

SERGE PANINE - COMPLETE

GEORGES OHNET*

With a General Introduction to the Series by GASTON BOISSIER, Secre-
taire
Perpetuel de l'academie Francaise.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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BY ROBERT ARNOT

The editor-in-chief of the Maison Mazarin—a man of letters who cherishes an enthusiastic yet discriminating love for the literary and artistic glories of France—formed within the last two years the great project of collecting and presenting to the vast numbers of intelligent readers of whom New World boasts a series of those great and undying romances which, since 1784, have received the crown of merit awarded by the French Academy—that coveted assurance of immortality in letters and in art.

In the presentation of this serious enterprise for the criticism and official sanction of The Academy, 'en seance', was included a request that, if possible, the task of writing a preface to the series should be undertaken by me. Official sanction having been bestowed upon the plan, I, as the accredited officer of the French Academy, convey to you its hearty appreciation, endorsement, and sympathy with a project so nobly artistic. It is also my duty, privilege, and pleasure to point out, at the request of my brethren, the peculiar importance and lasting value of this series to all who would know the inner life of a people whose greatness no turns of fortune have been able to diminish.

In the last hundred years France has experienced the most terrible vicissitudes, but, vanquished or victorious, triumphant or abased, never has she lost her peculiar gift of attracting the curiosity of the world. She interests every living being, and even those who do not love her desire to know her. To this peculiar attraction which radiates from her, artists and men of letters can well bear witness, since it is to literature and to the arts, before all, that France owes such living and lasting power. In every quarter of the civilized world there are distinguished writers, painters, and eminent musicians, but in France they exist in greater numbers than elsewhere. Moreover, it is

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universally conceded that French writers and artists have this particular and praiseworthy quality: they are most accessible to people of other countries. Without losing their national characteristics, they possess the happy gift of universality. To speak of letters alone: the books that Frenchmen write are read, translated, dramatized, and imitated everywhere; so it is not strange that these books give to foreigners a desire for a nearer and more intimate acquaintance with France.

Men preserve an almost innate habit of resorting to Paris from almost every quarter of the globe. For many years American visitors have been more numerous than others, although the journey from the United States is long and costly. But I am sure that when for the first time they see Paris—its palaces, its churches, its museums—and visit Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Chantilly, they do not regret the travail they have undergone. Meanwhile, however, I ask myself whether such sightseeing is all that, in coming hither, they wish to accomplish. Intelligent travellers—and, as a rule, it is the intelligent class that feels the need of the educative influence of travel—look at our beautiful monuments, wander through the streets and squares among the crowds that fill them, and, observing them, I ask myself again: Do not such people desire to study at closer range these persons who elbow them as they pass; do they not wish to enter the houses of which they see but the facades; do they not wish to know how Parisians live and speak and act by their firesides? But time, alas! is lacking for the formation of those intimate friendships which would bring this knowledge within their grasp. French homes are rarely open to birds of passage, and visitors leave us with regret that they have not been able to see more than the surface of our civilization or to recognize by experience the note of our inner home life.

How, then, shall this void be filled? Speaking in the first person, the simplest means appears to be to study those whose profession it is to describe the society of the time, and primarily, therefore, the works of dramatic writers, who are supposed to draw a faithful picture of it. So we go to the theatre, and usually derive keen pleasure therefrom. But is pleasure all that we expect to find? What we should look for above everything in a comedy or a drama is a representation, exact as possible, of the manners and characters of the dramatis persona of the play; and perhaps the conditions under which the play was written do not allow such representation. The exact and studied portrayal of a character demands from the author long preparation, and cannot be accomplished in a few hours. From the first scene to the last, each tale must be posed in the author's mind exactly as it will be proved to be at the end. It is the author's aim and mission to place completely before his audience the souls of the "agonists" laying bare the complications of motive, and throwing into relief the delicate shades of motive that sway them. Often, too, the play is produced before a numerous audience—an audience often distraught, always pressed for time, and impatient of the least delay. Again, the public in general require that they shall be able to understand without difficulty, and at first thought, the characters the

author seeks to present, making it necessary that these characters be depicted from their most salient sides—which are too often vulgar and unattractive.

In our comedies and dramas it is not the individual that is drawn, but the type. Where the individual alone is real, the type is a myth of the imagination—a pure invention. And invention is the mainspring of the theatre, which rests purely upon illusion, and does not please us unless it begins by deceiving us.

I believe, then, that if one seeks to know the world exactly as it is, the theatre does not furnish the means whereby one can pursue the study. A far better opportunity for knowing the private life of a people is available through the medium of its great novels. The novelist deals with each person as an individual. He speaks to his reader at an hour when the mind is disengaged from worldly affairs, and he can add without restraint every detail that seems needful to him to complete the rounding of his story. He can return at will, should he choose, to the source of the plot he is unfolding, in order that his reader may better understand him; he can emphasize and dwell upon those details which an audience in a theatre will not allow.

The reader, being at leisure, feels no impatience, for he knows that he can at any time lay down or take up the book. It is the consciousness of this privilege that gives him patience, should he encounter a dull page here or there. He may hasten or delay his reading, according to the interest he takes in his romance—nay, more, he can return to the earlier pages, should he need to do so, for a better comprehension of some obscure point. In proportion as he is attracted and interested by the romance, and also in the degree of concentration with which he reads it, does he grasp better the subtleties of the narrative. No shade of character drawing escapes him. He realizes, with keener appreciation, the most delicate of human moods, and the novelist is not compelled to introduce the characters to him, one by one, distinguishing them only by the most general characteristics, but can describe each of those little individual idiosyncrasies that contribute to the sum total of a living personality.

When I add that the dramatic author is always to a certain extent a slave to the public, and must ever seek to please the passing taste of his time, it will be recognized that he is often, alas! compelled to sacrifice his artistic leanings to popular caprice—that is, if he has the natural desire that his generation should applaud him.

As a rule, with the theatre-going masses, one person follows the fads or fancies of others, and individual judgments are too apt to be irresistibly swayed by current opinion. But the novelist, entirely independent of his reader, is not compelled to conform himself to the opinion of any person, or to submit to his caprices. He is absolutely free to picture society as he sees it, and we therefore can have more

confidence in his descriptions of the customs and characters of the day.

It is precisely this view of the case that the editor of the series has taken, and herein is the *raison d'être* of this collection of great French romances. The choice was not easy to make. That form of literature called the romance abounds with us. France has always loved it, for French writers exhibit a curiosity—and I may say an indiscretion—that is almost charming in the study of customs and morals at large; a quality that induces them to talk freely of themselves and of their neighbors, and to set forth fearlessly both the good and the bad in human nature. In this fascinating phase of literature, France never has produced greater examples than of late years.

In the collection here presented to American readers will be found those works especially which reveal the intimate side of French social life—works in which are discussed the moral problems that affect most potently the life of the world at large. If inquiring spirits seek to learn the customs and manners of the France of any age, they must look for it among her crowned romances. They need go back no farther than Ludovic Halevy, who may be said to open the modern epoch. In the romantic school, on its historic side, Alfred de Vigny must be looked upon as supreme. De Musset and Anatole France may be taken as revealing authoritatively the moral philosophy of nineteenth-century thought. I must not omit to mention the Jacqueline of Th. Bentzon, and the "Attic" Philosopher of Emile Souvestre, nor the great names of Loti, Claretie, Coppe, Bazin, Bourget, Malot, Droz, De Massa, and last, but not least, our French Dickens, Alphonse Daudet. I need not add more; the very names of these "Immortals" suffice to commend the series to readers in all countries.

One word in conclusion: America may rest assured that her students of international literature will find in this series of 'ouvrages couronnés' all that they may wish to know of France at her own fireside—a knowledge that too often escapes them, knowledge that embraces not only a faithful picture of contemporary life in the French provinces, but a living and exact description of French society in modern times. They may feel certain that when they have read these romances, they will have sounded the depths and penetrated into the hidden intimacies of France, not only as she is, but as she would be known.

GASTON BOISSIER

SECRETAIRE PERPETUEL DE L'ACADEMIE FRANCAISE

GEORGES OHNET

The only French novelist whose books have a circulation approaching the works of Daudet and of Zola is Georges Ohnet, a writer whose popularity is as interesting as his stories, because it explains, though it does not excuse, the contempt the Goncourts had for the favor of the great French public, and also because it shows how the highest form of Romanticism

still ferments beneath the varnish of Naturalism in what is called genius among the great masses of readers.

Georges Ohnet was born in Paris, April 3, 1848, the son of an architect. He was destined for the Bar, but was early attracted by journalism and literature. Being a lawyer it was not difficult for him to join the editorial staff of *Le Pays*, and later *Le Constitutionnel*. This was soon after the Franco-German War. His romances, since collected under the title 'Batailles de la Vie', appeared first in 'Le Figaro, L'Illustration, and Revue des Deux Mondes', and have been exceedingly well received by the public. This relates also to his dramas, some of his works meeting with a popular success rarely extended to any author. For some time Georges Ohnet did not find the same favor with the critics, who often attacked him with a passionate violence and unusual severity. True, a high philosophical flow of thoughts cannot be detected in his writings, but nevertheless it is certain that the characters and the subjects of which he treats are brilliantly sketched and clearly developed. They are likewise of perfect morality and honesty.

There was expected of him, however, an idea which was not quite realized. Appearing upon the literary stage at a period when Naturalism was triumphant, it was for a moment believed that he would restore Idealism in the manner of George Sand.

In any case the hostile critics have lost. For years public opinion has exalted him, and the reaction is the more significant when compared with the tremendous criticism launched against his early romances and novels.

A list of his works follows:

Serge Panine (1881), crowned by the French Academy, has since gone through one hundred and fifty French editions; *Le Maitre des Forges* (1882), a prodigious success, two hundred and fifty editions being printed (1900); *La Comtesse Sarah* (1882); *Lise Fleuyon* (1884); *La Grande Maynieye* (1886); *Les Dames de Croix-Mort* (1886); *Volonte* (1888); *Le Docteur Rameau* (1889); *Deynier Amour* (1889); *Le Cure de Favieyes* (1890); *Dette de Haine* (1891); *Nemsod et Cie.* (1892); *Le Lendemain des Amours* (1893); *Le Droit de l'Enfant* (1894.); *Les Vieilles Rancunes* (1894); *La Dame en Gris* (1895); *La Fille du Depute* (1896); *Le Roi de Paris* (1898); *Au Fond du Gouffre* (1899); *Gens de la Noce* (1900); *La Tenibreuse* (1900); *Le Cyasseur d'Affaires* (1901); *Le Crepuscule* (1901); *Le Marche a l'Amour* (1902).

Ohnet's novels are collected under the titles, 'Noir et Rose (1887) and *L'Ame de Pierre* (1890).

The dramatic writings of Georges Ohnet, mostly taken from his novels, have greatly contributed to his reputation. *Le Maitre des Forges* was played for a full year (*Gymnase*, 1883); it was followed by *Serge Panine* (1884); *La Comtesse Sarah* (1887). *La Grande Mayniere* (1888), met also

with a decided and prolonged success; *Dernier Amour* (Gymnase, 1890); *Colonel Roquebrune* (Porte St. Martin, 1897). Before that he had already written the plays *Regina Sarpi* (1875) and *Marthe* (1877), which yet hold a prominent place upon the French stage.

I have shown in this rapid sketch that a man of the stamp of Georges Ohnet must have immortal qualities in himself, even though flayed and roasted alive by the critics. He is most assuredly an artist in form, is endowed with a brilliant style, and has been named "L'Historiographe de la bourgeoisie contemporaine." Indeed, antagonism to plutocracy and hatred of aristocracy are the fundamental theses in almost every one of his books.

His exposition, I repeat, is startlingly neat, the development of his plots absolutely logical, and the world has acclaimed his ingenuity in dramatic construction. He is truly, and in all senses, of the Ages.

VICTOR CHERBOULIEZ
de l'Academie Francaise

SERGE PANINE

CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OF DESVARENNES

The firm of Desvarennés has been in an ancient mansion in the Rue Saint Dominique since 1875; it is one of the best known and most important in French industry. The counting-houses are in the wings of the building looking upon the courtyard, which were occupied by the servants when the family whose coat-of-arms has been effaced from above the gate-way were still owners of the estate.

Madame Desvarennés inhabits the mansion which she has had magnificently renovated. A formidable rival of the Darblays, the great millers of France, the firm of Desvarennés is a commercial and political power. Inquire in Paris about its solvency, and you will be told that you may safely advance twenty millions of francs on the signature of the head of the firm. And this head is a woman.

This woman is remarkable. Gifted with keen understanding and a firm will, she had in former times vowed to make a large fortune, and she has kept her word.

She was the daughter of a humble packer of the Rue Neuve-Coquenard. Toward 1848 she married Michel Desvarennés, who was then a journeyman

baker in a large shop in the Chaussee d'Antin. With the thousand francs which the packer managed to give his daughter by way of dowry, the young couple boldly took a shop and started a little bakery business. The husband kneaded and baked the bread, and the young wife, seated at the counter, kept watch over the till. Neither on Sundays nor on holidays was the shop shut.

Through the window, between two pyramids of pink and blue packets of biscuits, one could always catch sight of the serious-looking Madame Desvarences, knitting woollen stockings for her husband while waiting for customers. With her prominent forehead, and her eyes always bent on her work, this woman appeared the living image of perseverance.

At the end of five years of incessant work, and possessing twenty thousand francs, saved sou by sou, the Desvarences left the slopes of Montmartre, and moved to the centre of Paris. They were ambitious and full of confidence. They set up in the Rue Vivienne, in a shop resplendent with gilding and ornamented with looking-glasses. The ceiling was painted in panels with bright hued pictures that caught the eyes of the passers-by. The window-shelves were of white marble, and the counter, where Madame Desvarences was still enthroned, was of a width worthy of the receipts that were taken every day. Business increased daily; the Desvarences continued to be hard and systematic workers. The class of customers alone had changed; they were more numerous and richer. The house had a specialty for making small rolls for the restaurants. Michel had learned from the Viennese bakers how to make those golden balls which tempt the most rebellious appetite, and which, when in an artistically folded damask napkin, set off a dinner-table.

About this time Madame Desvarences, while calculating how much the millers must gain on the flour they sell to the bakers, resolved, in order to lessen expenses, to do without middlemen and grind her own corn. Michel, naturally timid, was frightened when his wife disclosed to him the simple project which she had formed. Accustomed to submit to the will of her whom he respectfully called "the mistress," and of whom he was but the head clerk, he dared not oppose her. But, a red-tapist by nature, and hating innovations, owing to weakness of mind, he trembled inwardly and cried in agony:

"Wife, you'll ruin us."

The mistress calmed the poor man's alarm; she tried to impart to him some of her confidence, to animate him with her hope, but without success, so she went on without him. A mill was for sale at Jouy, on the banks of the Oise; she paid ready money for it, and a few weeks later the bakery in the Rue Vivienne was independent of every one. She ground her own flour, and from that time business increased considerably. Feeling capable of carrying out large undertakings, and, moreover, desirous of giving up the meannesses of retail trade, Madame Desvarences, one fine day, sent in a tender for supplying bread to the military hospitals. It

was accepted, and from that time the house ranked among the most important. On seeing the Desvarennés take their daring flight, the leading men in the trade had said:

"They have system and activity, and if they do not upset on the way, they will attain a high position."

But the mistress seemed to have the gift of divination. She worked surely—if she struck out one way you might be certain that success was there. In all her enterprises, "good luck" stood close by her; she scented failures from afar, and the firm never made a bad debt. Still Michel continued to tremble. The first mill had been followed by many more; then the old system appeared insufficient to Madame Desvarennés. As she wished to keep up with the increase of business she had steam-mills built,—which are now grinding three hundred million francs' worth of corn every year.

Fortune had favored the house immensely, but Michel continued to tremble. From time to time when the mistress launched out a new business, he timidly ventured on his usual saying:

"Wife, you're going to ruin us."

But one felt it was only for form's sake, and that he himself no longer meant what he said. Madame Desvarennés received this plaintive remonstrance with a calm smile, and answered, maternally, as to a child:

"There, there, don't be frightened."

Then she would set to work again, and direct with irresistible vigor the army of clerks who peopled her counting-houses.

In fifteen years' time, by prodigious efforts of will and energy, Madame Desvarennés had made her way from the lonely and muddy Rue Neuve-Coquenard to the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique. Of the bakery there was no longer question. It was some time since the business in the Rue Vivienne had been transferred to the foreman of the shop. The flour trade alone occupied Madame Desvarennés's attention. She ruled the prices in the market; and great bankers came to her office and did business with her on a footing of equality. She did not become any prouder for it, she knew too well the strength and weakness of life to have pride; her former plain dealing had not stiffened into self-sufficiency. Such as one had known her when beginning business, such one found her in the zenith of her fortune. Instead of a woollen gown she wore a silk one, but the color was still black; her language had not become refined; she retained the same blunt familiar accent, and at the end of five minutes' conversation with any one of importance she could not resist calling him "my dear," to come morally near him. Her commands had more fulness. In giving her orders, she had the manner of a commander-in-chief, and it was useless to haggle when she had spoken.

The best thing to do was to obey, as well and as promptly as possible.

Placed in a political sphere, this marvellously gifted woman would have been a Madame Roland; born to the throne, she would have been a Catherine II.; there was genius in her. Sprung from the lower ranks, her superiority had given her wealth; had she come from the higher, the great mind might have governed the world.

Still she was not happy; she had been married fifteen years, and her fireside was devoid of a cradle. During the first years she had rejoiced at not having a child. Where could she have found time to occupy herself with a baby? Business engrossed her attention; she had no leisure to amuse herself with trifles. Maternity seemed to her a luxury for rich women; she had her fortune to make. In the struggle against the difficulties attending the enterprise she had begun, she had not had time to look around her and perceive that her home was lonely. She worked from morning till night. Her whole life was absorbed in this work, and when night came, overcome with fatigue, she fell asleep, her head filled with cares which stifled all tricks of the imagination.

Michel grieved, but in silence; his feeble and dependent nature missed a child. He, whose mind lacked occupation, thought of the future. He said to himself that the day when the dreamt-of fortune came would be more welcome if there were an heir to whom to leave it. What was the good of being rich, if the money went to collateral relatives? There was his nephew Savinien, a disagreeable urchin whom he looked on with indifference; and he was biased regarding his brother, who had all but failed several times in business, and to whose aid he had come to save the honor of the name. The mistress had not hesitated to help him, and had prevented the signature of "Desvarennes" being protested. She had not taunted him, having as large a heart as she had a mind. But Michel had felt humiliated to see his own folk make a gap in the financial edifice erected so laboriously by his wife. Out of this had gradually sprung a sense of dissatisfaction with the Desvarennes of the other branch, which manifested itself by a marked coolness, when, by chance, his brother came to the house, accompanied by his son Savinien.

And then the paternity of his brother made him secretly jealous. Why should that incapable fellow, who succeeded in nothing, have a son? It was only those ne'er-do-well sort of people who were thus favored. He, Michel, already called the rich Desvarennes, he had not a son. Was it just? But where is there justice in this world?

The first time that she saw him with a downcast face the mistress had questioned him, and he had frankly expressed his regrets. But he had been so repelled by his wife, in whose heart a great trouble, steadily repressed, however, had been produced, that he never dared to recur to the subject.

He suffered in silence. But he no longer suffered alone. Like an

overflowing river that finds an outlet in the valley, which it inundates, the longings for maternity, hitherto repressed by the preoccupations of business, had suddenly seized Madame Desvarences.

Strong and unyielding, she struggled and would not own herself conquered. Still she became sad. Her voice sounded less sonorously in the offices where she gave an order; her energetic nature seemed subdued. Now she looked around her. She beheld prosperity made stable by incessant work, respect gained by spotless honesty; she had attained the goal which she had marked out in her ambitious dreams, as being paradise itself. Paradise was there; but it lacked the angel. They had no child.

From that day a change came over this woman, slowly but surely; scarcely perceptible to strangers, but easy to be seen by those around her. She became benevolent, and gave away considerable sums of money, especially to children's "Homes." But when the good people who governed these establishments, lured on by her generosity, came to ask her to be on their committee of management, she became angry, asking them if they were joking with her? What interest could those brats have for her? She had other fish to fry. She gave them what they needed, and what more could they want? The fact was she felt weak and troubled before children. But within her a powerful and unknown voice had arisen, and the hour was not far distant when the bitter wave of her regrets was to overflow and be made manifest.

She did not like Savinien, her nephew, and kept all her sweetness for the son of one of their old neighbors in the Rue Neuve-Coquenard, a small haberdasher, who had not been able to get on, but continued humbly to sell thread and needles to the thrifty folks of the neighborhood. The haberdasher, Mother Delarue, as she was called, had remained a widow after one year of married life. Pierre, her boy, had grown up under the shadow of the bakery, the cradle of the Desvarences's fortunes.

On Sundays the mistress would give him a gingerbread or a cracknel, and amuse herself with his baby prattle. She did not lose sight of him when she removed to the Rue Vivienne. Pierre had entered the elementary school of the neighborhood, and by his precocious intelligence and exceptional application, had not been long in getting to the top of his class. The boy had left school after gaining an exhibition admitting him to the Chaptal College. This hard worker, who was in a fair way of making his own position without costing his relatives anything, greatly interested Madame Desvarences. She found in this plucky nature a striking analogy to herself. She formed projects for Pierre's future; in fancy she saw him enter the Polytechnic school, and leave it with honors. The young man had the choice of becoming a mining or civil engineer, and of entering the government service.

He was hesitating what to do when the mistress came and offered him a situation in her firm as junior partner; it was a golden bridge that she placed before him. With his exceptional capacities he was not long in

giving to the house a new impulse. He perfected the machinery, and triumphantly defied all competition. All this was a happy dream in which Pierre was to her a real son; her home became his, and she monopolized him completely. But suddenly a shadow came o'er the spirit of her dreams. Pierre's mother, the little haberdasher, proud of her son, would she consent to give him up to a stranger? Oh! if Pierre had only been an orphan! But one could not rob a mother of her son! And Madame Desvarences stopped the flight of her imagination. She followed Pierre with anxious looks; but she forbade herself to dispose of the youth: he did not belong to her.

This woman, at the age of thirty-five, still young in heart, was disturbed by feelings which she strove, but vainly, to rule. She hid them especially from her husband, whose repining chattering she feared. If she had once shown him her weakness he would have overwhelmed her daily with the burden of his regrets. But an unforeseen circumstance placed her at Michel's mercy.

Winter had come, bringing December and its snow. The weather this year was exceptionally inclement, and traffic in the streets was so difficult, business was almost suspended. The mistress left her deserted offices and retired early to her private apartments. The husband and wife spent their evenings alone. They sat there, facing each other, at the fireside. A shade concentrated the light of the lamp upon the table covered with expensive knick-knacks. The ceiling was sometimes vaguely lighted up by a glimmer from the stove which glittered on the gilt cornices. Ensnared in deep comfortable armchairs, the pair respectively caressed their favorite dream without speaking of it.

Madame Desvarences saw beside her a little pink-and-white baby girl, toddling on the carpet. She heard her words, understood her language, untranslatable to all others than a mother. Then bedtime came. The child, with heavy eyelids, let her little fair-haired head fall on her shoulders. Madame Desvarences took her in her arms and undressed her quietly, kissing her bare and dimpled arms. It was exquisite enjoyment which stirred her heart deliciously. She saw the cradle, and devoured the child with her eyes. She knew that the picture was a myth. But what did it matter to her? She was happy. Michel's voice broke on her reverie.

"Wife," said he, "this is Christmas Eve; and as there are only us two, suppose you put your slipper on the hearth."

Madame Desvarences rose. Her eyes vaguely turned toward the hearth on which the fire was dying, and beside the upright of the large sculptured mantelpiece she beheld for a moment a tiny shoe, belonging to the child which she loved to see in her dreams. Then the vision vanished, and there was nothing left but the lonely hearth. A sharp pain tore her swollen heart; a sob rose to her lips, and, slowly, two tears rolled down her cheeks. Michel, quite pale, looked at her in silence; he held out

his hand to her, and said, in a trembling voice:

"You were thinking about it, eh?"

Madame Desvarenes bowed her head, twice, silently, and without adding another word, the pair fell into each other's arms and wept.

From that day they hid nothing from each other, and shared their troubles and regrets in common. The mistress unburdened her heart by making a full confession, and Michel, for the first time in his life, learned the depth of soul of his companion to its inmost recesses. This woman, so energetic, so obstinate, was, as it were, broken down. The springs of her will seemed worn out. She felt despondencies and wearinesses until then unknown. Work tired her. She did not venture down to the offices; she talked of giving up business, which was a bad sign. She longed for country air. Were they not rich enough? With their simple tastes so much money was unnecessary. In fact, they had no wants. They would go to some pretty estate in the suburbs of Paris, live there and plant cabbages. Why work? they had no children.

Michel agreed to these schemes. For a long time he had wished for repose. Often he had feared that his wife's ambition would lead them too far. But now, since she stopped of her own accord, it was all for the best.

At this juncture their solicitor informed them that, near to their works, the Cernay estate was to be put up for sale. Very often, when going from Jouy to the mills, Madame Desvarenes had noticed the chateau, the slate roofs of the turrets of which rose gracefully from a mass of deep verdure. The Count de Cernay, the last representative of a noble race, had just died of consumption, brought on by reckless living, leaving nothing behind him but debts and a little girl two years old. Her mother, an Italian singer and his mistress, had left him one morning without troubling herself about the child. Everything was to be sold, by order of the Court.

Some most lamentable incidents had saddened the Count's last hours. The bailiffs had entered the house with the doctor when he came to pay his last call, and the notices of the sale were all but posted up before the funeral was over. Jeanne, the orphan, scared amid the troubles of this wretched end, seeing unknown men walking into the reception-rooms with their hats on, hearing strangers speaking loudly and with arrogance, had taken refuge in the laundry. It was there that Madame Desvarenes found her, playing, plainly dressed in a little alpaca frock, her pretty hair loose and falling on her shoulders. She looked astonished at what she had seen; silent, not daring to run or sing as formerly in the great desolate house whence the master had just been taken away forever.

With the vague instinct of abandoned children who seek to attach themselves to some one or some thing, Jeanne clung to Madame Desvarenes,

who, ready to protect, and longing for maternity, took the child in her arms. The gardener's wife acted as guide during her visit over the property. Madame Desvarences questioned her. She knew nothing of the child except what she had heard from the servants when they gossiped in the evenings about their late master. They said Jeanne was a bastard. Of her relatives they knew nothing. The Count had an aunt in England who was married to a rich lord; but he had not corresponded with her lately. The little one then was reduced to beggary as the estate was to be sold.

The gardener's wife was a good woman and was willing to keep the child until the new proprietor came; but when once affairs were settled, she would certainly go and make a declaration to the mayor, and take her to the workhouse. Madame Desvarences listened in silence. One word only had struck her while the woman was speaking. The child was without support, without ties, and abandoned like a poor lost dog. The little one was pretty too; and when she fixed her large deep eyes on that improvised mother, who pressed her so tenderly to her heart, she seemed to implore her not to put her down, and to carry her away from the mourning that troubled her mind and the isolation that froze her heart.

Madame Desvarences, very superstitious, like a woman of the people, began to think that, perhaps, Providence had brought her to Cernay that day and had placed the child in her path. It was perhaps a reparation which heaven granted her, in giving her the little girl she so longed for.

Acting unhesitatingly, as she did in everything, she left her name with

the woman, carried Jeanne to her carriage, and took her to Paris, promising herself to make inquiries to find her relatives.

A month later, the property of Cernay pleasing her, and the researches for Jeanne's friends not proving successful, Madame Desvarences took possession of the estate and the child into the bargain.

Michel welcomed the child without enthusiasm. The little stranger was indifferent to him; he would have preferred adopting a boy. The mistress was delighted. Her maternal instincts, so long stifled, developed fully. She made plans for the future. Her energy returned; she spoke loudly and firmly. But in her appearance there was revealed an inward contentment never remarked before, which made her sweeter and more benevolent. She no longer spoke of retiring from business. The discouragement which had seized her left her as if by magic. The house which had been so dull for some months became noisy and gay. The child, like a sunbeam, had scattered the clouds.

It was then that the most unlooked-for phenomenon, which was so considerably to influence Madame Desvarences's life, occurred. At the moment when the mistress seemed provided by chance with the heiress so much longed for, she learned with surprise that she was about to become a mother! After sixteen years of married life, this discovery was almost a discomfiture. What would have been delight formerly was now a cause for fear. She, almost an old woman!

There was an incredible commotion in the business world when the news became known. The younger branch of Desvarences had witnessed Jeanne's arrival with little satisfaction, and were still more gloomy when they learned that the chances of their succeeding to great wealth were over. Still they did not lose all hopes. At thirty-five years of age one cannot always tell how these little affairs will come off. An accident was possible. But none occurred; all passed off well.

Madame Desvarences was as strong physically as she was morally, and proved victorious by bringing into the world a little girl, who was named Michelins in honor of her father. The mistress's heart was large enough to hold two children; she kept the orphan she had adopted, and brought her up as if she had been her very own. Still there was soon an enormous difference in her manner of loving Jeanne and Michelins. This mother had for the long-wished-for child an ardent, mad, passionate love like that of a tigress for her cubs. She had never loved her husband. All the tenderness which had accumulated in her heart blossomed, and it was like spring.

This autocrat, who had never allowed contradiction, and before whom all her dependents bowed either with or against the grain, was now led in her turn; the bronze of her character became like wax in the little pink hands of her daughter. The commanding woman bent before the little fair head. There was nothing good enough for Micheline. Had the mother owned the world she would have placed it at the little one's feet. One tear from the child upset her. If on one of the most important subjects Madame Desvarences had said "No," and Micheline came and said "Yes," the hitherto resolute will became subordinate to the caprice of a child. They knew it in the house and acted upon it. This manoeuvre succeeded each time, although Madame Desvarences had seen through it from the first. It appeared as if the mother felt a secret joy in proving under all circumstances the unbounded adoration which she felt for her daughter. She often said:

"Pretty as she is, and rich as I shall make her, what husband will be worthy of Micheline? But if she believes me when it is time to choose one, she will prefer a man remarkable for his intelligence, and will give him her fortune as a stepping-stone to raise him as high as she chooses him to go."

Inwardly she was thinking of Pierre Delarue, who had just taken honors at the Polytechnic school, and who seemed to have a brilliant career before

him. This woman, humbly born, was proud of her origin, and sought a plebeian for her son-in-law, to put into his hand a golden tool powerful enough to move the world.

Micheline was ten years old when her father died. Alas, Michel was not a great loss. They wore mourning for him; but they hardly noticed that he was absent. His whole life had been a void. Madame Desvarenes, it is sad to say, felt herself more mistress of her child when she was a widow. She was jealous of Micheline's affections, and each kiss the child gave her father seemed to the mother to be robbed from her. With this fierce tenderness, she preferred solitude around this beloved being.

At this time Madame Desvarenes was really in the zenith of womanly splendor. She seemed taller, her figure had straightened, vigorous and powerful. Her gray hair gave her face a majestic appearance. Always surrounded by a court of clients and friends, she seemed like a sovereign. The fortune of the firm was not to be computed. It was said Madame Desvarenes did not know how rich she was.

Jeanne and Micheline grew up amid this colossal prosperity. The one, tall, brown-haired, with blue eyes changing like the sea; the other, fragile, fair, with dark dreamy eyes. Jeanne, proud, capricious, and inconstant; Micheline, simple, sweet, and tenacious. The brunette inherited from her reckless father and her fanciful mother a violent and passionate nature; the blonde was tractable and good like Michel, but resolute and firm like Madame Desvarenes. These two opposite natures were congenial, Micheline sincerely loving Jeanne, and Jeanne feeling the necessity of living amicably with Micheline, her mother's idol, but inwardly enduring with difficulty the inequalities which began to exhibit themselves in the manner with which the intimates of the house treated the one and the other. She found these flatteries wounding, and thought Madame Desvarenes's preferences for Micheline unjust.

All these accumulated grievances made Jeanne conceive the wish one morning of leaving the house where she had been brought up, and where she now felt humiliated. Pretending to long to go to England to see that rich relative of her father, who, knowing her to be in a brilliant society, had taken notice of her, she asked Madame Desvarenes to allow her to spend a few weeks from home. She wished to try the ground in England, and see what she might expect in the future from her family. Madame Desvarenes lent herself to this whim, not guessing the young girl's real motive; and Jeanne, well attended, went to her aunt's home in England.

Madame Desvarenes, besides, had attained the summit of her hopes, and an event had just taken place which preoccupied her. Micheline, deferring to her mother's wishes, had decided to allow herself to be betrothed to Pierre Delarue, who had just lost his mother, and whose business improved daily. The young girl, accustomed to treat Pierre like a brother, had

easily consented to accept him as her future husband.

Jeanne, who had been away for six months, had returned sobered and disillusioned about her family. She had found them kind and affable, had received many compliments on her beauty, which was really remarkable, but had not met with any encouragement in her desires for independence. She came home resolved not to leave until she married. She arrived in the Rue Saint-Dominique at the moment when Pierre Delarue, thirsting with ambition, was leaving his betrothed, his relatives, and gay Paris to undertake engineering work on the coasts of Algeria and Tunis that would raise him above his rivals. In leaving, the young man did not for a moment think that Jeanne was returning from England at the same hour with trouble for him in the person of a very handsome cavalier, Prince Serge Panine, who had been introduced to her at a ball during the London season. Mademoiselle de Cernay, availing herself of English liberty, was returning escorted only by a maid in company with the Prince. The journey had been delightful. The tete-a-tete travelling had pleased the young people, and on leaving the train they had promised to see each other again. Official balls facilitated their meeting; Serge was introduced to Madame Desvarenes as being an English friend, and soon became the most assiduous partner of Jeanne and Micheline. It was thus, under the most trivial pretext, that the man gained admittance to the house where he was to play such an important part.

CHAPTER II

THE GALLEY-SLAVE OF PLEASURE

One morning in the month of May, 1879, a young man, elegantly attired, alighted from a well-appointed carriage before the door of Madame Desvarenes's house. The young man passed quickly before the porter in uniform, decorated with a military medal, stationed near the door. The visitor found himself in an anteroom which communicated with several corridors. A messenger was seated in the depth of a large armchair, reading the newspaper, and not even lending an inattentive ear to the whispered conversation of a dozen canvassers, who were patiently awaiting their turn for gaining a hearing. On seeing the young man enter by the private door, the messenger rose, dropped his newspaper on the armchair, hastily raised his velvet skullcap, tried to smile, and made two steps forward.

"Good-morning, old Felix," said the young man, in a friendly tone to the messenger. "Is my aunt within?"

"Yes, Monsieur Savinien, Madame Desvarenes is in her office; but she has been engaged for more than an hour with the Financial Secretary of the

War Department.”

In uttering these words old Felix put on a mysterious and important air, which denoted how serious the discussions going on in the adjoining room seemed to his mind.

”You see,” continued he, showing Madame Desvarences’s nephew the ante-room full of people, ”madame has kept all these waiting since this morning, and perhaps she won’t see them.”

”I must see her though,” murmured the young man.

He reflected a moment, then added:

”Is Monsieur Marechal in?”

”Yes, sir, certainly. If you will allow me I will announce you.”

”It is unnecessary.”

And, stepping forward, he entered the office adjoining that of Madame Desvarences.

Seated at a large table of black wood, covered with bundles of papers and notes, a young man was working. He was thirty years of age, but appeared much older. His prematurely bald forehead, and wrinkled brow, betokened a life of severe struggles and privations, or a life of excesses and pleasures. Still those clear and pure eyes were not those of a libertine, and the straight nose solidly joined to the face was that of a searcher. Whatever the cause, the man was old before his time.

On hearing the door of his office open, he raised his eyes, put down his pen, and was making a movement toward his visitor, when the latter interrupted him quickly with these words:

”Don’t stir, Marechal, or I shall be off! I only came in until Aunt Desvarences is at liberty; but if I disturb you I will go and take a turn, smoke a cigar, and come back in three quarters of an hour.”

”You do not disturb me, Monsieur Savinien; at least not often enough, for be it said, without reproaching you, it is more than three months since we have seen anything of you. There, the post is finished. I was writing the last addresses.”

And taking a heavy bundle of papers off the desk, Marechal showed them to Savinien.

”Gracious! It seems that business is going on well here.”

"Better and better."

"You are making mountains of flour."

"Yes; high as Mont Blanc; and then, we now have a fleet."

"What! a fleet?" cried Savinien, whose face expressed doubt and surprise at the same time.

"Yes, a steam fleet. Last year Madame Desvarences was not satisfied with the state in which her corn came from the East. The corn was damaged owing to defective stowage; the firm claimed compensation from the steamship company. The claim was only moderately satisfied, Madame Desvarences got vexed, and now we import our own. We have branches at Smyrna and Odessa."

"It is fabulous! If it goes on, my aunt will have an administration as important as that of a European state. Oh! you are happy here, you people; you are busy. I amuse myself! And if you knew how it wearies me! I am withering, consuming myself, I am longing for business."

And saying these words, young Monsieur Desvarences allowed a sorrowful moan to escape him.

"It seems to me," said Marechal, "that it only depends upon yourself to do as much and more business than any one?"

"You know well enough that it is not so," sighed Savinien; "my aunt is opposed to it."

"What a mistake!" cried Marechal, quickly. "I have heard Madame Desvarences say more than twenty times how she regretted your being unemployed. Come into the firm, you will have a good berth in the counting-house."

"In the counting-house!" cried Savinien, bitterly; "there's the sore point. Now look here; my friend, do you think that an organization like mine is made to bend to the trivialities of a copying clerk's work? To follow the humdrum of every-day routine? To blacken paper? To become a servant?—me! with what I have in my brain?"

And, rising abruptly, Savinien began to walk hurriedly up and down the room, disdainfully shaking his little head with its low forehead on which were plastered a few fair curls (made with curling-irons), with the indignant air of an Atlas carrying the world on his shoulders.

"Oh, I know very well what is at the bottom of the business—my aunt is jealous of me because I am a man of ideas. She wishes to be the only one of the family who possesses any. She thinks of binding me down to a besotting work," continued he, "but I won't have it. I know what I want!"

It is independence of thought, bent on the solution of great problems—that is, a wide field to apply my discoveries. But a fixed rule, common law, I could not submit to it.”

”It is like the examinations,” observed Marechal, looking slyly at young Desvarences, who was drawing himself up to his full height; ”examinations never suited you.”

”Never,” said Savinien, energetically. ”They wished to get me into the Polytechnic School; impossible! Then the Central School; no better. I astonished the examiners by the novelty of my ideas. They refused me.”

”Well, you know,” retorted Marechal, ”if you began by overthrowing their theories—”

”That’s it!” cried Savinien, triumphantly. ”My mind is stronger than I; I must let my imagination have free run, and no one will ever know what that particular turn of mind has cost me. Even my family do not think me serious. Aunt Desvarences has forbidden any kind of enterprise, under pretence that I bear her name, and that I might compromise it because I have twice failed. My aunt said, it is true. Do you think it is generous of her to take advantage of my situation, and prohibit my trying to succeed? Are inventors judged by three or four failures? If my aunt had allowed me I should have astonished the world.”

”She feared, above all,” said Marechal, simply, ”to see you astonishing the Tribunal of Commerce.”

”Oh! you, too,” moaned Savinien, ”are in league with my enemies; you make no account of me.”

And young Desvarences sank as if crushed into an armchair and began to lament. He was very unhappy at being misunderstood. His aunt allowed him three thousand francs a month on condition that he would not make use of his ten fingers. Was it moral? Then he with such exuberant vigor had to waste it on pleasure and seeing life to the utmost. He passed his time in theatres, at clubs, restaurants, in boudoirs. He lost his time, his money, his hair, his illusions. He bemoaned his lot, but continued, only to have something to do. With grim sarcasm he called himself the galley-slave of pleasure. And notwithstanding all these consuming excesses, he asserted that he could not render his imagination barren. Amid the greatest follies at suppers, during the clinking of glasses; in the excitement of the dance-inspirations came to him in flashes, he made prodigious discoveries.

And as Marechal ventured a timid ”Oh!” tinged with incredulity, Savinien flew into a passion. Yes; he had invented something astonishing; he saw fortune within reach, and he thought the bargain made with his aunt very unjust. Therefore he had come to break it, and to regain his liberty.

Marechal looked at the young man while he was explaining with animation his ambitious projects. He scrutinized that flat forehead within which the dandy asserted so many good ideas were hidden. He measured that slim form bent by wild living, and asked himself how that degenerate being could struggle against the difficulties of business. A smile played on his lips. He knew Savinien too well not to be aware that he was a prey to one of those attacks of melancholy which seized on him when his funds were low.

On these occasions, which occurred frequently, the young man had longings for business, which Madame Desvarences stopped by asking: "How much?" Savinien allowed himself to be with difficulty induced to consent to renounce the certain profits promised, as he said, by his projected enterprise. At last he would capitulate, and with his pocket well lined, nimble and joyful, he returned to his boudoirs, race-courses, fashionable restaurants, and became more than ever the galley-slave of pleasure.

"And Pierre?" asked young Desvarences, suddenly and quickly changing the subject. "Have you any news of him?"

Marechal became serious. A cloud seemed to have come across his brow; he gravely answered Savinien's question.

Pierre was still in the East. He was travelling toward Tunis, the coast of which he was exploring. It was a question of the formation of an island sea by taking the water through the desert. It would be a colossal undertaking, the results of which would be considerable as regarded Algeria. The climate would be completely changed, and the value of the colony would be increased tenfold, because it would become the most fertile country in the world. Pierre had been occupied in this undertaking for more than a year with unequalled ardor; he was far from his home, his betrothed, seeing only the goal to be attained; turning a deaf ear to all that would distract his attention from the great work, to the success of which he hoped to contribute gloriously.

"And don't people say," resumed Savinien with an evil smile, "that during his absence a dashing young fellow is busy luring his betrothed away from him?"

At these words Marechal made a quick movement.

"It is false," he interrupted; "and I do not understand how you, Monsieur Desvarences, should be the bearer of such a tale. To admit that Mademoiselle Micheline could break her word or her engagements is to slander her, and if any one other than you—"

"There, there, my dear friend," said Savinien, laughing, "don't get into a rage. What I say to you I would not repeat to the first comer; besides, I am only the echo of a rumor that has been going the round during the last three weeks. They even give the name of him who has been

chosen for the honor and pleasure of such a brilliant conquest. I mean Prince Serge Panine.”

”As you have mentioned Prince Panine,” replied Marechal, ”allow me to tell you that he has not put his foot inside Madame Desvarences’s door for three weeks. This is not the way of a man about to marry the daughter of the house.”

”My dear fellow, I only repeat what I have heard. As for me, I don’t know any more. I have kept out of the way for more than three months. And besides, it matters little to me whether Micheline be a commoner or a princess, the wife of Delarue or of Panine. I shall be none the richer or the poorer, shall I? Therefore I need not care. The dear child will certainly have millions enough to marry easily. And her adopted sister, the stately Mademoiselle Jeanne, what has become of her?”

”Ah! as to Mademoiselle de Cernay, that is another affair,” cried Marechal.

And as if wishing to divert the conversation in an opposite direction to which Savinien had led it a moment before, he spoke readily of Madame Desvarences’s adopted daughter. She had made a lively impression on one of the intimate friends of the house—the banker Cayrol, who had offered his name and his fortune to the fair Jeanne.

This was a cause of deep amazement to Savinien. What! Cayrol! The shrewd close-fisted Auvergnat! A girl without a fortune! Cayrol Silex as he was called in the commercial world on account of his hardness. This living money-bag had a heart then! It was necessary to believe it since both money-bag and heart had been placed at Mademoiselle de Cernay’s feet. This strange girl was certainly destined to millions. She had just missed being Madame Desvarences’s heiress, and now Cayrol had taken it into his head to marry her.

But that was not all. And when Marechal told Savinien that the fair Jeanne flatly refused to become the wife of Cayrol, there was an outburst of joyful exclamations. She refused! By Jove, she was mad! An unlooked-for marriage—for she had not a penny, and had most extravagant notions. She had been brought up as if she were to live always in velvet and silks—to loll in carriages and think only of her pleasure. What reason did she give for refusing him! None. Haughtily and disdainfully she had declared that she did not love ”that man,” and that she would not marry him.

When Savinien heard these details his rapture increased. One thing especially charmed him: Jeanne’s saying ”that man,” when speaking of Cayrol. A little girl who was called ”De Cernay” just as he might call himself ”Des Batignolles” if he pleased: the natural and unacknowledged daughter of a Count and of a shady public singer! And she refused Cayrol, calling him ”that man.” It was really funny. And what did

worthy Cayrol say about it?

When Marechal declared that the banker had not been damped by this discouraging reception, Savinien said it was human nature. The fair Jeanne scorned Cayrol and Cayrol adored her. He had often seen those things happen. He knew the baggages so well! Nobody knew more of women than he did. He had known some more difficult to manage than proud Mademoiselle Jeanne.

An old leaven of hatred had festered in Savinien's heart against Jeanne since the time when the younger branch of the Desvarences had reason to fear that the superb heritage was going to the adopted daughter. Savinien had lost the fear, but had kept up the animosity. And everything that could happen to Jeanne of a vexing or painful nature would be witnessed by him with pleasure.

He was about to encourage Marechal to continue his revelations, and had risen and was leaning on the desk. With his face excited and eager, he was preparing his question, when, through the door which led to Madame Desvarences's office, a confused murmur of voices was heard. At the same time the door was half opened, held by a woman's hand, square, with short fingers, a firm-willed and energetic hand. At the same time, the last words exchanged between Madame Desvarences and the Financial Secretary of the War Office were distinctly audible. Madame Desvarences was speaking, and her voice sounded clear and plain; a little raised and vibrating. There seemed a shade of anger in its tone.

"My dear sir, you will tell the Minister that does not suit me. It is not the custom of the house. For thirty-five years I have conducted business thus, and I have always found it answer. I wish you good-morning."

The door of the office facing that which Madame Desvarences held closed, and a light step glided along the corridor. It was the Financial Secretary's. The mistress appeared.

Marechal rose hastily. As to Savinien, all his resolution seemed to have vanished at the sound of his aunt's voice, for he had rapidly gained a corner of the room, and seated himself on a leather-covered sofa, hidden behind an armchair, where he remained perfectly quiet.

"Do you understand that, Marechal?" said dame Desvarences; "they want to place a resident agent at the mill on pretext of checking things. They say that all military contractors are obliged to submit to it. My word, do they take us for thieves, the rascals? It is the first time that people have seemed to doubt me. And it has enraged me. I have been arguing for a whole hour with the man they sent me. I said to him, 'My dear sir, you may either take it or leave it. Let us start from this point: I can do without you and you cannot do without me. If you don't

buy my flour, somebody else will. I am not at all troubled about it. But as to having any one here who would be as much master as myself, or perhaps more, never! I am too old to change my customs.' Thereupon the Financial Secretary left. There! And, besides, they change their Ministry every fortnight. One would never know with whom one had to deal. Thank you, no."

While talking thus with Marechal, Madame Desvarenes was walking about the office. She was still the same woman with the broad prominent forehead. Her hair, which she wore in smooth plaits, had become gray, but the sparkle of her dark eyes only seemed the brighter from this. She had preserved her splendid teeth, and her smile had remained young and charming. She spoke with animation, as usual, and with the gestures of a man. She placed herself before her secretary, seeming to appeal to him as a witness of her being in the right. During the hour with the official personage she had been obliged to contain herself. She unburdened herself to Marechal, saying just what she thought.

But all at once she perceived Savinien, who was waiting to show himself now that she had finished. The mistress turned sharply to the young man, and frowned slightly:

"Hallo! you are there, eh? How is it that you could leave your fair friends?"

"But, aunt, I came to pay you my respects."

"No nonsense now; I've no time," interrupted the mistress. "What do you want?"

Savinien, disconcerted by this rude reception, blinked his eyes, as if seeking some form to give his request; then, making up his mind, he said:

"I came to see you on business."

"You on business?" replied Madame Desvarenes, with a shade of astonishment and irony.

"Yes, aunt, on business," declared Savinien, looking down as if he expected a rebuff.

"Oh, oh, oh!" said Madame Desvarenes, "you know our agreement; I give you an allowance—"

"I renounce my income," interrupted Savinien, quickly, "I wish to take back my independence. The transfer I made has already cost me too dear. It's a fool's bargain. The enterprise which I am going to launch is superb, and must realize immense profits. I shall certainly not abandon it."

While speaking, Savinien had become animated and had regained his self-possession. He believed in his scheme, and was ready to pledge his future. He argued that his aunt could not blame him for giving proof of his energy and daring, and he discoursed in bombastic style.

"That's enough!" cried Madame Desvarences, interrupting her nephew's oration. "I am very fond of mills, but not word-mills. You are talking too much about it to be sincere. So many words can only serve to disguise the nullity of your projects. You want to embark in speculation? With what money?"

"I contribute the scheme and some capitalists will advance the money to start with; we shall then issue shares!"

"Never in this life! I oppose it. You! With a responsibility. You! Directing an undertaking. You would only commit absurdities. In fact, you want to sell an idea, eh? Well, I will buy it."

"It is not only the money I want," said Savinien, with an indignant air, "it is confidence in my ideas, it is enthusiasm on the part of my shareholders, it is success. You don't believe in my ideas, aunt!"

"What does it matter to you, if I buy them from you? It seems to me a pretty good proof of confidence. Is that settled?"

"Ah, aunt, you are implacable!" groaned Savinien. "When you have laid your hand upon any one, it is all over. Adieu, independence; one must obey you. Nevertheless, it was a vast and beautiful conception."

"Very well. Marechal, see that my nephew has ten thousand francs. And you, Savinien, remember that I see no more of you."

"Until the money is spent!" murmured Marechal, in the ear of Madame Desvarences's nephew.

And taking him by the arm he was leading him toward the safe when the mistress turned to Savinien and said:

"By the way, what is your invention?"

"Aunt, it is a threshing machine," answered the young man, gravely.

"Rather a machine for coining money," said the incorrigible Marechal, in an undertone.

"Well; bring me your plans," resumed Madame Desvarences, after having reflected a moment. "Perchance you may have hit upon something."

The mistress had been generous, and now the woman of business reasserted herself and she thought of reaping the benefit.

Savinien seemed very confused at this demand, and as his aunt gave him an interrogative look, he confessed:

"There are no drawings made as yet."

"No drawings as yet?" cried the mistress. "Where then is your invention?"

"It is here," replied Savinien, and with an inspired gesture he struck his narrow forehead.

Madame Desvarenes and Marechal could not resist breaking out into a laugh.

"And you were already talking of issuing shares?" said the mistress. "Do you think people would have paid their money with your brain as sole guarantee? You! Get along; I am the only one to make bargains like that, and you are the only one with whom I make them. Go, Marechal, give him his money; I won't gainsay it. But you are a trickster, as usual!"

CHAPTER III

PIERRE RETURNS

By a wave of her hand she dismissed Savinien, who, abashed, went out with Marechal. Left alone, she seated herself at her secretary's desk, and taking the pile of letters she signed them. The pen flew in her fingers, and on the paper was displayed her name, written in large letters in a man's handwriting.

She had been occupied thus for about a quarter of an hour when Marechal reappeared. Behind him came a stout thickset man of heavy build, and gorgeously dressed. His face, surrounded by a bristly dark brown beard, and his eyes overhung by bushy eyebrows, gave him, at the first glance, a harsh appearance. But his mouth promptly banished this impression. His thick and sensual lips betrayed voluptuous tastes. A disciple of Lavater or Gall would have found the bump of amativeness largely developed.

Marechal stepped aside to allow him to pass.

"Good-morning, mistress," said he familiarly, approaching Madame Desvarenes.

The mistress raised her head quickly, and said:

”Ah! it’s you, Cayrol! That’s capital! I was just going to send for you.”

Jean Cayrol, a native of Cantal, had been brought up amid the wild mountains of Auvergne. His father was a small farmer in the neighborhood of Saint-Flour, scraping a miserable pittance from the ground for the maintenance of his family. From the age of eight years Cayrol had been a shepherd-boy. Alone in the quiet and remote country, the child had given way to ambitious dreams. He was very intelligent, and felt that he was born to another sphere than that of farming.

Thus, at the first opportunity which had occurred to take him into a town, he was found ready. He went as servant to a banker at Brioude. There, in the service of this comparatively luxurious house, he got smoothed down a little, and lost some of his clumsy loutishness. Strong as an ox, he did the work of two men, and at night, when in his garret, fell asleep learning to read. He was seized by the ambition to get on. No pains were to be spared to gain his goal.

His master having been elected a member of the Chamber of Deputies, Cayrol accompanied him to Paris. Life in the capital finished the turmoil of Cayrol’s brain. Seeing the prodigious activity of the great city on whose pavements fortunes sprang up in a day like mushrooms, the Auvergnat felt his moral strength equal to the occasion, and leaving his master, he became clerk to a merchant in the Rue du Sentier.

There, for four years, he studied commerce, and gained much experience. He soon learned that it was only in financial transactions that large fortunes were to be rapidly made. He left the Rue du Sentier, and found a place at a stock-broker’s. His keen scent for speculation served him admirably. After the lapse of a few years he had charge of the business. His position was getting better; he was making fifteen thousand francs per annum, but that was nothing compared to his dreams. He was then twenty-eight years of age. He felt ready to do anything to succeed, except something unhandsome, for this lover of money would have died rather than enrich himself by dishonest means.

It was at this time that his lucky star threw him in Madame Desvarennes’s way. The mistress, understanding men, guessed Cayrol’s worth quickly. She was seeking a banker who would devote himself to her interests. She watched the young man narrowly for some time; then, sure she was not mistaken as to his capacity, she bluntly proposed to give him money to start a business. Cayrol, who had already saved eighty thousand francs, received twelve hundred thousand from Madame Desvarennes, and settled in the Rue Taitbout, two steps from the house of Rothschild.

Madame Desvarennes had made a lucky hit in choosing Cayrol as her confidential agent. This short, thickset Auvergnat was a master of finance, and in a few years had raised the house to an unexpected degree of prosperity. Madame Desvarennes had drawn considerable sums as

interest on the money lent, and the banker's fortune was already estimated at several millions. Was it the happy influence of Madame Desvarences that changed everything she touched into gold, or were Cayrol's capacities really extraordinary? The results were there and that was sufficient. They did not trouble themselves over and above that.

The banker had naturally become one of the intimates of Madame Desvarences's house. For a long time he saw Jeanne without particularly noticing her. This young girl had not struck his fancy. It was one night at a ball, on seeing her dancing with Prince Panine, that he perceived that she was marvellously engaging. His eyes were attracted by an invincible power and followed her graceful figure whirling through the waltz. He secretly envied the brilliant cavalier who was holding this adorable creature in his arms, who was bending over her bare shoulders, and whose breath lightly touched her hair. He longed madly for Jeanne, and from that moment thought only of her.

The Prince was then very friendly with Mademoiselle de Cernay; he overwhelmed her with kind attentions. Cayrol watched him to see if he spoke to her of love, but Panine was a past master in these drawing-room skirmishes, and the banker got nothing for his pains. That Cayrol was tenacious has been proved. He became intimate with the Prince. He tendered him such little services as create intimacy, and when he was sure of not being repulsed with haughtiness, he questioned Serge. Did he love Mademoiselle de Cernay? This question, asked in a trembling voice and with a constrained smile, found the Prince quite calm. He answered lightly that Mademoiselle de Cernay was a very agreeable partner, but that he had never dreamed of offering her his homage. He had other projects in his head. Cayrol pressed the Prince's hand violently, made a thousand protestations of devotedness, and finally obtained his complete confidence.

Serge loved Mademoiselle Desvarences, and it was to become intimate with her that he had so eagerly sought her friend's company. Cayrol, in learning the Prince's secret, resumed his usual reserved manner. He knew that Micheline was engaged to Pierre Delarue, but still, women were so whimsical! Who could tell? Perhaps Mademoiselle Desvarences had looked favorably upon the handsome Serge.

He was really admirable to view, this Panine, with his blue eyes, pure as a maiden's, and his long fair mustache falling on each side of his rosy mouth. He had a truly royal bearing, and was descended from an ancient aristocratic race; he had a charming hand and an arched foot, enough to make a woman envious. Soft and insinuating with his tender voice and sweet Slavonic accent, he was no ordinary man, but one usually creating a great impression wherever he went.

His story was well known in Paris. He was born in the province of Posen, so violently seized on by Prussia, that octopus of Europe. Serge's

father had been killed during the insurrection of 1848, and he, when a year old, was brought by his uncle, Thaddeus Panine, to France, and was educated at the College Rollin, where he had not acquired over much learning.

In 1866, at the moment when war broke out between Prussia and Austria, Serge was eighteen years old. By his uncle's orders he had left Paris, and had entered himself for the campaign in an Austrian cavalry regiment. All who bore the name of Panine, and had strength to hold a sword or carry a gun, had risen to fight the oppressor of Poland. Serge, during this short and bloody struggle, showed prodigies of valor. On the night of Sadowa, out of seven bearing the name of Panine, who had served against Prussia, five were dead, one was wounded; Serge alone was untouched, though red with the blood of his uncle Thaddeus, who was killed by the bursting of a shell. All these Panines, living or dead, had gained honors. When they were spoken of before Austrians or Poles, they were called heroes.

Such a man was a dangerous companion for a young, simple, and artless girl like Micheline. His adventures were bound to please her imagination, and his beauty sure to charm her eyes. Cayrol was a prudent man; he watched, and it was not long before he perceived that Micheline treated the Prince with marked favor. The quiet young girl became animated when Serge was there. Was there love in this transformation? Cayrol did not hesitate. He guessed at once that the future would be Panine's, and that the maintenance of his own influence in the house of Desvarences depended on the attitude which he was about to take. He passed over to the side of the newcomer with arms and baggage, and placed himself entirely at his disposal.

It was he who three weeks before, in the name of Panine, had made overtures to Madame Desvarences. The errand had been difficult, and the banker had turned his tongue several times in his mouth before speaking. Still, Cayrol could overcome all difficulties. He was able to explain the object of his mission without Madame flying into a passion. But, the explanation over, there was a terrible scene. He witnessed one of the most awful bursts of rage that it was possible to expect from a violent woman. The mistress treated the friend of the family as one would not have dared to treat a petty commercial traveller who came to a private house to offer his wares. She showed him the door, and desired him not to darken the threshold again.

But if Cayrol was resolute he was equally patient. He listened without saying a word to the reproaches of Madame Desvarences, who was exasperated that a candidate should be set up in opposition to the son-in-law of her choosing. He did not go, and when Madame Desvarences was a little calmed by the letting out of her indignation, he argued with her. The mistress was too hasty about the business; it was no use deciding without reflecting. Certainly, nobody esteemed Pierre Delarue more than he did; but it was necessary to know whether Micheline loved him. A

childish affection was not love, and Prince Panine thought he might hope that Mademoiselle Desvarenes—

The mistress did not allow Cayrol to finish his sentence; she rang the bell and asked for her daughter. This time, Cayrol prudently took the opportunity of disappearing. He had opened fire; it was for Micheline to decide the result of the battle. The banker awaited the issue of the interview between mother and daughter in the next room. Through the door he heard the irritated tones of Madame Desvarenes, to which Micheline answered softly and slowly. The mother threatened and stormed. Coldly and quietly the daughter received the attack. The tussle lasted about an hour, when the door reopened and Madame Desvarenes appeared, pale and still trembling, but calmed. Micheline, wiping her beautiful eyes, still wet with tears, regained her apartment.

"Well," said Cayrol timidly, seeing the mistress standing silent and absorbed before him; "I see with pleasure that you are less agitated. Did Mademoiselle Micheline give you good reasons?"

"Good reasons!" cried Madame Desvarenes with a violent gesture, last flash of the late storm. "She cried, that's all. And you know when she cries I no longer know what I do or say! She breaks my heart with her tears. And she knows it. Ah! it is a great misfortune to love children too much!"

This energetic woman was conquered, and yet understood that she was wrong to allow herself to be conquered. She fell into a deep reverie, and forgot that Cayrol was present. She thought of the future which she had planned for Micheline, and which the latter carelessly destroyed in an instant.

Pierre, now an orphan, would have been a real son to the mistress. He would have lived in her house, and have surrounded her old age with care and affection. And then, he was so full of ability that he could not help attaining a brilliant position. She would have helped him, and would have rejoiced in his success. And all this scaffolding was overturned because this Panine had crossed Micheline's path. A foreign adventurer, prince perhaps, but who could tell? Lies are easily told when the proofs of the lie have to be sought beyond the frontiers. And it was her daughter who was going to fall in love with an insipid fop who only coveted her millions. That she should see such a man enter her family, steal Micheline's love from her, and rummage her strongbox! In a moment she vowed mortal hatred against Panine, and resolved to do all she could to prevent the longed-for marriage with her daughter.

She was disturbed in her meditation by Cayrol's voice. He wished to take an answer to the Prince. What must he say to him?

"You will let him know," said Madame Desvarenes, "that he must refrain

from seeking opportunities of meeting my daughter. If he be a gentleman, he will understand that his presence, even in Paris, is disagreeable to me. I ask him to go away for three weeks. After that time he may come back, and I agree to give him an answer."

"You promise me that you will not be vexed with me for having undertaken this errand?"

"I promise on one condition. It is, that not a word which has passed here this morning shall be repeated to any one. Nobody must suspect the proposal that you have just made to me."

Cayrol swore to hold his tongue, and he kept his word. Prince Panine left that same night for England.

Madame Desvarences was a woman of quick resolution. She took a sheet of paper, a pen, and in her large handwriting wrote the following lines addressed to Pierre:

"If you do not wish to find Micheline married on your return, come back without a moment's delay."

She sent this ominous letter to the young man, who was then in Tripoli. That done, she returned to her business as if nothing had happened. Her placid face did not once betray the anguish of her heart during those three weeks.

The term fixed by Madame Desvarences with the Prince had expired that morning. And the severity with which the mistress had received the Minister of War's Financial Secretary was a symptom of the agitation in which the necessity of coming to a decision placed Micheline's mother. Every morning for the last week she had expected Pierre to arrive. What with having to give an answer to the Prince as she had promised, and the longing to see him whom she loved as a son, she felt sick at heart and utterly cast down. She thought of asking the Prince for a respite. It was for that reason she was glad to see Cayrol.

The latter, therefore, had arrived opportunely. He looked as if he brought startling news. By a glance he drew Madame Desvarences's attention to Marechal and seemed to say:

"I must be alone with you; send him away."

The mistress understood, and with a decided gesture said:

"You can speak before Marechal; he knows all my affairs as well as I do myself."

"Even the matter that brings me here?" replied Cayrol, with surprise.

"Even that. It was necessary for me to have some one to whom I could speak, or else my heart would have burst! Come, do your errand. The Prince?"

"A lot it has to do with the Prince," exclaimed Cayrol, in a huff. "Pierre has arrived!"

Madame Desvarenes rose abruptly. A rush of blood rose to her face, her eyes brightened, and her lips opened with a smile.

"At last!" she cried. "But where is he? How did you hear of his return?"

"Ah! faith, it was just by chance. I was shooting yesterday at Fontainebleau, and I returned this morning by the express. On arriving at Paris, I alighted on the platform, and there I found myself face to face with a tall young man with a long beard, who, seeing me pass, called out, 'Ah, Cayrol!' It was Pierre. I only recognized him by his voice. He is much changed; with his beard, and his complexion bronzed like an African."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. He pressed my hand. He looked at me for a moment with glistening eyes. There was something on his lips which he longed to ask, yet did not; but I guessed it. I was afraid of giving way to tenderness, that might have ended in my saying something foolish, so I left him."

"How long ago is that?"

"About an hour ago. I only just ran home before coming on here. There I found Panine waiting for me. He insisted upon accompanying me. I hope you won't blame him?"

Madame Desvarenes frowned.

"I will not see him just now," she said, looking at Cayrol with a resolute air. "Where did you leave him?"

"In the garden, where I found the young ladies."

As if to verify the banker's words, a merry peal of laughter was heard through the half-open window. It was Micheline, who, with returning gaiety, was making up for the three weeks' sadness she had experienced during Panine's absence.

Madame Desvarenes went to the window, and looked into the garden. Seated on the lawn, in large bamboo chairs, the young girls were listening to a story the Prince was telling. The morning was bright and mild; the sun shining through Micheline's silk sunshade lit up her fair

head. Before her, Serge, bending his tall figure, was speaking with animation. Micheline's eyes were softly fixed on him. Reclining in her armchair, she allowed herself to be carried away with his conversation, and thoroughly enjoyed his society, of which she had been deprived for the last three weeks. Beside her, Jeanne, silently watching the Prince, was mechanically nibbling, with her white teeth, a bunch of carnations which she held in her hands. A painful thought contracted Mademoiselle de Cernay's brow, and her pale lips on the red flowers seemed to be drinking blood.

The mistress slowly turned away from this scene. A shadow had crossed her brow, which had, for a moment, become serene again at the announcement of Pierre's arrival. She remained silent for a little while, as if considering; then coming to a resolution, and turning to Cayrol, she said:

"Where is Pierre staying?"

"At the Hotel du Louvre," replied the banker.

"Well, I'm going there."

Madame Desvarenes rang the bell violently.

"My bonnet, my cloak, and the carriage," she said, and with a friendly nod to the two men, she went out quickly.

Micheline was still laughing in the garden. Marechal and Cayrol looked at each other. Cayrol was the first to speak.

"The mistress told you all about the matter then? How is it you never spoke to me about it?"

"Should I have been worthy of Madame Desvarenes's confidence had I spoken of what she wished to keep secret?"

"To me?"

"Especially to you. The attitude which you have taken forbade my speaking. You favor Prince Panine?"

"And you; you are on Pierre Delarue's side?"

"I take no side. I am only a subordinate, you know; I do not count."

"Do not attempt to deceive me. Your influence over the mistress is great. The confidence she has in you is a conclusive proof. Important events are about to take place here. Pierre has certainly returned to claim his right as betrothed, and Mademoiselle Micheline loves Prince Serge. Out of this a serious conflict will take place in the house.

There will be a battle. And as the parties in question are about equal in strength, I am seeking adherents for my candidate. I own, in all humility, I am on love's side. The Prince is beloved by Mademoiselle Desvarences, and I serve him. Micheline will be grateful, and will do me a turn with Mademoiselle de Cernay. As to you, let me give you a little advice. If Madame Desvarences consults you, speak well of Panine. When the Prince is master here, your position will be all the better for it."

Marechal had listened to Cayrol without anything betraying the impression his words created. He looked at the banker in a peculiar manner, which caused him to feel uncomfortable, and made him lower his eyes.

"Perhaps you do not know, Monsieur Cayrol," said the secretary, after a moment's pause, "how I entered this firm. It is as well in that case to inform you. Four years ago, I was most wretched. After having sought fortune ten times without success, I felt myself giving way morally and physically. There are some beings gifted with energy, who can surmount all the difficulties of life. You are one of those. As for me, the struggle exhausted my strength, and I came to grief. It would take too long to enumerate all the ways of earning my living I tried. Few even fed me; and I was thinking of putting an end to my miserable existence when I met Pierre. We had been at college together. I went toward him; he was on the quay. I dared to stop him. At first he did not recognize me, I was so haggard, so wretched-looking! But when I spoke, he cried, 'Marechal!' and, without blushing at my tatters, put his arms round my neck. We were opposite the Belle Jardiniere, the clothiers; he wanted to rig me out. I remember as if it were but yesterday I said, 'No, nothing, only find me work!'—'Work, my poor fellow,' he answered, 'but just look at yourself; who would have confidence to give you any? You look like a tramp, and when you accosted me a little while ago, I asked myself if you were not about to steal my watch!' And he laughed gayly, happy at having found me again, and thinking that he might be of use to me. Seeing that I would not go into the shop, he took off his overcoat, and put it on my back to cover my tattered clothes, and there and then he took me to Madame Desvarences. Two days later I entered the office. You see the position I hold, and I owe it to Pierre. He has been more than a friend to me—a brother. Come! after that, tell me what you would think of me if I did what you have just asked me?"

Cayrol was confused; he twisted his bristly beard with his fingers.

"Faith, I do not say that your scruples are not right; but, between ourselves, every step that is taken against the Prince will count for naught. He will marry Mademoiselle Desvarences."

"It is possible. In that case, I shall be here to console Pierre and sympathize with him."

"And in the mean time you are going to do all you can in his favor?"

"I have already had the honor of telling you that I cannot do anything."

"Well, well. One knows what talking means, and you will not change my idea of your importance. You take the weaker side then; that's superb!"

"It is but strictly honest," said Marechal. "It is true that that quality has become very rare!"

Cayrol wheeled round on his heels. He took a few steps toward the door, then, returning to Marechal, held out his hand:

"Without a grudge, eh?"

The secretary allowed his hand to be shaken without answering, and the banker went out, saying to himself:

"He is without a sou and has prejudices! There's a lad without a future."

CHAPTER IV

THE RIVALS

On reaching Paris, Pierre Delarue experienced a strange feeling. In his feverish haste he longed for the swiftness of electricity to bring him near Micheline. As soon as he arrived in Paris, he regretted having travelled so fast. He longed to meet his betrothed, yet feared to know his fate.

He had a sort of presentiment that his reception would destroy his hopes. And the more he tried to banish these thoughts, the more forcibly they returned. The thought that Micheline had forgotten her promise made the blood rush to his face.

Madame Desvarennes's short letter suggested it. That his betrothed was lost to him he understood, but he would not admit it. How was it possible that Micheline should forget him? All his childhood passed before his mind. He remembered the sweet and artless evidences of affection which the young girl had given him. And yet she no longer loved him! It was her own mother who said so. After that could he still hope?

A prey to this deep trouble, Pierre entered Paris. On finding himself face to face with Cayrol, the young man's first idea was, as Cayrol had guessed, to cry out, "What's going on? Is all lost to me?" A sort of anxious modesty kept back the words on his lips. He would not admit that

he doubted. And, then, Cayrol would only have needed to answer that all was over, and that he could put on mourning for his love. He turned around, and went out.

The tumult of Paris surprised and stunned him. After spending a year in the peaceful solitudes of Africa, to find himself amid the cries of street-sellers, the rolling of carriages, and the incessant movement of the great city, was too great a contrast to him. Pierre was overcome by languor; his head seemed too heavy for his body to carry; he mechanically entered a cab which conveyed him to the Hotel du Louvre. Through the window, against the glass of which he tried to cool his heated forehead, he saw pass in procession before his eyes, the Column of July, the church of St. Paul, the Hotel de Ville in ruins, and the colonnade of the Louvre.

An absurd idea took possession of him. He remembered that during the Commune he was nearly killed in the Rue Saint-Antoine by the explosion of a shell, thrown by the insurgents from the heights of Pere-Lachaise. He thought that had he died then, Micheline would have wept for him. Then, as in a nightmare, it seemed to him that this hypothesis was realized. He saw the church hung with black, he heard the funeral chants. A catafalque contained his coffin, and slowly his betrothed came, with a trembling hand, to throw holy water on the cloth which covered the bier. And a voice said within him:

"You are dead, since Micheline is about to marry another."

He made an effort to banish this importunate idea. He could not succeed. Thoughts flew through his brain with fearful rapidity. He thought he was beginning to be seized with brain fever. And this dismal ceremony kept coming before him with the same chants, the same words repeated, and the same faces appearing. The houses seemed to fly before his vacant eyes. To stop this nightmare he tried to count the gas-lamps: one, two, three, four, five—but the same thought interrupted his calculation:

"You are dead, since your betrothed is about to marry another."

He was afraid he was going mad. A sharp pain shot across his forehead just above the right eyebrow. In the old days he had felt the same pain when he had overworked himself in preparing for his examinations at the Polytechnic School. With a bitter smile he asked himself if one of the aching vessels in his brain was about to burst?

The sudden stoppage of the cab freed him from this torture. The hotel porter opened the door. Pierre stepped out mechanically. Without speaking a word he followed a waiter, who showed him to a room on the second floor. Left alone, he sat down. This room, with its commonplace furniture, chilled him. He saw in it a type of his future life: lonely and desolate. Formerly, when he used to come to Paris, he stayed with Madame Desvarenes, where he had the comforts of home, and every one

looked on him affectionately.

Here, at the hotel, orders were obeyed with politeness at so much a day. Would it always be thus in future?

This painful impression dissipated his weakness as by enchantment. He so bitterly regretted the sweets of the past, that he resolved to struggle to secure them for the future. He dressed himself quickly, and removed all the traces of his journey; then, his mind made up, he jumped into a cab, and drove to Madame Desvarences's. All indecision had left him. His fears now seemed contemptible. He must defend himself. It was a question of his happiness.

At the Place de la Concorde a carriage passed his cab. He recognized the livery of Madame Desvarences's coachman and leant forward. The mistress did not see him. He was about to stop the cab and tell his driver to follow her carriage when a sudden thought decided him to go on. It was Micheline he wanted to see. His future destiny depended on her. Madame Desvarences had made him clearly understand that by calling for his help in her fatal letter. He went on his way, and in a few minutes arrived at the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique.

Micheline and Jeanne were still in the garden, seated in the same place on the lawn. Cayrol had joined Serge. Both, profiting by the lovely morning, were enjoying the society of their beloved ones. A quick step on the gravel walk attracted their attention. In the sunlight a young man, whom neither Jeanne nor Micheline recognized, was advancing. When about two yards distant from the group he slowly raised his hat.

Seeing the constrained and astonished manner of the young girls, a sad smile played on his lips, then he said, softly:

"Am I then so changed that I must tell you my name?"

At these words Micheline jumped up, she became as white as her collar, and trembling, with sobs rising to her lips, stood silent and petrified before Pierre. She could not speak, but her eyes were eagerly fixed on the young man. It was he, the companion of her youth, so changed that she had not recognized him; worn by hard work, perhaps by anxieties, bronzed—and with his face hidden by a black beard which gave him a manly and energetic appearance. It was certainly he, with a thin red ribbon at his button-hole, which he had not when he went away, and which showed the importance of the works he had executed and of great perils he had faced. Pierre, trembling and motionless, was silent; the sound of his voice choked with emotion had frightened him. He had expected a cold reception, but this scared look, which resembled terror, was beyond all he had pictured. Serge wondered and watched.

Jeanne broke the icy silence. She went up to Pierre, and presented her forehead.

"Well," she said, "don't you kiss your friends?"

She smiled affectionately on him. Two grateful tears sparkled in the young man's eyes, and fell on Mademoiselle de Cernay's hair. Micheline, led away by the example and without quite knowing what she was doing, found herself in Pierre's arms. The situation was becoming singularly perplexing to Serge. Cayrol, who had not lost his presence of mind, understood it, and turning toward the Prince, said:

"Monsieur Pierre Delarue: an old friend and companion of Mademoiselle Desvarences's; almost a brother to her," thus explaining in one word all that could appear unusual in such a scene of tenderness.

Then, addressing Pierre, he simply added—"Prince Panine."

The two men looked at each other. Serge, with haughty curiosity; Pierre, with inexpressible rage. In a moment, he guessed that the tall, handsome man beside his betrothed was his rival. If looks could kill, the Prince would have fallen down dead. Panine did not deign to notice the hatred which glistened in the eyes of the newcomer. He turned toward Micheline with exquisite grace and said:

"Your mother receives her friends this evening, I think, Mademoiselle; I shall have the honor of paying my respects to her."

And taking leave of Jeanne with a smile, and of Pierre with a courteous bow, he left, accompanied by Cayrol.

Serge's departure was a relief to Micheline. Between these two men to whom she belonged, to the one by a promise, to the other by an avowal, she felt ashamed. Left alone with Pierre she recovered her self-possession, and felt full of pity for the poor fellow threatened with such cruel deception. She went tenderly to him, with her loving eyes of old, and pressed his hand:

"I am very glad to see you again, my dear Pierre; and my mother will be delighted. We were very anxious about you. You have not written to us for some months."

Pierre tried to joke: "The post does not leave very often in the desert. I wrote whenever I had an opportunity."

"Is it so very pleasant in Africa that you could not tear yourself away a whole year?"

"I had to take another journey on the coast of Tripoli to finish my labors. I was interested in my work, and anxious not to lose the result of so much effort, and I think I have succeeded—at least in—the opinion

of my employers," said the young man, with a ghastly smile.

"My dear Pierre, you come in time from the land of the sphinx," interrupted Jeanne gravely, and glancing intently at Micheline. "There is here, I assure you, a difficult enigma to solve."

"What is it?"

"That which is written in this heart," she replied, lightly touching her companion's breast.

"From childhood I have always read it as easily as a book," said Pierre, with tremulous voice, turning toward the amazed Micheline.

Mademoiselle de Cernay tossed her head.

"Who knows? Perhaps her disposition has changed during your absence;" and nodding pleasantly, she went toward the house.

Pierre followed her for a moment with his eyes, then, turning toward his betrothed, said:

"Micheline, shall I tell you your secret? You no longer love me."

The young girl started. The attack was direct. She must at once give an explanation. She had often thought of what she would say when Pierre came back to her. The day had arrived unexpectedly. And the answers she had prepared had fled. The truth appeared harsh and cold. She understood that the change in her was treachery, of which Pierre was the innocent victim; and feeling herself to blame, she waited tremblingly the explosion of this loyal heart so cruelly wounded. She stammered, in tremulous accents:

"Pierre, my friend, my brother."

"Your brother!" cried the young man, bitterly. "Was that the name you were to give me on my return?"

At these words, which so completely summed up the situation, Micheline remained silent. Still she felt that at all hazards she must defend herself. Her mother might come in at any moment. Between Madame Desvarences and her betrothed, what would become of her? The hour was decisive. Her strong love for Serge gave her fresh energy.

"Why did you go away?" she asked, with sadness.

Pierre raised with pride his head which had been bent with anguish.

"To be worthy of you," he merely said.

"You did not need to be worthy of me; you, who were already above every one else. We were betrothed; you only had to guard me."

"Could not your heart guard itself?"

"Without help, without the support of your presence and affection?"

"Without other help or support than I had myself: Hope and Remembrance."

Micheline turned pale. Each word spoken by Pierre made her feel the unworthiness of her conduct more completely. She endeavored to find a new excuse:

"Pierre, you know I was only a child."

"No," said the young man, with choked voice, "I see that you were already a woman; a being weak, inconstant, and cruel; who cares not for the love she inspires, and sacrifices all to the love she feels."

So long as Pierre had only complained, Micheline felt overwhelmed and without strength; but the young man began to accuse. In a moment the young girl regained her presence of mind and revolted.

"Those are hard words!" she exclaimed.

"Are they not deserved?" cried Pierre, no longer restraining himself. "You saw me arrive trembling, with eyes full of tears, and not only had you not an affectionate word to greet me with, but you almost accuse me of indifference. You reproach me with having gone away. Did you not know my motive for going? I was betrothed to you; you were rich and I was poor. To remove this inequality I resolved to make a name. I sought one of those perilous scientific missions which bring celebrity or death to those who undertake them. Ah! think not that I went away from you without heart-breaking! For a year I was almost alone, crushed with fatigue, always in danger; the thought that I was suffering for you supported me.

"When lost in the vast desert, I was sad and discouraged; I invoked you, and your sweet face gave me fresh hope and energy. I said to myself, 'She is waiting for me. A day will come when I shall win the prize of all my trouble.' Well, Micheline, the day has come; here I am, returned, and I ask for my reward. Is it what I had a right to expect? While I was running after glory, another, more practical and better advised, stole your heart. My happiness is destroyed. You did well to forget me. The fool who goes so far away from his betrothed does not deserve her faithfulness. He is cold, indifferent, he does not know how to love!"

These vehement utterances troubled Micheline deeply. For the first time she understood her betrothed, felt how much he loved her, and regretted

not having known it before. If Pierre had spoken like that before going away, who knows? Micheline's feelings might have been quickened. No doubt she would have loved him. It would have come naturally. But Pierre had kept the secret of his passion for the young girl to himself. It was only despair, and the thought of losing her, that made him give vent to his feelings now.

"I see that I have been cruel and unjust to you," said Micheline. "I deserve your reproaches, but I am not the only one to blame. You, too, are at fault. What I have just heard has upset me. I am truly sorry to cause you so much pain; but it is too late. I no longer belong to myself."

"And did you belong to yourself?"

"No! It is true, you had my word, but be generous. Do not abuse the authority which being my betrothed gives you. That promise I would now ask back from you."

"And if I refuse to release you from your promise? If I tried to, regain your love?" cried Pierre, forcibly. "Have I not the right to defend myself? And what would you think of my love if I relinquished you so readily?"

There was a moment's silence. The interview was at its highest pitch of excitement. Micheline knew that she must put an end to it. She replied with firmness:

"A girl such as I am will not break her word; mine belongs to you, but my heart is another's. Say you insist, and I am ready to keep my promise to become your wife. It is for you to decide."

Pierre gave the young girl a look which plunged into the depths of her heart. He read there her resolve that she would act loyally, but that at the same time she would never forget him who had so irresistibly gained her heart. He made a last effort.

"Listen," he said, with ardent voice, "it is impossible that you can have forgotten me so soon: I love you so much! Remember our affection in the old days, Micheline. Remember!"

He no longer argued; he pleaded. Micheline felt victorious. She was moved with pity.

"Alas! my poor Pierre, my affection was only friendship, and my heart has not changed toward you. The love which I now feel is quite different. If it had not come to me, I might have been your wife. And I esteemed you so much, that I should have been happy. But now I understand the difference. You, whom I had accepted, would never have been more to me than a tender companion; he whom I have chosen will be

my master.”

Pierre uttered a cry at this cruel and frank avowal.

”Ah! how you hurt me!”

And bitter tears rolled down his face to the relief of his overburdened heart. He sank on to a seat, and for a moment gave way to violent grief. Micheline, more touched by his despair than she had been by his reproaches, went to him and wiped his face with her lace handkerchief. Her white hand was close to the young man’s mouth,—and he kissed it eagerly. Then, as if roused by the action, he rose with a changed look in his eyes, and seized the young girl in his arms. Micheline did not utter a word. She looked coldly and resolutely at Pierre, and threw back her head to avoid the contact of his eager lips. That look was enough. The arms which held her were unloosed, and Pierre moved away, murmuring:

”I beg your pardon. You see I am not in my right mind.”

Then passing his hand across his forehead as if to chase away a wicked thought, he added:

”So it is irrevocable? You love him?”

”Enough to give you so much pain; enough to be nobody’s unless I belong to him.”

Pierre reflected a moment, then, coming to a decision:

”Go, you are free,” said he; ”I give you back your promise.”

Micheline uttered a cry of triumph, which made him who had been her betrothed turn pale. She regretted not having hidden her joy better. She approached Pierre and said:

”Tell me that you forgive me!”

”I forgive you.”

”You still weep?”

”Yes; I am weeping over my lost happiness. I thought the best means of being loved were to deserve it. I was mistaken. I will courageously atone for my error. Excuse my weakness, and believe that you will never have a more faithful and devoted friend than I.”

Micheline gave him her hand, and, smiling, bowed her forehead to his lips. He slowly impressed a brotherly kiss, which effaced the burning trace of the one which he had stolen a moment before.

At the same time a deep voice was heard in the distance, calling Pierre. Micheline trembled.

"'Tis my mother," she said. "She is seeking you. I will leave you. Adieu, and a thousand thanks from my very heart."

And nimbly springing behind a clump of lilac-trees in flower, Micheline disappeared.

Pierre mechanically went toward the house. He ascended the marble steps and entered the drawing-room. As he shut the door, Madame Desvarenes appeared.

CHAPTER V

A CRITICAL INTERVIEW

Madame Desvarenes had been driven to the Hotel du Louvre without losing a minute. She most wanted to know in what state of mind her daughter's betrothed had arrived in Paris. Had the letter, which brutally told him the truth, roused him and tightened the springs of his will? Was he ready for the struggle?

If she found him confident and bold, she had only to settle with him as to the common plan of action which must bring about the eviction of the audacious candidate who wished to marry Micheline. If she found him discouraged and doubtful of himself, she had decided to animate him with her ardor against Serge Panine.

She prepared these arguments on the way, and, boiling with impatience, outstripped in thought the fleet horse which was drawing her past the long railings of the Tuileries toward the Hotel du Louvre. Wrapped in her meditations she did not see Pierre. She was saying to herself:

"This fair-haired Polish dandy does not know with whom he has to deal. He will see what sort of a woman I am. He has not risen early enough in the morning to hoodwink me. If Pierre is only of the same opinion as I, we shall soon spoil this fortune-hunter's work."

The carriage stopped.

"Monsieur Pierre Delarue?" inquired the mistress.

"Madame, he went out a quarter of an hour ago."

"To go where?"

"He did not say."

"Do you know whether he will be absent long?"

"I don't know."

"Much obliged."

Madame Desvarences, quite discomfited by this mischance, reflected. Where could Pierre have gone? Probably to her house. Without losing a minute, she reentered the carriage, and gave orders to return to the Rue Saint-Dominique. If he had gone at once to her house, it was plain that he was ready to do anything to keep Micheline. The coachman who had received the order drove furiously. She said to herself:

"Pierre is in a cab. Allowing that he is driving moderately quick he will only have half-an-hour's start of me. He will pass through the office, will see Marechal, and however eager he be, will lose a quarter of an hour in chatting to him. It would be most vexing if he did anything foolish in the remaining fifteen minutes! The fault is mine: I ought to have sent him a letter at Marseilles, to tell him what line of conduct to adopt on his arrival. So long as he does not meet Micheline on entering the house!"

At that idea Madame Desvarences felt the blood rushing to her face. She put her head out of the carriage window, and called to the coachman:

"Drive faster!"

He drove more furiously still, and in a few minutes reached the Rue Saint-Dominique.

She tore into the house like a hurricane, questioned the hall-porter, and learned that Delarue had arrived. She hastened to Marechal, and asked him in such a strange manner, "Have you seen Pierre?" that he thought some accident had happened.

On seeing her secretary's scared look, she understood that what she most dreaded had come to pass. She hurried to the drawing-room, calling Pierre in a loud voice. The French window opened, and she found herself face to face with the young man. A glance at her adopted son's face increased her fears. She opened her arms and clasped Pierre to her heart.

After the first emotions were over, she longed to know what had happened during her absence, and inquired of Pierre:

"By whom were you received on arriving here?"

"By Micheline."

"That is what I feared! What did she tell you?"

"Everything!"

In three sentences these two strong beings had summed up all that had taken place. Madame Desvarences remained silent for a moment, then, with sudden tenderness, and as if to make up for her daughter's treachery, said:

"Come, let me kiss you again, my poor boy. You suffer, eh? and I too! I am quite overcome. For ten years I have cherished the idea of your marrying Micheline. You are a man of merit, and you have no relatives. You would not take my daughter away from me; on the contrary I think you like me, and would willingly live with me. In arranging this marriage I realized the dream of my life. I was not taking a son-in-law-I was gaining a new child."

"Believe me," said Pierre, sadly, "it is not my fault that your wish is not carried out."

"That, my boy, is another question!" cried Madame Desvarences, whose voice was at once raised two tones. "And that is where we do not agree. You are responsible for what has occurred. I know what you are going to tell me. You wished to bring laurels to Micheline as a dowry. That is all nonsense! When one leaves the Polytechnic School with honors, and with a future open to you like yours, it is not necessary to scour the deserts to dazzle a young girl. One begins by marrying her, and celebrity comes afterward, at the same time as the children. And then there was no need to risk all at such a cost. What, are we then so grand? Ex-bakers! Millionaires, certainly, which does not alter the fact that poor Desvarences carried out the bread, and that I gave change across the counter when folks came to buy sou-cakes! But you wanted to be a knight-errant, and, during that time, a handsome fellow. Did Micheline tell you the gentleman's name?"

"I met him when I came here; he was with her in the garden. We were introduced to each other."

"That was good taste," said Madame Desvarences with irony. "Oh, he is a youth who is not easily disturbed, and in his most passionate transports will not disarrange a fold of his cravat. You know he is a Prince? That is most flattering to the Desvarences! We shall use his coat-of-arms as our trade-mark. The fortune hunter, ugh! No doubt he said to himself, 'The baker has money—and her daughter is agreeable.' And he is making a business of it."

"He is only following the example of many of his equals. Marriage is to-day the sole pursuit of the nobility."

"The nobility! That of our country might be tolerated, but foreign noblemen are mere adventurers."

"It is well known that the Panines come from Posen—the papers have mentioned them more than twenty times."

"Why is he not in his own country?"

"He is exiled."

"He has done something wrong, then!"

"He has, like all his family, fought for independence."

"Then he is a revolutionist!"

"A patriot."

"You are very kind to tell me all that."

"I may hate Prince Panine," said Pierre, simply, "but that is no reason why I should not be just to him."

"So be it; he is an exceptional being, a great citizen, a hero, if you like. But that does not prove that he will make my daughter happy. And if you take my advice, we shall send him about his business in a very short time."

Madame Desvarenes was excited and paced hurriedly up and down the room.

The idea of resuming the offensive after she had been forced to act on the defensive for months past pleased her. She thought Pierre argued too much. A woman of action, she did not understand why Pierre had not yet come to a resolution. She felt that she must gain his confidence.

"You are master of the situation," she said. "The Prince does not suit me—"

"Micheline loves him," interrupted Pierre.

"She fancies so," replied Madame Desvarenes. "She has got it into her head, but it will wear off. You thoroughly understand that I did not bid you to come from Africa to be present at my daughter's wedding. If you are a man, we shall see some fun. Micheline is your betrothed. You have our word, and the word of a Desvarenes is as good as the signature. —It has never been dishonored. Well, refuse to give us back our promise. Gain time, make love, and take my daughter away from that

dandy.”

Pierre remained silent for a few minutes. In a moment he measured the extent of the mischief done, by seeing Micheline before consulting Madame Desvarences. With the help of this energetic woman he might have struggled, whereas left to his own strength, he had at the outset been vanquished and forced to lay down his arms. Not only had he yielded, but he had drawn his ally into his defeat.

”Your encouragements come too late,” said he. ”Micheline asked me to give her back her promise, and I gave it to her.”

”You were so weak as that!” cried Madame Desvarences. ”And she had so much boldness? Does she dote on him so? I suspected her plans, and I hastened to warn you. But all is not lost. You have given Micheline back her promise. So be it. But I have not given you back yours. You are pledged to me. I will not countenance the marriage which my daughter has arranged without my consent! Help me to break it off. And, faith, you could easily find another woman worth Micheline, but where shall I find a son-in-law worth you? Come, the happiness of us all is in peril; save it!”

”Why continue the struggle? I am beaten beforehand.”

”But if you forsake me, what can I do single-handed with Micheline?”

”Do what she wishes, as usual. You are surprised at my giving you this advice? It is no merit on my part. Until now you have refused your daughter’s request; but if she comes again beseeching and crying, you who are so strong and can say so well ’I will,’ will be weak and will not be able to refuse her her Prince. Believe me; consent willingly. Who knows? Your son-in-law may be grateful to you for it by-and-by.”

Madame Desvarences had listened to Pierre with amazement.

”Really, you are incredible,” she said; ”you discuss all this so calmly. Have you no grief?”

”Yes,” replied Pierre, solemnly, ”it is almost killing me.”

”Nonsense! You are boasting!” cried Madame Desvarences, vehemently. ”Ah, scholar! figures have dried up your heart!”

”No,” replied the young man, with melancholy, ”but work has destroyed in me the seductions of youth. It has made me thoughtful, and a little sad. I frightened Micheline, instead of attracting her. The worst is that we live in such a state of high pressure, it is quite impossible to grasp all that is offered to us in this life-work and pleasure. It is necessary to make a choice, to economize one’s time and strength, and to work with either the heart or the brain alone. The result is that the

neglected organ wastes away, and that men of pleasure remain all their lives mediocre workers, while hard workers are pitiful lovers. The former sacrifice the dignity of existence, the latter that which is the charm of existence. So that, in decisive moments, when the man of pleasure appeals to his intelligence, he finds he is unfit for duty, and when the man of toil appeals to his heart, he finds that he is unqualified for happiness."

"Well, my boy, so much the worse for the women who cannot appreciate men of work, and who allow themselves to be wheedled by men of pleasure. I never was one of those; and serious as you are, thirty years ago I would have jumped at you. But as you know your ailment so well, why don't you cure yourself? The remedy is at hand."

"What is it?"

"Strong will. Marry Micheline. I'll answer for everything."

"She does not love me."

"A woman always ends by loving her husband."

"I love Micheline too much to accept her hand without her heart."

Madame Desvarences saw that she would gain nothing, and that the game was irrevocably lost. A great sorrow stole over her. She foresaw a dark future, and had a presentiment that trouble had entered the house with Serge Panine. What could she do? Combat the infatuation of her daughter! She knew that life would be odious for her if Micheline ceased to laugh and to sing. Her daughter's tears would conquer her will. Pierre had told her truly. Where was the use of fighting when defeat was certain? She, too, felt that she was powerless, and with heartfelt sorrow came to a decision.

"Come, I see that I must make up my mind to be grandmother to little princes. It pleases me but little on the father's account. My daughter will have a sad lot with a fellow of that kind. Well, he had better keep in the right path; for I shall be there to call him to order. Micheline must be happy. When my husband was alive, I was already more of a mother than a wife; now my whole life is wrapped up in my daughter."

Then raising her vigorous arms with grim energy, she added:

"Do you know, if my daughter were made miserable through her husband, I should be capable of killing him."

These were the last words of the interview which decided the destiny of Micheline, of the Prince, of Madame Desvarences, and of Pierre. The

mistress stretched out her hand and rang the bell. A servant appeared, to whom she gave instructions to tell Marechal to come down. She thought it would be pleasant for Pierre to pour out his griefs into the heart of his friend. A man weeps with difficulty before a woman, and she guessed that the young man's heart was swollen with tears. Marechal was not far off. He arrived in a moment, and springing toward Pierre put his arms round his neck. When Madame Desvarenes saw the two friends fully engrossed with each other, she said to Marechal:

"I give you leave until this evening. Then bring Pierre back with you; I wish to see him after dinner."

And with a firm step she went toward Micheline's room, where the latter was waiting in fear to know the result of the interview.

CHAPTER VI

A SIGNIFICANT MEETING

The mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique is certainly one of the finest to be seen. Sovereigns alone have more sumptuous palaces. The wide staircase, of carved oak, is bordered by a bronze balustrade, made by Ghirlandajo, and brought from Florence by Sommervieux, the great dealer in curiosities. Baron Rothschild would consent to give only a hundred thousand francs for it. Madame Desvarenes bought it. The large panels of the staircase are hung with splendid tapestry, from designs by Boucher, representing the different metamorphoses of Jupiter. At each landing-place stands a massive Japanese vase of 'claisonne' enamel, supported by a tripod of Chinese bronze, representing chimeras. On the first floor, tall columns of red granite, crowned by gilt capitals, divide the staircase from a gallery, serving as a conservatory. Plaited blinds of crimson silk hang before the Gothic windows, filled with marvellous stained glass.

In the vestibule—the hangings of which are of Cordova-leather, with gold ground—seemingly awaiting the good pleasure of some grand lady, is a sedan-chair, decorated with paintings by Fragonard. Farther on, there is one of those superb carved mother-of-pearl coffers, in which Oriental women lay by their finery and jewellery. A splendid Venetian mirror, its frame embellished with tiny figure subjects, and measuring two metres in width and three in height, fills a whole panel of the vestibule. Portieres of Chinese satin, ornamented with striking embroidery, such as figures on a priest's chasuble, fall in sumptuous folds at the drawing-room and dining-room doors.

The drawing-room contains a splendid set of Louis Quatorze furniture,

of gilt wood, upholstered in fine tapestry, in an extraordinary state of preservation. Three crystal lustres, hanging at intervals along the room, sparkle like diamonds. The hangings, of woven silk and gold, are those which were sent as a present by Louis Quatorze to Monsieur de Pimentel, the Spanish Ambassador, to reward him for the part he had taken in the conclusion of the Treaty of the Pyrenees. These hangings are unique, and were brought back from Spain in 1814, in the baggage-train of Soult's army, and sold to an inhabitant of Toulouse for ten thousand francs. It was there that Madame Desvarenes discovered them in a garret in 1864, neglected by the grandchildren of the buyer, who were ignorant of the immense value of such unrivalled work. Cleverly mended, they are to-day the pride of the great trader's drawing-room. On the mantelpiece there is a large clock in Chinese lacquer, ornamented with gilt bronze, made on a model sent out from Paris in the reign of Louis Quatorze, and representing the Flight of the Hours pursued by Time.

Adjoining the great drawing-room is a boudoir upholstered in light gray silk damask, with bouquets of flowers. This is Madame Desvarenes's favorite room. A splendid Erard piano occupies one side of the apartment. Facing it is a sideboard in sculptured ebony, enriched with bronze, by Gouthieres. There are only two pictures on the walls: "The Departure of the Newly Married Couple," exquisitely painted by Lancret; and "The Prediction," an adorable work by Watteau, bought at an incredible price at the Pourtales sale. Over the chimney-piece is a miniature by Pommayrac, representing Micheline as a little child—a treasure which Madame Desvarenes cannot behold without tears coming to her eyes. A door, hidden by curtains, opens on to a staircase leading directly to the courtyard.

The dining-room is in the purest Renaissance style austere woodwork; immense chests of caned pearwood, on which stand precious ewers in Urbino ware, and dishes by Bernard Palissy. The high stone fireplace is surmounted by a portrait of Diana of Poitiers, with a crescent on her brow, and is furnished with firedogs of elaborately worked iron. The centre panel bears the arms of Admiral Bonnavet. Stained-glass windows admit a softly-tinted light. From the magnificently painted ceiling, a chandelier of brass repousse work hangs from the claws of a hovering eagle.

The billiard-room is in the Indian style. Magnificent panoplies unite Rajpoot shields, Mahratta scimitars, helmets with curtains of steel, rings belonging to Afghan chiefs, and long lances ornamented with white mares' tails, wielded by the horsemen of Cabul. The walls are painted from designs brought from Lahore. The panels of the doors were decorated by Gerome. The great artist has painted Nautch girls twisting their floating scarves, and jugglers throwing poignards into the air. Around the room are low divans, covered with soft and brilliant Oriental cloth. The chandelier is quite original in form, being the exact representation of the god Vishnu. From the centre of the body hangs a lotus leaf of emeralds, and from each of the four arms is suspended a lamp shaped like

a Hindu pagoda, which throws out a mellow light.

Madame Desvarences was entertaining her visitors in these celebrated apartments that evening. Marechal and Pierre had just come in, and were talking together near the fireplace. A few steps from them was a group, consisting of Cayrol, Madame Desvarences, and a third person, who had never until then put his foot in the house, in spite of intercessions in his favor made by the banker to Madame Desvarences. He was a tall, pale, thin man, whose skin seemed stretched on his bones, with a strongly developed under-jaw, like that of a ravenous animal, and eyes of indefinable color, always changing, and veiled behind golden-rimmed spectacles. His hands were soft and smooth, with moist palms and closely cut nails—vicious hands, made to take cunningly what they coveted. He had scanty hair, of a pale yellow, parted just above the ear, so as to enable him to brush it over the top of his head. This personage, clad in a double-breasted surtout, over a white waistcoat, and wearing a many-colored rosette, was called Hermann Herzog.

A daring financier, he had come from Luxembourg, preceded by a great reputation; and, in a few months, he had launched in Paris such a series of important affairs that the big-wigs on the Exchange felt bound to treat with him. There were many rumors current about him. Some said he was the most intelligent, most active, and most scrupulous of men that it was possible to meet. Others said that no greater scoundrel had ever dared the vengeance of the law, after plundering honest people. Of German nationality, those who cried him down said he was born at Mayence. Those who treated the rumors as legends said he was born at Frankfort, the most Gallic town beyond the river Rhine.

He had just completed an important line of railway from Morocco to the centre of our colony in Algeria, and now he was promoting a company for exporting grain and flour from America. Several times Cayrol had tried to bring Herzog and Madame Desvarences together. The banker had an interest in the grain and flour speculation, but he asserted that it would not succeed unless the mistress had a hand in it. Cayrol had a blind faith in the mistress's luck.

Madame Desvarences, suspicious of everything foreign, and perfectly acquainted with the rumors circulated respecting Herzog, had always refused to receive him. But Cayrol had been so importunate that, being quite tired of refusing, and, besides, being willing to favor Cayrol for having so discreetly managed the negotiations of Micheline's marriage, she had consented.

Herzog had just arrived. He was expressing to Madame Desvarences his delight at being admitted to her house. He had so often heard her highly spoken of that he had formed a high idea of her, but one which was, however, far below the reality; he understood now that it was an honor to be acquainted with her. He wheedled her with German grace, and with a German-Jewish accent, which reminds one of the itinerant merchants, who

offer you with persistence "a goot pargain."

The mistress had been rather cold at first, but Herzog's amiability had thawed her. This man, with his slow speech and queer eyes, produced a fascinating effect on one like a serpent. He was repugnant, and yet, in spite of one's self one was led on. He, had at once introduced the grain question, but in this he found himself face to face with the real Madame Desvarences; and no politeness held good on her part when it was a question of business. From his first words, she had found a weak point in the plan, and had attacked him with such plainness that the financier, seeing his enterprise collapse at the sound of the mistress's voice-like the walls of Jericho at the sound of the Jewish trumpets-had beaten a retreat, and had changed the subject.

He was about to float a credit and discount company superior to any in the world. He would come back and talk with Madame Desvarences about it, because she ought to participate in the large profits which the matter promised. There was no risk. The novelty of the undertaking consisted in the concurrence of the largest banking-houses of France and abroad, which would hinder all competition, and prevent hostility on the part of the great money-handlers. It was very curious, and Madame Desvarences would feel great satisfaction in knowing the mechanism of this company, destined to become, from the first, the most important in the world, and yet most easy to understand.

Madame Desvarences neither said "Yes" nor "No." Moved by the soft and insinuating talkativeness of Herzog, she felt herself treading on dangerous ground. It seemed to her that her foot was sinking, as in those dangerous peat-mosses of which the surface is covered with green grass, tempting one to run on it. Cayrol was under the charm. He drank in the German's words. This clever man, who had never till then been duped, had found his master in Herzog.

Pierre and Marechal had come nearer, and Madame Desvarences, profiting by this mingling of groups, introduced the men to each other. On hearing the name of Pierre Delarue, Herzog looked thoughtful, and asked if the young man was the renowned engineer whose works on the coast of Africa had caused so much talk in Europe? On Madame Desvarences replying in the affirmative, he showered well-chosen compliments on Pierre. He had had the pleasure of meeting Delarue in Algeria, when he had gone over to finish the railroad in Morocco.

But Pierre had stepped back on learning that the constructor of that important line was before him.

"Ah! is it you, sir, who carried out that job?" said he. "Faith! you treated those poor Moors rather hardly!"

He remembered the misery of the poor natives employed by Europeans who

superintended the work. Old men, women, and children were placed at the disposal of the contractors by the native authorities, to dig up and remove the soil; and these poor wretches, crushed with hard work, and driven with the lash by drunken overseers—who commanded them with a pistol in hand—under a burning sun, inhaled the noxious vapors arising from the upturned soil, and died like flies. It was a terrible sight, and one that Pierre could not forget.

But Herzog, with his cajoling sweetness, protested against this exaggerated picture. Delarue had arrived during the dog-days—a bad time. And then, it was necessary for the work to be carried on without delay. Besides, a few Moors, more or less—what did it matter? Negroes, all but monkeys!

Marechal, who had listened silently until then, interrupted the conversation, to defend the monkeys in the name of Littré. He had framed a theory, founded on Darwin, and tending to prove that men who despised monkeys despised themselves. Herzog, a little taken aback by this unexpected reply, had looked at Marechal slyly, asking himself if it was a joke. But, seeing Madame Desvarennes laugh, he recovered his self-possession. Business could not be carried on in the East as in Europe. And then, had it not always been thus? Had not all the great discoverers worked the countries which they discovered? Christopher Columbus, Cortez—had they not taken riches from the Indians, in exchange for the civilization which they brought them? He (Herzog) had, in making a railway in Morocco, given the natives the means of civilizing themselves. It was only fair that it should cost them something.

Herzog uttered his tirade with all the charm of which he was capable; he looked to the right and to the left to notice the effect. He saw nothing but constrained faces. It seemed as if they were expecting some one or something. Time was passing; ten o'clock had just struck. From the little boudoir sounds of music were occasionally heard, when Micheline's nervous hand struck a louder chord on her piano. She was there, anxiously awaiting some one or something. Jeanne de Cernay, stretched in an easy-chair, her head leaning on her hand, was dreaming.

During the past three weeks the young girl had changed. Her bright wit no longer enlivened Micheline's indolent calmness; her brilliant eyes were surrounded by blue rings, which denoted nights passed without sleep. The change coincided strangely with Prince Panine's departure for England, and the sending of the letter which recalled Pierre to Paris. Had the inhabitants of the mansion been less occupied with their own troubles, they would no doubt have noticed this sudden change, and have sought to know the reason. But the attention of all was concentrated on the events which had already troubled them, and which would no doubt be yet more serious to the house, until lately so quiet.

The visitors' bell sounded, and caused Micheline to rise. The blood rushed to her cheeks. She whispered, "It is he!" and, hesitating, she

remained a moment leaning on the piano, listening vaguely to the sounds in the drawing-room. The footman's voice announcing the visitor reached the young girls:

"Prince Panine."

Jeanne also rose then, and if Micheline had turned round she would have been frightened at the pallor of her companion. But Mademoiselle Desvarences was not thinking of Mademoiselle de Cernay; she had just raised the heavy door curtain, and calling to Jeanne, "Are you coming?" passed into the drawing-room:

It was indeed Prince Serge, who was expected by Cayrol with impatience, by Madame Desvarences with silent irritation, by Pierre with deep anguish. The handsome prince, calm and smiling, with white cravat and elegantly fitting dress-coat which showed off his fine figure, advanced toward Madame Desvarences before whom he bowed. He seemed only to have seen Micheline's mother. Not a look for the two young girls or the men who were around him. The rest of the universe did not seem to count. He bent as if before a queen, with a dash of respectful adoration. He seemed to be saying:

"Here I am at your feet; my life depends on you; make a sign and I shall be the happiest of men or the most miserable."

Micheline followed him with eyes full of pride; she admired his haughty grace and his caressing humility. It was by these contrasts that Serge had attracted the young girl's notice. She felt herself face to face with a strange nature, different from men around her, and had become interested in him. Then he had spoken to her, and his sweet penetrating voice had touched her heart.

What he had achieved with Micheline he longed to achieve with her mother. After placing himself at the feet of the mother of her whom he loved, he sought the road to her heart. He took his place beside the mistress and spoke. He hoped that Madame Desvarences would excuse the haste of his visit. The obedience which he had shown in going away must be a proof to her of his submission to her wishes. He was her most devoted and respectful servant. He resigned himself to anything she might exact of him.

Madame Desvarences listened to that sweet voice; she had never heard it so full of charm. She understood what influence this sweetness had exercised over Micheline; she repented not having watched over her more carefully, and cursed the hour that had brought all this evil upon them. She was obliged, however, to answer him. The mistress went straight to the point. She was not one to beat about the bush when once her mind was made up.

"You come, no doubt, sir, to receive an answer to the request you

addressed to me before your departure for England!"

The Prince turned slightly pale. The words which Madame Desvarences was about to pronounce were of such importance to him that he could not help feeling moved. He answered, in a suppressed tone:

"I would not have dared to speak to you on the subject, Madame, especially in public; but since you anticipate my desire, I admit I am waiting with deep anxiety for one word from you which will decide my fate."

He continued bent before Madame Desvarences like a culprit before his judge. The mistress was silent for a moment, as if hesitating before answering, and then said, gravely:

"That word I hesitated to pronounce, but some one in whom I have great confidence has advised me to receive you favorably."

"He, Madame, whoever he may be, has gained my everlasting gratitude."

"Show it to him," said Madame Desvarences; "he is the companion of Micheline's young days, almost a son to me."

And turning toward Pierre, she pointed him out to Panine.

Serge took three rapid strides toward Pierre, but quick as he had been Micheline was before him. Each of the lovers seized a hand of Pierre, and pressed it with tender effusion. Panine, with his Polish impetuosity, was making the most ardent protestations to Pierre—he would be indebted to him for life.

Micheline's late betrothed, with despair in his heart, allowed his hands to be pressed and wrung in silence. The voice of her whom he loved brought tears to his eyes.

"How generous and good you are!" said the young girl, "how nobly you have sacrificed yourself!"

"Don't thank me," replied Pierre; "I have no merit in accomplishing what you admire. I am weak, you see, and I could not bear to see you suffer."

There was a great commotion in the drawing-room. Cayrol was explaining to Herzog, who was listening with great attention, what was taking place. Serge Panine was to be Madame Desvarences's son-in-law. It was a great event.

"Certainly," said the German; "Madame Desvarences's son-in-law will become a financial power. And a Prince, too. What a fine name for a board of directors!"

The two financiers looked at each other for a moment; the same thought had struck them.

"Yes, but," replied Cayrol, "Madame Desvarences will never allow Panine to take part in business."

"Who knows?" said Herzog. "We shall see how the marriage settlements are drawn up."

"But," cried Cayrol, "I would not have it said that I was leading Madame Desvarences's son-in-law into speculations."

"Who is speaking of that?" replied Herzog, coldly. "Am I seeking shareholders? I have more money than I want; I refuse millions every day."

"Oh, I know capitalists run after you," said Cayrol, laughingly; "and to welcome them you affect the scruples of a pretty woman. But let us go and congratulate the Prince."

While Cayrol and Herzog were exchanging those few words which had such a considerable influence on the future of Serge Panine—a scene, terrible in its simplicity, was going on without being noticed. Micheline had thrown herself with a burst of tenderness into her mother's arms. Serge was deeply affected by the young girl's affection for him, when a trembling hand touched his arm. He turned round. Jeanne de Cernay was before him, pale and wan; her eyes sunken into her head like two black nails, and her lips tightened by a violent contraction. The Prince stood thunderstruck at the sight of her. He looked around him. Nobody was observing him. Pierre was beside Marechal, who was whispering those words which only true friends can find in the sad hours of life. Madame Desvarences was holding Micheline in her arms. Serge approached Mademoiselle de Cernay. Jeanne still fixed on him the same menacing look. He was afraid.

"Take care!" he said.

"Of what?" asked the young girl, with a troubled voice. "What have I to fear now?"

"What do you wish?" resumed Panine, with old firmness, and with a gesture of impatience.

"I wish to speak with you immediately."

"You see that is impossible."

"I must."

Cayrol and Herzog approached. Serge smiled at Jeanne with a sign of the head which meant "Yes." The young girl turned away in silence, awaiting the fulfilment of the promise made.

Cayrol took her by the hand with tender familiarity.

"What were you saying to the happy man who has gained the object of his dreams, Mademoiselle? It is not to him you must speak, but to me, to give me hope. The moment is propitious; it is the day for betrothals. You know how much I love you; do me the favor of no longer repulsing me as you have done hitherto! If you would be kind, how charming it would be to celebrate the two weddings on the same day. One church, one ceremony, one splendid feast would unite two happy couples. Is there nothing in this picture to entice you?"

"I am not easily enticed, as you know," said Jeanne, in a firm voice, trying to smile.

Micheline and Madame Desvarenes had drawn near.

"Come, Cayrol," said Serge, in a tone of command; "I am happy to-day; perhaps I may succeed in your behalf as I have done in my own. Let me plead your cause with Mademoiselle de Cernay?"

"With all my heart. I need an eloquent pleader," sighed the banker, shaking his head sadly.

"And you, Mademoiselle, will you submit to the trial?" asked the Prince, turning toward Jeanne. "We have always been good friends, and I shall be almost a brother to you. This gives me some right over your mind and heart, it seems to me. Do you authorize me to exercise it?"

"As you like, sir," answered Jeanne, coldly. "The attempt is novel. Who knows? Perhaps it will succeed!"

"May Heaven grant it," said Cayrol. Then, approaching Panine:

"Ah! dear Prince, what gratitude I shall owe you! You know," added he in a whisper, "if you need a few thousand louis for wedding presents—"

"Go, go, corrupter!" replied Serge, with the same forced gayety; "you are flashing your money in front of us. You see it is not invincible, as you are obliged to have recourse to my feeble talents. But know that I am working for glory."

And turning toward Madame Desvarenes he added: "I only ask a quarter of an hour."

"Don't defend yourself too much," said Micheline in her companion's ear, and giving her a tender kiss which the latter did not return.

"Come with me," said Micheline to Pierre, offering him her arm; "I want to belong to you alone while Serge is pleading with Jeanne. I will be your sister as formerly. If you only knew how I love you!"

The large French window which led to the garden had just been opened by Marechal, and the mild odors of a lovely spring night perfumed the drawing-room. They all went out on the lawn. Thousands of stars were twinkling in the sky, and the eyes of Micheline and Pierre were lifted toward the dark blue heavens seeking vaguely for the star which presided over their destiny. She, to know whether her life would be the long poem of love of which she dreamed; he, to ask whether glory, that exacting mistress for whom he had made so many sacrifices, would at least comfort him for his lost love.