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A Madame Josilphine Osborne
her respectful homage.

George Osborne

LISE FLEURON.

FROM THE FRENCH OF
GEORGES OHNET,

*Author of "Le Maître de Forges," "La Comtesse Sarah,"
"La Grande Marnière," &c., &c.*

BY
LADY WILLIAM GODOLPHIN OSBORNE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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“ Love, art thou sweet ? then bitter Death must be :
Love, thou art bitter : sweet is Death to me.

. O Love, if death be sweeter, let me die.

.

I fain would follow Love, if that could be ;
I needs must follow Death, who calls for me ;
Call and I follow, I follow ! Let me die.”



LISE FLEURON.

CHAPTER I.



BETWEEN the Ambigu and the Porte-Saint-Martin, having its principal entrance upon the Boulevard, and its private entrance in the Rue de Bondy, stands the theatre which bore in the beginning the name of Fantaisies-Dramatiques. It was erected upon the site of the Restaurant Balagny, burnt by the insurgent bands during the last days of the Commune, at the same time as the Porte-Saint-Martin. Retreating towards the Château-d'Eau, closely pursued by the troops from Versailles, the Federates, in order to stop the pursuit, and to gain a little breathing time, barred the

Boulevard with an immense conflagration. Three houses were devoured by the flames. A theatre disappeared, the most popular, the most in favour with that public who likes to see, towards midnight, crime punished and innocence triumphant. Half-a-dozen *bourgeois* were roasted in the blazing ruins; the termination of the duel engaged in between order and disorder, was not delayed for an hour. One year after, instead of three houses and a theatre, three theatres and one house displayed upon the Boulevard their newly-decorated façades. There are whimsical minds who note this fact, and infer from it that the Commune had a decisive influence over the development of dramatic art in France.

The principal entrance is only used in the evening, from seven o'clock till midnight, when the darkness becomes profound, and when the flames of the gas above the cornice of the portico, in which the name of the piece in vogue is written in glowing letters, breathed on by the wind, undulate like a sea of fire. It is at this hour obstructed by wooden barriers, between which the crowd, standing in a file, allows itself with docility to be penned. In front of this entrance a struggle takes place, by the spectators having reserved places contending against the offers of the ticket-sellers who

propose to them, "A good stall cheaper than at the booking-office," and against the onsets of the vendors of programmes, who violently thrust the paper into their hands. Gliding between the legs of the *agents de police*, the cocoa merchant, with small silver bell fastened to his shoulder, penetrates impudently as far as under the *marquise* to cry : " *A la fraîche, qui veut boire ?*"—whilst, established at the edge of the pavement, with their narrow, flat baskets, the orange sellers, with sun-tanned faces, wearing on their heads handkerchiefs of printed cotton, retail "fine Valencias" to the *gamins* of the quarter, by the light of a wax-candle set up in a red paper lantern.

It is a crush of foot-passengers, gazing, nose in air, and sounding their pockets before making up their minds to approach the *guichet*, a confusion of *fiacres*, to the doors of which the collectors of cigar ends spring, in the midst of shouts, disputes, and oaths. This uproar, this hubbub, this struggle, lasts half-an-hour ; then in the twinkling of an eye, the Place is cleared ; the *agents de police* walk up and down, with hands in pockets ; the vestibule is empty around the check-taker's office, in which sit three grave gentlemen, wearing carefully-arranged white cravats ; the programme sellers rush to the

bar of the wine shop; the heavy omnibuses drawn by three horses, on the Madeleine-Bastille route, can circulate at ease upon the *chaussée*, become almost a desert; tranquillity succeeds confusion. A little bell had worked this change of scene. It had proclaimed by tinkling that they were ready to draw up the curtain, and that the play was about to begin.

The other entrance does not enjoy those triumphant crushes; it has not the majestic width of that luxurious door; it does not give passage on the evening of a first representation, to formidable critics, to celebrated authors, to influential bankers, to *élégants* from the clubs, to well-known politicians who can do much *pour la boutonnière* of managers, and, finally, to women, graceful and charming, who will be the ornament of the theatre, and of whom a witty writer has said, "There are never too many of them! Whilst men are looking at them, they are not running down the play."

This entrance, commonly called *entrée des artistes*, is narrow, low, rarely swept, and gives access to a dark lobby, with damp and greasy walls, which leads to the lodge of the *concierge*, under whose vigilant eye one must pass before being able to penetrate to the interior of the theatre. An odour of cookery, a smell of fat burning on a cast-iron stove, mingled

with the suffocating emanations of gas, fills the throat as soon as one enters. The programme for the day is pasted to the wall, which in places preserves specimens, red, green, or yellow, of the varied colour of the paper. Above the door this simple inscription in black letters: *Administration*.

These two entrances, so full of contrast, give an admirable summary of the theatre; on one side brilliant, in the dazzling gleam of the foot-lights, with its luxurious decorations, its gilded fittings, its many-coloured costumes, and its actors, juvenile, thanks to their wigs, handsome, thanks to their *maquillage*: on the other side, gloomy, with the old hand-bills which are used to line the scenery; machinists in blouses, who make ready the changes of scene; the morose stage-manager, who perambulates the *coulisses* with the airs of a ruminant; the actor, his face unbent and wearied, who awaits, while muttering his cue, near the wings, the moment to make his appearance—perpetual contrasts, incessantly repeated, representations of still-life, painted with such fidelity to nature as to deceive the eye, of which the initiated alone can fathom the exact intention, and which the public, the sovereign master for whose pleasure everything is set to work, cannot suspect.

The entrance on the Boulevard is thrown wide open to the crowd: the entrance in the Rue de Bondy is scrupulously closed to it. It is before this small doorway that young authors and ingenuous lovers go to wait, their feet in the gutter, black and exhaling a fetid odour from the traffic of the street, casting furtive glances to endeavour to catch a glimpse of the interior of this paradise dreamed of so often and so fondly.

For a long time this paradise has been a hell. As in the fairy tales, all the genii except one seemed to have been present at the birth of the theatre. Each bestowed upon it a precious gift which ought to assure its fortune. But the evil genie who was forgotten had cast a fatal spell into the cradle of the newly-born, and all the marvellous favours with which it had been loaded remained useless. Every style had been essayed there: not one had succeeded. The pieces were often good, however, and cleverly put on the stage. Dramas, fairy spectacles, comedies, operettas, all failed. A kind of *malaise* took possession of the spectators as soon as they were seated in their places. And in vain the authors poured out wit in floods, the actors trod the boards with a *verve endiablée*, the splendour of the *mise en scène* dazzled the eyes; nothing could prevail against the baneful

influence. The managements fell to pieces, one after the other, at the breath of misfortune, as houses of cards at the breath of a child. And the theatre appeared vowed to evil fortune, definitive and invincible.

That conviction penetrated gradually into all minds, and cast into them a superstitious terror. It gave birth to legends. There are ill-natured jesters who respect nothing. They said that the theatre was haunted, and that the spirit of an assignee returns there in the night, a frightful spectre, bearing stamped papers beneath his shroud, and uttering in the corridors long-drawn-out groans. The journals got hold of these pleasantries, and the *Fantaisies-Dramatiques* became to the chroniclers, when actual and interesting events were wanting, a subject always ready and unfortunately always inexhaustible.

This beautiful structure was acquainted with the horrors of commercial speculation; a former wood-merchant, in order to give fresh impulse to the theatre, attempted an economical administration. In the shop windows of all the tobacconists and hairdressers of the quarter could be found tickets at half-price, which drew an appalling audience. Women in caps showed themselves in the balcony

stalls. The company, recruited from the suburbs, was obliged to play the pieces of provincial authors who paid to have their productions performed. There was a succession of dramas and comedies perpetrated by notaries retired from business and by merchants *en mal de* literature which dishonoured that stage. The low price of the places did not, however, succeed in attracting spectators, and the theatre—dirty, blackened, degraded—played wearisome pieces to empty benches.

This time it was in truth the end. People had no longer the courage to jest. Every one turned aside from that house, upon the pediment of which *La Guigne* had hoisted the black flag. They no longer dared to enter, as if the misfortune which reigned over it was contagious. It was utter abandonment, the pangs of death, in the darkness and the silence of the tomb.

The world asked whether the destiny of that building, marked with the brand of reprobation, like a pestilential lazaretto, should not be changed. A rumour had already spread of the sale of the theatre to a financial company which would set up in it a panorama, when one morning burst, like a clap of thunder, over Paris, some news which put the dramatic world into a state of excitement. The

Figaro published in the *Bruits de Couliisses* the following lines :—

“ M. François Rombaud has undertaken the management of the Fantaisies-Dramatiques. Hoping to exorcise its ill-luck, he changes the name of the theatre, which will be called in future Théâtre-Moderne. The signatures were exchanged yesterday evening. Yet another daring man who plunges into the gulf. Honour to the courage of the unhappy one ! ”

He who was the subject of this paragraph, ironically sympathetic, was a little man, well known to all the frequenters of the Bourse, where for two years he had transacted business with much skill and good fortune. The opulent firm of bankers, Nuño and Graméda, gave him commissions. He risked a few operations, and succeeded in attaining a sufficiently good position. Very thin ; his face, seamed by small-pox and beardless, illumined by two piercing black eyes ; light hair, cut short *en brosse*—he had the stealthy aspect of a ferret. He spoke fluently, with a strongly-marked southern accent, and with much gesticulation. Extremely shrewd, he was extraordinarily tenacious, and, when he had confidence in an affair, he clung to it desperately until he had brought it to a successful issue. He drew back promptly when it was proved to him that he had taken in hand a bad speculation. Those who were acquainted with him had been induced, by his *façon d'être*, to interest themselves

in him. Sélim Nuño, the great Portuguese financier, whose broad shoulders, white hair, and swarthy complexion are known to the whole of Paris, said readily, "That little Rombaudo, if he finds a good opportunity, is a fellow who will make his fortune." Therefore, great was the wonder on the Bourse when it was known that he, of whom Nuño thought so highly, had just embarked in that *galère théâtrale*.

Nothing appeared to destine him for managerial functions. He went, it is true, to every first representation, and seemed to take the utmost pleasure in applauding actors of talent. But between that and to cast the pieces and to set going the actors for one's own benefit, there is a world of difference. Those who argued thus, with some appearance of reason, were ignorant, it is true, of the origin of François Rombaudo, and could not be aware of certain under-currents in his existence which rendered very intelligible the determination taken by the new lessee of the Théâtre-Moderne.

He came into the world at Bordeaux, in the cellar of a wine-merchant: his mother was the daughter of the head door-keeper. Some said that his father was a waterman on the Gironde, others, a rich spirit-merchant. That beautiful creature, his mother, had the fortitude to live underground, in

a wine vault, during the four months which preceded his birth. It was necessary to avoid the anger of her father, an old non-commissioned officer who had served in the Crimea and in Italy, who, little disposed to trifle with a question of honour, and not knowing upon whom to lay the blame of the seduction, was absolutely determined to kill her who had allowed herself to be seduced.

The spirit-merchant must certainly have been an accomplice in the crime, for every month he paid the expenses of the child's nurse, and sent the little François, the son of Rombaud's daughter and of an unknown father, to school, when he had reached his eighth year. The *gamin* was intelligent, but he was not industrious. His education was a long succession of impositions and of detentions during recreation, to which he accustomed himself as the horse accustoms itself to the 'shafts. He became one of the most successful dunces that the universal *régime* had ever produced. When it was a question of obtaining his *baccalauréat*, in spite of his extraordinary assurance, he stood open-mouthed before the examiners, and left the examination hall riddled with black balls.

His patron entirely abandoned him. François had, with regard to him, committed one sole, but

immense error, that of not flattering his self-conceit. In vain he went to his house, to play a pathetic scene. He found the old gentleman as cold as ice to a scion whose want of success caused him to be definitively looked upon as a failure, and who moreover seemed in a fair way to turn out badly. François flung himself at his feet, his speech broken by sobs, and ended with exasperating him by melodramatically calling him *mon père*. The spirit-merchant, who had retired to the comforts of a rich *bourgeois* life, foresaw, in the obstinate affection of this young rascal, a future filled with painful scenes. He therefore asserted that he had taken an interest in him only through kindness of heart, that he was not related to him, and commanded him to keep aloof, under penalty of having a bone to pick with the *Commissaire*. This said, he confided him to the zeal of a man-servant, belonging to that powerful race from Franche-Comté which supplies the French cavalry with men of six feet, and had him put to the door.

Thwarted in the hopes that he had founded upon this very rich *Monsieur*, whom he was pleased to consider his father, Rombaudo turned his attention to his mother. The daughter of the head door-keeper at the wine emporium, after a varied existence,

interspersed with joyous *fêtes*, with *ventes de reconnaissances du Mont-de-Piété*, with apartments elegantly furnished, and with pallets in houses of ill-fame, had married, at the age of thirty, a *traiteur* on the Quai des Chartrons, at the sign of the *Barreauxverts*, and had become the mistress of a flourishing *cabaret*, at the door of which, every Monday, oyster-shells lay on the ground in heaps. Bending beneath the absolute sway of her husband, the poor woman was in terror each time her son made his appearance. She lavished good advice on the young man, abstracted three hundred francs from the cash-drawer in the counter, and only recovered her tranquillity of mind when she saw Rombaudo take again, with a lingering step, the road by which he had come.

Abandoned to himself, Rombaudo asked, for the first time since his birth, how he was going to live. He had not one second of weakness. A cold fury seized upon him. He determined to extricate himself from the difficulty at any cost, and to succeed. Perhaps, amid the pleasures of an assured life, he might have become a worthless fellow. The obstacles with which he was contending strengthened him. He had no special tastes. His studies, very incomplete, moreover rendered him fit for nothing.

He began by essaying the most dissimilar vocations. In succession, a painter upon porcelain, an insurance broker, an agent for wines, manager and secretary to a Casino, editor of a small illustrated journal, conductor of the Folies-Bordelaises, a *café-concert* where pretty girls sang little songs in the midst of cigar smoke, he knew how to emerge, with advantage to himself, from the most delicate situations. He had filled the journal with his gallant adventures, for this little man with an insignificant face had incredible *bonnes fortunes* ; he had fought a duel, and boldly, on more than one occasion ; he had been through almost everything, save bankruptcy. This arose, without doubt, from his birth, and the blood of the spirit-merchant showed itself in him, for the idea of carrying on unsuccessful affairs confounded this audacious spirit. He always steered clear of them, through a marvellous sagacity which made him scent danger afar off, and gave him the power to avoid it. Already well known on the Exchange at Bordeaux, and amongst the young men of the town, to the pleasures of whom he had contributed, people said of him, with that Gascon accent which lends to their words a savour of garlic : “ *Té ! Il a le nez creux, ce Rombaud !* ”

His nose guided him, one fine day, to Paris. He

was then thirty years old, and was scarcely better off than on the day when he left his mother on the Quai des Chartrons. He had not been able to save money: he had lived, and that was all. He relied upon finding in Paris more numerous chances of advancement than at Bordeaux. Above all he found more competition, and, therefore, more difficulties. Till that time he had experienced ups and downs. But now he became acquainted with the lowest depth of poverty, and was reduced to acting in comedy at Batignolles, with a salary of twenty-eight francs a month. He did not have food every day, and yet this was one of the happiest periods of his life. He was employed as a comic actor, under the name of Francisque, and, in a revival of *La Cocarde Tricolore*, he played, with colossal success, the part of the comrade of Dumanet, the legendary Chauvin, "*qui a mangé du chameau.*"

However, chance, which was the god to whom Rombaudo addressed all his prayers, was about to procure for the young man the opportunity so eagerly awaited. A representation of *La Dame de Monsoreau* had been solemnly announced at the Théâtre de Batignolles, with the co-operation of Mademoiselle Clémence Villa, from the Porte-Saint-Martin, in the rôle of Diane de Méridor. Danjoy, an insipid

beauty, with a voice destroyed by absinthe, a sallow face of a copper-green tint, black eyes, and much crimped hair, the idol of the girls of that quarter, was cast for Bussy. Chicot had been allotted to Francisque. In vain the actor had observed that the part of Chicot required a tall fellow, thin, and with long legs. The stage manager said to him in a bantering manner—

“You will be a little Chicot, *voilà tout!* and with your accent, you will play him to the life!”

He played the part. When he appeared at rehearsal—it was winter—in his mustard-coloured *gâteuse*, which trailed over his heels, and when he began to blunder through his *rôle*, the star, Mademoiselle Clémence Villa, from the Porte-Saint-Martin, bit her lips and put on an icy air.

“If the piece is cast like that,” said she, “*nous allons remporter une fameuse veste!* He is grotesque, this little man, with his paletot under his feet, and his face as full of holes as a skimmer!”

The actress began to walk stormily about behind the scenes. She was a very pretty woman, dark, with slate-coloured gray eyes, tall and well-made, with long white hands, and very small feet. *Entretenue* in opulence, she had been seized, lately, by a passion for the stage, and, without study, but

guided by a keen intellect, she had succeeded in getting herself engaged at the Porte-Saint-Martin, where she played fairies, in fairy spectacles, and pages, in fleshings. Feeling a violent desire to attempt leading characters, she determined to go as far as Batignolles, at length to play a *jeune première*. She expected great results from this performance. The lessee of the Vaudeville, harassed by a club-man who interested himself, like many others, in the beautiful girl, had promised to go. There was, perhaps, a formal engagement to hope for, if the effect produced by the actress was satisfactory.

The piece ran as if upon wheels. The manager came, but did not offer the desired engagement. Francisque trod the stage with fire, and caught the fancy of Clémence, who consoled herself for the indifference of the manager by carrying away with her the comedian, after the curtain had fallen. That *bonne fortune* lasted six weeks, then Clémence Villa started for a sea-bathing place, and Francisque heard nothing more of her.

At the end of a few months, having arrived at the termination of his engagement, and seeing that he was working to no purpose, the actor bid adieu to the suburbs, again became Rombaudo as before, and went on the Bourse. He carried out several small

operations, and rubbed on doing neither well nor ill, when one day, upon the Place, he found himself face to face with Clémence, who was leaving the shop of a confectioner. The two comrades fraternized in the middle of the pavement, and related to each other all that had befallen them since their separation. Clémence had laid hands upon the big Sélim Nuño, and had obtained from him an income and an hôtel. She was included now amongst the most notorious women in Paris.

"But, if you are on the Bourse," said she to Rombaud, "I can get you pushed forward by Nuño. *Mon ami* François, your fortune is made! . . . Picture to yourself that this big Portuguese, who is rich as a gold mine, cannot do without me. . . . He comes every day, at five o'clock, and tells me his affairs, that he scrupulously conceals from his wife and from his children. He says, 'If I spoke at home of all that I gain, they would garrote me. . . . Whilst with Clémence I have peace!' He consults me. He affirms that I have a capacity for business."

"You have much capacity," interrupted Rombaud, with a mocking air.

"Ah! try to be serious, will you?" said Clémence, laughing. . . . "We are no longer at Batignolles! . . . Come to dine with me to-morrow, and be

there at about six o'clock. I will present you to Sélim as a former comrade. But, you quite understand, no boasting, or I leave you *en plan*. . . ."

Rombaudo went to the house of Clémence, whom he found established in the Avenue Hoche, in a sumptuous hôtel, between court-yard and garden. He ascended a marble staircase, with panelled walls covered with tapestry of the Gobelins. He was announced by a footman in black livery, who savoured of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and found the banker *tête-à-tête* with Clémence in a small salon hung with heliotrope plush and furnished in the gilded wood of the date of Louis XV. A handsome Indian carpet deadened the sound of steps, and from the ceiling hung a chandelier in rock crystal, of inestimable value. Upon a sofa the master was proudly sitting, tranquil and majestic. He spoke to Rombaudo in a guttural voice, accustomed to roll the rough consonants of the Portuguese tongue. The ex-Francisque was serious, as a thrashed donkey, and greatly pleased Nuño, who had not been exempt from suspicion as to the motives which had induced Clémence to recommend the young man to him.

From that time Rombaudo ceased to *tripoter* in Turkish and Egyptian bonds. He had a genuine note-book for orders, and put away

every month, on settling day, a very pretty commission. He engaged a small *coupé*, and exhibited himself at the races. He associated with a few young frequenters of the Bourse, of good family, who squandered their gains and even more, with women charming but not prudish. He conducted himself very soberly in this frolicsome circle, he, the late comedian at Batignolles, and witnessed, with a benevolent eye, but without ever joining in them, the eccentricities which formed the habitual pastime of his friends.

To speak the truth, in the world of finance he was wearied to death. He regretted the adventures of former days. Seated upon the shore, he had a longing for the restless waves. He desired again to find himself in the midst of a storm. But he aspired to command the vessel. Ambition had come to him. And, secretly, he formed a project. He got himself admitted into the Club of the *Arts Réunis*. There, painters, musicians, journalists, men of the world, mingled in a most agreeable intimacy. A few heavy punters conducted a gaming table, the most frequented in Paris, and enriched the club.

Rombaudo never touched a card, but he talked a great deal, and, from preference, with literary men.

They thought him very witty, and if he had desired to be placed on the staff of a journal, nothing would have been more easy. He did not wish it. He dreamed of being served by the Press, but not of serving it. Clémence was his first confidante. He indeed owed her that mark of interest. And then she was necessary to him.

He went, one morning, to find her at the hour of her rising, and was shown into the dressing-room, where the beautiful girl, wearing a pink silk *peignoir*, with insertions and edgings of Mechlin lace, was having her hair, which was very long, combed by her maid. On her bare feet were delicate Turkish slippers, embroidered with silver. And in her lap she held a small English terrier, whose silky ears she was absently drawing through her fingers. With a gesture, Clémence dismissed her maid, and, turning with curiosity to Rombaud, who was not in the habit of paying such early visits—

“What is the matter?” asked she. “Are you in any trouble? Have you lost heavily at play?”

“No, *ma chère*,” said Rombaud, who could not refrain from smiling. “I never speculate on my own account, since others have speculated through my agency. I come, quite simply, to speak to you

of a business transaction, and as I wished to find you alone, I came in the morning. . . .”

Clémence, much interested, did not remark the superlative insolence of the explanation.

“In what can I serve you? Are you like Nuño, do you also believe in my ability?”

“On this subject, yes. I wish to take a theatre.”

“You?”

Clémence gazed attentively at Rombaudo, and, seeing him grave and determined—

“Are you serious?”

“Quite serious.”

“Then you are mad!”

But he, without being disconcerted, began, with southern impetuosity, and in a business-like style, to explain his plans. He depicted the stage struggling in a mortal crisis between ancient and modern art. Literature, in the last ten years, had made great progress; it had boldly entered the domain of realism. The historical drama was dying out, and authors were at the end of their imagination. The old models were worn out, and it was necessary to renew them. The drama, with its tears and its laughter, was the theatrical representation which best suited the French mind. It was the

style preferred by the Parisian public. It had been abandoned, but could it not be revived? To give it again—to depict the passions, the vices, the ludicrous side of actual society on the stage—to do to-day what Dumas did when he wrote *Antony*. Why had they not launched the drama in the path recently entered upon by comedy? Did they now act comedies in the costumes of the *Renaissance* or of Louis XV? Why should the drama drag itself along in the beaten track of history? Was not the present time fruitful in subjects? Every day the tribunals rang with cases, so scandalous and so horrible that it would be impossible to transfer those judicial contests to the stage without revolting the decency of the public. Adultery, deeds of violence, *chantage*, financial failures which become national disasters, all are tragic! And what rich costumes for the actresses did not the present fashion offer? What admirable decorations had not luxury carefully provided! And what charming details Parisian life would never be wearied of furnishing! Everything contributed to assure the success of the idea. The life of excess such as the world led, was a continual drama, filled with intoxications and with sorrows, where blood was mingled with tears. There was only to point out the design to the authors

disheartened by the ill-will of managers, and quite a rich plantation of talent would spring up, assuring at the same time the glory and prosperity of the promoter.

And Rombauid was inexhaustible, hurried on by the fever of inspiration. He wrote the plays, he acted the parts. He mimicked the despair of the forsaken, the raptures of the lovers ; he menaced like the jealous, and, his eyes darting flames, his arm raised, he was prepared to strike the guilty wife. The whole drama was within him, and overflowed with a passion, an ardour, a poetic enthusiasm that agitated Clémence. Her nostrils quivering, her respiration interrupted by emotion, the actress, like a war-horse who hears the shrill trumpet-call, had, in one moment, been captivated by that outline of dramatic splendours. She was burning with excitement. She was again seized by her unsatiated passion for the stage, and, impetuously, she gave utterance, in the midst of his speech, to eager thoughts which stimulated Rombauid like strokes from a whip.

“ And what characters, *mon bonhomme* ! Women of our time, true to life, rendered with force, realistic—in short, modern ! Those are rôles that I should play *crânement* ! ”

She was silent. An idea sinking into her brain, like a drop of cold water into a boiling vessel, suddenly calmed her fever.

"We are fools!" said she. "We are exciting ourselves . . . And a theatre?"

Rombaud sat down and, quite composed, ready to deal the decisive blow.

"I have one!" replied he, with a triumphant vibration in his voice, as if he was announcing the discovery of the richest *placer* in America.

"Which?"

"The Fantaisies-Dramatiques."

The countenance of Clémence expressed stupor; she let her arms drop with despondency.

"That *boite à fours*!" cried she. "Why, my poor fellow, you must not think of it! Nothing can be done with that. Every calculation proves abortive beforehand. *Ennui* oozes from the walls; the public will no longer go there. It is like a house in which all the tenants die, one after the other, of cholera. Who would go and live in it?"

"I would! I am not afraid. Ill-luck is not contagious; it is personal; *on a ça sous la peau*."

"But the most shrewd of the theatrical men in Paris have burnt their fingers there! You do not pretend to do better than they?"

“Why not ? There are no bad theatres, do you understand ?” resumed Rombaoud, with a warmth of conviction which again cast trouble into the mind of Clémence. “There are only bad managers, bad pieces, and, above all, bad actors.”

He had risen, and was walking about the dressing-room with unequal steps, holding in his hand a gold paper-knife, with a jade handle, that he had taken from the chimney-piece, and tracing, with the glittering blade, fantastic signs in the air, as if trying to exorcise the evil fortune.

“Do you see, I have peculiar ideas as to the working of theatres. I wish to do something more than all that has been done till now. New tactics ought to guarantee unlooked-for victories. It is thus that Bonaparte conquered Europe. At first I begin by changing the name of the theatre. I erase *Fantaisies-Dramatiques*, which is played out, and I put up in letters of gold, *Théâtre-Moderne*, which is new, effective, full of promise, and which gives a marvellous summary of my programme. I have the building swept ; I clean the body of the house, which is disgraceful ; I repaint it ; I put down fresh carpets ; I decorate it ; I make it comfortable, elegant—as a salon. I wish my audience to find themselves in an agreeable place of resort, which

predisposes them to be amused. It is necessary that, from the vestibule, adorned with mirrors and filled with flowering plants, to the balcony stalls, and to the boxes luxuriously fitted up, the pleasurable sensation should be accentuated by the cheerful tone of the colouring, the discreet softness of the carpets, the mild and caressing lustre of the lights. Wherever the eyes rest, the prospect must be reposeful and pleasant. The first highly important point, do you see, consists in preparing, by favourable material impressions, the intellectual impressions which the spectator is about to feel. Never does a spectator, well placed in a bright and agreeable house, become wearied when witnessing even a mediocre play. He bears the hardship patiently, and that which most clearly remains in his memory the following day is the brilliancy of the chandelier. In a theatre, gloomy and inconvenient, you must have a *chef-d'œuvre* in order to please the public. But I shall have excellent plays, and my charming little house will be the rendezvous of the fashionable world. I do not ignore that I shall have trouble in bringing back the multitude which has deserted this theatre. But I rely upon my company to obtain that result. I shall gather together the best actors in Paris. You will see what a *troupe*! Ah! it will cost me

something. I intend to throw away money through the windows, and I am quite certain that it will return through the door."

He could still have spoken, have minutely related his plans, and have enumerated his reforms. Clémence no longer heard him. Before her eyes appeared a house, resplendent with lights, full to overflowing with a select audience. Upon the stage, in the midst of a profound silence, a woman was playing a pathetic *rôle*, and tears flowed from all eyes. Then, suddenly, the thunder of applause burst forth, and from every part of the house fell a rain of flowers. With palpitating heart Clémence heard the stamping of the audience, the intoxication of triumph rushed to her head, for the actress who had unchained this enthusiasm, and whom the spectators in black coats and white cravats were recalling with loud shouts, was herself. She distinctly saw their hands striking one against the other, she clearly heard them repeat, "Villa! Villa!" Carried away by her illusion, she rose, a smile upon her lips. One second more and she would have bowed.

She saw herself in the presence of Rombaud, and realized that her happiness was still but a dream. One of the last words uttered by her late comrade

had lingered in her ear—"money!" Was not that, in fact, the basis of the calculation? Why had Rombaudo just related to her the whole of this affair, if not to interest her in the enterprise, and to induce her to participate in it with her *deniers*?

She regarded him with suspicious eyes.

"But the money," asked she, "where will you find it?"

"I have some," proudly said Rombaudo, with the air of a man who has found the key of a door communicating with the cellars of the Banque de France. "At first, one hundred and fifty thousand francs that I personally possess, and that I put into the affair. This proves to you the confidence with which it inspires me. . . For the remainder, I have sleeping partners. . . ."

If the ex-Francisque had had the misfortune to hesitate, to evade, and to say, "We shall see, I will look about," Clémence would have shrunk back into herself, and have closed, like a *belle de nuit*. But Rombaudo made his money, and that of his partners, ring in his pocket. Nothing more was required to untie the strings of every purse.

"You know that I am always at your service," said Clémence, "and I hope that, on your side, you have thought of me?"

“For an engagement, yes,” said Rombaudo.

“And for funds?”

The brow of the young man became gloomy. He affected a melancholy attitude.

“No, Clémence,” said he, “no! nothing from you but yourself. Your talent, that I was able to appreciate in my days of poverty, will contribute to assure my days of prosperity. I do not wish that a bond of interest should be added to our bonds of affection. . . And then, do you see, women are not always discreet. . . You would be able, in a moment of expansion, to say that you had money in my theatre. . . The world is ill-natured—it would welcome that statement, and, thence to give me a bad character, there would be but one step. . . Now, my honour will be the honour of my theatre itself; it must, therefore, be sheltered from all intrigue. Finally—shall I own it to you?—I wish to be absolute master, and to be dependent on none of my *troupe*. . . The success of my undertaking is at stake, and I will succeed! . . .”

He chose a favourable moment, like a comedian of a good school, and, gazing with serenity at the stupefied Clémence:—

“And, above all things, do not speak of this project to Nuño. He is very shrewd; he would

immediately divine its import; he would wish to be in it, and, as I am his debtor, I could not refuse. . . .”

The beautiful girl began to laugh. This time she had again found her Rombauid. It was after this conversation that the lease was signed which put the worst theatrical business in Paris into the hands of the most intrepid manager.

On hearing this news, the friends and acquaintances of Rombauid raised their arms to Heaven. All along the Boulevard, there was a burst of amazement: “He is mad! Mad enough for a strait-waistcoat!” The fact is that appearances were against him, and that he seemed like an insane person. Without instruction, without the requisite knowledge, prepared only by a few years as an unknown strolling-player, for he had disguised himself under the mask of Francisque, Rombauid installed himself in the managerial *fauteuil*, and proposed to set afloat a theatre which had crushed beneath its weight the most daring and the most able. He called it Théâtre-Moderne. Did he pretend, by changing the name, to change the house? He could baptise his copper money *louis d'or*; he would be none the richer for that. He would only vary the specie. But this unfortunate

theatre had no specie; everyone had worked it with equal want of success.

When they learned that Rombauid aspired to play dramas, and, moreover, modern dramas, exclamations recommenced, and the refrain, "He is mad! he is mad!" was taken up in chorus.

He was not mad. He had even intellect and to spare. And then, like all great men, he had his star. He raised towards it, during clear nights, his watchful ferret face, and addressed to it secret prayers. This devil of a fellow, sceptical as an old judge, had a superstitious faith in his good luck, symbolised by that faint light, scintillating in the gloomy heavens, which produced upon him the effect of a friendly eye, gazing at him from above.

The beginnings were very hard. But Rombauid carried out at all points his programme. He threw into confusion the whole theatre from the top to the bottom; he adorned it as a mother adorns her daughter whom she wishes to marry off. He spent much money; he lost more, without moving a muscle. He gave engagements, and, little by little, mustered at the Théâtre-Moderne, a company beyond comparison. Nothing stopped him. And, during this time, with two thousand five hundred francs of daily expenses, his receipts were three

hundred francs. Clémence Villa played the *grands rôles* of which she had dreamed, but she did not draw the public. And Rombaudo, cool as a gambler who awaits the return of a *série au baccarat*, continued to pursue fortune. In the theatrical world, they gossiped till they lost their breath. A few of his sleeping partners became uneasy. He offered to return their money to them. And, having tranquillised them by that proposal, he deigned to give a summary of his line of conduct.

“Have you sometimes fished with a rod and line? Yes. Have you ever caught a fish without a bait? No. Well! I am baiting my hook.”

He adhered to that, and confined himself from that time to a profound and majestic silence. Never—and this is to his credit—had similar discipline been seen in a theatre not paying its expenses. His *employés* revered him as a sovereign. They had confidence in him. His imperturbable serenity invigorated them. They said, “He is preparing a *coup*; one of these days you will see the bomb-shell burst.”

The bomb-shell burst, indeed, without Rombaudo's having occupied himself much about it. Two fortunate accidents combined to produce this result. By dint of essaying plays, he ended by performing

one which was good. Upon a stage accustomed to success, the piece would perhaps have passed off unnoticed. At the Théâtre-Moderne it caused an enormous sensation. But that happy chance might be fleeting. To render it lasting, he must have one of those *artistes* who become the idols of the public and draw them irresistibly : Rombaoud found her.

One evening, in the month of July, he arrived at the theatre 'quite joyous ; he led aside Massol, his general manager, an old comedian grown grey in harness, thoroughly master of the art of getting up a piece.

"I think," said he to him, "that I have to-day chanced upon a good recruit. Just now, on leaving the contest of the competitors at the *Conservatoire*, I engaged a young girl who has a great deal of talent. The jury, very unfortunately for her and very fortunately for me, refused her the first prize, which she deserved. She was wearing muslin, and looked modest—evidently that was only worth an honourable mention. She played a scene from *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle* like an angel. She is named Lise Fleuron. . . . I offered her three hundred francs a month, which she accepted with gratitude. . . . We will try her in the next

revival. Meanwhile, make her learn the part of Mademoiselle Villa."

The opportunity of essaying the ability of the *débutante* presented itself sooner than Rombaud expected. The theatre, holding fast its success, had not closed its doors. Clémence, on a warm summer evening, having made up a party of friends to go to dine at the Cascade, abused her undisputed sovereignty to get herself replaced in the piece then running. It was Lise who must play, at a moment's notice, a *rôle* of three acts. Warned at four o'clock, she had barely time to read her part over again, and at seven o'clock she was at the theatre. On her *début*, the poor girl had to undergo one of the most cruel ordeals that can be suffered by an artiste. An announcement having been made by the stage-manager, informing the public that Mademoiselle Clémence Villa being seriously indisposed, Mademoiselle Lise Fleuron would take the *rôle* of *La Baronne*, many spectators, especially those who had gone in with free admissions, rose and went to the check-taker's office to redemand their money. They paid back more than the receipts. The amiable little comrades of the *débutante* made her drink, to the last drop, the bitter draught of her first *désillusion*. They explained to her why the house was empty, and in

honour of whom they were playing to vacant benches. Pale, her eyes filled with tears, Lise bravely did her duty. She wrested applause from the few good bourgeois who, not wishing to be disturbed for nothing, had remained, and won the flattering approbation of Massol, who did not squander his compliments.

The following day, on arriving in her dressing-room, Clémence learned the misadventure of her substitute. She manifested keen regret at having injured the theatre by not playing, blamed the folly of the public, and showed as much modesty in appearance as she had pride in reality. She addressed a few words of consolation to Lise, with the haughty kindness of a princess who condescends to interest herself in one of her vassals. She deemed that little one insignificant. Yet a secret instinct caused her misgivings.

Between the two women the contrast was striking. It was like white and black. The one was as steady, as honest, as pure, as the other was irregular, corrupted, and dissolute. The first embodied within herself her school and all its traditions; she emerged from the conservatoire: the second represented *fantaisie* and all its freedoms; she emerged from intrigue. Externally, they were equally dissimilar.

Lise, fair, fragile, with a delicate cameo face made languid by a pensive smile, had a candid and dreamy grace. That gentle exterior concealed, however, an ardent temperament. And when, excited by a dramatic situation, she yielded to passion, a penetrating charm emanated from her. Her well-toned voice took delicious intonations which went to the heart. Clémence, dark, nervous, her face rather made up, an olive-coloured complexion, a wicked mouth, and black eyes, had an ironical manner of speaking, the asperity of which lashed and stimulated the public. Her voice, a little hollow, expressed anger with rare perfection, to such a degree that Rombauid said, "Clémence plays wickedness to the life."

The two women lived side by side for several months, without foreseeing the antagonism which would soon disunite them. In the month of September, Rombauid, after his great success in the spring, prolonged during the whole summer, produced a new piece, and in it Lise made her first appearance. The project was grave. The manager was fully aware of it. The play turning out a failure, the Théâtre-Moderne might again lose all the prestige reconquered with such difficulty. But fortune was for Rombauid, and, at the perilous hour when the new piece was oscillating, like a wavering

scale, the white and slender finger of a woman arrested it on the side of success. One scene, played with irresistible passion and tenderness, was sufficient for Lise Fleuron to take possession of the audience. That little girl, unknown the day before, revealed herself a great *artiste*. She threw into commotion the whole house, drew the spectators from their *fauteuils*, excited them to a state of wild enthusiasm, and kept them, for ten minutes, shouting, clapping, beside themselves, before a curtain that did not rise again, not having yet acquired the habit of recalls.

From the end of that act, the piece was a complete success, this success was changed to a triumph. An electric current passed between the house and the stage. The spectators were as if possessed. And, smiling, sure of herself, the enchantress who had worked this miracle continued her spells, riveting for ever the chain which bound to herself these people, in future her slaves. After the last act, and the name of the author given, there was upon the stage an unusual procession of visitors *faisant la bouche en cœur*, and rounding their arms. Rombauid received all the compliments, with the smile of a man who was quite certain that his hour would come. Lise heard these praises, with an ingenuous and

chaste joy which completed the exquisite impression that she had produced. To these *blasés* Parisians she gave the sensation of balmy freshness. She was adorable and adored. There were men who, from that evening, fell distractedly in love with her.

Clémence, who consoled herself for not drawing money by proving that her comrades drew no more than herself, at first took with anger the wonderful success of Lise Fleuron. Then she recovered her peace of mind by thinking that this success would be ephemeral. Radiant on her first appearance, Lise might, perhaps, at subsequent performances, sink back into her obscurity. It was soon necessary to renounce that hope. Everything convinced Clémence that the triumph of the girl who had become her rival, was real, perfect, and would be lasting. Certain signs announced to her that her reign was about to end. In an instant, all the adulations of which she had been the object in the theatre, were addressed to Lise. Everybody turned towards the rising sun.

Rombaud first gave the signal for prostration. He seemed seized by sudden madness, and, with a feverish agitation, he, the staid man who only *s'emballait* when he wished to do it, spoke of the success of his new piece, attributing all the honour

of it to Lise Fleuron. In the vestibule, leaning his back against the check-taker's office, regarding with softened eyes the *queue* which stretched out along the Boulevard, and the luxurious carriages drawn up in line, he forgot himself so far as to say to a group of journalists, "The piece is good, without doubt, but the actress, messieurs, the actress!"

"She will be a Desclée," said one of the bystanders.

"No," retorted Rombaudo emphatically, "she will be a *Fleuron*!"

This enthusiastic declaration was in flagrant opposition to his principles of administration. He had always been heard to exalt the piece and depreciate the actors, so as not to disclose his tactics to his *pensionnaires*, and to keep them better in hand.

The *feuilletons* poured in, flowery as bouquets, to Lise. In the clubs, they only spoke of that startling revelation of an enchanting actress who was at the same time an adorable woman. The photographers all solicited the honour of popularising the features of Mademoiselle Fleuron. The linen-draper, in their summer catalogues, immediately baptised a new article of wearing apparel "The Lise Fleuron." Numerous dishonourable proposals were made to the young actress, by letter and verbally. Hideous

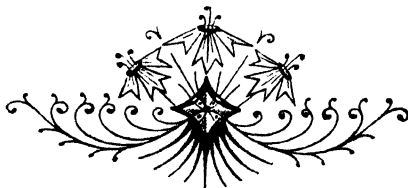
women crept into her modest apartments. In one week, Lise was versed in the intoxications and the mortifications of celebrity.

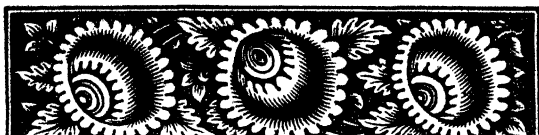
And Clémence underwent all the agonies of downfall, and all the tortures of jealousy. Everyone betrayed her, everyone! Down to that odious *débauché* Sélim, who had turned his corpulent figure and swarthy Portuguese face, “born when gingerbread was in season,” as she said, “to that *bringue savonneuse et incolore*. But he should pay for it, the old scoundrel, and he should find out how much his whim would cost him!” As to Rombaoud, from this evening he no longer placed himself at his window to cast tender glances at the star which smiled at him from a distance of thousands of leagues. He had a star, infinitely nearer, fair, with blue eyes, who was herself the incarnation of his good fortune, and to whom he would henceforth devote his worship.

But, as he was, before all things, a man of business, and one of the most shrewd, he hastened to strike while the iron was hot. He availed himself of all his advantages, made known the talent of his artistes, had some ingenious paragraphs inserted in the journals, furnished some witty words to the author of the piece, and beat the big drum in front

of his theatre, with wonderful animation. That done, and having seen to the most urgent affairs, he disquieted himself about the future, tore up the engagement which bound Mademoiselle Fleuron, for one year only and at a modest salary, to the Théâtre-Moderne, and made of his *grande comédienne* a golden bridge.

Whilst she was signing, he gazed at her, and she appeared to him so charming, so fresh, so pure, that he, who had never in his life dreamed of marriage, said to himself, "The man who shall be so clever as to make himself loved by that adorable girl will not do a bad business. And, if he had a theatre, he would have a marvellous *jeune première*, for nothing !"





CHAPTER II.

ON Thursday, the twenty-fifth of May, 1882, a young man, who had just turned the corner of the Faubourg Saint-Martin, struck into the Rue de Bondy, kept to the pavement for a few paces, cast, without pausing, a glance over the handbills in the style of the Renaissance, and, after a second survey, resolutely threaded the corridor which leads to the administration of the Théâtre-Moderne. An angry voice, issuing from the depths of the door-keeper's lodge, arrested him abruptly—

“Where are you going?”

At the same time a little old man, very sallow, wearing a knitted vest of greyish wool, one of his braces falling over his hip, a leather apron about his waist, a rabbit-skin cap upon his head, rushed out like a maniac, holding in one hand an awl and in the

other a boot, which he was conscientiously occupied in re-soling.

"Where are you going?" repeated he, suspicious, as if he were the guardian of the crown diamonds.

"To the administration," replied the young man.

"What to do?"

"To speak with M. Rombaud."

"Is it to ask for places? You must leave your letter here; you will come for the answer at five o'clock," said he, all in a breath.

"It is not to ask for places. M. Rombaud expects me . . .",

"They all say that!" grumbled the *concierge*, going in again to seat himself on a low chair. He cast an ill-natured glance at the obstinate visitor, and said to him in an arrogant tone—

"The staircase opposite, on the second floor, the passage to the left."

And taking a hammer, he began to beat his leather with heavy blows, as if he were striking the presumptuous one who had just resisted his will.

The young man plunged into the obscurity of the passage, stumbled against the first step of the staircase, seized the iron balustrade, and, feeling his way so as not to break his neck, he reached the second floor. A window, with dusty panes of glass,

overlooking a small court-yard, dimly lighted the landing. In the lobby, upon a bench, two persons were seated—an old man, holding between his legs a violin-case ; a woman, with jaded features, with hair thin upon the temples, and whose worn-out waterproof proclaimed dismal poverty. A *garçon de bureau*, in a surtout decorated with the military medal, seated at a small table, was reading with tranquillity an old volume, bound, of the *Journal pour Tous*. On hearing the young man ascend, he raised his eyes, and, without disturbing himself, only turning his head slightly, his finger marking the line to come next, he waited.

“Can Monsieur Rombaude be seen?” asked the new comer, speaking low as in a temple.

The office-keeper looked attentively at the visitor. He saw with a single glance the poverty of his exterior, the old-fashioned shape of his badly-brushed hat, the extravagant length of his frock-coat, his gloves like those worn at a funeral, and his thick-soled shoes polished with blacking. He smiled, rose, and stretching out his hand—

“If monsieur will give me his card . . .”

The stranger made a movement as if to search his pocket, checked himself, reddened slightly, then, in a pleasant voice, and lowering his eyes—

"I have no card," said he. "Announce M. Claude La Barre. . . ."

A door ajar, above which was written the word, *Secrétariat*, opened at the same moment, and a young man, fair, a long moustache, his hair cut short in the military fashion, appeared, showing out a woman, very pretty and very elegant, who held in her carefully gloved hand a free admission.

"Now, *au revoir, mon petit chat*," said he; "you know that I am always at your service."

And returning quickly—

"Jacquin, you are well aware that M. Rombaud has desired that he may not be disturbed. . . . He is with the *costumier*. . . . If monsieur will be so good as to tell me what brings him? . . ."

And, with a gesture, he invited Claude La Barre to enter his cabinet, a cheerful room looking upon the Boulevard, furnished with a mahogany bureau, a sofa, and four chairs covered with claret-coloured repps.

La Barre bowed.

"I thank you, monsieur, but it is with M. Rombaud personally that I have business. . . . He has made an appointment with me."

"In that case, it is another thing. . . . Have

the kindness to wait," said the secretary, with a malicious air. "And you, monsieur? . . ."

He addressed himself to the old violinist, who sat motionless upon his bench as if asleep, accustomed, without doubt, to long waitings in anterooms.

The old man rose slowly. . . .

"Monsieur, it is for a hearing—they have inquired for a first violin. . . ."

"Your name is—?"

"Verbroüst. . . ."

"Verbroüst," said the secretary, ironically—"the composer?"

"Yes, monsieur, the composer," said the old man, with *insouciance*. . . .

The secretary gazed at him who claimed as his own, the name of a man who, thirty years before, had gained great notoriety, and whose method of teaching, sold to the publishers for a morsel of bread, is still seen in the windows of the music-sellers.

"Well! monsieur," said he almost graciously, "you must have the goodness to come again, at seven o'clock this evening or to-morrow, before the performance. You will find Campoint, our *chef d'orchestre*, in the green-room of the musicians, and you will be able, I believe, easily to come to an understanding with him. . . ."

The old man rose, bowed without speaking, and, hugging his violin case under his arm, he descended the staircase with a heavy step.

“And you, madame?” continued the secretary, turning towards the woman, who had risen, and was straining in a forced smile the numerous wrinkles of her face.

“Monsieur, I am seeking an engagement. . . . I come from the provinces . . . where I have played *les jeunes mères*. . . .”

“Oh! madame, this is not my concern. Besides our company is complete. . . .”

“If, however, I could obtain a hearing. . . .”

“Not by me, madame. You must see the stage-manager.”

“But . . . M. Rombaudo. . . .”

The secretary raised his hands to heaven, with an air of desperation—

“Impossible, madame. M. Rombaudo has not a minute to himself. . . . *Il est sur les dents!* . . . Here is a gentleman with whom he has made an appointment . . . and whom, perhaps, he may not be able to see! Madam, I have the honour to wish you good morning. . . . Jacquin! . . .”

And, re-entering his cabinet, followed by the office-keeper, the secretary left the *jeune mère* from

the provinces in the middle of the lobby, her face fallen, her limbs nerveless, muttering lamentations, and unable to make up her mind to go away.

In the cabinet, the door of which was left half-open, La Barre heard the secretary moving papers, and conversing with his subordinates. . . .

“*Tenez*, these are the orders for this evening. . . . You will put a number on the tickets marked with a cross. . . . Young mothers, with such a ridiculous face! and not a dress to her back! . . . Thanks, we can find heaps of them, women, and better turned out than that! Did you observe the old man who was there a minute ago with his violin? Well! That man had his quarter of an hour of celebrity. . . . They brought out a ballet of his at the Opera, *La Libellule*, in the time of Léon Pillet. . . . He had talent. . . . The *jeune école* set him up as a rival to Auber. But he sought his inspirations in cognac. . . . And to-day he has come to ask for the place of first violin in a small orchestra. . . . Oh! Campoint will engage him with rapture. Idle as he is, he will make the *bon-homme* write the whole of the music for a play, between two absinthes. . . .”

The tinkling of an electric bell interrupted him. . . .

"It is M. Rombaud . . .," said the office-keeper, and, going out quickly, he opened a padded door at the end of the passage, and disappeared. La Barre, who remained standing, as if he feared by sitting down to render his waiting eternal, felt his heart oppressed. A sudden weariness seized upon him. Once again, he experienced the frightful anguish of doubt. He said to himself, "I shall not be received. That man, so immersed in business, will not find five minutes in which to speak to me freely. And yet it is certainly he who wrote to me to come."

In the pocket of his long frock-coat, he was crumpling Rombaud's letter. He could not resist the desire of reading it once more, to assure himself that he had not been in error. He knew, however, by heart, that letter which, when he had received it, caused him so much joy:—"Monsieur, I have read your play. There is great talent in it. But I must speak with you. Come to see me, at the theatre, one of these days, at about three o'clock. . . ."

Claude La Barre approached the window, and the doubtful daylight illumined his thin face, which had the profile of a cameo. Above his rounded forehead, grew chestnut-coloured hair, long and straight. His black eyes were surmounted by imperious brows. His delicate mouth, with arched lips, seemed made

for raillery. His chin square, prominent, announced determination. This tranquil countenance had an admirable expression of thoughtful gravity; his dreamy glance appeared to be solving a difficult problem. When animated, his face lighted up with an ardent blaze of intellect; his eyes sparkled with wit, his mouth curved nervously, as if to launch a dart. It was impossible that such a man should pass unobserved. He triumphantly attracted attention. And, badly dressed as he was, with his poverty-stricken appearance, and his anxious air, Claude La Barre had within him that radiancy which reveals a superior being.

He refolded his letter, put it in his pocket, took two or three steps in the vestibule, bending his head like a man accustomed to submit to repulses. Pensively he regarded his umbrella, the torn silk of which allowed the whalebones to be seen, and instinctively drew near to the door, to have less way to make under the insolently polite looks of the *garçon du bureau*, who was going, without doubt, to dismiss him. Jacquin re-appeared. La Barre was already beginning a gesture of acquiescence, so as to avoid at least half of the humiliating disclosure, but the office-porter, winking re-assuringly, his face brightened.

“M. Rombaud begs Monsieur to be so good as to wait in his cabinet. He is going up to look over the stock of scenery; he will be with Monsieur in an instant. . .”

And, throwing wide open the heavy padded swing-door, like the gate of a citadel which capitulates, he showed the writer into a room hung with stamped olive-coloured velvet, furnished in black wood, with windows adorned by old stained glass, through which the light of day passed, borrowing a softness, solemn and mystic. Upon the large bureau, packets of papers were heaped, a marvellous inkstand in chased silver, and manuscripts of plays in piles, with covers of many colours, gray, blue, red, salmon, carefully provided with alluring titles, to tempt the disdainful hand of managers. And all were sleeping there, gradually growing stale, yellowing like faded flowers.

La Barre longed to go to that common grave of literature, to dive into it to see if his dead would be found there. He did not dare. The dread of being surprised prevented him. He remained standing in the centre of the cabinet, looking around him.

Upon the chimney-piece, in velvet frames, the portraits of the stars of Rombaud's *troupe* were

displayed. Clémence Villa, in a low-bodied dress showing her adorable shoulders, was smiling sweetly, and with a strange glance, fixing her eyes on space. Madame Bréval, with her black *bandeaux*, her long bony waist, lean shoulders, and dark eyes, with coal-black brows, which gave her an ill-natured expression. And delicious in a riding costume, Lise Fleuron, holding a whip in her hand, with a coquetish air, and letting one see, below her skirt, slightly raised, her small foot wearing a boot wrinkled about the ankle. They were there, radiant all three of them, like queens, those favourites of the public, who, by lending to a play the support of their talent, could insure its success—Clémence Villa, by her *verve*, petulant and original; Bréval, by the power and vigour of her acting, at once tragic and comic; Lise Fleuron, by the tender and dreamy grace of her loving temperament.

And, mentally, La Barre went over the scenes in his piece, where the talent of these women would shine forth in full lustre. He saw Bréval and Clémence Villa playing the terrible scene of the avowal, in the third act, and the great artiste crushing her young comrade by her maternal imprecations. How glorious they would be, and what power they would give to his thought! Then, it

was Lise Fleuron in the love scene. . . . With such interpreters it would be a certain triumph.

But should he obtain them? Would his work be only received? And, received, would they not have it played by substitutes? The first piece of a young author, was it not always performed during the dog-days? And at that time the head of the company was absent at the seaside, at a watering-place, in the country. There were, however, beautiful situations in the play. And to think that it depended on the caprice of one man whether it should at last see the blaze of the foot-lights and unfold itself, *pimpante* and dramatic, beneath the eyes of an excited public, or whether it would go into the obscurity of a drawer to rejoin its elders, rejected and devoted to oblivion. La Barre stifled a sigh, and the memory of the years that had glided away returned, sad and dreary, to his mind.

The life of the writer had till now been neither happy nor easy. The son of a *chirurgien-major* of a regiment, his childhood was passed in changes of garrison. He had travelled over almost the whole of France and Algeria. Never had he remained longer than two winters in the same climate, sometimes in the rugged and cool mountains of the Isère, sometimes in the warm Pyrénées, sometimes under

the rainy sky of Bretagne, sometimes in rich and fertile Touraine. He had seen snow till the end of February, in the north, and, at the same date, the orange trees blossoming, in the south. In the far distance of his *souvenirs*, there was a sky eternally blue and a burning country, with white houses under tall dishevelled-looking trees, which was bound to be Oran. There, one day, when he was three years old, they dressed him entirely in black—he saw his father weeping, and the gentle and loving woman who lulled him to sleep in her lap while murmuring over him little songs, had disappeared. This had left in his heart a great void and a deep sadness. Later, when he asked where she was of the *bonne* who had taken her place with him, the latter answered laconically, “She is in Heaven.” And, in his childish imagination, he pictured her with large white wings, like the angels portrayed in the engravings of the Mass Books that were lent to him to keep him quiet.

The following summer they had again to decamp. The day preceding the departure, his father took him by the hand, and they both of them went, up a hill covered with myrtles and pomegranates, into a lovely cemetery, from whence they saw the sea. There, the major made him kneel before a tomb-stone, quite

new, and told him to repeat a prayer. And he remembered that, whilst, in a loud voice, he was pronouncing the holy words, great tears flowed down his father's cheeks, and traced a glittering furrow from his eyes to his moustache. Then they rose, and the major remained motionless, a long time, at the same spot, as if he could not tear himself from it. And he, unconscious, finding the waiting tedious, began to amuse himself with the flowers which grew about the tombs, till his father, calling him, said, "We are going away, Claude; say, 'Adieu!'" And there, amid the silence of that mournful place, in his childish voice, he had repeated, "Adieu!"

Slowly, they went down again, both of them, without speaking. The following day, they took the boat and crossed the sea to Marseilles, and thence, they went to Lyons. From that epoch, the disposition of the *médecin-major* was completely changed. This man, who had so long preserved a youthful appearance, grew old in a few months, and suddenly looked his full age. Left alone with a child, confined to the monotony of a middle-class existence, he became taciturn. He passed entire evenings without uttering a word, seated in the depths of a large tapestry-covered arm-chair, which had made

with him thousands of *kilomètres*, and which he called the Voltaire of the *tour de France*.

When Claude was eight, the major obtained for him a free admission to the Lycée at Versailles, and himself being in garrison at Montpellier, the father and son began to live apart. For seven years, Claude remained shut up between the four walls of the Lycée. His father found excellent reasons for not allowing him to go home in the vacations. He was not so situated as to be able to put up his son. Or, the *grandes manœuvres* detained him; or, he was again changing his quarters, and was in the midst of the preparations for his departure. The boy submitted to that captivity without complaining. He studied with courage, became a conspicuous pupil, and was loved by his masters. He had accustomed himself to look upon the Lycée as his real home, and those who surrounded him as his sole family.

However, he was just fifteen years old, when, the major having been sent into garrison at Evreux, Claude learned with delight that at last he would again see his father. He was to spend the Easter holiday with him. The ardent imagination of the boy sketched quite a picture of that first reunion, after their long separation. Claude believed that he would find his father as he had seen him on the day

when the major had taken him to Versailles. Of the years that had elapsed he thought nothing. He did not dream that they must have weighed heavily upon his father's head. He had not noticed the successive changes that had taken place in himself.

An hour before reaching Evreux, in the second-class compartment which conveyed him, he was exciting himself to tenderness by recalling the sweetest souvenirs of his childhood, and forgetting his seven years of university seclusion. All his sorrows had flown away, and in the depth of his heart he found nothing but joy. When the engine whistled, announcing their arrival at the station, a nervous trembling seized him, and, his head thrust out of the window, he cast an eager glance over the platform. In the throng of passengers who were hastening up it to take their places, he sought in vain the face that his memory brought before his eyes. He did not perceive one which resembled it. He leaped out of his compartment, saying to himself, "He must be waiting for me at the outlet." With disquietude he ran along the platform. He went to give his ticket and to leave the station, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder. Turning quickly, he saw before him a tall, old man, with a

white beard, at whom he gazed with uneasiness, fearing that he was about to hear some bad news.

“Are you not Claude La Barre?” asked the stranger, in a voice which awoke a sleeping echo in the heart of the boy.

“Yes, Monsieur,” said he, anxious, fearing to be mistaken, and eager to know.

The old man stretched out his arms saying, “I am thy father.” And Claude, filled with stupor, falling from the height of his dreams and of his hopes, allowed himself to be embraced by this father, whom he had not recognised, and by whom he had been accosted as a stranger.

If the major was changed externally, he was also changed morally. His gloomy disposition had become atrabilarious. His melancholy had turned to ill-nature. Dissatisfied with others and with himself, he never left off moaning and railing. All his brother officers had passed over his head and had been promoted. He remained fixed in the same grade, and laid the blame of that injustice on his chiefs, on politics, on God, and on the Devil. Nevertheless, to explain this full stop in his career, there was a reason that he did not avow to himself, and that Claude discovered with horror.

One evening when his father had sent him to the

little theatre in the town, where a travelling company was playing *La Belle Hélène*, the performance having ended early, Claude, on returning, saw a light in the major's room. He wished to say good night to him, and knocked, but did not obtain an answer. Feeling uneasy, he opened the door and found his father, in the depths of the old Voltaire of the *tour de France*, speechless and sightless, plunged in a brutal torpor, an empty rum bottle by his side. Horrified, the boy went out and never dared to make the slightest allusion to this heart-breaking discovery. But he now understood certain remarks that had reached his ears, when he passed with his father near the officers belonging to the regiment. He noticed the trembling of his hands, which rendered his prescriptions so illegible that his patients often brought them back to ask him to explain them, the regimental chemists having already been censured for administering *grammes* instead of grains, to an unfortunate trooper and nearly causing his death. If the major had never been summoned in the night, to urgent cases, no one would have been aware of his vice, for he yielded to it in solitude, and never had been seen at a *café*. In the dreariness of his empty home, given up to himself, without wife, not caring for play, fleeing from the

society of his brother officers, he rolled, powerless to restrain himself, down the fatal slope.

The dismayed boy did not judge his father: he pitied him. With a precocious knowledge of the things of this life, he comprehended the heart-rending griefs which had led this despairing one to escape from himself in drunkenness. Only, the affection that he felt for his father was mingled with a kind of dread. Claude feared again to find the major, his face crimson and swollen, inert in his chimney corner. And as much as it was possible, he kept aloof from him.

His father's lodgings overlooked from one floor a small garden intersected by four narrow walks edged with box. Two of the four square beds formed by these walks—those at the end—were devoted to the culture of vegetables; and the other two—those which lay before the windows—to the culture of flowers. Around the well, with a high curb, surmounted by a fragment of iron, to which was fixed the pulley that served to lower and to draw up the buckets, grew, erect upon their slender stalks, yellow sunflowers, enclosing their brilliant petals in the form of an aureole. A border of violets running along the *façade*, warmed by the elevated temperature which reigned in this nook, enclosed on

every side by the walls of the houses, exhaled delicious odours.

Claude liked to sit upon the window-sill of the *salle-à-manger*, and remained for hours, enervated by the warmth of the air, reading and dreaming. These were his happy moments. The daughter of their neighbour, a little girl of seven or eight years, with fair hair, blue eyes and a rosy complexion, played every afternoon about the gravel walks of the garden. And Claude followed her with his eyes, listening to her pretty prattle, not daring to speak to her, and feeling nevertheless instinctive tenderness for that little one who made the mirthfulness of this silent corner. A tacit agreement had divided the garden into two zones: one set apart for the major, the other for their neighbour. Sometimes the child, drawn on by her game, and singing in her clear voice, went beyond the limit. Then her mother, a woman with a sad face, who stitched without intermission near the window, cried, "Lise, where are you going?" and the little one hastily repassed the frontier, casting at Claude a terrified glance, as if expecting grave reproaches.

He dared say nothing, not even a kind word, and, not to restrain the gambols of the child, he withdrew into the gloomy interior of the apartment. One

day, however, he ventured to reply to the neighbour, "Let her do it, madame, it is of little importance!" And, to second his words by a demonstration, he bestrode the window and got down into the garden. Lise, arrested in full course, watched him with surprise. Her mother politely inclined her head, said, "Thanks, monsieur," and continued her work.

Claude began to walk in the alleys, followed slowly at a distance by the child. And, seeing the young boy smile at her, she grew bold enough to walk near him. She was charming, in her gray, woollen frock, with her light hair plaited, and hanging down her back in one single braid, and her complexion of transparent whiteness. She did the honours of her domain to Claude, and at the end of the day they were good friends. The following afternoon, the pleasure recommenced. Claude placed himself on a level with his innocent companion. There was, at the end of the garden, with its back against the wall, a narrow shed, the door of which was always mysteriously shut. Never had Lise dared to raise the latch. It seemed to her that, behind the door, frightful things might be concealed. She imparted to Claude her vague terrors. He, less promptly moved to fear, walked resolutely to the

cabin, and, in spite of the supplications of Lise, opened the door. The frightful things were old chairs, broken flower-pots, a spade, a rake, and a watering-pot, in which were steeping some twigs of osier for tying up lettuces. The children began to garden.

The days of the vacation passed thus ; and, one evening, with heaviness of heart, Claude announced to his little comrade that he must leave the following morning for Versailles, and took his leave of her. The sun was setting, casting over the roofs of the town his fiery rays, an exquisite freshness fell with the evening, and shadows already invaded the garden. The two children regarded each other without speaking. Lise twirled between her fingers a sprig of box that she had gathered. The red glare from the glowing sky illumined her fair hair and made her eyes sparkle.

“ Shall you come back again ? ” said she at length.

“ I hope so,” replied Claude, whose voice became tremulous. “ If my father stays at Evreux. . . . ”

“ And if he does not stay ? ”

He was silent. The little one took his hand—

“ Then we shall see each other no more ? ”

He shook his head, much moved, and feeling

great anguish in his heart. For he well knew that the major never remained long in the same garrison, and everything told him that he was seeing Lise for the last time. Then, with a sudden burst of despair that he could not restrain—

“Adieu, Lise,” cried he, his face deluged by tears; “whatever may happen, I shall never forget you.”

And, leaping over the window sill, he ran to shut himself up in his room, threw himself upon his bed, and, his head buried in the pillows, wept bitterly. Separated from that child, it seemed to him that he would be alone in the world. Graceful and pretty, he had seen in her a little woman. And he, already a big fellow, almost a man, had felt in his troubled heart a *naïf* and chaste love spring up. He left Evreux, bearing with him a souvenir at once bitter and sweet. Never would the image of the child who had made that first and deep impression upon him, be effaced from his memory. And yet he had been right in foreboding that he would not return to Evreux. The following year the major was sent to Lille, and Claude continued his studies far from that father whom he now trembled to approach.

Several years passed, and Claude arrived brilliantly at the end of his studies. So long as the

exhibition that had been granted to him provided for his material existence, all had gone well. But when, having obtained his two diplomas of bachelor, he was obliged to have recourse to his father and to ask his advice upon his future career, difficulties began. The major could not imagine a more brilliant profession than that of medicine. *Fruit-sec*,* having been obliged to lower his pretensions and to become an army surgeon, he ardently desired for Claude all those successes that he had not been able to win for himself. He pictured him supernumerary professor and physician at the hospitals, gaining at the same time wealth and celebrity. He opened his mind to his son, and pointed out to him all the advantages of the career. Unfortunately Claude was too well acquainted with all its disadvantages. He measured his future by the past life of his father; he recalled the perpetual rolling from garrison to garrison of his childish days, and all the provincial accents struggled confusedly in his memory—the slow speech of the northern provinces, the rough speech of the mountains in the east, and the singing speech of the plains of the *Midi*. He again saw Oran, the green hill, the silent cemetery overlooking the sea, and the

* A pupil who has failed in his examination at the École Polytechnique or elsewhere.

white stone which was so far away from him. 'He would not render himself liable to sow souvenirs, joyous or sad, in the four corners of the country. And very respectfully he apprised his father of his resolution. He encountered a will irrevocably fixed. He attempted to argue, and let loose upon himself fearful wrath. With the obstinacy of a monomaniac, the major would hear nothing. In his brain, destroyed by alcohol, the idea of making Claude a doctor had taken root. He was ready to make, out of his slender pay, sacrifices for his son, if he obtained from him unconditional obedience. He had made up his mind to abandon him to himself if he found him rebellious. Claude obeyed. He had dreamed of competing at the *École Normale*. He renounced this, and entered the *École de Médecine*.

Yet an irresistible vocation drew him towards literature. Living wretchedly in the Rue des Quatre-vents, in a small chamber on the fifth floor, he economised his fire-wood and his food in order to go to the theatre and to purchase books. Returning from lectures, his leathern *serviette* under his arm, he passed beneath the colonnade of the Odéon, and waited for hours to read the new romance from the window of the shop, the pages of which the obliging librarian allowed him to turn. In winter, the cold

benumbed and reddened the tips of his fingers, and he stamped about upon the spot to warm his feet, without the power to tear himself from his pleasure. And when night fell, and he could no longer read, he returned home, his brain haunted by the gallant heroes and the loving heroines. Scenes for dramas, and thrilling incidents for romances came into his mind. He mused over them, not perceiving the flight of the hours. But he did not write. He had promised his father to make medicine his study. He did that, and nothing else. He would act dishonestly if, accepting the sacrifices of the major, he had aimed at any other mark than that which had been fixed upon for him.

In the month of April, 1870, when he was twenty, he drew his number, and, by great good fortune chanced on a lucky one. However, a storm was brewing, which was about to completely change his life. War suddenly blazed out like a flash of lightning. Claude saw the whole of Paris rise in an outburst of patriotic enthusiasm. At the same time he heard of the major's departure for Metz. The movement of the troops was so unexpected that the young man could not bid his father adieu. He received from him a laconic letter, accompanied by a little money. And, himself, incorporated in the

Mobile, he was sent to the camp at Châlons. From that time he received no more news of the major.

During the five months of the siege, he suffered much, both bodily and mentally. He felt himself absolutely alone in the world. A secret voice told him that he would never see his father again. And, on the nights in the trenches, having before him the plain, white with hoar-frost under the cold light of the moon, he thought of the sad existence that the poor man had led, and compassionated him profoundly. The end of the siege came. Paris re-opened her gates, and letters arrived for everyone, except for Claude. The young man made inquiries at the War Office. Everything was in frightful disorder, and they could give him no information. He addressed himself to the regiment. The major's name had been inscribed on the rolls as "missing." Since the retreat of the army into Metz, after the battle of Saint-Privat, he had not been seen. Without doubt, the victim of his duty, he had been shot down behind some hedge, while succouring the wounded who were lying under fire.

Claude received that communication with a dull grief. He had anticipated misfortune. But the certainty that it was accomplished crushed him. He shut himself up to weep and to reflect. He heard

his father speaking to him with ardour, of glory, and of fortune. Alas ! that poor man had, himself, been dedicated to obscurity even in death. They did not even know where he had been struck down. A corner of common ground served as his grave. Then, suddenly, by a trick of his lively imagination, Claude again saw the chamber at Evreux and the old tapestry-covered Voltaire in which the major, his face swollen and red, his eyes dull, was sleeping off in solitude the effects of his inebriation. And, with a great shudder, he thought it was better for him to be slumbering beneath the blood-stained ground, fallen usefully and gloriously as a soldier. That consolatory impression effaced the other painful recollection, and he only preserved of his father a *souvenir* calmed and restored to serenity.

Left free and master of his actions, Claude asked himself if he should continue his studies. He felt a repulsion so absolute for the profession of medicine, that, without knowing in what manner he could strike out a path for himself *la plume à la main*, he resolved to follow literature. He was at that time twenty-two years old, and had but little money. The winding up of his father's affairs brought in a few hundred francs of which he quickly saw the last, and then he found himself in danger of want. He

had again hired his small room in the Rue des Quatre-vents, and passed his days in the libraries reading and making notes. He despoiled thus, for his instruction, all the philosophical wealth of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He drew comparisons between historical memoirs, and studied the stage from its birth with the great classic masters, to its blossoming forth with the great contemporary writers. He read all the novelists, and made the works of Balzac his breviary.

In order to live, he wrote sketches destined for encyclopædias. From time to time he succeeded in having articles inserted in the journals. Often he was not paid for them. Moreover, he had a passion: he collected engravings. In his long walks through Paris, he delighted in ransacking the portfolios at the doors of dealers in old books and *bric-à-brac*. In this way he had chanced to meet with a few prints of real value. He gazed at them, turned them over, smelt them, intoxicated himself with the odour of old paper, and satiated his eyes by a charming scene of Moreau or of Debucourt.

Unluckily, one day when there was a glazed frost, he fell in the street and injured his leg. Attended by a late fellow-student at the *École de Médecine*, for a month he remained in bed without

the power of moving. For the first time in his life he got into debt. And, from that period, seized with a violent desire to pay it off, he imposed on himself the hardest privations. He gave private lessons, and drew up, at night, catalogues for the libraries. He made monthly payments, and, rather than fail in one, he would have died of hunger before the drawer which contained his money. One day of supreme suffering, when wandering in the garden of the Luxembourg, gnawed by hunger, he saw an elderly man scattering crumbs of bread for the birds. The crumbs fell plentifully at the foot of the iron-railing surrounding the flower beds. Upon the watch, like a famished wolf, Claude lingered about till the man left the spot, then, frightening away the birds, he ate the bread which had been destined for them. And, overwhelmed by shame, he fled like a thief.

Claude began, however, to gain a small reputation in the Quartier Latin. Sometimes, in the inner salon, at the Café Médicis, he had succumbed to the temptation of reciting verses of his own, with a warmth of diction, an impassioned expression, which had astonished his hearers. At these moments his face was radiant, his eyes seemed fixed on an invisible being, and his fervid voice took vibrations

that went to the heart. One day, a romance-writer already celebrated, and who had occasional longings for his native Bohemia, found an opportunity of hearing Claude read one of his pieces. He remained dumb under the unexpected emotion it caused him. Then, not being able to conceal his admiration—

“How well it is treated,” exclaimed he, “and how well it is read! That fellow has a genius for the stage! We must do something together!”

And he made an appointment with Claude. The novelist wished to draw up from one of his works, a drama for the Ambigu, with the assistance of one whom in the language of the theatre they call a “*charpentier*.” But neither he, nor the “*charpentier*,” was able to succeed in creating the skeleton of the play, and they were both of them ready to throw it up. La Barre, put in possession of the whole of the materials, in one month, with the wonderful ardour of the first dramatic fever, wrote the five acts, and carried the play to the novelist. The latter uttered exclamations of rapture, declared it was a *chef-d’œuvre*, and made the young man the most liberal promises. The following winter, the piece was played with immense success, but without the slightest mention of the assistance of La Barre. Claude, indignant, went to complain to the famous

author, who cast the responsibility of that omission upon his collaborator. Moreover, it did not look well to put three names on the play-bill. And it was for the youngest to sacrifice himself. As to the profits, they would see that there was a just division. La Barre, made a fool of, was unwilling to make himself known to the public through a dispute in which, the romance-writer had given him to understand, the Press would not take the side of an unknown individual. He resigned himself, and, encouraged by the success of that piece, the fame of which had been considerable, he again applied himself to work.

But the theatres, he discovered by hard experience, remain stubbornly closed to *débutants*. He became versed in long waitings in anterooms, in receptions, where he was left standing in the offices of secretaries, and the invariable answers, "The play does not suit the company of our theatre. The dialogue is too comic for the theatres in which they only play tragedy, and too tragic for the *théâtres de comédie*." He experienced the full effects of the profound aversion that managers feel for young authors. He acquired a conviction that the dream of these purveyors of pleasure would be to perform always the same

piece, signed by the same name, and under different titles.

Yet, nothing disheartened him. And he fearlessly continued to create, having in the depth of his soul a certainty that he would end by putting his foot in the stirrup. He trusted one day to emerge from his obscurity. The Théâtre-Cluny took one of his pieces and played it. It was a modern comedy in three acts, a clever *pastiche*, in which nothing personal could give umbrage. The play, carelessly rehearsed by a company of actors, recruited at random, ill-dressed, wretched, so meagre that he asked himself many times during the rehearsals, if he would not do well to go to the theatre with a four-pound loaf of bread under each arm—succeeded the first night, brought in to Claude reviews full of praise, but did not yield him one sou. The ephemeral manager who had mounted the play, disappeared with it. Silence fell over that barren attempt, and La Barre sank back into the depth of his obscurity.

Alone, without relatives, without friends, he had moments of frightful despondency. He felt the burden that he persisted in bearing, too heavy for his shoulders. He told himself with bitterness that he was and never would be but a *raté*. He

began to think that perhaps he had been wrong in not obeying his father, and that the miscarriage of his career was the major's posthumous vengeance. If he had followed his orders, he would have been a doctor for five years, and if life in Paris had seemed to him too hard, he could have gone into the provinces. There, in a quiet country-town, he would have found some modest white house, with a tiled roof, a small verdant garden, where he would have been able to live in the comfort of an assured future. He would have driven in a cabriolet at the trot of a quiet horse, through the deep roads, shaded by green hedges, leading to the farms, where they would have welcomed him with a kindly *bonjour*. This was perhaps happiness. Instead of that, he had to struggle against the difficulties incessantly springing up of his situation ; he was exposed to rebuffs, and, in the ever-increasing humiliation of his life, he had acquired a habit of bowing his head, as under some expected affront. And, overcome by fury, he cursed his art, and cried in the silence of his chamber, " Literature is the worst of professions ! "

He inveighed against society at large, which is idiotic and cowardly, accepting usurped reputations, triumphant mediocrities, glory gained by dint of articles in newspapers, and by beat of *tam-tam* ; and

swore, that if ever he succeeded in extricating himself from the rutty path in which he was stagnating, to take a terrible revenge, and to set his foot upon the head of those who had tortured him.

Determined to make a last effort, Claude reflected, and began to write, alone by himself, a drama of which, for a long time, he had the idea in his head, *Les Viveurs*, a cutting satire, in which he could pour out his rancours at his ease. Rombaoud had just assumed the management of the Théâtre-Moderne, and the journals were filled with the projects formed by the young manager. He proposed to regenerate dramatic art, become, said he, the most wearisome of traffics. He desired to create new authors, and to secure successors to the masters of the contemporary stage.

Claude founded all his hopes for the future upon that enterprising being who proudly hoisted the banner of youth. He followed with interest, in the theatrical papers, the engagements that he gave. Each new piece that was accepted, and the title of which he read in the journals, caused him a pang at the heart. He said to himself, "If he takes so many of them, how can I induce him to accept mine?" The naïf Claude was still ignorant that three-fourths of the plays thus received, whose

titles are pompously given in the "Articles de Cou-lisses," are not even begun, and perhaps will never be finished. The announcement, in these cases, is a kind of experiment made by the author to ascertain the eventual success of his work. There are even some authors who enjoy great notoriety, whose pieces, advertised with much *fracas*, have never been and never will be played. If they were acted, the authors would lose their reputation.

Les Viveurs finished, Claude hastened to carry it to Rombauid. During the eight days which followed the departure of his manuscript, the writer could not be said to live. He was consumed by an intense fever and passed through alternations of the liveliest hope and of the most violent despair. He debated every hypothesis. Rombauid would require alterations. He would exact a reduction upon the amount of the *droits d'auteur*. He would force on him a collaborator. In his disordered state of mind, Claude felt prepared for anything. His play *should* be acted. He would do all that was desired; but first let the piece be accepted.

Rombauid's letter dazzled him. The vagueness of its expressions appeared to him decisive—this was a man who did not wish to bind himself before making his conditions, but who had decided to take

the play. He discovered talent in it, but he wished to talk it over. Well! they would talk it over.

They were about to talk. And in this luxurious cabinet, the walls lined by pictures of great value, with rich hangings elegantly draped, Claude, again overcome by extreme anxiety, and having lost all energy, awaited, while growing pale, the arrival of the arbiter of his destiny, and asked himself—
“What will he say to me?”

Then, in his mind, he went over the masterly situations in his work, and tried to find out what part of it had been able to please Rombaudo. And, abruptly, all the defects of the play sprang up before his eyes, and he no longer saw its good points. Seized by frightful trepidation, he felt certain that his subject was weak, and that the plot which he had drawn from it was mediocre. A cold dew stood on his forehead. He felt himself powerless, and condemned to obscurity. All the glorious visions, dreamed in his hours of delirium, took wing like a flock of startled birds. And, his heart oppressed, his lips parched, his hands trembling, the unhappy wretch thought himself irremediably lost.







CHAPTER III.

The opening of a door behind the hangings recalled him to himself. And a small spare man, dressed fashionably, with a mean-looking face illumined by two piercing grey eyes, entered, his hat on his head, an anxious air, a bunch of keys in his hand.

“I beg you to excuse me, Monsieur,” said he, with a strong southern accent. “It is really in spite of myself that I have made you wait. . . .”

La Barre shook his head with melancholy, compressed his lips, and in a rather low voice, into which his agitation put a tremor—

“I have been accustomed to it for a long time, Monsieur, but it is for me to express regret to you. I have come, I fear, at rather an inopportune time. The haste with which I have presented myself is

occasioned by the kindness of your letter. I hoped, wrongly perhaps, for a happy result, and I was anxious to know my fate."

He smiled, striving to mitigate the supplicating timidity of his words. He was longing to throw himself at the feet of that man, and yet he desired not to seem to humiliate himself too much before him. He cast at him a glance calculated to soften the rocks, and awaited, filled with anguish, the terrible verdict.

Rombaudo, seated in his arm-chair, his chin in his hand, had attentively heard and regarded the young writer. His broad forehead, his pensive eyes, his ironic mouth struck him. He experienced an inward shock ; he had a presentiment that this man who was standing there before him, would one day have the public at his feet. Superstitious as a gambler, he determined to attach him to himself, from the first day, by the bonds of gratitude. He had for a long time learned to divine the agonies of the solicitant tortured by doubt. He saw the temples of La Barre humid, his nerveless hands which could not keep quiet. He desired that the first word he was about to pronounce should remain unforgotten by the author, however brilliant might be his later fortune.

“You were quite right to come,” said he, “and if you had delayed, I should have gone to seek you. We have to come to an understanding about the distribution of your piece, for I propose to play it shortly.”

And as La Barre remained dumb from the shock of sudden and violent emotion, without strength to support this happiness so much desired and which came to him so abruptly—

“I shall run Cambry’s play till the closing of the theatre, for we close this year. . . . The day after the re-opening we will read *Les Viveurs*. You see that I rely upon your drama. It is upon it that I build my winter season. . . .”

He might have gone on speaking in this manner. La Barre no longer heard him. The words of Rombaud reached his ears as a confused humming. That single phrase revolved, stubborn and triumphant in his brain—“Play it shortly!” And before his eyes, dazzled, as in a mirage, he saw smiling or terrible, the personages in his drama. They now wore the face and the figure of their interpreters, and, suddenly become living, they passed on, saluting him with a friendly smile. A hand, being laid upon his shoulder, tore him from his dream. He saw Rombaud standing before him.

"I ask your pardon, Monsieur," said La Barre ingenuously; "but I have just experienced such great joy that, you see, I was a little stunned by it. I did not expect so prompt a result, knowing how many pieces you have in the theatre."

Rombaudo began to laugh.

"There are always many plays in a theatre. . . . The thing is to have one which is good. I have some, of all kinds," continued he, designating by a gesture, the manuscripts heaped upon his bureau, "signed by well-known names. . . ."

And over this word "well-known," his voice, filled with importance, grew sonorous.

"Good plays, *parbleu*, created on one model. But nothing original, nothing new, nothing of a nature to excite the curiosity of the public! It is terribly *blasé*, the public! It knows them all, and to please it we must serve up *primeurs*. Now, your piece, with its strong situations, its roughness of style—in fine, with its perfections and its defects—has a 'go' which will delight them. A sensational play, by an unknown author—for you have never been acted, is it not so? Sometimes, in the small theatres; *enfin* it is all the same! You are the man I want. With talent also, which does no harm, but the contrary. . . . If you succeed this time,

and if you have only five good ideas for plays in your head, I will make you the first dramatic author of the day."

And, as La Barre made a gesture of rather apprehensive doubt, at this sudden *exposé* of the future that might be in store for him—

"The old are dying out," resumed Rombaudo, "and my competitors, the managers in Paris, have done nothing for ten years to prepare their successors. They have choked off the whole of the rising literary generation, which asked nothing more than to produce. All that they are able to do with their manuscripts, in the present day, is in journalism or books. The stage being the exclusive appanage of seven or eight authors, numbered and classed, all the other writers are striving to create for themselves new paths. One must live! And in these days there is no medium. The theatre does not maintain a man: or it makes him a millionaire. Therefore, you see why the book-trade increases, and why the journals are glutted with writers! And all of them, novelists and journalists, have talent. A few of them are worthy of remark! . . . *Comment diable*, have you escaped the epidemic, and are you so infatuated as to write only for the stage? You must have the tastes of a hermit, and breakfast off a fried egg and

two sous worth of *fromage de brie*? . . . Yes?
. . . But, you see, all the world has not a stomach shaped after that fashion. In the times in which we are living, one wishes to enjoy. And your young contemporaries have taken a short cut towards it. You know what the theatre is, do not you? You have passed by those shops? The managers receive no other plays than those which have for their author the celebrated Machin, or the famous Chose. And those great masters have had their day. . . Now, there is no one to succeed them. . . My brother managers prefer to revive old trashy pieces which are not worth a sou, rather than to try new plays. . . By proceeding in this way, they do not pay their expenses, but they do not risk *le four*. And *le four* is their night-mare. . . Anything rather than expose themselves to that. . . No success, be it so, but, at least, *pas de fours*! They will tell you, if you question them, that they have no pieces. It is a lie—they have them. They will not play them—that is all. And why? Because they are absolutely ignorant and incapable of realizing the value of a work. Therefore, they prefer to do nothing. And the stage, gradually becomes sterile, like a plot of ground which has ceased to be cultivated. Myself, I am not more acute than they are, but I do

not fear to engage in a doubtful enterprise. I am an advocate of progress. I fearlessly play a piece when, from instinct, I feel it to be good. I do not occupy myself in ascertaining by whom it is written—I look at what there is inside it. And, from preference, I welcome first attempts: in course of time I shall have an opportunity of turning them to account. I shall speculate, do you see, in untried authors, without allowing myself to be discouraged till I have met with one who is a man of first-rate talent. And he will indemnify me amply for all that I shall have expended on the others!”

Rombauid paused, and earnestly regarding La Barre, he seemed to study, once more, the harmonious lines of his pensive face, the mighty breadth of his obstinate chin, and the delicate curve of his ironic lips. Then, making a truce with his southern loquacity—

“*Mon cher,*” said he, gravely, “strive to be that man, *hein?* And make my fortune at the same time as your own!”

He opened the padded door which led into the corridor, and, jingling the keys in his hand, he passed out, talking familiarly with his new author before the *garçon de bureau*, who rose precipitately, abandoning the exciting perusal of his illustrated journal.

“Ah!” said Rombaudo, “we are giving this evening a little *fête*, in honour of the hundredth night of Cambry’s play. Will you do me the pleasure of being one of us? . . . You will in this way make acquaintance with your future interpreters. . . .”

The door of the secretary’s room was half-open. He pushed it, and making La Barre go in before him—

“Delessard, are there any invitation cards for this evening left?” said Rombaudo, seating himself upon the small sofa, which gave back a metallic gasp. . . .

The secretary searched in a drawer, and drew from it a card, around which a painter of renown had, with a skilful pencil, traced a farandole of personages, representing the performers in the piece, and, in the centre, in a double medallion, Rombaudo with his crafty and mocking face, Cambry with his grave and inspired countenance.

“For whom?” asked Delessard.

“For Monsieur,” said Rombaudo, designating La Barre. . . .

Then, as if repairing a negligence. . . .

“But, first, let me make you known to each other! . . . M. Julien Delessard, my secretary,

one of the most brilliant writers on the theatrical press. . . . M. Claude La Barre, the author of *Les Viveurs*, the drama that we are about to mount. . . .”

Delessard rose from his arm-chair, the two young men bowed. The secretary, without speaking, began to write the name of the author. A forced smile contracted his lips, and his pen scratched, as if jealous, over the card-board, in tracing the letters of this unknown name—La Barre—which might tomorrow be celebrated.

“*Voilà*,” said Delessard, scattering sand over his writing. . . . And he stretched out to Claude the small card which was as the certificate of his new empire.

Rombaud, always guiding La Barre, traversed the lobby, descended a narrow staircase, pushed open an iron door, and, abruptly, the obscure depths of the stage lay before them. The scenery for the first act was fixed. A profound silence reigned in that vast space and, from above, through the wooden lattice work, the clear light of day, falling from the domed roof, illumined the triangular chandeliers and *passerelles*.* La Barre planted his foot firmly upon these boards which would henceforth be his domain.

* Movable bridges used in shifting the scenery.

He took possession of it. And, casting a glance over the house, which extended black and gloomy at his feet, he seemed to desire to wrest from it the secret of his future. But the gulf remained obscure. La Barre said within himself—"I will make my thoughts penetrate to all parts of this house, I will animate it, I will win it over, and I will wring applause from it. I shall see it as radiant as at this moment it is sombre, as tumultuous as it is motionless, as enthusiastic as it is lifeless and dull." And, raising his hand, he addressed to it a gesture of defiance.

Rombaudo pushed open another iron door, situated near the little cell of the gas-fitter, and they found themselves in the lobby of the orchestra stalls. As in a subterranean place, a distant glimmer of light guided them. They arrived at one of the two red velvet entrance doors which are on each side of the check-taker's office, and Rombaudo having thrown it open, they emerged into the vestibule. In the middle of her sentry-box, behind the wire-work of the *guichet*, near which on a low stool sat a *sergent de ville*, silent and inactive, the *buraliste* was putting in order her list of places for letting. The manager approached, and leaning his elbows on the counter—

"Have we much money this evening, Madame Seigneur?" said he with deference.

"Till three o'clock it came in slowly," said, with a grimace, the booking-office keeper, a small thin woman with keen eyes. . . . But, at the close of the Bourse, they went off very well. . . . The boxes and stalls have brought in. . . . We have at this moment two thousand and two. . . . "

With the end of her pen, she rapidly ran over the list.

"Six boxes are left. . . . We shall let them Four *baignoirs*. . . . They are less certain. . . . With the ordinary places we shall exceed three thousand. . . . "

"*Parfait!* I should like to do the same for thirty performances. . . . "

"You must not expect it!" said Madame Seigneur. "This evening is a hundredth night. That attracts many people; they think that we shall serve them up something else than on the preceding day. But to-morrow we shall take two thousand five hundred, and in eight days fifteen hundred. . . . "

Rombaudo gave a nod of approval to the *buraliste*, and taking La Barre's arm—

"Look at that little woman," said he, designating Madame Seigneur. "Well, she is with my check-taker, one of the most useful *employés* in the

theatre. . . Where an ordinary *buraliste* would make twelve hundred francs. . . she succeeds in obtaining eighteen hundred. . . Why? I do not know! . . . It is a question of the colour of her hair, of the shape of her nose, of the sound of her voice. She pleases! . . . Some one comes to take two balcony stalls, she lets a box on the first circle. . . Oh, she understands *joliment* that business! . . . And intelligent upon the affairs of the theatre! After a general rehearsal, she will say to you: Such a scene will produce an effect. . . At such a part there will be a hitch. . . It will be a *four*: or, it will be a success. . . And, above all, it will bring in money: or, it will not bring in any! And never is she deceived! She is valuable, *allez!* stand well with her!"

It was five o'clock, and the traffic increased upon the Boulevard. The terraces of the *cafés* began to fill with consumers and, in front of the peristyle, the familiars of the theatre, artistes, authors, journalists, were beginning to stop, *flânant* and relating the idle stories of the day. There, daily, from five to six, society, the arts, politics, were passed through the sieve, and each brought his quota of news. Nothing of all that took place in the town was ignored. The editors of the *Échos*

de Théâtre dropped in for a moment, to see how matters went in the house, and to pick up a *piquante*, or to narrate a sensational anecdote. Rombauid moved from one to the other, launching a word, imparting a confidence, but never neglecting the *réclame* which might benefit the *Théâtre-Moderne*.

He had presented La Barre, and was inexhaustible upon the merit of his play. With his southern warmth of imagination, he calculated beforehand the results of the affair, and, gesticulating, he appeared to be grasping by handfuls the gold that it would accumulate in his coffers.

La Barre, transported into celestial spheres, had completely lost the consciousness of his own being. It seemed to him that an enormous time had elapsed since his arrival. He had passed over, with one single bound, the whole of this theatre in which he was master, and which, for him, had no longer barriers, nor prohibitions, nor secrets. The manager, that dreaded being, whom he had trembled to accost, was now his friend, his comrade, drawing him aside, and saying, with a benevolent smile, "Is it not so, La Barre?" And he, abandoning himself to the intoxication, spoke out frankly, giving his opinion, as a man sure of his position, and who feels called on to hold his own in this world of arts, where, in one

evening, from unknown and disdained, he had become admired and illustrious. Happiness absolute, perfect, enraptured the young man; he was enchanted with his position, he thought the secret joys that he was tasting, cheaply purchased at the price of ten years of work and of strife.

While walking along the Boulevard, the passers by attracted by this group of men, who occupied the upper part of the flight of steps at the entrance, looked curiously, recognising some one of those who composed it. And La Barre was happy under those glances. His powers were increased tenfold; he felt himself capable of gigantic efforts, in order to remain ever thus within sight and to attract yet more completely the curiosity of the crowd. He longed to hear their lips murmur his name, and to see the passers pause in their walk saying, "That is the author of *Les Viveurs*."

Then, suddenly, he remembered that in this centre he was still—an intruder. They welcomed him, but it was only a draft upon the future. It remained for him to prove that he was worthy to be included in the number of those at whom the world gazes. And the recollection of his failure at the Théâtre-Cluny returned to him. In one instant, it seemed to him that the day became overcast and

that the sun was hidden. He shuddered. Had he come as far as this to fall back again and to disappear? A secret voice said to him, "No." He had a presentiment that this time destiny was tired of treating him with harshness, and that he would reach the dreamed-of goal. He looked coldly around him, and swore to himself not to yield to this intoxication, to guide his bark with a firm hand and with a clear vision. For, under the caressing waves which at that hour were lulling him voluptuously, he divined hidden reefs of rocks, mortally dangerous. He cooled down by degrees and began to lend extreme attention to everything that surrounded him, determined to avail himself of all in the interest of the sole thing which from this time appeared to him of importance—his future.

He was, at first, much struck by the strange pleasure with which those who surrounded him spoke ill-naturedly of everything. In a few moments, the new piece, played the evening before, its author and its interpreters, were slaughtered by their tongues, with matchless cruelty. Neither mercy nor pity! The plot was old as the streets, and the dialogue flat as the feet of the manager. The *ingénue* had clandestinely become the mother of a child, whom she passed off as her little brother; and the *jeune premier*

was about to marry a very old woman, retired, after having made a fortune in *la galanterie*. As to the author, he had not written a single line of the piece, and that was his only excuse.

"He had it written in the prisons," croaked the great Pavilly, the comic actor, who had just arrived, exhibiting his face, blue, ill-shaven, lighted by two small eyes sparkling with intelligence.

"*Eh bien*, Pavilly, it does not leave you, then, your laryngitis?"

The actor put on a doleful air, and, shaking his head, while gazing at Rombaudo—

"Over-fatigued! They set me to work on everything . . . I play in all the pieces . . . and they never give me any but *des pannes*! . . . With that I have my lessons. . . . Over-fatigued!"

"And, then, you talk . . . you talk . . ."

"He plays on the stage parts of a hundred and fifty lines," said Rombaudo, "and in the town parts of ten thousand!"

"You must make up your mind, do you see, to go to the Comédie-Française. There you would have rest!"

Pavilly's eyes flashed lightning—

"Yes, I should be able to rest myself there, for

they would die rather than allow me to act. . . .
They know well that I should override them all!
But *they* will never allow me to go there!"

"I hope so indeed!" cried Rombaudo. "In the first place I hold you for three more years, and you are liable to fifty thousand francs of forfeiture, you know, Pavilly? . . . Be sure that I would make you pay them! Ah! But!"

"*Dites donc, mes enfants*, do you know the last *mot* of Bernier? Our delicious *jeune premier* is changing his residence. . . His apartments no longer appeared sufficient for him. He said—'I have just hired a small hotel. . . It is necessary that I should be comfortably established. . . I live a great deal at home, I am very "*casernier*"!'"

"*Cher ange!* And to think that he lighted on that, all alone, without efforts!"

"I will cleave to his dear self—I will work him! That fellow is a mine of *coq-à-l'âne*. . . ."

"Oh! In him, *va*, there is more of the *âne* than of the *coq!*"

In the midst of this cross fire, La Barre, astounded, thought that no work, no personality, could escape these ferocious scoffers. Would it be his turn to-morrow? Cretet, the dreaded journalist, had already

hemmed in a corner Delessard, who had just come down from his cabinet, and was interrogating him with curiosity. It seemed to Claude that the glances of the chronicler weighed upon him. And seized by sudden uncasiness, at seeing him smile in his brown beard, he strained his ears endeavouring to surprise a few scraps of the conversation.

"A good title, moreover," said Cretet. . . .
"For myself, it annoys me, because my *grande machine* will be retarded."

La Barre trembled. He remembered that the journalist had a play accepted at the Théâtre-Moderne. *Les Viveurs*, even through this, that it obtained a prior representation, would it not have in him a dangerous adversary? He lowered his eyes and dared no longer look at the dreaded writer.

"You will speak to him for the little one," said Cretet again. . . . "And, if he is a good fellow, we shall be able to come to terms. . . ."

"What little one?" thought La Barre, who was ignorant of the journalist's passion for Rose Lointier, a member of Rombaudo's company, as bad an actress as she was a pretty woman.

"*Dites donc*, Rombaudo, they are very flourishing, your *artistes*!" said Doctor Panseron, physician to the theatre, a tall old man with a refined face,

dressed with studied elegance. "I have just met Trincard in a private *coupé*. . . . He was near driving over me, that fellow!"

"Eh! Doctor, it is the Bourse which does that for us. The people in the theatre have begun to speculate, following the example of the people in the world. . . . And now one never hears them speak but of *reports et de primes dont dix*. . . . They win money, it is true, but that cannot last. . . . And then these small speculators will burst up. . . ."

"Have I not been told that de Brives is, at this moment, much involved?" asked the doctor mysteriously of Rombaoud.

"Be easy," said the manager, "de Brives is a shrewd fellow, and when he shall feel the ground become uncertain, he will draw back. . . . Besides, I see him every day, and you know that Nuño keeps me *au courant*. . . . He is one of my sleeping partners. . . ."

A *coupé*, drawn by two magnificent black horses, stopping before the theatre, attracted the attention of the talkers. A footman sprang down from the box-seat, and opened the door. A woman alighted.

"*Tiens! here is Clémence Villa*," said Cretet. "What *chic, mes enfants!* Nuño supplies the funds

well to Rombaudo, but he supplies them still better to Clémence."

Behind the actress, a woman, carrying several band-boxes, stepped from the *coupé*.

"Go round," cried Clémence to her, pausing. "Pass by the Rue de Bondy. You would break your neck in the corridors. Take the carriage . . . you will get everything crushed amongst the crowd. . ."

Then, with a light step, she crossed the pavement, and ascended the *perron*. Wearing a broad-brimmed felt hat, with feathers arranged in the cavalier fashion; a long pelisse of *drap loutre*, trimmed with silk, and lined with flame-coloured plush; her complexion heightened, her eyes sparkling below the black curls of her hair, she was adorably pretty. She cast at La Barre, whom she did not know, and who drew back, agitated and crimsoning, a glance which scrutinized the young man from head to foot, as if she desired to appraise him. Then turning towards Rombaudo, who stretched out his hand to her—

"I come from my dressmaker, and I bring a new costume for the scene of the ball. . . . That is as I am! I really hope that you will play the piece fifty times more, . . . so that I can recover this with my extra pay!"

Then, aside, to the journalist, to whom she offered her cheek, with a smile that made her teeth gleam like pearls—

“*Bonjour, mon petit Cretet.* . . . You are well? . . . *Mon dieu!* what a droll anecdote you gave in your *Courrier* of this morning! It was highly seasoned . . . ”

And, drawing him three paces away, gesticulating, with her lips touching his ear—

“*Dites donc,* take care to write the description of my costume! It will please Félix. You know how amiable he is? . . . And a *chef-d'œuvre, mon cher,* you will see!”

“Yes, *mon bichon,* be easy!” said Cretet. . .
“Ah, but are you in the new piece?”

“What new piece?” asked Clémence, whose face became suddenly hard and evil, and her voice harsh and piercing.

“*Eh bien?* Why the piece which is to succeed *La Duchesse*, the drama that Rombaudo has just accepted—*Les Viveurs*. Very remarkable, from all that I hear! What! You do not know of it?”

Clémence was no longer listening to the journalist; she pounced upon Rombaudo, and, taking his arm, led him into a corner of the check-taker's

office, and there, shutting him in as in a confessional:

"Well! What is all this history about? You are mounting a new piece? . . . "

Rombaudo started, and with an air of vexation—

"Who has told you that?"

"Cretet, just now."

"Satanic babbler!"

"Why did you not tell me yourself?"

"It was only settled to-day!"

The young woman shook her head, and fixedly regarding Rombaudo—

"Oh! you know; no trickery with me; I have been acquainted with you for a long time. . . . All this hides some treachery. . . . Am I to play in the piece?"

"*Parbleu!*" said Rombaudo, with an amiable air. "Can we mount a play here without you?"

"Yes; but all depends on the rôle that they give me. . . . I have had enough of serving a *sa set-off* to Mademoiselle Fleuron! She always personates angels, and I personate monsters. . . . That will weary me, in the end! I am as sympathetic as she, as pretty as she, as young as she. . . . "

"Hum! hum!" said Rombaudo, who could not suppress a smile.

“Idiot! Within two or three years! Does that count on the stage? I have as much talent as she has!”

“Another kind of talent!” interrupted Rombaudo. “Quite as charming, quite as useful, but different. . . . And it is very fortunate! What would become of me if all my *artistes* were of the same temperament?”

“Yes; I know what that means!” exclaimed the actress. . . . “You are flattering me; you again wish to make me play a third rôle!”

“It is superb!”

“Rombaudo!” said Clémence, who became pale, and whose words hissed through her clenched teeth. “Take care! I hate her—your Fleuron! . . . I well know why you push her forward, to my injury. You hope that she will reward you for it by pretty speeches. . . . Well! *tu te mets le doigt dans l’œil, mon garçon*. . . . She belongs to de Brives, the virtuous Lise. . . .”

“It is false!” said Rombaudo, angrily.

“If it is not so yet, it will very soon be so. . . . Ah! but she shall pay me for it! . . . My parts and my lovers? It is a little too much! I do not know what I shall do to her, à cette *drogue-là*!”

These words were pronounced with such fury

that Rombaudo was seized by apprehension. He knew how jealous Clémence was of Lise. But he heard a threat of murder ring in the frenzied tones of the actress, whose lips were pale and trembling. He divined her capable of anything. He affected to become very mild and very paternal.

“You are unreasonable. You know that the cast is at the pleasure of the author. . . . Nothing has been arranged. . . . You can see him, you can speak to him. . . .”

“When?”

“At once, if you will. He is here.”

Clémence fell back a step, let her arms drop with stupor, and gazed at Rombaudo, as if to see if he was really in his right mind—

“And you do not present him to me,” said she, “and I have been here for a quarter of an hour! Listen, Rombaudo. You know that I am a devoted friend. . . . Be convinced that I should be an implacable enemy. I introduced Sélim to you, whom I might have kept to myself, and whom you have cost more than three hundred thousand francs up to this present hour. It would be quite as easy to me to take him away from you. I set your business afloat: it depends on me to sink it. And if you do not treat me, as I have a right to hope . . . you

know the building which is opposite the Palais de Justice . . . at the corner of the quay . . . the Tribunal de Commerce? . . . Well, you may go there to choose an assignee ! ”

Rombaudo became crimson, the veins in his forehead swelled, and the traces of small-pox which pitted his face made so many white spots upon his skin.

“Listen in your turn, Clémence,” replied he, firmly. “You know that without me you would never have risen to the serious business of the stage, and that you would still be playing *les “grues”* at the Variétés or at the Palais-Royal ! It was not for my sake that you made Nuño sink money in my theatre : it was for your own. You are very intelligent, you have revealed yourself an actress. But to whom do you owe it ? To me, who have dared to give you *rôles*. Now, do not try to set yourself up as sovereign mistress in my theatre : it is I alone who command here. And you shall obey, like all your comrades, or you shall say why ! ”

For an instant they stood opposite each other, menacing, eyes flashing into eyes. Rombaudo, with his Gascon *verve*, was the first to unbend the situation.

“Now ! do not be a fool ! ” said he, with frankness, and patting the shoulder of his *pensionnaire*. “Here there is success for everybody. And the piece is

superb : you will see. You shall not play in it if you do not wish. You see that I am accommodating. But you would repent it : it is I who tell you so. I myself was caught by the powerful situations in it, but the whole play ! . . . And there is no middle course ; either it will be a *four à tout casser*, or a success and two hundred representations."

"We shall see," said Clémence, who remained cold and haughty. "If my part does not please me, I shall only be more wearied at having to play it two hundred times in succession."

Without answering, Rombaudo returned with her towards the group, and then, making a sign to La Barre—

"My dear author," said he, gaily, "let me present you to Mademoiselle Clémence Villa, one of my best actresses, very hard to please, like all pretty women, and who will try to wind you round her finger. Grant her all that she may ask, if it is to your interest to do so ; and be certain, beforehand, that whatever you may arrange for her, she will not be dissatisfied. . . ."

Clémence, who, on joining the author, had assumed a gracious expression, as if appearing on the stage, addressed to Claude her most charming smile—

“When you are acquainted with me, Monsieur, you will know how much to believe. . . . But what I beg you not to doubt, is the unlimited devotion that I will show in order to make your play triumph, if, however, you are reserving a part for me in it. . . .”

“Look at Clémence, who is going in for a high stake!” whispered Pavilly to Delessard, giving him a touch with the elbow. “They have the devil within them, these women! . . . All that to act in the piece of this *petit jeune homme*, who does not look clever. . . . *Sapristi!* . . . If I, myself, could manage not to be in it!”

Madame Seigneur, in her narrow sentry-box, was arranging her papers and locking her drawers. It was six o'clock, and, upon the Boulevard, the gas was beginning to be lighted. Slowly the talkers dispersed. Rombaudo, alone with Cretet, stayed behind, keeping an eye on Clémence, who did not release La Barre, and who, to win him, had recourse to all the *roueries* of her *répertoire*. They heard her laugh in a caressing manner when the author spoke. She seemed to be applauding the very witty things that he was saying. She drew near to him, putting her pretty face close to that of Claude, lightly touching him with her bust, and letting him

breathe the perfume which emanated from her. He, very calm, leaning against the wooden barrier that separates the vestibule from the lobby, was observing curiously, and listening attentively to the actress, who, *à propos* to nothing, was telling him of her childhood.

She was, said she, of a good Italian family, settled for a long time at Marseilles. She had been educated at the best boarding-school in the town. An irresistible vocation, which had afflicted her old father, an influential *employé* at the prefecture of the Bouches-du-Rhône, had impelled her to quit everything for the stage. And now, in spite of the mortifications of a very arduous career, in spite of the disgust inspired in her by the contact of the horrible people with whom she passed her days, she proceeded courageously on her way, having but one passion—art; but one end—success!

And she made play with her eyelids while uttering her tirade; she affected a modest manner when speaking of her family; she put on heart-broken airs when passing sentence on the *cabotins*, her comrades; she had the ecstatic face of a young martyr ready to die for her faith, when she said, with a thrilling vibration in her voice, that word which she seemed to think sublime—art!

Too adroit to breathe a word of that which interested her, she turned the conversation upon the stage in general; and, without hesitation, battering down all the reputations that had been gained, lowering the most powerful and popular writers, she slaughtered, at the feet of the new author, the whole of contemporary literature.

To ask him for the principal *rôle* in his play? It was not by her this step would be taken. A voice more powerful than hers must make itself heard on that occasion. Sélim Nuño was there, he, her friend, her protector, to make the caprices of the actress triumph. She herself would have but one single thought—to charm. And in it she exerted her full powers, with all her dexterity.

In the vestibule night had fallen, and the Boulevard was quite dark. At the edge of the pavement, the lamps of the *coupé* gleamed.

“I must, however, go away,” murmured Clémence, as if she was already reluctant to leave the young man. . . . “I play to-night. . . . I must not forget it. But we shall see you this evening? Yes. Come to my dressing-room to tell me how you have liked me! I will act for you.”

La Barre felt that she took his hand. Indifferent, he let her do it. He was at a great distance from

her. He was thinking of that adorable Lise Fleruon, who, each time that he had seen her on the stage, had so keenly moved him. He heard her sweet voice, he saw her fair hair and her limpid blue eyes. And, in the far-away depths of his memory, like a graceful phantom seen imperfectly in his boyish dreams, a face smiling and innocent appeared, that of a little girl who was running about in a garden, and who also answered to the name of Lise.

Clémence Villa passed out like a sylph before him. Absently he followed, through the black crowd, the graceful *silhouette* of the actress. He saw her step into her carriage assisted by the footman. The door banged, and the *coupé* started, drawn at a trot by a pair of high-stepping horses.

“Come, it is time to go and dine!” said Rombaudo.

They again joined the *causeurs*, who were descending the stone steps of the peristyle, and La Barre, who, a few hours before, had slipped in, full of apprehension, through the back entrance, went forth, his heart swelled with hope, through the door of honour.





CHAPTER IV.

THE hatred that Clémence Villa had vowed to Lise Fleuron, though not of long standing, had yet solid roots. And it was a hatred which appeared very dangerous to those who knew the antecedents of the lady. The actress, though really from Marseilles, as she had told La Barre, was not the daughter of a well-to-do *bureaucrate* at the Hôtel de Ville, nor had she first seen the light of day in an honest *bourgeois* home, but in a garret of the Faubourgs, where her father, one of those workmen from Piedmont, always drinking, and frequently with a knife in his hand, had given her more kicks on the shins than lessons in morality.

Depraved to the marrow, at the age of fourteen the little girl went, in the evening, to the corner of the Promenades, to offer bouquets to well-dressed

old gentlemen. Two years later, she was taken up by the police, after a scuffle amongst some men, in which she had forcibly made a diversion by springing at the eyes of her lover's adversary. Violent and without heart, spiteful by disposition, wheedling and hypocritical when she was not the strongest, she had all the defects of the Italian race. She could, indeed, had the opportunity offered, have fought with a knife, as her father did, the *soi-disant* *bureaucrate*, to whom the State had ended by granting a retreat in prison.

Arrived at Paris in a condition of frightful misery, that enchanting girl, who had had the bizarre idea of dyeing her hair a bright carrot-red, lived, for several months, in a furnished room in the Rue de Laval, given up to the vilest profligacy. A hairdresser who saw her, deemed her too beautiful to ply the calling which maintained her, and, seized by pity, spoke of her to a woman well known in the world of gallantry. The latter interested herself in the unfortunate girl and took her into her service as assistant to her maid. Better fed, suitably dressed, Clémence appeared, as she was in reality, pretty as the Loves. At this time she was twenty years old. She rose rapidly from her inferior grade, and became the confidante, one might even say the

friend, of her mistress. For that celebrated impurity was excessively good to the girl whom she had picked out of the mud.

Clémence requited her for it, at Baden, by stealing her jewel case, in which she had twenty thousand francs in *rouleaux* of gold. The lady's famous diamonds were fortunately that evening upon her head, at her throat, and in her ears, otherwise they would have been carried off by Clémence, who absconded with a waiter at the hotel, and hurried without stopping to Hombourg, where she lost all at roulette. Her protectress did not prosecute her. She regretted the money, which she gained easily, less than that pretty girl whose society had been pleasant to her.

After that adventure, Clémence disappeared for a time. Perhaps she became acquainted with more atrocious sufferings than those at the commencement of her career, perhaps she tasted prison. She had, in love, a predilection for those adventurers who were capable of leading her into trouble. She was found again at Versailles during the war, where she was the delight of a German staff. The Commune saw nothing of her. People who burn private houses did not please her.

In 1872, she made her first appearance on the stage, at the Variétés, where she played the part of

the Princess in a revival of the *Brigands*. From that time she exhibited herself at different theatres, going from the Palais-Royal to the Porte-Saint-Martin, and from the Porte-Saint-Martin to Batignolles, where the ex-Francisque had fallen in with her. But whether she played the *grues* in operetta, or the lovers in drama, she had seen the end of her poverty. She had succeeded in obtaining an income from Sélim Nuño. And if, as was said, the affection of the old Portuguese for Clémence had grown cold, she could henceforth do without her protector. She had a handsome fortune.

That which now consumed Clémence, was the desire to shine on the stage. She wished, at any cost and no matter how, to succeed. She had studied with the best professors of elocution in Paris ; but had not been able to acquire what she lacked—early education. They were conscious that she did not know her scales. She redeemed these weaknesses by the ardour of her temperament, by vivacity. But that which long study, begun at an early age, could alone give—unity, gradation, amplitude of diction—she had not and would never have. She could not recite poetry, which enraged her. The modern style, rapid, interrupted, violent, suited her admirably. At a benefit she played the

second act of the *Supplice d'une Femme* in a marvellous manner. If she had gone through the three acts, it is probable that she would not have kept it up. But, often thus, in one scene she was remarkable.

It was not to gain applause in a fragment of a piece that she aspired. Her ambition was more lofty. She dreamed of creating two or three difficult rôles in so brilliant a fashion that they would give her an engagement at the *Comédie-Française*. She frequently said—

“There are in Paris only two *jeunes premières*, Bartet and myself! I, in violence; she, in grace.”

To which Pavilly, who was always at hand when there was some stinging sarcasm to dart, replied in his asthmatic voice—

“Yes; you are right. Bartet is, at the same time, purity, sweetness, and passion. . . . She is a *jeune première*! . . . ”

He paused for an instant, passed his tongue over his lips, winked his small eyes, grimaced a smile, and added, with conviction—

“But you, *ma chère*, you have a third rôle!”

This Pavilly, ugly and mischievous as the devil, was the *bête noire* of Clémence. But nothing could be done against him; they treated him with respect;

he had talent. Third *rôle* ! It was the most distasteful thing that could be said to the actress. To play wicked wives, treacherous women, when her dream was to personify the innocent and the persecuted ! This sentence pronounced upon her—third *rôle*—had the gift of exasperating her. She never pardoned a critic who did not class her as a *jeune première*. She tried to have a reporter on the staff of the *Soirée Théâtrale* dismissed who had written, in the innocence of his heart, that “Mademoiselle Villa had admirably created her *rôle*, à la manière noire.” There could be nothing black in her, except perhaps her conscience. All the rest was rose-coloured as the flowers, silvery as a pure fountain, azure as a cloudless sky.

The day when Clémence realized that a veritable star had risen in the painted canvas heavens of the Théâtre-Moderne, a terrible tempest raged in her heart. She vowed to her who was ruining at once her present and her future, a cruel hatred that, from a sentiment of pride, she was able to dissemble. She studied good-nature, like a *rôle*, before her glass. She, to appear affected by the success of that little Lise ! But why should she be ? Was there not room enough under the sun for everybody ? One single actress of worth in a theatre was too little.

They had indeed proved it the evening when Mademoiselle Fleuron had been obliged to replace her, Clémence Villa, in the rôle of *La Baronne*. It was a consolation to her to recall to mind the disastrous *début* which had inaugurated the career of Lise. And, by saying that the young girl had replaced her, she plainly established her superiority in the line of business.

Every evening she acted with Lise. In the lobby on the first floor, above the green room of the *artistes*, their dressing-rooms were separated by that of Fanny Mangin. To go to the room of Lise, it was necessary to pass before Clémence's door, which she always left open, on account of the heat of the gas. The beautiful girl cared very little at being seen when making her toilette—she was accustomed to nudity. Seated before her glass, wearing only a short embroidered skirt, below which one could perceive her ankles encased in silk stockings corresponding with the colour of her robe, and a cambric chemise trimmed with lace, which allowed her rounded throat and her ivory-white back to be seen almost to the waist, she was making up her face, lightly rubbing the hare's foot upon her cheek-bones, in order to lay on equally the vermilion of her *maquillage*. And, while harshly reprimanding her dresser in a sharp voice, she was

watching the comers and goers who went through this passage, narrow, dark, and suffocating, into which the half-opening of the dressing-room doors threw, between whiles, a dazzling light; at the same time the perfume of women, subtle and penetrating, pervaded the over-heated atmosphere.

During the *entr'actes*, Rombaud had a habit of taking a turn through the dressing-rooms. He went up the stairs, jingling, by a mechanical movement, his bunch of keys in his pocket, and uttering a sonorous "Hum!" which announced his coming. He stopped at Clémence's door, and, entering as if at home, seated himself upon the small sofa which alone occupied more than half the dressing-room. His hat on the back of his head, he chatted, paying his court to her, and assisting at the toilette of the actress. As soon as Rombaud had gone in, the door was closed. It was during these quarters of an hour that Clémence related to her manager all the tittle tattle of the *coulisses*, all the scandalous stories of the theatre. She was in truth a sovereign, possessing the master by herself alone. These visits were the consecration of her power. She made them a claim that Rombaud paid to her without bargaining. It was a tribute, *en souvenir* of the favours received in former days.

She had the heart-breaking grief of seeing him

pass before her open door, address to her a friendly good day, *du bout des doigts et du bout des lèvres*, and walk towards the dressing-room of Lise Fleuron. She heard him knock at the door and ask in a voice almost timid, "May one come in?" and waves of blood rushed to her temples. She saw in that respectful discretion an insult to herself. He entered at once without knocking when he went to visit Clémence. Why then did he affect so much ceremony with that Lise? Was it from respect to her innocence and her purity? In the first place, was she pure? They knew nothing about that. Those *mijaurées* who in appearance play the prude to such a degree, are often in reality wantons steeped in profligacy! She was acquainted with one, and not farther off than the end of the passage: Cécile Chrétien, whose mother professed to speak of her as immaculate, had been on terms with all Rombauid's friends, one after the other.

She attempted to discover scandalous stories about Lise. It was said that she lived in apartments on the fourth floor, in the Rue de Lancry, with her mother. But the mother was never seen. Perhaps it was a secret *ménage*, some *liaison* with a clerk, a small trader. Lise had the appearance of a woman who would sacrifice herself to shopmen,

and who, wearing a holland dress worth fifteen francs and a straw bonnet trimmed with ribbon, would go to spend her Sunday in the Ile Saint-Ouen, shooting for macaroons, amongst swings and wooden horses.

Oh ! if one could find out a vulgar lover, how her prestige would fall from her, how she would again become in one moment the little insignificant girl that she was in the beginning ! The halo of proud innocence, which beautified her and lent to her talent so lively a charm, for all these *blasés*, how quickly it would be torn from her brow !

With much discretion, in which her Italian finesse usefully guided her, Clémence made her investigations, and found nothing of all that she had hoped. Lise Fleuron was virtuous. She lived with her mother, a poor woman grown old prematurely, and whose sight was almost completely gone. No man was ever seen in her home. Her life was one of the most regular that it was possible to imagine. She went out at noon to go to the theatre for rehearsal, returned to her apartments at five o'clock, dined, set out again at seven to act her part, and was brought back at half-past twelve in a carriage driven by a hackney-coachman, who conveyed her home before returning to his *dépôt*, Rue Bellefond.

Foiled in that first expedition, Clémence took other measures. She said to herself, "Her virtue will do her more injury than the most glaring misconduct. In a theatre, a girl who desires to remain virtuous sets every one against her. She repulses the advances that are made to her; they will never forgive her prudery. She will make as many enemies as she will reject lovers." That thought consoled Clémence, and gave her strength to continue mistress of herself. She showed a calm face to all, while consumed by anger and jealousy.

In the world, nothing is more frequent than the hatreds of women. Rivalry in fortune, in fashion, in wit, and in love, are so many incentives to animosity, dexterously veiled by praises, carefully dissembled by caresses. Often when one sees two women compliment each other, smile at each other, one would believe them to be tender and devoted friends; and yet they detest each other. Their *façon d'être* presents the semblance of cordiality. But, in the depth of their hearts, they have wrath and all its madness, dreams of ferocious vengeance, wishes of misfortune, secret hopes for death. All that contributes to the advantage of their enemy is, to them, a cause of bitter suffering. They would do anything to crush her by their success, to dazzle her with their

brilliancy. They recruit partisans, intrigue for allies, and recoil before no promise, before no sacrifice, in order to assure the triumph of their cabal. It is an underhand war, but unmerciful, which has *salons* for its battlefield.

Yet these hatreds of women of the world are nothing compared to those of women in a theatre. In the world, the adversaries are necessarily separated. There are respites, diversions. The face-to-face is not continual. At a theatre, life is in common. They part in the evening, at midnight, after the play; they meet again at noon, after a few hours of sleep, for rehearsal. Like *forçats* in the same prison, they are riveted to their chain. The detested being is incessantly present to sight as her *souvenir* to thought. It is a mental haunting, a bodily persecution, a living nightmare. Hatred is aggravated by new grievances, real or imaginary. It is not only, as between worldlings, a question of precedence which is at stake, it is not for the fleeting triumph of one evening that the contest is begun, it is not to protect a frivolous vanity. The end is more lofty, the motives more serious. The passions contend together with the ambitions. To grow rich is the object quite as much as to become celebrated. Every question of *amour-propre* is augmented ten-fold by

a question of self-interest. It is at once a battle for existence and for glory which is there engaged in, furiously and without quarter.

The life that Lise Fleuron and Clémence Villaled, side by side, was bound therefore to be terrible. It was already so to Clémence. It was not so yet to Lise, who, in the innocence of her heart, did not suspect the tempests that she had raised. She showed affection to the woman who was dreaming of destroying her, and pursued her way straight on, happy to find it easy and smiling.

Yet, to the grievances that Clémence had against Lise, was soon to be added one more serious than all the others.

The *coulisses* of the Théâtre-Moderne had always been much frequented. Rombaudo, in his passage through the world of clubs, had made pleasant acquaintances. His friends acquired the habit after dinner, before going to a *soirée*, of coming to waste an hour at the theatre. During the performance they installed themselves near one of the wings, and there, amidst the profound silence of the attentive audience, to the murmur of the dialogue deadened by the scenery, they gossiped in a low voice with the actresses. And they made a very graphic picture.

Seated on a folding-stool, a small woollen shawl about her shoulders, on account of the currents of air which came through the opening that served for the passage of the scenery, Madame Bréval, with the grand manners of a *Marquise*, was throned, in the centre of a group, while awaiting her appearance. Rose Lointier, with bare shoulders, the whiteness of her bosom heightened by a patch made with a black pencil, was laughing, showing her teeth, set in rosy gums like those of a young dog, and resting her foot very high upon the steps of the gas-fitter's ladder, to allow her leg, which was charming, to be seen.

Fanny Mangin, very richly *entretenu*e by the Marquis Bévignano, the owner of a large racing stable, and adored by Mortagne, the handsome *jeune premier*, was relating ludicrous anecdotes to Raynaud, a large man, with iron-grey whiskers, late Attorney at the Tribunal de Commerce, a great frequenter of the world of theatres, director of a number of companies, very clever, very business-like, but not able to abstain from this *frou-frou* of skirts moving around him, and from this highly-spiced jargon of the *coulisses*. The beautiful red-haired girl had a weakness for Raynaud. She asked his advice, confided to him her hopes, and

gave him "*tuyaux*," by which he did not profit, on the horses that must win at the races the following Sunday.

Accompanying her daughter, and leaving her no more than her shadow, Madame Chrétien, with the majesty of a queen, approached Massol, to ask him the total amount of the receipts. Then she returned to the child, casting glances of defiance at Madame Bréval, whom she cordially detested. Cécile Chrétien, a tall, fair girl, rather pretty, but walking badly and looking stupid, remained motionless, her eyes fixed, smiling at vacancy, seeming to dream, and, in reality, thinking of nothing.

Gamard, a small dark man, the son of a wealthy paving-contractor, witty, but horribly ill-bred, well known for the eccentricities to which he yielded in public, went there for Albertine Rameau, a female *gamin* who played chambermaids with a natural and exquisite effrontery. He was a favourite with the scene-shifters, by whom he good-naturedly allowed himself to be fined for pronouncing the word *rope*. One must no more speak of *rope* in a theatre than in the house of a man who has been hanged. Rope is called string. The thoughtless person who makes this mistake, risks seeing himself offered a small end of plaited hemp, the price of which is from five to

twenty francs, according to the wealth of the person for whom it is destined. Gamard said *rope*, to have the pleasure of treating the scene-shifters. The young *gommeux* had a habit of relating to Cécile Chrétien, falsehoods as big as houses, of astounding her by the precision of the details, of making her believe them, and of narrating the anecdote to everybody, exclaiming in the low *argot* of a millionaire inhabitant of the Faubourg—

“Ah! *mes enfants*, in what a boat I have just taken her out! Words cannot describe it!”

To which Desmazes, the actor, a man of the world, very correct, very grave and composed, very gallant, rejoined, turning away with dignity—

“*Mon Dieu!* What bad manners he has, that M. Gamard!”

Campoint, the leader of the orchestra, who had failed to obtain the *prix de Rome*, was passing with an indolent and disdainful air, avoiding to speak to the women on account of Madame Bréval, with whom he lived maritally. That great actress, having reached the age of fifty, could not make up her mind to accept the cold and dreary solitude of a lonely life. And she was happy to play the *rôle* of providence to that young and vigorous fellow with thick eye-brows and a blue chin, who willingly

suffered himself to be protected. Campoint was talking eagerly with Trincard, who, absorbed in his financial calculations, allowed him to speak on without interruption. But when the conductor of the orchestra believed that the actor's attention was really excited by his narrative concerning the infamous behaviour of the lessee of the Opera, who refused to give an order for a ballet, to him, Campoint, the composer of the *Telephone-valse*, Trincard, emerging from a dream, let drop these words—

“And premiums fifteen hundred, of which two.
. . . I will go to five thousand! . . .”

Then Campoint, silent and irritated, left him, and went to drown his lost illusions in a *bock* at the Café du Théâtre.

At length Clémence Villa came in, the train of her costume borne by her dresser, a few seconds only before going on the stage. She considered it beneath her dignity to loiter in the *coulisses*. When the time had come for her to appear, they heard, behind the iron door, the voice of the call-boy, who was vociferating on the staircase, “Mademoiselle Villa, *c'est à vous!*” And, in the white cloud of her perfumed skirts, her hair wreathed with flowers, glittering with diamonds, she moved forward, giving a shake of the hand, bestowing a smile, and, with a

glance, seeking Jean de Brives, the only man amongst the *habitués* of the theatre who interested her. If she perceived him, then, with a quick movement she extricated her train from the hands of her dresser, saying, "That will do, Julianne, you can go up again," and, with sparkling eyes, a caressing gesture, a sweet voice, she took possession of the young man, drawing him aside, speaking to him in a low tone, asking him the most frivolous questions, and putting her white shoulders under his moustache.

He, smiling, very courteous, but perfectly reserved, listened to the actress, replied to her, humoured her manœuvres, and allowed her to make a parade of him, whilst nothing in his bearing permitted it to be thought that she had a right to him. Then, suddenly, at a sign from the stage-manager, Clémence drew back a step, cast a rapid glance over her *toilette*, rounded her arms, opened her eyes very wide, gave an expression of command to her features, and, pushing a door in the scenery, she appeared on the stage, speaking in an altered voice.

The act ended, the applause of the *claque* fell from the gallery on the fourth tier with the sound of a sack of walnuts violently shaken, the curtain dropped, and in one instant the theatre became obscure, was empty. On the staircase, in a file,

each was returning to her dressing-room. One could hear the small high-heeled shoes of the women impeded by their tucked-up trains, clatter up the steps. And, like schoolboys freed from the restraint of class, all began to laugh and talk noisily. It was a humming in which thoughtless voices mingled with grave voices in a joyous *ensemble*. Then the whole of this wave flowed into the dressing-rooms and, suddenly, there was again silence, whilst the machinists shifted the scenery, arranging it in a new place, and whilst the musicians from the orchestra descended into the Rue de Bondy to smoke a cigarette before the lodge of the *concierge*.

Then, on the empty stage, emerging from his box, appeared Gaillardin, the prompter, a little old man with a red face and bristling white hair. His wife in former days having deserted him with one of his friends, his mind had ever since been a little disordered.

“It has gone to his head!” said Pavilly.

He moved about in dark corners, gesticulating as if in pursuit of an invisible enemy, and repeating, “Badoureau, thou hast outraged me! Badoureau, miscreant! I will kill thee!”

“What could you expect?” again said Pavilly. “A prompter! It was bound to happen to him. . . . A prompter is not an actor!”

And always, even during the performance, while prompting, between two cues, the poor old man grumbled, his eyes flashing, his voice shaking, "Badoureau, miscreant! Badoureau, I will kill thee!"

The *artistes* had ended by getting used to it, and, in the theatre, everybody respected his frenzied mania. He rambled about, during the *entr'actes*, amongst the scenery being shifted, the lighted triangular gas-burners, the curtain falling from the flies, indifferent to this chaos that the *habitués* shunned by taking refuge in the dressing-rooms of the actresses, and, ever haunted by his night-mare, spoke in a broken voice to the man who had troubled his existence.

Jean de Brives never visited the dressing-rooms. He went, with Rombaudo, into his cabinet, and, sitting down, whilst the manager opened his evening correspondence, he remained to reflect, letting his eyes wander over the pictures which lined the walls.

He was a tall fellow, of about thirty, very graceful, and with a charming face. His chestnut hair, cut short, waved naturally; his beard of a light gold colour was trimmed to a point; his very slight moustache allowed a well-shaped mouth to be seen and, under his thick and dark eye-brows, he had

blue eyes. The habitual expression of his face was grave and proud. Clad in velvet and satin, he would have marvellously resembled those gallant *raffinés* at the court of Henri III., always ready for love and for battle.

Of a good family in Normandy, he was left an orphan at an early age. Brought to Paris by one of his uncles, an old bachelor moving in the best society, he had been, at the time of life when young people require guidance and advice, completely left to himself. Of a practical mind, a cold temperament, he did not let himself be swept along with the current of the easy existence in the midst of which he had been cast, as one throws into deep water a boy whom one wishes, with a single lesson, to teach to swim. He retired within himself, observed, and, endowed with superior penetration, he rendered justice to the mediocrity of his contemporaries.

He saw around him so many feeble characters, so many weak souls, so many hesitating hearts, that he came to this conclusion, that a man of a strong mind, resolved not to yield to the general indolence, and to walk steadily on, without swerving aside, towards the goal fixed, must, without any doubt, force fortune and arrive at success.

He had for his sole inheritance a net sum of three

hundred thousand francs. He calculated that this money well invested at five per cent., would give him an income of fifteen thousand francs. In the world where he desired to live this was decent poverty. He resolved to speculate in a certain way with his capital. Instead of placing it in the public funds, he locked it up in a drawer, and began to gamble. Like those daring mariners who employed their whole patrimony in fitting out a privateer, and, every sail unfurled, launched themselves on the ocean in search of galleons laden with gold, he staked all that he possessed on the game in which he was engaging, and began boldly to fight for life.

He was a pleasant fellow, an agreeable guest, and much liked at the club. An imperturbable gambler, losing five hundred louis upon one card without moving a muscle, and winning twenty or thirty thousand francs without betraying the slightest emotion, he never mentioned his gains or his losses, and was never heard to rejoice nor to lament. He did not display the coarse mirth of a *banquier* who has a run of luck, nor the morose and gloomy temper of a punter who is losing heavily. He was impassible, cold, not pronouncing one word louder than another, rising, when he had lost, with the same movement, supple and silent as when he had won.

He lived comfortably, but without luxury, always ready to welcome a friend and never hesitating to lend fifty louis to a comrade. He occupied four rooms on the *entresol*, in the Rue Taitbout. He had no carriage and made use of those belonging to the club. He was seen everywhere ; in the dress circle, on Saturdays at the *Cirque*, and on Tuesdays at the *Comédie Française* ; in society, where he danced with indefatigable ardour ; and in the *demi-monde*, where he never lingered. He was not known to have a mistress. Very discreet, if he saluted with a wave of the hand or a smile some pretty impurity driving in the Bois, her head framed in the window of her little *coupé*, and a friend touched his elbow, with an interrogative look, he immediately put on a serious face and said—

“ Oh ! not at all. She is simply a little acquaintance of mine.”

He sometimes enunciated speeches of this kind : “ Women are of no use and they are only in the way ! ” or : “ The only men who are truly strong are those who do not go after women.”

He appeared to put his theories into practice, and many people could have sworn that in his existence love had till this time counted for little. He was brave and not at all quarrelsome. One

evening he had a dispute at the baccarat table with a Spanish nobleman well known in Paris for his immense fortune. Insulted, Jean de Brives fought, and seriously wounded his adversary. The foreigner was at the point of death, his lung having been pierced. Jean went every day for three weeks to inquire after him, and showed sincere regret at having brought him to such a dangerous condition. This increased his popularity. And if all those who knew him could have been asked, "Who is M. Jean de Brives?" all would have answered with conviction, "Ah! a charming fellow."

In Paris, where one never penetrates deeply into things, where outside show influences, to four-fifths of society, the opinion that one forms of people, where courtesy in common intercourse is equal to a certificate of good breeding, and ordinary probity to a reputation of scrupulous honour, Jean de Brives might in truth pass for a perfect gentleman. An attentive observer, one of those curious persons who remain during hours standing behind the players, in the gambling-room at a club, watching the cards dealt at baccarat, would alone have been able to say whether Jean's balance-sheet was made up by winnings or by losings. To the majority of the people amongst whom he lived, the young man was

an amiable and idle fellow, who played high and paid his losses with punctuality.

However, in a few years the drawer in which Jean had locked his store of money had grown heavier by very large sums. The three hundred thousand francs had been doubled, and Jean had lived like those of his friends who possessed an income of fifty thousand pounds. The ambitious one, who had engaged in a contest with society, and who, having vanquished it, had levied from it large contributions, deemed the moment come to change his ground. He would not weary fortune by asking so little of her, and, ceasing to gamble at the club, he began to gamble on the Bourse.

This time, they were no longer the skirmishes of an evening, combats with small battalions. It was real war, with powerful armies engaged, not following the inspiration of the moment, but according to a plan of campaign maturely prepared, and carried out with the same boldness and energy that had assured his preceding victories. In the depth of his mind Jean had already conceived projects, the audacity of which would have greatly astonished those who said of him, with superficial good nature, "De Brives? A charming fellow!"

This charming fellow, with a clear brow, a sweet

smile, a frank glance, had the iron soul of those adventurers who conquer worlds—Pizarro or Cortez. If nothing impeded him in his forward march he would take rank amongst the most enterprising stock-jobbers of these days, which have seen so many fortunes rapidly amassed and as rapidly dashed down. He was a man to juggle with millions, and without moving a muscle, to involve, in one speculation, the existence of a whole people.

His good luck was undeniable; and Rombaudo, who could see it, had, at the time when he became manager of the Théâtre-Moderne, begged de Brives to take a single share at five hundred francs.

"I wish to have you with me," said the future lessee. "I am sure that you will influence the luck."

De Brives, who had always a note of a thousand francs at the disposal of an acquaintance, gave a hundred *louis* to Rombaudo, whom he liked, and received in exchange four sheets of paper, very prettily illustrated, which were to have a decisive influence on his future.

The Théâtre-Moderne amused him, and he often went there. That other side of the stage, those *coulisses*, dirty and tainted by the odour of gas, were to him an irresistible attraction. He felt a lively pleasure in talking with the actresses, in seeing

them close at hand, with their painted faces, which gave them the appearance of dolls coarsely rouged, and with their ivory-white shoulders smeared with *blanc liquide*. Sometimes a small hand was placed upon the breast of his coat, and left on it a chalky mark very difficult to remove. And he waited at the angle of a wing, looking curiously at the wigs, so charming at a distance, so grotesque near; the eyes, heavily blackened and elongated at the corners; and the teeth, gleaming between lips reddened with *cosmétique à la fraise*.

And nothing amused him so much as to see an actor, in the midst of an animated conversation, contract and harden his features, then bound upon the stage, exclaiming, in a vibrating voice—

“You have lied, Monsieur le Comte, and I will chastise you!”

This contrast between the simplicity of ordinary life and the exaggeration of the stage, delighted him. His nerves were strained, in spite of himself his life became more intense, the fever of the theatre seized upon him; and, in this centre where sound vibrated gloriously, where light gleamed to excess, the hours appeared to him shorter. The ambient *cabotinage* penetrated him.

Introduced to Clémence by Rombaudo, he was

courteous to her but reserved. If he had been assiduous in his attentions, it is probable that the actress would have cared no more for him than for all the others who paid court to her. The coldness of Jean piqued her. Why did he keep aloof, why did he appear not to seek her favour? Did he not think her worth the trouble of winning? She thought Jean a very affected and excessively impertinent young man, and promised herself to make him feel her power.

But Jean appeared much more desirous to stand well with Nuño than to please Clémence. When the Portuguese was there, he took possession of him and conversed with animation. Then, vexed and irritated, the young woman made an imperious sign to Sélim and constrained him to go to her. But de Brives turned upon his heel, and without persistence went to find Rombaudo, or to listen to the old anecdotes, always the same, that Dr. Panseron loved to relate, about the great romantic epoch.

"Of what were you speaking with M. de Brives?" said Clémence, crossly, one evening to Nuño.

"Of an important transaction on mines. . . . He is very intelligent, that young fellow. . . ."

"At all events, he is hardly polite! He affects not to come near me. . . . Is it that he believes

you to be jealous? His discretion in that case would indicate very great fatuity. Does he think that I am going to throw myself at his head?"

"I will bring him to you, *ma chère*, you shall tell him your mind. . . ."

Jean, brought before Clémence like a culprit to the feet of a queen, proved charming, and knew how to redeem his error. Clémence, disarmed, owned to herself that he pleased her *follement*. She returned home after the performance, a prey to one of those mad passions which in five minutes cast those *femmes de plaisir* into the arms of a man whom on the preceding day they did not know.

One evening in winter the snow was falling in large flakes, covering the town with a white sheet. None of the *habitués* had come to the theatre. Rombaud had shut himself up in his cabinet to examine plans for scenery. A dull *ennui* weighed upon the gloomy theatre. The actors played listlessly, to a half-empty house. Madame Bréval had a distracting headache, and Desmazes alone, lively, his eyes sparkling, walked the stage with a brisk step, saying that this winter reminded him of St. Petersburg and the glorious days of his dramatic career.

Clémence, left to herself, was in an atrocious temper, and had reprimanded the unfortunate

Julienne, her dresser, who had forgotten to sew a flounce to her dress, with a crudity of language that savoured of Saint-Lazare. Suddenly her face brightened, a smile passed over her lips. De Brives had just appeared. He crossed the stage and walked towards her. From a distance she admired his graceful bearing, his well-shaped figure, that showed off a black silk waistcoat embroidered with small flowers, and his coat with narrow facings. She stretched out her hand with a yielding *abandon*, and drew him gently towards her. He did not resist, and let himself drop upon a stool almost at the feet of the actress, who remained standing.

"It is horribly cold to-night," said he, "and I pity you for playing with bare shoulders. I have only crossed the stage and I am frozen."

With a rapid movement, Clémence slipped off the mantle, lined with blue fox, which enveloped her, and smiling, she cast it around Jean, who, in an instant, found himself in the warm and perfumed fur. The emotion that he felt was so violent that he grew pale. It seemed to him that he was clasped in the arms of Clémence, and that the warmth which pervaded him was that of the body of the young woman. They remained a moment, the one before the other, silent and much agitated. She, *gazing at*

him with a troubled smile, he, allured by the voluptuous ardour of the actress, and uneasy at feeling no longer master of himself.

They were behind a screen, and in a dim light. Clémence glanced around her, saw that they were alone ; then, bending forward, she took Jean's head between her hands, and pressed upon his lips a rapid kiss. He uttered a hollow exclamation, rose quickly, and, with a gesture, throwing off the pelisse, as if the silky fur contained a dangerous poison, he showed to the young woman an altered face. He had not time to speak ; she glided before him, light and graceful, and passed upon the stage.

Jean quite dazed, walked to Rombaudo's cabinet, laconically said, " Good evening," threw himself back in an arm-chair, and, lighting a cigarette, began to puff his smoke towards the ceiling in hurried whiffs, reflecting earnestly.

He was dissatisfied with himself. He blamed himself for that which had just happened. He had failed in resolution, and offered to Clémence, by his unusual familiarity, an opportunity that he was well aware she had been seeking for some time. He who excelled in crushing people who attempted to monopolise him and to overreach him, he had suffered himself to be caught like a student. And now he

was in the most embarrassing position. He had formed a project of entering into business relations with Nuño. He was conducting his negotiation with prudence and with uncommon ingenuity. He was on the eve of being offered, by the banker himself, that which he desired to obtain from him. And Clémence came with her senseless fancies, to place herself in the way.

A passing *liaison* with the beautiful girl would have been to him, at ordinary times, the most simple adventure in the world. She was, indeed, worth the trouble that he would take in responding to her advances. But, in the situation in which he chanced to be, it was quite impossible. However skilfully he might conceal himself, at the end of eight days he would be discovered, one morning or one evening, leaving her house. It would be sufficient for some one of those spies at the theatre, with the eye and the ear always on the watch, to surprise a look or overhear a word, in order to know their secret. It would be their joy to relate it all to Sélim. Certainly the Portuguese had no very great illusions as to the fidelity of Clémence, but he would not willingly make a favourite of a man who had shown so little respect to him. Jean had a cool and calculating brain. Between pleasure and business he did not

hesitate. And, however difficult it might be, he resolved to take as many steps backward as Clémence had taken forward. Determined to settle the question once and for all, he left the cabinet of Rombaoud.

The piece had just ended. It was only half-past eleven. The *artistes*, each in haste to return home, had quickly run through the dialogue. Clémence, in the simple robe she wore in the last act, remained on the stage hesitating, and vaguely seeking de Brives. On seeing him, she seemed to take a resolution.

"I shall not change my dress," said she. "Julienne, bring me my hat, and arrange everything in the dressing-room. . . ."

And turning to Jean, whilst her dresser went upstairs—

"Will you accompany me as far as my carriage?"

He bowed in sign of acquiescence. They could not speak to each other freely, being surrounded by people. The stage-manager was giving his orders for the rehearsal of the *tableau*, and the machinists were fixing the scenery of the first act for the following day. He did not offer his arm, and they started side by side, descending the narrow staircase which leads to the artistes' entrance. Arrived upon

the pavement, Clémence looked for her carriage in the street white with snow. She only saw her footman, who advanced hat in hand.

“The horses cannot draw up, madame,” said he. “The Rue de Bondy is one sheet of ice. . . . The *coupé* is at the corner of the Porte-Saint-Martin. On the Boulevard one can walk. . . . ”

Clémence took Jean’s arm and, pressing it to her side—

“I fear that you will have some difficulty in returning home in this dreadful weather. Shall I take you back ? ”

He hesitated for an instant, as if he were seeking what acceptable form to give to his refusal. Then, smiling, as if in jest—

“You are too compromising,” said he. “What would people say if they saw me alight from your carriage ? . . . ”

She gazed into the depths of his eyes and, with assurance—

“They may say what they will. . . . ”

“It might cost you dear ! ”

“What does that matter if it is my pleasure ? ”

He disengaged his arm that she was clasping forcibly to her bosom.

“I will not allow you to commit follies, *ma chère*

"Clémence," said he, with firmness. "I am not rich enough to be able to repair them. . . . Let us remain good friends. . . . That will be better.

. . . . "

Clémence paled. Her black eyes darted lightning and, panting as if she had just run a long race—

"Jean," said she, "I wish you to come with me!

. . . . "

He moved forward, opened the door of the *coupé*, aided the young woman to step in, and, bowing to her, he said very gently this single word—

"No."

She uttered an exclamation, tried to alight, but he was already at a distance. The footman shut the door, the coachman touched his horses, and the carriage bore away Clémence, weeping tears of powerlessness and rage.

Clémence had frequently had occasion to say *no*. But hitherto it had never been said to herself. The caprice that she had for Jean, being thwarted, turned to a violent passion. She swore that she would triumph over him. She sought the motives which could have driven him from her. As they were of a very special nature, she could not find them. She imagined that Jean loved a woman to whom he desired to remain faithful. But the event proved to her, after a brief

delay, that she had deceived herself, and that the young man's heart was free.

The whole of this heart he gave to Lise Fleuron. He was amongst those whom the tremendous success of the young actress had most astounded. His studied coldness disappeared, melted like ice in the rays of the sun. He showed extraordinary animation. For a few days he was not recognisable. Then he regained his empire over himself and disappeared completely.

He had examined his conscience, and had been appalled at the disorder which already reigned in his mind. He no longer thought but of Lise. The care of his affairs, that till this time had dominated every thing in his life, was now surpassed by the care of his love. He was alarmed and wished to strive against it. He constrained himself to go no more to the theatre. But life seemed to him monotonous. He dragged himself to the club, killing time, during interminable evenings. He had mad temptations to spring into a carriage and be driven to the Rue de Bondy.

In short, what harm could there be in it? Was he a child that he feared to face that charming woman? And he saw her on the stage surrounded by a circle of admirers. Her smile made his heart

beat. Seized by a sudden rage, he said to himself, "She will love one of them, and I, like an idiot, shall have lost all my chances." Then a voice within him said, "So much the better! That woman will be thy ruin!"

Vainly he sought in what way Lise, so sweet, so pure, could have a baneful influence over his life. The imperious voice spoke on, causing him a kind of superstitious dread. He was at once attracted and repelled by that menace of danger. At the end of a few days he was indeed wretched. He no longer took pleasure in anything. And speculation was without charm to him. At length, feeling himself grow weak, he compounded with his conscience—he did not go behind the scenes, but he went into the house.

From the first evening Clémence, with her piercing eyes, discovered him at the farther end of the orchestra, in the shadow cast by the balcony, and addressed to him a mocking smile that he affected not to see. He remained there, palpitating with the whole audience, and passionately feeling the charm of Lise. He heard with delight the flattering remarks of the spectators. He measured the immense distance travelled over by the young girl in so short a time. He saw from day to day her prestige become more

solidly established. He often heard young men freely express their admiration and envy him who was loved by that charming girl. Jean smiled. He knew that she loved no one, and he had the conviction that, if he allowed himself to be drawn into loving her, no one would be able to dispute her with him.

Lise, however, suspected nothing. Innocent, she had not seen the trouble that she had cast into the heart of Jean. She had not the same reasons for clear-sightedness as Clémence. Jealousy did not guide her eyes. She continued to play, without *arrière pensée*, delighted by her success, joyous at the praises addressed to her, satisfied to see herself encircled by admirers, but placing it all to her art, and having it alone before her eyes.

One evening she was changing her costume in her dressing-room adjoining that of Fanny Mangin. Fanny, who was not in the third act, was playing with Madame Chrétien, who had a passion for cards, a game at Chinese bezique, and, much absorbed, she had not heard Lise go up.

"How does it happen," said Madame Chrétien, "that for some time we have not seen M. de Brives?"

"Do not say that *we* do not see him," replied

the red-haired beauty; "say that *you* do not see him. Every evening he is in the house."

"*Tiens !* Why there?"

"A trick! Because he is madly in love with Lise."

"Well! but it seems to me that this would not be a reason for him to come no more behind the scenes . . ."

"You think so, do you? . . . Five hundred. . . Ah! what bad luck; I believed all the queens of spades were out! . . ."

The scorer cracked in the fingers of Fanny, who added—

"You see, de Brives is a queer fellow: he has peculiar ideas about women. . . ."

Interested in her game, Fanny ceased to speak, uttering low interjections when the looked-for cards did not make their appearance. And Lise, much agitated, still lent an ear, forgetting to dress herself, and in the silence hearing only her heart, which beat with heavy throbs in her throat. The image of Jean suddenly evoked had appeared to her. She again saw the young man assiduous in his attentions to her, but with a kind of respectful timidity. He had not shown his affection with the coarse exaggeration of Nuño, who fixed upon her glances of animal

admiration. Reserved, delicate, he hardly dared approach her. Was it then really because he loved her that he would go no more ?

“ Poor fellow ! ” murmured she, with an indulgent smile.

The sound of her voice recalled her to herself. She was alone in her dressing-room, and felt ashamed at having allowed herself to be carried on by her imagination. She said, “ I am mad ! What is the love of that young man to me ? Is it of that I have to think ? ”

The bell of the call-boy tinkled. She passed out into the passage, glided lightly before Fanny Mangin’s door that she might not be suspected of having overheard the conversation, and stepped upon the stage, promising herself not to try to discover Jean.

But a kind of magnetic power constrained her to look for him. She recited her part mechanically, and her eyes searched the house. She received a violent shock ; she had just seen him by whom she knew herself loved, motionless, as in a trance. She desired to turn away ; she could not. Their eyes met. Those of the young woman, troubled and fascinated ; those of the young man, impassioned, ardent. And Lise, shivering, felt the scorching

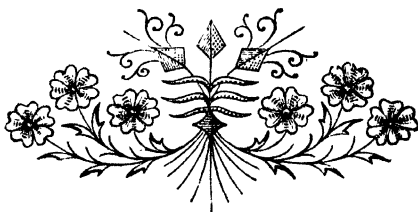
sensation of a kiss. Turning pale, she addressed a dumb supplication to Jean. As if he understood, he lowered his head, and ceased to gaze at her.

Lise, calmed, could continue to play. She was grateful to de Brives for his obedience. She was happy at having been understood by him. She asked herself with disquietude what were the ideas that, according to Fanny Mangin, he had about women.

She might have asked it of himself, for, in the next *entr'acte*, restraining himself no longer, forgetting all his resolutions, Jean went behind the scenes. She responded timidly with a little nod to his respectful bow, and made her escape, agitated by the most violent emotion that she had experienced in her whole life.

Jean stood immovable, following her with his eyes. He did not see Clémence, who was behind him, having witnessed that scene—immaterial to all others, of the utmost significance to herself. She had divined love in the eyes of Jean; she foreboded it in the agitation of Lise. She passed near the young man without being seen by him, so much was he absorbed. She would not speak to him, fearing to let her secret escape, to insult him, to strike him. She hastened upstairs, shut herself in her dressing-

room, and there she could yield to her fury. She ground her teeth and bit her lips, as she longed, with those small ferocious pearls, to lacerate her rival. She wrung her hands, in default of the power to wring the white, soft, and charming throat of Lise Fleuron. And, throwing herself upon the sofa, her head buried in the cushions through fear of being heard, she blasphemed, uttered threats; and, beside herself, with nerves shattered, she ended by weeping bitterly.





CHAPTER V.

UPON the stage, surrounded by scenery representing a vast hall in the time of Louis XIV., the curtain concealed by canvas drapery painted in the same style, lighted by lustres, in the midst of flowers, to the strains of the orchestra, keeping its place in the house and playing unseen, the *artistes* of the Théâtre-Moderne and the guests of Rombaudo were finishing supper. Fifty people were seated around a horse-shoe table. And the *maîtres d'hôtel de Brébant* moved about, full of business, with short quick steps, going from the stage to the green-room, where the viands and the bottles were packed in large hampers, brought from outside by squads of scullions.

In a corner, behind a screen, near the room of

the gas-fitter, the machinists, under the blinding light of the reflectors, were doing honour to the remains of the repast. Occasionally, notwithstanding the restraint that they imposed upon themselves, their loud merriment broke out, accompanying the popping of champagne corks, and great bursts of laughter from the principal table made an echo to their rough explosion of joy.

Conversation grew animated, the diapason of the voices rose, the flaming gas, the bouquet of the wines, began to create an intoxicating atmosphere which troubled the brain. Suddenly there was a profound silence. Daniel Cambry, rather pale, had just risen. Dwelling on his words, he spoke, offering his thanks to the brave company of the *Théâtre-Moderne*, who by their masterly performance, had assured the success of his work. And, as the moved words fell from his lips, a light blazed in the eyes of the poet. His voice took a metallic sonorousness. In the intoxication of his triumph, he seemed to sound the victorious march of young authors ascending to the conquest of glory.

La Barre felt violent emotion, a burning heat mounted to his breast; he ardently envied that happy man who, from the height of a great success, could face the future with pride, and exclaim, "It is

mine!" He told himself that he also would know that deep satisfaction. It was his turn. The lists were thrown open, and without limit. He had but to enter, to strive, and to vanquish.

But what efforts would not he have to make? What adversaries he would have opposed to him! All these men who surrounded him, grave or smiling, high priests of art with severe brows; critics hard to please and seldom satisfied; chroniclers humming and volatile as bees—able, either to give sweet honey by their praise, or to make the cruel point of their sting felt; actors never content with their *rôle*, always ready to depreciate the piece; the audience on the first tier, represented by these young *élégants*, the flower of the clubs, whom he saw here, so perfectly dressed, with waved hair, a gardenia in the button-hole, and flirting with their neighbours—he must give battle to them all upon a ground, covered with snares, sown with caltrops, and place them at his mercy.

But then, if he succeeded, what a victory! In one instant, notoriety won; his name, at one swoop, borne to every corner of Paris. For success at a theatre is complete, startling as a clap of thunder. To become the rival, the companion, the friend of this young man, to whom all listened with attention,

and who, standing, like the hero of a triumph saluted by the crowd, was expressing, in sentences vibrating with passion, his blissful intoxication—what a dream !

Two stamps of the foot given by the tall Bernard, the leader of the *claque*, who through force of habit gave the signal, were followed by a round of applause. Cambry sat down, in the midst of joyous acclamations, propitious wishes, and professions of friendship. Glasses were clinked noisily, and Madame Bréval, with a grand theatrical gesture, went up to the young author and kissed him, amidst shouts of enthusiasm.

Then, silence again reigned. Rombaudo, standing, his glass in hand, spoke in his turn and, in a few high-sounding phrases, he recapitulated the programme of the Théâtre-Moderne : *Tout par la jeunesse et pour la jeunesse !* It was upon this stage that the dramatic future of France rested ! It was within the shelter of its walls that the nursery of young authors must grow up and prosper. And, mastered by emotion, himself captivated by the affecting promises of his speech, Rombaudo stopped short in the midst of a telling sentence, the final period of which he had rounded in the morning. He made an effort to continue, but, his voice was strangled in his throat, he rolled his eyes distractedly,

he struck his chest vigorously and repeatedly, without forcing a word from it; and seeing his eloquence altogether adrift, he raised his glass, crying with a stronger accent than usual—

“*Té !* To the future of the Théâtre-Moderne !”

Stampings welcomed this conclusion, which had the double advantage of being short and unstudied. The “*Té !*” which burst from the oppressed heart of Rombaudo, was repeated with rapture by his guests, and Pavilly, in his muffled voice, having murmured, “Perhaps it is time to offer our hand to the ladies and go to dance a light quadrille,” everybody rose tumultuously, and passed into the *foyer du public*, converted into a ball-room.

La Barre, timid as a *débutant*, was one of the last to go out. The tall Bernard, become very red and full of friendly familiarity, cried, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the writer—

“The little *fête* has gone off well. . . . I started that capitally, *hein*, at the moment of the toasts? Ah! Hundredth nights in this house, do you see, we must have two a-year! It is your turn now! and you may rely upon me!”

The *foyer* presented a very curious picture. Standing in groups, men and women were conversing with animation. Without considering difference of

opinions, or of schools, brought together on the ground of art, authors, journalists, romance-writers, amalgamated cheerfully, setting aside prejudices and rancours. Claude could observe them more easily than at table. Before him, he saw "*Monsieur*" of the *Orchestre*, that power, formidable and masked mysteriously like a Venetian tribunal, having its emissaries and sbirri, to such an extent that more than one manager hears, in the night, some one walking within his walls trying to surprise the secret of his dream. This terrible anonymous one was peacefully incarnate as a fair, young man, in the act of relating, with a foreign accent, but with a vivacity extremely French, an anecdote which appeared greatly to divert his hearers. Maxime Faucheron, a *vaudevilliste*, with a monachal face, screening behind spectacles his malicious eyes, and Pierre Devanves, a tall and handsome fellow, whose two successes, obtained one after the other, in two very dissimilar styles, had opened to him the doors of all the theatres. A little farther off Frédéric Verney, a stout man, very short-sighted, of implacable candour, hitting his friends as hard as his enemies, prompt to blame and to praise, adoring the theatre, and perfectly acquainted with the usages of the stage, was talking with Adolphe Angu, very bald, with a keen glance, a waxed

moustache, a writer full of erudition, a distinguished archæologist, a remarkable financier, treating with as much talent a dramatic as an economic question, an inexhaustible mine of anecdotes and of souvenirs that he narrated with charming humour. Near them, Henry Fauquet, a political chronicler and a dramatic critic at the same time ; Athénien de Marseille, very fashionable and very fluent, giving details of the tour that he had just made in Italy to La Fourneraye, the famous *conférencier*, who, with his long hair and his drooping moustache, seemed a Vercingétorix in modern costume. Surrounded by young people, younger himself than all of them, Rolff, the master of Parisian chronicle, was developing, in his shrill voice, an astounding paradox, to which he gave, with a *verve endiablée*, the appearance of an incontestable truth. Henry de Senne, a literary gentleman, a sparkling journalist, dominated by his tall figure the gastronomist Poncelet. Victorien Poll one of the most terrible scoffers of this time, loosened the reins of his imagination, whilst Léon Rigot discussed a religious question with Farcaud, a writer of rare worth, a philosophical mind, who, with wild eyes, his hair in disorder, lent an ear while following in his memory a Wagnérienne phrase. Adolphe Carot, a talented romance writer and

brilliant journalist, was making an ardent profession of Legitimist faith to Léon Gendron, a Republican of the sceptical school, a chronicler of great originality, an ex-advocate; having cast his long robe to the nettles, rabid against the magistracy, whose failings he well knew; and *trainant le boulet* of criticism, by bewailing the length of the performances, the stupidity of the plays, and the age of the actresses. Jean Dax, the young critic on the *Revue*, a fashionable worldling, who is contented to write articles sparkling as brilliants, till the day when he shall bring out a book or a play which will place him in the first rank, was passing from group to group, fluttering around the women, always prepared with a stinging sarcasm or a gallant speech. He went from time to time to join Daniel Cambry, his intimate friend, who, seated in a corner, was listening to François Dobbée, the poet, with soft eyes, a pensive brow, completely engrossed in narrating the plot of his future drama. Armand Silvain, a handsome bearded fellow with a merry face, was improvising to please Albertine Rameau, a sonnet frightfully realistic, and was vowing to dedicate to this female *gamin* the next volume of his *Contes Popelards*; whilst the editor who publishes the works of Cambry was asking Bienpassant, one of the most brilliant

romance writers of the modern school, for the particulars of his new book.

It was an animated and striking spectacle. Each of these men, who separately would have merited attention and was accustomed to attract it, setting aside all pretension, all *pose*, yielded to the charm of this gathering, and enjoyed, unrestrainedly, this evening of truce, during which he could be amiable, at liberty to show his teeth the next day.

The conversation between these women, whose talent is to please, and these men, whose specialty is to amuse, soon took a turn extremely *piquant*. La Barre, who was not on exhibition, and did not think himself obliged to sustain the honour of his flag, made no efforts, and, more solitary than a countryman in a crowd, he gave himself up without *arrière-pensée* to the enjoyment of the present hour. Even as the philosopher at a Roman orgy, in the admirable painting of Couture, he could fold his arms, observe and follow the progress of the merriment, which, among Parisians, mounts swiftly, sparkling and light as the foam of champagne. He wondered at the expenditure of *verve* which took place at these times. A clever man, who could pick up all the shafts which, in a few minutes, whizzed past in that courteous *mêlée*, would have laid

in a stock of wit sufficient to fill four successful volumes.

In the centre of that noisy gathering, one single person remained calm and peaceful. Seated modestly near a window, Lise Fleuron listened smilingly to the merry speeches of her neighbours, but did not join in the conversation. Wearing a low-cut white dress, with roses in her hair, she appeared the image of simplicity and of innocence. Her lovely face was a little pale, and, from time to time, she cast a furtive glance towards Jean de Brives, who was engaged in earnest conversation.

Claude could regard her at leisure. He admired her slight and graceful figure; her pretty shoulders, whose incomplete roundness testified to her youth; her white throat, around which no ribbon was twined to veil its perfection, and which supported with exquisite grace her small head crowned by a diadem of fair hair. Perhaps a magnetic influence was evolved from the gaze of Claude, for twice in succession, the eyes of the actress were fixed on those of the young man, and each time, he seemed to see a friendly smile flit across the lips of Lise. The voice of Rombaoud drew him from his contemplation.

“Come that I may present you to Cambry,” said the manager. “You will often now have occasion

to meet him. He can be very useful to you. You must make each other's acquaintance to-day. It is a date that he will never forget, for it marks his first great success."

Taking Claude's arm, Rombaudo crossed the *foyer* in the direction of the young man, who rose on seeing them approach.

"I wish you good fortune equal to mine," said the young and already celebrated writer, whom Claude had complimented upon his brilliant and unquestionable success. "And especially I desire that you may not buy it at as high a price as myself."

And the recollection of the struggle engaged in by Cambry—bitter, violent, and in which, thrown to the ground ten times, he had always risen more ardent and more vigorous after each check—came into the mind of Claude. In truth, he had not stolen his glory. He had conquered it proudly by dint of work. And the premature wrinkles which furrowed his brow, the thinness of his face, with eyes disquieting through their mobility, the sarcastic curves of his mouth, were the traces printed by sadness, deception, and bitterness.

"I had many difficulties to overcome," resumed the author, gravely, as if he were casting a glance over his past. . . . "But all are forgotten,"

added he, with a careless gesture. "One hour of success makes up for ten years of torture. I have left the infernal regions, and I am in Paradise. Stay, there is one of its angels."

And, with a movement of the head, he showed to Claude, conversing with a prince of *feuilleton*, at the other end of the *foyer*, the adorable Lise.

"It is she who had the greatest share in the success of my drama. She was its charm, its poetry, its light. All that united grace and talent can do, she has done, and with the greatest facility. She has an admirable disposition, and you will certainly be much indebted to her. But do you not know her?"

"No," said Claude.

"Come then, I will myself introduce you to her. Stay, look at her from here, observe her simplicity and her girlish animation; is she not the incarnation of innocence? Everything about her conspires to captivate; she is of those who are born to triumph. Even to her name of Fleuron, which gives vaguely the idea of a crown. You will see, in ten years, at what a height that girl will be placed, if she lives.
. . ."

A shadow passed over the face of the writer, whom Claude regarded with disquietude.

“I ask your pardon,” continued Cambry; “but I have by nature an *esprit tourmenté*, and I am extremely superstitious. . . . Many times it has seemed to me that I have seen that charming girl, her head adorned by the white veil of martyrdom. . . . Does it not appear to you that she has the pale and sweet face of an Ophelia?”

In a rapid vision, La Barre saw Lise stretched upon a bed covered with flowers; she was smiling sadly, and her eyes were closed. A violet shadow spread over her face, and, in the sepulchral obscurity of the room, wax candles were burning with a funereal light. He had a moment of fearful emotion, there was a ringing in his ears, and he thought he heard bells tolling the death knell.

“Very fortunately she is wonderfully well,” said Cambry; “and presages mean nothing. If she is Ophelia for the moment, she is Ophelia beloved, happy, and in full possession of her reason.”

They moved forward. Lise rose to receive them, quitting those who surrounded her; and, when near, Claude again saw upon her lips that smile which, from a distance, seeming to be addressed to him, had so completely won his heart.

“*Ma chère Lise*,” said Cambry, “I bring to you M. Claude La Barre, for whom you will in a short

time fight and conquer. I have told him what a faithful ally he will have in you, and here he is, full of confidence and of hope. I leave him in your hands; be kind to him."

Lise answered nothing. She gazed earnestly at Claude. She gracefully threw back her small head and, in her delicious voice—

"Have you no memory, Monsieur Claude, or am I indeed so changed that you have not recognised me?"

And, as La Barre stood motionless, not daring yet to understand—

"Do you not remember a little garden in which, in former days, we cultivated flowers together?"

At these words the heart of La Barre melted. He recalled the sorrowful days of his sojourn at Evreux, the terrible evening on which he had seen his father in the old Voltaire of the *tour de France*, and his gloomy dejection dissipated by the apparition of a little fair girl, who had gone to hold out her hand to him, and who had wiled him from his mental distress. Therefore he had not deceived himself when he believed he had discovered the Lise of former times, gentle and timid, in that other Lise, enchanting and *fêtée*, who had so greatly troubled his imagination! It was indeed the same, and in

the eyes of the actress he again found the friendly glance of his little companion. A tear that he could not restrain trickled down his cheek. Lise drew him towards her and made him sit down upon the sofa.

“Well! what ails you?” said she. “Are you so afflicted at seeing me again? This evening, from the first instant, I recognised you . . . Claude! your name has ever been present in my thoughts. I hoped that you would have come to me of yourself, with outstretched hands; but you remained cold, and you appeared not to notice the engaging looks I cast at you.”

She paused. He gazed at her as if in an ecstacy. It seemed to him that they had never been separated, that they had always stayed the one with the other, so powerful were the bonds which attached him to her. In a few moments the aspect of his life was changed. He saw it smiling, prolific, filled with favourable promises. A glance from two blue eyes had sufficed to make everything resplendent around Claude.

With a sign, Lise summoned de Brives. She desired to unite these two young men by a solid friendship. Having them beside her, forgetting the *fête*, disdainful of those who revolved around her

in quest of a word or a smile, she plunged again with delight into her past, still so near, and related her life to La Barre, the sudden vocation which had called her to the stage, the *pension* that the Préfet had obtained for her, her entrance at the *Conservatoire*, and the misfortune of poor Madame Fleuron, who had become blind. She spoke with animation, sadness, or gaiety, unveiling to her friend the deep distresses and the small pleasures of her former existence, firmly grounded now in the security of an assured future.

And she gazed at Claude with satisfaction. Was it not singular to meet thus, in this theatre which was their common passion? Who could have expected that he would write dramas in which she would act? She would devote herself body and soul to his work! Ah! *certainly*, she would passionately study his *rôles*! Never had she thrown herself into a character as she would do it for him. He should see of what she was capable on the stage. And she promised him a triumph.

As he stood, pensive, fixing upon her an earnest glance, which seemed to read the heart and divine the thoughts, seized with a sudden desire to parade her influence over those men before whom the whole world bowed, she rose and stepped forward into the

foyer. The groups broke up, and she was surrounded in a second. By a singular chance, at the same moment, Clémence Villa returned from the balcony, followed by a retinue. The heat had become suffocating, and, on that lovely night in June, which made the sky resplendent with countless stars, the actress, allowing her companions to smoke, had remained to breathe the cool air, leaning her elbows on the stone balustrade, and having at her feet the Boulevard, at that late hour still filled with movement. She re-entered through the large open window, radiantly beautiful in her rose-coloured dress embroidered with pearls. And the two rivals found themselves face to face.

They could number their partisans and count their forces. All the influential representatives of literature who were gathered together there, encompassed with their homage and eulogies the charming artiste who promised to be one of the glories of the French stage. Clémence herself attracted the women already, in the secret recesses of their hearts, jealous of Lise, and bearing with difficulty her superiority, which, however, her rare modesty rendered so little weighty to them.

Very fortunately Fanny Mangin made a diversion by her beauty. Superb in her ball-dress from the

third act of *La Duchesse*, having come out, as she said, in all the diamonds of the crown, she dazzled by the lustre of her gems and the sparkling of her eyes. She stood talking with Georges Froyer, a small, dark man, always in quest of news, always on the scent of an affair, a talented journalist, an energetic administrator, without a rival in organizing a *fête*, and, between times, writing verses full of pathos and dreamy grace. The beautiful red-haired girl, watched from a distance by Mortagne, who, established at the corner of the hearth, was affecting an air of sombre pre-occupation, ended by relating to the journalist an adventure that had recently happened to a well-known singer, who was opulently protected by a German reigning prince.

“Yes, *mon cher*, the Grand Duke, separated from his *bien-aimée* by the exigencies of his rank, testified his love by having served up to the whole of his household, civil and military, the *menu* of the dinner eaten on the preceding day by the beauty. Now, she, who led in Paris a *vie de polichinelle*, as it wearied her to write, every day, her *menu*, caused one to be autographed, always the same, that she sent each morning to her august lover. . . . You can see from here the faces of the

courtiers! For fifteen days they ate the same dinner, when they decided to send a deputation to the lady to beseech her to vary her fare.
. . . .”

“And then?”

“*Ma foi!* They chose two magnificent officers of Uhlans, fair as Turkish tobacco, and rosy as raspberry jelly. She promised to have six other *menus* autographed, one for each day of the week; then she carried the men away with her to the *Maison d’Or pour les décarêmer*. And the legend asserts that they took an ample revenge on the Grand Duke!”

“*Dites donc, ma chère*, do not tell it to anyone; we will work it up to-morrow into a first-rate *soirée théâtrale*. . . .”

“What? The history of the two Uhlans?” asked Raoul Arché, laughingly, slapping the shoulder of his comrade. “It is known, my good fellow! Fanny has already narrated it to all the journalists who are here. . . . That fallacious person, O Georges, is abusing your credulity! . . .”

Fanny began to laugh heartily.

“Can you complain,” said she, “if, for once, you are paid back in your own coin?”

Then, regarding her with a comically indignant

look, the young *vaudevilliste*, whose gift of improvisation is well known, declaimed :—

Fanny Mangin, petite masque,
Tu nous fais poser, et pourtant
De ton père le charlatan,
Ce soir, tu n'as pas mis le casque !

“What ! my father !” exclaimed the beautiful girl, astounded.

“*Eh bien*, yes;” coolly replied Raoul. . . .
“Mangin, *l'homme au casque*, the dealer in *crayons*.
. . . You are not his daughter ? Are you really
sure of that ? It is curious. I have been told so !”

And, turning upon his heel, the young man left the actress crimson with anger, and went to find Edouard Maxime, who, having taken possession of the piano, was executing a sonata of Mozart, by tapping the key-board with his hat.

The graver people began to leave, and the mirth became more unrestrained. In the *foyer*, violently heated by the lustres, the lights of which were reflected in the mirrors, the murmur of voices rose higher. In an instant, when they would be reduced to a chosen few, the *fête* would be at its maddest. Campoint, at the head of a quatuor, was already at his post, and prepared to give the signal for dancing. A voice was heard, that of Gamard, very excited.

He had just told an extremely equivocal anecdote to Cécile Chrétien, and he was repeating laughingly, in the midst of a circle of comrades, his favourite expression, "In what a boat I have just taken her out!" But Cécile had overheard him, and, with much affectation, assuming the lofty airs of a virtuous girl, she exclaimed with asperity—

"Monsieur Gamard, it is a falsehood! I have never been in a boat with you! No, never! Do you hear? Never!"

And as Gamard laughed more and more, striking his hand heavily upon his leg, La Mère Chrétien went to the rescue of her daughter. Speaking above his head, with the cooings of a pupil of Madame Plessy, she wished to put young Gamard back into his place. But the latter having retorted, the borrowed dignity of La Mère Chrétien gave way to her natural vulgarity, Célimène was changed into Madame Angot. An energetic "*Eh! va donc, mauvais bou-diné!*" resounded in the midst of the *fête*, like a stone dashed through the panes of glass in a window. Mortagne, with the haughty grace of a *jeune premier*, led Madame Chrétien aside to remonstrate with her, whilst Desmazuères indignant, and taking a high tone, as if still playing the rôle of the Duke, shook the terrible Gamard, protesting

to him that his manners were unworthy of a nobleman.

“A nobleman! Oh! là! là!” rejoined the *gommeux*, staring at the actor. . . . “In our family, we are all noble as *les quatre fers d’un chien*! . . . Papa is a pavier, and he is called Gamard, without prefix! All the world cannot be of a grand family like yours, *mon cher* Desma-zures. . . .”

The music broke off their conversation. Desma-zures moved away with head erect, legs straightened like a professor of deportment. Gamard began to waltz with Albertine Rameau, going through the steps and back steps, reversing, undulating, and displaying the graces of a dancer at a public ball.

Couples were formed, and now the *foyer* was filled with a whirling crowd. Sélim Nuño swept into a corner by the vortex of dresses, which floated light and graceful, was leaning his back against the chimney-piece; and there, his eyes flaming in his swarthy face, brushed lightly in passing by snowy shoulders, their whiteness enhanced by the black coats of the cavaliers, he stood, his legs whipped by the trains, breathing the agitating emanations exhaled from these women.

Clémence, quitting the arm of her partner, approached Rombaud, and, drawing him aside—

“*Tiens !* look at them !” murmured she in his ear. And, with a gesture, she showed Lise and Jean, who were waltzing.

Careless of all who surrounded them, given up to the delight of being together, entwined, with eyes meeting eyes, the face of Jean was bending over Lise’s fair hair, as if he refrained with difficulty from burying his lips in those soft and silky curls ; they moved on, hardly touching the parquet with their feet, representing in themselves the divinity of youth and love.

“ But look ! look then ! ” repeated Clémence.

Rombaud looked, and, master of himself as he was, he started. Lise, yielding to the arm of Jean, was turning giddily, almost swooning. A vague smile played about her mouth ; her eyes, blinded by the lights, were drowned in ecstasy ; she saw nothing but a succession of flames, she heard nothing but a confused murmur. And, borne on by her partner, caressed by the air which became cooler in proportion as the waltz grew more rapid, she wished to remain ever thus, clasped in his arms in a delicious trance.

Clémence questioned Rombaud no more, but she

took his arm, and her contracted fingers cruelly bruised his flesh.

“Do not pinch me so hard, it hurts me!” said he, with ill-humour; then regaining his good temper—

“Well! they are amusing themselves, *ces enfants*! They are quite right; they are here for that!”

And, turning away his head that he might not see the threatening light which gleamed in the eyes of Clémence, he walked towards Claude.

The waltz ended, and the dancers separated. Lise sank upon a sofa, and, breathless, sightless, she remained tired out, prostrated. De Brives, standing before her, waited till she should recover her composure. He experienced the exquisite delight of moral possession. He had just felt the young girl palpitate in his arms. He had divined love in her eyes, on her lips. And, trembling with joy, knowing her to be indeed his own, forgetting everything, he was tempted to take her and to bear her away upon his heart.

He was brought back to the consciousness of reality by a heavy hand being placed upon his shoulder; at the same time a guttural voice sounded in his ears. It was Sélim, who, incapable of longer resisting his caprice, had approached Lise. He

crossed the *foyer* with the ponderous step of a mastodon, and seated himself beside the young girl. The attack was so little disguised, so brutal, that de Brives shivered with anger. The Portuguese installed himself near the actress and seemed to say—

“As long as I am here—I who, through the omnipotence of my wealth, am the master in this house—I intend no one to take the liberty of incommoding me.”

He turned his small grey eyes with wrinkled lids upon the young man, and, as if obeying an order, Jean silently walked away. The movement that he had made to place himself between her whom he adored and the old *débauché* was brusquely arrested. The power of money, almighty, imposing, was plainly manifested in the victorious intervention of the banker. This king of the Bourse had only to show himself and each person would yield up to him his place. And Sélim, the enormous and hideous incarnation of the golden calf, wallowing on the sofa, presented himself to the eyes of Lise when she recovered from her long stupor.

She gazed with surprise at Nuño, who was smiling at her. She had still before her eyes Jean, graceful, young, and seductive, and she suddenly perceived Sélim, unwieldy, old, and alarming. She made a

movement to rise. The banker laid his fat hand on that of Lise and kept her near him.

“Are you afraid of me, *ma chère enfant*?” said he, rolling his rough and guttural pronunciation. “In that case you fail to appreciate the sentiment which attracts me towards you. This is the second time only since your great success that I have had an opportunity of approaching you. . . . And I desire to express to you, not only all the admiration that I feel for you, but in addition to that all the interest which I take in you. . . . I know what you are. . . . your life has been related to me”

Lise was amazed. The banker was speaking to her in a paternal tone, and his face breathed benevolence. Was this the Sélim of whom she had heard so much evil?

“I am acquainted with nothing more meritorious and more deserving. You know that I have some influence here. Can I do anything to please you? Speak, I am quite at your service.”

“I thank you, Monsieur, for your kindness,” said Lise, in that silvery tone which so deliciously agitated her audience. “But I desire nothing . . . I have been treated by M. Rombaudo with a liberality to which I have still but little right . . . My salary has been increased, and I am very happy . . .”

She said these words, "very happy," with a brightening of the face, a radiancy in her glance, a caress in her smile, that made waves of blood rush to the head of the Portuguese. His eyes sparkled like a conflagration, and he longed madly for the love of that pretty girl, so fresh, so sweet, so *naïve*, who had just given him one of those emotions which to him were priceless.

"Happy," resumed he, gazing searchingly at Lise, "with twelve thousand francs a-year? But, *chère petite*, it is poverty. It is not that which is suitable for you. To vegetate in a condition so low is to be willing to sacrifice your future. To your charming person you require, like the canvas of a master, a splendid frame. I think you remarkably intelligent—understand me well, and do not be alarmed at the frankness of my language. You are at the beginning of your career. It rests with yourself to give to your admirable talent the decisive assistance of a good monetary position. Your success has been immense; but it must be lasting. Now, we are living at a time when all that does not violently strike the eyes, all that does not ardently excite curiosity, all that does not cruelly attract envy, is in one instant forgotten. It is the century of bluster, of *tam-tam*, of loud cries, of vast affairs,

of great triumphs, of immense scandals. We live to excess, like the frenzied, like the mad, like the insane. And the grand motive power of all these transports, of all these follies, is money. The rich man sees the whole world at his feet. His ugliness becomes distinction, his idiocy kindness of heart, his brutality an amiable sportiveness. They flatter his manias, they forestall his whims, they pander to his vices. He is rich—he is a sovereign! I have known—I who speak to you—very hard times. I was, in my youth, a contrabandist. . . . Reassure yourself; in my country it is a calling which does not dishonour! I have travelled over the scorching rocks of the mountains in Portugal, bearing upon my back bales of merchandise, parched by thirst, serving as a target for the carbines of the *douaniers*; and I cursed my life, and I swore if ever I became rich to put my foot upon the head of my fellow-creatures. I have done it. But at the cost of how much misery! You, *mon bijou*, you have this happiness, you are entering life through the best door. From the first step everything smiles upon you, everything favours you. You have talent, you are pretty, and you please. The commencement of your career is marked by success. You have but to open your hand and wealth is yours. You can

have to-morrow an *hôtel*, horses, diamonds, *toilettes*, all the accessories indispensable to a woman who desires to reign over Paris as a queen. For, do not deceive yourself, talent without the support of wealth is a very slight thing. It is like a rough diamond that shines, without doubt, but to which an elegant setting has not given its entire value. You are that diamond which might dazzle the crowd by its unrivalled brilliancy, and you seek obscurity. You limit your ambition to the *bourgeois pot au feu*, and to apartments on the fourth floor! And you pretend to be happy! Why, it is madness; and you are running to meet misfortune. From to-morrow—I am going to prove it to you—you will be in difficulties, and crushed under the weight of your debts; or you will exhibit yourself upon the stage dressed like a *figurante*, and the public will begin to take a dislike to you. You are preparing for your first important creation. You have ordered the five costumes that your *rôle* requires of a petty *conturière*, and yet you have spent three thousand francs. If you create three *rôles* in a year, and it is the least that you can expect, there is your whole salary squandered. Upon what will you live?”

Sélim paused on that sentence, which summed up so completely his thought, and cast at the actress

an interrogative glance. Lise, leaning back, motionless, remained dumb. In an instant, the Portuguese had opened before her a terrible prospect. As in a dream, she saw a gulf, boundless and dismal, yawning at her feet. It seemed to her that she had a vertigo, and that the abyss attracted her. The justness of the tempter's calculations struck her, and she repeated to herself mechanically, "Upon what shall we live?"

Then the house, crowded with spectators, abruptly appeared before her eyes. She saw the audience enthusiastic, applauding with every hand, and raining bouquets upon the stage. And before the foot-lights a woman, fashionable, and magnificently dressed, diamonds about her throat, was bowing to this subjugated tyrant, who welcomed its favourite with cheers. She did not distinguish the features of the victorious one. Was it herself or another?

The woman whom she saw was embellished by all that there could be of the most refined luxury. Her dress alone must have cost a sum equal to the salary of Lise for six months. And the young girl said to herself, "If it is I, then I shall have sold myself, and the favour of the public would be the price of my degradation." The swarthy face of the Portuguese, with his heavy eyes and wrinkled

lids, his savage mouth, and his white hair, passed before her eyes. She felt a shudder of disgust, a flame rushed from her heart to her head.

“I have long known,” said she steadily, “that the stage is not a school for morality, and that virtue is but little cultivated there. In the eyes of the world, an actress who has but one lover is a woman *fort rangée*, and, if she has chosen a rich man, she has given a remarkable proof of good sense. In that way she will become acquainted with love, and will know how to represent it on the stage in all its emotions. At the same time, she will have given a solid basis to her career. If the world attacks her, she will have some one to defend her. If she meets with a reverse of fortune—the stage is fertile in perils—she will find in her luxury a compensation, a succour. She will be able to recruit herself, to recover her powers, and to set out again with renewed ardour for the conquest of success. She will not experience the material difficulties of life: to her cares as an *artiste* will not be joined the cares of a *ménagère*. She will be free, powerful, brilliant, and nothing will be able to resist her. It is indeed this, is it not? that you have wished to make me understand, and your conclusion has been the necessity of selling myself? . . .”

Sélim quickly raised his head. For an instant he thought, "This little one is really intelligent, she is quite *dans le mouvement*. I, who thought to find in her a determined virtue, and who was intent on demolishing it with my most weighty arguments, I was indeed wasting my time." And nodding his head with a satisfied air, he awaited the expected *dénoûment*. While listening to Lise, he was saying to himself, "What a pretty voice she has!" And he abandoned himself to the charm of that exquisite music.

The last words were pronounced by the young girl in a tone of asperity which lashed the millionaire like the stroke of a whip. He saw her haughty and frozen, her arms folded over her white bosom, as if to shield her heart from every menace. He recognised, in one instant, the Lise, adorable and modest, who had enraptured the public. Her blue eyes proudly sustained his gaze, her pure face was radiant, and over her lips flitted a melancholy smile. She presented thus the likeness of one of those celestial messengers who, in the grand stained-glass windows of cathedrals, appear to the praying saints, bringing to them with hope a divine reflex of their heavenly abode.

Dazzled, Sélim bent his head with humility, then in a lowered voice—

“I merely wished to induce you to give your heart with discretion. Beautiful as you are, you will be encompassed with homage, and with temptations. You will love, *mon enfant*, and he who shall be so happy as to please you will have a very great influence upon your destiny. You are at the decisive hour. You can, by your own choice, either remain a chrysalis or become a butterfly. Pardon me for having spoken to you a little roughly perhaps, and know that I do not regret having brought about this interview, whatever emotion it may have caused you. In five minutes I have become thoroughly acquainted with you. And all that I have discovered of your character has pleased me. You have great elevation of mind, and much firmness of soul. You appear resolved not to drift with the current, but to direct your life with energy. You will doubtless pass through violent storms, and it is not impossible that you may emerge from them with honour. I wish it very sincerely. But remember that I have told you that I take much interest in you. And if you are ever in one of those perilous situations when one has need of a friend sure and devoted, come straight to me—you may be certain that you will find me always at your service.”

The heart of Lise was oppressed. She believed

that, in Nuño's words, she could discover a threatening meaning. She had a presentiment that this man spoke the truth, and that her whole life would one day be at the mercy of his generosity. She felt chilled to the bone. Her sight grew dim. She thought of de Brives with anguish.

Was it then through him that she would become acquainted with misfortune? In spite of herself, she now associated him with her destiny, and it seemed to her that he must be mingled with all which would happen to her, either sad or joyous. She saw him smiling as if he was sure of her love. He must be good and generous. Why should he make her suffer? And, apart from him, what sweetness would there be in her life? Beloved by him, would she not be happy? And her happiness, *sparkling* on her face, would it not be, in the eyes of the *public*, her greatest charm? She would triumph, *she was* sure of it, provided that she was loved. So long as her heart should be filled with intoxication, so long as her love should sing upon her lips, she would be victorious and applauded.

She recovered confidence, regarded the future with tranquillity, and again become mistress of herself—

“I thank you,” said she with simplicity, “for the

assurances of devotion which you give me. But, before everything, I rely upon myself. I have in fact had this dream, presumptuous at an epoch that you deem so corrupt, to owe all to my unaided efforts and to attain success solely by work. Just now you scoffed at my *bourgeoises* tendencies, and my simple tastes. What can I do? It is nature who is guilty; she created me thus. You have sketched for me an attractive picture of the splendours that I might obtain if, following the example of many others, I consented to become a prostitute, but, do you see, I have not the vocation. . . . As to the dangers that you point out to me, I am aware of them, and they do not cause me fear. If I have difficulties to conquer, I will exert myself valiantly; if I have assaults to sustain, I will endeavour not to fall a victim. If I must suffer, in order to live honestly and entirely for my art, I will suffer. It will be to me, a motive for self-study, and my talent, as you are so good as to tell me that I have talent, will profit by it. I think the public more just, more upright, less ungrateful, than you proclaim it. It is impossible that, for the want of a few jewels and a little lace, it will not show favour to a poor girl who, upon the stage, will tax her ingenuity to please it. And then, in fine, if I fail, I shall have at least this

consolation, I shall be free, having followed no other inspiration than that of my conscience."

Sélim rose: he bowed to Lise, and with a cold irony in his voice—

"Mademoiselle, no one offers for your success, wishes more sincere than mine. You have everything in order to succeed, and I hope to see you before long, at the Comédie-Française. The first bouquet that you receive there will come from me. But you have a tender and loving heart. If you suffer, you will suffer cruelly. Watch carefully over yourself, and, above all, distrust ineligible young men!"

When pronouncing these last words, he smiled, and his piercing glance seemed to penetrate the heart of the young girl, to read in it the name of Jean. He shook his head and, as if to engrave that warning deeper on the mind of Lise, he repeated, "Distrust ineligible young men!" Then, ponderously, he withdrew, leaving the actress plunged in unspeakable trouble.

What did he mean by his sardonic sentence? Had he in truth read her thoughts, and did he suspect the growing love which drew her to de Brives? Did he know concerning the young man things that he would not consent to say plainly, and

did he desire to put her on her guard? She writhed in vague disquietness, and conjured up grievous chimeras. It seemed to her that a convulsion had taken place in her mind. Was it indeed she who had just heard Nuño, the redoubtable financier, before whom the most intrepid lowered their flag, make to her offers which would have maddened with joy any other than Lise Fleuron? Was it indeed she, so timid, so *naïve*, who had resolutely coped with this sphinx, when he had given her the enigma of her future to solve?

The young girl, simple and candid, had then in one instant been transformed into a woman, resolute and experienced. She had understood all, seized all, with a clear-sightedness suddenly awakened. The tempter had carried her to the summit of the mountain and from there had shown to her the immense town lying at her feet, like a domain which was reserved for her, and the entire public reduced to servitude and prepared to greet her with acclamations. The goal was before her, visible, radiant, superb. But between this goal and herself there was a sombre space, overflowing with mire and degradation, into which she must descend and plant her feet. And, overcome by uncontrollable disgust, she turned away and said "No!" Then in one single flight he had

brought her back to the earth, and she was now again blended with the mass, given up to herself, without other succour than her own will, without other counsel than that of her heart.

She looked around her. Nothing was changed. Everything was as before except herself. She had abruptly lost all her illusions, all her faith, stripped off like spring flowers, by the gloomy experience of an old man. Now she perceived all the perils of her road, all the dangers of her career. She foresaw that, even at this moment, diverse interests were coalescing against her. She suspected Nuño of having wished by means of a supreme temptation to shield her from her enemies. He had offered her the opportunity of crushing them, of vanquishing them. But it was ended: she had said, "No."

She asked herself, with bitterness, who were her enemies, and why they should try to injure her. She believed, the poor child, that she had never offended anyone, forgetting her brilliant success, her exquisite beauty, her unimpeachable virtue, which were the most cruel offences. She thought of Jean, and, with a smile which would have enraptured the young man if he had known its signification, she murmured—

“They are jealous! Bah! They are only jealous of the fortunate!”

De Brives was near her; she bent towards him, and confidently rested her arm upon his.

“What has Nuño been saying to you?” asked Jean, in a trembling voice.

She assumed an air of indifference—

“He spoke to me of my future; he is very kind, very paternal. He is indeed a good man. Why do people speak so badly of him?”

Jean was silent. He thought: “Sélim kind and paternal! She did not understand what he said to her, or else she wishes to put me on a wrong scent.” He was seized by a jealous rage on thinking that there, just now, before his eyes, Nuño had been able to make the most degrading propositions to Lise. What prestige did his enormous wealth give to this man, so that he was protected by it from the importunate better than a king by his guards! He measured once more the tremendous power of money, and, filled with anger, he recognised the necessity of possessing it. He dreamed of it as limitless, absolute, irresistible. He felt within himself the requisite energy and audacity to conquer it. The vast field of speculation was there within his reach. He would do like Nuño—he would reap from it a large and

rich harvest; and then he would not be compelled to give place to anyone, pitiaibly, as he had just done, and he would treat as an equal to an equal the sovereigns of finance, who were the veritable masters of the earth.

“Of what are you thinking?” said Lise, seeing him thoughtful.

Jean started; he looked at the young girl, saw her troubled, and said, to reassure her—

“I am thinking of you.”

“Even when with me?”

“Always. You are my sole and incessant pre-occupation.”

“Oh! sole!”

She lifted her blue eyes to his face, and smiled with a delicious coquetry. She had forgotten all, the odious words heard, the keen apprehensions felt. As a dark cloud that the breeze of summer drives from the heavens, the gloomy impressions were effaced from her mind by the loving words of Jean. She no longer remembered anything but the man who was before her, charming, assiduous, tender, him by whom she was adored. And, in her heart, filled with exquisite emotion, an intoxicating voice arose which sang passionately of youth and love.

The *fête* began to take an extravagant turn.

Being now left to themselves, the *artistes* and the friends of Rombaudo, freed from all restraint, abandoned themselves to the joyous follies which invariably terminate these *soirées*. Pavilly was accomplishing a fantastic *cavalier seul*, and young Gamard, electrified, was preparing to walk upon his hands. The dust, raised by the feet of the dancers, mounted like a golden haze around the lustres, and the musicians, excessively excited, played, hurrying the time, with a frenzied animation that shook the nerves. A loud shout arose. Edouard Maxime, who had mysteriously stolen out for an instant upon the balcony, had just set fire to some Bengal lights, and let off some Roman candles.

"Half-past two," said Lise; "I must make my escape. . . ."

"Already? Are you afraid of losing your slipper, like Cinderella?" asked Jean.

"No; but I shall be scolded if I return by daylight. Wait for me here, I am going to my dressing-room for my mantle. . . ."

He followed her into the lobby, crossed the stage, and stood at the foot of the staircase, listening to the light sound of her steps, which echoed on the upper floor. Those words, "Wait for me," had filled him with joy. For the first time, Lise

disposed of Jean, manifesting very clearly in this way that she was aware of her power over him. She showed the chain, still slender, but yet very solid, which bound them together. She took him for her companion, and did not fear to leave with him in the presence of the whole world, at the risk of whatever might be thought.

De Brives said to himself : “ She has not reflected on what she is doing ; she has not weighed the consequences of her confiding behaviour to me. It would be honourable to resist the allurements and not allow her to compromise herself.” In the depths of his heart a mocking voice responded : “ Dost thou love her ? Dost thou covet her ? Then, do not be *naïf*, and do not repel the opportunity when it presents itself ! Do not wait till another, bolder or less scrupulous, carries off from thee that adorable girl ! Moreover, who has told thee that she does not know where she is going, and that it is not with a resolute foot that she is moving forward ? Certainly, she is innocent, and chaste, and pure. But her virtue is none the less the virtue of the theatre, destined surely to succumb one day. Do not refuse therefore the favour that she is willing to show thee. She has chosen thee ; thou dost please her ; take her ; she will be a charming mistress.”

Thus, gained over by his scepticism, Jean had arrived at the same conclusion as Sélim urged on by his depravity—the inevitable fall of Lise.

The sincere and ardent love felt by the young man did not pay to the actress the alms of a little respect. All his good feelings were suffocated by that base argument : “ Rather myself than another.” He did not admit that Lise, beautiful, sweet, poetical, could remain virtuous. The entire corruption of the theatre weighed upon her ; she was absorbed in the general impurity, and branded on the brow with the mark which fatally devoted her to vice.

During this time, Lise, with a light heart, was moving about her dressing-room. She had reflected that a moment only would be required to change her dress, and she took off her ball costume to save herself the trouble of bringing it back to the theatre the following day. By the feeble light of the gas faintly burning, she hastened her préparations, that she might not give Jean time to become impatient. She regretted having so inconsiderately told him to wait for her. Where had her head been, as they did not follow the same road, he going to the Rue Taitbout, and she to the Rue de Lancry ? A smile passed over her lips. After all, thought she, he is not very unfortunate ; he will have the satisfaction

of putting me into a carriage. He has often wasted his time in a less useful way, when he stayed to gamble all night at the club.

She became grave at the thought of play. Instinctively she dreaded gamblers. In the dramas in which they figured, the destiny reserved for them was always so lamentable! They sacrificed everything to their horrible passion. The supplications of love betrayed, the counsels of ambition repudiated, the calls of honour disowned, nothing could tear them from their sinful madness, and their final punishment was terrible. Jean, assuredly, was not like them. She promised herself to use all her influence to divert him from this evil propensity. She felt so keen an affection for him that nothing which might henceforth happen to him, either bad or good, would find her indifferent. In her innocence, she did not dream for an instant of the danger that there was in her friendship for the young man. She did not look beyond the present hour. She did not think how far this sentiment might lead her. She was happy, without being exactly aware of the source of her happiness. It was sufficient to her. And if it had been proposed to her to remain always thus, in the ineffable delight of her vague tenderness, she would have joyfully answered, "Yes."

She ran quickly down the stairs, calling from the upper landing, "I am coming." Her eyes caressed, with complacency, the handsome face of Jean, without discovering on it a trace of the detestable thoughts which had agitated the young man during her absence. Confidingly, she took his arm, and was preparing to push open the heavy baize door, when Cretet and *la petite* Lointier, clad in a waterproof, cowled with a lace mantilla, appeared in the lobby. Clémence followed them, conversing with La Barre, and preceding Nuño, who came from Rombaudo's cabinet.

Lise paused, uneasy and troubled. Without knowing why, she felt dissatisfied, and blushed, as if she had been committing a fault. She separated hastily from her cavalier, stretched out her hand to Claude who hurried towards her, and, allowing Jean to descend alone, she remained behind.

Clémence took Nuño's arm; then, with a wicked smile, turning to the journalist, and pointing out to him the three couples, she said, in such a tone that Lise, walking last, could hear her—

"Each lover is going away with his mistress. It is very pretty! There is only that poor M. La Barre, who is quite alone. Bah! an author! He has his muse! *Allons, bonne nuit, mes petits enfants!*"

Her insulting laugh pursued Lise down the stairs. And Sélim's words returned to the ears of the young girl, "Distrust ineligible young men!"

Why, however, should she feel distrust? Was it not she who had begged Jean to await her? And what harm was she doing by walking downstairs with him? Clémence with the free manners which were habitual to her, had doubtless wished to jest. But did not the young girl hear, every day at the theatre, very indecorous words flutter about her ears, to which she paid no attention? From whence then came her sudden embarrassment? And how was it that the words of her comrade made her suffer, like a secret outrage to her modesty?

Arrived upon the *trottoir* of the Rue de Bondy, with a look she sought, amongst the few carriages stationed there, the *fiacre* which every evening conveyed her home. She did not see it.

"*Tiens!* my old coachman has deserted me!" said she. "How stupid I am! I forgot to tell him yesterday that I should not leave at the usual hour."

"Let us go as far as the Boulevard," said Claude.

They all three walked in the direction of the Porte-Saint-Martin. Clémence followed them with her eyes, then addressing herself to Sélim—

"You were very prompt in going to shut yourself

up in Rombauid's cabinet, after having talked with our *grande artiste*," said she acrimoniously. "What did you say to that dear little one? She appeared much agitated. You know that I tolerate your caprices. Yet do not abuse my patience. You are a little Sultan-like; you are not called Sélim for nothing. But do not try to throw your handkerchief in my theatre. . . . That, for instance, I could not endure!"

Nuño assumed an air of indifference, and, taking a cigar from a handsome case in chased silver—

"Mademoiselle Fleuron is a very honest girl," said he, "and you are wrong to speak of her as you do. As to my caprices, if you tolerate them, I must observe to you that I close my eyes to your fancies. We both profit by that mutual indulgence. Therefore, we cannot reproach each other. You are a very agreeable woman when you are not in a bad humour. Are you going to be good-tempered? Yes? I will set you down at your door, before returning home. No? Good night."

Clémence began to laugh; she said to her coachman, "Follow!" And showing to Nuño a face again serene—

"*Allons, vieux scélérat*, give me a seat in your *coupé*."

The horses harnessed to the carriage of the Portuguese started at a quick trot. When turning the corner of the Boulevard, Sélim showed to Clémence, through the window, Lise, who was walking between Jean and La Barre.

“Do you see; she has gone away under good escort? What was the meaning of your spitefulness just now?”

“How do you know that she will keep them both with her?” replied the actress.

As if chance had determined to become the accomplice of Clémence, the group stopped at the edge of the *trottoir*. Claude shook the hand of Jean and of Lise, and slowly, almost as with regret, continued his way towards the Madeleine, whilst the two young people, arm-in-arm, turned and went back in the direction of the Rue de Lancry.

“Well?” exclaimed Clémence, at once triumphant and furious.

Sélim did not answer. He remarked the violent exasperation of his companion, and said to himself, “Is she jealous of the actress only? Or does that little de Brives please Clémence; and has she a double motive for hating Lise Fleuron?” Not a nerve quivered in the heart of the Portuguese at the thought that another was loved by the charming girl

whom he coveted. He only calculated the chances that he would have in the future, and found them numerous. After all, Lise showed unquestionable taste in taking for her first lover a man of the world. Generally that favour was reserved for a *cabotin*, and, in most cases, for the lowest comic actor of the *troupe*. Nuño, an old prowler of the *coulisses*, had always seen these *pitres* exercise inexplicable seduction. Their obscene mirth, their coarse bluster, intoxicates these girls rapidly, and without the possibility of resistance, like the drugged wine of an obscure *cabaret*. A *liaison* between de Brives and Lise did not appear to Sélim likely to be lasting. However modest might be the dreams of the actress, the young fellow had not enough money to keep it up for a long time. He must soon run aground ; and then it would be for the dexterous to work for the rescue of Lise.

“My time will come,” said the Portuguese to himself. “A woman’s first lover does not count ; he is like the first tenant in a new house. After him one only lets to substantial people.”

He began to laugh, completely forgetting Clémence, who, leaning back in the cushioned corner of the *coupé*, was yielding to her tempestuous thoughts.

“What amuses you ?” asked the actress.

"I have done a fine thing to-day," replied the banker, finding it prudent to divert her attention. . . . "I have induced the Crédit Universel, to take up the Servian Loan—it is I who issue the shares. . . . There will be, my little cat, handsome premiums to realize. . . . "

"*Dites donc*, Sélim, if I sell my Roumanian Railways?" said the young woman, her eyes suddenly brightening. . . . "I could take many Servians at par. . . . "

"How many Roumanians have you?"

"I have five hundred. . . . They have risen a hundred and twenty francs since you advised me to buy them. . . . "

"Too soon! . . . " said Nuño. "They will go up again eighty francs . . . before we liquidate. . . . Let settling-day pass. . . . "

With the back of his large hand, brown and hairy, he stroked Clémence's cheek, and regarding her with unexpected tenderness—

"It is pretty," said he in his rough voice, "a little woman who understands business so well!"

"*Dame!* I am your pupil," replied the actress, with grateful humility. "But my mind has a bent in that direction," said she gaily. "That is positive!"

"As to that little Fleuron," resumed Nuño after a silence, "I very much fear that she will be a fool. And I give up occupying myself about her."

A flash of diabolical joy illumined the face of Clémence. She believed that she could read a hidden meaning in his words. She said to herself, "Sélim has lost his interest in her, he abandons her to me. I will get rid of her!"

Incapable of penetrating into the dark and tortuous recesses of his mind, she did not divine that the Portuguese wished to make use of her to precipitate the events which would deliver Lise over to him. And smiling, pacified, happy, for the first time for many months, she dreamed of a radiant future.

Whilst these formidable intrigues were being concocted around her, Lise, leaning on Jean's arm, was walking up the Boulevard.

"It is so fine," de Brives had said, "and you live so near! What is the good of having a carriage? If you fear dangerous encounters, I will go with you as far as your door."

The air was mild, the pavement dry; Lise did not dare to refuse. And side by side, with that step, cadenced and undulating, which is the walk of lovers, they moved on without speaking, their hearts *en*

fête. They passed before the theatre. The upper part was blazing with light, and through the open windows the music of the orchestra was heard, casting to the night wind its joyous strains.

“Those mad people are still dancing up there!” said de Brives. “They will stay till daybreak.”

Lise did not answer. She was enjoying with rapture the delight of finding herself on the arm of him whom she loved, and, absorbed, she seemed to fear to lose a single one of the joys of the present hour. She regarded Jean by stealth, admiring his graceful figure, seized with a longing to touch and to draw out between her fingers his long fair moustache. He turned towards her and their eyes met. They smiled, and Jean gently pressed the young girl’s arm to his heart.

“In a few days the theatre will close,” said he, “and everyone will be going away. . . . Do you also leave Paris?”

“Not yet,” replied she, “but I shall certainly go to pass six weeks at Evreux with my mother, at the house of one of my aunts. . . .”

“And during all that time I shall not see you. How long it will be!”

“You could come to Evreux, it is a very pretty town. I shall organise there a performance for the

benefit of the poor. . . . That will be a reasonable pretext for you."

"One single evening . . . What will that be? You do not think of the distress that I shall feel when I am far from you . . . Will it cost you nothing to be separated from me?"

"You know that it will," said she, in a low tone.

Jean bent over her shoulder, and touching her ear with his lips, with a fervour that made Lise thrill—

"I love you so much!" murmured he.

"Jean!" said she, striving to disengage herself from him, as if the contact of the young man scorched her. But he held her firmly, and clasping her more closely, in the same manner that she had called him Jean he called her Lise. And, not able to satiate himself with that first indulgence of their love, he repeated many times that simple and charming name with an expression of tenderness that brought tears into the young girl's eyes. Palpitating he strained her in his arms; each throb of his heart was answered by the heart of her whom he adored. And Lise no longer resisted; she was happy in his embrace. A sweet and perfumed warmth enveloped her. Instead of trying to escape, she now clung to Jean, intoxicated, vanquished, won.

The Boulevard was deserted, and they walked, slowly, beneath the trees of the islet which is opposite the Rue de Lancry. The moon had emerged from behind the clouds, and, through the large leaves of the plane-trees, she shed her mild and pure beams upon their faces. They moved on, thoughtless as two birds, in that clear and balmy night, careless of the hour, unconscious of the road passed over and repassed twenty times, engrossed by the happiness of being together, and not dreaming that it was time to part. Jean had forgotten all, his evil thoughts, his egotistic calculations. The innocence of Lise had deeply moved and purified him. He did not for one instant think of trying to lead her astray, of attempting to abuse her unconditional surrender, so confiding and so ingenuous. He felt her so wholly his own that he had not a wish to advance the hour when, of herself, she would fall into his arms. They spoke, and like a flood too long restrained, confessions rushed to their lips. They were eager to know everything of each other.

Simply and frankly they related their lives; they told each other how long a time they had loved, astonished at the lightning-like rapidity with which they had both become attached, recognising in that the decree of fate, and rejoicing that they had been

so well able to obey it. They seated themselves on a bench before the Ambigu, an object of curiosity to the rare passers, who smilingly turned aside, seeing them so near each other. They went as far as the Place du Château-d'Eau, and returned by the Boulevard Magenta, following the streets by chance, and found themselves, without being aware of it, before the door of Lise. The eyes of the young girl were struck by the appearance of the house; she recognised it, stopped abruptly, seemed to awake from a dream, and exclaimed—

“*Mon Dieu!* What o'clock is it?”

Jean consulted his watch. It was four o'clock in the morning. For an hour and a half they had been walking, without suspecting the flight of time.

“I must go in,” said Lise softly.

And as Jean looked at her with supplicating eyes—

“If my mother awakes, and if she does not find me there she will be uneasy.”

However, without being asked by him, she went back as far as the Ambigu, and very slowly returned to her door. They stood there yet an instant, lingering, gazing at each other, and not able to tear themselves from their loved *tête-à-tête*. . . .

“Adieu,” at length said Lise.

Smiling, she offered him her brow. Jean stooped ; but on breathing the perfume of the young girl's fair hair, passion suddenly took possession of him ; he caught Lise in his arms, clasped her madly to his heart, and seeing her pale, her lips apart, as if thirsting for love, he closed her mouth with a kiss. He felt her quiver in his arms and sink back ; all the houses in the street turned before his eyes, swept round in a giddy whirlpool. He heard a stifled cry. And when he regained possession of himself, he saw Lise, slender and graceful, disappearing through the half open door. It fell back heavily, and Jean was alone





CHAPTER VI.



LISE slept a calm sleep. The souvenirs she had brought home did not trouble her; they were pleasant. If the face of Jean passed through her dreams, she saw it smiling and delighted. The day was advanced, and it was already eleven o'clock when she opened her eyes. Floods of light entered her room through the windows, which overlooked large gardens filled with shade and coolness. The sky was blue, the birds chased each other with busy twitterings among the branches, and the sunbeams played in the verdure. Lise awoke with happy impressions. A fulness of joy was within her, which made her find everything good and beautiful. She began to sing, without knowing why. Songs mounted to her lips as prayers of gratitude. Her

gaiety was a thanksgiving. She twisted her beautiful hair into one single coil, hastily put on a large *peignoir* of pink cambric, and, her bare feet in small high-heeled slippers, she ran to her mother's chamber. The *bonne* was laying the cloth in the *salle à manger*. She welcomed Lise with a friendly "good day," and, through the door left ajar—

"Ah! Well, madame, here is mademoiselle up, and she looks as if she had got out of bed with the right foot first!"

"You are here, my daughter?" said the blind woman.

"Yes, mamma. Have you slept well?"

"No, my poor little one, I did not sleep," answered *la mère* Fleuron, in a piteous voice. "Ah! when one is old and wretched as I am, one sleeps no more! At what hour did you come home?"

"Very late, mamma," said Lise, not wishing to own that it was four o'clock in the morning, and smiling on seeing that her mother, despite the deprivation of sleep of which she complained, had not heard her.

"Were you well amused?"

"Yes, mamma."

Lise approached her mother, who was sitting in a large arm-chair near the open window. She was a

small, spare woman, with a complexion yellow and as if tanned, with grey hair flattened *en bandeaux* over her low and wrinkled forehead. Her eyes, that she always kept lowered, were surmounted by thick black brows. She was wearing a dress of grey cloth, her shoulders were covered by a small black woollen shawl. She knitted without cessation, and when she had finished her row of stitches, with a mechanical action she stuck the long steel needle in her hair above the ear. Lise seated herself on the arm of the chair and, with cajoling tenderness, began to caress her mother. She paid to that poor woman, soured by her infirmity, touching attentions, with her white hand smoothing her mother's hair, straightening the small woollen shawl, which was displaced. She slipped a stool under her feet, questioning her lovingly, and obtaining only the fretful answers of a woman who thinks to relieve herself by continual complaints. Then Lise began her review of the room, and she moved about with a light step, warbling in a joyous voice, with a something in it airy and coquettish that made one think of a bird.

“What is the matter with you, Lise?” asked *la mère* Fleuron, struck by the extraordinary excitement of her daughter. She threw back her head, a position in which, she said, her glance passing

beneath the film over her eyes, still permitted her slightly to distinguish objects. Lise reddened under the troubled gaze of her mother. She seated herself upon a chair, and, without answering—

“Do you know that I saw, yesterday evening, some one with whom you were acquainted in former days?”

“Where?”

“At Evreux.”

“Ah! at the time when I had my sight,” sighed the blind woman. “And who is it?”

“The son of the army doctor who lived near us, on the other side of the garden, M. La Barre.”

“*Tiens!* He who drank. . . . Yes, I remember the little boy. I saw him when I was working at the window. He was amiable. And what is he doing now?”

“He writes dramas. He is the author of the new piece we are going to play at the re-opening. I was very pleased to meet him again. . . .”

“Ah! he also belongs to the theatre!” said *la mère* Fleuron, with bitterness, who had never been able to pardon her daughter the vocation which had called her to the stage. Although Lise had brought abundance into the household, although she had great success, the prejudice against actors and those

who associated with them had remained indestructible, and, at the bottom of her heart, the former *couturière* thought that the young girl had turned out badly.

“And why does not this young man enter a profession?” asked the blind woman; “is he idle or good-for-nothing?”

“But, mamma, to write dramas is a profession. Those who are successful draw from it, not only much honour, but still more, much money. . . . Look at M. d’Ennery and M. Sardou. . . . Their works are like estates, which, every year, bring in a large sum. It appears that M. La Barre has talent, and that his play is very remarkable. . . .”

La mère Fleuron shook her head with an air full of doubt.

“So much the better, my child; I wish that he may succeed whilst these things are still thought of importance. . . . But that does not prevent me from never understanding how people can gain enormous sums by making small black marks on white paper; how men and women, dressed up like learned dogs, can get paid hundreds and thousands for reciting sentences in public; and how all this is honestly gained, as in a real handicraft, by hard work!”

“Mamma!”

“In fine, you well know,” obstinately continued the blind woman, to whose temples a red flush had mounted, “that in days gone by . . . it is you who read it to me, they allowed *artistes* to die without the consolations of religion, and they did not bury them in the cemeteries!”

“Well! mamma,” said Lise, merrily, “in these days they decorate them!”

La mère Fleuron clasped her hands as if to offer up a prayer. She threw back her head, endeavouring to see her daughter, and, in an accent of stupor—

“They decorate them! . . . With the Cross of the Legion of Honour? With that which your grandfather gained at the taking of Algiers?”

“Yes, mamma.”

The blind woman reflected for an instant, then, with conviction—

“Then it is not in earnest,” said she. “It is to make fun of them!”

Usually Lise allowed her mother to talk on, very often accusing her of being ungrateful, but enduring with patience her harsh reproaches. This morning however her nerves were strained; a desire to speak, to spread abroad the over-fulness of her heart, urged.

her on. She suffered herself to be drawn into a contest, furnishing arguments in abundance :—

The situation was now altogether changed, and the stage attracted every eye, every ambition, and every homage. Authors were like princes, honoured, admired, sought, and everywhere held the first rank. As to the *artistes*, those who worked at their art in earnest, *bien entendu*, they lived, in the theatre, applauded, *fêtés*, and liberally paid, and off the stage, as good *bourgeois*, in their homes with their wives and children. There were some who, in the country, were mayors of their Commune. One could not find people more happy and more honourable. *Artistes* liked a little too much, perhaps, ostentation, newspaper paragraphs, and theatrical effects. But this was the result, quite simple and very excusable, of their profession, which kept them always on view. And then the fault of this fell also upon the public, which incites actors to exaggerate their importance, by making minute and curious inquiries about the people and the affairs of the theatre. This was an infatuation, a passion, a madness. The theatre now fills an important place in society. In the *salons*, in the journals, in books, and even at the Tribunal, they occupy themselves with it. Everyone has something to do with it; and there is almost a general *cabotinage*.

The women of the *grand monde*, under pretext of getting up *fêtes* for charity, draw the *artistes* into the intimacy of their lives, and transform their family hotels into theatres, their aristocratic *salons* into *coulisses*. This is a sudden and complete revenge, the conquest by the *artistes* of that world from which for so long a time they have been excluded, and in which they henceforth reign as masters, having founded their sovereignty by their talent, and holding in their hand the sceptre of fashion.

And Lise, carried away by her subject, spoke with an unaccustomed eloquence which surprised her mother, leaving her embarrassed and unable to reply. But reduced to powerlessness, though unconvinced, lowering her head like a restive she-goat, the blind woman did not surrender, but repeated with obstinacy—

“It is not right that they should sell words so dear! . . . It is not in earnest, and it will not last!”

Lise then began to laugh, and gently, with a warmth of tenderness which did not penetrate to the withered heart of the poor sick woman—

“Well! mamma, let us enjoy it while it lasts, as you say. If you would like it after breakfast, I will

take you in a carriage to the Bois de Boulogne.
. . . .”

“What is the use?” bitterly answered *la mère* Fleuron, “as I cannot see!”

“You will take the air and you will sleep better. Now, grumbling mamma, come to breakfast.”

And, putting her arm round the waist of the blind woman, Lise aided her to rise and led her, with maternal attention, to the *salle à manger*.

The change did the young girl good. Leaning back in the carriage beside her mother, she could cherish her secret thoughts and wander in her *souvenir*, as in a sure retreat adorned by flowers. Magnificent equipages passed without arousing her attention. She saw neither the sky, which was blue and cloudless; nor the lake, which spread its sheet of silver between banks clothed with short and soft grass; nor the trees, whose leafy boughs offered to wayfarers a shelter full of cool shade. She was following, in an entrancing vision, a handsome young man with a proud bearing, a tempting mouth, and a long, fair moustache, who smiled at her tenderly. When a horseman rode by, attracting her eyes by the spirited caracoles of his steed, she contrasted him with the hero of her dream and

murmured, "Thou art not equal to Jean—the Jean who loves me and whom I love!"

Jean! Jean always! In her heart and on her lips there was no longer room but for Jean. She did not look for him—she knew that he rode in the Bois only in the morning. At this moment he was on the Bourse, transacting business and pursuing fortune.

Nuño had definitively taken him into his confidence. He explained to Jean his plans, unfolded to him his projects, and, growing warm as he proceeded, he threw such light upon his financial tactics that it inspired in the young man a respectful terror.

Sélim, on a large scale, was as de Brives on a small—a shearer of men. Only he had, for a great while, lost the scruples that Jean still preserved. In this gambling with vast financial affairs, small private interests disappeared, swamped in immense general interests. Governments negotiated with the banker. And Nuño levied enormous contributions from the people, with the same dispassionate severity as that of the commander of an army, when, after a battle, he crushes a province with a war-tax. Men were his tributaries. He was a kind of potentate of finance, and nations sweated, from the end of one year to the other, in toil and in poverty, to furnish money to this brewer of millions.

And of all those important financial transactions, engaged in abroad, and the contracts for which were drawn up in every language, in every idiom—European, African, or Asiatic—a little of the gold, wrung from the poor and the suffering bowing down over the laboriously cultivated earth, stuck to the hands of all the intermediate agents. This began with the sovereign who had decreed the Convention ; it was continued by the Ministers who had enforced it ; by the agents who had jobbed it ; to end with Clémence Villa, who, in a lace peignoir, while offering five o'clock tea in her boudoir, to her lord and master, Sélim Nuño, had listened with an attentive ear to his brilliant *exposé* of the operation.

When the Portuguese with his curt speech and his rough accent, explained to Jean the mechanism of one of these vast combinations, which would give over to him the whole of a kingdom for many years, it seemed to Jean that he heard the groaning screws of a formidable wine-press, in which, instead of grapes, they were crushing men, and from which, instead of wine, there flowed blood.

When the young man gambled at the club, it was a combat with equal weapons, money against money, *sang-froid* against *sang-froid*. He was at the mercy of his adversaries, and might be the

victim of bad luck. Nuño, armed with his millions, contended with the certainty of victory. Nothing could prevail against him. And if he had transactions with too strong a party, he knew how, at an opportune moment, to contract alliances, to form syndicates, and to put the whole artillery of the *Haut.Banque* on his side.

Jean, influenced by his early ideas, by his prejudices as a man of the world, had abruptly revolted ; he severely censured Nuño's proceedings. But, on penetrating deeper into the world of finance, he had discovered that everywhere there was the same mode of action. From the top to the bottom of the social ladder, he had seen undue advantage taken of the small by the great, of the weak by the strong.

And he had quickly arrived at enunciating aphorisms, reassuring to his conscience, for his own use : There were in this world only victors and vanquished. It would be folly to let oneself be conquered. He who is not a tyrant is a slave. In business, persons disappear ; there is nothing but deeds. From the moment that the deed is legal, what reproach can one incur ? We are not acquainted with the people whose money we collect. Would they make so many difficulties in order to collect ours ?

We convince ourselves easily of that which we desire. He began to find quite natural all that had at first disgusted him. He saw around him men considered strictly honourable reap wealth from this field, as from a domain belonging to them. He set out resolutely after them and gleaned. He was remarkably intelligent and amused Nuño by his vivacity. The Portuguese listened to him with a vague smile, his wrinkled lids partly drooping over his eyes, like blinds. He had thus the appearance of a cat who is lying in wait for a mouse. He often said to him—

“Take care not to go too fast. Distrust your impulsiveness. The best affairs are those that we leave to grow ripe. You have very good abilities and you will succeed, if you do not break your back on the road.”

When, at about ten o'clock, de Brives passed through the vast court-yard of the hotel in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, the out-buildings of which had been transformed into offices, the agents and men of business who went to the audiences that Sélim gave, as if he were a Minister, received the young man with the deference that is shown to a favourite. Without waiting, he entered the cabinet of Nuño's private secretary, and there he heard how

matters stood in the house, before seeing the master.

Never had Nuño welcomed Jean more warmly than the day after that *soirée* when he had seen him going away with Lise Fleuron on his arm. He seemed to wish to attach de Brives to himself by definite bonds. He opened his mind to him, and let him foresee in a future near at hand a participation in his most important affairs. In his own mind the Portuguese well knew that it was this which would, the most surely and the most speedily, lead the young man to ruin. On the way to make his fortune, certain of being loved, Jean gave himself up to unalloyed happiness. He risked a large operation on the Bourse, and, at about five o'clock, his affairs transacted, his correspondence arranged, he went with a light step to read the evening papers at the club.

The walk appeared delightful to him. It was the end of a lovely day; the Boulevard was black with carriages and, upon the *trottoirs*, women, in light toilettes, *pimpante* in figure, were going and coming, gracefully balancing their parasols. He paused for an instant in the refuge which faces the *Grand Opéra*, and remained there, intoxicated by the air, dazzled by the movement, looking at the

gilded statues on the cupola, which glittered under the rays of the setting sun. It was a fascinating scene, an incessant arrival of equipages, as if on that day the town was making a splendid display of its luxury and of its wealth.

In a large waggonette, drawn by four horses, quite a cargo of English, under the charge of a guide from Cook's Agency, were returning from an excursion; and, in the midst of elderly ladies with flat waists, with poverty-stricken chignons, clad in gray dust cloaks, wearing bell-shaped hats in brown straw, and old gentlemen with large, black overcoats, broad-brimmed felt hats, and shoes with double soles, like flowers in a cluster of thistles, bloomed a few young girls, with rosy cheeks, light hair, and large dreamy eyes lovingly fixed upon the indispensable Bædeker.

For an instant Jean followed the carriage, which went down the Rue de la Paix at the full trot of the post-horses.

Arrived at the Place Vendôme, he turned to the left and entered the club. He climbed the staircase with its baluster of wrought-iron, passed before the footman, who bowed respectfully, crossed the billiard-room, and went into the grand salon, wainscoted in white, relieved by gilded mouldings, the

upper part of the doors being sullied by time, the two windows overlook the Place opposite the column.

Seven or eight members, grouped before the fire-place, were talking with animation. One of them held a journal and was reading a paragraph from it to those who surrounded him. And there were comments, exclamations, and bursts of laughter.

The apparition of Jean seemed to freeze the words upon their lips. His comrades silently gave him a hand and, after exchanging a glance amongst themselves, they dispersed, some going to the small card-room, others to the writing-room. Jean, amazed, saw that there remained with himself only a big fellow, named Verneville, whom he met every day on the Bourse, and with whom he was on friendly terms. Jean approached him, and affecting an easy tone—

“What has happened? Why do they make their escape when I appear?”

For a moment Verneville kept silence, then, making up his mind—

“*Ma foi, mon cher* de Brives, you will certainly end by knowing the affair; it is much better that you should hear it at once. They withdrew from

discretion, that you might not be embarrassed, if, before them, you began to read . . . ”

“What?” cried Jean, becoming very pale, and suspecting some baseness.

The big fellow took from an arm-chair the journal which was furnishing the subject of conversation when Jean entered, and stretching it out to his comrade—

“See there,” said he.

With a glance, Jean ran over the newspaper. There was, in the first place, a bitter-sweet account of the *soirée* given in honour of the hundredth representation, in which the writer of the article, B. de Lantenac, made merry at the expense of Rombaud, of his *artistes*, and of his guests. Recalling the adverse early days of the Théâtre-Moderne, which had for a long time only existed on the subsidies of Nuño, he compared that unfortunate house to the raft of *La Méduse*, and depicted Sélim, with his swarthy complexion, playing the part of the negro in Géricault's celebrated painting, gazing, mounted upon the booking-office, to see if, in the distance, the public was not coming to the rescue of the company threatened with death from starvation. He asserted that each one of the hundred performances of *La Duchesse* had not covered its expenses,

and insinuated that Rombaud, a shrewd calculator, losing by each of those evenings, relied upon recouping himself by the number. And he concluded by saying, "This success is a success *à la* Pyrrhus. Another such hundredth night and all is lost !"

It was a tissue of abusive nonsense, embellished by *Boulevardières* jokes. Jean read the article, shrugging his shoulders.

"Some reporter whom they neglected to invite," murmured he.

But Verneville having said, "Look lower down," he passed on to the *Échos*, and, suddenly, the following short paragraph burst upon his eyes, scathing as vitriol:—

"In the *coulisses* at the theatres much is being said concerning the shipwreck of the charming Mademoiselle Z.'s virtue, the *jeune première* who has this winter been so great a favourite with the public. This amiable girl that people have been pleased to quote as the last survivor of the eleven thousand virgins, has allowed her eyes to fall upon one of the most fashionable of our young clubmen, well launched in the world of finance. It is maintained that the Bourse has not been a stranger to this happy mortal's triumph. However that may be, this conquest will be the most brilliant *fleuron* in his *couronne galante*. One of Mademoiselle Z.'s comrades, the witty X., who passionately cultivates the *à peu près*, exclaimed on hearing of the occurrence, 'That little Z. is a sly girl—she waited till *Brives* dropped ready-roasted into her mouth.'"

Twice Jean read these stupid and malicious lines. A terrible anger was kindled within him. His

thoughts revolved, with frightful rapidity, in his brain, and it seemed to him that he himself was being drawn into a whirlpool. His ears were filled with a confused clamour, and his hands became damp. His eyes were fixed upon the journal, he gazed at it without seeing it, thinking of poor Lise, insulted in so cowardly a manner by a wretch who gave up to the jeers of an imbecile public the outraged purity of the innocent and modest girl. He was insensible to the indignity offered to himself personally. He only suffered for Lise. His upright nature revolted—he blamed himself for all that had happened. Tears rushed to his eyes, and he uttered so furious a cry of rage that Verneville started back amazed.

This movement restored Jean to himself. He crushed the journal in his hands as he longed to crush the writer of the article, and hurled it violently into the fire-place. Then, turning to the *boursier*, who was gazing at him anxiously—

“I thank you, Verneville; you have behaved as a man of honour and as a true friend. Now enlighten me completely, if you can. When was this journal brought here?”

“Just now, by post. The club takes it.”

“Then none of those gentlemen have helped to spread the slander?”

“*Grand Dieu ! cher ami,*” rejoined Verneville, “why, there was but one cry, and entirely of disapprobation ! You know that you are much liked here . . . *Parbleu !* they always jest a little ! . . . There are always friends to exclaim : Ah ! *ce diable de Brives !* Look at that Don Juan ! But as to the article, they found it vile and contemptible. . . . And everybody will be with you. . . . Moreover, she is charming, that little Lise . . . quite charming ! . . .”

And Verneville, tormented by curiosity, drew nearer ; he was about to touch Jean’s elbow, saying to him, “*Hein !* after all, you are not to be pitied !” But the young man did not give him time.

“These *Échos* are signed ‘Leperello.’ . . . Do you know who conceals himself under this fictitious name ?”

“Desfiguières, who knows everyone, was naming him as you came in. . . . It is that same B. de Lantenac. . . . B. stands for Baptiste, Bertrand, or Baron, at your choice.”

“Who is this Lantenac ?”

“A tall, long-haired man, bearded, young, without orthography, but very fluent, a regular Bohemian, living in the *ateliers* or in the beer-houses. . . .”

“Will the fellow fight ?”

“Not at the beginning of the month, but after the twenty-fifth, as much as you will. . . .”

“Why?”

“Because, at the end of the month he has no more money, and by means of a duel, which would get the journal sold, he would obtain an advance from the editors. . . .”

“Good!” said Jean, with menacing irony. “If he is bound to have no courage till the end of the present month, I charge myself with making him an advance which will force him to change his mind. Do you know the offices of this journal?”

“Useless to go to them; you will never find your man there. He holds his sittings in the evening, at the Café des Variétés.”

“That is perfect. I hope, Verneville, that you will be so good as to stand by me? We will take Michalon, and the affair shall not be protracted, I will answer for it.”

“Quite at your orders, *cher ami*,” said the big fellow, who, with lively satisfaction, saw himself involved in a quarrel which, for at least two days, would be the subject of conversation to the whole of Paris.

“Thanks,” said Jean; “and now not a word.”

Again become master of himself, he asked the

steward if M. Michalon was at the club, and upon a reply in the affirmative, he walked towards the *salle d'armes*, where he was certain to find his friend.

Lise had returned from the Bois at four o'clock with her mother. She had assisted the blind woman to reascend the rather steep steps of the staircase, had found upon the table in the ante-room a journal, addressed to "Mademoiselle Fleuron, *Artiste Dramatique*," had taken it up mechanically and, without thinking of reading it, had deposited it with her parasol and gloves on the chimney-piece in her room. For an hour, while changing her dress to go to the theatre, while moving busily about her small room, hung with a cheerful paper, the furniture of which, in maple and bamboo, was of charming simplicity, she passed twenty times within reach of that journal, containing in its folds the impoisoned article, and had no thought of casting her eyes over it.

Lise, adoring her art, devoting to the study of her rôles all the power of mind and intelligence that she possessed, had no curiosity to learn what was said of her. She did her best, and for all else she trusted to the verdict of the public, her sole master. She did not try to see the journals, and, at the time of her great success, Rombaoud had been obliged to tell Delessard to make cuttings from all the news-

papers which loaded her with praises and flatteries, and had been almost angry before he could induce her to send a message of thanks to the head-quarters of dramatic criticism.

“You cannot think,” said the manager, “how very sensitive journalists are to these little attentions. They will not be more favourable to you for it, nor more indulgent, if you have not the good fortune to please them, but at least, in criticising you, they will do it for form’s sake and with amiability. And if they approve of you, they will say it with rather more persistency, on remembering that you have been gracious. To managers and *artistes*, do you see, politeness is the coin which costs least and which brings in most.”

That indifference prevented Lise from learning, at her own house, within two steps of her mother, who would have heard her sobs if she could not see her tears, the atrocious and venomous treachery of which she was the victim. She dined at five o’clock, very cheerfully, and at a quarter to seven she set out for the theatre.

Lise never lingered in the lobbies; she went up at once to her dressing-room, greeted with a friendly *bonjour* by the *employés* at the theatre, by whom she was much liked, being always considerate and

polite to them. Her dresser, Pauline, who, in her youth, had dressed Madame Dorval, and boasted of it as an old soldier of the Imperial Guard of having been at Austerlitz, was waiting for her in the passage, took her key, and got out for her all her little requirements. She made up her face rapidly, and in her under garments, in order to suffer less from heat, her costume being quite ready, she took up a book while awaiting the bell of the call-boy. When she heard the cry on the staircase, "They are going to begin," she put on her dress. And, at the exact moment when Campoint—whom Madame Bréval was lovingly contemplating through the curtain by means of one of the two holes, encircled with tin, which seem to be the eyes of the scenery—attacked the overture, she appeared on the stage.

The first act and the second passed off, and the *coulisses* remained almost deserted. It was generally during the third act that Rombaoud and the *habitues* of the theatre arrived. Lise never went to the green-room of the artistes, nor did she stay to gossip at the wings with her manager. As soon as the last words were spoken, whether she was in the following act or not, she went up to her dressing-room, opened the window, closed the venetian shutters, and,

stretching herself upon the sofa, she rested while awaiting her turn to play.

This evening, after the first act, contrary to her habits, Lise, feeling languid, and not having to change her costume, remained upon the stage. In a vast recess in the wall, was arranged a kind of square nook, provided with a carpet, furnished with a sofa and six chairs, and ornamented by a large glass before which, between two appearances, the women restored their hair to order. The frequenters of the theatre and the artistes called this retreat *La Potinière*. It was there that, during the performance, they met to relate, in a low tone, the tittle-tattle and scandal of the day. And often the murmur of the frivolous chit-chat grew so loud that it threatened to drown the voices of the actors, and Roberval, the stage-manager, was obliged to cry, *Chut!* sometimes imposing silence on his manager himself.

Lise went to sit there. She remained alone. It seemed as if everyone avoided her. On their faces she discovered a sardonic expression which she had never before seen, and that gave her a chill at the heart. She had a presentiment of misfortune. She asked herself what could have thus changed all those around her. In the course of the second act a group formed near the room of the gas-fitter, before the

door of communication, in the midst of which, Mortagne was not slow in holding forth. From a distance, Lise followed his movements, with the intuition that he was speaking of her. The *jeune premier* shook his handsome head, and, in the silence of the pauses made by the actors, fragments of sentences, of words, reached her: "Should not permit it . . . charming girl . . . slander . . . vile journalism . . . stick across the back. . . ." And, with his grand gesture of provocation, which made so great an effect in the fourth act of *La Duchesse*, Mortagne addressed himself to invisible adversaries. The men especially appeared agitated. Desmazures took it up, when Mortagne had ended, and the gentleman-actor assumed airs of crushing disdain. As to Pavilly, he kept silence. He had a weakness for Lise, and the subject was too serious for it to be possible to launch a malicious jest. His small deep-set eyes were lowered to the floor, and he whistled, while rocking backwards and forwards, like some one who has an idea of his own.

Clémence Villa, having come down, took a turn in the *coulisses*, and seeing Lise quite alone like a person infected with the plague, she walked towards the group. At sight of her, Pavilly brightened up

suddenly, his satirical mouth contracted, and his nostrils dilated.

“You are speaking of the article upon that poor Lise?” said Clémence, breaking into the conversation, as if she had followed it from the beginning. “Who is this Lantenac who, they say, subscribes himself Leperello?”

“How! You ask such a question?” said Pavilly. “Adorable angel, recall your *souvenirs*. Lantenac, *ma chère*, let us see. . . . Lantenac of the *Guignol*, at Bordeaux You knew him well when you were performing with me at the Théâtre-Français.”

Clémence paled slightly, her eye-lids flickered, and, in a tone of great surprise—

“Really! Is it he?” said she.

“Yes, it is he,” repeated Pavilly. “You loved him much in those days, *ma toute belle*, together with a crowd of others. And now, you do not remember him! O woman, woman,” declaimed he, imitating the voice of Taillade, “thy name is frailty!”

Clémence, furious, was preparing to answer sharply. But, without giving her time to assume the airs of an offended queen—

“Now, *mes enfants*,” continued the comic actor, “will you have my opinion? Well, that *canaillerie*

is the work of a woman. That great idiot of a Lantenac would never have had such an idea by himself . . . He received his little *Écho* ready written, and as he is as slothful as an adder, and as the malice in it is, in fact, piquant, he inserted it, *raide comme balle*. Now, if they wrapped up that pretty piece of dirty rubbish in a bank note for a hundred francs, it would not astonish me, being acquainted with the manners of the personage."

While thus speaking, Pavilly's eyes dwelt upon Clémence with so singular an expression that she almost lost countenance. She accepted, without remonstrance, the aggressive words aimed at her by the comic actor.

"The best thing that we can do," said Madame Bréval, "is not to abandon that little one at a time when she is so abominably attacked. She is alone. Let us go to her."

"I was about to propose it," said Clémence. "After all, if Lise has taken a lover, it seems to me that it was only her right, and that there is no great crime in it!"

"You amaze me!" whispered Pavilly in her ear, putting into these three words treasures of irony.

In an instant, Lise was surrounded, and *La Potinière* was full. Trembling, more troubled by

the arrival of her comrades than she had been by their desertion, she cast at them supplicating glances. She dared not ask the subject in question, she feared to hear the name of Jean. It seemed to her that, if this adored name were, in her presence, coupled with her own, she would die of shame. They rambled on, therefore, in vague protestations. Madame Bréval, with her grand manners of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, took Lise in her arms, and kissed her forehead. As to Clémence, who decidedly a little exaggerated her manifestations of sympathy, as if to divert possible suspicions, she assured Lise that she might rely upon the support of all her comrades.

Pavilly, who followed that scene with his eyes, turning towards Clémence, hissed between his teeth—

“The tender Esther, protected by the haughty Vashti . . . it is touching!”

“What do you mean, with your haughty Vashti?” exclaimed Clémence, whom, since the success of Lise, Pavilly had affected to designate thus.

“Peut-être on t’a conté la fameuse disgrâce
De l’altière Vashti dont j’occupe la place,”

declaimed he in a flute-like voice. . . . “Then you do not know your classics? And you dream of the Comédie-Française! Esther took the place of

Vashti, and seized upon the heart of Ahasuerus. But Haman remained. . . Haman, '*l'impie Aman . . . race d'Amalécite!*' . . . It is curious, but it strikes me that Lantenac has the face of Haman !”

“ You are stupid, *mon bonhomme*,” said Clémence, sharply, turning her back on the delighted Pavilly.

At the same moment as the three blows were being struck the door of communication opened, and Rombaudo appeared, followed by Delessard. He crossed the stage without speaking to anyone, his hat tipped over his nose, jingling the keys in his pocket, and went out through the door opening into the lobby leading to the boxes, taking the direction of his cabinet.

“ *Fichtre*,” said Roberval, “ the *patron* does not look in a good temper this evening. Beware of fines !”

“ It is this affair of Lise which puts him into that state,” said Delessard to the stage-manager. “ When he came to the check-taker’s office just now he did not know of it. By chance, I had the journal in my pocket ; I showed it to him. . . . He became white as his shirt. He did not say a word, but threaded the lobby on the ground-floor, and he has gone to shut himself up alone in his cabinet. Shall I tell you why ? Well ! He is crazed about Lise,

the *patron* . . . like the others—like Nuño, like de Brives, like Pavilly, like Demazures. All are after her! What is there in her so remarkable that they love her so much as that?”

“Then you have never observed her on the stage?” said Roberval. . . . “She has an animation, a grace, a charm. . . . She produces a wonderful effect!”

“Doubtless, she has talent. But as a woman, she says nothing at all to me!”

The third act was drawing to an end, and the *artistes* hurried on with determination, feeling that, behind the scenes, the play would be much more interesting than before the footlights. The strong situation was near, that on which Lise's first success had hung. From the commencement of the piece the public was cold to its favourite. It showed reserve. The current of sympathy which existed between the audience and the actress appeared to have been broken. The slander had done its work. It was as if jealousy was felt by the spectators, who desired that the beloved *artiste* should remain exclusively their own.

Lise, coldly received, experienced a painful shock, her animation was quenched, and, preoccupied, unhappy, she had played her part timidly. But,

arrived at her grand scene, the actress awoke. The woman forgot her sorrows; she thought no longer but of her art. Inspiration gave her new powers, she saw nothing more of all that which was not on the stage, and, in an instant, with the might of her irresistible genius, she set fire to the situation. She was transfigured, her eyes sparkled, her voice rang out from her chest. She appeared, in truth, to suffer the griefs, to shed the tears, and to rage in the angers of her part. She laid bare her soul, and availed herself of her real anguish for the expression of her fictitious feelings. During these few minutes she was superior to herself.

A sudden shout burst forth from the house, till then cold and dead. Behind the side-scenes the comrades of Lise were listening, excited and breathless. She, rushing, like a distracted woman, through her part, paid attention to nothing, and did not enjoy the triumph she had gained. With a bitter joy she spread abroad her despair. She tore out her heart, and passionately, with sublime outcries, cast it in the face of the public. She shook Mortagne so roughly in her scene of violence that he was confounded, and, catching fire in his turn, as if she had communicated to him her devouring flame, he played the end of the act in unison with his comrade,

causing the spectators to experience one of those thrilling emotions which leave the whole house vibrating and agitated.

"What is it?" said Rombaudo, passing behind the scenes and hearing the cries of the public frenziedly recalling the *artistes*.

"It is Lise," said the doctor, who arrived, quite enthusiastic, through the door of communication. "*Sapristi!* That little one has just been admirable! There is not another woman in Paris capable of playing with such feeling and such truth! . . . What a marvellous actress!"

Lise came off the stage, trembling, pale, exhausted by her efforts. She passed through the midst of her silent companions. And, with head bent, again given up to disquietude, she walked towards the door in order to return to her dressing-room, when Rombaudo stopped her and, hat in hand, a thing that he did for no one else in the theatre—

"I am sorry not to have been here to applaud you," said he, in a moved voice. . . . "You are fatigued, *mon enfant*, go to rest yourself. . . . Roberval, we will not begin the fourth act till Mademoiselle Fleuron says that she is ready. . . . I wish to speak with you, Lise. Do not leave the theatre without having seen me."

And, respectfully he accompanied her to the iron door, followed by his administrative staff, and repeating the words of the doctor—

“That little one is the first actress in Paris !”

Lise went out into the lobby, a humming still in her ears, her heart oppressed, and wearied as if she had just run a long race. She had already placed her foot on the first step of the staircase, when she heard herself called. She turned and found herself opposite La Barre. She uttered a cry of joy, and, seizing the hand of the young man, drew him away with her. At last, she had some one in whom she could trust, who would not laugh at her if she wept, and who would find words of sincere affection to console her. She led him to her dressing-room, and then, gazing into the depth of his eyes—

“You will tell me what this is about,” said she. “I must know of what I am accused. For, from the constrained bearing of those who defend or commiserate me, I am certain that some accusation is laid upon me. . . . But what ?”

Claude looked sadly at the young girl. Was it then for him that the painful duty of telling her the truth was reserved, and of displaying before her eyes the disgrace by which they sullied her reputation ?

Lise understood the hesitation of her friend ; she nervously clasped his hand.

“Do not deceive me,” said she ; “I will know all.”

Claude did not answer. He recoiled before the grievous necessity of explaining to Lise the infamous allusions of which she was the object ; he could not find words to tell that pure girl that she was quoted as a *fille perdue* ; and, with a brusque movement, he held out to her the journal.

Lise recognised it. It was the same that she had left on the chimney-piece in her room. She was astonished at the refined malice with which they had sent the insulting article to her. She shuddered on thinking that it might be read by one of her relatives. Trotting about in her apartment, at the time when she could see, her mother would certainly have read the newspaper, and what a frightful blow it would have been to her ! Lise congratulated herself, with horrible bitterness, that her mother’s blindness had secured her from making the cruel discovery.

With great disgust she resolved to open the vile journal, and remained quite calm when reading the envenomed lines. She had expected worse than that. She sought in her memory if she had ever been guilty of any rudeness to her insulter. She could remember

nothing. Placed opposite the reality, she deemed it less frightful than the chimeras that she had imagined. She ended by laughing at it, her innocence putting her beyond the outrage.

“My friends will defend me,” said she; “they will contradict that stupid story. . . . And it will be no more talked of. . . . One forgets quickly in Paris. . . .”

She had regained her tranquillity, and wishing to change her costume, she begged La Barre to establish himself in the corner of her dressing-room, behind the door of her wardrobe. Claude once hemmed in, she made haste, her small nimble fingers always tying strings and fastening hooks and eyes, speaking with volubility, very nervous, and seized with a desire to pour out the agitation which was boiling within her. La Barre heard the *frou-frou* of the train worn by Lise, and a perfumed atmosphere surrounded him. He listened to the young girl, answering laconically, being aware that she paid no attention to anything that he said to her. And it was always Jean who was upon her lips. Lise ceremoniously called him M. de Brives; but Claude divined that in her heart she was murmuring with adoration—“Jean.”

A gloomy sadness took possession of Claude.

He envied that young man who had the happiness of being loved by this adorable girl. What had he done to deserve it? Nothing but appear, and the heart of Lise had been gained. His fair moustache and his blue eyes had sufficed. She belonged to him. That odious *Écho* spoke the truth. And if it was not so now, it would be when he willed it. He had but to open his arms and she would cast herself into them with rapture.

She was ready. They went down. The number of the *habitués*, behind the scenes, was larger than usual. Raynaud had just arrived, and Adrien Gamard, in the centre of a circle of attentive hearers, was speaking with violent gesticulations. Rombaudo listened to him, sitting upon the sofa used in the fourth act, and the words of the *gommeux* seemed to interest him keenly :

“The first act of *Lili* had just ended, in the body of the house at the *Variétés* it was as hot as the infernal regions. I was with Boulanger, an old chum of mine. I say to him, ‘Let us go and have a *bock*.’ We enter the *café*, and who do I see? De Brives, Verneville, and Michalon, standing before a table, on which a tall bearded fellow, looking very worried, was leaning his elbows. De Brives spoke to him and he did not reply. At last, he

stood up very pale and, stamping his foot, he cried, 'No!' At the same moment de Brives raised his hand, and gave him such a '*pain*' across the face, that the *bonhomme* was deposited on the floor. . . . Then his comrades rushed forward, all together, and wished to fall upon de Brives. Ah! *mes enfants*! If you had only seen Michalon! . . . How grand it was! . . . He caught one of them with each hand, and he struck them, one against the other, as if he was playing the cymbals, flattening them at every blow. . . . And he said, in a tranquil voice, 'Gentlemen, you are wrong, you are intermeddling with what does not concern you. . . . Let my friend have a quiet explanation with yours.' And, while speaking, he continued to strike them together so well, that they extricated themselves from his hands as faint as two carp. Meanwhile, the tall bearded fellow had picked himself up, and he called out to de Brives—

" 'You wish to fight? Well! we will fight!'

" 'That is what you should have said just now,' replied de Brives; 'you would have spared me unnecessary actions.'

" And, with a jerk of the thumb, he sent his card into the face of *Monsieur* who, again become furious, tried to throw himself upon him, and to whom

Michalon with the gentleness of a colossus, said paternally—

“ ‘Now, *mon cher*, keep quiet, do not force me to break your back. If you wish to hurt my friend, you can do it to-morrow morning!’

“Then I took myself off from the *Variétés*, and I came running all the way to tell you the affair. Very *crâne*, de Brives, *mes petits bons*, and a wrist! I only tell you this! I would not have wished to receive the fillip that he gave to the tall bearded fellow on the cheek. Ah! by the by, do you know? It was Lantenac!”

A stifled cry was heard. Lise, much agitated, leaning against the scenery, supported herself with difficulty. She had heard the last words of Gamard's narrative, and the name of de Brives involved in a quarrel with Lantenac, had like a sharp sword pierced her to the heart. Rombauid hastened to her. With a gesture she waved him aside, and, taking Claude's arm, she sought, without speaking, without complaining, the darkest corner of the *coulisses*.

“Lise was here,” said Rombauid. “Poor girl! She is quite upset again. Madame Bréval, be so good as to see if she requires anything. . . .”

Much annoyed, he shook his keys, champed his

moustache, while walking slowly to and fro. Then the manager gaining the upper hand—

“*Sapristi*, the house is full to-night. That *diable* of an article has brought us an audience. . . . If only Lise can finish the piece! . . .”

He did not understand the young girl. The blow which had struck her had not crushed her. Seated beside La Barre, upon a stool made use of by the pianist when they played dance music behind the scenes, she preserved a gloomy silence. She had not thought for an instant of the sequel to that affair, in which Jean was as much compromised as herself. And, suddenly, that terrible result—a duel, between the insulter and the man she loved—loomed before her eyes.

She was not surprised that Jean was going to fight; she reproached herself for not having thought, from the first moment, that he would provoke a duel. Would he have been the man who had so completely possessed himself of her, the handsome, the proud Jean, if he had not indignantly resented the insult offered to her? For she knew that he was fighting as much for her honour as for his own. She did not think how it would be possible to prevent the meeting. She deemed it inevitable. And, although she felt fearful anguish, at the idea of the danger that

Jean was about to incur, she did not admit that he could shun it without disgrace. Her temperament as an actress, full of the exaggeration necessitated by the perspective of the stage, manifested itself; the reality disappeared from her eyes. She saw herself entangled with Jean in a kind of dramatic catastrophe. He became a Rodrigue, and she was prepared to cry to him, "*Sors vainqueur d'un combat dont Chimène est le prix!*" The situation demanded that he should risk his life, for nothing in the world would the actress have compounded with that theatrical necessity. But the woman was dismayed, and, from the depths of her heart a fervent prayer arose, beseeching Heaven to spare her defender. In Lise there were two natures, the one of a little *bourgeoise*, created for a tranquil existence, without noise, and without difficulties; the other, of a veritable heroine, accustomed to redundant phrases, to extravagant sentiments, to the clash of words and of swords.

Madame Bréval having come to ask Lise how she felt, the young girl asserted that she was ready to play. And, without faltering, sustained by the fever which consumed her, she went on to the end of her rôle.

Clémence saw with stupefaction the energy

displayed by her rival. She had hoped to witness a defeat : she was obliged to score one more victory to the account of Lise. With a fury that she could hardly dissemble, she discovered that, to humble her whom she hated, she must strike a ruder blow. She professed a charming friendliness, she supported her comrade with affectation, during the scenes which they acted together, and forced everybody to observe how tender and devoted she was in that painful ordeal.

Without suspicion Lise thanked her. And it appeared evident that Clémence and herself were very good friends. Within herself the Italian was saying, "Let Lantenac give a good sword thrust through the arm of de Brives, and there is the lover in bed for fifteen days. The theatre closes at the end of the week, they will be separated. Lise has said that she is going into the Provinces. And, besides, she dare not go to his rooms. . . . And she could not receive him at her mother's. Their affairs are not sufficiently advanced for them to try to see each other elsewhere."

She reasoned as a tactician in love to whom none of the marches and counter-marches of an intrigue are unknown. She had been aware, for a long time, from having made use of them, of what utility

furnished apartments are in Paris. But that which her skilled *rouerie* could not divine, was to what lengths the innocent love of Lise would go in the way of daring. And reassured, she congratulated herself on having made in the course of her career of galantry, friends devoted, like Lantenac, even to infamy.

The play had just ended.

"Stay, I want you," said Lise to Claude, on leaving the stage. "Go to await me in M. Rombaud's cabinet."

The theatre was empty. Campoint, rolling a cigarette, had just gone up to Madame Bréval's dressing-room. Rombaud and La Barre lingered for an instant, watching the removal of the accessories.

"Then you are acquainted with Lise?" asked Rombaud pausing. "You did not tell me of it."

"Our acquaintance," said Claude, "dates from far back."

"She seems to have great friendship for you. . . . That story is much to be regretted! . . . You must use your influence over her, to give her some good advice. . . . We must at any cost try to separate her from that animal Jean. . . ."

"To separate her?" said Claude.

"Well! She occupies herself with him more

than she ought ! How the devil did she become so infatuated about that fellow ? ”

They looked at each other, full of care, bitten by the same jealousy. The author drooped his handsome, thoughtful head over his chest. He was sufficiently acquainted with de Brives, and had penetrated so far into the little secrets of his life, that he understood the curiosity which had at first taken possession of Lise. That *viveur*, graceful, refined, courteous, reserved, had filled the mind of the young girl. She had heard that he was a desperate gambler, a man to lose or to gain enormous sums in one night, a gulf for money. She had taken pleasure in bending over this gulf ; little by little she had become giddy. And the formidable abyss had attracted her more. She was still bending over, and was earnestly regarding the mysterious monster. She had found him so charming that she was not afraid. And she had loved him through contrast : she, of a simple and upright nature ; he, of a complicated and disorderly nature. And, as the fair and pure Marguerite, so had she been to this sceptical and scoffing Faust, become, by a miracle of love, gentle and believing under the eyes of the adored woman. But let his passion again resume its sway, let ambition again become the mistress of his

thoughts, and he would, allured by the tempting demon, rush into the orgies of Walpurgis, and give his soul in exchange for the treasures of the earth. And the poor deluded girl would be left alone with her grief.

He understood them, these types of the irresistible lover, skilful in troubling the hearts of women, he, Claude, whose imagination was haunted by them, and who, in the burning language of his dramas, made them so well express their passions. Was he to have the grief of finding a living subject for study •in that Lise of whom he could not think without a throb at the heart, to whom he could not speak without a trembling in the voice, and whom he wished to be happy, even at the price of his own happiness?

Rombaud, seeing him absorbed in profound meditation, laid his hand upon his shoulder.

“Of what are you thinking?” said he.

“I am thinking of Lise,” answered Claude, in a moved voice; “and I see her so good, so honest, so loyal, that I cannot prevent myself from looking upon her as vowed to misfortune. That adorable girl, incited by her aspirations, has become a great actress, and she came into the world in a position which doomed her to be a little *bourgeoise*. She is destined to combat, and she is not armed against the

dangers of her career. She will receive every blow in the centre of her heart. The stage is a battlefield. To triumph on it, one must have, not only an immense talent, but still more, an indomitable energy. One has to defend one's self against the whole world, and often against one's self. Lise is conquered beforehand. She will be the victim of her sincerity, of her candour, of her love. It will be those exquisite qualities which make her so charming that will render her vulnerable."

"Shall we not defend her?" said Rombaudo, affecting a gaiety that he did not feel. "You are indeed a prophet of misfortune. For my part, I myself am not disposed to allow a child, who is the star of my *troupe*, to be ill-treated. It is to my interest to protect her, and I shall not fail in doing so. Besides, I have a sincere affection for her. . . ."

He paused; he was perhaps about to say more than he wished.

At the top of the staircase the light step of Lise beginning to descend, was heard. Rombaudo opened the padded door of his cabinet, and Claude found himself, for the second time, in that room where he had passed one of the most poignant quarters of an hour in his whole life. Lise followed them in, and

seated herself silently upon the sofa. Rombauid went and placed himself beside her.

“*Ma chère petite,*” said he, taking her hand, “I am very pleased that M. La Barre is present at our interview. He has a friendship for you equal to my own. You must be frank and you must open your heart to me. What I have to ask you is extremely delicate, and yet it is necessary that I put the question to you. Is there any truth whatever . . . in the article which has been published?”

Rombauid pronounced these last words with hesitation; he expected to see Lise indignantly act the comedy of modesty alarmed, which he had seen done by so many actresses whose emotion was very little justified. There was nothing of the kind. Lise, very plainly, and without turning away her lovely face, her blue eyes gazing straight at him, declared that the attack was inexcusable, and that it was a simple calumny. She now appeared insensible to the insult. In the depth of her being there was but one preoccupation—Jean. Rombauid had asked her to stay; she obeyed. But she was impatient to go away and to be free.

“*Mon Dieu,* if that fool de Brives had not rushed forward and ‘put his feet into the dish,’” said Rombauid, “nothing would have been more easy

than to obtain a retraction, and to make use of that vile piece of ill-nature for your glorification . . .”

“I want no glorification,” said Lise, with firmness. “As to M. de Brives, he was personally attacked, and could not dispense with acting¹ as he has done. . . . Any man of honour would have done the same . . .”

“I tell you that he is a fool!” cried Rombauid, growing suddenly excited. “My dear Lise, you are too good-natured to that fellow . . . you tolerate his assiduities, which have been the cause of all that has happened . . . you have, oh, *mon Dieu!* very innocently I know, laid yourself open to malicious speeches . . . I beseech you, there is still time: change your line of conduct . . . De Brives is my friend; he is a charming fellow; but if you knew how fickle he is, how superficial! He ought to inspire no confidence in a woman . . . You understand me, do you not, *ma chère enfant?* No confidence! None!”

And with his cajoling southern finesse Rombauid spoke on, encompassing Lise with the mellow sweetness of his phrases, like a tender father-confessor. He paused, confounded at seeing a fleeting smile pass over the young girl's lips. Rombauid's words had awakened in the memory of Lise the recollection

of Nuño saying to her, "Distrust ineligible young men!" They were of one mind therefore, and each said unkind things of young men! In reality, they wished to dissuade her from Jean, who was the only one she could love.

But the Southerner was not a man to retreat so speedily. He resumed his arguments and, always questioning Lise, who scarcely answered, he employed, with a dull rage, all his artillery against him whom he called his friend. The ex-actor reappeared in him; he had entered into the spirit of his part and, before the eyes of the attentive Claude, he played to the life the scene of Arnolphe and Agnès. He desired absolutely to learn all that had passed between Jean and Lise. He thirsted for the details of the walk on the preceding night. And, burning with jealous fury, he again attacked de Brives.

"After all, who could know? It was perhaps de Brives who, in gossiping, had brought about the whole affair. He knew him to be indiscreet. He had without doubt boasted. . . ." And he set off again, beseeching Lise to dismiss this *diable* of a fellow so compromising. Rombaoud would himself, from the morrow, forbid his entrance to the *coulisses*. . . . And as Lise protested, declaring that for

nothing in the world would she allow such an affront to be offered to de Brives, the manager bitterly reproached her for not appreciating his good intentions. At last, losing all restraint, he broke out into violent invectives against Jean—

“In short, was he anything but an adventurer? How had he always lived? By gambling and by speculating on the Bourse. Fortune had favoured him till now; but let a reverse overtake him, and he would fall, without the power to rise again. It was in this way that he had seen so many *viveurs* become *chevaliers d'industrie*.”

He had not time to continue. Lise had started up, and, her lips blanched, her blue eyes grown black beneath their frowning brows, in accents of superb disdain—

“What you are now saying,” cried she, “is as hateful as that which was written about me! I will no more permit you to insult M. de Brives than he permitted people to insult me!”

“Lise!” exclaimed Rombaudo stupefied.

“Yes, what you are doing is cowardly and shameful!” continued she. “Why do you torture me? And by what right? In fine, what is it that you wish to know? If I love him?”

She paused, suffocated by emotion, compressing

her panting bosom with her trembling hand, and, violently excited, able no longer to retain the avowal which was scorching her lips—

“Well! Be satisfied! Yes, I love him! And nothing will prevent me from loving him!”

A crimson blush dyed her face; she concealed it in her hands, and, sinking back upon the sofa, she burst into sobs.

Rombaudo exchanged a glance with Claude. It was ended. There was nothing further to hope. She loved Jean, she was ready to brave the whole world for him. And she would proclaim, if it were necessary, her love before everyone, as she had just proclaimed it before them. The cry of exasperated passion uttered by Lise had reached his heart. He no longer knew what to say, or what to do. He drew near the actress, took her hands, called her his dear child, his good little Lise and assured her of his kind intentions; he had gone further than he intended—he begged her to excuse it, to forget it. It was her tranquillity of mind that he had in view. He stopped short; he was again about to begin his attack on Jean.

Lise dried her eyes, darted at Rombaudo a glance full of sadness, and, turning to Claude—

“Are you also going to forsake me?” said she.

“In what can I serve you?” said La Barre.

She went to him, coaxing and charming, like a child who wishes to obtain a favour.

“You can tell me all that is going to take place. I do not know what has been settled with regard to this meeting, and I am dying of anxiety. Go to M. de Brives’ apartments this very evening. See him, tell him that you come from me, let him conceal nothing from you. . . .”

She took Claude’s arm, leaned upon it, resting her head on the shoulder of the young man.

“I pray you do this, and I will love you well. Let me have news to-morrow morning, at the earliest moment. . . . I beseech you!”

In her softest voice she repeated, “I beseech you.” And Claude, bewitched by the enchantress, could but answer, “Yes.” If she had sent him to the infernal regions he must have gone. Rombaudo, become very cold, had reflected. The man of business imposed silence on the lover. If the woman was lost to him, let him at least keep the actress. He approached Lise, who, turning away her eyes from him, was preparing to go—

“Lise, can you leave without having pardoned me?” said he humbly.

Incapable of rancour, she stretched out her hand to him. Then, with gravity—

“You have caused me much pain. And wherefore?”

Rombaud gave a brusque start, and was upon the point of answering—

“Well! Have you not understood that it is because I also, I love you?”

But he was not a man to surrender so completely, without hoping to obtain some advantage from it.

• “It was in your interest,” said he. “I wish that you may never have reason to find it out.”

She shook her head, with the sublime blindness of love, profound, absolute.

“The dearest interest that there can now be for me in this life,” said she in a low voice, “is my love.”

She smiled at Rombaud, and went out with Claude. The ex-Françisque remained behind, dreaming. Clémence Villa had suddenly returned to his mind. He understood now the undying hatred which stimulated the actress, doubly wounded, in her pride and in her passion. He was aware of the dangers that she would force Lise to encounter. He suspected that it was she who had distilled a few drops of venom into the mercenary inkstand of

Lantenac. He resolved to defend the young girl energetically against the machinations of her rival. The frankness with which Lise had confided in him bound him to her cause. And then, in the depths of his heart, he yielded vaguely to the same hopes as Nuño. The future might reserve for him a sweet revenge.

But he was not sufficiently generous to forgive de Brives. And he strongly desired for the morning of the following day, one of those good simultaneous thrusts, a striking demonstration of the logic of duelling, which send six inches of steel between the ribs of each of the adversaries.





CHAPTER VII.



ON arriving at the house in the Rue de Lancry, Lise found, as every evening, the *bonne*, who was waiting for her, seated near the table in the ante-room, and working by the light of a lamp.

“Mademoiselle, the play has ended later than usual to-day,” said the good girl. . . .
 “It is a quarter to one. . . . Madame has only just fallen asleep. . . . Ah! some one brought this little parcel for you. . . .”

Without replying, Lise took the small, light packet, enveloped in white paper, and went softly to her mother’s room. Calmly extended in her bed, the blind woman was breathing regularly. For an instant the young girl watched her as she lay sleeping, by the light of the night-lamp which *la mère Fleuron* continued to exact in her chamber, although

she could no longer see its rays ; she smiled at her, and, gliding like a shadow over the floor, she passed into her own room. Having taken off her mantle and her hat, she sat down. She was broken with fatigue. Resting her elbow on the arm of her chair, she remained in deep thought.

Rombaud's words were plainly engraved on her memory. And without anger, without excitement, she weighed them now, and they appeared to her more serious and more sincere than when they were spoken in his cabinet. She recalled to mind the glance of Claude, so grave and so sorrowful. Why had he said nothing ; why had not he advised her ? She would have had confidence in him. Did he condemn her love, or did he approve it ? When he replied, " In what can I serve you ? " there had been a secret bitterness in his voice. She was seized by disquietude. It was her life, she knew it, which was at stake. She did not admit that she could refuse to give herself wholly, irrevocably. What would become of her if what Rombaud said was true, if Jean was fickle, and if his love was but a caprice ?

Indeed she hardly knew him ; she had not been able to study him. In an instant she had been captured. The attraction had been powerful and

irresistible. She had seen nothing of him but his handsome and proud face. She only knew him to be a gambler. And was not that enough to trouble her grievously? There, alone by herself, she no longer found in her heart that superb confidence with which she had determined to wean Jean from his formidable passion. She was shaken, dismayed, and her mind over-excited, nourished by dramatic *souvenirs*, mixed up in the horrible plot of *Trente ans ou la vie d'un joueur*, de Brives and herself. She saw the gambler under the lineaments of Jean. She followed him in his terrible decadence, mental and bodily. The sound of the gold falling upon the green cloth rang in her ears. And she had the sinister vision of the man whom she loved steeping himself in crime, in infamy, and dragging her with him.

In the silence of the night, her forehead bathed in perspiration, her heart beating, she was, though wide awake, a prey to a terrible dream. She endeavoured to escape from it; she made an effort, rose from her chair, passed her hand over her aching brow, and walked about at random in the room. She stopped before the table. And upon it, near her hat and gloves carelessly thrown aside, she saw the small parcel, enveloped in white paper, which

had been remitted to her on her arrival. She opened it mechanically and stood immovable, speechless, and overwhelmed by emotion. It contained nothing but a small cluster of those blue flowers that we call "forget-me-nots."

With the tips of her white fingers Lise raised the crushed flowers, seeming gently to caress the bouquet. She looked for no name upon the paper, she did not ask herself who had thought of sending it to her. There was only one single being in the whole world who could dream of appealing thus to her *souvenir*: it was he of whom her imagination was full, and who seemed to come in this way to protest against her doubts, and to assert the sincerity of his love. Lise pressed the modest flowers to her lips, then placed them in her *corsage*. As if with their faint perfume the aspirations of Jean were exhaled, going straight to the heart of the young girl, her trouble was dispelled, she recovered her steadfast faith, and, ceasing to be disquieted for herself, she trembled for the man whom she loved.

The terrible realities of the present hour again took possession of her. She no more saw the situation from a conventional point of view, and the danger to which Jean was about to be exposed appeared to her. It was not a combat on the stage, arranged

beforehand, with blunted swords, which was going to take place in a few hours. It was a veritable duel, desperate, mortal perhaps, for the insults had been the gravest that could be offered. Blood would flow, flesh would be lacerated by the point of the sword. A man would fall upon the green grass. . . . Lise closed her eyes to escape the hideous spectacle. It was Jean, pale, lifeless, who was extended before her. But it was in vain that she would not look ; the frightful picture pursued her, and, notwithstanding the horror it inspired, she could not flee from it.

• In this room, which was separated only by the *salon* from that of her mother, she felt fear. She dared not remain thus in the silence. She opened the window, rested her arms upon the iron scroll-work protecting it, and gazed into the gardens. Solitary and silent, beneath the pale beams of the moon, with their stunted shrubs, their narrow alleys, their high white walls, and their sombre verdure, they produced upon her the effect of a cemetery. She was seized by unconquerable terror, and shut herself up in her room, with all the tapers on her chimney-piece lighted.

She did not think of sleeping. She began to walk up and down, suppressing the sound of her steps that she might not awaken her mother, calling

for the dawn with anguish, eager to receive the tidings that Claude had promised her, and given up to all the horrors of solitude.

Why had Jean sent her those flowers, why those "forget-me-nots?" Did he attach any special meaning to this bouquet? Did he know himself to be in grave danger? Was his adversary unusually formidable? Did he fear not to see her again? Was this his last offering that he had made to her? She fell into a state of exaggerated fear. Her mind was filled with sinister thoughts. She had the most ghastly presentiments. Superstitious to excess, she promised herself, if Jean returned safe and unhurt, to see in that favourable issue a proof of Divine protection, and no more to doubt the happiness to come. She made Heaven intervene in her love affairs, and gave to it a share of the responsibility in her contemplated surrender of herself. She prayed fervently for him whom she loved, and felt herself more calm.

The hours had glided away, and already a faint light whitened the sky. Lise resolved to lie down on her bed, hoping to sleep, and to reach thus, without being aware of it, the moment when she would receive news. But sleep fled from her. For the first time in her life she became acquainted with the

fever of wakefulness. At length, worn out, she ended by closing her eyes. It was broad daylight when the *bonne* entered her room, and awoke her by exclaiming—

“Mademoiselle, it is ten o’clock. Do you not intend to get up this morning? Here is your breakfast quite cold . . . I have warmed it up three times, but it would soon be spoiled . . .”

In one instant Lise recovered the thoughts which agitated her before sleeping. She sat up on her bed—

• “Have no letters come for me?” asked she.

“*Ma foi*, yes, Mademoiselle, there is one, and that same smells very good. I have left it in the kitchen . . . I will go for it.”

During the short time taken by the girl to go and return, Lise was tortured by unspeakable emotion. She showed so agonized a face to her servant that the latter, amazed, cried—

“Oh, *mon Dieu*! Do you expect bad news?”

“No,” said Lise, who eagerly seized her letter and began to tear open the envelope. “I thank you; leave me.”

She turned to the signature and with a start of joy recognised the name of Jean. He wrote to her himself, beseeching her to have no fear. He had

seen La Barre, who had depicted to him the young girl's torment. The meeting was for that morning at ten . . .

Lise cast a glance at the clock and her heart seemed to stop; the hand pointed to five minutes past ten. The poor girl trembled frightfully. She thought that at this very moment Jean was engaged with his adversary, and, without reading to the end of the letter, she sank back upon her pillow, weeping bitterly. She stopped her ears; it seemed to her that she could hear the clashing of swords. She lay thus for some moments, motionless, struck with horror, like a condemned person who is waiting the announcement of his execution.

La mère Fleuron, become uneasy, felt her way into the room. With her hands she sought her daughter's head, but Lise, that the blind woman should not touch her cheeks wet with tears, turned to the wall, feigning to sleep. All that wrested her from her mortal preoccupation was odious to her, and yet that preoccupation was a torture. She desired that nothing should divert her from the thought of Jean, during the time in which she deemed him exposed to the thrusts of his antagonist. And she remained as if dead, her face upon the letter whose delicate perfume recalled to her him whom she

loved, repeating mentally that supplicant phrase, ever the same, "My God, I beseech you, save him!" without power to find another prayer.

At last, towards eleven o'clock, she shook off her torpor. She took up her letter and read it again. The tender sentences which terminated it drew from her a grievous sigh. At the bottom of the sheet, as a postscript, Jean had added these words, "The meeting is to take place at Saint-Germain. I have made arrangements so that you will be informed of the result, whatever it may be."

• There was then only to wait. Never had the hours seemed so long to Lise. She was compelled to dissemble her torment, to appear calm, and to smile, when she was dying of anxiety. During breakfast she was obliged to speak in an easy way, and with a tranquil voice, that her mother might suspect nothing. The blind woman had acquired an extraordinarily keen sense of hearing. Her auditory powers had become double since she had lost her sight, and, from the tone of her daughter's voice, she was able to divine her feelings. Lise made it her study to deceive her mother. She dreaded the whole string of questions that she would have to undergo, from that poor woman, unemployed and worrying, if her accents betrayed the slightest sadness.

After breakfast she withdrew to her room. It was twelve o'clock. She began to feel a feverish impatience. What had happened? How was it that, in two hours, Jean had not returned. Why had they not sent tidings to her? She no longer doubted that the result was unfortunate. She pictured to herself Jean seriously wounded. She did not think of his death. It seemed to her that if he whom she loved had been killed, something within herself would have broken and would have warned her of it. He had stayed at Saint-Germain perhaps, or they could not bring him back. In the confusion in which his friends must be, how could they think of executing his orders, and of sending to her, she, who was out of sight, and whose tortures they did not suspect?

She thought of taking the train and of going to find him. But where? She would risk crossing him on the way. At one o'clock she could no longer bear it. To remain patient became impossible to her. Jean's servants could give her information, however vague it might be. And, in fine, she would not wait in this immobility, which was to her a martyrdom. By walking, she would delude herself. She would imagine that she was drawing nearer to Jean. She took her hat, her

mantle, called to her mother through the partly open door—

“Mamma, I am going out. . . .”

And, without awaiting a reply, she ran downstairs. An empty *fiacre* was passing before the door; she stopped it, gave the address to the coachman, and sprang into the carriage saying—

“Drive fast, *mon ami*, if you please, I am in great haste. . . .”

The driver shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, “What has that to do with me?” and, lashing his thin horse, set off at a jerking and slow pace which made her blood boil. Ten times Lise was upon the point of alighting, thinking that she would arrive sooner on foot. At length at the end of a terrible quarter-of-an-hour, the carriage stopped. She paid, looked at the house, with which she was not acquainted, verified the number, and, her heart oppressed, her respiration broken, without daring to ask directions of the *concierge*, she penetrated to a staircase, and went up at hazard. She knew that Jean occupied the *entresol*. But, upon the landing, she found herself between two doors from which to choose. She paused for an instant, she was suffocating, and, in the half obscurity of the staircase she heard her heart beating loudly in her bosom.

She was again a prey to fearful anxiety. And now she was tempted to descend the stairs and to make her escape. Through the walls of the two sets of apartments, she could distinguish confused sounds. There were strangers in them, to whom she must apply. What would they think of her? And if they recognised her, what would they say? In her precipitate departure she had not thought of putting on a veil. And she must show herself with her face uncovered. She stood, resting her hand on the baluster, not knowing how to decide, trembling, and fearing that some one in going up or down, would come and surprise her. Then, brusquely, ashamed of her weakness, she approached the door on the right and rang. The sound of steps reached her, the door opened, and a *valet-de-chambre* appeared who, with hat on his head, was prepared to go out.

“M. de Brives?” asked Lise, with resolution.

“He is at home. But monsieur sees no one.”

“Why not?” exclaimed the young girl, with terrible anxiety.

“Because monsieur is wounded,” replied the *valet-de-chambre*, in a low tone.

“Wounded!”

Lise turned pale as the dead; with one hand

she put aside the man-servant, and, passing quickly between himself and the door, she entered the antechamber.

“What are you saying there? Wounded?” cried a sonorous voice in the adjoining room. “What a fool he is, that Francis! He will go and tell it all over the house. . . . A slight scratch of no importance, which has not even been named. . . . There is only one wounded, but a real wound, *par exemple*, that is Lantenac . . .”

And the gigantic Michalon came forward, holding his hat in one hand, a sheet of note-paper in the other. On seeing Lise, he bowed respectfully—

“I ask your pardon, Madame,” said he. “M. de Brives is here . . . in his room . . . I will inform him . . .”

He showed Lise into the *salon*, and, opening a door—

“Jean, here is someone asking for you . . . Adieu, *mon bonhomme*, I am going to get the seconds to sign the *procès-verbal*.”

He addressed a friendly smile to the young girl and went out. In the antechamber, Lise heard him say to the valet—

“Your walk to the Rue de Lancry is unnecessary;

take the other letters. . . . And not wounded, do you hear? Not wounded at all!"

Lise sat down; she could no longer support herself. An immense joy filled her heart. Jean had returned, he had come forth a victor from the combat, he had punished the calumniator.

She passionately desired to see him. After the emotions which she had felt, she had no patience to wait longer; she rose, prepared to call him, when the door opened, and in the moulding, clad in black, a little pale, but smiling, Jean appeared. He recognised the young girl, uttered a cry, stretched out his arms, and Lise, impelled by a power that she could not resist, fell into them with *abandon* leaning her face upon the shoulder of her lover, in order to conceal her blushes. Jean put her gently into a chair. He placed himself on a stool, at her feet, clasping her hands, and devouring her with his eyes.

It was indeed Lise in his home. That joy for which he had not dared to hope, she had brought to him herself. And, too moved to speak, given up to the delight of again seeing themselves together, after having feared to be so grievously parted, they gazed at each other, and their smiles said more than their words could have done. A delicious languor took possession of Lise, in this small sumptuous *salon*,

with furniture low, luxurious, made for reverie, with curtains loosely draped over red silk blinds. A discreet and caressing light softened the glance, thick carpets deadened the murmur of voices, and a voluptuous silence benumbed the mind.

Lise wished to escape that impression. She sat upright; and withdrew a little from Jean. She thought it necessary to explain to him how, unhinged by anxiety, she had not been able to resist her longing for tidings, and had come to his rooms. She did not deny herself the pleasure of reproaching him, and of making him pay, by a quarrel, her hours of anguish.

Jean was amazed. He had sent her a telegram, from Saint-Germain, announcing that all had ended well. But the service was so badly performed that, two hours after, she had not received it. He then began to relate to her humorously, the incidents of the duel. How, having taken two carriages at the station, his adversary and himself, with their seconds, had driven in the direction of the forest. But, on the road, they had met *gendarmes* going their rounds, on horseback, who, having suspected their intention, followed them through the alleys for more than an hour, rendering any halt impossible. And Jean sportively described to her that drive in

the woods, with the yellow cross-belt, and the *Tri-corne de Pandore* on the horizon, the signals exchanged between the two carriages, and the anger of Michalon, who with the tranquillity of a Hercules, proposed to pounce cautiously upon the *gendarmes*, to put them one under each arm, and to go for a walk in the forest, till they had finished cutting each other to pieces.

At length they succeeded in shaking off the representatives of the law, they found a favourable spot, and cast off their coats, waistcoats, and shirts. And here Lise was again a prey to terror, on learning that the combat had lasted twenty minutes, Jean's antagonist being vigorous, skilful, and resolute. She had an explanation of the persistency with which Michalon denied the wound that the *valet de chambre* desired at any price to bestow on his master, when Jean told her how Lantenac, in a supreme hand-to-hand encounter, touched him with the point of his sword, in the side, at the same time himself falling seriously wounded. It was only when putting on his clothes, later, that Jean felt the smart of his scratch, and he had shown to Michalon a long tear in the skin, the blood from which had been absorbed by his red silk vest. They both kept silence, not wishing to let their adversaries

suspect that the duel had terminated *coup pour coup*, nor to permit them to take advantage of it in order to diminish the importance of the defeat.

Lise listened to this account with impassioned attention, her eyes sparkling, her respiration irregular, trembling, as if the duel was taking place before her eyes, clasping Jean's hand to give herself courage. When the journalist had fallen, she breathed a sigh of relief. And now she interrogated Jean to hear if he did not suffer, if he had no fever, mingling with her questions the statement of her own torments, and, in the agitation of her joy betraying the ardent love by which she was possessed. Jean, enraptured, pleased himself by questioning her in his turn, desirous to penetrate into the depths of that heart which opened so ingenuously to him.

If he had not returned living, what would she have done? And Lise, suddenly saddened, could hardly restrain her tears. Would life have been possible to her, tortured by the horrible regret of having lost him whom she loved, and of having been the cause of his loss? For it was for her that he had fought, for her alone! Filled with grateful tenderness, she fastened upon him triumphant glances. He was her hero, her defender, her god.

In the silence, the bell of the time-piece sounded

three times. Lise started up with surprise. She had been there two hours, and it seemed to her that she had only just come. During that sweet talk the time had passed with incredible rapidity.

"I must go," said Lise, slightly rearranging her hair before the glass over the chimney-piece.

"Why so soon?" asked Jean, with sadness. "Are you so sparing of the happiness that you can give me?"

"I did wrong in coming," rejoined Lise, turning serious; "do not make me repent my impulse . . ."

Jean, kneeling upon a cushion before her, took her hands and touched them lightly with his lips, with gentle, timid kisses, as if he feared to alarm her.

"At least, you will come again," said he, "now that you know the way?"

Lise shook her fair head, seeming to say, "See how exacting you have already become!" Then in an accent of melancholy—

"For my peace of mind, I should do better, without doubt, to say farewell to you, and never to see you again."

Jean, gently drawing her towards himself by the wrists, constrained her to look at him, and, in his most impressive voice—

“Then you do not love me?”

For an instant, Lise did not answer. She sat shrinking back a little, but detained by him, and her eyes meeting his eyes. All her fears were dispelled, and, in her heart, she found nothing but love. She abandoned herself to the delight of seeing the man whom she adored at her feet. With a glance she caressed his white forehead, upon which his chestnut eye-brows traced two proud lines, his red-lipped mouth beneath his long fair moustache, and, on his throat, below the ear, a small satiny spot which seemed irresistibly to attract a kiss. She trembled—an unknown and burning heat mounted to her breast. She was afraid, and endeavoured to free herself, but he clasped her more closely. She murmured—

“Jean, for pity’s sake, let me go. . . .”

He ceased to draw her towards him, submissive, obedient, in order to prove to her the power that she had over him. And supplicating her in his turn—

“Lise, I beseech you, do not go yet. I am so happy with you, and I have so many things to tell you! I never see you alone, and I am jealous of all those who surround you. I fear that they will steal you from me. . . .”

She again approached him, seeing him anxious and unhappy.

“No,” said she, “fear nothing. If you knew how indifferent to me are all those of whom you speak. Their flatteries leave me cold and their supplications find me disdainful. How should they be able to please me? They appeal to my vanity, but never to my affection. They have pointed out to me a future calculated to tempt the imagination, but not to seduce the heart. And it is my heart which is my sole master. The depravity of those men who believe that everything can be bought and will be sold, love as well as glory, sickens me, and I repulse them with disgust. If I love, I must love freely; if I give myself, it shall be to the man of my choice. I shall not make a bargain, and, if I am deceived, a fortune will not be left in my hands as a consolation. Perhaps I am senseless, and they are right, but I prefer my blindness to their clear-sightedness. It is because you were discreet and timid, Jean, that you attracted my eyes, and that I began to think about you.

She smiled adorably, and regarding him coquetishly—

“Perhaps you were only more clever and more deceitful than the others, and were playing a part?

We were on the stage. . . . Who knows? It may be contagious!"

He tried to protest, to defend himself; she closed his mouth with her hand, and assuming an air of authority—

"If you wish me to stay, you must be silent," said she, merrily.

She went with vivacity to the chimney-piece, near which a portrait in a velvet frame was suspended. A small screen of blue *moire* protected it from indiscreet eyes, and at the lower part a bouquet was fastened, as a pious tribute brought to the foot of an altar. With a rapid movement Lise raised the curtain and crimsoned with joy on recognising herself. Therefore she was the idol to whom Jean offered up his prayers. She reigned, mysterious, over all that surrounded him, and her place was before his eyes as within his heart. She was touched, and could not prevent herself from letting him see it.

He, enchanted, attended her in her domiciliary visit, replying to her questions, grave or gay, admiring her grace, and deliciously enjoying her beauty. She raised a *portière* and saw Jean's room, very severe, hung with old tapestry, furnished with carved cabinets and arm-chairs with high backs. A four-

post bedstead, with a coverlet of embroidered silk, stood opposite a wooden chimney-piece, surmounted by a large glass framed in ebony inlaid with brass. A lively curiosity incited her to penetrate into that chamber, where all would speak to her of the secret tastes and the inmost preferences of the man whom she loved. But she did not dare, and, letting the curtain again fall, she returned to the salon.

Jean had opened a small *bahut* ; he took out a tray in Bohemian glass, upon which stood two flasks adorned with armorial bearings, and a cut-glass box containing biscuits. He placed them on a small round table and said, with a smile—

“You will not leave without breaking bread with me. . . . If you refuse, it is that you are my enemy”

She gave him an angelic look, and, herself taking one of the flasks, she poured into two glasses some topaz-coloured wine.

“Why two?” said Jean. . . . “Are you afraid that I shall know your thoughts?”

She drank a little of the wine and stretched out the glass to Jean. He drained it to the last drop, and quickly shattered the glass between his fingers.

“It shall never more be used,” said he.

She sat down and thought no longer of leaving,

again overpowered by the torpor that she had already experienced so much difficulty in conquering. Her eyes closed in spite of herself, and it seemed to her that if she did not make an effort she would sleep sweetly. Her nerves, violently shaken during the last twenty-four hours, were relaxed, and the half obscurity of the *salon*, the warm atmosphere which reigned there, gradually benumbed her will. Her thoughts floated in a thin mist. She saw, through her partly-closed eye-lids, the *salon* bathed in the rose-coloured and softened light of the blinds. The harmony of the things that surrounded them gave her a feeling of profound peace, and she had a sensation of exquisite beatitude. She desired to remain always there, in that immobility, in that silence, far from reality, almost dreaming. And she was happy.

Jean drew near and knelt before her. In a voice soft as a breath, and which made her thrill, he murmured in her ear, "I love thee!" And in the heart of Lise an echo, suddenly awakened, repeated those ardent words, "I love thee!" They were in unison now, sharing the same intoxication. He had passed his arm round the waist of the young girl, and bending towards her, fascinating her with his gaze, he passionately repeated, "I love thee!"

Lise hastily raised herself. Into the depth of her darkened brain a feeling of danger had suddenly penetrated. She shuddered at finding herself in the arms of him whom she adored. Growing pale, she writhed, and her head lightly brushed Jean's mouth. She endeavoured to tear herself from his embrace, and, in the effort, her comb becoming loosened allowed the perfumed and silky masses of her fair hair to fall over her shoulders. She raised her eyes imploringly and encountered, close to her own, the face of the young man. An unknown ardour circulated in her veins. It seemed to her that she was surrounded by a sea of fire. She tried to cry out; a devouring kiss closed her lips, and, distracted, maddened, she felt her soul escape her.

When, in the small, dimly-lighted *salon*, Lise returned to herself, she had at first much difficulty in recovering her ideas. An enervated languor held her in a kind of half-sleep. And she remained torpid, hearing vaguely, in the silence, the sounds of the street. She breathed a long sigh, and, making an effort, raised her head, which felt heavy. She saw Jean at her feet, who was gazing at her with adoration. She turned away, ashamed and charmed at the same time. In her heart the voice of her triumphant love arose, saying to her, "He is thine!"

But another voice, that of her vanquished chastity, replied, "It is thou who art his."

As if he divined the trouble which agitated her, and was eager to appease it, Jean poured out a flood of tender words. He was radiant with delight. Of his icy scepticism no trace remained. He yielded to the rapture of that participated love, so full of sweetness. He took Lise in his arms, he repeated a hundred times that he adored her, and he brought back a smile to her lips.

He spoke to her of the future, and they both abandoned themselves to that charming pastime of forming plans, so easy to make, so difficult to realize. He could not endure the thought of seeing Lise no more. The theatre was about to close. It was the dead season for Parisians. They would fly from the mob of foreigners, and would seclude themselves, in the country, in a small house, hidden among trees, on the slope of a hill. Lise would accompany her mother to Evreux, and would then go to meet Jean. They would invent a pretext, so that she could obtain her liberty from the jealous tyranny of Madame Fleuron. She must propose to pay a visit to a friend. And, without restraint, without obstacle, the two would pass a few weeks together. Like children, they enjoyed beforehand this happy time, attaching

themselves more closely the one to the other by the bond of their dreams, and of their hopes.

It was nearly five o'clock, when Lise remembered that the present time had duties for her from which she was not permitted to escape. She uttered an exclamation. And, without any opposition from Jean this time, she made ready to leave. It was necessary to restore order to her hair, and she went into his dressing-room, which she found elegant and refined like that of a woman. She took pleasure in touching all the little ivory or steel implements that were used by the young man; she lifted the silver lids of the powder-boxes, and if she did not sprinkle her handkerchief with a few drops of his favourite perfume, it was that she dreaded the questions of her mother. She made use of Jean's tortoise-shell comb; she compelled him to kneel before her, and arranged his hair to her taste. She could not resolve to leave, and it was he, more anxious for her than she was for herself, who reminded her that the hours were passing.

It was necessary to tear herself from this loved happiness of being with him. Lise put on her hat, her mantle, and, accompanied by Jean, she crossed that ante-room in which she had experienced such terrible emotion, and in which she still seemed

to hear the frank voice of the gigantic Michalon saying, "Not wounded! What a fool he is, that Francis! Not wounded at all!" She laid her hands on Jean's shoulders and kissed him fondly; then, having said to him, "Till this evening, is it not?" she ran down the stairs, followed by the eyes of her lover, whose heart she carried away with her.

END OF VOL. I.



