

A WOODLAND QUEEN - V3

ANDRE THEURIET*

[NOTE: There is a short list of bookmarks, or pointers, at the end of the file for those who may wish to sample the author's ideas before making an entire meal of them. D.W.]

A WOODLAND QUEEN
(‘Reine des Bois’)

By ANDRE THEURIET

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRANGE, DARK SECRET

Julien had once entertained the hope that Claudet's marriage with Reine would act as a kind of heroic remedy for the cure of his unfortunate passion, he very soon perceived that he had been woefully mistaken. As soon as he had informed the grand chasserot of the success of his undertaking, he became aware that his own burden was considerably heavier. Certainly it had been easier for him to bear uncertainty than the boisterous rapture evinced by his fortunate rival. His jealousy rose against it, and that was all. Now that he had torn from Reine the avowal of her love for Claudet, he was more than ever oppressed by his hopeless passion, and plunged into a condition of complete moral and physical disintegration. It mingled with his blood, his nerves, his thoughts, and possessed him altogether, dwelling within him like an adored and tyrannical mistress. Reine appeared constantly before him as he had contemplated her on the outside steps of the farmhouse, in her never-to-be-forgotten negligee of the short skirt and the half-open bodice. He again beheld the silken treasure of her tresses, gliding playfully around her shoulders, the clear, honest look of her limpid eyes, the expressive smile of her enchanting lips, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling he reflected that perhaps before a month was over, all these charms would belong to Claudet. Then, almost at the same moment, like a swallow, which, with one rapid turn of its wing, changes its course, his thoughts

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went in the opposite direction, and he began to imagine what would have happened if, instead of replying in the affirmative, Reine had objected to marrying Claudet. He could picture himself kneeling before her as before the Madonna, and in a low voice confessing his love. He would have taken her hands so respectfully, and pleaded so eloquently, that she would have allowed herself to be convinced. The little, hands would have remained prisoners in his own; he would have lifted her tenderly, devotedly, in his arms, and under the influence of this feverish dream, he fancied he could feel the beating heart of the young girl against his own bosom. Suddenly he would wake up out of his illusions, and bite his lips with rage on finding himself in the dull reality of his own dwelling.

One day he heard footsteps on the gravel; a sonorous and jovial voice met his ear. It was Claudet, starting for La Thuiliere. Julien bent forward to see him, and ground his teeth as he watched his joyous departure. The sharp sting of jealousy entered his soul, and he rebelled against the evident injustice of Fate. How had he deserved that life should present so dismal and forbidding an aspect to him? He had had none of the joys of infancy; his youth had been spent wearily under the peevish discipline of a cloister; he had entered on his young manhood with all the awkwardness and timidity of a night-bird that is made to fly in the day. Up to the age of twenty-seven years, he had known neither love nor friendship; his time had been given entirely to earning his daily bread, and to the cultivation of religious exercises, which consoled him in some measure for his apparently useless way of living. Latterly, it is true, Fortune had seemed to smile upon him, by giving him a little more money and liberty, but this smile was a mere mockery, and a snare more hurtful than the pettinesses and privations of his past life. The fickle goddess, continuing her part of mystifier, had opened to his enraptured sight a magic window through which she had shown him a charming vision of possible happiness; but while he was still gazing, she had closed it abruptly in his face, laughing scornfully at his discomfiture. What sense was there in this perversion of justice, this perpetual mockery of Fate? At times the influence of his early education would resume its sway, and he would ask himself whether all this apparent contradiction were not a secret admonition from on high, warning him that he had not been created to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of this world, and ought, therefore, to turn his attention toward things eternal, and renounce the perishable delights of the flesh?

"If so," thought he, irreverently, "the warning comes rather late, and it would have answered the purpose better had I been allowed to continue in the narrow way of obscure poverty!" Now that the enervating influence of a more prosperous atmosphere had weakened his courage, and cooled the ardor of his piety, his faith began to totter like an old wall. His religious beliefs seemed to have been wrecked by the same storm which had destroyed his passionate hopes of love, and left him stranded and forlorn without either haven or pilot, blown hither and thither solely by the violence of his passion.

By degrees he took an aversion to his home, and would spend entire days in the woods. Their secluded haunts, already colored by the breath of autumn, became more attractive to him as other refuge failed him. They were his consolation; his doubts, weakness, and amorous regrets, found sympathy and indulgence under their silent shelter. He felt less lonely, less humiliated, less prosaic among these great forest depths, these lofty ash-trees, raising their verdant branches to heaven. He found he could more easily evoke the seductive image of Reine Vincart in these calm solitudes, where the recollections of the previous springtime mingled with the phantoms of his heated imagination and clothed themselves with almost living forms. He seemed to see the young girl rising from the mists of the distant valleys. The least fluttering of the leaves heralded her fancied approach. At times the hallucination was so complete that he could see, in the interlacing of the branches, the undulations of her supple form, and the graceful outlines of her profile. Then he would be seized by an insane desire to reach the fugitive and speak to her once more, and would go tearing along the brushwood for that purpose. Now and then, in the half light formed by the hanging boughs, he would see rays of golden light, coming straight down to the ground, and resting there lightly like diaphanous apparitions. Sometimes the rustling of birds taking flight, would sound in his ears like the timid frou-frou of a skirt, and Julien, fascinated by the mysterious charm of these indefinite objects, and following the impulse of their mystical suggestions, would fling himself impetuously into the jungle, repeating to himself the words of the "Canticle of Canticles": "I hear the voice of my beloved; behold! she cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." He would continue to press forward in pursuit of the intangible apparition, until he sank with exhaustion near some stream or fountain. Under the influence of the fever, which was consuming his brain, he would imagine the trickling water to be the song of a feminine voice. He would wind his arms around the young saplings, he would tear the berries from the bushes, pressing them against his thirsty lips, and imagining their odoriferous sweetness to be a fond caress from the loved one.

He would return from these expeditions exhausted but not appeased. Sometimes he would come across Claudet, also returning home from paying his court to Reine Vincart; and the unhappy Julien would scrutinize his rival's countenance, seeking eagerly for some trace of the impressions he had received during the loving interview. His curiosity was nearly always baffled; for Claudet seemed to have left all his gayety and conversational powers at La Thuiliere. During their *tete-a-tete* meals, he hardly spoke at all, maintaining a reserved attitude and a taciturn countenance. Julien, provoked at this unexpected sobriety, privately accused his cousin of dissimulation, and of trying to conceal his happiness. His jealousy so blinded him that he considered the silence of Claudet as pure hypocrisy not recognizing that it was assumed for the purpose of concealing some unpleasantness rather than satisfaction.

The fact was that Claudet, although rejoicing at the turn matters had taken, was verifying the poet's saying: "Never is perfect happiness our lot." When Julien brought him the good news, and he had flown so joyfully to La Thuiliere, he had certainly been cordially received by Reine, but, nevertheless, he had noticed with surprise an absent and dreamy look in her eyes, which did not agree with his idea of a first interview of lovers. When he wished to express his affection in the vivacious and significant manner ordinarily employed among the peasantry, that is to say, by vigorous embracing and resounding kisses, he met with unexpected resistance.

"Keep quiet!" was the order, "and let us talk rationally!"

He obeyed, although not agreeing in her view of the reserve to be maintained between lovers; but, he made up his mind to return to the charge and triumph over her bashful scruples. In fact, he began again the very next day, and his impetuous ardor encountered the same refusal in the same firm, though affectionate manner. He ventured to complain, telling Reine that she did not love him as she ought.

"If I did not feel friendly toward you," replied the young girl, laconically, "should I have allowed you to talk to me of marriage?"

Then, seeing that he looked vexed and worried, and realizing that she was perhaps treating him too roughly, she continued, more gently:

"Remember, Claudet, that I am living all alone at the farm. That obliges me to have more reserve than a girl whose mother is with her. So you must not be offended if I do not behave exactly as others might, and rest assured that it will not prevent me from being a good wife to you, when we are married."

"Well, now," thought Claudet, as he was returning despondently to Vivey: "I can't help thinking that a little caress now and then wouldn't hurt any one!"

Under these conditions it is not to be supposed he was in a mood to relate any of the details of such meagre lovemaking. His self-love was wounded by Reine's coldness. Having always been "cock-of-the-walk," he could not understand why he had such poor success with the only one about whom he was in earnest. He kept quiet, therefore, hiding his anxiety under the mask of careless indifference. Moreover, a certain primitive instinct of prudence made him circumspect. In his innermost soul, he still entertained doubts of Julien's sincerity. Sometimes he doubted whether his cousin's conduct had not been dictated by the bitterness of rejected love, rather than a generous impulse of affection, and he did not care to reveal Reine's repulse to one whom he vaguely suspected of being a former lover. His simple, ardent nature could not put up with opposition, and he thought only of hastening the day when Reine would belong to him altogether. But, when he broached this subject, he had the

mortification to find that she was less impatient than himself.

"There is no hurry," she replied, "our affairs are not in order, our harvests are not housed, and it would be better to wait till the dull season."

In his first moments of joy and effervescence, Claudet had evinced the desire to announce immediately the betrothal throughout the village. This Reine had opposed; she thought they should avoid awakening public curiosity so long beforehand, and she extracted from Claudet a promise to say nothing until the date of the marriage should be settled. He had unwillingly consented, and thus, during the last month, the matter had been dragging on indefinitely:

With Julien de Buxieres, this interminable delay, these incessant comings and goings from the chateau to the farm, as well as the mysterious conduct of the bridegroom-elect, became a subject of serious irritation, amounting almost to obsession. He would have wished the affair hurried up, and the sacrifice consummated without hindrance. He believed that when once the newly-married pair had taken up their quarters at La Thuilliere, the very certainty that Reine belonged in future to another would suffice to effect a radical cure in him, and chase away the deceptive phantoms by which he was pursued.

One evening, as Claudet was returning home, more out of humor and silent than usual, Julien asked him, abruptly:

"Well! how are you getting along? When is the wedding?"

"Nothing is decided yet," replied Claudet, "we have time enough!"

"You think so?" exclaimed de Buxieres, sarcastically; "you have considerable patience for a lover!"

The remark and the tone provoked Claudet.

"The delay is not of my making," returned he.

"Ah!" replied the other, quickly, "then it comes from Mademoiselle Vincart?" And a sudden gleam came into his eyes, as if Claudet's assertion had kindled a spark of hope in his breast. The latter noticed the momentary brightness in his cousin's usually stormy countenance, and hastened to reply:

"Nay, nay; we both think it better to postpone the wedding until the harvest is in."

"You are wrong. A wedding should not be postponed. Besides, this prolonged love-making, these daily visits to the farm—all that is not

very proper. It is compromising for Mademoiselle Vincart!"

Julien shot out these remarks with a degree of fierceness and violence that astonished Claudet.

"You think, then," said he, "that we ought to rush matters, and have the wedding before winter?"

"Undoubtedly!"

The next day, at La Thuiliere, the grand chasserot, as he stood in the orchard, watching Reine spread linen on the grass, entered bravely on the subject.

"Reine," said he, coaxingly, "I think we shall have to decide upon a day for our wedding."

She set down the watering-pot with which she was wetting the linen, and looked anxiously at her betrothed.

"I thought we had agreed to wait until the later season. Why do you wish to change that arrangement?"

"That is true; I promised not to hurry you, Reine, but it is beyond me to wait—you must not be vexed with me if I find the time long. Besides, they know nothing, around the village, of our intentions, and my coming here every day might cause gossip and make it unpleasant for you. At any rate, that is the opinion of Monsieur de Buxieres, with whom I was conferring only yesterday evening."

At the name of Julien, Reine frowned and bit her lip.

"Aha!" said she, "it is he who has been advising you?"

"Yes; he says the sooner we are married, the better it will be."

"Why does he interfere in what does not concern him?" said she, angrily, turning her head away. She stood a moment in thought, absently pushing forward the roll of linen with her foot. Then, shrugging her shoulders and raising her head, she said slowly, while still avoiding Claudet's eyes:

"Perhaps you are right—both of you. Well, let it be so! I authorize you to go to Monsieur le Cure and arrange the day with him."

"Oh, thanks, Reine!" exclaimed Claudet, rapturously; "you make me very happy!"

He pressed her hands in his, but though absorbed in his own joyful feelings, he could not help remarking that the young girl was trembling

in his grasp. He even fancied that there was a suspicious, tearful glitter in her brilliant eyes.

He left her, however, and repaired at once to the cure's house, which stood near the chateau, a little behind the church.

The servant showed him into a small garden separated by a low wall from the cemetery. He found the Abbe Pernot seated on a stone bench, sheltered by a trellised vine. He was occupied in cutting up pieces of hazel-nuts to make traps for small birds.

"Good-evening, Claudet!" said the cure, without moving from his work; "you find me busy preparing my nets; if you will permit me, I will continue, for I should like to have my two hundred traps finished by this evening. The season is advancing, you know! The birds will begin their migrations, and I should be greatly provoked if I were not equipped in time for the opportune moment. And how is Monsieur de Buxieres? I trust he will not be less good-natured than his deceased cousin, and that he will allow me to spread my snares on the border hedge of his woods. But," added he, as he noticed the flurried, impatient countenance of his visitor, "I forgot to ask you, my dear young fellow, to what happy chance I owe your visit? Excuse my neglect!"

"Don't mention it, Monsieur le Cure. You have guessed rightly. It is a very happy circumstance which brings me. I am about to marry."

"Aha!" laughed the Abbe, "I congratulate you, my dear young friend. This is really delightful news. It is not good for man to be alone, and I am glad to know you must give up the perilous life of a bachelor. Well, tell me quickly the name of your betrothed. Do I know her?"

"Of course you do, Monsieur le Cure; there are few you know so well. It is Mademoiselle Vincart."

"Reine?"

The Abbe flung away the pruning-knife and branch that he was cutting, and gazed at Claudet with a stupefied air. At the same time, his jovial face became shadowed, and his mouth assumed an expression of consternation.

"Yes, indeed, Reine Vincart," repeated Claudet, somewhat vexed at the startled manner of his reverence; "are you surprised at my choice?"

"Excuse me-and-is it all settled?" stammered the Abbe, with bewilderment, "and-and do you really love each other?"

"Certainly; we agree on that point; and I have come here to arrange with you about having the banns published."

"What! already?" murmured the cure, buttoning and unbuttoning the top of his coat in his agitation, "you seem to be in a great hurry to go to work. The union of the man and the woman—ahem—is a serious matter, which ought not to be undertaken without due consideration. That is the reason why the Church has instituted the sacrament of marriage. Hast thou well considered, my son?"

"Why, certainly, I have reflected," exclaimed Claudet with some irritation, "and my mind is quite made up. Once more, I ask you, Monsieur le Cure, are you displeased with my choice, or have you anything to say against Mademoiselle Vincart?"

"I? no, absolutely nothing. Reine is an exceedingly good girl."

"Well, then?"

"Well, my friend, I will go over to-morrow and see your fiancee, and we will talk matters over. I shall act for the best, in the interests of both of you, be assured of that. In the meantime, you will both be united this evening in my prayers; but, for to-day, we shall have to stop where we are. Good-evening, Claudet! I will see you again."

With these enigmatic words, he dismissed the young lover, who returned to the chateau, vexed and disturbed by his strange reception.

The moment the door of the presbytery had closed behind Claudet, the Abbe Pernot, flinging to one side all his preparations, began to pace nervously up and down the principal garden-walk. He appeared completely unhinged. His features were drawn, through an unusual tension of ideas forced upon him. He had hurriedly caught his skullcap from his head, as if he feared the heat of his meditation might cause a rush of blood to the head. He quickened his steps, then stopped suddenly, folded his arms with great energy, then opened them again abruptly to thrust his hands into the pockets of his gown, searching through them with feverish anxiety, as if he expected to find something which might solve obscure and embarrassing questions.

"Good Lord! Good Lord! What a dreadful piece of business; and right in the bird season, too! But I can say nothing to Claudet. It is a secret that does not belong to me. How can I get out of it? Tutt! tutt! tutt!"

These monosyllabic ejaculations broke forth like the vexed clucking of a frightened blackbird; after which relief, the Abbe resumed his fitful striding up and down the box-bordered alley. This lasted until the hour of twilight, when Augustine, the servant, as soon as the Angelus had sounded, went to inform her master that they were waiting prayers for him in the church. He obeyed the summons, although in a somewhat absent mood, and hurried over the services in a manner which did not contribute to the edification of the assistants. As soon as he got home, he ate his Supper without appetite, mumbled his prayers, and shut himself up in the

room he used as a study and workshop. He remained there until the night was far advanced, searching through his scanty library to find two dusty volumes treating of "cases of conscience," which he looked eagerly over by the feeble light of his study lamp. During this laborious search he emitted frequent sighs, and only left off reading occasionally in order to dose himself plentifully with snuff. At last, as he felt that his eyes were becoming inflamed, his ideas conflicting in his brain, and as his lamp was getting low, he decided to go to bed. But he slept badly, turned over at least twenty times, and was up with the first streak of day to say his mass in the chapel. He officiated with more dignity and piety than was his wont; and after reading the second gospel he remained for a long while kneeling on one of the steps of the altar. After he had returned to the sacristy, he divested himself quickly of his sacerdotal robes, reached his room by a passage of communication, breakfasted hurriedly, and putting on his three-cornered hat, and seizing his knotty, cherry-wood cane, he shot out of doors as if he had been summoned to a fire.

Augustine, amazed at his precipitate departure, went up to the attic, and, from behind the shelter of the skylight, perceived her master striding rapidly along the road to Planche-au-Vacher. There she lost sight of him—the underwood was too thick. But, after a few minutes, the gaze of the inquisitive woman was rewarded by the appearance of a dark object emerging from the copse, and defining itself on the bright pasture land beyond. "Monsieur le Cure is going to La Thuiliere," thought she, and with this half-satisfaction she descended to her daily occupations.

It was true, the Abbe Pernot was walking, as fast as he could, to the Vincart farm, as unmindful of the dew that tarnished his shoe-buckles as of the thorns which attacked his calves. He had that within him which spurred him on, and rendered him unconscious of the accidents on his path. Never, during his twenty-five years of priestly office, had a more difficult question embarrassed his conscience. The case was a grave one, and moreover, so urgent that the Abbe was quite at a loss how to proceed. How was it that he never had foreseen that such a combination of circumstances might occur? A priest of a more fervent spirit, who had the salvation of his flock more at heart, could not have been taken so unprepared. Yes; that was surely the cause! The profane occupations in which he had allowed himself to take so much enjoyment, had distracted his watchfulness and obscured his perspicacity. Providence was now punishing him for his lukewarmness, by interposing across his path this stumbling-block, which was probably sent to him as a salutary warning, but which he saw no way of getting over.

While he was thus meditating and reproaching himself, the thrushes were calling to one another from the branches of their favorite trees; whole flights of yellowhammers burst forth from the hedges red with haws; but he took no heed of them and did not even give a single thought to his neglected nests and snares.

He went straight on, stumbling over the juniper bushes, and wondering what he should say when he reached the farm, and how he should begin. Sometimes he addressed himself, thus: "Have I the right to speak? What a revelation! And to a young girl! Oh, Lord, lead me in the straight way of thy truth, and instruct me in the right path!"

As he continued piously repeating this verse of the Psalmist, in order to gain spiritual strength, the gray roofs of La Thuiliere rose before him; he could hear the crowing of the cocks and the lowing of the cows in the stable. Five minutes after, he had pushed open the door of the kitchen where La Guite was arranging the bowls for breakfast.

"Good-morning, Guitiote," said he, in a choking voice; "is Mademoiselle Vincart up?"

"Holy Virgin! Monsieur le Cure! Why, certainly Mademoiselle is up. She was on foot before any of us, and now she is trotting around the orchard. I will go fetch her."

"No, do not stir. I know the way, and I will go and find her myself."

She was in the orchard, was she? The Abbe preferred it should be so; he thought the interview would be less painful, and that the surrounding trees would give him ideas. He walked across the kitchen, descended the steps leading from the ground floor to the garden, and ascended the slope in search of Reine, whom he soon perceived in the midst of a bower formed by clustering filbert-trees.

At sight of the cure, Reine turned pale; he had doubtless come to tell her the result of his interview with Claudet, and what day had been definitely chosen for the nuptial celebration. She had been troubled all night by the reflection that her fate would soon be irrevocably sealed; she had wept, and her eyes betrayed it. Only the day before, she had looked upon this project of marriage, which she had entertained in a moment of anger and injured feeling, as a vague thing, a vaporous eventuality of which the realization was doubtful; now, all was arranged, settled, cruelly certain; there was no way of escaping from a promise which Claudet, alas! was bound to consider a serious one. These thoughts traversed her mind, while the cure was slowly approaching the filbert-trees; she felt her heart throb, and her eyes again filled with tears. Yet her pride would not allow that the Abbe should witness her irresolution and weeping; she made an effort, overcame the momentary weakness, and addressed the priest in an almost cheerful voice:

"Monsieur le Cure, I am sorry that they have made you come up this hill to find me. Let us go back to the farm, and I will offer you a cup of coffee."

"No, my child," replied the Abbe, motioning with his hand that she should stay where she was, "no, thank you! I will not take anything. Remain

where you are.

"I wish to talk to you, and we shall be less liable to be disturbed here."

There were two rustic seats under the nut-trees; the cure took one and asked Reine to take the other, opposite to him. There they were, under the thick, verdant branches, hidden from indiscreet passers-by, surrounded by silence, installed as in a confessional.

The morning quiet, the solitude, the half light, all invited meditation and confidence; nevertheless the young girl and the priest sat motionless; both agitated and embarrassed and watching each other without uttering a sound. It was Reine who first broke the silence.

"You have seen Claudet, Monsieur le Cure?"

"Yes, yes!" replied the Abbe, sighing deeply.

"He-spoke to you of our-plans," continued the young girl, in a quavering voice, "and you fixed the day?"

"No, my child, we settled nothing. I wanted to see you first, and converse with you about something very important."

The Abbe hesitated, rubbed a spot of mud off his soutane, raised his shoulders like a man lifting a heavy burden, then gave a deep cough.

"My dear child," continued he at length, prudently dropping his voice a tone lower, "I will begin by repeating to you what I said yesterday to Claudet Sejournant: the marriage, that is to say, the indissoluble union, of man and woman before God, is one of the most solemn and serious acts of life. The Church has constituted it a sacrament, which she administers only on certain formal conditions. Before entering into this bond, one ought, as we are taught by Holy Writ, to sound the heart, subject the very inmost of the soul to searching examinations. I beg of you, therefore, answer my questions freely, without false shame, just as if you were at the tribunal of repentance. Do you love Claudet?"

Reine trembled. This appeal to her sincerity renewed all her perplexities and scruples. She raised her full, glistening eyes to the cure, and replied, after a slight hesitation:

"I have a sincere affection for Claudet-and-much esteem."

"I understand that," replied the priest, compressing his lips, "but-excuse me if I press the matter-has the engagement you have made with him been determined simply by considerations of affection and suitability, or by more interior and deeper feelings?"

"Pardon, Monsieur le Cure," returned Reine, coloring, "it seems to me that a sentiment of friendship, joined to a firm determination to prove a faithful and devoted wife, should be, in your eyes as they are in mine, a sufficient assurance that—"

"Certainly, certainly, my dear child; and many husbands would be contented with less. However, it is not only a question of Claudet's happiness, but of yours also. Come now! let me ask you: is your affection for young Sejournant so powerful that in the event of any unforeseen circumstance happening, to break off the marriage, you would be forever unhappy?"

"Ah!" replied Reine, more embarrassed than ever, "you ask too grave a question, Monsieur le Cure! If it were broken off without my having to reproach myself for it, it is probable that I should find consolation in time."

"Very good! Consequently, you do not love Claudet, if I may take the word love in the sense understood by people of the world. You only like, you do not love him? Tell me. Answer frankly."

"Frankly, Monsieur le Cure, no!"

"Thanks be to God! We are saved!" exclaimed the Abbe, drawing a long breath, while Reine, amazed, gazed at him with wondering eyes.

"I do not understand you," faltered she; "what is it?"

"It is this: the marriage can not take place."

"Can not? why?"

"It is impossible, both in the eyes of the Church and in those of the world."

The young girl looked at him with increasing amazement.

"You alarm me!" cried she. "What has happened? What reasons hinder me from marrying Claudet?"

"Very powerful reasons, my dear child. I do not feel at liberty to reveal them to you, but you must know that I am not speaking without authority, and that you may rely on the statement I have made."

Reine remained thoughtful, her brows knit, her countenance troubled.

"I have every confidence in you, Monsieur le Cure, but—"

"But you hesitate about believing me," interrupted the Abbe, piqued at not finding in one of his flock the blind obedience on which he had

reckoned. "You must know, nevertheless, that your pastor has no interest in deceiving you, and that when he seeks to influence you, he has in view only your well-being in this world and in the next."

"I do not doubt your good intentions," replied Reine, with firmness, "but a promise can not be annulled without sufficient cause. I have given my word to Claudet, and I am too loyal at heart to break faith with him without letting him know the reason."

"You will find some pretext."

"And supposing that Claudet would be content with such a pretext, my own conscience would not be," objected the young girl, raising her clear, honest glance toward the priest; "your words have entered my soul, they are troubling me now, and it will be worse when I begin to think this matter over again. I can not bear uncertainty. I must see my way clearly before me. I entreat you then, Monsieur le Cure, not to do things by halves. You have thought it your duty to tell me I can not wed with Claudet; now tell me why not?"

"Why not? why not?" repeated the Abbe, angrily. "I distress myself in telling you that I am not authorized to satisfy your unwise curiosity! You must humble your intelligence and believe without arguing."

"In matters of faith, that may be possible," urged Reine, obstinately, "but my marriage has nothing to do with discussing the truths of our holy religion. I therefore respectfully ask to be enlightened, Monsieur le Cure; otherwise—"

"Otherwise?" repeated the Abby Pernot, inquiringly, rolling his eyes uneasily.

"Otherwise, I shall keep my word respectably, and I shall marry Claudet."

"You will not do that?" said he, imploringly, joining his hands as if in supplication; "after being openly warned by me, you dare not burden your soul with such a terrible responsibility. Come, my child, does not the possibility of committing a mortal sin alarm your conscience as a Christian?"

"I can not sin if I am in ignorance, and as to my conscience, Monsieur le Cure, do you think it is acting like a Christian to alarm without enlightening?"

"Is that your last word?" inquired the Abbe, completely aghast.

"It is my last word," she replied, vehemently, moved both by a feeling of self-respect, and a desire to force the hand of her interlocutor.

"You are a proud, obstinate girl!" exclaimed the Abbe, rising abruptly, "you wish to compel me to reveal this secret! Well, have your way! I will tell you. May the harm which may result from it fall lightly upon you, and do not hereafter reproach me for the pain I am about to inflict upon you."

He checked himself for a moment, again joined his hands, and raising his eyes toward heaven ejaculated fervently, as if repeating his devotions in the oratory: "O Lord, thou knowest I would have spared her this bitter cup, but, between two evils, I have avoided the greater. If I forfeit my solemn promise, consider, O Lord, I pray thee, that I do it to avoid disgrace and exposure for her, and deign to forgive thy servant!"

He seated himself again, placed one of his hands before his eyes, and began, in a hollow voice, Reine, all the while gazing nervously at him:

"My child, you are forcing me to violate a secret which has been solemnly confided to me. It concerns a matter not usually talked about before young girls, but you are, I believe, already a woman in heart and understanding, and you will hear resignedly what I have to tell you, however much the recital may trouble you. I have already informed you that your marriage with Claudet is impossible. I now declare that it would be criminal, for the reason that incest is an abomination."

"Incest!" repeated Reine, pale and trembling, "what do you mean?"

"I mean," sighed the cure, "that you are Claudet's sister, not having the same mother, but the same father: Claude-Odouart de Buxieres."

"Oh! you are mistaken! that cannot be!"

"I am stating facts. It grieves me to the heart, my dear child, that in speaking of your deceased mother, I should have to reveal an error over which she lamented, like David, with tears of blood. She confessed her sin, not to the priest, but to a friend, a few days before her death. In justice to her memory, I ought to add that, like most of the unfortunates seduced by this untamable de Buxieres, she succumbed to his wily misrepresentations. She was a victim rather than an accomplice. The man himself acknowledged as much in a note entrusted to my care, which I have here."

And the Abbe' drew from his pocket an old, worn letter, the writing yellow with age, and placed it before Reine. In this letter, written in Claude de Buxieres's coarse, sprawling hand, doubtless in reply to a reproachful appeal from his mistress, he endeavored to offer some kind of honorable amends for the violence he had used, and to calm Madame Vincart's remorse by promising, as was his custom, to watch over the future of the child which should be born to her.

"That child was yourself, my poor girl," continued the Abbe, picking up

the letter which Reine had thrown down, after reading it, with a gesture of sickened disgust.

She appeared not to hear him. She had buried her face in her hands, to hide the flushing of her cheeks, and sat motionless, altogether crushed beneath the shameful revelation; convulsive sobs and tremblings occasionally agitating her frame.

"You can now understand," continued the priest, "how the announcement of this projected marriage stunned and terrified me. I could not confide to Claudet the reason for my stupefaction, and I should have been thankful if you could have understood so that I could have spared you this cruel mortification, but you would not take any intimation from me. And now, forgive me for inflicting this cross upon you, and bear it with courage, with Christian fortitude."

"You have acted as was your duty," murmured Reine, sadly, "and I thank you, Monsieur le Cure!"

"And will you promise me to dismiss Claudet at once—today?"

"I promise you."

The Abbe Pernot advanced to take her hand, and administer some words of consolation; but she evaded, with a stern gesture, the good man's pious sympathy, and escaped toward the dwelling.

The spacious kitchen was empty when she entered. The shutters had been closed against the sun, and it had become cool and pleasant. Here and there, among the copper utensils, and wherever a chance ray made a gleam of light, the magpie was hopping about, uttering short, piercing cries. In the recess of the niche containing the colored prints, sat the old man Vincart, dozing, in his usual supine attitude, his hands spread out, his eyelids drooping, his mouth half open. At the sound of the door, his eyes opened wide. He rather guessed at, than saw, the entrance of the young girl, and his pallid lips began their accustomed refrain: "Reine! Rei-eine!"

Reine flew impetuously toward the paralytic old man, threw herself on her knees before him, sobbing bitterly, and covered his hands with kisses. Her caresses were given in a more respectful, humble, contrite manner than ever before.

"Oh! father—father!" faltered she; "I loved you always, I shall love you now with all my heart and soul!"

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE'S SAD ENDING

The kitchen was bright with sunshine, and the industrious bees were buzzing around the flowers on the window-sills, while Reine was listlessly attending to culinary duties, and preparing her father's meal. The humiliating disclosures made by the Abbe Pernot weighed heavily upon her mind. She foresaw that Claudet would shortly be at La Thuiliere in order to hear the result of the cure's visit; but she did not feel sufficiently mistress of herself to have a decisive interview with him at such short notice, and resolved to gain at least one day by absenting herself from the farm. It seemed to her necessary that she should have that length of time to arrange her ideas, and evolve some way of separating Claudet and herself without his suspecting the real motive of rupture. So, telling La Guite to say that unexpected business had called her away, she set out for the woods of Maignefontaine.

Whenever she had felt the need of taking counsel with herself before deciding on any important matter, the forest had been her refuge and her inspiration. The refreshing solitude of the valleys, watered by living streams, acted as a strengthening balm to her irresolute will; her soul inhaled the profound peace of these leafy retreats. By the time she had reached the inmost shade of the forest her mind had become calmer, and better able to unravel the confusion of thoughts that surged like troubled waters through her brain. The dominant idea was, that her self-respect had been wounded; the shock to her maidenly modesty, and the shame attendant upon the fact, affected her physically, as if she had been belittled and degraded by a personal stain; and this downfall caused her deep humiliation. By slow degrees, however, and notwithstanding this state of abject despair, she felt, cropping up somewhere in her heart, a faint germ of gladness, and, by close examination, discovered its origin: she was now loosed from her obligations toward Claudet, and the prospect of being once more free afforded her immediate consolation.

She had so much regretted, during the last few weeks, the feeling of outraged pride which had incited her to consent to this marriage; her loyal, sincere nature had revolted at the constraint she had imposed upon herself; her nerves had been so severely taxed by having to receive her fiance with sufficient warmth to satisfy his expectations, and yet not afford any encouragement to his demonstrative tendencies, that the certainty of her newly acquired freedom created a sensation of relief and well-being. But, hardly had she analyzed and acknowledged this sensation when she reproached herself for harboring it when she was about to cause Claudet such affliction.

Poor Claudet! what a cruel blow was in store for him! He was so guilelessly in love, and had such unbounded confidence in the success of

his projects! Reine was overcome by tender reminiscences. She had always experienced, as if divining by instinct the natural bonds which united them, a sisterly affection for Claudet. Since their earliest infancy, at the age when they learned their catechism under the church porch, they had been united in a bond of friendly fellowship. With Reine, this tender feeling had always remained one of friendship, but, with Claudet, it had ripened into love; and now, after allowing the poor young fellow to believe that his love was reciprocated, she was forced to disabuse him. It was useless for her to try to find some way of softening the blow; there was none. Claudet was too much in love to remain satisfied with empty words; he would require solid reasons; and the only conclusive one which would convince him, without wounding his self-love, was exactly the one which the young girl could not give him. She was, therefore, doomed to send Claudet away with the impression that he had been jilted by a heartless and unprincipled coquette. And yet something must be done. The grand chasserot had been too long already in the toils; there was something barbarously cruel in not freeing him from his illusions.

In this troubled state of mind, Reine gazed appealingly at the silent witnesses of her distress. She heard a voice within her saying to the tall, vaulted ash, "Inspire me!" to the little rose-colored centaurea of the wayside, "Teach me a charm to cure the harm I have done!" But the woods, which in former days had been her advisers and instructors, remained deaf to her invocation. For the first time, she felt herself isolated and abandoned to her own resources, even in the midst of her beloved forest.

It is when we experience these violent mental crises, that we become suddenly conscious of Nature's cold indifference to our sufferings. She really is nothing more than the reflex of our own sensations, and can only give us back what we lend her. Beautiful but selfish, she allows herself to be courted by novices, but presents a freezing, emotionless aspect to those who have outlived their illusions.

Reine did not reach home until the day had begun to wane. La Guite informed her that Claudet had waited for her during part of the afternoon, and that he would come again the next day at nine o'clock. Notwithstanding her bodily fatigue, she slept uneasily, and her sleep was troubled by feverish dreams. Every time she closed her eyes, she fancied herself conversing with Claudet, and woke with a start at the sound of his angry voice.

She arose at dawn, descended at once to the lower floor, to get through her morning tasks, and as soon as the big kitchen clock struck nine, she left the house and took the path by which Claudet would come. A feeling of delicate consideration toward her lover had impelled her to choose for her explanation any other place than the one where she had first received his declaration of love, and consented to the marriage. Very soon he came in sight, his stalwart figure outlined against the gray landscape.

He was walking rapidly; her heart smote her, her hands became like ice, but she summoned all her fortitude, and went bravely forward to meet him.

When he came within forty or fifty feet, he recognized Reine, and took a short cut across the stubble studded with cobwebs glistening with dew.

"Aha! my Reine, my queen, good-morning!" cried he, joyously, "it is sweet of you to come to meet me!"

"Good-morning, Claudet. I came to meet you because I wish to speak with you on matters of importance, and I preferred not to have the conversation take place in our house. Shall we walk as far as the Planche-au-Vacher?"

He stopped short, astonished at the proposal and also at the sad and resolute attitude of his betrothed. He examined her more closely, noticed her deep-set eyes, her cheeks, whiter than usual.

"Why, what is the matter, Reine?" he inquired; "you are not yourself; do you not feel well?"

"Yes, and no. I have passed a bad night, thinking over matters that are troubling me, and I think that has produced some fever."

"What matters? Any that concern us?"

"Yes;" replied she, laconically.

Claudet opened his eyes. The young girl's continued gravity began to alarm him; but, seeing that she walked quickly forward, with an absent air, her face lowered, her brows bent, her mouth compressed, he lost courage and refrained from asking her any questions. They walked on thus in silence, until they came to the open level covered with juniper-bushes, from which solitary place, surrounded by hawthorn hedges, they could trace the narrow defile leading to Vivey, and the faint mist beyond.

"Let us stop here," said Reine, seating herself on a flat, mossy stone, "we can talk here without fear of being disturbed."

"No fear of that," remarked Claudet, with a forced smile, "with the exception of the shepherd of Vivey, who comes here sometimes with his cattle, we shall not see many passers-by. It must be a secret that you have to tell me, Reine?" he added.

"No;" she returned, "but I foresee that my words will give you pain, my poor Claudet, and I prefer you should hear them without being annoyed by the farm-people passing to and fro."

"Explain yourself!" he exclaimed, impetuously. "For heaven's sake, don't keep me in suspense!"

"Listen, Claudet. When you asked my hand in marriage, I answered yes, without taking time to reflect. But, since I have been thinking over our plans, I have had scruples. My father is becoming every day more of an invalid, and in his present state I really have no right to live for any one but him. One would think he was aware of our intentions, for since you have been visiting at the farm, he is more agitated and suffers more. I think that any change in his way of living would bring on a stroke, and I never should forgive myself if I thought I had shortened his life. That is the reason why, as long as I have him with me, I do not see that it will be possible for me to dispose of myself. On the other hand, I do not wish to abuse your patience. I therefore ask you to take back your liberty and give me back my promise."

"That is to say, you won't have me!" he exclaimed.

"No; my poor friend, it means only that I shall not marry so long as my father is living, and that I can not ask you to wait until I am perfectly free. Forgive me for having entered into the engagement too carelessly, and do not on that account take your friendship from me."

"Reine," interrupted Claudet, angrily, "don't turn your brain inside out to make me believe that night is broad day. I am not a child, and I see very well that your father's health is only a pretext. You don't want me, that's all, and, with all due respect, you have changed your mind very quickly! Only the day before yesterday you authorized me to arrange about the day for the ceremony with the Abbe Pernot. Now that you have had a visit from the cure, you want to put the affair off until the week when two Sundays come together! I am a little curious to know what that confounded old abbe has been babbling about me, to turn you inside out like a glove in such a short time."

Claudet's conscience reminded him of several rare frolics, chance love-affairs, meetings in the woods, and so on, and he feared the priest might have told Reine some unfavorable stories about him. "Ah!" he continued, clenching his fists, "if this old poacher in a cassock has done me an ill turn with you, he will not have much of a chance for paradise!"

"Undeceive yourself," said Reine, quickly, "Monsieur le Cure is your friend, like myself; he esteems you highly, and never has said anything but good of you."

"Oh, indeed!" sneered the young man, "as you are both so fond of me, how does it happen that you have given me my dismissal the very day after your interview with the cure?"

Reine, knowing Claudet's violent disposition, and wishing to avoid trouble for the cure, thought it advisable to have recourse to evasion.

"Monsieur le Cure," said she, "has had no part in my decision. He has not spoken against you, and deserves no reproaches from you."

"In that case, why do you send me away?"

"I repeat again, the comfort and peace of my father are paramount with me, and I do not intend to marry so long as he may have need of me."

"Well," said Claudet, persistently, "I love you, and I will wait."

"It can not be."

"Why?"

"Because," replied she, sharply, "because it would be kind neither to you, nor to my father, nor to me. Because marriages that drag along in that way are never good for anything!"

"Those are bad reasons!" he muttered, gloomily.

"Good or bad," replied the young girl, "they appear valid to me, and I hold to them."

"Reine," said he, drawing near to her and looking straight into her eyes, "can you swear, by the head of your father, that you have given me the true reason for your rejecting me?"

She became embarrassed, and remained silent.

"See!" he exclaimed, "you dare not take the oath!"

"My word should suffice," she faltered.

"No; it does not suffice. But your silence says a great deal, I tell you! You are too frank, Reine, and you don't know how to lie. I read it in your eyes, I do. The true reason is that you do not love me."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away her head.

"No, you do not love me. If you had any love for me, instead of discouraging me, you would hold out some hope to me, and advise me to have patience. You never have loved me, confess now!"

By dint of this persistence, Reine by degrees lost her self-confidence. She could realize how much Claudet was suffering, and she reproached herself for the torture she was inflicting upon him. Driven into a corner, and recognizing that the avowal he was asking for was the only one that would drive him away, she hesitated no longer.

"Alas!" she murmured, lowering her eyes, "since you force me to tell you some truths that I would rather have kept from you, I confess you have guessed. I have a sincere friendship for you, but that is all. I have concluded that to marry a person one ought to love him differently, more than everything else in the world, and I feel that my heart is not turned altogether toward you."

"No," said Claudet, bitterly, "it is turned elsewhere."

"What do you mean? I do not understand you."

"I mean that you love some one else."

"That is not true," she protested.

"You are blushing—a proof that I have hit the nail!"

"Enough of this!" cried she, imperiously.

"You are right. Now that you have said you don't want me any longer, I have no right to ask anything further. Adieu!"

He turned quickly on his heel. Reine was conscious of having been too hard with him, and not wishing him to go away with such a grief in his heart, she sought to retain him by placing her hand upon his arm.

"Come, Claudet," said she, entreatingly, "do not let us part in anger. It pains me to see you suffer, and I am sorry if I have said anything unkind to you. Give me your hand in good fellowship, will you?"

But Claudet drew back with a fierce gesture, and glancing angrily at Reine, he replied, rudely:

"Thanks for your regrets and your pity; I have no use for them." She understood that he was deeply hurt; gave up entreating, and turned away with eyes full of tears.

He remained motionless, his arms crossed, in the middle of the road. After some minutes, he turned his head. Reine was already nothing more than a dark speck against the gray of the increasing fog. Then he went off, haphazard, across the pasture-lands. The fog was rising slowly, and the sun, shorn of its beams, showed its pale face faintly through it. To the right and the left, the woods were half hidden by moving white billows, and Claudet walked between fluid walls of vapor. This hidden sky, these veiled surroundings, harmonized with his mental condition. It was easier for him to hide his chagrin. "Some one else! Yes; that's it. She loves some other fellow! how was it I did not find that out the very first day?" Then he recalled how Reine shrank from him when he solicited a caress; how she insisted on their betrothal being kept secret, and how many times she had postponed the date of the wedding. It was evident

that she had received him only in self-defence, and on the pleading of Julien de Buxieres. Julien! the name threw a gleam of light across his brain, hitherto as foggy as the country around him. Might not Julien be the fortunate rival on whom Reine's affections were so obstinately set? Still, if she had always loved Monsieur de Buxieres, in what spirit of perversity or thoughtlessness had she suffered the advances of another suitor?

Reine was no coquette, and such a course of action would be repugnant to her frank, open nature. It was a profound enigma, which Claudet, who had plenty of good common sense, but not much insight, was unable to solve. But grief has, among its other advantages, the power of rendering our perceptions more acute; and by dint of revolving the question in his mind, Claudet at last became enlightened. Had not Reine simply followed the impulse of her wounded feelings? She was very proud, and when the man whom she secretly loved had come coolly forward to plead the cause of one who was indifferent to her, would not her self-respect be lowered, and would she not, in a spirit of bravado, accept the proposition, in order that he might never guess the sufferings of her spurned affections? There was no doubt, that, later, recognizing that the task was beyond her strength, she had felt ashamed of deceiving Claudet any longer, and, acting on the advice of the Abbe Pernot, had made up her mind to break off a union that was repugnant to her.

"Yes;" he repeated, mournfully to himself, "that must have been the way it happened." And with this kind of explanation of Reine's actions, his irritation seemed to lessen. Not that his grief was less poignant, but the first burst of rage had spent itself like a great wind-storm, which becomes lulled after a heavy fall of rain; the bitterness was toned down, and he was enabled to reason more clearly.

Julien—well, what was the part of Julien in all this disturbance? "If what I imagine is true," thought he, "Monsieur de Buxieres knows that Reine loves him, but has he any reciprocal feeling for her? With a man as mysterious as my cousin, it is not easy to find out what is going on in his heart. Anyhow, I have no right to complain of him; as soon as he discovered my love for Reine, did he not, besides ignoring his own claim, offer spontaneously to take my message? Still, there is something queer at the bottom of it all, and whatever it costs me, I am going to find it out."

At this moment, through the misty air, he heard faintly the village clock strike eleven. "Already so late! how the time flies, even when one is suffering!" He bent his course toward the chateau, and, breathless and excited, without replying to Manette's inquiries, he burst into the hall where his cousin was pacing up and down, waiting for breakfast. At this sudden intrusion Julien started, and noted Claudet's quick breathing and disordered state.

"Ho, ho!" exclaimed he, in his usual, sarcastic tone, "what a hurry you

are in! I suppose you have come to say the wedding-day is fixed at last?"

"No!" replied Claudet, briefly, "there will be no wedding."

Julien tottered, and turned to face his cousin.

"What's that? Are you joking?"

"I am in no mood for joking. Reine will not have me; she has taken back her promise."

While pronouncing these words, he scrutinized attentively his cousin's countenance, full in the light from the opposite window. He saw his features relax, and his eyes glow with the same expression which he had noticed a few days previous, when he had referred to the fact that Reine had again postponed the marriage.

"Whence comes this singular change?" stammered de Buxieres, visibly agitated; "what reasons does Mademoiselle Vincart give in explanation?"

"Idle words: her father's health, disinclination to leave him. You may suppose I take such excuses for what they are worth. The real cause of her refusal is more serious and more mortifying."

"You know it, then?" exclaimed Julien, eagerly.

"I know it, because I forced Reine to confess it."

"And the reason is?"

"That she does not love me."

"Reine—does not love you!"

Again a gleam of light irradiated the young man's large, blue eyes. Claudet was leaning against the table, in front of his cousin; he continued slowly, looking him steadily in the face:

"That is not all. Not only does Reine not love me, but she loves some one else."

Julien changed color; the blood coursed over his cheeks, his forehead, his ears; he drooped his head.

"Did she tell you so?" he murmured, at last, feebly.

"She did not, but I guessed it. Her heart is won, and I think I know by whom."

Claudet had uttered these last words slowly and with a painful effort, at the same time studying Julien's countenance with renewed inquiry. The latter became more and more troubled, and his physiognomy expressed both anxiety and embarrassment.

"Whom do you suspect?" he stammered.

"Oh!" replied Claudet, employing a simple artifice to sound the obscure depth of his cousin's heart, "it is useless to name the person; you do not know him."

"A stranger?"

Julien's countenance had again changed. His hands were twitching nervously, his lips compressed, and his dilated pupils were blazing with anger, instead of triumph, as before.

"Yes; a stranger, a clerk in the iron-works at Grancey, I think."

"You think!—you think!" cried Julien, fiercely, "why don't you have more definite information before you accuse Mademoiselle Vincart of such treachery?"

He resumed pacing the hall, while his interlocutor, motionless, remained silent, and kept his eyes steadily upon him.

"It is not possible," resumed Julien, "Reine can not have played us such a trick! When I spoke to her for you, it was so easy to say she was already betrothed!"

"Perhaps," objected Claudet, shaking his head, "she had reasons for not letting you know all that was in her mind."

"What reasons?"

"She doubtless believed at that time that the man she preferred did not care for her. There are some people who, when they are vexed, act in direct contradiction to their own wishes. I have the idea that Reine accepted me only for want of some one better, and afterward, being too openhearted to dissimulate for any length of time, she thought better of it, and sent me about my business."

"And you," interrupted Julien, sarcastically, "you, who had been accepted as her betrothed, did not know better how to defend your rights than to suffer yourself to be ejected by a rival, whose intentions, even, you have not clearly ascertained!"

"By Jove! how could I help it? A fellow that takes an unwilling bride is playing for too high stakes. The moment I found there was another she

preferred, I had but one course before me—to take myself off.”

”And you call that loving!” shouted de Buxieres, ”you call that losing your heart! God in heaven! if I had been in your place, how differently I should have acted! Instead of leaving, with piteous protestations, I should have stayed near Reine, I should have surrounded her with tenderness. I should have expressed my passion with so much force that its flame should pass from my burning soul to hers, and she would have been forced to love me! Ah! If I had only thought! if I had dared! how different it would have been!”

He jerked out his sentences with unrestrained frenzy. He seemed hardly to know what he was saying, or that he had a listener. Claudet stood contemplating him in sullen silence: ”Aha!” thought he, with bitter resignation; ”I have sounded you at last. I know what is in the bottom of your heart.”

Manette, bringing in the breakfast, interrupted their colloquy, and both assumed an air of indifference, according to a tacit understanding that a prudent amount of caution should be observed in her presence. They ate hurriedly, and as soon as the cloth was removed, and they were again alone, Julien, glancing with an indefinable expression at Claudet, muttered savagely:

”Well! what do you decide?”

”I will tell you later,” responded the other, briefly.

He quitted the room abruptly, told Manette that he would not be home until late, and strode out across the fields, his dog following. He had taken his gun as a blind, but it was useless for Montagnard to raise his bark; Claudet allowed the hares to scamper away with out sending a single shot after them. He was busy inwardly recalling the details of the conversation he had had with his cousin. The situation now was simplified Julien was in love with Reine, and was vainly combating his overpowering passion. What reason had he for concealing his love? What motive or reasoning had induced him, when he was already secretly enamored of the girl, to push Claudet in front and interfere to procure her acceptance of him as a fiance? This point alone remained obscure. Was Julien carrying out certain theories of the respect due his position in society, and did he fear to contract a misalliance by marrying a mere farmer’s daughter? Or did he, with his usual timidity and distrust of himself, dread being refused by Reine, and, half through pride, half through backward ness, keep away for fear of a humiliating rejection? With de Buxieres’s proud and suspicious nature, each of these suppositions was equally likely. The conclusion most undeniable was, that notwithstanding his set ideas and his moral cowardice, Julien had an ardent and over powering love for Mademoiselle Vincart. As to Reine herself, Claudet was more than ever convinced that she had a secret inclination toward somebody, although she had denied the charge. But for

whom was her preference? Claudet knew the neighborhood too well to believe the existence of any rival worth talking about, other than his cousin de Buxieres. None of the boys of the village or the surrounding towns had ever come courting old Father Vincart's daughter, and de Buxieres himself possessed sufficient qualities to attract Reine. Certainly, if he were a girl, he never should fix upon Julien for a lover; but women often have tastes that men can not comprehend, and Julien's refinement of nature, his bashfulness, and even his reserve, might easily have fascinated a girl of such strong will and somewhat peculiar notions. It was probable, therefore, that she liked him, and perhaps had done so for a long time; but, being clear-sighted and impartial, she could see that he never would marry her, because her condition in life was not equal to his own. Afterward, when the man she loved had flaunted his indifference so far as to plead the cause of another, her pride had revolted, and in the blind agony of her wounded feelings, she had thrown herself into the arms of the first comer, as if to punish herself for entertaining loving thoughts of a man who could so disdain her affection.

So, by means of that lucid intuition which the heart alone can furnish, Claudet at last succeeded in evolving the naked truth. But the fatiguing labor of so much thinking, to which his brain was little accustomed, and the sadness which continued to oppress him, overcame him to such an extent that he was obliged to sit down and rest on a clump of brushwood. He gazed over the woods and the clearings, which he had so often traversed light of heart and of foot, and felt mortally unhappy. These sheltering lanes and growing thickets, where he had so frequently encountered Reine, the beautiful hunting-grounds in which he had taken such delight, only awakened painful sensations, and he felt as if he should grow to hate them all if he were obliged to pass the rest of his days in their midst. As the day waned, the sinuosities of the forest became more blended; the depth of the valleys was lost in thick vapors. The wind had risen. The first falling leaves of the season rose and fell like wounded birds; heavy clouds gathered in the sky, and the night was coming on apace. Claudet was grateful for the sudden darkness, which would blot out a view now so distasteful to him. Shortly, on the Auberive side, along the winding Aubette, feeble lights became visible, as if inviting the young man to profit by their guidance. He arose, took the path indicated, and went to supper, or rather, to a pretence of supper, in the same inn where he had breakfasted with Julien, whence the latter had gone on his mission to Reine. This remembrance alone would have sufficed to destroy his appetite.

He did not remain long at table; he could not, in fact, stay many minutes in one place, and so, notwithstanding the urgent insistence of the hostess, he started on the way back to Vivey, feeling his way through the profound darkness. When he reached the chateau, every one was in bed. Noiselessly, his dog creeping after him, he slipped into his room, and, overcome with fatigue, fell into a heavy slumber.

The next morning his first visit was to Julien. He found him in a nervous and feverish condition, having passed a sleepless night. Claudet's revelations had entirely upset his intentions, and planted fresh thorns of jealousy in his heart. On first hearing that the marriage was broken off, his heart had leaped for joy, and hope had revived within him; but the subsequent information that Mademoiselle Vincart was probably interested in some lover, as yet unknown, had grievously sobered him. He was indignant at Reine's duplicity, and Claudet's cowardly resignation. The agony caused by Claudet's betrothal was a matter of course, but this love-for-a-stranger episode was an unexpected and mortal wound. He was seized with violent fits of rage; he was sometimes tempted to go and reproach the young girl with what he called her breach of faith, and then go and throw himself at her feet and avow his own passion.

But the mistrust he had of himself, and his incurable bashfulness, invariably prevented these heroic resolutions from being carried out. He had so long cultivated a habit of minute, fatiguing criticism upon every inward emotion that he had almost incapacitated himself for vigorous action.

He was in this condition when Claudet came in upon him. At the noise of the opening door, Julien raised his head, and looked dolefully at his cousin.

"Well?" said he, languidly.

"Well!" retorted Claudet, bravely, "on thinking over what has been happening during the last month, I have made sure of one thing of which I was doubtful."

"Of what were you doubtful?" returned de Buxieres, quite ready to take offence at the answer.

"I am about to tell you. Do you remember the first conversation we had together concerning Reine? You spoke of her with so much earnestness that I then suspected you of being in love with her."

"I-I-hardly remember," faltered Julien, coloring.

"In that case, my memory is better than yours, Monsieur de Buxieres. To-day, my suspicions have become certainties. You are in love with Reine Vincart!"

"I?" faintly protested his cousin.

"Don't deny it, but rather, give me your confidence; you will not be sorry for it. You love Reine, and have loved her for a long while. You have succeeded in hiding it from me because it is hard for you to unbosom yourself; but, yesterday, I saw it quite plainly. You dare not

affirm the contrary!”

Julien, greatly agitated, had hidden his face in his hands. After a moment’s silence, he replied, defiantly: ”Well, and supposing it is so? What is the use of talking about it, since Reine’s affections are placed elsewhere?”

”Oh! that’s another matter. Reine has declined to have me, and I really think she has some other affair in her head. Yet, to confess the truth, the clerk at the iron-works was a lover of my own imagining; she never thought of him.”

”Then why did you tell such a lie?” cried Julien, impetuously.

”Because I thought I would plead the lie to get at the truth. Forgive me for having made use of this old trick to put you on the right track. It wasn’t such a bad idea, for I succeeded in finding out what you took so much pains to hide from me.”

”To hide from you? Yes, I did wish to hide it from you. Wasn’t that right, since I was convinced that Reine loved you?” exclaimed Julien, in an almost stifled voice, as if the avowal were choking him. ”I have always thought it idle to parade one’s feelings before those who do not care about them.”

”You were wrong,” returned poor Claudet, sighing deeply, ”if you had spoken for yourself, I have an idea you would have been better received, and you would have spared me a terrible heart-breaking.”

He said it with such profound sadness that Julien, notwithstanding the absorbing nature of his own thoughts, was quite overcome, and almost on the point of confessing, openly, the intensity of his feeling toward Reine Vincart. But, accustomed as he was, by long habit, to concentrate every emotion within himself, he found it impossible to become, all at once, communicative; he felt an invincible and almost maidenly bashfulness at the idea of revealing the secret sentiments of his soul, and contented himself with saying, in a low voice:

”Do you not love her any more, then?”

”I? oh, yes, indeed! But to be refused by the only girl I ever wished to marry takes all the spirit out of me. I am so discouraged, I feel like leaving the country. If I were to go, it would perhaps be doing you a service, and that would comfort me a little. You have treated me as a friend, and that is a thing one doesn’t forget. I have not the means to pay you back for your kindness, but I think I should be less sorry to go if my departure would leave the way more free for you to return to La Thuiliere.”

"You surely would not leave on my account?" exclaimed Julien, in alarm.

"Not solely on your account, rest assured. If Reine had loved me, it never would have entered my head to make such a sacrifice for you, but she will not have me. I am good for nothing here. I am only in your way."

"But that is a wild idea! Where would you go?"

"Oh! there would be no difficulty about that. One plan would be to go as a soldier. Why not? I am hardy, a good walker, a good shot, can stand fatigue; I have everything needed for military life. It is an occupation that I should like, and I could earn my epaulets as well as my neighbor. So that perhaps, Monsieur de Buxieres, matters might in that way be arranged to suit everybody."

"Claudet!" stammered Julien, his voice thick with sobs, "you are a better man than I! Yes; you are a better man than I!"

And, for the first time, yielding to an imperious longing for expansion, he sprang toward the grand chasserot, clasped him in his arms, and embraced him fraternally.

"I will not let you expatriate yourself on my account," he continued; "do not act rashly, I entreat!"

"Don't worry," replied Claudet, laconically, "if I so decide, it will not be without deliberation."

In fact, during the whole of the ensuing week, he debated in his mind this question of going away. Each day his position at Vivey seemed more unbearable. Without informing any one, he had been to Langres and consulted an officer of his acquaintance on the subject of the formalities required previous to enrolment.

At last, one morning he resolved to go over to the military division and sign his engagement. But he was not willing to consummate this sacrifice without seeing Reine Vincart for the last time. He was nursing, down in the bottom of his heart, a vague hope, which, frail and slender as the filament of a plant, was yet strong enough to keep him on his native soil. Instead of taking the path to Vivey, he made a turn in the direction of La Thuiliere, and soon reached the open elevation whence the roofs of the farm-buildings and the turrets of the chateau could both alike be seen. There he faltered, with a piteous sinking of the heart. Only a few steps between himself and the house, yet he hesitated about entering; not that he feared a want of welcome, but because he dreaded lest the reawakening of his tenderness should cause him to lose a portion of the courage he should need to enable him to leave. He leaned against the trunk of an old pear-tree and surveyed the forest site on which the farm was built.

The landscape retained its usual placidity. In the distance, over the waste lands, the shepherd Tringuesse was following his flock of sheep, which occasionally scattered over the fields, and then, under the dog's harassing watchfulness, reformed in a compact group, previous to descending the narrow hill-slope. One thing struck Claudet: the pastures and the woods bore exactly the same aspect, presented the same play of light and shade as on that afternoon of the preceding year, when he had met Reine in the Ronces woods, a few days before the arrival of Julien. The same bright yet tender tint reddened the crab-apple and the wild-cherry; the tomtits and the robins chirped as before, among the bushes, and, as in the previous year, one heard the sound of the beechnuts and acorns dropping on the rocky paths. Autumn went through her tranquil rites and familiar operations, always with the same punctual regularity; and all this would go on just the same when Claudet was no longer there. There would only be one lad the less in the village streets, one hunter failing to answer the call when they were surrounding the woods of Charbonniere. This dim perception of how small a space man occupies on the earth, and of the ease with which he is forgotten, aided Claudet unconsciously in his effort to be resigned, and he determined to enter the house. As he opened the gate of the courtyard, he found himself face to face with Reine, who was coming out.

The young girl immediately supposed he had come to make a last assault, in the hope of inducing her to yield to his wishes. She feared a renewal of the painful scene which had closed their last interview, and her first impulse was to put herself on her guard. Her countenance darkened, and she fixed a cold, questioning gaze upon Claudet, as if to keep him at a distance. But, when she noted the sadness of her young relative's expression, she was seized with pity. Making an effort, however, to disguise her emotion, she pretended to accost him with the calm and cordial friendship of former times.

"Why, good-morning, Claudet," said she, "you come just in time. A quarter of an hour later you would not have found me. Will you come in and rest a moment?"

"Thanks, Reine," said he, "I will not hinder you in your work. But I wanted to say, I am sorry I got angry the other day; you were right, we must not leave each other with ill-feeling, and, as I am going away for a long time, I desire first to take your hand in friendship."

"You are going away?"

"Yes; I am going now to Langres to enroll myself as a soldier. And true it is, one knows when one goes away, but it is hard to know when one will come back. That is why I wanted to say good-by to you, and make peace, so as not to go away with too great a load on my heart."

All Reine's coldness melted away. This young fellow, who was leaving his

country on her account, was the companion of her infancy, more than that, her nearest relative. Her throat swelled, her eyes filled with tears. She turned away her head, that he might not perceive her emotion, and opened the kitchen-door.

"Come in, Claudet," said she, "we shall be more comfortable in the dining-room. We can talk there, and you will have some refreshment before you go, will you not?"

He obeyed, and followed her into the house. She went herself into the cellar, to seek a bottle of old wine, brought two glasses, and filled them with a trembling hand.

"Shall you remain long in the service?" asked she.

"I shall engage for seven years."

"It is a hard life that you are choosing."

"What am I to do?" replied he, "I could not stay here doing nothing."

Reine went in and out of the room in a bewildered fashion. Claudet, too much excited to perceive that the young girl's impassiveness was only on the surface, said to himself: "It is all over; she accepts my departure as an event perfectly natural; she treats me as she would Theotime, the coal-dealer, or the tax-collector Boucheseiche. A glass of wine, two or three unimportant questions, and then, good-by-a pleasant journey, and take care of yourself!"

Then he made a show of taking an airy, insouciant tone.

"Oh, well!" he exclaimed, "I've always been drawn toward that kind of life. A musket will be a little heavier than a gun, that's all; then I shall see different countries, and that will change my ideas." He tried to appear facetious, poking around the kitchen, and teasing the magpie, which was following his footsteps with inquisitive anxiety. Finally, he went up to the old man Vincart, who was lying stretched out in his picture-lined niche. He took the flabby hand of the paralytic old man, pressed it gently and endeavored to get up a little conversation with him, but he had it all to himself, the invalid staring at him all the time with uneasy, wide-open eyes. Returning to Reine, he lifted his glass.

"To your health, Reine!" said he, with forced gayety, "next time we clink glasses together, I shall be an experienced soldier—you'll see!"

But, when he put the glass to his lips, several big tears fell in, and he had to swallow them with his wine.

"Well!" he sighed, turning away while he passed the back of his hand across his eyes, "it must be time to go."

She accompanied him to the threshold.

"Adieu, Reine!"

"Adieu!" she murmured, faintly.

She stretched out both hands, overcome with pity and remorse. He perceived her emotion, and thinking that she perhaps still loved him a little, and repented having rejected him, threw his arms impetuously around her. He pressed her against his bosom, and imprinted kisses, wet with tears, upon her cheek. He could not leave her, and redoubled his caresses with passionate ardor, with the ecstasy of a lover who suddenly meets with a burst of tenderness on the part of the woman he has tenderly loved, and whom he expects never to fold again in his arms. He completely lost his self-control. His embrace became so ardent that Reine, alarmed at the sudden outburst, was overcome with shame and terror, notwithstanding the thought that the man, who was clasping her in his arms with such passion, was her own brother.

She tore herself away from him and pushed him violently back.

"Adieu!" she cried, retreating to the kitchen, of which she hastily shut the door.

Claudet stood one moment, dumfounded, before the door so pitilessly shut in his face, then, falling suddenly from his happy state of illusion to the dead level of reality, departed precipitately down the road.

When he turned to give a parting glance, the farm buildings were no longer visible, and the waste lands of the forest border, gray, stony, and barren, stretched their mute expanse before him.

"No!" exclaimed he, between his set teeth, "she never loved me. She thinks only of the other man! I have nothing more to do but go away and never return!"

CHAPTER IX

LOVE HEALS THE BROKEN HEART

In arriving at Langres, Claudet enrolled in the seventeenth battalion of light infantry. Five days later, paying no attention to the lamentations of Manette, he left Vivey, going, by way of Lyon, to the camp at

Lathonay, where his battalion was stationed. Julien was thus left alone at the chateau to recover as best he might from the dazed feeling caused by the startling events of the last few weeks. After Claudet's departure, he felt an uneasy sensation of discomfort, and as if he himself had lessened in value. He had never before realized how little space he occupied in his own dwelling, and how much living heat Claudet had infused into the house which was now so cold and empty. He felt poor and diminished in spirit, and was ashamed of being so useless to himself and to others. He had before him a prospect of new duties, which frightened him. The management of the district, which Claudet had undertaken for him, would now fall entirely on his shoulders, and just at the time of the timber sales and the renewal of the fences. Besides all this, he had Manette on his conscience, thinking he ought to try to soften her grief at her son's unexpected departure. The ancient housekeeper was like Rachel, she refused to be comforted, and her temper was not improved by her recent trials. She filled the air with lamentations, and seemed to consider Julien responsible for her troubles. The latter treated her with wonderful patience and indulgence, and exhausted his ingenuity to make her time pass more pleasantly. This was the first real effort he had made to subdue his dislikes and his passive tendencies, and it had the good effect of preparing him, by degrees, to face more serious trials, and to take the initiative in matters of greater importance. He discovered that the energy he expended in conquering a first difficulty gave him more ability to conquer the second, and from that result he decided that the will is like a muscle, which shrivels in inaction and is developed by exercise; and he made up his mind to attack courageously the work before him, although it had formerly appeared beyond his capabilities.

He now rose always at daybreak. Gaitered like a huntsman, and escorted by Montagnard, who had taken a great liking to him, he would proceed to the forest, visit the cuttings, hire fresh workmen, familiarize himself with the woodsmen, interest himself in their labors, their joys and their sorrows; then, when evening came, he was quite astonished to find himself less weary, less isolated, and eating with considerable appetite the supper prepared for him by Manette. Since he had been traversing the forest, not as a stranger or a person of leisure, but with the predetermination to accomplish some useful work, he had learned to appreciate its beauties. The charms of nature and the living creatures around no longer inspired him with the defiant scorn which he had imbibed from his early solitary life and his priestly education; he now viewed them with pleasure and interest. In proportion, as his sympathies expanded and his mind became more virile, the exterior world presented a more attractive appearance to him.

While this work of transformation was going on within him, he was aided and sustained by the ever dear and ever present image of Reine Vincart. The trenches, filled with dead leaves, the rows of beech-trees, stripped of their foliage by the rude breath of winter, the odor peculiar to underwood during the dead season, all recalled to his mind the

impressions he had received while in company with the woodland queen. Now that, he could better understand the young girl's adoration of the marvellous forest world, he sought out, with loving interest, the sites where she had gone into ecstasy, the details of the landscape which she had pointed out to him the year before, and had made him admire. The beauty of the scene was associated in his thoughts with Reine's love, and he could not think of either separately. But, notwithstanding the steadfastness and force of his love, he had not yet made any effort to see Mademoiselle Vincart. At first, the increase of occupation caused by Claudet's departure, the new duties devolving upon him, together with his inexperience, had prevented Julien from entertaining the possibility of renewing relations that had been so violently sundered. Little by little, however; as he reviewed the situation of affairs, which his cousin's generous sacrifice had engendered, he began to consider how he could benefit thereby. Claudet's departure had left the field free, but Julien felt no more confidence in himself than before. The fact that Reine had so unaccountably refused to marry the grand chasserot did not seem to him sufficient encouragement. Her motive was a secret, and therefore, of doubtful interpretation. Besides, even if she were entirely heart-whole, was that a reason why she should give Julien a favorable reception? Could she forget the cruel insult to which he had subjected her? And immediately after that outrageous behavior of his, he had had the stupidity to make a proposal for Claudet. That was the kind of affront, thought he, that a woman does not easily forgive, and the very idea of presenting himself before her made his heart sink. He had seen her only at a distance, at the Sunday mass, and every time he had endeavored to catch her eye she had turned away her head. She also avoided, in every way, any intercourse with the chateau. Whenever a question arose, such as the apportionment of lands, or the allotment of cuttings, which would necessitate her having recourse to M. de Buxieres, she would abstain from writing herself, and correspond only through the notary, Arbillot. Claudet's heroic departure, therefore, had really accomplished nothing; everything was exactly at the same point as the day after Julien's unlucky visit to La Thuiliere, and the same futile doubts and fears agitated him now as then. It also occurred to him, that while he was thus debating and keeping silence, days, weeks, and months were slipping away; that Reine would soon reach her twenty-third year, and that she would be thinking of marriage. It was well known that she had some fortune, and suitors were not lacking. Even allowing that she had no afterthought in renouncing Claudet, she could not always live alone at the farm, and some day she would be compelled to accept a marriage of convenience, if not of love.

"And to think," he would say to himself, "that she is there, only a few steps away, that I am consumed with longing, that I have only to traverse those pastures, to throw myself at her feet, and that I positively dare not! Miserable wretch that I am, it was last spring, while we were in that but together, that I should have spoken of my love, instead of terrifying her with my brutal caresses! Now it is too late! I have wounded and humiliated her; I have driven away Claudet, who would at any

rate have made her a stalwart lover, and I have made two beings unhappy, without counting myself. So much for my miserable shufflings and evasion! Ah! if one could only begin life over again!"

While thus lamenting his fate, the march of time went steadily on, with its pitiless dropping out of seconds, minutes, and hours. The worst part of winter was over; the March gales had dried up the forests; April was tingeing the woods with its tender green; the song of the cuckoo was already heard in the tufted bowers, and the festival of St. George had passed.

Taking advantage of an unusually clear day, Julien went to visit a farm, belonging to him, in the plain of Anjeures, on the border of the forest of Maigrefontaine. After breakfasting with the farmer, he took the way home through the woods, so that he might enjoy the first varied effects of the season.

The forest of Maigrefontaine, situated on the slope of a hill, was full of rocky, broken ground, interspersed with deep ravines, along which narrow but rapid streams ran to swell the fishpond of La Thuiliere. Julien had wandered away from the road, into the thick of the forest where the budding vegetation was at its height, where the lilies multiply and the early spring flowers disclose their umbelshaped clusters, full of tiny, white stars. The sight of these blossoms, which had such a tender meaning for him, since he had identified the name with that of Reine, brought vividly before him the beloved image of the young girl. He walked slowly and languidly on, heated by his feverish recollections and desires, tormented by useless self-reproach, and physically intoxicated by the balmy atmosphere and the odor of the flowering shrubs at his feet. Arriving at the edge of a somewhat deep pit, he tried to leap across with a single bound, but, whether he made a false start, or that he was weakened and dizzy with the conflicting emotions with which he had been battling, he missed his footing and fell, twisting his ankle, on the side of the embankment. He rose with an effort and put his foot to the ground, but a sharp pain obliged him to lean against the trunk of a neighboring ash-tree. His foot felt as heavy as lead, and every time he tried to straighten it his sufferings were intolerable. All he could do was to drag himself along from one tree to another until he reached the path.

Exhausted by this effort; he sat down on the grass, unbuttoned his gaiter, and carefully unlaced his boot. His foot had swollen considerably. He began to fear he had sprained it badly, and wondered how he could get back to Vivey. Should he have to wait on this lonely road until some woodcutter passed, who would take him home? Montagnard, his faithful companion, had seated himself in front of him, and contemplated him with moist, troubled eyes, at the same time emitting short, sharp whines, which seemed to say:

"What is the matter?" and, "How are we going to get out of this?"

Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching. He perceived a flutter of white skirts behind the copse, and just at the moment he was blessing the lucky chance that had sent some one in that direction, his eyes were gladdened with a sight of the fair visage of Reine.

She was accompanied by a little girl of the village, carrying a basket full of primroses and freshly gathered ground ivy. Reine was quite familiar with all the medicinal herbs of the country, and gathered them in their season, in order to administer them as required to the people of the farm. When she was within a few feet of Julien, she recognized him, and her brow clouded over; but almost immediately she noticed his altered features and that one of his feet was shoeless, and divined that something unusual had happened. Going straight up to him, she said:

"You seem to be suffering, Monsieur de Buxieres. What is the matter?"

"A—a foolish accident," replied he, putting on a careless manner. "I fell and sprained my ankle."

The young girl knit her brows with an anxious expression; then, after a moment's hesitation; she said:

"Will you let me see your foot? My mother understood about bone-setting, and I have been told that I inherit her gift of curing sprains."

She drew from the basket an empty bottle and a handkerchief.

"Zelie," said she to the little damsel, who was standing astonished at the colloquy, "go quickly down to the stream, and fill this bottle."

While she was speaking, Julien, greatly embarrassed, obeyed her suggestions, and uncovered his foot. Reine, without any prudery or nonsense, raised the wounded limb, and felt around cautiously.

"I think," said she at last, "that the muscles are somewhat injured."

Without another word, she tore the handkerchief into narrow strips, and poured the contents of the bottle, which Zelie had filled, slowly over the injure member, holding her hand high for that purpose. Then, with a soft yet firm touch, she pressed the injured muscles into their places, while Julien bit his lips and did his very utmost to prevent her seeing how much he was suffering. After this massage treatment, the young girl bandaged the ankle tightly with the linen bands, and fastened them securely with pins.

"There," said she, "now try to put on your shoe and stocking; they will give support to the muscles. Now you, Zelie, run, fit to break your neck, to the farm, make them harness the wagon, and tell them to bring it

here, as close to the path as possible.”

The girl picked up her basket and started on a trot.

”Monsieur de Buxieres;” said Reine, ”do you think you can walk as far as the carriage road, by leaning on my arm?”

”Yes;” he replied, with a grateful glance which greatly embarrassed Mademoiselle Vincart, ”you have relieved me as if by a miracle. I feel much better and as if I could go anywhere you might lead, while leaning on your arm!”

She helped him to rise, and he took a few steps with her aid.

”Why, it feels really better,” sighed he.

He was so happy in feeling himself thus tenderly supported by Reine, that he altogether forgot his pain.

”Let us walk slowly,” continued she, ”and do not be afraid to lean on me. All you have to think of is reaching the carriage.”

”How good you are,” stammered he, ”and how ashamed I am!”

”Ashamed of what?” returned Reine, hastily. ”I have done nothing extraordinary; anyone else would have acted in the same manner.”

”I entreat you,” replied he, earnestly, ”not to spoil my happiness. I know very well that the first person who happened to pass would have rendered me some charitable assistance; but the thought that it is you— you alone—who have helped me, fills me with delight, at the same time that it increases my remorse. I so little deserve that you should interest yourself in my behalf!”

He waited, hoping perhaps that she would ask for an explanation, but, seeing that she did not appear to understand, he added:

”I have offended you. I have misunderstood you, and I have been cruelly punished for my mistake. But what avails my tardy regret in healing the injuries I have inflicted! Ah! if one could only go backward, and efface, with a single stroke, the hours in which one has been blind and headstrong!”

”Let us not speak of that!” replied she, shortly, but in a singularly softened tone.

In spite of herself, she was touched by this expression of repentance, so naively acknowledged in broken, disconnected sentences, vibrating with the ring of true sincerity. In proportion as he abased himself, her anger diminished, and she recognized that she loved him just the same,

notwithstanding his defects, his weakness, and his want of tact and polish. She was also profoundly touched by his revealing to her, for the first time, a portion of his hidden feelings.

They had become silent again, but they felt nearer to each other than ever before; their secret thoughts seemed to be transmitted to each other; a mute understanding was established between them. She lent him the support of her arm with more freedom, and the young man seemed to experience fresh delight in her firm and sympathetic assistance.

Progressing slowly, although more quickly than they would have chosen themselves, they reached the foot of the path, and perceived the wagon waiting on the beaten road. Julien mounted therein with the aid of Reine and the driver. When he was stretched on the straw, which had been spread for him on the bottom of the wagon, he leaned forward on the side, and his eyes met those of Reine. For a few moments their gaze seemed riveted upon each other, and their mutual understanding was complete. These few, brief moments contained a whole confession of love; avowals mingled with repentance, promises of pardon, tender reconciliation!

"Thanks!" he sighed at last, "will you give me your hand?"

She gave it, and while he held it in his own, Reine turned toward the driver on the seat.

"Felix," said she, warningly, "drive slowly and avoid the ruts. Good-night, Monsieur de Buxieres, send for the doctor as soon as you get in, and all will be well. I will send to inquire how you are getting along."

She turned and went pensively down the road to La Thuiliere, while the carriage followed slowly the direction to Vivey.

The doctor, being sent for immediately on Julien's arrival, pronounced it a simple sprain, and declared that the preliminary treatment had been very skilfully applied, that the patient had now only to keep perfectly still. Two days later came La Guite from Reine, to inquire after M. de Buxieres's health. She brought a large bunch of lilies which Mademoiselle Vincart had sent to the patient, to console him for not being able to go in the woods, which Julien kept for several days close by his side.

This accident, happening at Maigrefontaine, and providentially attended to by Reine Vincart, the return to the chateau in the vehicle belonging to La Thuiliere, the sending of the lilies, were all a source of great mystification to Manette. She suspected some amorous mystery in all these events, commented somewhat uncharitably on every minor detail, and took care to carry her comments all over the village. Very soon the entire parish, from the most insignificant woodchopper to the Abbe Pernot himself, were made aware that there was something going on between M. de Buxieres and the daughter of old M. Vincart.

In the mean time, Julien, quite unconscious that his love for Reine was providing conversation for all the gossips of the country, was cursing the untoward event that kept him stretched in his invalid-chair. At last, one day, he discovered he could put his foot down and walk a little with the assistance of his cane; a few days after, the doctor gave him permission to go out of doors. His first visit was to La Thuiliere.

He went there in the afternoon and found Reine in the kitchen, seated by the side of her paralytic father, who was asleep. She was reading a newspaper, which she retained in her hand, while rising to receive her visitor. After she had congratulated him on his recovery, and he had expressed his cordial thanks for her timely aid, she showed him the paper.

"You find me in a state of disturbance," said she, with a slight degree of embarrassment, "it seems that we are going to have war and that our troops have entered Italy. Have you any news of Claudet?"

Julien started. This was the last remark he could have expected. Claudet's name had not been once mentioned in their interview at Maigrefontaine, and he had nursed the hope that Reine thought no longer about him.

All his mistrust returned in a moment on hearing this name come from the young girl's lips the moment he entered the house, and seeing the emotion which the news in the paper had caused her.

"He wrote me a few days ago," replied he.

"Where is he?"

"In Italy, with his battalion, which is a part of the first army corps. His last letter is dated from Alexandria."

Reine's eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she gazed absently at the distant wooded horizon.

"Poor Claudet!" murmured she, sighing, "what is he doing just now, I wonder?"

"Ah!" thought Julien, his visage darkening, "perhaps she loves him still!"

Poor Claudet! At the very time they are thus talking about him at the farm, he is camping with his battalion near Voghera, on the banks of one of the obscure tributaries of the river Po, in a country rich in waving corn, interspersed with bounteous orchards and hardy vines climbing up to the very tops of the mulberry-trees. His battalion forms the extreme end of the advance guard, and at the approach of night, Claudet is on duty on

the banks of the stream. It is a lovely May night, irradiated by millions of stars, which, under the limpid Italian sky, appear larger and nearer to the watcher than they appeared in the vaporous atmosphere of the Haute-Marne.

Nightingales are calling to one another among the trees of the orchard, and the entire landscape seems imbued with their amorous music. What ecstasy to listen to them! What serenity their liquid harmonies spread over the smiling landscape, faintly revealing its beauties in the mild starlight.

Who would think that preparations for deadly combat were going on through the serenity of such a night? Occasionally a sharp exchange of musketry with the advanced post of the enemy bursts upon the ear, and all the nightingales keep silence. Then, when quiet is restored in the upper air, the chorus of spring songsters begins again. Claudet leans on his gun, and remembers that at this same hour the nightingales in the park at Vivey, and in the garden of La Thuilliere, are pouring forth the same melodies. He recalls the bright vision of Reine: he sees her leaning at her window, listening to the same amorous song issuing from the coppice woods of Maigrefontaine. His heart swells within him, and an overpowering homesickness takes possession of him. But the next moment he is ashamed of his weakness, he remembers his responsibility, primes his ear, and begins investigating the dark hollows and rising hillocks where an enemy might hide.

The next morning, May 20th, he is awakened by a general hubbub and noise of fighting. The battalion to which he belongs has made an attack upon Montebello, and is sending its sharpshooters among the cornfields and vineyards. Some of the regiments invade the rice-fields, climb the walls of the vineyards, and charge the enemy's column-ranks. The sullen roar of the cannon alternates with the sharp report of guns, and whole showers of grape-shot beat the air with their piercing whistle. All through the uproar of guns and thunder of the artillery, you can distinguish the guttural hurrahs of the Austrians, and the broken oaths of the French troopers. The trenches are piled with dead bodies, the trumpets sound the attack, the survivors, obeying an irresistible impulse, spring to the front. The ridges are crested with human masses swaying to and fro, and the first red uniform is seen in the streets of Montebello, in relief against the chalky facades bristling with Austrian guns, pouring forth their ammunition on the enemy below. The soldiers burst into the houses, the courtyards, the enclosures; every instant you hear the breaking open of doors, the crashing of windows, and the scuffling of the terrified inmates. The white uniforms retire in disorder. The village belongs to the French! Not just yet, though. From the last houses on the street, to the entrance of the cemetery, is rising ground, and just behind stands a small hillock. The enemy has retrenched itself there, and, from its cannons ranged in battery, is raining a terrible shower on the village just evacuated.

The assailants hesitate, and draw back before this hailstorm of iron; suddenly a general appears from under the walls of a building already crumbling under the continuous fire, spurs his horse forward, and shouts: "Come, boys, let us carry the fort!"

Among the first to rally to this call, one rifleman in particular, a fine, broad-shouldered active fellow, with a brown moustache and olive complexion, darts forward to the point indicated. It is Claudet. Others are behind him, and soon more than a hundred men, with their bayonets, are hurling themselves along the cemetery road; the grand chasserot leaps across the fields, as he used formerly in pursuit of the game in the Charbonniere forest. The soldiers are falling right and left of him, but he hardly sees them; he continues pressing forward, breathless, excited, scarcely stopping to think. As he is crossing one of the meadows, however, he notices the profusion of scarlet gladiolus and also observes that the rye and barley grow somewhat sturdier here than in his country; these are the only definite ideas that detach themselves clearly from his seething brain. The wall of the cemetery is scaled; they are fighting now in the ditches, killing one another on the side of the hill; at last, the fort is taken and they begin routing the enemy. But, at this moment, Claudet stoops to pick up a cartridge, a ball strikes him in the forehead, and, without a sound, he drops to the ground, among the noisome fennels which flourish in graveyards—he drops, thinking of the clock of his native village.

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"I have sad news for you," said Julien to Reine, as he entered the garden of La Thuiliere, one June afternoon.

He had received official notice the evening before, through the mayor, of the decease of "Germain-Claudet Sejournant, volunteer in the seventeenth battalion of light infantry, killed in an engagement with the enemy, May 20, 1859."

Reine was standing between two hedges of large peasant-roses. At the first words that fell from M. de Buxieres's lips, she felt a presentiment of misfortune.

"Claudet?" murmured she.

"He is dead," replied Julien, almost inaudibly, "he fought bravely and was killed at Montebello."

The young girl remained motionless, and for a moment de Buxieres thought she would be able to bear, with some degree of composure, this announcement of the death in a foreign country of a man whom she had refused as a husband. Suddenly she turned aside, took two or three steps, then leaning her head and folded arms on the trunk of an adjacent tree, she burst into a passion of tears. The convulsive movement of her

shoulders and stifled sobs denoted the violence of her emotion. M. de Buxieres, alarmed at this outbreak, which he thought exaggerated, felt a return of his old misgivings. He was jealous now of the dead man whom she was so openly lamenting. Her continued weeping annoyed him; he tried to arrest her tears by addressing some consolatory remarks to her; but, at the very first word, she turned away, mounted precipitately the kitchen-stairs, and disappeared, closing the door behind her. Some minutes after, La Guite brought a message to de Buxieres that Reine wished to be alone, and begged him to excuse her.

He took his departure, disconcerted, downhearted, and ready to weep himself, over the crumbling of his hopes. As he was nearing the first outlying houses of the village, he came across the Abbe Pernot, who was striding along at a great rate, toward the chateau.

"Ah!" exclaimed the priest, "how are you, Monsieur de Buxieres, I was just going over to see you. Is it true that you have received bad news?"

Julien nodded his head affirmatively, and informed the cure of the sad notice he had received. The Abbe's countenance lengthened, his mouth took on a saddened expression, and during the next few minutes he maintained an attitude of condolence.

"Poor fellow!" he sighed, with a slight nasal intonation, "he did not have a fair chance! To have to leave us at twenty-six years of age, and in full health, it is very hard. And such a jolly companion; such a clever shot!"

Finally, not being naturally of a melancholy turn of mind, nor able to remain long in a mournful mood, he consoled himself with one of the pious commonplaces which he was in the habit of using for the benefit of others: "The Lord is just in all His dealings, and holy in all His works; He reckons the hairs of our heads, and our destinies are in His hands. We shall celebrate a fine high mass for the repose of Claudet's soul."

He coughed, and raised his eyes toward Julien.

"I wished," continued he, "to see you for two reasons, Monsieur de Buxieres: first of all, to hear about Claudet, and secondly, to speak to you on a matter—a very delicate matter—which concerns you, but which also affects the safety of another person and the dignity of the parish."

Julien was gazing at him with a bewildered air. The cure pushed open the little park gate, and passing through, added:

"Let us go into your place; we shall be better able to talk over the matter."

When they were underneath the trees, the Abbe resumed:

"Monsieur de Buxieres, do you know that you are at this present time giving occasion for the tongues of my parishioners to wag more than is at all reasonable? Oh!" continued he, replying to a remonstrating gesture of his companion, "it is unpremeditated on your part, I am sure, but, all the same, they talk about you—and about Reine."

"About Mademoiselle Vincart?" exclaimed Julien, indignantly, "what can they say about her?"

"A great many things which are displeasing to me. They speak of your having sprained your ankle while in the company of Reine Vincart; of your return home in her wagon; of your frequent visits to La Thuiliere, and I don't know what besides. And as mankind, especially the female portion, is more disposed to discover evil than good, they say you are compromising this young person. Now, Reine is living, as one may say, alone and unprotected. It behooves me, therefore, as her pastor, to defend her against her own weakness. That is the reason why I have taken upon myself to beg you to be more circumspect, and not trifle with her reputation."

"Her reputation?" repeated Julien, with irritation. "I do not understand you, Monsieur le Cure!"

"You don't, hey! Why, I explain my meaning pretty clearly. Human beings are weak; it is easy to injure a girl's reputation, when you try to make yourself agreeable, knowing you can not marry her."

"And why could I not marry her?" inquired Julien, coloring deeply.

"Because she is not in your own class, and you would not love her enough to overlook the disparity, if marriage became necessary."

"What do you know about it?" returned Julien, with violence. "I have no such foolish prejudices, and the obstacles would not come from my side. But, rest easy, Monsieur," continued he, bitterly, "the danger exists only in the imagination of your parishioners. Reine has never cared for me! It was Claudet she loved!"

"Hm, hm!" interjected the cure, dubiously.

"You would not doubt it," insisted de Buxieres, provoked at the Abbe's incredulous movements of his head, "if you had seen her, as I saw her, melt into tears when I told her of Sejournant's death. She did not even wait until I had turned my back before she broke out in her lamentations. My presence was of very small account. Ah! she has but too cruelly made me feel how little she cares for me!"

"You love her very much, then?" demanded the Abbe, slyly, an almost imperceptible smile curving his lips.

"Oh, yes! I love her," exclaimed he, impetuously; then coloring and drooping his head. "But it is very foolish of me to betray myself, since Reine cares nothing at all for me!"

There was a moment of silence, during which the curé took a pinch of snuff from a tiny box of cherry wood.

"Monsieur de Buxieres;" said he, With a particularly oracular air, "Claudet is dead, and the dead, like the absent, are always in the wrong. But who is to say whether you are not mistaken concerning the nature of Reine's unhappiness? I will have that cleared up this very day. Good-night; keep quiet and behave properly."

Thereupon he took his departure, but, instead of returning to the parsonage, he directed his steps hurriedly toward La Thuiliere. Notwithstanding a vigorous opposition from La Guite, he made use of his pastoral authority to penetrate into Reine's apartment, where he shut himself up with her. What he said to her never was divulged outside the small chamber where the interview took place. He must, however, have found words sufficiently eloquent to soften her grief, for when he had gone away the young girl descended to the garden with a soothed although still melancholy mien. She remained a long time in meditation in the thicket of roses, but her meditations had evidently no bitterness in them, and a miraculous serenity seemed to have spread itself over her heart like a beneficent balm.

A few days afterward, during the unpleasant coolness of one of those mornings, white with dew, which are the peculiar privilege of the mountain-gorges in Langres, the bells of Vivey tolled for the dead, announcing the celebration of a mass in memory of Claudet. The grand chasserot having been a universal favorite with every one in the neighborhood, the church was crowded. The steep descent from the high plain overlooked the village. They came thronging in through the wooded glens of Praslay; by the Auberive road and the forests of Charbonniere; companions in hunting and social amusements, foresters and wearers of sabots, campers in the woods, inmates of the farms embedded in the forests—none failed to answer the call. The rustic, white-walled nave was too narrow to contain them all, and the surplus flowed into the street. Arbeltier, the village carpenter, had erected a rudimentary catafalque, which was draped in black and bordered with wax tapers, and placed in front of the altar steps. On the pall, embroidered with silver tears, were arranged large bunches of wild flowers, sent from La Thuiliere, and spreading an aromatic odor of fresh verdure around. The Abbe Pernot, wearing his insignia of mourning, officiated. Through the side windows were seen portions of the blue sky; the barking of the dogs and singing of birds were heard in the distance; and even while listening to the 'Dies irae', the curé could not help thinking of the robust and bright young fellow who, only the year previous, had been so joyously traversing the woods, escorted by Charbonneau and Montagnard, and who was now lying in a foreign land, in the common pit of the little cemetery of

Montebello.

As each verse of the funeral service was intoned, Manette Sejournant, prostrate on her prie-dieu, interrupted the monotonous chant with tumultuous sobs. Her grief was noisy and unrestrained, but those present sympathized more with the quiet though profound sorrow of Reine Vincart. The black dress of the young girl contrasted painfully with the dead pallor of her complexion. She emitted no sighs, but, now and then, a contraction of the lips, a trembling of the hands testified to the inward struggle, and a single tear rolled slowly down her cheek.

From the corner where he had chosen to stand alone, Julien de Buxieres observed, with pain, the mute eloquence of her profound grief, and became once more a prey to the fiercest jealousy. He could not help envying the fate of this deceased, who was mourned in so tender a fashion. Again the mystery of an attachment so evident and so tenacious, followed by so strange a rupture, tormented his uneasy soul. "She must have loved Claudet, since she is in mourning for him," he kept repeating to himself, "and if she loved him, why this rupture, which she herself provoked, and which drove the unhappy man to despair?"

At the close of the absolution, all the assistants defiled close beside Julien, who was now standing in front of the catafalque. When it came to Reine Vincart's turn, she reached out her hand to M. de Buxieres; at the same time, she gazed at him with such friendly sadness, and infused into the clasp of her hand something so cordial and intimate that the young man's ideas were again completely upset. He seemed to feel as if it were an encouragement to speak. When the men and women had dispersed, and a surging of the crowd brought him nearer to Reine, he resolved to follow her, without regard to the question of what people would say, or the curious eyes that might be watching him.

A happy chance came in his way. Reine Vincart had gone home by the path along the outskirts of the wood and the park enclosure. Julien went hastily back to the chateau, crossed the gardens, and followed an interior avenue, parallel to the exterior one, from which he was separated only by a curtain of linden and nut trees. He could just distinguish, between the leafy branches, Reine's black gown, as she walked rapidly along under the ashtrees. At the end of the enclosure, he pushed open a little gate, and came abruptly out on the forest path.

On beholding him standing in advance of her, the young girl appeared more surprised than displeased. After a momentary hesitation, she walked quietly toward him.

"Mademoiselle Reine," said he then, gently, "will you allow me to accompany you as far as La Thuiliere?"

"Certainly," she replied, briefly.

She felt a presentiment that something decisive was about to take place between her and Julien, and her voice trembled as she replied. Profiting by the tacit permission, de Buxieres walked beside Reine; the path was so narrow that their garments rustled against each other, yet he did not seem in haste to speak, and the silence was interrupted only by the occasional flight of a bird, or the crackling of some falling branches.

"Reine," said Julien, suddenly, "you have so often and so kindly extended to me the hand of friendship, that I have decided to speak frankly, and open my heart to you. I love you, Reine, and have loved you for a long time. But I have been so accustomed to hide what I think, I know so little how to conduct myself in the varying circumstances of life, and I have so much mistrust of myself, that I never have dared to tell you before now. This will explain to you my stupid behavior. I am suffering the penalty to-day, for while I was hesitating, another took my place; although he is dead, his shadow stands between us, and I know that you love him still."

She listened to him with bent head and half-closed eyes, and her heart began to beat violently.

"I never have loved him in the way you suppose," she replied, simply.

A gleam of light shot through Julien's melancholy blue eyes. Both remained silent. The green pasture-lands, bathed in the full noonday sun, were lying before them. The grasshoppers were chirping in the bushes, and the skylarks were soaring aloft with their joyous songs. Julien was endeavoring to extract the exact meaning from the reply he had just heard. He was partly reassured, but some points had still to be cleared up.

"But still," said he, "you are lamenting his loss."

A melancholy smile flitted for an instant over Reine's pure, rosy lips.

"Are you jealous of my tears?" said she, softly.

"Oh, yes!" he exclaimed, with sudden exultation, "I love you so entirely that I can not help envying Claudet his share in your affections! If his death causes you such poignant regret, he must have been nearer and dearer to you than those that survive."

"You might reasonably suppose otherwise," replied she, almost in a whisper, "since I refused to marry him."

He shook his head, seemingly unable to accept that positive statement.

Then Reine began to reflect that a man of his distrustful and despondent temperament would, unless the whole truth were revealed to him, be forevermore tormented by morbid and injurious misgivings. She knew he

loved her, and she wished him to love her in entire faith and security. She recalled the last injunctions she had received from the Abbe Pernot, and, leaning toward Julien, with tearful eyes and cheeks burning with shame, she whispered in his ear the secret of her close relationship to Claudet.

This painful and agitating confidence was made in so low a voice as to be scarcely distinguished from the soft humming of the insects, or the gentle twittering of the birds.

The sun was shining everywhere; the woods were as full of verdure and blossoms as on the day when the young man had manifested his passion with such savage violence. Hardly had the last words of her avowal expired on Reine's lips, when Julien de Buxieres threw his arms around her and fondly kissed away the tears from her eyes.

This time he was not repelled.