from that living tomb, where cruel hands had thrust him. He would waken up his manhood, which had only been slumbering. But oh! the shame, if he should find that it were really dead! Then he would curse God, if, by the touch of His finger, He had made him forfeit his place in creation that He might bind him down to His own service only.

The priest stood upright on his feet, his mind all dazed and scared. He believed that at this fresh outburst of blasphemy, the church was falling down upon him. The beam of sunlight, which had poured itself over the high-altar, had gradually broadened out and mounted up the walls in a fiery glow. It rose still higher, and bathed the ceiling in its blood-like effulgence. Then, suddenly, the church grew quite black and dark. It was as though the fires of the setting sun had burst open the roof, and pierced the walls and thrown open wide breaches everywhere to some exterior foe. The gloomy frame-work seemed to shake and tremble beneath some violent assault. The night was coming quickly on.

Then, in the far distance, the priest heard a gentle murmur mounting up from the valley of Les Artaud. The time had been when he did not understand the impassioned language of those burning lands, where only the knotted vine-roots writhed, and the withered almond-trees and decrepid olives sprawled out their weary limbs. Protected by his ignorance, he had passed calmly and undisturbed through all this world of passion. But, to-day, steeped, as he now was, in carnal knowledge, his ear caught keenly the slightest sigh of the leaves that lay panting and languid in the sun's heat. Far off, on the edge of the horizon, the hills, still hot with the setting luminary's farewell kiss, seemed all tremulous and quivering, as though shaken by the steps of some invisible army. Nearer at hand, the scattered rocks, the stones along the road, and all the pebbles in the valley seemed animated with a throbbing life, and looked, as

they lay there, as though they were merely resting between successive springs forward, urged onward by a craving to advance. Then there were the tracts of the ruddy soil of the few fields that had been reduced into cultivation, which seemed to heave and swell like rivers that had burst their banks, bearing along in their blood-like flood the engenderings of seeds and the births of roots and the embraces of plants. Soon everything seemed filled with motion. The vine-leaves appeared to be crawling along like great insects; the parched corn, and the burnt-up grass formed themselves into dense lance-waving battalions; the trees stretched out their branches, like wrestlers making ready for a contest; the fallen leaves skipped forward; the very dust on the road set itself in motion. It was a moving multitude that was reinforced with fresh recruits at every step; a rutting legion, the sound of whose coming went on in front of it; an outburst of passionate vitality, sweeping everything along with it in a mighty whirlwind of universal procreation. The onset was an impetuous one. From the limits of the horizon, the whole company of hills and stones and fields and trees hurled themselves against the church. At the first shock, the building quivered and cracked. The walls were pierced and the tiles on the roof were thrown down. But the Great Christ, though it trembled for a moment, did not fall.

Then there was a short respite. Outside the voices sounded more angrily, and the priest could now distinguish human ones amongst them. It was the villagers of Les Artaud, that handful of bastards, who sprang up out of that rocky soil with the persistence of reeds, and who were now in their turn breathing round them an atmosphere reeking with teeming life. They had spread fornication broadcast over the land, planting everywhere forests of humanity that swallowed up everything around them. They now crept up to the church and pushed back the door and seemed to threaten to block up the very nave with the invading scions of their race. Behind them came the beasts; the oxen that tried to batter down the walls with their horns, flocks of asses, goats, and sheep, that dashed themselves violently round the church, like a living surge, while swarms of wood-lice and crickets attacked its foundations and cut them away with their saw-like teeth. On the other side was Désirée's poultry-yard, where the dung-hill reeked with its suffocating fumes. Here the big cock, Alexander, sounded the assault, and the hens set to work to loosen the stones with their beaks, and the rabbits undermined the foundations of the altars; the pig, too fat to stir,

grunted and waited till all the sacred ornaments should be nothing more than a handful of warm ashes in which he might wallow.

A great roar mounted up and a second assault was delivered. The villagers, the animals, all the swarming sea of life, cast themselves upon the church with such an impetuous shock that the rafters bent and curved. This time a piece of the wall tottered and fell down, the ceiling shook, the wood-work of the windows was carried away, and the grey mists of the evening broke in through the gaping breaches. The great Christ clung to His cross only by the nail that pierced His left hand.

A mighty shout hailed the toppling-down of the block of wall. The church, however, still stood firmly, in spite of the injuries it had received. It offered a stern, silent and unflinching resistance, keeping a firm hold on the tiniest stones of its foundations. It seemed as though to keep itself from falling into ruins, it required only the support of its slenderest pillar, which, by some miracle of equilibrium, bore up safely and securely the gaping roof. Then the Abbé Mouret beheld the rude plants of the plain, the dreadful-looking growths that had become iron-hard amidst the arid rocks, of close-grained fibre and knotted like snakes and bossed over with muscle, set themselves to work. The rust-hued lichens gnawed away at the rough plaster like a fiery leprosy. Then the thyme-plants followed on and thrust their roots between the bricks like so many iron wedges. The lavenders insinuated their hooked tongues into the loosened stone-work, and by their slow persistent efforts tore the blocks asunder. The junipers, the rosemaries, the thorny whins, scaled higher up the walls and battered them with irresistible blows; and even the grass, the grass whose dried blades pushed themselves beneath the great door, stiffened itself into steel-like spears and cut through the door, and made its way into the nave, where it forced up the flagstones with its powerful levers. It was a victorious revolt of rebellious nature, constructing its barricades from the over-turned altars, and wrecking the church which had for centuries kept it in too great subjection. The other combatants fell back, and let the plants, the thyme and the lavender and the lichens, complete the overthrow of the building with their perpetual attack of tiny blows and constant gnawing round its base, which was more destructive than the heavier onslaught blows of the stronger assailants.

Then, suddenly, the end came. The service-tree, whose top-

most branches had already forced their way through the broken windows into the aisle, rushed violently in with its formidable stream of greenery; it planted itself in the centre of the nave, and then it began to grow monstrously bigger. Its trunk spread out to such a colossal girth, that it seemed as though it would burst open the church, which spanned it too closely. Its branches shot themselves out in knotted arms, each one of which broke down a piece of the wall or thrust off a strip of the roof, and they went on constantly multiplying themselves, each branch ramifying itself infinitely into other ones, till a whole tree sprang out of each single knot, with such impetuous vigour that the ruins of the church, pierced through and through like a sieve, toppled down into fragments, obscuring the heavens with a cloud of fine dust.

Now the giant tree seemed to be touching the stars; its forest of branches was a forest of limbs, of legs, arms, breasts, bellies, which sweated with sap; the long locks of women streamed down from it; men's heads burst out from the bark like grinning new-born buds; up aloft, pairs of lovers, lying faint and languid by the edges of their nests, filled the air with the music of their delights and the odour of their fecundity.

A final puff of the storm which had broken over the church swept away the dust of its remains, the pulpit and the confessional-box ground into powder, the mangled images of the saints, and the shattered vases, all of which the legion of sparrows that had once dwelt amongst the tiles had eagerly pecked to bits. The great Christ, torn from the cross, hung for a moment suspended by one of the streaming women's curls, and then fell headlong into the black darkness which echoed with the crash of its fall. The Tree of Life had just pierced the heavens; it over-topped the stars.

The Abbé Mouret was filled with the mad joy of an accursed spirit at the sight before him. The church was vanquished. God no longer had a house. For the present, God could no longer trouble him. He was free to rejoin Albine, since it was she who had triumphed. He laughed merrily at himself for having said, an hour before, that the church would consume away the whole earth with its shadow. The earth, indeed, had avenged itself by consuming the church. The mad laughter into which he broke out had the effect of suddenly awakening him from his hallucination. Feeling completely dazed and stupid, he gazed round the nave which was growing slowly dark beneath the evening shadows. Through the windows he could

see patches of star-sown sky. He was just going to stretch out his arms to feel at the walls, when he heard Désirée's voice calling to him from the vestry-passage :

"Serge ! Serge ! Are you there ?— Why don't you speak, then ? I have been looking for you for this last half-hour."

She came in ; she was holding a lighted lamp ; and then the priest saw that the church was still standing. He could not understand what had happened, but remained in a horrible state of doubt between the unconquerable church, springing up again from its ruins, and an all-powerful Albine, who could overturn God by a single breath.

X.

DÉSIRÉE came up to him, full of her merry chatter.

"Oh! you're there, are you?" she cried. "Have you been playing at hide-and-seek? I called out to you at the top of my voice at least ten times. I thought you must have gone out."

She pried into all the gloomy corners with an inquisitive glance, and she stepped warily up to the confessional box, as though she expected to surprise someone hiding there. She came back again to Serge, disappointed, and continued:

"So, you are quite alone, then? Have you been asleep? What amusement do you find in shutting yourself up all alone in the dark?— Come along, it is time we went in to dinner."

The Abbé drew his fevered hands across his brow, to wipe away the traces of the thoughts which he feared were plain for all the world to read. He fumbled mechanically at the buttons of his cassock, which seemed to him all unfastened and disarranged in shameful disorder. Then, with stern-set face and without a sign of emotion, he followed his sister; hiding, by a strong effort of self-control, the agonies of his flesh beneath his priestly unruffled calm. Désirée did not even suspect that there was anything the matter with him. She said simply as they entered the dining-room:

"I have had such a good sleep; but you have been talking too much, and have made yourself quite pale."

In the evening, after dinner, Brother Archangias came in to have his game of cards with La Teuse. He was in a very merry mood that night; and, when the brother was merry, it was his habit to prod La Teuse in the side with his thick fists, an attention which La Teuse returned by heartily boxing his ears. This skirmishing made them both laugh, with a roaring laughter that shook the very ceiling. The brother, too, when in these gay humours, would break out into all kinds of

extraordinary jocosities. He would try to smash plates with his nose, and would offer to bet that he could break through the dining-room door by using his posterior as a battering-ram. He would empty all the snuff out of his box into the old servant's coffee, or would thrust a handful of pebbles down her neck, pushing them down with his hands as far as her waist. The merest trifle would give rise to these noisy outbursts of gaiety in the midst of his ordinary morose sternness. Frequently some little incident, at which no one else even laughed, was sufficient to throw him into a state of wild hilarity, stamping his feet and twirling himself round like a top and holding in his splitting sides.

"What is it that makes you so gay to-night?" La Teuse asked him.

He made no reply. He was sitting astride a chair and galloping round the table on it.

"Well! well! go on making a baby of yourself! And, my gracious, what a big baby you are! If the Lord is looking at you, He must be very well pleased with you!"

The brother slipped off the chair and lay down on the floor, sticking up his legs into the air.

"He does see me, and is pleased to see me as I am. It is His wish that I should be gay. When He wishes me to be merry for a time, He rings a bell in my body, and then I begin to knock about; and the whole of Paradise smiles, as it watches me."

He dragged himself on his back to the wall, and then, supporting himself on the nape of his neck, he hoisted up his body as high as he could and began drumming the wall with his heels. His cassock slipped down and exposed his black trousers, patched at the knees with green cloth.

"Look, your reverence," he said, "how high I can reach with my heels. I dare bet you couldn't do as much. Come! look amused and laugh a little. It is better to drag oneself along on one's back than to be longing for an idle hussy's flesh for a mattress; you know what I mean, eh? One turns oneself into a beast for a moment, and scratches oneself and shakes out one's vermin. That makes one feel easier. But I, when I take to scratching myself, imagine myself to be God's dog, and that's what makes me say that all Paradise looks out of the windows and smiles at me— Your reverence might try and squeeze out a smile as well. It's all done for the saints and you. See! here is a turn-over for Saint Joseph; here's another

for Saint Michael, and another for Saint John, and another for Saint Mark, and another for Saint Matthew—”

And so he went on, mocking at a whole chapelful of saints, and turning somersaults all round the room.

The Abbé Mouret, who had been sitting in perfect silence, with his hands resting on the edge of the table, was, at last, constrained to smile. Usually, the brother's sportiveness only disquieted him. La Teuse, as the brother rolled within her reach, kicked at him with her foot.

“Come!” she said, “are we to have our game to-night?”

His only reply was to grunt and to go down on all fours. Then he sprang along, in this fashion, towards La Teuse. When he was quite close to her, he thrust his head under her petticoats and seized her right knee between his teeth.

“Let me alone! will you?” she cried. “What indecency are you after now?”

“Bah!” sneered the brother, so amazed at the idea, that he stayed just where he was, without thinking of getting up. “Look you! I'm nearly poisoned with the taste of your knee. It is quite foul and bitter. I bite women and then I spit the taste out, do you see?”

He spat upon her petticoats. When he got on to his feet again, he puffed and snorted, as he gave himself a shake. His belly still quavered and shook with his outburst of gaiety, like a leather bottle that is nearly drained. Presently he said, in heavy solemn tones:

“Let us play— What makes me gay is my own affair. It is not necessary to explain it to you, La Teuse.”

Then the game began. It was a terrible struggle. The brother hurled down his cards violently upon the table. Whenever he cried out the windows shook and trembled. La Teuse seemed to be winning. She had had three aces for some time and was casting longing eyes at the fourth. Brother Archangias began to indulge in fresh outbursts of gaiety. He pushed up the table, at the risk of breaking the lamp. He cheated outrageously, just for a joke, he said, defending himself by the most abominable lies. Then he suddenly began to sing the “Vespers,” beating the time on the palm of his left hand with his cards. When his hilarity reached its height and he could find no adequate means of expressing the gaiety which filled him, he always took to chanting the “Vespers,” and would go on repeating them for hours. La Teuse, who was quite aware of

habits, cried out to him, in the midst of the bellowing with which he was shaking the room :

"Make a little less noise, do ! It is quite distracting. You are much too lively to-night."

Then he set to work on the "Compline." The Abbé Mouret had seated himself by the window. He appeared to be paying no attention to what was going on around him, apparently neither hearing nor seeing anything of it. At dinner he had eaten with his ordinary appetite and had even managed to reply to Désirée's everlasting rattle of questions. But now he had given up the struggle, feeling himself at the end of his strength, racked and broken and utterly exhausted by the internal tempest that still ceaselessly raged within him. He had not even the courage to get up from his seat and go upstairs to his own room. He was afraid that if he turned his face towards the light of the lamp, the tears, which he could no longer keep back, would be noticed. He pressed his face close to the window and gazed out into the darkness, growing gradually more drowsy and falling into a kind of night-mare stupor.

Brother Archangias, still busy at his psalm-singing, winked his eye and nodded his head in the direction of the sleeping priest.

"What's the matter ?" asked La Teuse.

The brother replied by a more strongly significant wink.

"Well, what do you mean ? Can't you speak ? Ah ! there's a king. That's capital, and I take your queen."

The brother laid down his cards and bent over the table and whispered close to La Teuse's face :

"That drab has been here."

"I know that quite well," said La Teuse. "I saw her go with mademoiselle into the poultry-yard."

He looked at her very sternly, and shook his fist at her.

"You saw her, and you let her come in ! You ought to have called me, and we would have hung her up by the feet to a nail in your kitchen."

She seemed put-out at what he said, and, lowering her voice that she might not awaken the Abbé Mouret, she replied :

"Indeed, it is very good of you to talk about hanging people up in my kitchen ! I certainly saw her, and I even saw that, after I had gone away, she went to join his reverence in the church, when the catechizing was over. They were quite alone and undisturbed there, and could do whatever they pleased.

It's no business of mine, is it? Haven't I my cooking to attend to?— As for the girl herself, I detest her. But if she is necessary to his reverence's health—why, she is welcome to come every hour of the day and night; and I will lock them up together, if they like."

"If you were to do that, La Teuse," said the brother, with angry sternness, "I would strangle you."

She laughed at him.

"Don't talk any of your nonsense to me, my man! Don't you know that you are as much forbidden to have anything to do with a woman as an ass is with the *Pater Noster*? Just you try to strangle me and you would see what I would do! Do be quiet, now, and let us finish the game. See! here's another king."

But the brother, holding his cards between his fingers, went on with his angry complaints.

"She must have come by some road that the devil alone knows for me to have missed her to-day. Every afternoon I go and keep guard up yonder by Le Paradou. If ever I find them together again, I will introduce the drab to a stout dog-wood stick which I have cut expressly for her benefit—I will keep a watch in the church as well, now."

He played his card, which was taken with a knave by La Teuse. Then he threw himself back in his chair, and broke out again into one of his enormous laughs. He did not seem to be able to work himself up into a genuine rage this evening.

"Well, well," he grumbled, "never mind, even if she has seen him, she has had a smacking fall on her nose. I will tell you all about it, La Teuse. It was raining, you know. I was standing by the school-door, when I caught sight of her coming down from the church. She was walking along quite straight and upright, in her stuck-up fashion, in spite of the pouring rain. And when she got into the road, she tumbled down full length, the ground was so slippery. Oh! how I did laugh! how I did laugh! I clapped my hands, too. When she picked herself up again, I saw she was bleeding at the wrist. I shall feel happy over it for a week. I cannot think of her there on the ground without feeling the greatest delight and pleasure."

Then, turning his whole attention to the game, he puffed out his cheeks and began to chant the *De profundis*. When he had got to the end of it, he began it all over again. In the midst of this dirge the game came to a conclusion. It was he

who was beaten, but his defeat did not seem to vex him in the least.

When La Teuse had locked the door behind him, after having awakened the Abbé Mouret, his voice could still be heard, as he went on his way through the black night, singing out the last bar of the psalm, *Et ipse redimet Israel ex omnibus iniquitatibus ejus*, with extraordinary gusto and jubilation.

XI.

THAT night the Abbé Mouret slept very heavily. When he opened his eyes in the morning, later than usual, his face and hands were wet with tears. He had been weeping all through the night while he slept. He did not say his mass that morning. In spite of his long rest, he had not recovered from his excessive weariness and fatigue of the previous evening, and he remained in his bedroom till noon, sitting in a chair at the foot of his bed. The condition of stupor into which he was every minute falling more deeply took away from him all sensation of suffering. He was conscious only of a great void and blank as he sat there overwhelmed with a vague sense of trouble and calamity. Even to read his breviary cost him a great effort. Its Latin seemed to him a barbarous language, whose mere syllables he would never again be able to pronounce.

Presently he tossed the book down on his bed and gazed for hours out of his open window at the surrounding country. In the far distance he saw the white wall of Le Paradou, creeping up the crest of the hills like a thin white line amongst the gloomy patches of the pine plantations. To the left, hidden by one of the plantations, was the breach. He could not see it, but he knew it was there. He remembered every detail of the scattered stones and brambles. The night before he would not have dared thus to gaze out upon that dreaded scene. But this morning he so far forgot himself as to allow himself to trace out the line of the wall, as it emerged from the clumps of verdure which here and there concealed it. But his blood pulsed none the faster for it. Temptation, as though disdaining his present weakness, left him free from all attack, scorning to enter into a struggle with one who was incapable, in his abandonment by the divine grace, of making any resistance, and who was now, though perfectly free from all goadings of passion, ready, from mere stupor, to run blindly into the arms

of that which he had the day before so strenuously sought to avoid.

He caught himself talking aloud and telling himself that, since the breach in the wall was still open, he would go and join Albine again at sunset. He felt that it would weary him somewhat to do this, but he did not think that he could do otherwise. She was expecting him to go, and she was his wife. When he tried to form a mental picture of her face, he could only imagine her as very pale and a long way off. Then he began to be a little uneasy as to their manner of life together. It would be difficult for them to remain in the neighbourhood; they would have to go away somewhere, without anyone knowing anything about it. But then, when they had managed to conceal themselves, they would want plenty of money to enable them to live happily and comfortably. He tried, over and over again, to hit upon some scheme by which they could get away in such a manner as would enable them to live together like two happy lovers, but he could come to no satisfactory conclusion. Now that he was no longer swayed by his mad infatuation and desire, the practical side of the situation alarmed him, and thrust him, in all his weakness, face to face with a complicated problem with which he was totally unable to grapple.

Where were they to get horses for their escape? And if they went away on foot, would they not be stopped and detained as vagabonds? Was he capable of getting any employment, by which he could earn bread for his wife? He had never been taught any kind of trade. He was quite ignorant of actual life. He ransacked his memory, and he could remember nothing but strings of prayers and details of ceremonies and pages out of Bouvier's "*Instruction Théologique*," which he had learned by heart at the seminary. He troubled and disquieted himself, too, with matters of no real concern. He asked himself whether he would dare to give his arm to his wife in the street. He certainly could not walk with a woman clinging to his arm. He would appear so strange and awkward that everyone would turn round and stare at him. They would guess that he was a priest and would insult Albine. It would be quite vain for him to try to obliterate all traces of his priesthood. He would always wear that mournful pallor and carry about with him the odour of incense. And what if he should have children some day? As this thought suddenly occurred to him, he quite started. He felt a strange repugnance

at the very idea. He felt sure that he should not be fond of them. Suppose there were two of them, a little boy and a little girl— He would not let them get on to his knees and it would distress him to feel their hands clutching at his clothes. He could not reconcile himself to this idea of flesh of his flesh, which had always seemed to him to savour of impurity. The thought of the little girl troubled him the most, with her great eyes, in whose depths he could already see a womanish tenderness shining. No! no! he would have no children. The hope that he might be impotent soothed him exceedingly. Doubtless all his virility had withered away during his tardy adolescence. That consideration determined him. In the evening he would escape with Albine.

When the evening came, however, the Abbé Mouret felt too tired. So he put off his flight till the next morning. The next morning he made a fresh pretext for delay. He could not leave his sister alone with La Teuse. He would prepare a letter, directing her to be taken to her uncle Pascal's. For three days he was always on the point of writing this letter, and the paper and pen and ink were lying ready on the table in his room. Then, on the third day, he went away, leaving the letter unwritten. He took up his hat quite suddenly and set off for Le Paradou in a state of dazed and stupid resignation; as though he were unwillingly performing some compulsory task, which he saw no means of avoiding. Albine's image was completely effaced from his memory. It was no longer her that he beheld, but he was driven on by the goad of old desires whose lingering influence, though they themselves were quite dead, still worked upon his lonely and silent being.

He took no pains to escape notice. He stopped, at the end of the village, to talk for a moment to Rosalie. She told him that her baby was suffering from convulsions; and she laughed, as she spoke, with the laugh that seemed to break from the corner of her mouth, that was natural to her. Then he struck out over the rocks, and walked straight on towards the breach in the wall. By force of habit, he had brought his breviary with him. Finding the way grow tedious, he opened the book and read the assigned prayers. When he put it back again under his arm, he had forgotten all about Le Paradou. He went on walking steadily, thinking about a new chasuble he wanted to get in place of his old gold-broidered one, which was certainly falling into pieces. For some time he had been saving up twenty-sous pieces, and he calculated that by the

end of September he would have got together the necessary amount of money. He had reached the hills when the song of a peasant in the distance reminded him of a canticle which used to be familiar to him at the seminary. He tried to recall the first verses of it, but his recollection failed him. It vexed him to find that his memory was so poor. And when, at last, he succeeded in remembering the words, he experienced a soothing pleasure in humming the verses, which came back to his mind, one by one. It was a hymn of homage to Mary. He broke out into a smile, as though some soft breath from the days of his childhood were playing upon his face. Ah! how happy he was then! Why shouldn't he be as happy again! He had not grown any bigger and he wanted nothing more than the same old gratifications, an unruffled peace, a nook in the chapel, where his knees left their mark, a life of seclusion, enlivened by the delightful puerilities of childhood. He had gradually raised his voice, as he continued to sing the canticle in fine, flute-like tones, when he suddenly became aware of the breach immediately in front of him.

For a moment, he seemed surprised. Then, the smile dying out of his face, he murmured quietly:

"Albine will be expecting me. The sun is already setting."

But just as he was mounting up to push the stones aside for his passage, he was terribly startled by a snore. He hurriedly sprang down again, and only just missed planting his foot right on the face of Brother Archangias, who was lying on the ground, sleeping soundly. Slumber had overtaken him while he was keeping guard over the entrance to Le Paradou. He barred the approach to it, lying down at full length before its threshold, with arms and legs spread out. His right hand, thrown back behind his head, still clutched the staff of dogwood, which he seemed to be brandishing like a fiery sword. He was snoring loudly in the midst of the brambles, his face exposed to the sun, without a quiver in his tanned skin. A swarm of great flies was hovering over his half-opened mouth.

The Abbé Mouret looked at him for a moment. He envied the slumber of that dust-wallowing saint. He tried to drive the flies away, but they returned persistently and clung around the purple lips of the brother, who was quite unconscious of their presence. Then the Abbé strode over his great body and entered Le Paradou.

XII.

ALBINE was sitting on a patch of grass, a few yards away from the wall. She sprang up, as she caught sight of Serge.

"Ah! you have come at last!" she cried, trembling with excitement.

"Yes," he said, quite calmly, "I have come."

She flung her arms round his neck, but she did not kiss him. She gazed intently into his face, with an expression of uneasy anxiety.

"What is the matter with you?" she cried. "Why don't you kiss my cheeks like you used to do?— Well, well, if you are ill, I will make you all right again. Now that you are here once more, all our old happiness will come back again. There will be no more gloom and wretchedness. See! I am smiling. You must smile, too, Serge."

But his face remained grave and solemn.

"I have been troubled, too, like you," she went on. "I am quite pale yet, am I not? For a whole week I have stayed out on that patch of grass, where you found me. I wanted one thing only, to see you coming back through the hole in the wall. At every sound, I sprang up and rushed to meet you. But, alas! it was not you it was only the leaves rustling in the wind— But I was quite sure that you would come. I should have waited for you for years."

Then she asked him:

"Do you still love me?"

"Yes," he answered, "I love you still."

They stood looking at each other, feeling ill at ease. A deep silence sprang up between them. Serge, who was perfectly calm and unruffled, did not attempt to break it. Albine twice opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again immediately, surprised at the words that rose to her lips. She could summon up nothing but expressions of bitterness. She felt the tears

springing up in her eyes. What could be the matter with her, that she did not feel full of happiness, now that she had got her lover back with her?

"Listen to me," she said, at last. "Do not let us stay here. It is the hole that is freezing us— Let us go back to our old home. Give me your hand."

They plunged into the depths of Le Paradou. The autumn was approaching and the leaves were falling one by one from the yellowing trees. The paths were already littered with a thick bed of dead foliage, soaked with moisture, over which their muffled steps sounded like sighs. Away, beyond the lawns, a misty vapour mounted-up, obscuring with its gloomy veil the blueness of the spreading distance. The garden lay wrapped in complete silence, broken only occasionally by some wailing breath that sounded like a groan.

Serge began to shiver beneath the avenue of tall trees, along which they were walking.

"How cold it is here!" he said.

"You are cold, indeed," murmured Albine, sadly. "My hand is no longer able to warm you. Shall I wrap you round with the skirt of my dress?— Come, let us renew all our old affection."

She led him along to the flower-garden. The thicket of rose-bushes was still fragrant with perfume, but there was a tinge of bitterness about the scent of the surviving blossoms, and their foliage, which had thrown itself out in wild profusion, lay over the ground like a sleeping flood. Serge, however, manifested such an unwillingness to enter the tangled jungle, that they lingered at its skirts, trying to make out, in the distance, the paths along which they had passed in the spring-time. Albine recollected every little nook. She pointed out with her fingers the grotto where the marble woman lay sleeping; the screens of honey-suckle and clematis; the fields of violets; the fountain that spurted out crimson carnations; the steps that flowed with a stream of golden gilliflowers; the ruined colonnade, in the midst of which the lilies had reared for them their snowy pavilion. It was there that they had been born again beneath the golden sun-light. She went over every smallest detail of that first day together, how they had walked, and how fragrant the air was beneath the cool shade. Serge seemed to be listening, but he suddenly asked a question, which showed that he had been totally unaffected by anything she had said. His cold unconcern never left him.

She led him towards the orchard, but they could not reach it. The stream was too much swollen. Serge no longer thought of taking Albine on his back and bounding across with her to the other side in three light leaps. The apple-trees and the pear-trees were still laden with fruit, and the vines bent beneath the weight of their gleaming clusters. Ah! how they had gambolled and sported beneath the appetizing shade of those ancient trees! What merry children they were then! Albine smiled as she thought of the shameless way in which she had exposed her legs as she clambered up into the tree that broke down beneath her. Had he forgotten what a lot of plums they ate? Serge only answered by shaking his head. Already he seemed quite tired and weary. The orchard, with its green depths and chaos of mossy trunks, disquieted him and suggested to his mind some dark gloomy wilderness, teeming with snakes and nettles.

Then she led him away to the meadow-lands, where she made him take some few steps amongst the grass. It reached up to his shoulders, now, and seemed like a swarm of clinging arms that tried to knot themselves round his limbs and pull him down and bury him beneath that endless sea of surging green. He begged Albine to go no further. She was walking on in front, and did not stop; but when she saw how distressed he appeared to be, she stayed her steps and came and stood by his side, growing gradually more low-spirited till, in the end, she shuddered and trembled like himself. But she still went on talking. With a sweeping gesture she pointed out to him the streams, the clumps of willows, and the grassy tracts stretching far away towards the horizon. All that was theirs in the old days. For whole days they had lived amongst them. Over yonder, between those three willows by the edge of the stream, they had played at being lovers. Then they would have been delighted if the grass had been taller than themselves, that they might have lost themselves in its thick depths, and have been the more completely alone and secluded, like larks hopping about at the bottom of a field of corn. Why did he tremble and shudder so, to-day, at merely feeling the tip of his foot touch and sink into the grass?

Then she led him to the forest. The great trees seemed to inspire Serge with a still greater dread. He did not know them again, in the solemn sternness of their black trunks. Here, more than anywhere else, amidst these solemn columns, through which the light streamed freely, the past seemed quite

dead. The first rains had washed out the traces of their footsteps from the sandy paths, and the winds had swept away every other lingering memorial. But Albine, her throat choking with bitter grief, shot out a protesting glance. She could still see plainly their lightest footfalls on the sandy gravel, and, as they passed each bush, the warmth with which they had once brushed against it, surged up hotly to her cheek. She still strove to waken again into life Serge's memory of the past, and her eyes gazed upon him with an expression of yearning supplication. It was along this path that they had silently wandered, burning with the love which they dared not confess. It was in this clearing, that they had lingered one evening till very late watching the stars, which seemed to be raining down upon them golden drops of gentle warmth. Beneath this oak they had exchanged their first kiss. The fragrance of that kiss still clung to the tree and the greening mosses still remembered it. It was a lie to say that the forest had become voiceless and naked.

Serge turned away his head, that he might escape the gaze of Albine's eyes, which oppressed him.

Then she led him to the great rocks. Perhaps there he would no longer shudder and tremble with that appearance of weakness which was so distressing to her. At this hour they were yet hot with the red glow of the setting sun. They still wore an air of tragic passion, with their heated couches of stone whereon the fleshy plants writhed in their monstrous couplings. Without speaking a single word, without even turning her head, Albine led Serge up the rough ascent, wishing to take him far up beyond the springs till they should again emerge into the full light on the topmost summit. They would come to the cedar beneath whose shade they had been racked with the thrills of their first desire, and they would lie down on the hot stones till the contagion of the passioning earth laid them under its influence. But Serge's feet soon began to stumble pitifully. He could walk no further. He fell down on to his knees. Albine, by a mighty effort, raised him up and carried him along for a moment, but he fell again, and lay, quite overcome, on the ground. In front of him, beneath him, *Le Paradou* unrolled its vast extent.

"You have lied to me!" cried Albine. "You do not love me any longer!"

She burst into tears, standing by his side, and feeling that she was powerless to get him any further. There was no sign

of anger in her now. She was weeping over their dead love. Serge lay dazed and stupefied.

"The garden is all dead. I am so cold," he murmured. She took his head between her hands, and showed him *Le Paradou*.

"Look at it!— Ah! it is your eyes that are dead; your ears and your limbs and your whole body. You have passed by all the scenes of our joys and happiness, without seeing them or hearing them or recognising them. You have done nothing but slip and stumble, and now you have fallen down here in sheer weakness— You do not love me any more."

He protested gently and tranquilly. Then she burst out into a passionate torrent of words.

"Don't speak to me! The garden is not dead! It will sleep for the winter, but it will wake up again in May, and will restore to us all the love we have entrusted to its keeping. Our kisses will blossom again amongst the flower-beds, and our vows will bud out again with the trees and plants— If you could only see it and understand it, you would know that it throbs with an even deeper passion and loves even more absorbingly in this autumn-time, when it lies drowsing in its fecundity— You do not love me any more, and you cannot understand it."

He raised his eyes to her and seemed to be begging her not to be angry. His face was pinched and pale with an expression of childish fear. The sound of her voice made him start and tremble. He persuaded her to rest for a little while by his side. They could talk quietly and discuss matters. Then, with *Le Paradou* spreading itself out in front of them, they began to speak of their love, but without touching even one another's finger-ends.

"I love you; indeed, I love you," Serge said in his calm, unconcerned voice. "If I did not love you, I should not be here; I should not have come— I am very weary, it is true. I don't know why. I thought I should find that pleasant warmth again here, of which the mere memory is so delightful. But I am so cold, and the garden seems quite black and gloomy. I can't see anything left of what used to be here. But, indeed, it is not my fault. I am trying hard to be as you would wish me and to please you."

"You love me no longer!" Albine repeated once more.

"Yes, indeed, I do love you. I was very wretched and miserable the other day when I drove you away— Oh! I was so

bursting with love for you, that, if you had come back and thrown yourself into my arms, I should almost have crushed you to death in my embrace. Never before had I had such a mad longing for you. For hours your image, full of breathing life, was present before me, caressing me with clinging, supple fingers. When I shut my eyes, you gleamed out in all the brightness of the sun and wreathed yourself in a fiery glow—Then I trampled down every obstacle, and came here.”

He remained silent for a moment or two, buried in deep thought. Then he spoke again.

“And now my arms feel as though they were broken. If I were to try to strain you to my breast, I could not hold you; I should let you fall. Wait till this fit of trembling has passed away. Give me your hands, and let me kiss them again. Be gentle to me and do not look at me with such angry eyes. Help me to find my heart again.”

He spoke with such a genuine sadness and was moved with such an evident longing to resume all their old tenderness, that Albine could not help being touched. For a moment, all her wonted gentleness returned to her.

“What is the matter with you?” she asked, with an expression of anxiety. “What is making you so ill?”

“I do not know. I feel as though all my blood had escaped from my veins. Just now, as I was coming here, I felt as though some one had flung a robe of ice round my shoulders, which fastened itself to my flesh and turned me into stone from my head to my feet—I have felt it before, somewhere—I can’t tell you anything more.”

She interrupted him with a kindly laugh.

“You give way to foolish fancies. You have got cold, that’s all—At any rate, it is not I that you are afraid of, is it? We won’t stop in the garden during the winter, like a couple of wild things. We will go wherever you like—into some big town. We can love each other there, amongst all the people, quite as undisturbed as amongst the trees. You will see that I can be something else than a wild gad-about, for ever bird-nesting and tramping along for hours without being tired—When I was a little girl, I used to wear embroidered skirts and fine stockings and laces and all kinds of finery. I daresay you never heard of that.”

He was not listening to her. Suddenly he broke out into a little cry, and said:

“Ah! now I recollect!”

She asked him what he meant, but he would not answer her. He had just remembered the sensation he used to feel in the chapel of the seminary. That was the icy robe wrapping his shoulders, and turning his body to stone. Then his life as a priest took complete possession of his thoughts. The vague recollections which had haunted him as he walked on from Les Artaud to Le Paradou became clearer and more distinct and assumed a complete mastery over his mind. While Albine talked to him of the happy life they would lead together, he was hearing the tinkling of the sanctuary bell that signalled the elevation of the Host and was seeing the monstrance trace gleaming crosses over the heads of the kneeling crowd.

"And for your sake," Albine was saying, "I will put on my brodered skirts again— I want you to be bright and gay. We will try to find something to make you lively. Perhaps you will love me better when you see me looking beautiful and prettily dressed, like a fine lady. I will wear my comb properly and won't let my hair fall wildly about my neck any more. And I won't roll up my sleeves over my elbows, and I will fasten my dress so that my shoulders shall not be bare and uncovered. I can make a proper bow and can walk along quite gracefully and properly, with my chin in the air. Yes, I will make you a nice little wife, as I walk along through the streets leaning on your arm."

"Did you ever go to church when you were a little girl?" he asked her in low tones. "I can never pass a church without entering it. As soon as the door closes silently behind me, I feel as though I were in Paradise itself, with the angels whispering their stories of love into my ear and the saints breathing round me their soft caressing welcomes— Ah! I could live there for ever, entranced in that absorbing beatitude."

She looked at him with steady eyes, while a passing blaze glared up in her loving glance. She answered him in tones that were full of submission.

"I will do whatever you wish. I learned music once. I was quite a clever young lady and was taught all the accomplishments— I will go back to school and begin my music lessons again. If there is any tune you would like to hear me play, you will only have to tell me, and I will practise it for months, so that I may play it to you some evening in our own home when we are quite by ourselves in some snug little room, with the curtains closely drawn. And you will pay me with just one kiss, won't you? A kiss right on the lips, which will

wake up all your love again. Ah! yes, and then you will take me and strain me close again to your breast!"

"Yes, yes," he murmured, answering his own thoughts only; "my great joy at first was to light the candles, to prepare the cruets, and to carry the missal. Then, afterwards, I was filled with bliss at the approach of God, and felt as though I could die of sheer love— These are my only recollections. I know of nothing else. When I raise my hand, it is to give a benediction. When I reach out my lips, it is to kiss the altar. If I look for my heart, I can no longer find it. I have offered it to God, and He has accepted it and taken it."

Aibine grew very pale and her eyes gleamed fiercely. With tones that quivered and trembled, she said to him:

"I should not like my little girl to leave me. You can send the boy, if you like, to college, but the darling little fair-haired pet I must keep always with me. I myself will teach her to read. Oh! yes, I remember it all quite well, and if there is anything I have forgotten, I will have masters to teach it to me. —Yes, we will keep our dear little one always about our knees. You will be very happy so, won't you, dear? Speak to me; tell me that you will feel warm again, and will always smile, and have no regrets for anything you have left behind."

"I have often thought of the stone-saints that have been censed in their niches for hundreds of years. They must have got quite saturated with incense, to their very bowels— And I am like one of those saints. I have the fragrance of the incense in the inmost fold of being. It is its aromatic embalming that gives me my serenity, the death-like tranquillity of my body, the peace which I enjoy in no longer living the life of the flesh— Ah! may nothing ever disturb my still quiescence! May I ever remain cold and rigid, with a ceaseless smile on my marble lips, incapable of descending amidst the throng of men! It is my one, my only desire!"

Aibine sprang to her feet, angry and threatening. She shook Serge and cried:

"What is it you are saying? What are you dreaming aloud about?— Am I not your wife? Haven't you come here to be my husband?"

He recoiled before her reproach, trembling more violently than before.

"No! no!—leave me!—I am afraid!" he stammered out.

Then he broke out into a supreme cry:

"I cannot! I cannot!"

For a moment, Albine stood silently gazing at the unhappy man who lay shivering at her feet. Her eyes gleamed with an angry fire. She had flung her arms open, as though she would seize him and strain him to her breast in a wild thrill of desire, but she seemed to be reflecting for an instant, and then she merely took him by the hand. She lifted him to his feet.

"Come!" she said.

She led him away to that giant tree, to the very spot where she had yielded herself up to him and where he had possessed her. It was the same bliss-inspiring shade, the same breathing-trunk as of yore; and the same branches spread themselves widely around, like sheltering and protecting arms. The tree still reared itself aloft, kindly, robust, powerful, and fertile. As on the day of the consummation of their union, the close warmth of a recessed alcove, the glimmer of a summer's night brooding over the naked shoulder of some fair girl, a sob of passionate love breaking upon the voluptuous silence, hung about the clearing as it lay bathed in its dim green light. And, in the distance, Le Paradou, in spite of the first chills of autumn, broke out again into its sighing passion. Once more it was turning itself into an accomplice of their love. From the flower-garden, from the orchard, from the meadow-lands, from the forest, from the great rocks, from the spreading heavens, there came again a ripple of voluptuous joy, a breeze that bore along with it a dust all pregnant with fecundity. Never had the garden, even on the warmest evenings of the spring-time, been wrapped in such a soft tenderness as on this fair autumn evening, when the plants and trees seemed to be bidding each other good-night ere they sank to sleep. The scent of the ripened branches wafted a thrill of desire through the scanty leaves.

"Do you hear? do you hear?" Albine stammered into Serge's ear, after she had let him slip down into the grass at the foot of the tree.

Serge was weeping.

"You see that Le Paradou is not dead. It is crying out to us to love each other. It is yearning for our union and marriage— Oh, do remember! Clasp me to your heart! Let us belong to each other!"

Serge still continued to weep.

Albine said nothing more. She flung her arms around him in a wild embrace. She pressed her lips to his corpse-like face

and tried to warm him into life. But Serge had nothing for her but tears.

After a long silence, Albine spoke again. She was standing over him, with an expression of scorn and determination.

"Away with you! Go!" she said, in a low voice.

Serge rose with difficulty. He picked up his breviary, which had fallen down upon the grass. He went away.

"Away with you! Go!" Albine repeated, in louder tones, following him and driving him before her.

She drove him on from bush to bush till she had brought him back to the breach in the wall, in the midst of the stern-looking trees. And there, as she saw Serge hesitating, with his head bent down towards the ground, she cried out to him passionately:

"Away with you! Go!"

Then she slowly went back into Le Paradou, without even turning her head. The night was coming on apace, and the garden was a vast winding-sheet of dark shadow.

XIII.

WHEN Brother Archangias awoke, he mounted up on to the breach and struck his stick against the stones, breaking out into the most violent language.

"May the devil break their thighs for them! May he fix them fast the one to the other, like a couple of dogs! May he drag them along by their feet, with their noses trailing in their own filth!"

But when he saw Albine driving away the priest, he stopped for a moment in surprise. Then he struck the stones vigorously with his stick and broke into a mighty burst of laughter.

"Good-bye, you drab! A pleasant walk to you! Go back and fornicate with your wild beasts!— Ah! a priest cannot satisfy you. You want some one with much stronger loins. You should get an oak tree. Will you take my stick? Here! take it, and lie with it! It's a fine sturdy fellow, that may be able to satisfy you!"

And, as he spoke, he hurled his stick into the gloom after Albine. Then, looking at the Abbé Mouret, he growled out:

"I knew you were in there. I saw that the stones had been disturbed— Listen to me, your reverence. Your sin has made me your superior, and God tells you, through my mouth, that hell has no torments severe enough for a priest who lets himself fall a prey to the lusts of the flesh. If He were to pardon you, He would be too indulgent, and detract from His own justice."

With slow steps the pair walked down towards Les Artaud. The priest had not opened his lips. Gradually he lifted his head erect and threw off his fit of trembling. As he caught sight, in the distance, of the Solitary One looming blackly against the purplish sky, and the red glow of the tiles on the church, a gentle smile played upon his lips and in his calm eyes there shone an expression of perfect serenity.

The brother every now and then launched a vicious kick at any stone that came in his way. Presently, he turned to his companion.

"Is it all finished this time?" he asked. "Well, when I was your age, I was possessed, too. A demon was ever gnawing at my loins. But, after a time, he grew weary of it, and he took himself off. Now, I have no loins. I live in perfect serenity— Yes, indeed, I knew quite well that you would go. For three weeks I have been keeping a watch upon you. I used to look into the garden through the breach in the wall. I should have liked to cut the trees down. I have often hurled stones at them, and when I managed to break a branch off, I felt quite pleased— Tell me, now, is it so very sweet, the pleasure that you taste in there?"

He made the Abbé Mouret stop in the middle of the road, and glared at him with eyes that gleamed with a terrible expression of jealousy. The thought of the delicious meetings in Le Paradou tortured him. For weeks he had lingered by its threshold, sniffing from afar its unrighteous joys. But, as the Abbé kept perfect silence, he resumed his steps, jeering and muttering phrases of equivocal meaning. Then, in a louder voice, he said :

"You see, when a priest does what you have done, he scandalises all the other priests— I myself feel that my purity is sullied by my walking at your side. You poison our whole sex— Just now, you are behaving more sensibly. There is no need for you to make a confession. I know the feeling well enough. Heaven has broken your back for you, as it has done for so many others. So much the better! So much the better!"

He clapped his hands triumphantly. The Abbé, buried in a deep reverie, did not even hear him. His smile had spread over his whole face. When the brother left him at the vicarage door, he went round and entered the church. It looked quite grey and gloomy, just as on the terrible evening of that streaming day when temptation had torn him so violently. And it still remained poverty-stricken and silent, bare of all that gleaming gold and sighing passion that had swept in from the country-side. It was full of a solemn stillness, which only a breath of mercy seemed to stir.

Kneeling down before the great Christ of painted cardboard and bursting into tears, which he allowed to flow unrestrainedly down his cheeks, as though they were so many blessings, the priest murmured :

"Oh ! my God, it is not true that Thou art pitiless. I know it, I feel it ; Thou hast already pardoned me. I feel it in the outpouring of Thy grace, which, for some hours now, has been dropping itself in a sweet stream upon me, bringing back to me, slowly but surely, perfect peace and spiritual health— Oh ! my God, it is when I cast myself unreservedly before Thee, that Thou protectest me most effectually. Thou hidest Thyself from me, the better to rescue me from evil. Thou permittest my flesh to run its own course, that it may convince me of its weakness and nothingness— And now, oh ! my God, I see that Thou hast for ever marked me with Thy seal, that awful seal, pregnant with all blessings, which sets a man apart from other men, and whose mark is so ineffaceable that, sooner or later, it will make itself manifest even upon the sinning members. Thou hast broken me with sin and temptation. Thou hast burned me up in Thy flames. Thou hast willed that there should be nought left of me save a ruin, where Thou mightest safely descend. I am an empty tabernacle wherein Thou mayest dwell— Blessed art Thou, oh ! my God !"

He prostrated himself and blessed God in the dust. The Church was triumphant. It remained firm and unshaken, towering aloft over the priest's head with its altars and its confessional, with its pulpit and crosses and holy images. The world had ceased to exist for him. Temptation was extinguished, as a fire that was henceforth useless and unnecessary for the purification of his body. He was entering into a supernatural peace and calm. He broke out into a supreme cry.

"I am Thine, oh ! my God ! Thine only, to the exclusion of life and its creatures and of everything ! I am Thine only, oh ! my God, throughout all eternity !"

XIV.

At this moment Albine was wandering about in Le Paradou, racked with all the mute agony of a wounded animal. She had ceased to weep. Her face was very white and there was a deep line traced across her brow. Why was she being made to endure all this cruel suffering? Of what fault had she been guilty, that the garden no longer kept true to the promise it had been holding out to her since her childhood? She questioned herself as she walked abstractedly along, with no eyes for the avenues that were gradually glooming beneath the approaching night. She had always been obedient to the trees. She could never remember having injured a flower. She had ever been the beloved daughter of the green foliage, hearkening to it submissively, yielding herself up to it in full belief in the happiness which it promised to her. And when, on that supreme day, Le Paradou had cried aloud to her to throw herself beneath the giant-tree, she had lain down there and spread open her arms, repeating the lesson which the grass had whispered to her. So then, since she had nothing to reproach herself with, it was the garden which had betrayed her; and it was the garden that was torturing her, for the mere sake of seeing her suffer.

She halted and looked round her. The vast gloomy masses of foliage were wrapped in deep silence. The paths and walks were blocked up with black walls of darkness. The distant lawns were lulling to sleep the breezes that kissed them. She spread out her hands with a gesture of hopelessness, and broke into a bitter cry of protest. It could not all end thus. But her voice choked beneath the silent trees. Three times she bid Le Paradou answer her, but never an explanation came to her from its lofty branches, and not a leaf seemed moved with pity for her. Then she resumed her weary wandering, and she felt that she was entering the fatal sternness of the winter. Now

that she had ceased to rebelliously question the earth, she caught sound of a gentle murmur running along the ground. It was the farewell of the plants, wishing to one another a happy death. To have drunk in the sun for a whole season, to have lived ever wreathed with flowers, to have breathed out a continual perfume, and then, at the first touch of pain, to depart, with the hope of springing-up again somewhere, was not all this a life sufficiently long and happily spent, which an obstinate craving for further existence would mar? Ah! how sweet it must be to die, and have an endless night of peaceful rest before one, wherein to think of the short days of life and to recall eternally its fugitive joys!

She stayed her steps once more in the deep stillness of Le Paradou, but no longer gave utterance to accusing protestations. She believed, now, that she understood it all. Doubtless the garden had death in store for her, as the supreme, culminating happiness. It was to death that it had been all along leading her in its tender fashion. After love, there could be naught but death. Never had the garden loved her so much as it did now, and she had shown herself ungrateful in accusing it, while all the time she was still its best beloved child. The motionless boughs, the paths barred-up with darkness, the lawns where the breezes lay asleep, were only mute and voiceless that they might lure her on to taste the joys of a long silence. They wanted her to be with them in their winter rest, and they were plotting to carry her off, swathed round with their dried leaves, her eyes frozen up like the waters of the springs, her limbs stiffened like the naked branches, and her blood sleeping the sleep of the sap. She would live their life to the very end and die their death. Perhaps they had willed that next summer she should spring-up as a rose in the little flower-garden, or a slim pale willow in the meadow-lands, or a tender birch in the forest. Yes, it was the great law of life; she was going to die.

Then, for the last time, she bent her steps through the garden, in quest of death. What fragrant plant needed her long locks to increase the perfume of its leaves? What flower would wish the gift of her satin-like skin, the snowy whiteness of her arms, the tender flesh-tints of her neck? To what weakly tree should she offer up her young blood? She would have liked to be of service to the trees that fringed the avenues, to slay herself there, that from her flesh a bright foliage might spring, lofty and fertile, gladdened by the swarming birds in

the May-time, and caressed by the sun's hot kisses. But Le Paradou still maintained its long silence and had not yet made up its mind to confide to her in what last kiss it would spirit away her life. She must wander all round it and pace out all her old rambles once more. The full darkness of the night had almost fallen, and she thought she was being gradually sucked into the earth. She climbed up the great rocks and questioned them, asking them whether it was upon their stony beds that she must breathe out her life. She went through the forest, half-expecting, with a hope that made her steps linger, that some oak would cast itself down upon and bury her beneath the majesty of its fall. She skirted the streams that flowed through the meadow-lands, bending down at almost every step to see whether a couch had not been made ready for her in their clear waters amongst the lilies. But nowhere did death call to her or reach out his cold hands. Yet, she could not be mistaken. Le Paradou was certainly going to teach her to die, as it had taught her to love. She began again to scour amongst the bushes, more eagerly than when on those past-away hot mornings she had gone searching for love. And then, suddenly, just as she was reaching the flower-garden, she came upon death, in all the evening fragrance. She ran quickly forward, breaking out into a laugh of pleasure. She was to die amongst the flowers.

First she ran along to the thicket of rose-trees. There, in the last dying glimmer of the gloaming, she stripped the trees of their blossoms and gathered all the roses that hung languishing beneath the approach of winter. She plucked those that grew near the ground, quite heedless of the thorns; she plucked those in front of her, using both her hands; and she plucked those that hung over her head, standing on the tips of her toes and pulling down the boughs. So eager and impetuous was she, that she even broke the branches, she, who had ever been so scrupulously tender to even the tiniest blades of grass. Soon her arms were piled up with roses and she tottered beneath her burden of flowers. When she had quite stripped the trees, carrying away even the fallen petals, she turned her steps to the pavilion; and after she had let her load of blossoms slip on to the floor of the room with the blue ceiling, she went down again into the garden.

This time she gathered the violets. She plucked enormous bunches of them, which she pressed one by one, against her breast. Then she went to gather the carnations, plucking

them all, even to the buds ; massing them together in huge clusters of white blossoms, like bowls of milk, and huge clusters of red ones, like bowls of blood. Then she went to look for the Marvels of Peru, the heliotropes and the lilies. She devastated the beds of Marvel of Peru, whose flowers were almost closed beneath the night-air ; she rifled the field of heliotropes, piling up into a heap her harvest of blossom ; and she crowded under her arms bundles of lilies like bundles of reeds. When she had again loaded herself with as much as she could carry, she returned to the pavilion to throw down, by the side of the roses, the violets and the carnations and the lilies and the Marvels of Peru and the heliotropes. And then, without stopping to take breath, she went down again.

This time she went to that gloomy corner which seemed like the grave-yard of the flower-garden. A warm autumn had given birth there to a second crop of spring flowers. Here she made a raid upon the borders of tuberoses and hyacinths ; going down on her knees, and clutching her harvest with greedy precaution, lest she should miss a single blossom. The tuberoses seemed to her to be very precious flowers, which would distill drops of gold and all kinds of glories and wondrous sweetnesses. The hyacinths, beaded with their pearly bloom, were necklets, from whose every pearl would pour joys unknown to men. And when she had buried herself beneath the mass of tuberoses and hyacinths which she had gathered, she next stripped a field of poppies that bloomed a little way off, and then she even found means to crop a spreading tract of marigolds. Over the tuberoses and the hyacinths she heaped up the marigolds and poppies. She ran back to empty her load in the room with the blue ceiling, taking care that the breeze did not rob her of a single pistil. Then she came down again.

What was she going to gather now ? She had stripped bare the whole flower-garden. As she lifted herself up on the tips of her toes she could see nothing, in the dim gloom, but the garden lying all naked and dead, bright no longer with the tender eyes of its roses, the crimson smile of its carnations, or the perfumed locks of its heliotropes. But she could not return with empty arms. So she laid hands upon the herbs and leafy plants. She tore and pulled at them, bending down close to the ground, and seemed as though she would carry off the very soil itself in a clutch of supreme passion. She crammed her skirt with a harvest of aromatic plants, southernwood, mint,

verbenas. She came across a border of balm, and left not a leaf of it unplucked. She even broke off two great fennel-plants, which she threw over her shoulders like a couple of trees. If she had been able, she would have carried away with her, between her teeth, all the greenery of the garden. When she reached the door of the pavilion, she turned round and gave a last look at Le Paradou. It was quite dark. The night had fully come and cast its black veil over everything. Then she went up the steps, never more to come down them.

The great room was quickly decked. She had placed a lighted lamp upon the table. She sorted out the pile of flowers on the floor and arranged them in big bunches, which she distributed about the room. She began by putting some lilies behind the lamp on the table, softening the light as it streamed through their snowy purity. Then she strewed handfuls of carnations over the old carpet, whose coloured texture was already strewn with red bouquets that had faded a century ago, till it was all hidden, and the couch that lay against the wall as well, beneath a deluge of blossom. Then she placed the four arm-chairs in front of the alcove. She piled up the first one with marigolds, the second with poppies, the third with the Marvels of Peru, and the fourth with heliotrope. The chairs were completely buried in bloom, leaving nothing but the tips of the arms visible and looking like heaps of flowers. Lastly, she turned to the bed. She pushed a little table close to the head of it, on which she placed an enormous bunch of violets. Then, gathering them up in her arms, she covered the bed entirely with all the hyacinths and tuberoses she had plucked. So many of them were there that they flowed over and hung down at the ends and sides in festoons of blossom, and the whole bed was a perfect mass of bloom.

Still the roses remained. These she scattered all over the room, without even looking to see where they fell. Some of them dropped on to the table and the couch and the chairs, and a portion of the bed was quite buried beneath them. For some minutes it rained thick bunches of roses, a real down-pour of heavy blossoms, like a storm-shower, that settled in pools of flowers in the hollows of the floor. But as the heap seemed to be scarcely diminished, she finished them off by weaving them into garlands which she hung upon the walls. She twined garlands of roses round the necks and arms and shoulders of the plaster cupids that sported over the alcove, and all their nakedness was hidden beneath roses. The blue ceiling, the

oval panels, wreathed with knots of flesh-coloured ribbon, the erotic paintings, spotted and crumbling with age, were all hung round with rosy drapery and mantles of roses. The great room was fully decked. Now she could die there.

For a moment she remained standing, glancing round her. She was looking to see if death was there. Then she gathered up the aromatic leaves, the southernwood, the mint, the verbenas, the balm and the fennel. She wreathed them and twisted them and made wedges of them with which to stop-up every little opening and cranny in the windows and about the doorway. Then she drew the white calico-curtains and, without even a sigh, lay down on the bed, on the flowery mass of hyacinths and tuberoses. There she drained her last draught of pleasure. With widely opened eyes she smiled tenderly on the room. Ah! how she had loved there! And now she was going to die there so happily! In that supreme moment the plaster cupids suggested to her not the slightest thought of impurity, and the paintings, where women's limbs lay clasping and clinging, disturbed her no more. She was conscious of nothing beneath that blue ceiling save the intoxicating perfume of the flowers. And she thought that this perfume was none other than the old love-fragrance which the alcove had ever breathed, but now increased a hundredfold and become so strong and penetrating that it would surely suffocate her. In perfect stillness, her hands clasped over her heart, she continued to smile, while she listened to the buzzing of the perfumes in her swimming head. They were singing to her soft strange chords of fragrance which were slowly and very sweetly lulling her to sleep.

At first, it was the music of an overture, bright and child-like; and her hands that had just now twisted and twined the aromatic foliage breathed out the slight pungency of crushed herbage and brought back to her mind her old wild ramblings through the depths of Le Paradou. Then there sounded in her ears a flute-like melody of tiny notes, which wandered away from the violets that lay upon the table near the head of the bed; and this flute-strain, weaving into its song the soft gentleness of the lilies' tones, sang to her of the first joys of her love, its first confession and its first kiss beneath the trees of the forest. Her breathing was growing more difficult, as the voice of the carnations, wrapped in their penetrating fragrance, burst upon her in a cry of passion, whose ringing notes seemed to drown all others. Then the poppies and mari-

golds broke into song, and she thought that she should die to their strains of wailing, which seemed to be repeating all the torment of her old desire. But then all suddenly grew quiet and peaceful; her breath came again tranquilly, and she glided into a perfect serenity, lulled by a descending scale of the flowers' notes, which died away into a soft sweet love-song from the heliotropes, who whispered to her with their vanilla breath of the approach of her marriage-hour. The Marvels of Peru broke out, here and there, in gentle trillings. Then there was a hush. And then the roses began. Their voices streamed down from the ceiling like the strains of a distant choir. It was a mighty chorus, whose first notes broke startlingly upon her ear.

As the volume of melody swelled greater and louder, her whole frame vibrated with the mighty sound that broke in waves around her. The bridegroom was at hand and the trumpet blast of the roses sounded the supreme moment. She strained her hands more closely to her heart and lay panting and gasping and dying. As she opened her lips for the kiss which should drain her life, the hyacinths and tuberoses breathed round her such a mighty sigh that it drowned all the chorus of the roses.

And, amidst the final gasp of the flowers, Albine died.

XV.

ABOUT three o'clock the next day, La Teuse and Brother Archangias, who were chatting on the vicarage-steps, saw Doctor Pascal's gig coming at full gallop through the village. The whip was being vigorously brandished from beneath the lowered hood.

"Where can he be off to at that rate?" murmured the old servant. "He will break his neck."

The gig had just reached the rising-ground on which the church was built. Suddenly, the horse reared and stopped, and the doctor's head, all white and disordered, appeared from under the hood.

"Is Serge there?" he cried, in a voice full of indignant excitement.

La Teuse had stepped down to the edge of the hill. "His reverence is in his room," she said. "He will be reading his breviary. Do you want to speak to him? Shall I call him?"

Uncle Pascal, who seemed almost distracted, made an angry gesture with his right hand which held the whip. Bending himself still further forward, at the risk of falling out altogether, he replied:

"Ah! he is reading his breviary, is he?— No! no! don't call him. I should strangle him, and that would do no good—I wanted to tell him that Albine was dead. Dead! do you hear? Tell him, from me, that she is dead!"

And he drove off, lashing his horse so fiercely that it bolted madly along. But, twenty paces away, he pulled up again, and stretching out his head, he cried loudly:

"Tell him, too, from me, that she was pregnant! It will please him to know that."

Then the gig went along on its headlong way again. It jolted up the stony hill that led to Le Paradou. La Teuse stood quite dumbfounded. Brother Archangias sniggered

and looked at her with eyes glittering with a savage joy. She thrust him away from her and almost made him fall head-foremost down the steps.

"Be off with you!" she said, full of anger. "I shall grow to hate you. Is it possible to rejoice at any one's death? I wasn't fond of the girl, myself; but it is very sad to die at her age. Be off with you, and don't go on sniggering like that, or I shall throw my scissors at your face!"

It was only about an hour before that a peasant, who had gone to Plassans to sell vegetables, had told Doctor Pascal of Albine's death, and had added that Jeanbernat wanted to see him. The doctor was feeling a little relieved and soothed by what he had just screamed out, as he had passed the vicarage. He had gone out of his way to give himself that satisfaction. He was reproaching himself for the death of the girl as for a crime in which he himself had shared. All along the road he had never ceased overwhelming himself with angry accusations, wiping the tears from his eyes that he might see where to guide his horse; driving his gig angrily over heaps of stones, fiercely hoping to overturn himself and break one of his limbs. When he reached the long lane that skirted the endless wall of the park, a glimmer of hope broke upon him. Perhaps Albine was only in a dead-faint. The peasant had told him that she had suffocated herself with flowers. Ah! if he could only get there in time, he might be able to save her! and he lashed his horse fiercely, as though he were lashing himself.

It was a lovely day. The pavilion was all bathed in the sunlight, just as it was in the fair spring-time. But the leaves of the bind-weed which mounted up to the roof were spotted and patched with rust, and the honey bees no longer buzzed round the gilliflowers. He hastily tethered his horse and pushed open the gate of the little garden. All around still lay that perfect silence in which Jeanbernat had been wont to smoke his pipe; but, to-day, the old man was no longer sitting on his bench, watching his salad plants.

"Jeanbernat!" called the doctor.

No one answered. Then, entering the vestibule, the doctor saw something that he had never seen before. At the end of the passage, below the dark frame of the stair-case, a door lay open into *Le Paradou*, and he could see the vast garden lying beneath the pale sunlight, in all its autumn-melancholy and rusty with its sere and yellow foliage. He hurried through the door-way and stepped over the damp grass.

"Ah ! is it you, doctor ?" said Jeanbernat's calm voice. •

The old man was digging out a hole at the foot of a mulberry-tree with his spade. He had straightened his tall form on hearing steps approach him. Then he betook him to his task again, throwing out at each effort an enormous mass of the rich soil.

"What are you doing there ?" asked Doctor Pascal.

Jeanbernat straightened himself again. He wiped the sweat off his face with the sleeve of his shirt. "I am digging a hole," he answered quite simply. "She always loved the garden and it will please her to sleep here."

The doctor felt a choking in his throat. For a moment he stood by the edge of the grave, incapable of speaking. He watched Jeanbernat digging sturdily on.

"Where is she ?" at last he asked.

"Up there ; in her room. I have left her on her bed. I should like you to go and listen at her heart, before we put her away in here. I listened myself, but I couldn't hear anything."

The doctor went upstairs. The room was quite undisturbed. Only a window had been opened. The flowers, withered and choked with their own perfumes, exhaled only the faint odour of their dead beauty. Within the alcove, however, there still hung an asphyxiating warmth, which seemed to trickle into the room and gradually disperse itself in tiny puffs. Albine, snow-pale, with her hands over her heart and a smile playing on her face, lay sleeping on her couch of hyacinths and tuberoses. She was quite happy, since she had died. Standing by the bed, the doctor gazed earnestly at her, with a keen inquisitive expression, as though he were hoping that a resurrection were possible for her. But he did not even disturb her clasped hands. He just kissed her brow, on the spot where her maternity had already marked a slight shadow. Below, in the garden, Jeanbernat continued to drive his spade into the ground with heavy, regular blows.

A quarter of an hour later, the old man came upstairs. He had completed his work. He found the doctor seated by the bed-side, buried in such a deep reverie that he did not seem conscious of the heavy tears that were trickling down his cheeks.

The two men only glanced at each other. Then, after an interval of silence, Jeanbernat said slowly :

"Well, was I not right ? There is nothing, nothing, nothing—All that is mere nonsense."

He remained standing and began to pick up the roses that had fallen from the bed, throwing them, one by one, on to Albine's dress.

"The flowers," he said, "live only for a day, while the rough nettles, like me, wear out the very stones from which they spring— Now, good-night; I am nearly distracted. They have choked up my last ray of sun-light. It is all foolery!"

Then he threw himself into one of the chairs. He did not shed a tear, but he bore himself with a rigid despair, like automaton whose mechanism is broken. Mechanically he reached out his hand and took a book that lay on the violet-strewn table. It was an odd volume of Holbach, which he had been reading since the morning, while he watched by Albine's body. As the doctor still remained silent and buried in gloomy thought, he began to turn its pages over. Then a sudden idea struck him.

"If you will help me," he said to the doctor, "we will carry her downstairs, and bury her with all her flowers." Uncle Pascal shuddered. He explained to the old man that it was not allowed to keep the dead in that way.

"What! it isn't allowed!" cried Jeanbernat. "Well, then, I will allow it myself! Doesn't she belong to me? Isn't she mine? Do you think I am going to let the priests walk off with her? Let them try, if they want to get a shot from my gun!"

He sprang to his feet and waved his book about with a terrible gesture. The doctor seized his hands and clasped them within his own, beseeching him to be calm. He talked to him for a long time, saying whatever came first into his head. He blamed himself, made fragmentary confessions of his fault, and hinted vaguely at those who had killed Albine.

"Listen," he said in conclusion, "she is yours no longer, and you must give her up."

But Jeanbernat shook his head, and refused with a gesture. However, his obstinate resolution was shaken. In a moment or two, he added:

"Well, well, let them take her, and may she break their arms for them! I hope she will rise up out of the ground and kill them all with fear— And I have a little business to do over there, as well. I will go to-morrow— Good-bye, doctor. The hole will do for me."

And, when the doctor was gone, he sat down again by the dead girl's side, and went on with his book.

XVI.

THAT morning there was a great commotion and excitement in the yard at the vicarage. The Artaud butcher had just slaughtered Matthew, the pig, in the shed. Désirée, quite wild about it all, had held Matthew's feet, while he was being bled, kissing him in the back that he might feel the pain of the knife less, and telling him that it was quite necessary that he should be killed, now that he had got so fat. No one could cut off a goose's neck with a single stroke of the hatchet more unconcernedly than she could, or gash open a fowl's throat with a pair of scissors. Her familiarity with the animals made her look upon their slaughter with great equanimity. It was quite necessary, she would say. It made room for the young ones who were growing up. This morning, she was very gay.

"Mademoiselle," grumbled La Teuse, every minute, "you are going to make yourself ill. There is no sense in working yourself up into such a state, just because a pig has been slaughtered. You are as red as if you had been dancing a whole night."

But Désirée only clapped her hands and turned away and busied herself about the yard again. La Teuse was complaining that her legs were sinking under her. Since six o'clock in the morning her enormous frame had been perpetually oscillating between the kitchen and the yard. She was going to make some black-puddings, and was busy whisking the blood in two great earthen-ware dishes, and never would she be able to get it finished, she said, since mademoiselle was for ever calling her away for mere nothings.

It must be mentioned that, at the very moment when the butcher was bleeding Matthew, Désirée had been thrilled with a wild excitement on entering the stable. Lisa, the cow, was showing signs of labour. Her intense joy and pleasure

at this sight, joined to Matthew's slaughter, had quite turned her head.

"One goes and another comes!" she cried, skipping and dancing with wild gaiety. "Come and look, La Teuse! come and look!"

It was eleven o'clock. Every now and then the sound of chanting was wafted over from the church. A confused murmur of doleful voices could be heard, a muttering of prayers and scraps of Latin pronounced in louder and clearer tones.

"Come! oh, do come!" repeated Désirée for the twentieth time.

"I must go and toll the bell, now," murmured the old servant. "Really, I shall never get finished— What is it that you want now, mademoiselle?"

But she did not wait for an answer. She threw herself into the midst of a swarm of fowls, who were greedily drinking the blood from the dishes. She angrily kicked them away, and then covered up the dishes, saying:

"It would be a great deal better, if, instead of tormenting me, you would come and look after these wretched animals— If you don't watch them, there will be no black-pudding for you. Do you hear?"

Désirée only laughed. Where was the harm in the fowls drinking a few drops of the blood? It made them fat. Then she tried again to drag La Teuse off to look at the cow, but the old servant refused to go.

"I must go and toll the bell— They will be coming out of church directly. You know that quite well."

At this moment the voices in the church broke out into louder tones, singing a dirge-like chant. The sound of steps could be distinctly heard.

"No! no!" insisted Désirée, dragging La Teuse towards the stable. "Just come and look at her, and tell me what I am to do."

The cow, lying down on her bed of straw, turned her head and gazed at them with her big eyes. Désirée said she was sure she wanted something. Perhaps there was something they could do for her to make her suffer less. La Teuse shrugged her shoulders. Didn't the animals know very well how to manage their own affairs? All you had to do was just to leave them alone and not bother them. Then she set off towards the vestry, but, as she passed in front of the shed, she broke out into a fresh cry.

"Get away! get away!" she shrieked, shaking her fist.
"Ah! the scamp!"

Matthew was lying at full length on his back, with his feet in the air, under the shed, waiting to be fried. The gash which the knife had made in his neck was still quite fresh, and was beaded with little drops of blood. And a little white hen was very delicately picking off, one by one, these drops of blood.

"Well," said Désirée, very quietly, "it is only feeding itself." She bent down and patted the pig's plump belly, saying:

"Eh! my fat fellow, you have stolen their food too often, to grudge them a tiny little bit of your neck, now!"

La Teuse hastily stripped off her apron and tied it round Matthew's neck. Then she hurried away and disappeared within the church. The great door had just creaked on its rusty hinges and a burst of chanting was wafted out into the open air, into the midst of the bright sunshine. Suddenly the bell began to toll with slow and regular strokes. Désirée, who had remained kneeling by the side of the pig, and patting his belly, raised her head to listen, still continuing to smile.

When she saw that she was alone, she glanced cautiously around her, and then glided away into the stable and closed the door behind her. She had gone to assist the cow. The little gate of the grave-yard, which had been opened quite wide to let the body pass through it, hung against the wall, half torn from its hinges. The empty ground and its dry herbage lay bathed in gentle sunlight. The funeral procession passed into it, chanting the last verse of the *Miserere*. Then there was a short silence.

"*Requiem æternam dona ei, Domine,*" said the Abbé Mouret, in solemn tones.

"*Et lux perpetua luceat ei,*" added Brother Archangias, in a drawling bass.

At the head walked Vincent, wearing a surplice and bearing the cross, a great copper cross, with half the plating rubbed off, which he lifted up aloft with both his hands. Then came the Abbé Mouret, looking very pale in his black chasuble, his head erect, and without a quiver on his lips as he chanted the office, gazing into the distance with firmly fixed eyes. The flame of the lighted candle which he was carrying scarcely showed in the full daylight. Just behind him, almost touching

him, came Albine's coffin, borne by four peasants on a sort of litter painted black. The coffin, clumsily covered with a pall that was too short for it, exposed to view, at the lower end, the fresh deal of which it was made, in which the heads of the nails sparkled with a steely glitter. The middle of the pall was covered with flowers: white roses, hyacinths and tuberoses, taken from the dead girl's bed.

"Take care! take care!" cried Brother Archangias to the peasants, as they tilted up the litter a little, to enable them to get it through the gate-way. "You are going to upset everything on to the ground!"

He held the coffin in its place with his fat hand. He was carrying the holy-water vessel, in the absence of a second clerk, and he was representing as well the choir-man and the rural policeman, who had not been able to come.

"Come in, too, you others," he said, turning round.

There was another funeral, that of Rosalie's baby, who had died the previous day from an attack of convulsions. There was the mother, the father, old mother Bricbet, Catherine, and the two girls, La Rousse and Lisa. The two latter were carrying the baby's coffin, one supporting each end. The voices were hushed again and there was another interval of silence. The bell still continued to toll in slow sad tones. The funeral procession crossed through the grave-yard, going towards the corner which was enclosed by the church on one side and by the wall of the poultry-yard on the other. Swarms of grasshoppers scudded away in alarm at the approaching foot-steps and the lizards hurried off to their holes. A heavy warmth hung over this corner of the grave-yard. The crackling of the dry grass under the steps of the mourners sounded like choking sobs.

"Stay! stop where you are!" cried the brother, barring the way before the two girls, who were carrying the baby's coffin. "Wait for your turn, and don't be tripping up our legs here."

The two girls laid the baby down on the ground. Rosalie, Fortuné, and old mother Bricbet were lingering in the middle of the grave-yard, while Catherine followed warily behind Brother Archangias. Albine's grave was dug at the left-hand side of the Abbé Caffin's tomb, whose white stone seemed in the brilliant sunshine all flecked with silvery streaks. The gaping grave, freshly dug that morning, yawned open in the midst of thick tufts of grass. Over its sides drooped long

stalks and a fallen flower lay at the bottom, staining the dark soil with its crimson petals. As the Abbé Mouret came forward, the soft earth crumbled and gave way beneath his feet, and he was obliged to step back, to keep himself from slipping into the grave.

"*Ego sum*—" he intoned in a deep, full voice, that made itself heard clearly above the mournful tolling of the bell.

During the anthem, those who were present instinctively cast furtive glances towards the bottom of the still empty grave. Vincent, who had planted the cross at its foot, opposite to the priest, broke off little patches of earth and amused himself by watching them fall. This made Catherine laugh, and she bent forward, from behind him, to get a better view. The peasants had laid the litter down on the grass and they stretched their arms, while Brother Archangias was preparing the sprinkler.

"Come here, Voriau!" called Fortuné.

The big black dog, who had gone off to sniff at the coffin, came sulkily back.

"What have they brought the dog for?" exclaimed Rosalie.

"Oh! he followed us," said Lisa, smiling quietly.

They were all chatting together in subdued tones round the baby's coffin. The father and mother occasionally forgot all about it, and then, when they caught sight of it again, lying between them, at their feet, they would be silent for a moment or two.

"Wouldn't old Bamousse come?" inquired La Rousse.

Old mother Brichet turned up her eyes to heaven.

"He threatened to break everything into pieces yesterday, when the little one was lying dead. No, no, he is not a good man. I must confess that to you, Rosalie. Didn't he nearly strangle me, crying out that he had been robbed, and that he would have given one of his corn-fields for the little one to have died three days before the wedding?"

"One can never tell what will happen," said Fortuné mischievously.

"What's the good of the old man putting himself out about it? We are married, all the same, now," added Rosalie.

They smiled at one another across the little coffin. Lisa and La Rousse nudged each other with their elbows. Then they all became very serious and solemn again. Fortuné picked up a clod of earth to throw at Voriau, who was prowling about amongst the old tomb-stones.

"Ah! they've nearly finished over there, now!" La Rousse whispered very softly.

The Abbé Mouret was just concluding the *De profundis* by Albine's grave. Then, with slow steps, he approached the coffin, drew himself up erectly and gazed at it for a moment without a quiver in his glance. He looked taller and his face shone with a serenity that seemed to transfigure him. He stooped down and picked up a handful of earth, and scattered it over the coffin in the form of a cross. Then, in a voice so steady and clear that not a syllable was lost, he said :

"Revertitur in terram suam unde erat, et spiritus redit ad Deum qui dedit illum."

A shudder ran through those who were present. Lisa seemed to think for a moment, and then she said, with an air of weariness :

"It is not very cheerful, all this, when one thinks that one's own turn will come some day."

Brother Archangias handed the sprinkler to the priest, who took it and shook it several times over the corpse.

"Requiescat in pace," he murmured.

"Amen," responded Vincent and the brother, together, in tones so respectively shrill and deep, that Catherine had to cram her fist into her mouth to keep from bursting into a laugh.

"No, indeed, it is certainly not cheerful," continued Lisa. "There seems to be scarcely anyone at all at yonder funeral. The grave-yard would be quite empty without us."

"I've heard say that she killed herself," said old mother Brichet.

"Yes, I know," interrupted La Rousse. "The brother didn't want to have her buried amongst the christian folks, but his reverence said that eternity was for everybody. I was there—And I think the Philosopher might have come."

At that moment Rosalie reduced them all to silence, as she murmured :

"See! there he is, the Philosopher."

Jeanbernard was, indeed, just entering the grave-yard. He walked straight on to the group that still lingered round the grave. He stepped along with a lithe gait, so springy, still, that none of them heard him coming. When he was close to them, he stood for a moment behind Brother Archangias and seemed to fix his eyes, for an instant, on the nape of his neck. Then, just as the Abbé Mouret was finishing the office, he calmly

drow his knife from his pocket, opened it and sliced off, with a single cut, the brother's right ear.

No one had had time to interfere. The brother gave a terrible yell.

"The left one will do for another time," said Jeanbernard quietly, as he threw the ear down on to the ground. Then he went away.

They were all so dazed and astounded that no one followed him. Brother Archangias had dropped down upon the heap of fresh soil which had been thrown out of the grave. He was staunching his bleeding wound with his handkerchief. One of the four peasants, who had carried the coffin wanted to lead him home. But he refused with a gesture, and he stayed where he was, fierce and sullen, desiring to see Albine laid in her grave.

"There! it's our turn at last!" said Rosalie with a little sigh.

But the Abbé Mouret still lingered by the grave, watching the bearers who were slipping cords under Albine's coffin, that they might let it gently down. The bell was still tolling; but La Teuse must have been getting tired, for it tolled irregularly, as though it were becoming a little irritated at the length of the ceremony.

The sun was growing hotter and the Solitary's shadow was creeping slowly along through the tombstones that dotted the grass of the church-yard. As the Abbé Mouret stepped back out of the way of the bearers, his eyes lighted upon the marble grave-stone of the Abbé Caffin, the priest who had loved, and who was now sleeping so peacefully there, beneath the wild-flowers.

Suddenly, just as the coffin was being let down, supported by the cords, which strained and creaked under the weight, a tremendous uproar broke out in the poultry-yard at the other side of the wall. The goat was bleating. The ducks, the geese, and the turkeys were all raising their loudest voices and flapping their wings. The fowls were all cackling at once. The yellow cock, Alexander, was crowing with his fullest notes. The rabbits could be heard leaping in their hutches and stamping against their wooden floors. And, over all this noisy commotion of the animals, there rang out a loud laugh. There was a rustling of skirts. Désirée, her hair streaming loose from her head, her arms bare to the elbows, and her face crimson with triumph, burst into sight, her hands resting upon the

coping-stone of the wall. She must have mounted up on to the dung-hill.

"Serge! Serge!" she cried

At this moment, Albine's coffin had reached the bottom of the grave. The bearers had just withdrawn the cords. One of the peasants cast the first shovelful of earth.

"Serge! Serge!" she cried, still more loudly, clapping her hands, "the cow has got a calf!"

THE END.

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