

# A WOODLAND QUEEN - V1

ANDRE THEURIET\*

As early as 1857 the poems of Theuriet were printed in the 'Revue de Paris' and the 'Revue des Deux Mondes'. His greatest novel, 'Reine des Bois' (Woodland Queen), was crowned by the Academie Francaise in 1890. To the public in general he became first known in 1870 by his 'Nouvelles Intimes'. Since that time he has published a great many volumes of poems, drama, and fiction. A great writer, he perhaps meets the wishes of that large class of readers who seek in literature agreeable rest and distraction, rather than excitement or aesthetic gratification. He is one of the greatest spirits that survived the bankruptcy of Romanticism. He excels in the description of country nooks and corners; of that polite rusticity which knows nothing of the delving laborers of 'La Terre', but only of graceful and learned leisure, of solitude nursed in revery, and of passion that seems the springtide of germinating nature. He possesses great originality and the passionate spirit of a 'paysagiste': pictures of provincial life and family-interiors seem to appeal to his most pronounced sympathies. His taste is delicate, his style healthy and frank, and at the same time limpid and animated.

After receiving, in 1890, the Prix Vitet for the ensemble of his literary productions, he was elected to the Academy in 1896. To the stage Theuriet has given 'Jean-Marie', drama in verses (Odeon, February 11, 1871). It is yet kept on the repertoire together with his 'Maison de deux Barbeaux (1865), Raymonde (1887), and Les Maugars (1901).'

His novels, tales, and poems comprise a long list. 'Le Bleu et le Noir' (1873) was also crowned by the Academy. Then followed, at short intervals: 'Mademoiselle Guignon (1874.); Le Mariage de Gerard (1875); La Fortune d'Angele (1876); Raymonde (1877),' a romance of modern life, vastly esteemed by the reading public; 'Le Don Juan de Vireloup (1877); Sous Bois, Impressions d'un Forestier (1878); Le Filleul d'un Marquis (1878); Les Nids (1879); Le fils Maugars (1879); La Maison de deux Barbeaux (1879); Toute seule (1880); Sauvageonne (1880), his most realistic work; Les Enchantements de la Foret (1881); Le Livre de la Payse (poetry, 1882); Madame Heurteloup (1882); Peche de Jeunesse (1883); Le Journal de Tristan, mostly autobiographical; Bigarreau (1885); Eusebe Lombard (1885); Les OEillets de Kerlatz (1885); Helene (1886); Nos Oiseaux (beautiful verses, 1886); La Vie Rustique (1887); Amour d'Automne (1888); Josette (1888); Deux Soeurs (1889); Contes pour les Soirs d'Hiver (1890); Charme Dangereux (1891); La Ronde des Saisons et des Mois (1889);

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La Charmeresse (1891); Fleur de Nice (1896); Bois Fleury (1897); Refuge (1898); Villa Tranquille (1899); Claudette (1900); La Petite Dernière (1901); Le Manuscrit du Chanoine (1902), etc.

Besides this abundant production Andre Theuriet has also contributed to various journals and magazines: 'Le Moniteur, Le Musee Universal, L'Illustration, Le Figaro, Le Gaulois, La Republique Francaise, etc.; he has lectured in Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland, and has even found leisure to fill the post as Mayor of Bourg-la-Reine (Seine et Oise), perhaps no onerous office (1882-1900). He has also been an 'Officier de la Legion d'Honneur' since 1895.

MELCHIOR DE VOGUE  
de l'Academie Francaise.

A WOODLAND QUEEN

BOOK 1.

## CHAPTER I

### THE UNFINISHED WILL

Toward the middle of October, about the time of the beechnut harvest, M. Eustache Destourbet, justice of the Peace of Auberive, accompanied by his clerk, Etienne Seurrot, left his home at Abbatiale, in order to repair to the Chateau of Vivey, where he was to take part in removing the seals on some property whose owner had deceased.

At that period, 1857, the canton of Auberive, which stretches its massive forests like a thick wall between the level plain of Langres and the ancient Chatillonnais, had but one main road of communication: that from Langres to Bar-sur-Aube. The almost parallel adjacent route, from Auberive to Vivey, was not then in existence; and in order to reach this last commune, or hamlet, the traveller had to follow a narrow grass-bordered path, leading through the forest up the hill of Charboniere, from the summit of which was seen that intermingling of narrow gorges and wooded heights which is so characteristic of this mountainous region. On all sides were indented horizons of trees, among which a few, of more dominant height, projected their sharp outlines against the sky; in the distance were rocky steeps, with here and there a clump of brambles, down which trickled slender rivulets; still farther, like little islands, half submerged in a sea of foliage, were pastures of tender green dotted with juniper bushes, almost black in their density, and fields of rye struggling painfully through the stony soil—the entire scene presenting a picture of mingled wildness and cultivation, aridity and luxuriant freshness.

Justice Destourbet, having strong, wiry limbs, ascended cheerily the steep mountain-path. His tall, spare figure, always in advance of his companion, was visible through the tender green of the young oaks, clothed in a brown coat, a black cravat, and a very high hat, which the justice, who loved correctness in details, thought it his duty to don whenever called upon to perform his judicial functions. The clerk, Seurrot, more obese, and of maturer age, protuberant in front, and somewhat curved in the back, dragged heavily behind, perspiring and out of breath, trying to keep up with his patron, who, now and then seized with compassion, would come to a halt and wait for his subordinate.

"I trust," said Destourbet, after one of these intervals which enabled the clerk to walk by his side, "I trust we shall find Maitre Arbillot down there; we shall have need of his services in looking over and filing the papers of the deceased."

"Yes, Monsieur," answered Seurrot, "the notary will meet us at the chateau; he went to Praslay to find out from his associates whether Monsieur de Buxieres had not left a will in his keeping. In my humble opinion, that is hardly likely; for the deceased had great confidence in Maitre Arbillot, and it seems strange that he should choose to confide his testamentary intentions to a rival notary."

"Well," observed the justice, "perhaps when the seals are raised, we may discover an autograph will in some corner of a drawer."

"It is to be hoped so, Monsieur," replied Seurrot; "I wish it with all my heart, for the sake of Claudet Sejournant, for he is a good fellow, although on the sinister bar of the escutcheon, and a right jolly companion."

"Yes; and a marvellous good shot," interrupted the justice. "I recognize all that; but even if he had a hundred other good qualities, the grand chasserot, as they call him here, will be on the wrong side of the hedge if Monsieur de Buxieres has unfortunately died intestate. In the eye of the law, as you are doubtless aware, a natural child, who has not been acknowledged, is looked upon as a stranger."

"Monsieur de Buxieres always treated Claudet as his own son, and every one knew that he so considered him."

"Possibly, but if the law were to keep count of all such cases, there would be no end to their labors; especially in all questions of the 'cujus'. Odouart de Buxieres was a terribly wild fellow, and they say that these old beech-trees of Vivey forest could tell many a tale of his exploits."

"He, he!" assented the clerk, laughing slyly, and showing his toothless gums, "there is some truth in that. The deceased had the devil in his

boots. He could see neither a deer nor a pretty girl without flying in pursuit. Ah, yes! Many a trick has he played them—talk of your miracles, forsooth!—well, Claudet was his favorite, and Monsieur de Buxieres has told me, over and over again, that he would make him his heir, and I shall be very much astonished if we do not find a will.”

”Seurrot, my friend,” replied the justice, calmly, ”you are too experienced not to know that our country folks dread nothing so much as testifying to their last wishes—to make a will, to them, is to put one foot into the grave. They will not call in the priest or the notary until the very last moment, and very often they delay until it is too late. Now, as the deceased was at heart a rustic, I fear greatly that he did not carry his intentions into execution.”

”That would be a pity—for the chateau, the lands, and the entire fortune would go to an heir of whom Monsieur Odouart never had taken account—to one of the younger branch of Buxieres, whom he had never seen, having quarrelled with the family.”

”A cousin, I believe,” said the justice.

”Yes, a Monsieur Julien de Buxieres, who is employed by the Government at Nancy.”

”In fact, then, and until we receive more ample information, he is, for us, the sole legitimate heir. Has he been notified?”

”Yes, Monsieur. He has even sent his power of attorney to Monsieur Arbillot’s clerk.”

”So much the better,” said M. Destourbet, ”in that case, we can proceed regularly without delay.”

While thus conversing, they had traversed the forest, and emerged on the hill overlooking Vivey. From the border line where they stood, they could discover, between the half-denuded branches of the line of aspens, the sinuous, deepset gorge, in which the Aubette wound its tortuous way, at the extremity of which the village lay embanked against an almost upright wall of thicket and pointed rocks. On the west this narrow defile was closed by a mill, standing like a sentinel on guard, in its uniform of solid gray; on each side of the river a verdant line of meadow led the eye gradually toward the clump of ancient and lofty ash-trees, behind which rose the Buxieres domicile. This magnificent grove of trees, and a monumental fence of cast-iron, were the only excuse for giving the title of chateau to a very commonplace structure, of which the main body presented bare, whitewashed walls, flanked by two small towers on turrets shaped like extinguishers, and otherwise resembling very ordinary pigeon-houses.

This chateau, or rather country squire's residence, had belonged to the Odouart de Buxieres for more than two centuries. Before the Revolution, Christophe de Buxieres, grandfather of the last proprietor, had owned a large portion of Vivey, besides several forges in operation on the Aube and Aubette rivers. He had had three children: one daughter, who had embraced religion as a vocation; Claude Antoine, the elder son, to whom he left his entire fortune, and Julien Abdon, the younger, officer in the regiment of Rohan Soubise, with whom he was not on good terms. After emigrating and serving in Conde's army, the younger Buxieres had returned to France during the Restoration, had married, and been appointed special receiver in a small town in southern France. But since his return, he had not resumed relations with his elder brother, whom he accused of having defrauded him of his rights. The older one had married also, one of the Rochetaillee family; he had had but one son, Claude Odouart de Buxieres, whose recent decease had brought about the visit of the Justice of Auberive and his clerk.

Claude de Buxieres had lived all his life at Vivey. Inheriting from his father and grandfather flourishing health and a robust constitution, he had also from them strong love for his native territory, a passion for the chase, and a horror of the constraint and decorum exacted by worldly obligations. He was a spoiled child, brought up by a weak-minded mother and a preceptor without authority, who had succeeded in imparting to him only the most elementary amount of instruction, and he had, from a very early age, taken his own pleasure as his sole rule of life. He lived side by side with peasants and poachers, and had himself become a regular country yeoman, wearing a blouse, dining at the wine-shop, and taking more pleasure in speaking the mountain patois than his own native French. The untimely death of his father, killed by an awkward huntsman while following the hounds, had emancipated him at the age of twenty years. From this period he lived his life freely, as he understood it; always in the open air, without hindrance of any sort, and entirely unrestrained.

Nothing was exaggerated in the stories told concerning him. He was a handsome fellow, jovial and dashing in his ways, and lavish with his money, so he met with few rebuffs. Married women, maids, widows, any peasant girl of attractive form or feature, all had had to resist his advances, and with more than one the resistance had been very slight. It was no false report which affirmed that he had peopled the district with his illegitimate progeny. He was not hard to please, either; strawberry-pickers, shepherd-girls, wood-pilers, day-workers, all were equally charming in his sight; he sought only youth, health, and a kindly disposition.

Marriage would have been the only safeguard for him; but aside from the fact that his reputation of reckless huntsman and general scapegrace naturally kept aloof the daughters of the nobles, and even the Langarian middle classes, he dreaded more than anything else in the world the monotonous regularity of conjugal life. He did not care to be restricted always to the same dishes—preferring, as he said, his meat sometimes

roast, sometimes boiled, or even fried, according to his humor and his appetite.

Nevertheless, about the time that Claude de Buxieres attained his thirty-sixth year, it was noticed that he had a more settled air, and that his habits were becoming more sedentary. The chase was still his favorite pastime, but he frequented less places of questionable repute, seldom slept away from home, and seemed to take greater pleasure in remaining under his own roof. The cause of this change was ascribed by some to the advance of years creeping over him; others, more perspicacious, verified a curious coincidence between the entrance of a new servant in the chateau and the sudden good behavior of Claude.

This girl, a native of Aprey, named Manette Sejournant, was not, strictly speaking, a beauty, but she had magnificent blonde hair, gray, caressing eyes, and a silvery, musical voice. Well built, supple as an adder, modest and prudish in mien, she knew how to wait upon and cosset her master, accustoming him by imperceptible degrees to prefer the cuisine of the chateau to that of the wine-shops. After a while, by dint of making her merits appreciated, and her presence continually desired, she became the mistress of Odouart de Buxieres, whom she managed to retain by proving herself immeasurably superior, both in culinary skill and in sentiment, to the class of females from whom he had hitherto been seeking his creature comforts.

Matters went on in this fashion for a year or so, until Manette went on a three months' vacation. When she reappeared at the chateau, she brought with her an infant, six weeks old, which she declared was the child of a sister, lately deceased, but which bore a strange likeness to Claude. However, nobody made remarks, especially as M. de Buxieres, after he had been drinking a little, took no pains to hide his paternity. He himself held the little fellow at the baptismal font, and later, consigned him to the care of the Abbe Pernot, the curate of Vivey, who prepared the little Claudet for his first communion, at the same time that he instructed him in reading, writing, and the first four rules of arithmetic. As soon as the lad reached his fifteenth year, Claude put a gun into his hands, and took him hunting with him. Under the teaching of M. de Buxieres, Claudet did honor to his master, and soon became such an expert that he could give points to all the huntsmen of the canton. None could equal him in tracing a dog; he knew all the passes, by-paths, and enclosures of the forest; swooped down upon the game with the keen scent and the velocity of a bird of prey, and never was known to miss his mark. Thus it was that the country people surnamed him the 'grand chasserot', the term which we here apply to the sparrow-hawk. Besides all these advantages, he was handsome, alert, straight, and well made, dark-haired and olive-skinned, like all the Buxieres; he had his mother's caressing glance, but also the overhanging eyelids and somewhat stern expression of his father, from whom he inherited also a passionate temperament, and a spirit averse to all kinds of restraint. They were fond of him throughout the country, and M. de Buxieres, who felt his youth renewed in him, was very proud of

his adroitness and his good looks. He would invite him to his pleasure parties, and make him sit at his own table, and confided unhesitatingly all his secrets to him. In short, Claudet, finding himself quite at home at the chateau, naturally considered himself as one of the family. There was but one formality wanting to that end: recognizance according to law. At certain favorable times, Manette Sejournant would gently urge M. de Buxieres to have the situation legally authorized, to which he would invariably reply, from a natural dislike to taking legal advisers into his confidence:

”Don’t worry about anything; I have no direct heir, and Claudet will have all my fortune; my will and testament will be worth more to him than a legal acknowledgment.”

He would refer so often and so decidedly to his settled intention of making Claudet his sole heir, that Manette, who knew very little about what was required in such cases, considered the matter already secure. She continued in unsuspecting serenity until Claude de Buxieres, in his sixty-second year, died suddenly from a stroke of apoplexy.

The will, which was to insure Claudet’s future prospects, and to which the deceased had so often alluded, did it really exist? Neither Manette nor the grand chasserot had been able to obtain any certain knowledge in the matter, the hasty search for it after the decease having been suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the mayor of Vivey; and by the proceedings of the justice of the peace. The seals being once imposed, there was no means, in the absence of a verified will, of ascertaining on whom the inheritance devolved, until the opening of the inventory; and thus the Sejournants awaited with feverish anxiety the return of the justice of the peace and his bailiff.

M. Destoubet and Stephen Seurrot pushed open a small door to the right of the main gateway, passed rapidly under the arched canopy of beeches, the leaves of which, just touched by the first frost, were already falling from the branches, and, stamping their muddy feet on the outer steps, advanced into the vestibule. The wide corridor, flagged with black-and-white pavement, presented a cheerless aspect of bare walls discolored by damp, and adorned alternately by stags’ heads and family portraits in a crumbling state of decay. The floor was thus divided: on the right, the dining-room and the kitchen; on the left, drawing-room and a billiard-hall. A stone staircase, built in one of the turrets, led to the upper floors. Only one of these rooms, the kitchen, which the justice and his bailiff entered, was occupied by the household. A cold light, equally diffused in all directions, and falling from a large window, facing north across the gardens, allowed every detail of the apartment to be seen clearly; opposite the door of entrance, the tall chimney-place, with its deep embrasure, gave ample shelter to the notary, who installed himself upon a stool and lighted his pipe at one of the embers, while his principal clerk sat at the long table, itemizing the objects contained in the inventory.

In the opposite angle of the chimney-place, a lad of twenty-four years, no other than Claudet, called by the friendly nickname of the grand chasserot, kept company with the notary, while he toyed, in an absent fashion, with the silky ears of a spaniel, whose fluffy little head lay in his lap. Behind him, Manette Sejournant stood putting away her shawl and prayerbook in a closet. A mass had been said in the morning at the church, for the repose of the soul of the late Claude de Buxieres, and mother and son had donned their Sunday garments to assist at the ceremony.

Claudet appeared ill at ease in his black, tightly buttoned suit, and kept his eyes with their heavy lids steadily bent upon the head of the animal. To all the notary's questions, he replied only by monosyllables, passing his fingers every now and then through his bushy brown locks, and twining them in his forked beard, a sure indication with him of preoccupation and bad humor.

Manette had acquired with years an amount of embonpoint which detracted materially from the supple and undulating beauty which had so captivated Claude de Buxieres. The imprisonment of a tight corset caused undue development of the bust at the expense of her neck and throat, which seemed disproportionately short and thick. Her cheeks had lost their gracious curves and her double chin was more pronounced. All that remained of her former attractions were the caressing glance of her eye, tresses still golden and abundant, especially as seen under the close cap of black net, white teeth, and a voice that had lost nothing of its insinuating sweetness.

As the justice and his bailiff entered, Maitre Arbillot, and a petulant little man with squirrel-like eyes and a small moustache, arose quickly.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he cried. "I was anxiously expecting you—if you are willing, we will begin our work at once, for at this season night comes on quickly."

"At your orders, Maitre Arbillot," replied the justice, laying his hat down carefully on the window-sill; "we shall draw out the formula for raising the seals. By the way, has no will yet been found?"

"None to my knowledge. It is quite clear to me that the deceased made no testament, none at least before a notary."

"But," objected M. Destourbet, "he may have executed a holograph testament."

"It is certain, gentlemen," interrupted Manette, with her soft, plaintive voice, "that our dear gentleman did not go without putting his affairs in order. 'Manette,' said he, not more than two weeks ago; 'I do not intend you shall be worried, neither you nor Claudet, when I am no longer here.

All shall be arranged to your satisfaction.' Oh! he certainly must have put down his last wishes on paper. Look well around, gentlemen; you will find a will in some drawer or other."

While she applied her handkerchief ostentatiously to her nose and wiped her eyes, the justice exchanged glances with the notary.

"Maitre Arbillot, you think doubtless with me, that we ought to begin operations by examining the furniture of the bedroom?"

The notary inclined his head, and notified his chief clerk to remove his papers to the first floor.

"Show us the way, Madame," said the justice to the housekeeper; and the quartet of men of the law followed Manette, carrying with them a huge bunch of keys.

Claudet had risen from his seat when the justice arrived. As the party moved onward, he followed hesitatingly, and then halted, uncertain how to decide between the desire to assist in the search and the fear of intruding. The notary, noticing his hesitation; called to him:

"Come, you also, Claudet, are not you one of the guardians of the seals?"

And they wended their silent way, up the winding staircase of the turret. The high, dark silhouette of Manette headed the procession; then followed the justice, carefully choosing his foothold on the well-worn stairs, the asthmatic old bailiff, breathing short and hard, the notary, beating his foot impatiently every time that Seurrot stopped to take breath, and finally the principal clerk and Claudet.

Manette, opening noiselessly the door of the deceased's room, entered, as if it were a church, the somewhat stifling apartment. Then she threw open the shutters, and the afternoon sun revealed an interior decorated and furnished in the style of the close of the eighteenth century. An inlaid secretary, with white marble top and copper fittings, stood near the bed, of which the coverings had been removed, showing the mattresses piled up under a down bed covered with blue-and-white check.

As soon as the door was closed, the clerk settled himself at the table with his packet of stamped paper, and began to run over, in a low, rapid voice, the preliminaries of the inventory. In this confused murmuring some fragments of phrases would occasionally strike the ear: "Chateau of Vivey—deceased the eighth of October last—at the requisition of Marie-Julien de Buxieres, comptroller of direct contributions at Nancy—styling himself heir to Claude Odouart de Buxieres, his cousin-german by blood—"

This last phrase elicited from Claudet a sudden movement of surprise.

"The inventory," explained Maitre Arbillot, "is drawn up at the

requisition of the only heir named, to whom we must make application, if necessary, for the property left by the deceased.”

There was a moment of silence, interrupted by a plaintive sigh from Manette Sejournant and afterward by the tearing sound of the sealed bands across the bureau, the drawers and pigeonholes of which were promptly ransacked by the justice and his assistant.

Odouart de Buxieres had not been much of a scribe. A double Liege almanac, a memorandum-book, in which he had entered the money received from the sale of his wood and the dates of the payments made by his farmers; a daybook, in which he had made careful note of the number of head of game killed each day—that was all the bureau contained.

”Let us examine another piece of furniture,” murmured the justice.

Manette and Claudet remained unmoved. They apparently knew the reason why none but insignificant papers had been found in the drawers, for their features expressed neither surprise nor disappointment.

Another search through a high chest of drawers with large copper handles was equally unprofitable. Then they attacked the secretary, and after the key had been turned twice in the noisy lock, the lid went slowly down. The countenances of both mother and son, hitherto so unconcerned, underwent a slight but anxious change. The bailiff continued his scrupulous search of each drawer under the watchful eye of the justice, finding nothing but documents of mediocre importance; old titles to property, bundles of letters, tradesmen’s bills, etc. Suddenly, at the opening of the last drawer, a significant ”Ah!” from Stephen Seurrot drew round him the heads of the justice and the notary, and made Manette and Claudet, standing at the foot of the bed, start with expectation. On the dark ground of a rosewood box lay a sheet of white paper, on which was written:

”This is my testament.”

With the compression of lip and significant shake of the head of a physician about to take in hand a hopeless case of illness, the justice made known to his two neighbors the text of the sheet of paper, on which Claude Odouart de Buxieres had written, in his coarse, ill-regulated hand, the following lines:

”Not knowing my collateral heirs, and caring nothing about them, I give and bequeath all my goods and chattels—”

The testator had stopped there, either because he thought it better, before going any further, to consult some legal authority more experienced than himself, or because he had been interrupted in his labor and had deferred completing this testifying of his last will until some future opportunity.

M. Destoubet, after once more reading aloud this unfinished sentence, exclaimed:

"Monsieur de Buxieres did not finish—it is much to be regretted!"

"My God! is it possible?" interrupted the housekeeper; "you think, then, Monsieur justice, that Claudet does not inherit anything?"

"According to my idea," replied he, "we have here only a scrap of unimportant paper; the name of the legatee is not indicated, and even were it indicated, the testament would still be without force, being neither dated nor signed."

"But perhaps Monsieur de Buxieres made another?"

"I think not; I am more inclined to suppose that he did not have time to complete the arrangements that he wished to make, and the proof lies in the very existence of this incomplete document in the only piece of furniture in which he kept his papers." Then, turning toward the notary and the bailiff: "You are doubtless, gentlemen, of the same opinion as myself; it will be wise, therefore, to defer raising the remainder of the seals until the arrival of the legal heir. Maitre Arbillot, Monsieur Julien de Buxieres must be notified, and asked to be here in Vivey as soon as possible."

"I will write this evening," said the notary; "in the meanwhile, the keeping of the seals will be continued by Claudet Sejournant."

The justice inclined his head to Manette, who was standing, pale and motionless, at the foot of the bed; stunned by the unexpected announcement; the bailiff and the chief clerk, after gathering up their papers, shook hands sympathizingly with Claudet.

"I am grieved to the heart, my dear fellow," said the notary, in his turn, "at what has happened! It is hard to swallow, but you will always keep a courageous heart, and be able to rise to the top; besides, even if, legally, you own nothing here, this unfinished testament of Monsieur de Buxieres will constitute a moral title in your favor, and I trust that the heir will have enough justice and right feeling to treat you properly."

"I want nothing from him!" muttered Claudet, between his teeth; then, leaving his mother to attend to the rest of the legal fraternity, he went hastily to his room, next that of the deceased, tore off his dress-coat, slipped on a hunting-coat, put on his gaiters, donned his old felt hat, and descended to the kitchen, where Manette was sitting, huddled up in front of the embers, weeping and bewailing her fate.

Since she had become housekeeper and mistress of the Buxieres household,

she had adopted a more polished speech and a more purely French mode of expression, but in this moment of discouragement and despair the rude dialect of her native country rose to her lips, and in her own patois she inveighed against the deceased:

”Ah! the bad man, the mean man! Didn’t I tell him, time and again, that he would leave us in trouble! Where can we seek our bread this late in the day? We shall have to beg in the streets!”

”Hush! hush! mother,” interrupted Claudet, sternly, placing his hand on her shoulder, ”it does not mend matters to give way like that. Calm thyself—so long as I have hands on the ends of my arms, we never shall be beggars. But I must go out—I need air.”

And crossing the gardens rapidly, he soon reached the outskirts of the brambly thicket.

This landscape, both rugged and smiling in its wildness, hardly conveyed the idea of silence, but rather of profound meditation, absolute calm; the calmness of solitude, the religious meditation induced by spacious forest depths. The woods seemed asleep, and the low murmurings, which from time to time escaped from their recesses, seemed like the unconscious sighs exhaled by a dreamer. The very odor peculiar to trees in autumn, the penetrating and spicy odor of the dying leaves, had a delicate and subtle aroma harmonizing with this quietude of fairyland.

Now and then, through the vaporous golden atmosphere of the late autumn sunset, through the pensive stillness of the hushed woods, the distant sound of feminine voices, calling to one another, echoed from the hills, and beyond the hedges was heard the crackling of branches, snapped by invisible hands, and the rattle of nuts dropping on the earth. It was the noise made by the gatherers of beechnuts, for in the years when the beech produces abundantly, this harvest, under the sanction of the guardians of the forest, draws together the whole population of women and children, who collect these triangular nuts, from which an excellent species of oil is procured.

Wending his way along the copse, Claudet suddenly perceived, through an opening in the trees, several large white sheets spread under the beeches, and covered with brown heaps of the fallen fruit. One or two familiar voices hailed him as he passed, but he was not disposed to gossip, for the moment, and turned abruptly into the bushwood, so as to avoid any encounter. The unexpected event which had just taken place, and which was to change his present mode of life, as well as his plans for the future, was of too recent occurrence for him to view it with any degree of calmness.

He was like a man who has received a violent blow on the head, and is for the moment stunned by it. He suffered vaguely, without seeking to know from what cause; he had not been able as yet to realize the extent of his

misfortune; and every now and then a vague hope came over him that all would come right.

So on he went, straight ahead, his eyes on the ground, and his hands in his pockets, until he emerged upon one of the old forest roads where the grass had begun to burst through the stony interstices; and there, in the distance, under the light tracery of weaving branches, a delicate female silhouette was outlined on the dark background. A young woman, dressed in a petticoat of gray woolen material, and a jacket of the same, close-fitting at the waist, her arms bare to the elbows and supporting on her head a bag of nuts enveloped in a white sheet, advanced toward him with a quick and rhythmical step. The manner in which she carried her burden showed the elegance of her form, the perfect grace of her chest and throat. She was not very tall, but finely proportioned. As she approached, the slanting rays of the setting sun shone on her heavy brown hair, twisted into a thick coil at the back of her head, and revealed the amber paleness of her clear skin, the long oval of her eyes, the firm outline of her chin and somewhat full lips; and Claudet, roused from his lethargic reverie by the sound of her rapid footsteps, raised his eyes, and recognized the daughter of Pere Vincart, the proprietor of La Thuilliere.

At the same moment, the young girl, doubtless fatigued with the weight of her bundle, had laid it down by the roadside while she recovered her breath. In a few seconds Claudet was by her side.

"Good-evening, Reine," said he, in a voice singularly softened in tone, "shall I give you a lift with that?"

"Good-evening, Claudet," replied she; "truly, now, that is not an offer to be refused. The weight is greater than I thought."

"Have you come far thus laden?"

"No; our people are nutting in the Bois des Ronces; I came on before, because I don't like to leave father alone for long at a time and, as I was coming, I wished to bring my share with me."

"No one can reproach you with shirking work, Reine, nor of being afraid to take hold of things. To see you all day trotting about the farm, no one would think you had been to school in the city, like a young lady."

And Claudet's countenance became irradiated with a glow of innocent and tender admiration. It was evident that his eyes looked with delight into the dark limpid orbs of Reine, on her pure and rosy lips, and on her partly uncovered neck, the whiteness of which two little brown moles only served to enhance.

"How can it be helped?" replied she, smiling, "it must be done; when there is no man in the house to give orders, the women must take a hand

themselves. My father was not very strong when my mother died, and since he had that attack he has become quite helpless, and I have had to take his place.”

While she spoke, Claudet took hold of the bundle, and, lifting it as if it had been a feather, threw it over his shoulder. They walked on, side by side, in the direction of La Thuliere; the sun had set, and a penetrating moisture, arising from the damp soil of the adjacent pasture lands, encircled them in a bluish fog.

”So he is worse, your father, is he?” said Claudet, after a moment’s silence.

”He can not move from his armchair, his mental faculties are weakening, and I am obliged to amuse him like a child. But how is it with yourself, Claudet?” she asked, turning her frank, cordial gaze upon him. ”You have had your share of trouble since we last met, and great events have happened. Poor Monsieur de Buxieres was taken away very suddenly!”

The close relationship that united Claudet with the deceased was a secret to no one; Reine, as well as all the country people, knew and admitted the fact, however irregular, as one sanctioned by time and continuity. Therefore, in speaking to the young man, her voice had that tone of affectionate interest usual in conversing with a bereaved friend on a death that concerns him.

The countenance of the ’grand chasserot’, which had cleared for a time under her influence, became again clouded.

”Yes;” sighed he, ”he was taken too soon!”

”And now, Claudet, you are sole master at the chateau?”

”Neither—master—nor even valet!” he returned, with such bitterness that the young girl stood still with surprise.

”What do you mean?” she exclaimed, ”was it not agreed with Monsieur de Buxieres that you should inherit all his property?”

”Such was his intention, but he did not have time to put it in execution; he died without leaving any will, and, as I am nothing in the eye of the law, the patrimony will go to a distant relative, a de Buxieres whom Monsieur Odouart did not even know.”

Reine’s dark eyes filled with tears.

”What a misfortune!” she exclaimed, ”and who could have expected such a thing? Oh! my poor Claudet!”

She was so moved, and spoke with such sincere compassion, that Claudet was perhaps misled, and thought he read in her glistening eyes a tenderer sentiment than pity; he trembled, took her hand, and held it long in his.

"Thank you, Reine! Yes," he added, after a pause, "it is a rude shock to wake up one morning without hearth or home, when one has been in the habit of living on one's income."

"What do you intend to do?" inquired Reine, gravely.

Claudet shrugged his shoulders.

"To work for my bread—or, if I can find no suitable trade, enlist in a regiment. I think I should not make a bad soldier. Everything is going round and round in my head like a millwheel. The first thing to do is to see about my mother, who is lamenting down there at the house—I must find her a comfortable place to live."

The young girl had become very thoughtful.

"Claudet," replied she, "I know you are very proud, very sensitive, and could not wish to hurt your feelings. Therefore, I pray you not to take in ill part that which I am going to say—in short, if you should get into any trouble, you will, I hope, remember that you have friends at La Thuilliere, and that you will come to seek us."

The 'grand chasserot' reddened.

"I shall never take amiss what you may say to me, Reine!" faltered he; "for I can not doubt your good heart—I have known it since the time when we played together in the cure's garden, while waiting for the time to repeat the catechism. But there is no hurry as yet; the heir will not arrive for several weeks, and by that time, I trust, we shall have had a chance to turn round."

They had reached the boundary of the forest where the fields of La Thuilliere begin.

By the last fading light of day they could distinguish the black outline of the ancient forge, now become a grange, and a light was twinkling in one of the low windows of the farm.

"Here you are at home," continued Claudet, laying the bundle of nuts on the flat stone wall which surrounded the farm buildings; "I wish you good-night."

"Will you not come in and get warm?"

"No; I must go back," replied he.

"Good-night, then, Claudet; au revoir and good courage!"

He gazed at her for a moment in the deepening twilight, then, abruptly pressing her hands:

"Thank you, Reine," murmured he in a choking voice, "you are a good girl, and I love you very much!"

He left the young mistress of the farm precipitately, and plunged again into the woods.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HEIR TO VIVEY

While these events were happening at Vivey, the person whose name excited the curiosity and the conversational powers of the villagers—Marie-Julien de Buxieres—ensconced in his unpretentious apartment in the Rue Stanislaus, Nancy, still pondered over the astonishing news contained in the Auberive notary's first letter. The announcement of his inheritance, dropping from the skies, as it were, had found him quite unprepared, and, at first, somewhat sceptical. He remembered, it is true, hearing his father once speak of a cousin who had remained a bachelor and who owned a fine piece of property in some corner of the Haute Marne; but, as all intercourse had long been broken off between the two families, M. de Buxieres the elder had mentioned the subject only in relation to barely possible hopes which had very little chance of being realized. Julien had never placed any reliance on this chimerical inheritance, and he received almost with indifference the official announcement of the death of Claude Odouart de Buxieres.

By direct line from his late father, he became in fact the only legitimate heir of the chateau and lands of Vivey; still, there was a strong probability that Claude de Buxieres had made a will in favor of some one more within his own circle. The second missive from Arbillot the notary, announcing that the deceased had died intestate, and requesting the legal heir to come to Vivey as soon as possible, put a sudden end to the young man's doubts, which merged into a complex feeling, less of joy than of stupefaction.

Up to the present time, Julien de Buxieres had not been spoiled by Fortune's gifts. His parents, who had died prematurely, had left him nothing. He lived in a very mediocre style on his slender salary as comptroller of direct contributions, and, although twenty-seven years old, was housed like a supernumerary in a small furnished room on the second floor above the ground. At this time his physique was that of a

young man of medium height, slight, pale, and nervous, sensitive in disposition, reserved and introspective in habit. His delicate features, his intelligent forehead surmounted by soft chestnut hair, his pathetic blue eyes, his curved, dissatisfied mouth, shaded by a slight, dark moustache, indicated a melancholy, unquiet temperament and precocious moral fatigue.

There are some men who never have had any childhood, or rather, whose childhood never has had its happy time of laughter. Julien was one of these. That which imparts to childhood its charm and enjoyment is the warm and tender atmosphere of the home; the constant and continued caressing of a mother; the gentle and intimate creations of one's native country where, by degrees, the senses awaken to the marvellous sights of the outer world; where the alternating seasons in their course first arouse the student's ambition and cause the heart of the adolescent youth to thrill with emotion; where every street corner, every tree, every turn of the soil, has some history to relate. Julien had had no experiences of this peaceful family life, during which are stored up such treasures of childhood's recollections. He was the son of a government official, who had been trotted over all France at the caprice of the administration, and he had never known, so to speak, any associations of the land in which he was born, or the hearth on which he was raised. Chance had located his birth in a small town among the Pyrenees, and when he was two years old he had been transplanted to one of the industrial cities of Artois. At the end of two years more came another removal to one of the midland towns, and thus his tender childhood had been buffeted about, from east to west, from north to south, taking root nowhere. All he could remember of these early years was an unpleasant impression of hasty packing and removal, of long journeys by diligence, and of uncomfortable resettling. His mother had died just as he was entering upon his eighth year; his father, absorbed in official work, and not caring to leave the child to the management of servants, had placed him at that early age in a college directed by priests. Julien thus passed his second term of childhood, and his boyhood was spent behind these stern, gloomy walls, bending resignedly under a discipline which, though gentle, was narrow and suspicious, and allowed little scope for personal development. He obtained only occasional glimpses of nature during the monotonous daily walks across a flat, meaningless country. At very rare intervals, one of his father's colleagues would take him visiting; but these stiff and ceremonious calls only left a wearisome sensation of restraint and dull fatigue. During the long vacation he used to rejoin his father, whom he almost always found in a new residence. The poor man had alighted there for a time, like a bird on a tree; and among these continually shifting scenes, the lad had felt himself more than ever a stranger among strangers; so that he experienced always a secret though joyless satisfaction in returning to the cloisters of the St. Hilaire college and submitting himself to the yoke of the paternal but inflexible discipline of the Church.

He was naturally inclined, by the tenderness of his nature, toward a

devotional life, and accepted with blind confidence the religious and moral teaching of the reverend fathers. A doctrine which preached separation from profane things; the attractions of a meditative and pious life, and mistrust of the world and its perilous pleasures, harmonized with the shy and melancholy timidity of his nature. Human beings, especially women, inspired him with secret aversion, which was increased by consciousness of his awkwardness and remissness whenever he found himself in the society of women or young girls.

The beauties of nature did not affect him; the flowers in the springtime, the glories of the summer sun, the rich coloring of autumn skies, having no connection in his mind with any joyous recollection, left him cold and unmoved; he even professed an almost hostile indifference to such purely material sights as disturbing and dangerous to the inner life. He lived within himself and could not see beyond.

His mind, imbued with a mystic idealism, delighted itself in solitary reading or in meditations in the house of prayer. The only emotion he ever betrayed was caused by the organ music accompanying the hymnal plain-song, and by the pomp of religious ceremony.

At the age of eighteen, he left the St. Hilaire college in order to prepare his baccalaureate, and his father, becoming alarmed at his increasing moodiness and mysticism, endeavored to infuse into him the tastes and habits of a man of the world by introducing him into the society of his equals in the town where he lived; but the twig was already bent, and the young man yielded with bad grace to the change of regime; the amusements they offered were either wearisome or repugnant to him. He would wander aimlessly through the salons where they were playing whist, where the ladies played show pieces at the piano, and where they spoke a language he did not understand. He was quite aware of his worldly inaptitude, and that he was considered awkward, dull, and ill-tempered, and the knowledge of this fact paralyzed and frightened him still more. He could not disguise his feeling of ennui sufficiently to prevent the provincial circles from being greatly offended; they declared unanimously that young de Buxieres was a bear, and decided to leave him alone. The death of his father, which happened just as the youth was beginning his official cares, put a sudden end to all this constraint. He took advantage of his season of mourning to resume his old ways; and returned with a sigh of relief to his solitude, his books, and his meditations. According to the promise of the Imitation, he found unspeakable joys in his retirement; he rose at break of day, assisted at early mass, fulfilled, conscientiously, his administrative duties, took his hurried meals in a boardinghouse, where he exchanged a few polite remarks with his fellow inmates, then shut himself up in his room to read Pascal or Bossuet until eleven o'clock.

He thus attained his twenty-seventh year, and it was into the calm of this serious, cloister-like life, that the news fell of the death of Claude de Buxieres and of the unexpected inheritance that had accrued to

him.

After entering into correspondence with the notary, M. Arbillot, and becoming assured of the reality of his rights and of the necessity of his presence at Vivey, he had obtained leave of absence from his official duties, and set out for Haute Marne. On the way, he could not help marvelling at the providential interposition which would enable him to leave a career for which he felt he had no vocation, and to pursue his independent life, according to his own tastes, and secured from any fear of outside cares. According to the account given by the notary, Claude de Buxieres's fortune might be valued at two hundred thousand francs, in furniture and other movables, without reckoning the chateau and the adjacent woods. This was a much larger sum than had ever been dreamed of by Julien de Buxieres, whose belongings did not amount in all to three thousand francs. He made up his mind, therefore, that, as soon as he was installed at Vivey, he would change his leave of absence to an unlimited furlough of freedom. He contemplated with serene satisfaction this perspective view of calm and solitary retirement in a chateau lost to view in the depths of the forest, where he could in perfect security give himself up to the studious contemplative life which he loved so much, far from all worldly frivolities and restraint. He already imagined himself at Vivey, shut up in his carefully selected library; he delighted in the thought of having in future to deal only with the country people, whose uncivilized ways would be like his own, and among whom his timidity would not be remarked.

He arrived at Langres in the afternoon of a foggy October day, and inquired immediately at the hotel how he could procure a carriage to take him that evening to Vivey. They found him a driver, but, to his surprise, the man refused to take the journey until the following morning, on account of the dangerous state of the crossroads, where vehicles might stick fast in the mire if they ventured there after nightfall. Julien vainly endeavored to effect an arrangement with him, and the discussion was prolonged in the courtyard of the hotel. Just as the man was turning away, another, who had overheard the end of the colloquy, came up to young de Buxieres, and offered to undertake the journey for twenty francs.

"I have a good horse," said he to Julien; "I know the roads, and will guarantee that we reach Vivey before nightfall."

The bargain was quickly made; and in half an hour, Julien de Buxieres was rolling over the plain above Langres, in a shaky old cabriolet, the muddy hood of which bobbed over at every turn of the wheel, while the horse kept up a lively trot over the stones.

The clouds were low, and the road lay across bare and stony prairies, the gray expanse of which became lost in the distant mist. This depressing landscape would have made a disagreeable impression on a less unobserving traveller, but, as we have said, Julien looked only inward, and the

phenomena of the exterior world influenced him only unconsciously. Half closing his eyes, and mechanically affected by the rhythmical tintinnabulation of the little bells, hanging around the horse's neck, he had resumed his meditations, and considered how he should arrange his life in this, to him, unknown country, which would probably be his own for some time to come. Nevertheless, when, at the end of the level plain, the road turned off into the wooded region, the unusual aspect of the forest aroused his curiosity. The tufted woods and lofty trees, in endless succession under the fading light, impressed him by their profound solitude and their religious silence. His loneliness was in sympathy with the forest, which seemed contemporary with the Sleeping Beauty of the wood, the verdant walls of which were to separate him forever from the world of cities. Henceforth, he could be himself, could move freely, dress as he wished, or give way to his dreaming, without fearing to encounter the ironical looks of idle and wondering neighbors. For the first time since his departure from his former home, he experienced a feeling of joy and serenity; the influence of the surroundings, so much in harmony with his wishes, unlocked his tongue, and made him communicative.

He made up his mind to speak to the guide, who was smoking at his side and whipping his horse.

"Are we far from Vivey now?"

"That depends, Monsieur—as the crow flies, the distance is not very great, and if we could go by the roads, we should be there in one short hour. Unfortunately, on turning by the Allofroy farm, we shall have to leave the highroad and take the cross path; and then—my gracious! we shall plunge into the ditch down there, and into perdition."

"You told me that you were well acquainted with the roads!"

"I know them, and I do not know them. When it comes to these crossroads, one is sure of nothing. They change every year, and each new superintendent cuts a way out through the woods according to his fancy. The devil himself could not find his way."

"Yet you have been to Vivey before?"

"Oh, yes; five or six years ago; I used often to take parties of hunters to the chateau. Ah! Monsieur, what a beautiful country it is for hunting; you can not take twenty steps along a trench without seeing a stag or a deer."

"You have doubtless had the opportunity of meeting Monsieur Odouart de Buxieres?"

"Yes, indeed, Monsieur, more than once—ah! he is a jolly fellow and a fine man—"

"He was," interrupted Julien, gravely, "for he is dead."

"Ah! excuse me—I did not know it. What! is he really dead? So fine a man! What we must all come to. Careful, now!" added he, pulling in the reins, "we are leaving the highroad, and must keep our eyes open."

The twilight was already deepening, the driver lighted his lantern, and the vehicle turned into a narrow lane, half mud, half stone, and hedged in on both sides with wet brushwood, which flapped noisily against the leathern hood. After fifteen minutes' riding, the paths opened upon a pasture, dotted here and there with juniper bushes, and thence divided into three lines, along which ran the deep track of wagons, cutting the pasturage into small hillocks. After long hesitation, the man cracked his whip and took the right-hand path.

Julien began to fear that the fellow had boasted too much when he declared that he knew the best way. The ruts became deeper and deeper; the road was descending into a hole; suddenly, the wheels became embedded up to the hub in thick, sticky mire, and the horse refused to move. The driver jumped to the ground, swearing furiously; then he called Julien to help him to lift out the wheel. But the young man, slender and frail as he was, and not accustomed to using his muscles, was not able to render much assistance.

"Thunder and lightning!" cried the driver, "it is impossible to get out of this—let go the wheel, Monsieur, you have no more strength than a chicken, and, besides, you don't know how to go about it. What a devil of a road! But we can't spend the night here!"

"If we were to call out," suggested Julien, somewhat mortified at the inefficiency of his assistance, "some one would perhaps come to our aid."

They accordingly shouted with desperation; and after five or six minutes, a voice hailed back. A woodcutter, from one of the neighboring clearings, had heard the call, and was running toward them.

"This way!" cried the guide, "we are stuck fast in the mud. Give us a lift."

The man came up and walked round the vehicle, shaking his head.

"You've got on to a blind road," said he, "and you'll have trouble in getting out of it, seeing as how there's not light to go by. You had better unharness the horse, and wait for daylight, if you want to get your carriage out."

"And where shall we go for a bed?" growled the driver; "there isn't even a house near in this accursed wild country of yours!"

"Excuse me—you are not far from La Thuiliere; the farm people will not refuse you a bed, and to-morrow morning they will help you to get your carriage out of the mud. Unharness, comrade; I will lead you as far as the Plancheau-Vacher; and from there you will see the windows of the farmhouse."

The driver, still grumbling, decided to take his advice. They unharnessed the horse; took one of the lanterns of the carriage as a beacon, and followed slowly the line of pasture-land, under the woodchopper's guidance. At the end of about ten minutes, the forester pointed out a light, twinkling at the extremity of a rustic path, bordered with moss.

"You have only to go straight ahead," said he, "besides, the barking of the dogs will guide you. Ask for Mamselle Vincart. Good-night, gentlemen."

He turned on his heel, while Julien, bewildered, began to reproach himself for not having thanked him enough. The conductor went along with his lantern; young de Buxieres followed him with eyes downcast. Thus they continued silently until they reached the termination of the mossy path, where a furious barking saluted their ears.

"Here we are," growled the driver, "fortunately the dogs are not yet let loose, or we should pass a bad quarter of an hour!"

They pushed open a side-wicket and, standing in the courtyard, could see the house. With the exception of the luminous spot that reddened one of the windows of the ground floor, the long, low facade was dark, and, as it were, asleep. On the right, standing alone, outlined against the sky, was the main building of the ancient forge, now used for granaries and stables; inside, the frantic barking of the watch-dogs mingled with the bleating of the frightened sheep, the neighing of horses, and the clanking of wooden shoes worn by the farm hands. At the same moment, the door of the house opened, and a servant, attracted by the uproar, appeared on the threshold, a lantern in her hand.

"Hallo! you people," she exclaimed sharply to the newcomers, who were advancing toward her, "what do you want?"

The driver related, in a few words, the affair of the cabriolet, and asked whether they would house him at the farm until the next day—himself and the gentleman he was conducting to Vivey.

The girl raised the lantern above her head in order to scrutinize the two strangers; doubtless their appearance and air of respectability reassured her, for she replied, in a milder voice:

"Well, that does not depend on me—I am not the mistress here, but come in, all the same—Mamselle Reine can not be long now, and she will answer

for herself.”

As soon as the driver had fastened his horse to one of the outside posts of the wicket-gate, the servant brought them into a large, square hall, in which a lamp, covered with a shade, gave a moderate light. She placed two chairs before the fire, which she drew together with the poker.

”Warm yourselves while you are waiting,” continued she, ”it will not be long, and you must excuse me—I must go and milk the cows—that is work which will not wait.”

She reached the courtyard, and shut the gate after her, while Julien turned to examine the room into which they had been shown, and felt a certain serenity creep over him at the clean and cheerful aspect of this homely but comfortable interior. The room served as both kitchen and dining-room. On the right of the flaring chimney, one of the cast-iron arrangements called a cooking-stove was gently humming; the saucepans, resting on the bars, exhaled various appetizing odors. In the centre, the long, massive table of solid beech was already spread with its coarse linen cloth, and the service was laid. White muslin curtains fell in front of the large windows, on the sills of which potted chrysanthemums spread their white, brown, and red blossoms.

Round the walls a shining battery of boilers, kettles, basins, and copper plates were hung in symmetrical order. On the dresser, near the clock, was a complete service of old Apey china, in bright and varied colors, and not far from the chimney, which was ornamented with a crucifix of yellow copper, was a set of shelves, attached to the wall, containing three rows of books, in gray linen binding. Julien, approaching, read, not without surprise, some of the titles: Paul and Virginia, La Fontaine’s Fables, Gessner’s Idylls, Don Quixote, and noticed several odd volumes of the Picturesque Magazine.

Hanging from the whitened ceiling were clusters of nuts, twisted hemp, strings of yellow maize, and chaplets of golden pippins tied with straw, all harmonizing in the dim light, and adding increased fulness to the picture of thrift and abundance.

”It’s jolly here!” said the driver, smacking his lips, ”and the smell which comes from that oven makes one hungry. I wish Mamselle Reine would arrive!”

Just as he said this, a mysterious falsetto voice, which seemed to come from behind the copper basins, repeated, in an acrid voice: ”Reine! Reine!”

”What in the world is that?” exclaimed the driver, puzzled.

Both looked toward the beams; at the same moment there was a rustling of wings, a light hop, and a black-and-white object flitted by, resting,

finally, on one of the shelves hanging from the joists.

"Ha, ha!" said the driver, laughing, "it is only a magpie!"

He had hardly said it, when, like a plaintive echo, another voice, a human voice this time, childish and wavering, proceeding from a dark corner, faltered: "Rei-eine—Rei-eine!"

"Hark!" murmured Julien, "some one answered."

His companion seized the lamp, and advanced toward the portion of the room left in shadow. Suddenly he stopped short, and stammered some vague excuse.

Julien, who followed him, then perceived, with alarm, in a sort of niche formed by two screens, entirely covered with illustrations from Epinal, a strange-looking being stretched in an easy-chair, which was covered with pillows and almost hidden under various woolen draperies. He was dressed in a long coat of coarse, pale-blue cloth. He was bareheaded, and his long, white hair formed a weird frame for a face of bloodless hue and meagre proportions, from which two vacant eyes stared fixedly. He sat immovable and his arms hung limply over his knees.

"Monsieur," said Julien, bowing ceremoniously, "we are quite ashamed at having disturbed you. Your servant forgot to inform us of your presence, and we were waiting for Mademoiselle Reine, without thinking that—"

The old man continued immovable, not seeming to understand; he kept repeating, in the same voice, like a frightened child:

"Rei-eine! Rei-eine!"

The two bewildered travellers gazed at this sepulchral-looking personage, then at each other interrogatively, and began to feel very uncomfortable. The magpie, perched upon the hanging shelf, suddenly flapped his wings, and repeated, in his turn, in falsetto:

"Reine, queen of the woods!"

"Here I am, papa, don't get uneasy!" said a clear, musical voice behind them.

The door had been suddenly opened, and Reine Vincart had entered. She wore on her head a white cape or hood, and held in front of her an enormous bouquet of glistening leaves, which seemed to have been gathered as specimens of all the wild fruit-trees of the forest: the brown beam-berries, the laburnums, and wild cherry, with their red, transparent fruit, the bluish mulberry, the orange-clustered mountain-ash. All this forest vegetation, mingling its black or purple tints with the dark, moist leaves, brought out the whiteness of the young girl's complexion,

her limpid eyes, and her brown curls escaping from her hood.

Julien de Buxieres and his companion had turned at the sound of Reine's voice. As soon as she perceived them, she went briskly toward them, exclaiming:

"What are you doing here? Don't you see that you are frightening him?"

Julien, humbled and mortified, murmured an excuse, and got confused in trying to relate the incident of the carriage. She interrupted him hurriedly:

"The carriage, oh, yes—La Guitiote spoke to me about it. Well, your carriage will be attended to! Go and sit down by the fire, gentlemen; we will talk about it presently."

She had taken the light from the driver, and placed it on an adjacent table with her plants. In the twinkling of an eye, she removed her hood, unfastened her shawl, and then knelt down in front of the sick man, after kissing him tenderly on the forehead. From the corner where Julien had seated himself, he could hear her soothing voice. Its caressing tones contrasted pleasantly with the harsh accent of a few minutes before.

"You were longing for me, papa," said she, "but you see, I could not leave before all the sacks of potatoes had been laid in the wagon. Now everything has been brought in, and we can sleep in peace. I thought of you on the way, and I have brought you a fine bouquet of wild fruits. We shall enjoy looking them over tomorrow, by daylight. Now, this is the time that you are to drink your bouillon like a good papa, and then as soon as we have had our supper Guitte and I will put you to bed nice and warm, and I will sing you a song to send you to sleep."

She rose, took from the sideboard a bowl which she filled from a saucepan simmering on the stove, and then, without taking any notice of her visitors, she returned to the invalid. Slowly and with delicate care she made him swallow the soup by spoonfuls. Julien, notwithstanding the feeling of ill-humor caused by the untoward happenings of the evening, could not help admiring the almost maternal tenderness with which the young girl proceeded in this slow and difficult operation. When the bowl was empty she returned to the stove, and at last bethought herself of her guests.

"Excuse me, Monsieur, but I had to attend to my father first. If I understood quite aright, you were going to Vivey."

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I had hoped to sleep there tonight."

"You have probably come," continued she, "on business connected with the chateau. Is not the heir of Monsieur Odouart expected very shortly?"

"I am that heir," replied Julien, coloring.

"You are Monsieur de Buxieres?" exclaimed Reine, in astonishment. Then, embarrassed at having shown her surprise too openly, she checked herself, colored in her turn, and finally gave a rapid glance at her interlocutor. She never should have imagined this slender young man, so melancholy in aspect, to be the new proprietor—he was so unlike the late Odouart de Buxieres!

"Pardon me, Monsieur," continued she, "you must have thought my first welcome somewhat unceremonious, but my first thought was for my father. He is a great invalid, as you may have noticed, and for the first moment I feared that he had been startled by strange faces."

"It is I, Mademoiselle," replied Julien, with embarrassment, "it is I who ought to ask pardon for having caused all this disturbance. But I do not intend to trouble you any longer. If you will kindly furnish us with a guide who will direct us to the road to Vivey, we will depart to-night and sleep at the chateau."

"No, indeed," protested Reine, very cordially. "You are my guests, and I shall not allow you to leave us in that manner. Besides, you would probably find the gates closed down there, for I do not think they expected you so soon."

During this interview, the servant who had received the travellers had returned with her milk-pail; behind her, the other farm-hands, men and women, arranged themselves silently round the table.

"Guitiote," said Reine, "lay two more places at the table. The horse belonging to these gentlemen has been taken care of, has he not?"

"Yes, Mamselle, he is in the stable," replied one of the grooms.

"Good! Bernard, to-morrow you will take Fleuriot with you, and go in search of their carriage which has been swamped in the Planche-au-Vacher. That is settled. Now, Monsieur de Buxieres, will you proceed to table—and your coachman also? Upon my word, I do not know whether our supper will be to your liking. I can only offer you a plate of soup, a chine of pork, and cheese made in the country; but you must be hungry, and when one has a good appetite, one is not hard to please."

Every one had been seated at the table; the servants at the lower end, and Reine Vincart, near the fireplace, between M. de Buxieres and the driver. La Guite helped the cabbage-soup all around; soon nothing was heard but the clinking of spoons and smacking of lips. Julien, scarcely recovered from his bewilderment, watched furtively the pretty, robust young girl presiding at the supper, and keeping, at the same time, a watchful eye over all the details of service. He thought her strange; she upset all his ideas. His own imagination and his theories pictured a

woman, and more especially a young girl, as a submissive, modest, shadowy creature, with downcast look, only raising her eyes to consult her husband or her mother as to what is allowable and what is forbidden. Now, Reine did not fulfil any of the requirements of this ideal. She seemed to be hardly twenty-two years old, and she acted with the initiative genius, the frankness and the decision of a man, retaining all the while the tenderness and easy grace of a woman. Although it was evident that she was accustomed to govern and command, there was nothing in her look, gesture, or voice which betrayed any assumption of masculinity. She remained a young girl while in the very act of playing the virile part of head of the house. But what astonished Julien quite as much was that she seemed to have received a degree of education superior to that of people of her condition, and he wondered at the amount of will-power by which a nature highly cultivated, relatively speaking, could conform to the unrefined, rough surroundings in which she was placed.

While Julien was immersed in these reflections, and continued eating with an abstracted air, Reine Vincart was rapidly examining the reserved, almost ungainly, young man, who did not dare address any conversation to her, and who was equally stiff and constrained with those sitting near him. She made a mental comparison of him with Claudet, the bold huntsman, alert, resolute, full of dash and spirit, and a feeling of charitable compassion arose in her heart at the thought of the reception which the Sejournant family would give to this new master, so timid and so little acquainted with the ways and dispositions of country folk. Julien did not impress her as being able to defend himself against the ill-will of persons who would consider him an intruder, and would certainly endeavor to make him pay dearly for the inheritance of which he had deprived them.

"You do not take your wine, Monsieur de Buxieres!" said she, noticing that her guest's glass was still full.

"I am not much of a wine-drinker," replied he, "and besides, I never take wine by itself—I should be obliged if you would have some water brought."

Reine smiled, and passed him the water-bottle.

"Indeed?" she said, "in that case, you have not fallen among congenial spirits, for in these mountains they like good dinners, and have a special weakness for Burgundy. You follow the chase, at any rate?"

"No, Mademoiselle, I do not know how to handle a gun!"

"I suppose it is not your intention to settle in Vivey?"

"Why not?" replied he; "on the contrary, I intend to inhabit the chateau, and establish myself there definitely."

"What!" exclaimed Reine, laughing, "you neither drink nor hunt, and you intend to live in our woods! Why, my poor Monsieur, you will die of ennui."

"I shall have my books for companions; besides, solitude never has had any terrors for me."

The young girl shook her head incredulously.

"I shouldn't wonder," she continued, "if you do not even play at cards."

"Never; games of chance are repugnant to me."

"Take notice that I do not blame you," she replied, gayly, "but I must give you one piece of advice: don't speak in these neighborhoods of your dislike of hunting, cards, or good wine; our country folk would feel pity for you, and that would destroy your prestige."

Julien gazed at her with astonishment. She turned away to give directions to La Guite about the beds for her guests—then the supper went on silently. As soon as they had swallowed their last mouthful, the menservants repaired to their dormitory, situated in the buildings of the ancient forge. Reine Vincart rose also.

"This is the time when I put my father to bed—I am obliged to take leave of you, Monsieur de Buxieres. Guitote will conduct you to your room. For you, driver, I have had a bed made in a small room next to the furnace; you will be nice and warm. Good-night, gentlemen, sleep well!"

She turned away, and went to rejoin the paralytic sufferer, who, as she approached, manifested his joy by a succession of inarticulate sounds.

The room to which Guitote conducted Julien was on the first floor, and had a cheerful, hospitable appearance. The walls were whitewashed; the chairs, table, and bed were of polished oak; a good fire of logs crackled in the fireplace, and between the opening of the white window-curtains could be seen a slender silver crescent of moon gliding among the flitting clouds. The young man went at once to his bed; but notwithstanding the fatigues of the day, sleep did not come to him. Through the partition he could hear the clear, sonorous voice of Reine singing her father to sleep with one of the popular ballads of the country, and while turning and twisting in the homespun linen sheets, scented with orrisroot, he could not help thinking of this young girl, so original in her ways, whose grace, energy, and frankness fascinated and shocked him at the same time. At last he dozed off; and when the morning stir awoke him, the sun was up and struggling through the foggy atmosphere.

The sky had cleared during the night; there had been a frost, and the

meadows were powdered white. The leaves, just nipped with the frost, were dropping softly to the ground, and formed little green heaps at the base of the trees. Julien dressed himself hurriedly, and descended to the courtyard, where the first thing he saw was the cabriolet, which had been brought in the early morning and which one of the farm-boys was in the act of sousing with water in the hope of freeing the hood and wheels from the thick mud which covered them. When he entered the diningroom, brightened by the rosy rays of the morning sun, he found Reine Vincart there before him. She was dressed in a yellow striped woolen skirt, and a jacket of white flannel carelessly belted at the waist. Her dark chestnut hair, parted down the middle and twisted into a loose knot behind, lay in ripples round her smooth, open forehead.

"Good-morning, Monsieur de Buxieres," said she, in her cordial tone, "did you sleep well? Yes? I am glad. You find me busy attending to household matters. My father is still in bed, and I am taking advantage of the fact to arrange his little corner. The doctor said he must not be put near the fire, so I have made a place for him here; he enjoys it immensely, and I arranged this nook to protect him from draughts."

And she showed him how she had put the big easy chair, padded with cushions, in the bright sunlight which streamed through the window, and shielded by the screens, one on each side. She noticed that Julien was examining, with some curiosity, the uncouth pictures from Epinal, with which the screens were covered.

"This," she explained, "is my own invention. My father is a little weak in the head, but he understands a good many things, although he can not talk about them. He used to get weary of sitting still all day in his chair, so I lined the screens with these pictures in order that he might have something to amuse him. He is as pleased as a child with the bright colors, and I explain the subjects to him. I don't tell him much at a time, for fear of fatiguing him. We have got now to Pyramus and Thisbe, so that we shall have plenty to occupy us before we reach the end."

She caught a pitying look from her guest which seemed to say: "The poor man may not last long enough to reach the end." Doubtless she had the same fear, for her dark eyes suddenly glistened, she sighed, and remained for some moments without speaking.

In the mean time the magpie, which Julien had seen the day before, was hopping around its mistress, like a familiar spirit; it even had the audacity to peck at her hair and then fly away, repeating, in its cracked voice:

"Reine, queen of the woods!"

"Why 'queen of the woods?'" asked Julien, coloring.

"Ah!" replied the young girl, "it is a nickname which the people around

here give me, because I am so fond of the trees. I spend all the time I can in our woods, as much as I can spare from the work of the farm.

"Margot has often heard my father call me by that name; she remembers it, and is always repeating it."

"Do you like living in this wild country?"

"Very much. I was born here, and I like it."

"But you have not always lived here?"

"No; my mother, who had lived in the city, placed me at school in her own country, in Dijon. I received there the education of a young lady, though there is not much to show for it now. I stayed there six years; then my mother died, my father fell ill, and I came home."

"And did you not suffer from so sudden a change?"

"Not at all. You see I am really by nature a country girl. I wish you might not have more trouble than I had, in getting accustomed to your new way of living, in the chateau at Vivey. But," she added, going toward the fire, "I think they are harnessing the horse, and you must be hungry. Your driver has already primed himself with some toast and white wine. I will not offer you the same kind of breakfast. I will get you some coffee and cream."

He bent his head in acquiescence, and she brought him the coffee herself, helping him to milk and toasted bread. He drank rapidly the contents of the cup, nibbled at a slice of toast, and then, turning to his hostess, said, with a certain degree of embarrassment:

"There is nothing left for me to do, Mademoiselle, but to express my most heartfelt thanks for your kind hospitality. It is a good omen for me to meet with such cordiality on my arrival in an unknown part of the country. May I ask you one more question?" he continued, looking anxiously at her; "why do you think it will be so difficult for me to get accustomed to the life they lead here?"

"Why?" replied she, shaking her head, "because, to speak frankly, Monsieur, you do not give me the idea of having much feeling for the country. You are not familiar with our ways; you will not be able to speak to the people in their language, and they will not understand yours—you will be, in their eyes, 'the city Monsieur,' whom they will mistrust and will try to circumvent. I should like to find that I am mistaken, but, at present, I have the idea that you will encounter difficulties down there of which you do not seem to have any anticipation—"

She was intercepted by the entrance of the driver, who was becoming

impatient. The horse was in harness, and they were only waiting for M. de Buxieres. Julien rose, and after awkwardly placing a piece of silver in the hand of La Guite, took leave of Reine Vincart, who accompanied him to the threshold.

"Thanks, once more, Mademoiselle," murmured he, "and au revoir, since we shall be neighbors."

He held out his hand timidly and she took it with frank cordiality. Julien got into the cabriolet beside the driver, who began at once to belabor vigorously his mulish animal.

"Good journey and good luck, Monsieur," cried Reine after him, and the vehicle sped joltingly away.

## CHAPTER III

### CONSCIENCE HIGHER THAN THE LAW

On leaving La Thuiliere, the driver took the straight line toward the pasturelands of the Planche-au-Vacher.

According to the directions they had received from the people of the farm, they then followed a rocky road, which entailed considerable jolting for the travellers, but which led them without other difficulty to the bottom of a woody dell, where they were able to ford the stream. As soon as they had, with difficulty, ascended the opposite hill, the silvery fog that had surrounded them began to dissipate, and they distinguished a road close by, which led a winding course through the forest.

"Ah! now I see my way!" said the driver, "we have only to go straight on, and in twenty minutes we shall be at Vivey. This devil of a fog cuts into one's skin like a bunch of needles. With your permission, Monsieur de Buxieres, and if it will not annoy you, I will light my pipe to warm myself."

Now that he knew he was conducting the proprietor of the chateau, he repented having treated him so cavalierly the day before; he became obsequious, and endeavored to gain the good-will of his fare by showing himself as loquacious as he had before been cross and sulky. But Julien de Buxieres, too much occupied in observing the details of the country, or in ruminating over the impressions he had received during the morning, made but little response to his advances, and soon allowed the conversation to drop.

The sun's rays had by this time penetrated the misty atmosphere, and the white frost had changed to diamond drops, which hung tremblingly on the leafless branches. A gleam of sunshine showed the red tints of the beech-trees, and the bright golden hue of the poplars, and the forest burst upon Julien in all the splendor of its autumnal trappings. The pleasant remembrance of Reine Vincart's hospitality doubtless predisposed him to enjoy the charm of this sunshiny morning, for he became, perhaps for the first time in his life, suddenly alive to the beauty of this woodland scenery. By degrees, toward the left, the brushwood became less dense, and several gray buildings appeared scattered over the glistening prairie. Soon after appeared a park, surrounded by low, crumbling walls, then a group of smoky roofs, and finally, surmounting a massive clump of ash-trees, two round towers with tops shaped like extinguishers. The coachman pointed them out to the young man with the end of his whip.

"There is Vivey," said he, "and here is your property, Monsieur de Buxieres."

Julien started, and, notwithstanding his alienation from worldly things, he could not repress a feeling of satisfaction when he reflected that, by legal right, he was about to become master of the woods, the fields, and the old homestead of which the many-pointed slate roofs gleamed in the distance. This satisfaction was mingled with intense curiosity, but it was also somewhat shadowed by a dim perspective of the technical details incumbent on his taking possession. No doubt he should be obliged, in the beginning, to make himself personally recognized, to show the workmen and servants of the chateau that the new owner was equal to the situation. Now, Julien was not, by nature, a man of action, and the delicately expressed fears of Reine Vincart made him uneasy in his mind. When the carriage, suddenly turning a corner, stopped in front of the gate of entrance, and he beheld, through the cast-iron railing, the long avenue of ash-trees, the grass-grown courtyard, the silent facade, his heart began to beat more rapidly, and his natural timidity again took possession of him.

"The gate is closed, and they don't seem to be expecting you," remarked the driver.

They dismounted. Noticing that the side door was half open, the coachman gave a vigorous pull on the chain attached to the bell. At the sound of the rusty clamor, a furious barking was heard from an adjoining outhouse, but no one inside the house seemed to take notice of the ringing.

"Come, let us get in all the same," said the coachman, giving another pull, and stealing a furtive look at his companion's disconcerted countenance.

He fastened his horse to the iron fence, and both passed through the side gate to the avenue, the dogs all the while continuing their uproar. Just as they reached the courtyard, the door opened and Manette Sejournant

appeared on the doorstep.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said she, in a slow, drawling voice, "is it you who are making all this noise?"

The sight of this tall, burly woman, whose glance betokened both audacity and cunning, increased still more Julien's embarrassment. He advanced awkwardly, raised his hat and replied, almost as if to excuse himself:

"I beg pardon, Madame—I am the cousin and heir of the late Claude de Buxieres. I have come to install myself in the chateau, and I had sent word of my intention to Monsieur Arbillot, the notary—I am surprised he did not notify you."

"Ah! it is you, Monsieur Julien de Buxieres!" exclaimed Madame Sejournant, scrutinizing the newcomer with a mingling of curiosity and scornful surprise which completed the young man's discomfiture. "Monsieur Arbillot was here yesterday—he waited for you all day, and as you did not come, he went away at nightfall."

"I presume you were in my cousin's service?" said Julien, amiably, being desirous from the beginning to evince charitable consideration with regard to his relative's domestic affairs.

"Yes, Monsieur," replied Manette, with dignified sadness; "I attended poor Monsieur de Buxieres twenty-six years, and can truly say I served him with devotion! But now I am only staying here in charge of the seals—I and my son Claudet. We have decided to leave as soon as the notary does not want us any more."

"I regret to hear it, Madame," replied Julien, who was beginning to feel uncomfortable. "There must be other servants around—I should be obliged if you would have our carriage brought into the yard. And then, if you will kindly show us the way, we will go into the house, for I am desirous to feel myself at home—and my driver would not object to some refreshment."

"I will send the cowboy to open the gate," replied the housekeeper. "If you will walk this way, gentlemen, I will take you into the only room that can be used just now, on account of the seals on the property."

Passing in front of them, she directed her steps toward the kitchen, and made way for them to pass into the smoky room, where a small servant was making coffee over a clear charcoal fire. As the travellers entered, the manly form of Claudet Sejournant was outlined against the bright light of the window at his back.

"My son," said Manette, with a meaning side look, especially for his benefit, "here is Monsieur de Buxieres, come to take possession of his inheritance."

The grand chasserot attempted a silent salutation, and then the young men took a rapid survey of each other.

Julien de Buxieres was startled by the unexpected presence of so handsome a young fellow, robust, intelligent, and full of energy, whose large brown eyes gazed at him with a kind of surprised and pitying compassion which was very hard for Julien to bear. He turned uneasily away, making a lame excuse of ordering some wine for his coachman; and while Manette, with an air of martyrdom, brought a glass and a half-empty bottle, Claudet continued his surprised and inquiring examination of the legal heir of Claude de Buxieres.

The pale, slight youth, buttoned up in a close-fitting, long frock-coat, which gave him the look of a priest, looked so unlike any of the Buxieres of the elder branch that it seemed quite excusable to hesitate about the relationship. Claudet maliciously took advantage of the fact, and began to interrogate his would-be deposer by pretending to doubt his identity.

"Are you certainly Monsieur Julien de Buxieres?" asked he, surveying him suspiciously from head to foot.

"Do you take me for an impostor?" exclaimed the young man.

"I do not say that," returned Claudet, crossly, "but after all, you do not carry your name written on your face, and, by Jove! as guardian of the seals, I have some responsibility—I want information, that is all!"

Angry at having to submit to these inquiries in the presence of the coachman who had brought him from Langres, Julien completely lost control of his temper.

"Do you require me to show my papers?" he inquired, in a haughty, ironical tone of voice.

Manette, foreseeing a disturbance, hastened to interpose, in her hypocritical, honeyed voice:

"Leave off, Claudet, let Monsieur alone. He would not be here, would he, if he hadn't a right? As to asking him to prove his right, that is not our business—it belongs to the justice and the notary. You had better, my son, go over to Auberive, and ask the gentlemen to come to-morrow to raise the seals."

At this moment, the cowboy, who had been sent to open the gate, entered the kitchen.

"The carriage is in the courtyard," said he, "and Monsieur's boxes are in the hall. Where shall I put them, Madame Sejourmant?"

Julien's eyes wandered from Manette to the young boy, with an expression of intense annoyance and fatigue.

"Why, truly," said Manette, "as a matter of fact, there is only the room of our deceased master, where the seals have been released. Would Monsieur object to taking up his quarters there?"

"I am willing," muttered Julien; "have my luggage carried up there, and give orders for it to be made ready immediately."

The housekeeper gave a sign, and the boy and the servant disappeared.

"Madame," resumed Julien, turning toward Manette, "if I understand you right, I can no longer reckon upon your services to take care of my household. Could you send me some one to supply your place?"

"Oh! as to that matter," replied the housekeeper, still in her wheedling voice, "a day or two more or less! I am not so very particular, and I don't mind attending to the house as long as I remain. At what hour would you wish to dine, Monsieur?"

"At the hour most convenient for you," responded Julien, quickly, anxious to conciliate her; "you will serve my meals in my room."

As the driver had now finished his bottle, they left the room together.

As soon as the door was closed, Manette and her son exchanged sarcastic looks.

"He a Buxieres!" growled Claudet. "He looks like a student priest in vacation."

"He is an 'ecrigneule'," returned Manette, shrugging her shoulders.

'Ecrigneule' is a word of the Langrois dialect, signifying a puny, sickly, effeminate being. In the mouth of Madame Sejournant, this picturesque expression acquired a significant amount of scornful energy.

"And to think," sighed Claudet, twisting his hands angrily in his bushy hair, "that such a slip of a fellow is going to be master here!"

"Master?" repeated Manette, shaking her head, "we'll see about that! He does not know anything at all, and has not what is necessary for ordering about. In spite of his fighting-cock airs, he hasn't two farthings' worth of spunk—it would be easy enough to lead him by the nose. Do you see, Claudet, if we were to manage properly, instead of throwing the handle after the blade, we should be able before two weeks are, over to have rain or sunshine here, just as we pleased. We must only have a little more policy."

"What do you mean by policy, mother?"

"I mean—letting things drag quietly on—not breaking all the windows at the first stroke. The lad is as dazed as a young bird that has fallen from its nest. What we have to do is to help him to get control of himself, and accustom him not to do without us. As soon as we have made ourselves necessary to him, he will be at our feet."

"Would you wish me to become the servant of the man who has cheated me out of my inheritance?" protested Claudet, indignantly.

"His servant—no, indeed! but his companion—why not? And it would be so easy if you would only make up your mind to it, Claude. I tell you again, he is not ill-natured—he looks like a man who is up to his neck in devotion. When he once feels we are necessary to his comfort, and that some reliable person, like the curate, for example, were to whisper to him that you are the son of Claudet de Buxieres, he would have scruples, and at last, half on his own account, and half for the sake of religion, he would begin to treat you like a relative."

"No;" said Claudet, firmly, "these tricky ways do not suit me. Monsieur Arbillot proposed yesterday that I should do what you advise. He even offered to inform this gentleman of my relationship to Claude de Buxieres. I refused, and forbade the notary to open his mouth on the subject. What! should I play the part of a craven hound before this younger son whom my father detested, and beg for a portion of the inheritance? Thank you! I prefer to take myself out of the way at once!"

"You prefer to have your mother beg her bread at strangers' doors!" replied Manette, bitterly, shedding tears of rage.

"I have already told you, mother, that when one has a good pair of arms, and the inclination to use them, one has no need to beg one's bread. Enough said! I am going to Auberive to notify the justice and the notary."

While Claudet was striding across the woods, the boy carried the luggage of the newly arrived traveller into the chamber on the first floor, and Zelig, the small servant, put the sheets on the bed, dusted the room, and lighted the fire. In a few minutes, Julien was alone in his new domicile, and began to open his boxes and valises. The chimney, which had not been used since the preceding winter, smoked unpleasantly, and the damp logs only blackened instead of burning. The boxes lay wide open, and the room of the deceased Claude de Buxieres had the uncomfortable aspect of a place long uninhabited. Julien had seated himself in one of the large armchairs, covered in Utrecht velvet, and endeavored to rekindle the dying fire. He felt at loose ends and discouraged, and had no longer the courage to arrange his clothes in the open wardrobes, which stood open, emitting a strong odor of decaying

mold.

The slight breath of joyous and renewed life which had animated him on leaving the Vincart farm, had suddenly evaporated. His anticipations collapsed in the face of these bristling realities, among which he felt his isolation more deeply than ever before. He recalled the cordiality of Reine's reception, and how she had spoken of the difficulties he should have to encounter. How little he had thought that her forebodings would come true the very same day! The recollection of the cheerful and hospitable interior of La Thuiliere contrasted painfully with his cold, bare Vivey mansion, tenanted solely by hostile domestics. Who were these people—this Manette Sejournant with her treacherous smile, and this fellow Claudet, who had, at the very first, subjected him to such offensive questioning? Why did they seem so ill-disposed toward him? He felt as if he were completely enveloped in an atmosphere of contradiction and ill-will. He foresaw what an amount of quiet but steady opposition he should have to encounter from these subordinates, and he became alarmed at the prospect of having to display so much energy in order to establish his authority in the chateau. He, who had pictured to himself a calm and delightful solitude, wherein he could give himself up entirely to his studious and contemplative tastes. What a contrast to the reality!

Rousing himself at last, he proceeded mechanically to arrange his belongings in the room, formerly inhabited by his cousin de Buxieres. He had hardly finished when Zelig made her appearance with some plates and a tablecloth, and began to lay the covers. Seeing the fire had gone out, the little servant uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Oh!" cried she, "so the wood didn't flare!"

He gazed at her as if she were talking Hebrew, and it was at least a minute before he understood that by "flare" she meant kindle.

"Well, well!" she continued, "I'll go and fetch some splinters."

She returned in a few moments, with a basket filled with the large splinters thrown off by the woodchoppers in straightening the logs: she piled these up on the andirons, and then, applying her mouth vigorously to a long hollow tin tube, open at both ends, which she carried with her, soon succeeded in starting a steady flame.

"Look there!" said she, in a tone implying a certain degree of contempt for the "city Monsieur" who did not even know how to keep up a fire, "isn't that clever? Now I must lay the cloth."

While she went about her task, arranging the plates, the water-bottle, and glasses symmetrically around the table, Julien tried to engage her in conversation. But the little maiden, either because she had been cautioned beforehand, or because she did not very well comprehend M. de

Buxieres's somewhat literary style of French, would answer only in monosyllables, or else speak only in patois, so that Julien had to give up the idea of getting any information out of her. Certainly, Mademoiselle Vincart was right in saying that he did not know the language of these people.

He ate without appetite the breakfast on which Manette had employed all her culinary art, barely tasted the roast partridge, and to Zélie's great astonishment, mingled the old Burgundy wine with a large quantity of water.

"You will inform Madame Sejournant," said he to the girl, as he folded his napkin, "that I am not a great eater, and that one dish will suffice me in future."

He left her to clear away, and went out to look at the domain which he was to call his own. It did not take him very long. The twenty or thirty white houses, which constituted the village and lay sleeping in the wooded hollow like eggs in a nest, formed a curious circular line around the chateau. In a few minutes he had gone the whole length of it, and the few people he met gave him only a passing glance, in which curiosity seemed to have more share than any hospitable feeling. He entered the narrow church under the patronage of Our Lady; the gray light which entered through the moldy shutters showed a few scattered benches of oak, and the painted wooden altar. He knelt down and endeavored to collect his thoughts, but the rude surroundings of this rustic sanctuary did not tend to comfort his troubled spirit, and he became conscious of a sudden withering of all religious fervor. He turned and left the place, taking a path that led through the forest. It did not interest him more than the village; the woods spoke no language which his heart could understand; he could not distinguish an ash from an oak, and all the different plants were included by him under one general term of "weeds"; but he needed bodily fatigue and violent physical agitation to dissipate the overpowering feeling of discouragement that weighed down his spirits. He walked for several hours without seeing anything, nearly got lost, and did not reach home till after dark. Once more the little servant appeared with his meal, which he ate in an abstracted manner, without even asking whether he were eating veal or mutton; then he went immediately to bed, and fell into an uneasy sleep. And thus ended his first day.

The next morning, about nine o'clock, he was informed that the justice of the peace, the notary, and the clerk, were waiting for him below. He hastened down and found the three functionaries busy conferring in a low voice with Manette and Claudet. The conversation ceased suddenly upon his arrival, and during the embarrassing silence that followed, all eyes were directed toward Julien, who saluted the company and delivered to the justice the documents proving his identity, begging him to proceed without delay to the legal breaking of the seals. They accordingly began operations, and went through all the house without interruption,

accompanied by Claudet, who stood stiff and sullen behind the justice, taking advantage of every little opportunity to testify his dislike and ill-feeling toward the legal heir of Claude de Buxieres. Toward eleven o'clock, the proceedings came to an end, the papers were signed, and Julien was regularly invested with his rights. But the tiresome formalities were not yet over: he had to invite the three officials to breakfast. This event, however, had been foreseen by Manette. Since early morning she had been busy preparing a bountiful repast, and had even called Julien de Buxieres aside in order to instruct him in the hospitable duties which his position and the customs of society imposed upon him.

As they entered the dining-room, young de Buxieres noticed that covers were laid for five people; he began to wonder who the fifth guest could be, when an accidental remark of the clerk showed him that the unknown was no other than Claudet. The fact was that Manette could not bear the idea that her son, who had always sat at table with the late Claude de Buxieres, should be consigned to the kitchen in presence of these distinguished visitors from Auberive, and had deliberately laid a place for him at the master's table, hoping that the latter would not dare put any public affront upon Claudet. She was not mistaken in her idea. Julien, anxious to show a conciliatory spirit, and making an effort to quell his own repugnance, approached the 'grand chasserot', who was standing at one side by himself, and invited him to take his seat at the table.

"Thank you," replied Claudet, coldly, "I have breakfasted." So saying, he turned his back on M. de Buxieres, who returned to the hall, vexed and disconcerted.

The repast was abundant, and seemed of interminable length to Julien. The three guests, whose appetites had been sharpened by their morning exercise, did honor to Madame Sejourant's cooking; they took their wine without water, and began gradually to thaw under the influence of their host's good Burgundy; evincing their increased liveliness by the exchange of heavy country witticisms, or relating noisy and interminable stories of their hunting adventures. Their conversation was very trying to Julien's nerves. Nevertheless, he endeavored to fulfil his duties as master of the house, throwing in a word now and then, so as to appear interested in their gossip, but he ate hardly a mouthful. His features had a pinched expression, and every now and then he caught himself trying to smother a yawn. His companions at the table could not understand a young man of twenty-eight years who drank nothing but water, scorned all enjoyment in eating, and only laughed forcedly under compulsion. At last, disturbed by the continued taciturnity of their host, they rose from the table sooner than their wont, and prepared to take leave. Before their departure, Arbillot the notary, passed his arm familiarly through that of Julien and led him into an adjoining room, which served as billiard-hall and library.

"Monsieur de Buxieres," said he, pointing to a pile of law papers heaped upon the green cloth of the table; "see what I have prepared for you; you will find there all the titles and papers relating to the real estate, pictures, current notes, and various matters of your inheritance. You had better keep them under lock and key, and study them at your leisure. You will find them very interesting. I need hardly say," he added, "that I am at your service for any necessary advice or explanation. But, in respect to any minor details, you can apply to Claudet Sejournant, who is very intelligent in such matters, and a good man of business. And, by the way, Monsieur de Buxieres, will you allow me to commend the young man especially to your kindly consideration."

But Julien interrupted him with an imperious gesture, and replied, frowning angrily:

"If you please, Maitre Arbillot, we will not enter upon that subject. I have already tried my best to show a kindly feeling toward Monsieur Claudet, but I have been only here twenty-four hours, and he has already found opportunities for affronting me twice. I beg you not to speak of him again."

The notary, who was just lighting his pipe, stopped suddenly. Moved by a feeling of good-fellowship for the 'grand chasserot', who had, however, enjoined him to silence, he had it on the tip of his tongue to inform Julien of the facts concerning the parentage of Claudet de Buxieres; but, however much he wished to render Claudet a service, he was still more desirous of respecting the feelings of his client; so, between the hostility of one party and the backwardness of the other, he chose the wise part of inaction.

"That is sufficient, Monsieur de Buxieres," replied he, "I will not press the matter."

Thereupon he saluted his client, and went to rejoin the justice and the clerk, and the three comrades wended their way to Auberive through the woods, discussing the incidents of the breakfast, and the peculiarities of the new proprietor.

"This de Buxieres," said M. Destourbet, "does not at all resemble his deceased cousin Claude!"

"I can quite understand why the two families kept apart from each other," observed the notary, jocosely.

"Poor 'chasserot'!" whined Seurrot the clerk, whom the wine had rendered tender-hearted; "he will not have a penny. I pity him with all my heart!"

As soon as the notary had departed, Julien came to the determination of transforming into a study the hall where he had been conferring with

Maitre Arbillot, which was dignified with the title of "library," although it contained at the most but a few hundred odd volumes. The hall was spacious, and lighted by two large windows opening on the garden; the floor was of oak, and there was a great fireplace where the largest logs used in a country in which the wood costs nothing could find ample room to blaze and crackle. It took the young man several days to make the necessary changes, and during that time he enjoyed a respite from the petty annoyances worked by the steady hostility of Manette Sejournant and her son. To the great indignation of the inhabitants of the chateau, he packed off the massive billiard-table, on which Claude de Buxieres had so often played in company with his chosen friends, to the garret; after which the village carpenter was instructed to make the bookshelves ready for the reception of Julien's own books, which were soon to arrive by express. When he had got through with these labors, he turned his attention to the documents placed in his hands by the notary, endeavoring to find out by himself the nature of his revenues. He thought this would be a very easy matter, but he soon found that it was encumbered with inextricable difficulties.

A large part of the products of the domain consisted of lumber ready for sale. Claude de Buxieres had been in the habit of superintending, either personally or through his intermediate agents, one half of the annual amount of lumber felled for market, the sale of which was arranged with the neighboring forge owners by mutual agreement; the other half was disposed of by notarial act. This latter arrangement was clear and comprehensible; the price of sale and the amounts falling due were both clearly indicated in the deed. But it was quite different with the bargains made by the owner himself, which were often credited by notes payable at sight, mostly worded in confused terms, unintelligible to any but the original writer. Julien became completely bewildered among these various documents, the explanations in which were harder to understand than conundrums. Although greatly averse to following the notary's advice as to seeking Claudet's assistance, he found himself compelled to do so, but was met by such laconic and surly answers that he concluded it would be more dignified on his part to dispense with the services of one who was so badly disposed toward him. He therefore resolved to have recourse to the debtors themselves, whose names he found, after much difficulty, in the books. These consisted mostly of peasants of the neighborhood, who came to the chateau at his summons; but as soon as they came into Julien's presence, they discovered, with that cautious perception which is an instinct with rustic minds, that before them stood a man completely ignorant of the customs of the country, and very poorly informed on Claude de Buxieres's affairs. They made no scruple of mystifying this "city gentleman," by means of ambiguous statements and cunning reticence. The young man could get no enlightenment from them; all he clearly understood was, that they were making fun of him, and that he was not able to cope with these country bumpkins, whose shrewdness would have done honor to the most experienced lawyer.

After a few days he became discouraged and disgusted. He could see

nothing but trouble ahead; he seemed surrounded by either open enemies or people inclined to take advantage of him. It was plain that all the population of the village looked upon him as an intruder, a troublesome master, a stranger whom they would like to intimidate and send about his business. Manette Sejournant, who was always talking about going, still remained in the chateau, and was evidently exerting her influence to keep her son also with her. The fawning duplicity of this woman was unbearable to Julien; he had not the energy necessary either to subdue her, or to send her away, and she appeared every morning before him with a string of hypocritical grievances, and opposing his orders with steady, irritating inertia. It seemed as if she were endeavoring to render his life at Vivey hateful to him, so that he would be compelled finally to beat a retreat.

One morning in November he had reached such a state of moral fatigue and depression that, as he sat listlessly before the library fire, the question arose in his mind whether it would not be better to rent the chateau, place the property in the hands of a manager, and take himself and his belongings back to Nancy, to his little room in the Rue Stanislaus, where, at any rate, he could read, meditate, or make plans for the future without being every moment tormented by miserable, petty annoyances. His temper was becoming soured, his nerves were unstrung, and his mind was so disturbed that he fancied he had none but enemies around him. A cloudy melancholy seemed to invade his brain; he was seized with a sudden fear that he was about to have an attack of persecution-phobia, and began to feel his pulse and interrogate his sensations to see whether he could detect any of the premonitory symptoms.

While he was immersing himself in this unwholesome atmosphere of hypochondria, the sound of a door opening and shutting made him start; he turned quickly around, saw a young woman approaching and smiling at him, and at last recognized Reine Vincart.

She wore the crimped linen cap and the monk's hood in use among the peasants of the richer class. Her wavy, brown hair, simply parted in front, fell in rebellious curls from under the border of her cap, of which the only decoration was a bow of black ribbon; the end floating gracefully over her shoulders. The sharp November air had imparted a delicate rose tint to her pale complexion, and additional vivacity to her luminous, dark eyes.

"Good-morning, Monsieur de Buxieres," said she, in her clear, pleasantly modulated voice; "I think you may remember me? It is not so long since we saw each other at the farm."

"Mademoiselle Vincart!" exclaimed Julien. "Why, certainly I remember you!"

He drew a chair toward the fire, and offered it to her. This charming

apparition of his cordial hostess at La Thuiliere evoked the one pleasant remembrance in his mind since his arrival in Vivey. It shot, like a ray of sunlight, across the heavy fog of despair which had enveloped the new master of the chateau. It was, therefore, with real sincerity that he repeated:

"I both know you and am delighted to see you. I ought to have called upon you before now, to thank you for your kind hospitality, but I have had so much to do, and," his face clouding over, "so many annoyances!"

"Really?" said she, softly, gazing pityingly at him; "you must not take offence, but, it is easy to see you have been worried! Your features are drawn and you have an anxious look. Is it that the air of Vivey does not agree with you?"

"It is not the air," replied Julien, in an irritated tone, "it is the people who do not agree with me. And, indeed," sighed he, "I do not think I agree any better with them. But I need not annoy other persons merely because I am annoyed myself! Mademoiselle Vincart, what can I do to be of service to you? Have you anything to ask me?"

"Not at all!" exclaimed Reine, with a frank smile; "I not only have nothing to ask from you, but I have brought something for you—six hundred francs for wood we had bought from the late Monsieur de Buxieres, during the sale of the Ronces forest." She drew from under her cloak a little bag of gray linen, containing gold, five-franc pieces and bank-notes. "Will you be good enough to verify the amount?" continued she, emptying the bag upon the table; "I think it is correct. You must have somewhere a memorandum of the transaction in writing."

Julien began to look through the papers, but he got bewildered with the number of rough notes jotted down on various slips of paper, until at last, in an impatient fit of vexation, he flung the whole bundle away, scattering the loose sheets all over the floor.

"Who can find anything in such a chaos?" he exclaimed. "I can't see my way through it, and when I try to get information from the people here, they seem to have an understanding among themselves to leave me under a wrong impression, or even to make my uncertainties still greater! Ah! Mademoiselle Reine, you were right! I do not understand the ways of your country folk. Every now and then I am tempted to leave everything just as it stands, and get away from this village, where the people mistrust me and treat me like an enemy!"

Reine gazed at him with a look of compassionate surprise. Stooping quietly down, she picked up the scattered papers, and while putting them in order on the table, she happened to see the one relating to her own business.

"Here, Monsieur de Buxieres," said she, "here is the very note you were

looking for. You seem to be somewhat impatient. Our country folk are not so bad as you think; only they do not yield easily to new influences. The beginning is always difficult for them. I know something about it myself. When I returned from Dijon to take charge of the affairs at La Thuiliere, I had no more experience than you, Monsieur, and I had great difficulty in accomplishing anything. Where should we be now, if I had suffered myself to be discouraged, like you, at the very outset?"

Julien raised his eyes toward the speaker, coloring with embarrassment to hear himself lectured by this young peasant girl, whose ideas, however, had much more virility than his own.

"You reason like a man, Mademoiselle Vincart," remarked he, admiringly, "pray, how old are you?"

"Twenty-two years; and you, Monsieur de Buxieres?"

"I shall soon be twenty-eight."

"There is not much difference between us; still, you are the older, and what I have done, you can do also."

"Oh!" sighed he, "you have a love of action. I have a love of repose—I do not like to act."

"So much the worse!" replied Reine, very decidedly. "A man ought to show more energy. Come now, Monsieur de Buxieres, will you allow me to speak frankly to you? If you wish people to come to you, you must first get out of yourself and go to seek them; if you expect your neighbor to show confidence and good-will toward you, you must be open and good-natured toward him."

"That plan has not yet succeeded with two persons around here," replied Julien, shaking his head.

"Which persons?"

"The Sejournalants, mother and son. I tried to be pleasant with Claudet, and received from both only rebuffs and insolence."

"Oh! as to Claudet," resumed she, impulsively, "he is excusable. You can not expect he will be very gracious in his reception of the person who has supplanted him—"

"Supplanted?—I do not understand."

"What!" exclaimed Reine, "have they not told you anything, then? That is wrong. Well, at the risk of meddling in what does not concern me, I think it is better to put you in possession of the facts: Your deceased cousin never was married, but he had a child all the same—"

Claudet is his son, and he intended that he should be his heir also. Every one around the country knows that, for Monsieur de Buxieres made no secret of it ”

”Claudet, the son of Claude de Buxieres?” ejaculated Julien, with amazement.

”Yes; and if the deceased had had the time to make his will, you would not be here now. But,” added the young girl, coloring, ”don’t tell Claudet I have spoken to you about it. I have been talking here too long. Monsieur de Buxieres, will you have the goodness to reckon up your money and give me a receipt?”

She had risen, and Julien gazed wonderingly at the pretty country girl who had shown herself so sensible, so resolute, and so sincere. He bent his head, collected the money on the table, scribbled hastily a receipt and handed it to Reine.

”Thank you, Mademoiselle,” said he, ”you are the first person who has been frank with me, and I am grateful to you for it.”

”Au revoir, Monsieur de Buxieres.”

She had already gained the door while he made an awkward attempt to follow her. She turned toward him with a smile on her lips and in her eyes.

”Come, take courage!” she added, and then vanished.

Julien went back dreamily, and sat down again before the hearth. The revelation made by Reine Vincart had completely astounded him. Such was his happy inexperience of life, that he had not for a moment suspected the real position of Manette and her son at the chateau. And it was this young girl who had opened his eyes to the fact! He experienced a certain degree of humiliation in having had so little perception. Now that Reine’s explanation enabled him to view the matter from a different standpoint, he found Claudet’s attitude toward him both intelligible and excusable. In fact, the lad was acting in accordance with a very legitimate feeling of mingled pride and anger. After all, he really was Claude de Buxieres’s son—a natural son, certainly, but one who had been implicitly acknowledged both in private and in public by his father. If the latter had had time to draw up the incomplete will which had been found, he would, to all appearances, have made Claudet his heir. Therefore, the fortune of which Julien had become possessed, he owed to some unexpected occurrence, a mere chance. Public opinion throughout the entire village tacitly recognized and accepted the ’grand chasserot’ as son of the deceased, and if this recognition had been made legally, he would have been rightful owner of half the property.

”Now that I have been made acquainted with this position of affairs,

what is my duty?" asked Julien of himself. Devout in feeling and in practice, he was also very scrupulous in all matters of conscience, and the reply was not long in coming: that both religion and uprightness commanded him to indemnify Claudet for the wrong caused to him by the carelessness of Claude de Buxieres. Reine had simply told him the facts without attempting to give him any advice, but it was evident that, according to her loyal and energetic way of thinking, there was injustice to be repaired. Julien was conscious that by acting to that effect he would certainly gain the esteem and approbation of his amiable hostess of La Thuiliere, and he felt a secret satisfaction in the idea. He rose suddenly, and, leaving the library, went to the kitchen, where Manette Sejournant was busy preparing the breakfast.

"Where is your son?" said he. "I wish to speak with him."

Manette looked inquiringly at him.

"My son," she replied, "is in the garden, fixing up a box to take away his little belongings in—he doesn't want to stay any longer at other peoples' expense. And, by the way, Monsieur de Buxieres, have the goodness to provide yourself with a servant to take my place; we shall not finish the week here."

Without making any reply, Julien went out by the door, leading to the garden, and discovered Claudet really occupied in putting together the sides of a packing-case. Although the latter saw the heir of the de Buxieres family approaching, he continued driving in the nails without appearing to notice his presence.

"Monsieur Claudet," said Julien, "can you spare me a few minutes? I should like to talk to you."

Claudet raised his head, hesitated for a moment, then, throwing away his hammer and putting on his loose jacket, muttered:

"I am at your service."

They left the outhouse together, and entered an avenue of leafy lime-trees, which skirted the banks of the stream.

"Monsieur," said Julien, stopping in the middle of the walk, "excuse me if I venture on a delicate subject—but I must do so—now that I know all."

"Beg pardon—what do you know?" demanded Claudet, reddening.

"I know that you are the son of my cousin de Buxieres," replied the young man with considerable emotion.

The 'grand chasserot' knitted his brows.

"Ah!" said he, bitterly, "my mother's tongue has been too long, or else that blind magpie of a notary has been gossiping, notwithstanding my instructions."

"No; neither your mother nor Maitre Arbillot has been speaking to me. What I know I have learned from a stranger, and I know also that you would be master here if Claude de Buxieres had taken the precaution to write out his will. His negligence on that point has been a wrong to you, which it is my duty to repair."

"What's that!" exclaimed Claudet. Then he muttered between his teeth: "You owe me nothing. The law is on your side."

"I am not in the habit of consulting the law when it is a question of duty. Besides, Monsieur de Buxieres treated you openly as his son; if he had done what he ought, made a legal acknowledgment, you would have the right, even in default of a will, to one half of his patrimony. This half I come to offer to you, and beg of you to accept it."

Claudet was astonished, and opened his great, fierce brown eyes with amazement. The proposal seemed so incredible that he thought he must be dreaming, and mistrusted what he heard.

"What! You offer me half the inheritance?" faltered he.

"Yes; and I am ready to give you a certified deed of relinquishment as soon as you wish—"

Claudet interrupted him with a violent shrug of the shoulders.

"I make but one condition," pursued Julien.

"What is it?" asked Claudet, still on the defensive.

"That you will continue to live here, with me, as in your father's time."

Claudet was nearly overcome by this last suggestion, but a lingering feeling of doubt and a kind of innate pride prevented him from giving way, and arrested the expression of gratitude upon his lips.

"What you propose is very generous, Monsieur," said he, "but you have not thought much about it, and later you might regret it. If I were to stay here, I should be a restraint upon you—"

"On the contrary, you would be rendering me a service, for I feel myself incapable of managing the property," replied Julien, earnestly. Then, becoming more confidential as his conscience was relieved of its burden, he continued, pleasantly: "You see I am not vain about admitting the

fact. Come, cousin, don't be more proud than I am. Accept freely what I offer with hearty goodwill!"

As he concluded these words, he felt his hand seized, and affectionately pressed in a strong, robust grip.

"You are a true de Buxieres!" exclaimed Claudet, choking with emotion. "I accept—thanks—but, what have I to give you in exchange?—nothing but my friendship; but that will be as firm as my grip, and will last all my life."