

MONSIEUR - MADAME AND BEBE - V2

GUSTAVE DROZ*

BOOK 2.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLUE NOTE-BOOK

Toward midnight mamma made a sign to me with her eyes, and under cover of a lively waltz we slipped out of the drawing-room. In the hall the servants, who were passing to and fro, drew aside to let us go by them, but I felt that their eyes were fixed upon me with the curiosity which had pursued me since the morning. The large door giving on to the park was open, although the night was cool, and in the shadow I could make out groups of country folk gathered there to catch a glimpse of the festivities through the windows. These good people were laughing and whispering; they were silent for a moment as we advanced to ascend the staircase, but I once more felt that I was the mark of these inquisitive looks and the object of all these smiles. The face of mamma, who accompanied me, was much flushed, and large tears were flowing from her eyes.

How was it that an event so gay for some was so sad for others?

When I think over it now I can hardly keep my countenance. What silly terrors at that frightful yet charming moment! Yet, after all, one exaggerates things a great deal.

On reaching the first floor mamma stopped, choking, took my head in her hands, and kissed me on the forehead, and exclaimed, "Valentine!" I was not greatly moved by this outburst, knowing that mamma, since she has grown a little too stout, has some difficulty in getting upstairs. I judged, therefore, that the wish to take breath for a moment without appearing to do so had something to do with this sudden halt.

We entered the nuptial chamber; it was as coquettish as possible, refreshing to the eye, snug, elegant, and adorned with fine Louis XVI

*PDF created by pdfbooks.co.za

furniture, upholstered in Beauvais tapestry. The bed, above all, was a marvel of elegance, but to tell the truth I had no idea of it till a week later. At the outside it seemed to me that I was entering an austere-looking locality; the very air we breathed appeared to me to have something solemn and awe-striking about it.

"Here is your room, child," said mamma; "but first of all come and sit here beside me, my dear girl."

At these words we both burst into tears, and mamma then expressed herself as follows:

"The kiss you are giving me, Valentine, is the last kiss that I shall have from you as a girl. Your husband—for Georges is that now—"

At these words I shuddered slightly, and by a singular freak of my brain pictured to myself Monsieur Georges—Georges—my husband—in a cotton night cap and a dressing-gown. The vision flashed across my mind in the midst of the storm. I saw him just as plainly as if he had been there. It was dreadful. The nightcap came over his forehead, down to his eyebrows, and he said to me, pressing my hand; "At last, Valentine; you are mine; do you love me? oh! tell me, do you love me?" And as his head moved as he uttered these words, the horrible tuft at the end of his nightcap wagged as an accompaniment.

"No," I said to myself, "it is impossible for my husband to appear in such a fashion; let me banish this image—and yet my father wears the hideous things, and my brother, who is quite young, has them already. Men wear them at all ages, unless though—" It is frightful to relate, but Georges now appeared to me with a red-and-green bandanna handkerchief tied round his head. I would have given ten years of my life to be two hours older, and hurriedly passed my hand across my eyes to drive away these diabolical visions.

However, mamma, who had been still speaking all the time, attributing this movement to the emotion caused by her words, said, with great sweetness:

"Do not be alarmed, my dear Valentine; perhaps I am painting the picture in too gloomy colors; but my experience and my love render this duty incumbent upon me."

I have never heard mamma express herself so fluently. I was all the more surprised as, not having heard a word of what she had already said, this sentence seemed suddenly sprung upon me. Not knowing what to answer, I threw myself into the arms of mamma, who, after a minute or so, put me away gently, saying, "You are suffocating me, dear."

She wiped her eyes with her little cambric handkerchief, which was damp, and said, smilingly:

"Now that I have told you what my conscience imposed on me, I am strong. See, dear, I think that I can smile. Your husband, my dear child, is a man full of delicacy. Have confidence; accept all without misgiving."

Mamma kissed me on the forehead, which finished off her sentence, and added:

"Now, dear one, I have fulfilled a duty I regarded as sacred. Come here and let me take your wreath off."

"By this time," I thought, "they have noticed that I have left the drawing-room. They are saying, 'Where is the bride?' and smiling, 'Monsieur Georges is getting uneasy. What is he doing? what is he thinking? where is he?'"

"Have you tried on your nightcap, dear?" said mamma, who had recovered herself; "it looks rather small to me, but is nicely embroidered. Oh, it is lovely!"

And she examined it from every point of view.

At that moment there was a knock at the door. "It is I," said several voices, among which I distinguished the flute-like tones of my aunt Laura, and those of my godmother. Madame de P., who never misses a chance of pressing her two thick lips to some one's cheeks, accompanied them. Their eyes glittered, and all three had a sly and triumphant look, ferreting and inquisitive, which greatly intimidated me. Would they also set about fulfilling a sacred duty?

"Oh, you are really too pretty, my angel!" said Madame de P., kissing me on the forehead, after the moist fashion peculiar to her, and then sitting down in the large Louis XVI armchair.

My maid had not been allowed to undress me, so that all of them, taking off their gloves, set to work to render me this service. They tangled the laces, caught their own lace in the hooks, and laughed heartily all the while.

"It is the least that the oldest friend of the family," –she loved to speak of herself as such– "should make herself useful at such a moment," muttered Madame de P., holding her eyeglass in one hand and working with the other.

I passed into a little boudoir to complete my toilette for the night, and found on the marble of the dressing-table five or six bottles of scent, tied up with red, white, and blue ribbons—an act of attention on the part of my Aunt Laura. I felt the blood flying to my head; there was an unbearable singing in my ears. Now that I can coolly weigh the impressions I underwent, I can tell that what I felt above all was anger.

I would have liked to be in the farthest depths of the wildest forest in America, so unseemly did I find this curious kindness which haunted me with its attentions. I should have liked to converse a little with myself, to fathom my own emotion somewhat, and, in short, to utter a brief prayer before throwing myself into the torrent.

However, through the open door, I could hear the four ladies whispering together and stifling their outbursts of laughter; I had never seen them so gay. I made up my mind. I crossed the room, and, shaking off the pretty little white slippers which my mother had embroidered for me, jumped into bed. I was not long in finding out that it was no longer my own narrow little bed. It was immense, and I hesitated a moment, not knowing which way to turn. I felt nevertheless a feeling of physical comfort. The bed was warm, and I do not know what scent rose from its silken coverlet. I felt myself sink into the mass of feathers, the pillows, twice over too large and trimmed with embroidery, gave way as it were beneath me, burying me in a soft and perfumed abyss.

At length the ladies rose, and after giving a glance round the room, doubtless to make sure that nothing was lacking, approached the bed.

"Good-night, my dear girl," said my mother, bending over me.

She kissed me, carried her handkerchief, now reduced to a wet dab, to her eyes, and went out with a certain precipitation.

"Remember that the old friend of the family kissed you on this night, my love," said Madame de P., as she moistened my forehead.

"Come, my little lamb, good-night and sleep well," said my aunt, with her smile that seemed to issue from her nose. She added in a whisper: "You love him, don't you? The slyboots! she won't answer! Well, since you love him so much, don't tell him so, my dear. But I must leave you; you are sleepy. Goodnight."

And she went away, smiling.

At length I was alone. I listened; the doors were being closed, I heard a carriage roll along the road; the flame of the two candles placed upon the mantelshelf quivered silently and were reflected in the looking-glass.

I thought about the ceremony of that morning, the dinner, the ball. I said to myself, clenching my fists to concentrate my thoughts: "How was Marie dressed? She was dressed in—dressed in—dressed in—" I repeated the words aloud to impart more authority to them and oblige my mind to reply; but do what I would, it was impossible for me to drive away the thought that invaded my whole being.

"He is coming. What is he doing? Where is he? Perhaps he is on the

stairs now. How shall I receive him when he comes?"

I loved him; oh! with my whole soul, I can acknowledge it now; but I loved him quite at the bottom of my heart. In order to think of him I went down into the very lowest chamber of my heart, bolted the door, and crouched down in the darkest corner.

At last, at a certain moment, the floor creaked, a door was opened in the passage with a thousand precautions, and I heard the tread of a boot—a boot!

The boot ceased to creak, and I heard quite close to me, on the other side of the wall, which was nothing but a thin partition, an armchair being rolled across the carpet, and then a little cough, which seemed to me to vibrate with emotion. It was he! But for the partition I could have touched him with my finger. A few moments later I could distinguish the almost imperceptible sound of footsteps on the carpet; this faint sound rang violently in my head. All at once my breathing and my heart both stopped together; there was a tap at the door. The tapping was discreet, full of entreaty and delicacy. I wanted to reply, "Come in," but I had no longer any voice; and, besides, was it becoming to answer like that, so curtly and plainly? I thought "Come in" would sound horribly unseemly, and I said nothing. There was another tap. I should really have preferred the door to have been broken open with a hatchet or for him to have come down the chimney. In my agony I coughed faintly among my sheets. That was enough; the door opened, and I divined from the alteration in the light shed by the candles that some one at whom I did not dare look was interposing between them and myself.

This some one, who seemed to glide across the carpet, drew near the bed, and I could distinguish out of the corner of my eye his shadow on the wall. I could scarcely restrain my joy; my Captain wore neither cotton nightcap nor bandanna handkerchief. That was indeed something. However, in this shadow which represented him in profile, his nose had so much importance that amid all my uneasiness a smile flitted across my lips. Is it not strange how all these little details recur to your mind? I did not dare turn round, but I devoured with my eyes this shadow representing my husband; I tried to trace in it the slightest of his gestures; I even sought the varying expressions of his physiognomy, but, alas! in vain.

I do not know how to express in words all that I felt at that moment; my pen seems too clumsy to write my sensations, and, besides, did I really see deep into my heart?

Do men comprehend all this? Do they understand that the heart requires gradual changes, and that if a half-light awakens, a noon-day blaze dazzles and burns? It is not that the poor child, who is trembling in a corner, refuses to learn; far from that, she has aptitude, good-will, and a quick and ready intelligence; she knows she has reached the age at which it is necessary to know how to read; she rejects neither the

science nor even the teacher. It is the method of instruction that makes her uneasy. She is afraid lest this young professor, whose knowledge is so extensive, should turn over the pages of the book too quickly and neglect the A B C.

A few hours back he was the submissive, humble lover, ready to kneel down before her, hiding his knowledge as one hides a sin, speaking his own language with a thousand circumspections. At any moment it might have been thought that he was going to blush. She was a queen, he a child; and now all at once the roles are changed; it is the submissive subject who arrives in the college cap of a professor, hiding under his arm an unknown and mysterious book. Is the man in the college cap about to command, to smile, to obtrude himself and his books, to speak Latin, to deliver a lecture?

She does not know that this learned individual is trembling, too; that he is greatly embarrassed over his opening lesson, that emotion has caused him to forget his Latin, that his throat is parched and his legs are trembling beneath him. She does not know this, and I tell you between ourselves, it is not her self-esteem that suffers least at this conjecture. She suffers at finding herself, after so many signatures, contracts, and ceremonies-still a charming child, and nothing more.

I believe that the first step in conjugal life will, according to the circumstances accompanying it, give birth to captivating sympathies or invincible repulsion. But to give birth to these sympathies, to strike the spark that is to set light to this explosion of infinite gratitude and joyful love-what art, what tact, what delicacy, and at the same time what presence of mind are needed.

How was it that at the first word Georges uttered my terrors vanished? His voice was so firm and so sweet, he asked me so gayly for leave to draw near the fire and warm his feet, and spoke to me with such ease and animation of the incidents of the day. I said to myself, "It is impossible for the least baseness to be hidden under all this." In presence of so much good-humor and affability my scaffolding fell to pieces. I ventured a look from beneath the sheets: I saw him comfortably installed in the big armchair, and I bit my lips. I am still at a loss to understand this little fit of ill-temper. When one is reckoning on a fright, one is really disappointed at its delaying itself. Never had Georges been more witty, more affectionate, more well-bred; he was still the man of the day before. He must really have been very excited.

"You are tired out, I am certain, darling," he said.

The word "darling" made me start, but did not frighten me; it was the first time he had called me so, but I really could not refuse him the privilege of speaking thus. However it may be, I maintained my reserve, and in the same tone as one replies, "No thanks, I don't take tea," I answered:

"Oh, yes! I am worn out."

"I thought so," he added, approaching the bed; "you can not keep your eyes open; you can not even look at me, my dear little wife."

"I will leave you," continued he. "I will leave you; you need repose." And he drew still more closely to me, which was not natural. Then, stretching out his hand, which I knew was white and well cared for: "Won't you give me a little shake of the hand, dear? I am half asleep, too, my pretty little wife." His face wore an expression which was alarming, though not without its charm; as he said this, I saw clearly that he had lied to me like a demon, and that he was no more sleepy than I was.

However that may be, I was guilty of the fault, the carelessness that causes disaster, of letting him take my hand, which was straying by chance under the lace of the pillows.

I was that evening in a special condition of nervous sensibility, for at this contact a strange sensation ran through me from head to foot. It was not that the Captain's hand had the softness of satin—I believe that physical sensations, in us women, have causes directly contrary to those which move men; for that which caused me such lively emotion was precisely its firmness. There was something strong, manly, and powerful about it. He squeezed my hand rather strongly.

My rings, which I have a fancy for wearing all at once, hurt me, and—I really should not have believed it—I liked it very much, perhaps too much. For the first time I found an inexplicable, an almost intoxicating, charm in this intimate contact with a being who could have crushed me between his fingers, and that in the middle of the night too, in silence, without any possibility of help. It was horribly delicious.

I did not withdraw my hand, which he kissed, but lingeringly. The clock struck two, and the last sound had long since died away when his lips were still there, quivering with rapid little movements, which were so many imperceptible kisses, moist, warm, burning. I felt gleams of fire flashing around me. I wished to draw away my hand, but could not; I remember perfectly well that I could not. His moustache pricked me, and whiffs of the scent with which he perfumed it reached me and completed my trouble. I felt my nostrils dilating despite myself, and, striving but in vain to take refuge in my inmost being, I exclaimed inwardly: "Protect me, Lord, but this time with all your might. A drop of water, Lord; a drop of water!" I waited—no appreciable succor reached from above. It was not till a week afterward that I understood the intentions of Providence.

"You told me you were sleepy," I murmured, in a trembling voice. I was like a shipwrecked person clutching at a floating match-box; I knew quite

well that the Captain would not go away.

"Yes, I was sleepy, pet," said Georges, approaching his face to mine; "but now I am athirst." He put his lips to my ear and whispered softly, "Athirst for a kiss from you, love."

This "love" was the beginning of another life. The spouse now appeared, the past was fleeing away, I was entering on the future. At length I had crossed the frontier; I was in a foreign land. Oh! I acknowledge—for what is the use of feigning?—that I craved for this love, and I felt that it engrossed me and spread itself through me. I felt that I was getting out of my depth, I let go the last branch that held me to the shore, and to myself I repeated: "Yes, I love you; yes, I am willing to follow you; yes, I am yours, love, love, love!"

"Won't you kiss your husband; come, won't you?"

And his mouth was so near my own that it seemed to meet my lips.

"Yes," said I.

.....

August 7th, 185- How many times have I not read through you during the last two years, my little blue note-book! How many things I might add as marginal notes if you were not doomed to the flames, to light my first fire this autumn! How could I have written all this, and how is it that having done so I have not dared to complete my confidences! No one has seen you, at any rate; no one has turned your pages. Go back into your drawer, dear, with, pending the first autumn fire, a kiss from your Valentine.

NOTE.—Owing to what circumstances this blue note-book, doomed to the flames, was discovered by me in an old Louis XVI chiffonnier I had just bought does not greatly matter to you, dear reader, and would be out of my power to explain even if it did.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLUE NOTE-BOOK AGAIN

Only to think that I was going to throw you into the fire, poor dear! Was I not foolish? In whom else could I confide? If I had not you, to whom could I tell all those little things at which every one laughs, but which make you cry!

This evening, for instance, I dined alone, for Georges was invited out; well, to whom else can I acknowledge that when I found myself alone, face to face with a leg of mutton, cooked to his liking, and with the large carving-knife which is usually beside his plate, before me, I began to cry like a child? To whom else can I admit that I drank out of the Bohemian wine-glass he prefers, to console me a little?

But if I were to mention this they would laugh in my face. Father Cyprien himself, who nevertheless has a heart running over with kindness, would say to me:

”Let us pass that by, my dear child; let us pass that by.”

I know him so well, Father Cyprien; while you, you always listen to me, my poor little note-book; if a tear escapes me, you kindly absorb it and retain its trace like a good-hearted friend. Hence I love you.

And, since we are *tete-a-tete*, let us have a chat. You won't be angry with me for writing with a pencil, dear. You see I am very comfortably settled in my big *by-by* and I do not want to have any ink-stains. The fire sparkles on the hearth, the street is silent; let us forget that George will not return till midnight, and turn back to the past.

I can not recall the first month of that dear past without laughing and weeping at one and the same time.

How foolish we were! How sweet it was! There is a method of teaching swimming which is not the least successful, I am told. It consists in throwing the future swimmer into the water and praying God to help him. I am assured that after the first lesson he keeps himself afloat.

Well, I think that we women are taught to be wives in very much the same fashion.

Happy or otherwise—the point is open to discussion marriage is a hurricane—something unheard-of and alarming.

In a single night, and without any transition, everything is transformed and changes color; the erst while-cravatted, freshly curled, carefully dressed gentleman makes his appearance in a dressing-gown. That which was prohibited becomes permissible, the code is altered, and words acquire a meaning they never had before, *et cetera*, *et cetera*.

It is not that all this is so alarming, if taken the right way—a woman with some courage in her heart and some flexibility in her mind supports the shock and does not die under it; but the firmest of us are amazed at it, and stand open-mouthed amid all these strange novelties, like a penniless gourmand in the shop of Potel and Chabot.

They dare not touch these delicacies surrounding them, though invited to

taste. It is not that the wish or the appetite is lacking to them, but all these fine fruits have been offered them so lately that they have still the somewhat acid charm of green apples or forbidden fruit. They approach, but they hesitate to bite.

After all, why complain? What would one have to remember if one had entered married life like an inn, if one had not trembled a little when knocking at the door? And it is so pleasant to recall things, that one would sometimes like to deck the future in the garments of the past.

It was, I recollect, two days after the all-important one. I had gone into his room, I no longer remember why—for the pleasure of going in, I suppose, and thereby acting as a wife. A strong desire is that which springs up in your brain after leaving church to look like an old married woman. You put on caps with ribbons, you never lay aside your cashmere shawl, you talk of "my home"—two sweet words—and then you bite your lips to keep from breaking out into a laugh; and "my husband," and "my maid," and the first dinner you order, when you forget the soup. All this is charming, and, however ill at ease you may feel at first in all these new clothes, you are quite eager to put them on.

So I had gone into the dressing-room of my husband, who, standing before the glass, very lightly clad, was prosaically shaving.

"Excuse me, dear," said he, laughing, and he held up his shaving-brush, covered with white lather. "You will pardon my going on with this. Do you want anything?"

"I came, on the contrary," I answered, "to see whether you had need of anything;" and, greatly embarrassed myself, for I was afraid of being indiscreet, and I was not sure whether one ought to go into one's husband's room like this, I added, innocently, "Your shirts have buttons, have they not?"

"Oh, what a good little housewife I have married! Do not bother yourself about such trifles, my pet. I will ask your maid to look after my buttons," said he.

I felt confused; I was afraid of appealing too much of a schoolgirl in his eyes. He went on working his soap into a lather with his shaving-brush. I wanted to go away, but I was interested in such a novel fashion by the sight of my husband, that I had not courage to do so. His neck was bare—a thick, strong neck, but very white and changing its shape at every movement—the muscles, you know. It would have been horrible in a woman, that neck, and yet it did not seem ugly to me. Nor was it admiration that thus inspired me; it was rather like gluttony. I wanted to touch it. His hair, cut very short—according to regulation—grew very low, and between its beginning and the ear there was quite a smooth white place. The idea at once occurred to me that if ever I became brave enough, it was there that I should kiss him oftenest; it was strange,

that presentiment, for it is in fact on that little spot that I—

He stopped short. I fancied I understood that he was afraid of appearing comical in my eyes, with his face smothered in lather; but he was wrong. I felt myself all in a quiver at being beside a man—the word man is rather distasteful to me, but I can not find another, for husband would not express my thoughts—at being beside a man in the making of his toilette. I should have liked him to go on without troubling himself; I should have liked to see how he managed to shave himself without encroaching on his moustache, how he made his parting and brushed his hair with the two round brushes I saw on the table, what use he made of all the little instruments set out in order on the marble—tweezers, scissors, tiny combs, little pots and bottles with silver tops, and a whole arsenal of bright things, that aroused quite a desire to beautify one's self.

I should have liked him while talking to attend to the nails of his hands, which I was already very fond of; or, better still, to have handed them over to me. How I should have rummaged in the little corners, cut, filed, arranged all that.

"Well, dear, what are you looking at me like that for?" said he, smiling.

I lowered my eyes at once, and felt that I was blushing. I was uneasy, although charmed, amid these new surroundings. I did not know what to answer, and mechanically I dipped the tip of my finger into the little china pot in which the soap was being lathered.

"What is the matter, darling?" said he, approaching his face to mine; "have I offended you?"

I don't know what strange idea darted through my mind, but I suddenly took my hand from the pot and stuck the big ball of lather at the end of my finger on the tip of his nose. He broke out into a hearty laugh, and so did I; though I trembled for a moment, lest he should be angry.

"So that's the way in which you behave to a captain in the lancers? You shall pay for this, you wicked little darling;" and, taking the shaving brush in his hand, he chased me round the room. I dodged round the table, I took refuge behind the armchair, upsetting his boots with my skirt, getting the tongs at the same time entangled in it. Passing the sofa, I noticed his uniform laid out—he had to wait on the General that morning—and, seizing his schapska, I made use of it as a buckler. But laughter paralyzed me, and besides, what could a poor little woman do against a soldier, even with a buckler?

He ended by catching me—the struggle was a lovely one. It was all very well for me to scream, as I threw my head backward over the arm by which he clasped me; I none the less saw the frightful brush, like a big

snowball, at the end of a little stick, come nearer and yet nearer.

But he was merciful; he was satisfied with daubing a little white spot on my chin and exclaiming, "The cavalry have avenged themselves."

Seizing the brush in turn, I said to him roguishly, "Captain, let me lather your face," for I did so want to do that.

In answer, he held his face toward me, and, observing that I was obliged to stand on the tips of my toes and to support myself a little on his shoulder, he knelt down before me and yielded his head to me.

With the tip of my finger I made him bend his face to the right and the left, backward and forward, and I lathered and lathered, giggling like a schoolgirl. It amused me so to see my Captain obey me like a child; I would have given I don't know what if he had only had his sword and spurs on at that moment. Unfortunately, he was in his slippers. I spread the lather over his nose and forehead; he closed his eyes and put his two arms round me, saying:

"Go on, my dear, go on; but see that you don't put any into my mouth."

At that moment I experienced a very strange feeling. My laughter died away all at once; I felt ashamed at seeing my husband at my feet and at thus amusing myself with him as if he were a doll.

I dropped the shaving-brush; I felt my eyes grow moist; and, suddenly, becoming more tender, I bent toward him and kissed him on the neck, which was the only spot left clear.

Yet his ear was so near that, in passing it, my lips moved almost in spite of myself, and I whispered:

"Don't be angry, dear," then, overcome by emotion and repentance, I added: "I love you, I do love you."

"My own pet!" he said, rising suddenly. His voice shook.

What delightful moments these were! Unfortunately, oh! yes, indeed, unfortunately, he could not press his lathered face to mine!

"Wait a little," he exclaimed, darting toward the washbasin, full of water, "wait an instant!"

But it seemed as if it took him a week to wash it off.

CHAPTER XV

MY WIFE GOES TO A DANCE

Madame—Ah! it is so nice of you to come home early! (Looking at the clock.) A quarter to six. But how cold you are! your hands are frozen; come and sit by the fire. (She puts a log on the fire.) I have been thinking of you all day. It is cruel to have to go out in such weather. Have you finished your doubts? are you satisfied?

Monsieur—Quite well satisfied, dear. (Aside.) But I have never known my wife to be so amiable. (Aloud, taking up the bellows.) Quite well satisfied, and I am very hungry. Has my darling been good?

Madame—You are hungry. Good! (Calling out.) Marie, call into the kitchen that your master wants to dine early. Let them look after everything—and send up a lemon.

Monsieur—A mystery?

Madame—Yes, Monsieur, I have a little surprise for you, and I fancy that it will delight you.

Monsieur—Well, what is the surprise?

Madame—Oh! it is a real surprise. How curious you look! your eyes are glittering already. Suppose I were not to tell you anything?

Monsieur—Then you would vex me very much.

Madame—There, I don't want to vex you. You are going to have some little green oysters and a partridge. Am I good?

Monsieur—Oysters and a partridge! You are an angel. (He kisses her.) An angel. (Aside.) What on earth is the matter with her? (Aloud.) Have you had visitors to-day?

Madame—I saw Ernestine this morning, but she only stayed a moment. She has just discharged her maid. Would you believe it, that girl was seen the night before last dressed up as a man, and in her master's clothes, too! That was going too far.

Monsieur—That comes of having confidential servants. And you just got a sight of Ernestine?

Madame—And that was quite enough, too. (With an exclamation.) How stupid I am! I forgot. I had a visit from Madame de Lyr as well.

Monsieur—God bless her! But does she still laugh on one side of her mouth to hide her black tooth?

Madame—How cruel you are! Yet, she likes you very well. Poor woman! I was really touched by her visit. She came to remind me that we—now you will be angry. (She kisses him and sits down beside him.)

Monsieur—Be angry! be angry! I'm not a Turk. Come, what is it?

Madame—Come, we shall go to dinner. You know that there are oysters and a partridge. I won't tell you—you are already in a bad temper. Besides, I all but told her that we are not going.

Monsieur—(raising his hands aloft)—I thought so. She and her evening may go to the dogs. What have I done to this woman that she should so pester me?

Madame—But she thinks she is affording you pleasure. She is a charming friend. As for me, I like her because she always speaks well of you. If you had been hidden in that cabinet during her visit, you could not have helped blushing. (He shrugs his shoulders.) "Your husband is so amiable," she said to me, "so cheery, so witty. Try to bring him; it is an honor to have him." I said, "Certainly," but without meaning it, you know. But I don't care about it at all. It is not so very amusing at Madame de Lyr's. She always invites such a number of serious people. No doubt they are influential people, and may prove useful, but what does that matter to me? Come to dinner. You know that there is a bottle left of that famous Pomard; I have kept it for your partridge. You can not imagine what pleasure I feel in seeing you eat a partridge. You eat it with such a gusto. You are a glutton, my dear. (She takes his arm.) Come, I can hear your rascal of a son getting impatient in the dining-room.

Monsieur—(with a preoccupied air)—Hum! and when is it?

Madame—When is what?

Monsieur—The party, of course.

Madame—Ah! you mean the ball—I was not thinking of it. Madame de Lyr's ball. Why do you ask me that, since we are not going? Let us make haste, dinner is getting cold This evening.

Monsieur—(stopping short)—What! this party is a ball, and this ball is for this evening. But, hang it! people don't invite you to a ball like that. They always give notice some time beforehand.

Madame—But she sent us an invitation a week ago, though I don't know what became of the card. I forgot to show it to you.

Monsieur—You forgot! you forgot!

Madame—Well, it is all for the best; I know you would have been sulky all the week after. Come to dinner.

They sat down to table. The cloth was white, the cutlery bright, the oysters fresh; the partridge, cooked to perfection, exhaled a delightful odor. Madame was charming, and laughed at everything. Monsieur unbent his brows and stretched himself on the chair.

Monsieur—This Pomard is very good. Won't you have some, little dear?

Madame—Yes, your little dear will. (She pushes forward her glass with a coquettish movement.)

Monsieur—Ah! you have put on your Louis Seize ring. It is a very pretty ring.

Madame—(putting her hand under her husband's nose)—Yes; but look—see, there is a little bit coming off.

Monsieur—(kissing his wife's hand)—Where is the little bit?

Madame—(smiling)—You jest at everything. I am speaking seriously. There—look—it is plain enough! (They draw near once another and bend their heads together to see it.) Don't you see it? (She points out a spot on the ring with a rosy and slender finger.) There! do you see now—there?

Monsieur—That little pearl which—What on earth have you been putting on your hair, my dear? It smells very nice—You must send it to the jeweller. The scent is exquisite. Curls don't become you badly.

Madame—Do you think so? (She adjusts her coiffure with her white hand.) I thought you would like that scent; now, if I were in your place I should—

Monsieur—What would you do in my place, dear?

Madame—I should—kiss my wife.

Monsieur—(kissing her)—Well, I must say you have very bright ideas sometimes. Give me a little bit more partridge, please. (With his mouth full.) How pretty these poor little creatures look when running among the corn. You know the cry they give when the sun sets?—A little gravy.—There are moments when the poetic side of country life appeals to one. And to think that there are barbarians who eat them with cabbage. But (filling his glass) have you a gown ready?

Madame—(with innocent astonishment.)—What for, dear?

Monsieur—Why, for Madame de Lyr's—

Madame—For the ball?—What a memory you have—There you are still thinking of it—No, I have not—ah! yes, I have my tarletan, you know; but then a woman needs so little to make up a ball-room toilette.

Monsieur—And the hairdresser, has he been sent for?

Madame—No, he has not been sent for; but I am not anxious to go to this ball. We will settle down by the fireside, read a little, and go to bed early. You remind me, however, that, on leaving, Madame de Lyr did say, "Your hairdresser is the same as mine, I will send him word." How stupid I am; I remember now that I did not answer her. But it is not far, I can send Marie to tell him not to come.

Monsieur—Since this blessed hairdresser has been told, let him come and we will go and—amuse ourselves a little at Madame de Lyr's. But on one condition only; that I find all my dress things laid out in readiness on my bed with my gloves, you know, and that you tie my necktie.

Madame—A bargain. (She kisses him.) You are a jewel of a husband. I am delighted, my poor dear, because I see you are imposing a sacrifice upon yourself in order to please me; since, as to the ball itself, I am quite indifferent about it. I did not care to go; really now I don't care to go.

Monsieur—Hum. Well, I will go and smoke a cigar so as not to be in your way, and at ten o'clock I will be back here. Your preparations will be over and in five minutes I shall be dressed. Adieu.

Madame—Au revoir.

Monsieur, after reaching the street, lit his cigar and buttoned up his great-coat. Two hours to kill. It seems a trifle when one is busy, but when one has nothing to do it is quite another thing. The pavement is slippery, rain is beginning to fall—fortunately the Palais Royal is not far off. At the end of his fourteenth tour round the arcades, Monsieur looks at his watch. Five minutes to ten, he will be late. He rushes home.

In the courtyard the carriage is standing waiting.

In the bedroom two unshaded lamps shed floods of light. Mountains of muslin and ribbons are piled on the bed and the furniture. Dresses, skirts, petticoats, and underpetticoats, lace, scarfs, flowers, jewels, are mingled in a charming chaos. On the table there are pots of pomade, sticks of cosmetic, hairpins, combs and brushes, all carefully set out. Two artificial plaits stretch themselves languishingly upon a dark mass

not unlike a large handful of horsehair. A golden hair net, combs of pale tortoise-shell and bright coral, clusters of roses, sprays of white lilac, bouquets of pale violets, await the choice of the artist or the caprice of the beauty. And yet, must I say it? amidst this luxury of wealth Madame's hair is undressed, Madame is uneasy, Madame is furious.

Monsieur—(looking at his watch)—Well, my dear, is your hair dressed?

Madame—(impatiently)—He asks me whether my hair is dressed? Don't you see that I have been waiting for the hairdresser for an hour and a half? Can't you see that I am furious, for he won't come, the horrid wretch?

Monsieur—The monster!

Madame—Yes, the monster; and I would advise you not to joke about it.

There is a ring. The door opens and the lady's-maid exclaims, "It is he, Madame!"

Madame—It is he!

Monsieur—It is he!

The artist enters hurriedly and bows while turning his sleeves up.

Madame—My dear Silvani, this is unbearable.

Silvani—Very sorry, very, but could not come any sooner. I have been dressing hair since three o'clock in the afternoon. I have just left the Duchesse de W., who is going to the Ministry this evening. She sent me home in her brougham. Lisette, give me your mistress's combs, and put the curling-tongs in the fire.

Madame—But, my dear Silvani, my maid's name is not Lisette.

Silvani—You will understand, Madame, that if I had to remember the names of all the lady's-maids who help me, I should need six clerks instead of four. Lisette is a pretty name which suits all these young ladies very well. Lisette, show me your mistress's dress. Good. Is the ball an official one?

Madame—But dress my hair, Silvani.

Silvani—It is impossible for me to dress your hair, Madame, unless I know the circle in which the coiffure will be worn. (To the husband, seated in the corner.) May I beg you, Monsieur, to take another place? I wish to be able to step back, the better to judge the effect.

Monsieur—Certainly, Monsieur Silvani, only too happy to be agreeable to you. (He sits down on a chair.)

Madame—(hastily)—Not there, my dear, you will rumple my skirt. (The husband gets up and looks for another seat.) Take care behind you, you are stepping on my bustle.

Monsieur—(turning round angrily)—Her bustle! her bustle!

Madame—Now you go upsetting my pins.

Silvani—May I beg a moment of immobility, Madame?

Monsieur—Come, calm yourself, I will go into the drawing-room; is there a fire there?

Madame—(inattentively)—But, my dear, how can you expect a fire to be in the drawing-room?

Monsieur—I will go to my study, then.

Madame—There is none there, either. What do you want a fire in your study for? What a singular idea! High up, you know, Silvani, and a dash of disorder, it is all the rage.

Silvani—Would you allow a touch of brown under the eyes? That would enable me to idealize the coiffure.

Monsieur—(impatiently)—Marie, give me my top-coat and my cap. I will walk up and down in the anteroom. (Aside.) Madame de Lyr shall pay for this.

Silvani—(crimping)—I leave your ear uncovered, Madame; it would be a sin to veil it. It is like that of the Princesse de K., whose hair I dressed yesterday. Lisette, get the powder ready. Ears like yours, Madame, are not numerous.

Madame—You were saying—

Silvani—Would your ear, Madame, be so modest as not to listen?

Madame's hair is at length dressed. Silvani sheds a light cloud of scented powder over his work, on which he casts a lingering look of satisfaction, then bows and retires.

In passing through the anteroom, he runs against Monsieur, who is walking up and down.

Silvani—A thousand pardons, I have the honor to wish you good night.

Monsieur—(from the depths of his turned-up collar) Good-night.

A quarter of an hour later the sound of a carriage is heard. Madame is ready, her coiffure suits her, she smiles at herself in the glass as she slips the glove-stretchers into the twelve-button gloves.

Monsieur has made a failure of his necktie and broken off three buttons. Traces of decided ill-humor are stamped on his features.

Monsieur—Come, let us go down, the carriage is waiting; it is a quarter past eleven. (Aside.) Another sleepless night. Sharp, coachman; Rue de la Pepiniere, number 224.

They reach the street in question. The Rue de la Pepiniere is in a tumult. Policemen are hurriedly making way through the crowd. In the distance, confused cries and a rapidly approaching, rumbling sound are heard. Monsieur thrusts his head out of the window.

Monsieur—What is it, Jean?

Coachman—A fire, Monsieur; here come the firemen.

Monsieur—Go on all the same to number 224.

Coachman—We are there, Monsieur; the fire is at number 224.

Doorkeeper of the House—(quitting a group of people and approaching the carriage)—You are, I presume, Monsieur, one of the guests of Madame de Lyr? She is terror-stricken; the fire is in her rooms. She can not receive any one.

Madame—(excitedly)—It is scandalous.

Monsieur—(humming)—Heart-breaking, heartbreaking! (To the coachman.) Home again, quickly; I am all but asleep. (He stretches himself out and turns up his collar.) (Aside.) After all, I am the better for a well-cooked partridge.

CHAPTER XVI

A FALSE ALARM

Every time I visit Paris, which, unhappily, is too often, it rains in torrents. It makes no difference whether I change the time of starting from that which I had fixed upon at first, stop on the way, travel at night, resort, in short, to a thousand devices to deceive the barometer—at ten leagues from Paris the clouds begin to pile up and I get out of the train amidst a general deluge.

On the occasion of my last visit I found myself as usual in the street, followed by a street porter carrying my luggage and addressing despairing signals to all the cabs trotting quickly past amid the driving rain. After ten minutes of futile efforts a driver, more sensible than the others, and hidden in his triple cape, checks his horses. With a single bound I am beside the cab, and opening, the door with a kind of frenzy, jump in.

Unfortunately, while I am accomplishing all this on one side, a gentleman, similarly circumstanced, opens the other door and also jumps in. It is easy to understand that there ensues a collision.

"Devil take you!" said my rival, apparently inclined to push still farther forward.

I was about to answer him, and pretty sharply, too, for I hail from the south of France and am rather hotheaded, when our eyes met. We looked one another in the face like two lions over a single sheep, and suddenly we both burst out laughing. This angry gentleman was Oscar V., that dear good fellow Oscar, whom I had not seen for ten years, and who is a very old friend of mine, a charming fellow whom I used to play with as a boy.

We embraced, and the driver, who was looking at us through the window, shrugged his shoulders, unable to understand it all. The two porters, dripping with water, stood, one at each door, with a trunk on his shoulder. We had the luggage put on the cab and drove off to the Hotel du Louvre, where Oscar insisted on dropping me.

"But you are travelling, too, then?" said I to my friend, after the first moments of expansion. "Don't you live in Paris?"

"I live in it as little as possible and have just come up from Les Roches, an old-fashioned little place I inherited from my father, at which I pass a great deal of the year. Oh! it is not a chateau; it is rustic, countrified, but I like it, and would not change anything about it. The country around is fresh and green, a clear little river flows past about forty yards from the house, amid the trees; there is a mill in the background, a spreading valley, a steeple and its weather-cock on the horizon, flowers under the windows, and happiness in the house. Can I grumble? My wife makes exquisite pastry, which is very agreeable to me and helps to whiten her hands. By the way, I did not tell you that I am married. My dear fellow, I came across an angel, and I rightly thought that if I let her slip I should not find her equal. I did wisely. But I want to introduce you to my wife and to show you my little place. When will you come and see me? It is three hours from Paris—time to smoke a couple of cigars. It is settled, then—I am going back to-morrow morning and I will have a room ready for you. Give me your card and I will write down my address on it."

All this was said so cordially that I could not resist my friend's invitation, and promised to visit him.

Three or four days later, Paris being empty and the recollection of my old companion haunting me, I felt a strong desire to take a peep at his conjugal felicity and to see with my own eyes this stream, this mill, this steeple, beside all which he was so happy.

I reached Les Roches at about six in the evening and was charmed at the very first glance. Oscar's residence was a little Louis Quinze chateau buried in the trees; irregularly built, but charmingly picturesque. It had been left unaltered for a century at least, and everything, from the blackened mansard roofs with their rococo weather-cocks, to the bay windows with their tiny squares of glass and the fantastic escutcheon over the door, was in keeping. Over the thick tiles of the somewhat sunken roof, the rough-barked old chestnuts lazily stretched their branches. Creepers and climbing roses wantoned over the front, framing the windows, peeping into the garrets, and clinging to the waterspouts, laden with large bunches of flowers which swayed gently in the air. Amid all these pointed roofs and this profusion of verdure and trees the blue sky could only be caught a glimpse of here and there.

The first person I saw was Oscar, clad in white from head to foot, and wearing a straw hat. He was seated on an enormous block of stone which seemed part and parcel of the house, and appeared very much interested in a fine melon which his gardener had just brought to him. No sooner had he caught sight of me than he darted forward and grasped me by the hand with such an expression of good-humor and affection that I said to myself, "Yes, certainly he was not deceiving me, he is happy." I found him just as I had known him in his youth, lively, rather wild, but kind and obliging.

"Pierre," said he to the gardener, "take this gentleman's portmanteau to the lower room," and, as the gardener bestirred himself slowly and with an effort, Oscar seized the portmanteau and swung it, with a jerk, on to the shoulders of the poor fellow, whose legs bent under the weight.

"Lazybones," said Oscar, laughing heartily. "Ah! now I must introduce you to my little queen. My wife, where is my wife?"

He ran to the bell and pulled it twice. At once a fat cook with a red face and tucked-up sleeves, and behind her a man-servant wiping a plate, appeared at the ground-floor windows. Had they been chosen on purpose? I do not know, but their faces and bearing harmonized so thoroughly with the picture that I could not help smiling.

"Where is your mistress?" asked Oscar, and as they did not answer quickly enough he exclaimed, "Marie, Marie, here is my friend George."

A young girl, fair as a lily, appeared at a narrow, little window, the

one most garlanded by, flowers, on the first floor. She was clad in a white dressing-gown of some particular shape; I could not at first make out. With one hand she gathered its folds about her, and with the other restrained her flowing hair. Hardly had she seen me when she blushed, somewhat ashamed, no doubt, at having been surprised in the midst of her toilet, and, giving a most embarrassed yet charming bow; hurriedly disappeared. This vision completed the charm; it seemed to me that I had suddenly been transported into fairy-land. I had fancied when strapping my portmanteau that I should find my friend Oscar installed in one of those pretty, little, smart-looking houses, with green shutters and gilt lightning-conductor, dear to the countrified Parisian, and here I found myself amid an ideal blending of time-worn stones hidden in flowers, ancient gables, and fanciful ironwork reddened by rust. I was right in the midst of one of Morin's sketches, and, charmed and stupefied, I stood for some moments with my eyes fixed on the narrow window at which the fair girl had disappeared.

"I call her my little queen," said Oscar, taking my arm. "It is my wife. Come this way, we shall meet my cousin who is fishing, and two other friends who are strolling about in this direction, good fellows, only they do not understand the country as I do—they have on silk stockings and pumps, but it does not matter, does it? Would you like a pair of slippers or a straw hat?"

I hope you have brought some linen jackets. I won't offer you a glass of Madeira—we shall dine at once. Ah! my dear fellow, you have turned up at the right moment; we are going to taste the first melon of the year this evening."

"Unfortunately, I never eat melons, though I like to see others do so."

"Well, then, I will offer you consolation by seeking out a bottle of my old Pomard for you. Between ourselves, I don't give it to every one; it is a capital wine which my poor father recommended to me on his deathbed; poor father, his eyes were closed, and his head stretched back on the pillow. I was sitting beside his bed, my hand in his, when I felt it feebly pressed. His eyes half opened, and I saw him smile. Then he said in a weak, slow, and the quavering voice of an old man who is dying: 'The Pomard at the farther end—on the left—you know, my boy—only for friends.' He pressed my hand again, and, as if exhausted, closed his eyes, though I could see by the imperceptible motion of his lips that he was still smiling inwardly. Come with me to the cellar," continued Oscar, after a brief silence, "at the farther end to the left, you shall hold the lantern for me."

When we came up from the cellar, the bell was ringing furiously, and flocks of startled birds were flying out of the chestnut-trees. It was for dinner. All the guests were in the garden. Oscar introduced me in his off-hand way, and I offered my arm to the mistress of the house to conduct her to the dining-room.

On examining my friend's wife, I saw that my first impression had not been erroneous—she was literally a little angel, and a little angel in the shape of a woman, which is all the better. She was delicate, slender as a young girl; her voice was as thrilling and harmonious as the chaffinch, with an indefinable accent that smacked of no part of the country in particular, but lent a charm to her slightest word. She had, moreover, a way of speaking of her own, a childish and coquettish way of modulating the ends of her sentences and turning her eyes toward her husband, as if to seek for his approbation. She blushed every moment, but at the same time her smile was so bewitching and her teeth so white that she seemed to be laughing at herself. A charming little woman! Add to this a strange yet tasteful toilette, rather daring, perhaps, but suiting this little queen, so singular in herself. Her beautiful fair hair, twisted up apparently at hazard, was fixed rather high up on the head by a steel comb worn somewhat on one side; and her white muslin dress trimmed with wide, flat ruches, cut square at the neck, short in the skirt, and looped up all round, had a delicious eighteenth-century appearance. The angel was certainly a trifle coquettish, but in her own way, and yet her way was exquisite.

Hardly were we seated at table when Oscar threw toward his little queen a rapid glance, but one so full of happiness and—why should I not say it?—love that I experienced a kind of shiver, a thrill of envy, astonishment, and admiration, perhaps. He took from the basket of flowers on the table a red rose, scarcely opened, and, pushing it toward her, said with a smile:

”For your hair, Madame.”

The fair girl blushed deeply, took the flower, and, without hesitation, quickly and dexterously stuck it in her hair, high up on the left, just in the right spot, and, delightedly turning round to each of us, repeated several times, amid bursts of laughter, ”Is it right like that?”

Then she wafted a tiny kiss with the tips of her fingers to her husband, as a child of twelve would have done, and gayly plunged her spoon into the soup, turning up her little finger as she did so.

The other guests had nothing very remarkable about them; they laughed very good-naturedly at these childish ways, but seemed somewhat out of place amid all this charming freedom from restraint. The cousin, above all, the angler, with his white waistcoat, his blue tie, his full beard, and his almond eyes, especially displeased me. He rolled his r's like an actor at a country theatre. He broke his bread into little bits and nibbled them as he talked. I divined that the pleasure of showing off a large ring he wore had something to do with this fancy for playing with his bread. Once or twice I caught a glance of melancholy turned toward the mistress of the house, but at first I did not take much notice of it, my attention being attracted by the brilliant gayety of Oscar.

It seemed to me, however, at the end of a minute or so, that this young man was striving in a thousand ways to engage the attention of the little queen.

The latter, however, answered him in the most natural way in the world, neither betraying constraint nor embarrassment. I was mistaken, no doubt. Have you ever noticed, when you are suddenly brought into the midst of a circle where you are unacquainted, how certain little details, matters of indifference to every one else, assume importance in your eyes? The first impression is based upon a number of trifles that catch your attention at the outset. A stain in the ceiling, a nail in the wall, a feature of your neighbor's countenance impresses itself upon your mind, installs itself there, assumes importance, and, in spite of yourself, all the other observations subsequently made by you group around this spot, this nail, this grimace. Think over it, dear reader, and you will see that every opinion you may have as to a fact, a person, or an object has been sensibly influenced by the recollection of the little trifle that caught your eye at the first glance. What young girl victim of first impressions has not refused one or two husbands on account of a waistcoat too loose, a cravat badly tied, an inopportune sneeze, a foolish smile, or a boot too pointed at the toe?

One does not like admitting to one's self that such trifles can serve as a base to the opinion one has of any one, and one must seek attentively in order to discover within one's mind these unacknowledged germs.

I recollect quite well that the first time I had the honor of calling on Madame de M., I noticed that one of her teeth, the first molar on the right, was quite black. I only caught a glimpse of the little black monster, such was the care taken to hide it, yet I could not get this discovery out of my head. I soon noticed that Madame de M. made frightful grimaces to hide her tooth, and that she took only the smallest possible mouthfuls at table to spare the nervous susceptibilities of the little monster.

I arrived at the pitch of accounting for all the mental and physical peculiarities of Madame de M. by the presence of this slight blemish, and despite myself this black tooth personified the Countess so well that even now, although it has been replaced by another magnificent one, twice as big and as white as the bottom of a plate, even now, I say, Madame de M. can not open her mouth without my looking naturally at it.

But to return to our subject. Amid all this conjugal happiness, so delightfully surrounded, face to face with dear old Oscar, so good, so confiding, so much in love with this little cherub in a Louis XV dress, who carried grace and naivete to so strange a pitch, I had been struck by the too well combed and foppish head of the cousin in the white waistcoat. This head had attracted my attention like the stain on the ceiling of which I spoke just now, like the Countess's black tooth, and

despite myself I did not take my eyes off the angler as he passed the silver blade of his knife through a slice of that indigestible fruit which I like to see on the plates of others, but can not tolerate on my own.

After dinner, which lasted a very long time, we went into the garden, where coffee had been served, and stretched ourselves out beatifically, cigar in mouth. All was calm and silent about us, the insects had ceased their music, and in an opaline sky little violet clouds were sleeping.

Oscar, with a happy air, pointed out to me the famous mill, the quiet valley, and farther on his loved stream, in which the sun, before setting, was reflecting itself amid the reeds. Meanwhile the little queen on her high heels flitted round the cups like a child playing at party-giving, and with a thousand charming touches poured out the boiling coffee, the odor of which blended deliciously with the perfume of the flowers, the hay, and the woods.

When she had finished she sat down beside her husband, so close that her skirt half hid my friend, and unceremoniously taking the cigar from his lips, held it at a distance, with a little pout, that meant, "Oh, the horrid thing!" and knocked off with her little finger the ash which fell on the gravel. Then she broke into a laugh, and put the cigar back between the lips of her husband held out to her.

It was charming. Oscar was no doubt accustomed to this, for he did not seem astonished, but placed his hand on his wife's shoulder, as one would upon a child's, and, kissing her on the forehead, said, "Thanks, my dear."

"Yes, but you are only making fun of me," said the young wife, in a whisper, leaning her head against her husband's arm.

I could not help smiling, there was so much coaxing childishness and grace in this little whispered sentence. I do not know why I turned toward the cousin who had remained a little apart, smoking in silence. He seemed to me rather pale; he took three or four sudden puffs, rose suddenly under the evident influence of some moral discomfort, and walked away beneath the trees.

"What is the matter with cousin?" said Oscar, with some interest. "What ails him?"

"I don't know," answered the little queen, in the most natural manner in the world, "some idea about fishing, no doubt."

Night began to fall; we had remained as I have said a long time at table. It was about nine o'clock. The cousin returned and took the seat he had occupied before, but from this moment it seemed to me that a strange constraint crept in among us, a singular coolness showed itself. The

talk, so lively at first, slackened gradually and, despite all my efforts to impart a little life to it, dragged wretchedly. I myself did not feel very bright; I was haunted by the most absurd notions in the world; I thought I had detected in the sudden departure of the cousin, in his pallor, in his embarrassed movements, the expression of some strong feeling which he had been powerless to hide. But how was it that that adorable little woman with such a keen intelligent look did not understand all this, since I understood it myself? Had not Oscar, however confiding he might be, noted that the departure of the cousin exactly coincided with the kiss he had given his wife? Were these two blind, or did they pretend not to see, or was I myself the victim of an illusion? However, conversation had died away; the mistress of the house, singular symptom, was silent and serious, and Oscar wriggled in his chair, like a man who is not altogether at ease. What was passing in their minds?

Soon we heard the clock in the drawing-room strike ten, and Oscar, suddenly rising, said: "My dear fellow, in the country it is Liberty Hall, you know; so I will ask your permission to go in—I am rather tired this evening. George," he added to me, "they will show you your room; it is on the ground floor; I hope that you will be comfortable there."

Everybody got up silently, and, after bidding one another good-night in a somewhat constrained manner, sought their respective rooms. I thought, I must acknowledge, that they went to bed rather too early at my friend's. I had no wish to sleep; I therefore examined my room, which was charming. It was completely hung with an old figured tapestry framed in gray wainscot. The bed, draped in dimity curtains, was turned down and exhaled that odor of freshly washed linen which invites one to stretch one's self in it. On the table, a little gem dating from the beginning of the reign of Louis XVI, were four or five books, evidently chosen by Oscar and placed there for me. These little attentions touch one, and naturally my thoughts recurred to the dear fellow, to the strange incident of the evening, to the vexations and tortures hidden,, perhaps, by this apparent happiness. I was ridiculous that night—I already pitied him, my poor friend.

I felt quite touched, and, full of melancholy, went and leaned against the sill of the open window. The moon had just risen, the sky was beautifully clear, whiffs of delicious perfumes assailed my nostrils. I saw in the shadow of the trees glowworms sparkling on the grass, and, in the masses of verdure lit up mysteriously by the moon, I traced strange shapes of fantastic monsters. There was, above all, a little pointed roof surmounted by a weathercock, buried in the trees at about fifty paces from my window, which greatly interested me. I could not in the obscurity make out either door or windows belonging to this singular tower. Was it an old pigeon-house, a tomb, a deserted summer-house? I could not tell, but its little pointed roof, with a round dormer window, was extremely graceful. Was it chance or an artist lull of taste that had covered this tower with creepers and flowers, and surrounded it

with foliage in such capricious fashion that it seemed to be hiding itself in order to catch all glances? I was gazing at all this when I heard a faint noise in the shrubbery. I looked in that direction and I saw—really, it was an anxious moment—I saw a phantom clad in a white robe and walking with mysterious and agitated rapidity. At a turning of the path the moon shone on this phantom. Doubt was impossible; I had before my eyes my friend's wife. Her gait no longer had that coquettish ease which I had noticed, but clearly indicated the agitation due to some strong emotion.

I strove to banish the horrible suspicion which suddenly forced itself into my mind. "No," I said to myself, "so much innocence and beauty can not be capable of deception; no doubt she has forgotten her fan or her embroidery, on one of the benches there." But instead of making her way toward the benches I noticed on the right, the young wife turned to the left, and soon disappeared in the shadow of the grove in which was hidden the mysterious turret.

My heart ached. "Where is she going, the hapless woman?" I exclaimed to myself. "At any rate, I will not let her imagine any one is watching her." And I hurriedly blew out my candle. I wanted to close my window, go to bed, and see nothing more, but an invincible curiosity took me back to the window. I had only been there a few minutes when I plainly distinguished halting and timid footsteps on the gravel. I could see no one at first, but there was no doubt that the footsteps were those of a man. I soon had a proof that I was not mistaken; the elongated outline of the cousin showed up clearly against the dark mass of shrubbery. I should have liked to have stopped him, the wretch, for his intention was evident; he was making his way toward the thicket in which the little queen had disappeared. I should have liked to shout to him, "You are a villain; you shall go no farther." But had I really any right to act thus? I was silent, but I coughed, however, loud enough to be heard by him.

He suddenly paused in his uneasy walk, looked round on all sides with visible anxiety, then, seized by I know not what impulse, darted toward the pavilion. I was overwhelmed. What ought I to do? Warn my friend, my childhood's companion? Yes, no doubt, but I felt ashamed to pour despair into the mind of this good fellow and to cause a horrible exposure. "If he can be kept in ignorance," I said to myself, "and then perhaps I am wrong—who knows? Perhaps this rendezvous is due to the most natural motive possible."

I was seeking to deceive myself, to veil the evidence of my own eyes, when suddenly one of the house doors opened noisily, and Oscar—Oscar himself, in all the disorder of night attire, his hair ruffled, and his dressing-gown floating loosely, passed before my window. He ran rather than walked; but the anguish of his heart was too plainly revealed in the strangeness of his movements. He knew all. I felt that a mishap was inevitable. "Behold the outcome of all his happiness, behold the bitter

poison enclosed in so fair a vessel!" All these thoughts shot through my mind like arrows. It was necessary above all to delay the explosion, were it only for a moment, a second, and, beside myself, without giving myself time to think of what I was going to say to him, I cried in a sharp imperative tone:

"Oscar, come here; I want to speak to you."

He stopped as if petrified. He was ghastly pale, and, with an infernal smile, replied, "I have no time-later on."

"Oscar, you must, I beg of you—you are mistaken."

At these words he broke into a fearful laugh.

"Mistaken—mistaken!"

And he ran toward the pavilion.

Seizing the skirt of his dressing-gown, I held him tightly, exclaiming:

"Don't go, my dear fellow, don't go; I beg of you on my knees not to go."

By way of reply he gave me a hard blow on the arm with his fist, exclaiming:

"What the devil is the matter with you?"

"I tell you that you can not go there, Oscar," I said, in a voice which admitted of no contradiction.

"Then why did not you tell me at once?"

And feverishly snatching his dressing-gown from my grasp, he began to walk frantically up and down.

CHAPTER XVII

I SUP WITH MY WIFE

That evening, which chanced to be Christmas Eve, it was infernally cold. The snow was falling in heavy flakes, and, driven by the wind, beat furiously against the window panes. The distant chiming of the bells could just be heard through this heavy and woolly atmosphere. Foot-passengers, wrapped in their cloaks, slipped rapidly along, keeping close

to the house and bending their heads to the wintry blast.

Enveloped in my dressing-gown, and tapping with my fingers on the window-panes, I was smiling at the half-frozen passers-by, the north wind, and the snow, with the contented look of a man who is in a warm room and has on his feet comfortable flannel-lined slippers, the soles of which are buried in a thick carpet. At the fireside my wife was cutting out something and smiling at me from time to time; a new book awaited me on the mantelpiece, and the log on the hearth kept shooting out with a hissing sound those little blue flames which invite one to poke it.

"There is nothing that looks more dismal than a man tramping through the snow, is there?" said I to my wife.

"Hush," said she, lowering the scissors which she held in her hand; and, after smoothing her chin with her fingers, slender, rosy, and plump at their tips, she went on examining the pieces of stuff she had cut out.

"I say that it is ridiculous to go out in the cold when it is so easy to remain at home at one's own fireside."

"Hush."

"But what are you doing that is so important?"

"I—I am cutting out a pair of braces for you," and she set to work again. But, as in cutting out she kept her head bent, I noticed, on passing behind her, her soft, white neck, which she had left bare that evening by dressing her hair higher than usual. A number of little downy hairs were curling there. This kind of down made me think of those ripe peaches one bites so greedily. I drew near, the better to see, and I kissed the back of my wife's neck.

"Monsieur!" said Louise, suddenly turning round.

"Madame," I replied, and we both burst out laughing.

"Christmas Eve," said I.

"Do you wish to excuse yourself and to go out?"

"Do you mean to complain?"

"Yes, I complain that you are not sufficiently impressed by the fact of its being Christmas Eve. The ding-ding-dong of the bells of Notre Dame fails to move you; and just now when the magic-lantern passed beneath the window, I looked at you while pretending to work, and you were quite calm."

"I remain calm when the magic-lantern is going by! Ah! my dear, you are very severe on me, and really—"

"Yes, yes, jest about it, but it was none the less true that the recollections of your childhood have failed."

"Now, my dear, do you want me to leave my boots out on the hearth this evening on going to bed? Do you want me to call in the magic-lantern man, and to look out a big sheet and a candle end for him, as my poor mother used to do? I can still see her as she used to entrust her white sheet to him. 'Don't make a hole in it, at least,' she would say. How we used to clap our hands in the mysterious darkness! I can recall all those joys, my dear, but you know so many other things have happened since then. Other pleasures have effaced those."

"Yes, I can understand, your bachelor pleasures; and, there, I am sure that this Christmas Eve is the first you have passed by your own fireside, in your dressing-gown, without supper; for you used to sup on Christmas Eve."

"To sup, to sup."

"Yes, you supped; I will wager you did."

"I have supped two or three times, perhaps, with friends, you know; two sous' worth of roasted chestnuts and—"

"A glass of sugar and water."

"Oh, pretty nearly so. It was all very simple; as far as I can recollect. We chatted a little and went to bed."

"And he says that without a smile. You have never breathed a word to me of all these simple pleasures."

"But, my dear, all that I am telling you is strictly true. I remember that once, however, it was rather lively. It was at Ernest's, and we had some music. Will you push that log toward me? But, never mind; it will soon be midnight, and that is the hour when reasonable people—"

Louise, rising and throwing her arms around my neck, interrupted me with: "Well, I don't want to be reasonable, I want to wipe out all your memories of chestnuts and glasses of sugar and water."

Then pushing me into my dressing-room she locked the door.

"But, my dear, what is the matter with you?" said I through the keyhole.

"I want ten minutes, no more. Your newspaper is on the mantelpiece; you have not read it this evening. There are some matches in the corner."

I heard a clatter of crockery, a rustling of silk my wife mad?

Louise soon came and opened the door.

"Don't scold me for having shut you up," she said, kissing me. "Look how I have beautified myself? Do you recognize the coiffure you are so fond of, the chignon high, and the neck bare? Only as my poor neck is excessively timid, it would have never consented to show itself thus if I had not encouraged it a little by wearing my dress low. And then one must put on full uniform to sup with the authorities."

"To sup?"

"Certainly, to sup with you; don't you see my illuminations and this table covered with flowers and a heap of good things? I had got it all ready in the alcove; but you understand that to roll the table up to the fire and make a little toilette, I wanted to be alone. Come, Monsieur, take your place at table. I am as hungry as a hunter. May I offer you a wing of cold chicken?"

"Your idea is charming, but, dear, really I am ashamed; I am in my dressing-gown."

"Take off your dressing-gown if it incommodes you, Monsieur, but don't leave this chicken wing on my hands. I want to serve you myself." And, rising, she turned her sleeves up to the elbow, and placed her table napkin on her arm.

"It is thus that the waiters at the restaurant do it, is it not?"

"Exactly; but, waiter, allow me at least to kiss your hand."

"I have no time," said she, laughing, sticking the corkscrew into the neck of the bottle. "Chambertin—it is a pretty name; and then do you remember that before our marriage (how hard this cork is!) you told me that you liked it on account of a poem by Alfred de Musset? which, by the way, you have not let me read yet. Do you see the two little Bohemian glasses which I bought expressly for this evening? We will drink each other's health in them."

"And his, too, eh?"

"The heir's, poor dear love of an heir! I should think so. And then I will put away the two glasses against this time next year; they shall be our Christmas Eve glasses? Every year we will sup like this together, however old we may get."

"But, my dear, how about the time when we have no longer any teeth?"

"Well, we will sup on good strong soups; it will be very nice, all the same. Another piece, please, with some of the jelly. Thanks."

As she held out her plate I noticed her arm, the outline of which was lost in lace.

"Why are you looking up my sleeve instead of eating?"

"I am looking at your arm, dear. You are charming, let me tell you, this evening. That coiffure suits you so well, and that dress which I was unacquainted with."

"Well, when one seeks to make a conquest—"

"How pretty you look, pet!"

"Is it true that you think me charming, pretty, and a pet this evening? Well, then," lowering her eyes and smiling at her bracelets, "in that case I do not see why—"

"What is it you do not see, dear?"

"I do not see any reason why you should not come and give me just a little kiss."

And as the kiss was prolonged, she said to me, amid bursts of laughter, her head thrown back, and showing the double row of her white teeth: "I should like some pie; yes, some brie! You will break my Bohemian glass, the result of my economy. You always cause some mishap when you want to kiss me. Do you recollect at Madame de Brill's ball, two days before our marriage, how you tore my skirt while waltzing in the little drawing-room?"

"Because it is difficult to do two things at once—to keep step and to kiss one's partner."

"I recollect, too, when mamma asked how my skirt had got torn, I felt that I was blushing up to my ears. And Madame D., that old jaundiced fairy, who said to me with her Lenten smile, 'How flushed you are tonight, my dear child! I could have strangled her! I said it was the key of the door that had caught it. I looked at you out of the corner of my eye; you were pulling your moustache and seemed greatly annoyed—you are keeping all the truffles for yourself; that is kind—not that one; I want the big black one there in the corner—it was very wrong all the same, for—oh! not quite full—I do not want to be tipsy—for, after all, if we had not been married—and that might have happened, for you know they say that marriages only depend on a thread. Well, if the thread had not been strong enough, I should have remained a maid with a kiss on my shoulder, and a nice thing that would have been."

"Bah! it does not stain."

"Yes, Monsieur, it does, I beg your pardon. It stains so much that there are husbands, I believe, who even shed their blood to wash out such little stains."

"But I was joking, dear. Hang it!—don't you think—yes, certainly, hang it!"

"Ah! that's right, I like to see you angry. You are a trifle jealous, dear—oh! that is too bad; I asked you for the big black one, and you have gone and eaten it."

"I am sorry, dear; I quite forgot about it."

"It was the same at the Town Hall, where I was obliged to jog your elbow to make you answer 'Yes' to the Mayor's kind words."

"Kind!"

"Yes, kind. I thought him charming. No one could have been more graceful than he was in addressing me. 'Mademoiselle, will you consent to accept for your husband that great, ugly fellow standing beside you?'" (Laughing, with her mouth full.) "I wanted to say to him, 'Let us come to an understanding, Mr. Mayor; there is something to be said on either side.' I am choking!"—she bursts out laughing—"I was wrong not to impose restrictions. Your health, dear! I am teasing you; it is very stupid. I said 'Yes' with all my heart, I can assure you, dear, and I thought the word too weak a one. When I think that all women, even the worst, say that word, I feel ashamed not to have found another." Holding out her glass: "To our golden wedding—will you touch glasses?"

"And to his baptism, little mamma."

In a low voice: "Tell me—are you sorry you married me?"

Laughing, "Yes." Kissing her on the shoulder, "I think I have found the stain again; it was just there."

"It is two in the morning, the fire is out, and I am a little—you won't laugh now? Well, I am a little dizzy."

"A capital pie, eh?"

"A capital pie! We shall have a cup of tea for breakfast tomorrow, shall we not?"

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM ONE THING TO ANOTHER

SCENE.—The country in autumn—The wind is blowing without—MADAME, seated by the fireside in a large armchair, is engaged in needlework —MONSIEUR, seated in front of her, is watching the flames of the fire—A long silence.

Monsieur—Will you pass me the poker, my dear?

Madame—(humming to herself)—"And yet despite so many fears." (Spoken.) Here is the poker. (Humming.) "Despite the painful—"

Monsieur—That is by Mehul, is it not, my dear? Ah! that is music—I saw Delaunay Riquier in Joseph. (He hums as he makes up the fire.) "Holy pains." (Spoken.) One wonders why it does not burn, and, by Jove! it turns out to be green wood. Only he was a little too robust—Riquier. A charming voice, but he is too stout.

Madame—(holding her needlework at a distance, the better to judge of the effect)—Tell me, George, would you have this square red or black? You see, the square near the point. Tell me frankly.

Monsieur—(singing) "If you can repent." (Spoken without turning his head.) Red, my dear; red. I should not hesitate; I hate black.

Madame—Yes, but if I make that red it will lead me to— (She reflects.)

Monsieur—Well, my dear, if it leads you away, you must hold fast to something to save yourself.

Madame—Come, George, I am speaking seriously. You know that if this little square is red, the point can not remain violet, and I would not change that for anything.

Monsieur—(slowly and seriously)—My dear, will you follow the advice of an irreproachable individual, to whose existence you have linked your fate? Well, make that square pea-green, and so no more about it. Just look whether a coal fire ever looked like that.

Madame—I should only be too well pleased to use up my pea-green wool; I have a quantity of it.

Monsieur—Then where lies the difficulty?

Madame—The difficulty is that pea-green is not sufficiently religious.

Monsieur—Hum! (Humming.) Holy pains! (Spoken.) Will you be kind enough to pass the bellows? Would it be indiscreet to ask why the poor pea-green, which does not look very guilty, has such an evil reputation? You are going in for religious needlework, then, my dear?

Madame—Oh, George! I beg of you to spare me your fun. I have been familiar with it for a long time, you know, and it is horribly disagreeable to me. I am simply making a little mat for the confessional-box of the vicar. There! are you satisfied? You know what it is for, and you must understand that under the present circumstances pea-green would be altogether out of place.

Monsieur—Not the least in the world. I can swear to you that I could just as well confess with pea-green under my feet. It is true that I am naturally of a resolute disposition. Use up your wool; I can assure you that the vicar will accept it all the same. He does not know how to refuse. (He plies the bellows briskly.)

Madame—You are pleased, are you not?

Monsieur—Pleased at what, dear?

Madame—Pleased at having vented your sarcasm, at having passed a jest on one who is absent. Well, I tell you that you are a bad man, seeing that you seek to shake the faith of those about you. My beliefs had need be very fervent, principles strong, and have real virtue, to resist these incessant attacks. Well, why are you looking at me like that?

Monsieur—I want to be converted, my little apostle. You are so pretty when you speak out; your eyes glisten, your voice rings, your gestures—I am sure that you could speak like that for a long time, eh? (He kisses her hand, and takes two of her curls and ties them under her chin.) You are looking pretty, my pet.

Madame—Oh! you think you have reduced me to silence because you have interrupted me. Ah! there, you have tangled my hair. How provoking you are! It will take me an hour to put it right. You are not satisfied with being a prodigy of impiety, but you must also tangle my hair. Come, hold out your hands and take this skein of wool.

Monsieur—(sitting down on a stool, which he draws as closely as possible to Madame, and holding up his hands) My little Saint John!

Madame—Not so close, George; not so close. (She smiles despite herself.) How silly you are! Please be careful; you will break my wool.

Monsieur—Your religious wool.

Madame—Yes, my religious wool. (She gives him a little pat on the

cheek.) Why do you part your hair so much on one side, George? It would suit you much better in the middle, here. Yes, you may kiss me, but gently.

Monsieur—Can you guess what I am thinking of?

Madame—How do you imagine I could guess that?

Monsieur—Well, I am thinking of the barometer which is falling and of the thermometer which is falling too.

Madame—You see, cold weather is coming on and my mat will never be finished. Come, let us make haste.

Monsieur—I was thinking of the thermometer which is falling and of my room which faces due north.

Madame—Did you not choose it yourself? My wool! Good gracious! my wool! Oh! the wicked wretch!

Monsieur—In summer my room with the northern aspect is, no doubt, very pleasant; but when autumn comes, when the wind creeps in, when the rain trickles down the windowpanes, when the fields, the country, seem hidden under a huge veil of sadness, when the spoils of our woodlands strew the earth, when the groves have lost their mystery and the nightingale her voice—oh! then the room with the northern aspect has a very northern aspect, and—

Madame—(continuing to wind her wool)—What nonsense you are talking!

Monsieur—I protest against autumns, that is all. God's sun is hidden and I seek another. Is not that natural, my little fairhaired saint, my little mystic lamb, my little blessed palmbranch? This new sun I find in you, pet—in your look, in the sweet odor of your person, in the rustling of your skirt, in the down on your neck which one notices by the lamp-light when you bend over the vicar's mat, in your nostril which expands when my lips approach yours—

Madame—Will you be quiet, George? It is Friday, and Ember week.

Monsieur—And your dispensation? (He kisses her.) Don't you see that your hand shakes, that you blush, that your heart is beating?

Madame—George, will you have done, sir? (She pulls away her hand, throws herself back in the chair, and avoids her husband's glance.)

Monsieur—Your poor little heart beats, and it is right, dear; it knows that autumn is the time for confidential chats and evening caresses, the time for kisses. And you know it too, for you defend yourself poorly,

and I defy you to look me in the face. Come! look me in the face.

Madame—(she suddenly leans toward her husband, the ball of wool rolling into the fireplace, the pious task falling to the ground. She takes his head between her hands)—Oh, what a dear, charming husband you would be if you had—

Monsieur—If I had what? Tell me quickly.

Madame—If you had a little religion. I should only ask for such a little at the beginning. It is not very difficult, I can assure you. While, now, you are really too—

Monsieur—Pea-green, eh?

Madame—Yes, pea-green, you great goose. (She laughs frankly.)

Monsieur—(lifting his hands in the air)—Sound trumpets! Madame has laughed; Madame is disarmed. Well, my snowwhite lamb, I am going to finish my story; listen properly, there, like that—your hands here, my head so. Hush! don't laugh. I am speaking seriously. As I was saying to you, the north room is large but cold, poetic but gloomy, and I will add that two are not too many in this wintry season to contend against the rigors of the night. I will further remark that if the sacred ties of marriage have a profoundly social significance, it is—do not interrupt me—at that hour of one's existence when one shivers on one's solitary couch.

Madame—You can not be serious.

Monsieur—Well, seriously, I should like the vicar's mat piously spread upon your bed, to keep us both warm together, this very evening. I wish to return as speedily as possible to the intimacy of conjugal life. Do you hear how the wind blows and whistles through the doors? The fire splutters, and your feet are frozen. (He takes her foot in his hands.)

Madame—But you are taking off my slipper, George.

Monsieur—Do you think, my white lamb, that I am going to leave your poor little foot in that state? Let it stay in my hand to be warmed. Nothing is so cold as silk. What! openwork stockings? My dear, you are rather dainty about your foot-gear for a Friday. Do you know, pet, you can not imagine how gay I wake up when the morning sun shines into my room. You shall see. I am no longer a man; I am a chaffinch; all the joys of spring recur to me. I laugh, I sing, I speechify, I tell tales to make one die of laughter. Sometimes I even dance.

Madame—Come now! I who in the morning like neither noise nor broad daylight—how little all that suits!

Monsieur—(suddenly changing his tone)—Did I say that I liked all that? The morning sun? Never in autumn, my sweet dove, never. I awake, on the contrary full of languor and poesy; I was like that in my very cradle. We will prolong the night, and behind the drawn curtain, behind the closed shutter, we will remain asleep without sleeping. Buried in silence and shadow, delightfully stretched beneath your warm eider-down coverlets, we will slowly enjoy the happiness of being together, and we will wish one another good-morning only on the stroke of noon. You do not like noise, dear. I will not say a word. Not a murmur to disturb your unfinished dream and warn you that you are no longer sleeping; not a breath to recall you to reality; not a movement to rustle the coverings. I will be silent as a shade, motionless as a statue; and if I kiss you—for, after all, I have my weaknesses—it will be done with a thousand precautions, my lips will scarcely brush your sleeping shoulder; and if you quiver with pleasure as you stretch out your arms, if your eye half uncloses at the murmur of my kiss, if your lips smile at me, if I kiss you, it would be because you would like me to, and I shall have nothing to reproach myself with.

Madame—(her eyes half closed, leaning back in her armchair, her head bent with emotion, she places her hands before his mouth. In a low voice)—Hush, hush! Don't say that, dear; not another word! If you knew how wrong it was!

Monsieur—Wrong! What is there that is wrong? Is your heart of marble or adamant, that you do not see that I love you, you naughty child? That I hold out my arms to you, that I long to clasp you to my heart, and to fall asleep in your hair? What is there more sacred in the world than to love one's wife or love one's husband? (Midnight strikes.)

Madame—(she suddenly changes her expression at the sound, throws her arms round her husband, and hurriedly kisses him thrice)—You thought I did not love you, eh, dear? Oh, yes! I love you. Great baby! not to see that I was waiting the time.

Monsieur—What time, dear?

Madame—The time. It has struck twelve, see. (She blushes crimson.) Friday is over. (She holds out her hand for him to kiss.)

Monsieur—Are you sure the clock is not five minutes fast, love?

CHAPTER XIX

A LITTLE CHAT

MADAME F— MADAME H—

(These ladies are seated at needlework as they talk.)

Madame F—For myself, you know, my dear, I fulfil my duties tolerably, still I am not what would be called a devotee. By no means. Pass me your scissors. Thanks.

Madame H—You are quite welcome, dear. What a time those little squares of lace must take. I am like yourself in respect of religion; in the first place, I think that nothing should be overdone. Have you ever—I have never spoken to any one on the subject, but I see your ideas are so in accordance with my own that—

Madame F—Come, speak out, dear; you trust me a little, I hope.

Madame H—Well, then, have you—tell me truly—ever had any doubts?

Madame F—(after reflecting for a moment)—Doubts! No. And you?

Madame H—I have had doubts, which has been a real grief to me. Heavens! how I have wept.

Madame F—I should think so, my poor dear. For my own part, my faith is very strong. These doubts must have made you very unhappy.

Madame H—Terribly so. You know, it seems as if everything failed you; there is a vacancy all about you—I have never spoken about it to my husband, of course—Leon is a jewel of a man, but he will not listen to anything of that kind. I can still see him, the day after our marriage; I was smoothing my hair—broad bands were then worn, you know.

Madame F—Yes, yes; they were charming. You will see that we shall go back to them.

Madame H—I should not be surprised; fashion is a wheel that turns. Leon, then, said to me the day after our wedding: "My dear child, I shall not hinder you going to church, but I beg you, for mercy's sake, never to say a word to me about it."

Madame F—Really, Monsieur H. said that to you?

Madame H—Upon my honor. Oh! my husband is all that is most—or, if you prefer it, all that is least—

Madame F—Yes, yes, I understand. That is a grief, you know. Mine is only indifferent. From time to time he says some disagreeable things to me on the question, but I am sure he could be very easily brought back to the right. At the first illness he has, you shall see. When he has only

a cold in the head, I notice the change. You have not seen my thimble?

Madame H—Here it is. Do not be too sure of that, dear; men are not to be brought back by going "chk, chk" to them, like little chickens. And then, though I certainly greatly admire the men who observe religious practices, you know me well enough not to doubt that—I think, as I told you, that nothing should be exaggerated. And yourself, pet, should you like to see your husband walking before the banner with a great wax taper in his right hand and a bouquet of flowers in his left?

Madame F—Oh! no, indeed. Why not ask me at once whether I should like to see Leon in a black silk skull cap, with cotton in his ears and a holy water sprinkler in his hand? One has no need to go whining about a church with one's nose buried in a book to be a pious person; there is a more elevated form of religion, which is that of—of refined people, you know.

Madame H—Ah! when you speak like that, I am of your opinion. I think, for instance, that there is nothing looks finer than a man while the host is being elevated. Arms crossed, no book, head slightly bowed, grave look, frock coat buttoned up. Have you seen Monsieur de P. at mass? How well he looks!

Madame F—He is such a fine man, and, then, he dresses so well. Have you seen him on horseback? Ah! so you have doubts; but tell me what they are, seeing we are indulging in confidences.

Madame H—I can hardly tell you. Doubts, in short; about hell, for instance, I have had horrible doubts. Oh! but do not let us speak about that; I believe it is wrong even to think of it.

Madame F—I have very broad views on that point; I never think about it. Besides, my late confessor helped me. "Do not seek too much," he always said to me, "do not try to understand that which is unfathomable." You did not know Father Gideon? He was a jewel of a confessor; I was extremely pleased with him. Not too tedious, always discreet, and, above all, well-bred. He turned monk from a romantic cause—a penitent was madly in love with him.

Madame H—Impossible!

Madame F—Yes, really. What! did you not know about it? The success of the monastery was due to that accident. Before the coming of Father Gideon it vegetated, but on his coming the ladies soon flocked there in crowds. They organized a little guild, entitled "The Ladies of the Agony." They prayed for the Chinese who had died without confession, and wore little death's heads in aluminum as sleeve-links. It became very fashionable, as you are aware, and the good fathers organized, in turn, a registry for men servants; and the result is that, from one thing leading to another, the community has become extremely wealthy. I have

even heard that one of the most important railway stations in Paris is shortly to be moved, so that the size of their garden can be increased, which is rather restricted at present.

Madame H—As to that, it is natural enough that men should want a place to walk in at home; but what I do not understand is that a woman, however pious she may be, should fall in love with a priest. It is all very well, but that is no longer piety; it is—fanaticism. I venerate priests, I can say so truly, but after all I can not imagine myself—you will laugh at me—ha, ha, ha!

Madame F—Not at all. Ha, ha, ha! what a child you are!

Madame H—(working with great briskness)—Well, I can not imagine that they are men—like the others.

Madame F—(resuming work with equal ardor)—And yet, my dear, people say they are.

Madame H—There are so many false reports set afloat. (A long silence.)

Madame F—(in a discreet tone of voice)—After all, there are priests who have beards—the Capuchins, for instance.

Madame H—Madame de V. has a beard right up to her eyes, so that counts for nothing, dear.

Madame F—That counts for nothing. I do not think so. In the first place, Madame de V.'s beard is not a perennial beard; her niece told me that she sheds her moustaches every autumn. What can a beard be that can not stand the winter? A mere trifle.

Madame H—A mere trifle that is horribly ugly, my dear.

Madame F—Oh! if Madame de V. had only moustaches to frighten away people, one might still look upon her without sorrow, but—

Madame H—I grant all that. Let us allow that the Countess's moustache and imperial are a nameless species of growth. I do not attach much importance to the point, you understand. She has a chin of heartbreaking fertility, that is all.

Madame F—To return to what we were saying, how is it that the men who are strongest, most courageous, most manly—soldiers, in fact—are precisely those who have most beard?

Madame H—That is nonsense, for then the pioneers would be braver than the Generals; and, in any case, there is not in France, I am sure, a General with as much beard as a Capuchin. You have never looked at a

Capuchin then?

Madame F—Oh, yes! I have looked at one quite close. It is a rather funny story. Fancy Clementine's cook having a brother a Capuchin—an ex-jeweller, a very decent man. In consequence of misfortunes in business—it was in 1848, business was at a stand-still—in short, he lost his senses—no, he did not lose his senses, but he threw himself into the arms of Heaven.

Madame H—Oh! I never knew that! When? Clementine—

Madame F—I was like you, I would not believe it, but one day Clementine said to me: "Since you will not believe in my Capuchin, come and see me tomorrow about three o'clock; he will be paying a visit to his sister. Don't have lunch first; we will lunch together." Very good. I went the next day with Louise, who absolutely insisted upon accompanying me, and I found at Clementine's five or six ladies installed in the drawing-room and laughing like madcaps. They had all come to see the Capuchin. "Well," said I, as I went in, when they all began to make signs to me and whisper, "Hush, hush!" He was in the kitchen.

Madame H—And what was he like?

Madame F—Oh! very nice, except his feet; you know how it always gives one a chill to look at their feet; but, in short, he was very amiable. He was sent for into the drawing-room, but he would not take anything except a little biscuit and a glass of water, which took away our appetites. He was very lively; told us that we were coquettes with our little bonnets and our full skirts. He was very funny, always a little bit of the jeweller at the bottom, but with plenty of good nature and frankness. He imitated the buzzing of a fly for us; it was wonderful. He also wanted to show us a little conjuring trick, but he needed two corks for it, and unfortunately his sister could only find one.

Madame H—No matter, I can not understand Clementine engaging a servant like that.

Madame F—Why? The brother is a guarantee.

Madame H—Of morality, I don't say no; but it seems to me that a girl like that can not be very discreet in her ways.

Madame F—How do you make that out?

Madame H—I don't know, I can not reason the matter out, but it seems to me that it must be so, that is all, . . . besides, I should not like to see a monk in my kitchen, close to the soup. Oh, mercy! no!

Madame F—What a child you are!

Madame H—That has nothing to do with religious feelings, my dear; I do not attack any dogma. Ah! if I were to say, for instance—come now, if I were to say, what now?

Madame F—In point of fact, what really is dogma?

Madame H—Well, it is what can not be attacked. Thus, for instance, a thing that is evident, you understand me, is unassailable, . . . or else it should be assailed, . . . in short, it can not be attacked. That is why it is monstrous to allow the Jewish religion and the Protestant religion in France, because these religions can be assailed, for they have no dogma. I give you this briefly, but in your prayer-book you will find the list of dogmas. I am a rod of iron as regards dogmas. My husband, who, as I said, has succeeded in inspiring me with doubts on many matters—without imagining it, for he has never required anything of me; I must do him that justice—but who, at any rate, has succeeded in making me neglect many things belonging to religion, such as fasting, vespers, sermons, . . . confession.

Madame F—Confession! Oh! my dear, I should never have believed that.

Madame H—It is in confidence, dear pet, that I tell you this. You will swear never to speak of it?

Madame F—Confession! Oh! yes, I swear it. Come here, and let me kiss you.

Madame H—You pity me, do you not?

Madame F—I can not pity you too much, for I am absolutely in the same position.

Madame H—You, too! Good heavens! how I love you. What can one do, eh? Must one not introduce some plan of conciliation into the household, sacrifice one's belief a little to that of one's husband?

Madame F—No doubt. For instance, how would you have me go to high mass, which is celebrated at my parish church at eleven o'clock exactly? That is just our breakfast time. Can I let my husband breakfast alone? He would never hinder me from going to high mass, he has said so a thousand times, only he has always added, "When you want to go to mass during breakfast time, I only ask one thing—it is to give me notice the day before, so that I may invite some friends to keep me company."

Madame H—But only fancy, pet, our two husbands could not be more alike if they were brothers. Leon has always said, "My dear little chicken—"

Madame F—Ha! ha! ha!

Madame H—Yes, that is his name for me; you know how lively he is. He has always said to me, then, "My dear little chicken, I am not a man to do violence to your opinions, but in return give way to me as regards some of your pious practices." I only give you the mere gist of it; it was said with a thousand delicacies, which I suppress. And I have agreed by degrees, . . . so that, while only paying very little attention to the outward observances of religion, I have remained, as I told you, a bar of iron as regards dogmas. Oh! as to that, I would not give way an inch, a hair-breadth, and Leon is the first to tell me that I am right. After all, dogma is everything; practice, well, what would you? If I could bring Leon round, it would be quite another thing. How glad I am to have spoken to you about all this.

Madame F—Have we not been chattering? But it is half-past five, and I must go and take my cinchona bark. Thirty minutes before meals, it is a sacred duty. Will you come, pet?

Madame H—Stop a moment, I have lost my thimble again and must find it.