

GERFAUT - V3

CHARLES DE BERNARD*

BOOK 3.

CHAPTER XIII

MONSIEUR DE BERGENHEIM

Some men in society marry too soon, a great number too late, a small and fortunate proportion at an opportune time. Young men in the country, of good family, are usually established in marriage by their parents as early as possible. When the family council finds an heiress who answers all the conditions of the programme laid out, they begin by giving the victim his cue. Provided the young lady has not a positively crooked nose, arms too red, and too uncouth a waist—sometimes even notwithstanding these little misfortunes—the transaction is concluded without any difficulty.

Clemence and Christian should be placed in the first rank of privileged couples of this kind. The most fastidious old uncle or precise old dowager could not discover the slightest pretense for criticism. Age, social position, wealth, physical endowments, all seemed united by a chance as rare as fortunate. So Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, who had very high pretensions for her niece, made no objection upon receiving the first overtures. She had not, at this time, the antipathy for her future nephew's family which developed later. The Bergenheims were in her eyes very well-born gentleman.

A meeting took place at the Russian Embassy. Bergenheim came in uniform; it was etiquette to do so, as the minister of war was present; but at the same time, of course, there was a little vanity on his part, for his uniform showed off his tall, athletic figure to the best advantage. Christian was certainly a very handsome soldier; his moustache and eyebrows were of a lighter tint than his complexion, and gave him that martial air which pleases women. Clemence could find no reason for a refusal. The way in which she had been brought up by her aunt had not rendered her so happy but that she often desired to change her situation. Like the greater number of young girls, she consented to become a wife so

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as not to remain a maiden; she said yes, so as not to say no.

As to Christian, he was in love with his wife as nine out of ten cavalry officers know how to love, and he seemed perfectly satisfied with the sentiment that he received in return for this sudden affection. A few successes with young belles, for whom an epaulette has an irresistible attraction, had inspired Baron de Bergenheim with a confidence in himself the simplicity of which excused the conceit. He persuaded himself that he pleased Clemence because she suited him exactly.

There are singers who pretend to read music at sight; give them a score by Gluck—"I beg your pardon," they will say, "my part is written here in the key of 'C' and I sing only in the key of 'G'!" How many men do not know even the key of 'G' in matters of love! Unfortunately for him, Bergenheim was one of that number. After three years of married life, he had not divined the first note in Clemence's character. He decided in his own mind, at the end of a few months, that she was cold, if not heartless. This discovery, which ought to have wounded his vanity, inspired him, on the contrary, with a deeper respect for her; insensibly this reserve reacted upon himself, for love is a fire whose heat dies out for want of fuel, and its cooling off is more sudden when the flame is more on the surface than in the depths.

The revolution of 1830 stopped Christian's career, and gave further pretexts for temporary absences which only added to the coolness which already existed between husband and wife. After handing in his resignation, the Baron fixed his residence at his chateau in the Vosges mountains, for which he shared the hereditary predilection of his family. His tastes were in perfect harmony with this dwelling, for he had quickly become the perfect type of a country gentleman, scorning the court and rarely leaving his ancestral acres. He was too kind-hearted to exact that his wife should share his country tastes and retired life. The unlimited confidence which he had in her, a loyalty which never allowed him to suppose evil or suspect her, a nature very little inclined to jealousy, made him allow Clemence the greatest liberty. The young woman lived at will in Paris with her aunt, or at Bergenheim with her husband, without a suspicious thought ever entering his head. Really,—what had he to fear? What wrong could she reproach him with? Was he not full of kindness and attention toward her? Did he not leave her mistress of her own fortune, free to do as she liked, to gratify every caprice? He thus lived upon his faith in the marriage contract, with unbounded confidence and old-fashioned loyalty.

According to general opinion, Madame de Bergenheim was a very fortunate woman, to whom virtue must be so easy that it could hardly be called a merit. Happiness, according to society, consists in a box at the Opera, a fine carriage, and a husband who pays the bills without frowning. Add to the above privileges, a hundred thousand francs' worth of diamonds, and a woman has really no right to dream or to suffer. There are, however, poor, loving creatures who stifle under this happiness as if

under one of those leaden covers that Dante speaks of; they breathe, in imagination, the pure, vital air that a fatal instinct has revealed to them; they struggle between duty and desire; they gaze, like captive doves and with a sorrowful eye, upon the forbidden region where it would be so blissful to soar; for, in fastening a chain to their feet, the law did not bandage their eyes, and nature gave them wings; if the wings tear the chain asunder, shame and misfortune await them! Society will never forgive the heart that catches a glimpse of the joys it is unacquainted with; even a brief hour in that paradise has to be expiated by implacable social damnation and its everlasting flames.

CHAPTER XIV

GERFAUT'S ALLEGORY

There almost always comes a moment when a woman, in her combat against love, is obliged to call falsehood to the help of duty. Madame de Bergenheim had entered this terrible period, in which virtue, doubting its own strength, does not blush to resort to other resources. At the moment when Octave, a man of experience, was seeking assistance in exciting her jealousy, she was meditating a plan of defence founded upon deceit. In order to take away all hope from her lover, she pretended a sudden affection for her husband, and in spite of her secret remorse she persisted in this role for two days; but during the night her tears expiated her treachery. Christian greeted his wife's virtuous coquetry with the gratitude and eagerness of a husband who has been deprived of love more than he likes. Gerfaut was very indignant at the sight of this perfidious manoeuvre, the intention of which he immediately divined; and his rage wanted only provocation to break out in full force.

One evening they were all gathered in the drawing-room with the exception of Aline, whom a reprimand from Mademoiselle de Corandeuil had exiled to her room. The old lady, stretched out in her chair, had decided to be unfaithful to her whist in favor of conversation. Marillac, leaning his elbows upon a round table, was negligently sketching some political caricatures, at that time very much the fashion, and particularly agreeable to the Legitimist party. Christian, who was seated near his wife, whose hand he was pressing with caressing familiarity, passed from one subject to another, and showed in his conversation the overwhelming conceit of a happy man who regards his happiness as a proof of superiority.

Gerfaut, standing, gazed gloomily at Clemence, who leaned toward her husband and seemed to listen eagerly to his slightest word. Bergenheim was a faithful admirer of the classics, as are all country gentlemen, who introduce a sentiment of propriety into their literary opinions and

prefer the ancient writers to the modern, for the reason that their libraries are much richer in old works than in modern books. The Baron unmercifully sacrificed Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, whom he had never read, upon the altar of Racine and Corneille, of which he possessed two or three editions, and yet it would have embarrassed him to recite half a dozen verses from them. Marillac boldly defended the cause of contemporary literature, which he considered as a personal matter, and poured out a profusion of sarcastic remarks in which there was more wit than good taste.

"The gods fell from Olympus, why should they not also fall from Parnassus?" said the artist, finally, with a triumphant air. "Say what you will, Bergenheim, your feeble opposition will not prevail against the instincts of the age. The future is ours, let me tell you, and we are the high priests of the new religion; is it not so, Gerfaut?"

At these words, Mademoiselle de Corandeuil shook her head, gravely.

"A new religion!" said she; "if this pretension should be verified you would only be guilty of heresy, and, without allowing myself to be taken in, I can understand how elevated minds and enthusiastic hearts might be attracted by the promises of a deceptive Utopia; but you, gentlemen, whom I believe to be sincere, do you not see to what an extent you delude yourselves? What you call religion is the most absolute negation of religious principles; it is the most distressing impiety ornamented with a certain sentimental hypocrisy which has not even the courage frankly to proclaim its principles."

"I swear to you, Mademoiselle, that I am religious three days out of four," replied Marillac; "that is something; there are some Christians who are pious only on Sunday."

"Materialism is the source from which modern literature takes its inspiration," continued the old lady; "and this poisonous stream not only dries up the thoughts which would expand toward heaven, but also withers all that is noble in human sentiment. To-day, people are not content to deny God, because they are not pure enough to comprehend Him; they disown even the weakness of the heart, provided they have an exalted and dignified character. They believe no longer in love. All the women that your fashionable writers tell us about are vulgar and sometimes unchaste creatures, to whom formerly a gentleman would have blushed to give one glance or to offer a supper. I say this for your benefit, Monsieur de Gerfaut, for in this respect you are far from being irreproachable; and I could bring forth your books to support my theory. If I accuse you of atheism, in love, what have you to say in reply?"

Carried away by one of those impulsive emotions which men of imagination can not resist, Octave arose and said:

"I should not deny such an accusation. Yes, it is a sad thing, but true,

and only weak minds recoil from the truth: reality exists only in material objects; all the rest is merely deception and fancy. All poetry is a dream, all spiritualism a fraud! Why not apply to love the accommodating philosophy which takes the world as it is, and does not throw a savory fruit into the press under the pretext of extracting I know not what imaginary essence? Two beautiful eyes, a satin skin, white teeth, and a shapely foot and hand are of such positive and inestimable value! Is it not unreasonable, then, to place elsewhere than in them all the wealth of love? Intellect sustains its owner, they say; no, intelligence kills. It is thought that corrupts sensation and causes suffering where, but for that, joy would reign supreme.

”Thought! accursed gift! Do we give or ask a thought of the rose whose perfume we breathe? Why not love as we breathe? Would not woman, considered simply as a perfectly organized vegetation, be the queen of creation? Why not enjoy her perfume as we bend before her, leaving her clinging to the ground where she was born and lives? Why tear her from the earth, this flower so fresh, and have her wither in our hands as we raise her up like an offering? Why make of so weak and fragile a creature a being above all others, for whom our enthusiasm can find no name, and then discover her to be but an unworthy angel?

”Angel! yes, of course, but an angel of the Earth, not of Heaven; an angel of flesh, not of light! By dint of loving, we love wrongly. We place our mistress too high and ourselves too low; there is never a pedestal lofty enough for her, according to our ideas. Fools! Oh! reflection is always wise, but desire is foolish, and our conduct is regulated by our desire. We, above all, with our active, restless minds, blase in many respects, unbelieving in others and disrespectful in the remainder, soar over life as over an impure lake, and look at everything with contempt, seeking in love an altar before which we can humble our pride and soften our disdain.

”For there is in every man an insurmountable need to fall on his knees before no matter what idol, if it remains standing and allows itself to be adored. At certain hours, a prayerbell rings in the depth of the heart, the sound of which throws him upon his knees as it cries: ’Kneel!’ And then the very being who ignores God in His churches and scorns kings upon their thrones, the being who has already exhausted the hollow idols of glory and fame, not having a temple to pray in, makes a fetich for himself in order to have a divinity to adore, so as not to be alone in his impiety, and to see, above his head when he arises, something that shall not be empty and vacant space. This man seeks a woman, takes all that he has, talent passion, youth, enthusiasm, all the wealth of his heart, and throws them at her feet like the mantle that Raleigh spread out before Elizabeth, and he says to this woman: ’Walk, O my queen; trample under your blessed feet the heart of your adoring slave!’ This man is a fool, is he not? For when the queen has passed, what remains upon the mantle? Mud!”

Gerfaut accompanied these words with such a withering glance that the one for whom they were intended felt her blood freeze in her veins, and withdrew the hand her husband had kept till then in his; she soon arose and seated herself at the other side of the table, under the pretext of getting nearer the lamp to work, but in reality in order to withdraw from Christian's vicinity. Clemence had expected her lover's anger, but not his scorn; she had not strength to endure this torture, and the conjugal love which had, not without difficulty, inflamed her heart for the last few days, fell to ashes at the first breath of Octave's indignation.

Mademoiselle de Corandeuil greeted the Vicomte's words indulgently; for, from consummate pride, she separated herself from other women.

"So then," said she, "you pretend that if to-day love is painted under false and vulgar colors, the fault is the model's, not the artist's."

"You express my thought much better than I could have done it myself," said Gerfaut, in an ironical tone; "where are the angels whose portraits are called for?"

"They are in our poetical dreams," said Marillac, raising his eyes to the ceiling with an inspired air.

"Very well! tell us your dreams then, instead of copying a reality which it is impossible for you to render poetic, since you yourselves see it without illusions."

Gerfaut smiled bitterly at this suggestion, artlessly uttered by the Baron.

"My dreams," he replied, "I should tell them to you poorly indeed, for the first blessing of the awakening is forgetfulness, and to-day I am awake. However, I remember how I allowed myself to be once overcome by a dream that has now vanished, but still emits its luminous trail in my eyes. I thought I had discovered, under a beautiful and attractive appearance, the richest treasure that the earth can bestow upon the heart of man; I thought I had discovered a soul, that divine mystery, deep as the ocean, ardent as a flame, pure as air, glorious as heaven itself, infinite as space, immortal as eternity! It was another universe, where I should be king. With what ardent and holy love I attempted the conquest of this new world, but, less fortunate than Columbus, I met with shipwreck instead of triumph."

Clemence, at this avowal of her lover's defeat, threw him a glance of intense contradiction, then lowered her eyes, for she felt her face suffused with burning blushes.

When he entered his room that night, Gerfaut went straight to the window. He could see in the darkness the light which gleamed in Clemence's room.

"She is alone," said he to himself; "certainly heaven protects us, for in the state of exasperation I am in, I should have killed them both."

CHAPTER XV

DECLARATION OF WAR

Far from rejoicing at this moment in the triumph he had just obtained, Gerfaut fell into one of those attacks of disenchantment, during which, urged on by some unknown demon, he unmercifully administered to himself his own dreaded sarcasm. Being unable to sleep, he arose and opened his window again, and remained with his elbows resting upon the sill for some time. The night was calm, numberless stars twinkled in the heavens, the moon bathed with its silvery light the tops of the trees, through which a monotonous breeze softly rustled. After gazing at this melancholy picture of sleeping nature, the poet smiled disdainfully, and said to himself "This comedy must end. I can not waste my life thus. Doubtless, glory is a dream as well as love; to pass the night idiotically gazing at the moon and stars is, after all, as reasonable as to grow pale over a work destined to live a day, a year, or a century! for what renown lasts longer than that? If I were really loved, I should not regret those wasted hours; but is it true that I am loved? There are moments when I recover my coolness and clearness of mind, a degree of self possession incompatible with the enthusiasm of genuine passion; at other times, it is true, a sudden agitation renders me powerless and leaves me as weak as a child. Oh, yes, I love her in a strange manner; the sentiment that I feel for her has become a study of the mind as well as an emotion of the heart, and that is what gives it its despotic tenacity; for a material impression weakens and gradually dies out, but when an energetic intelligence is brought to bear upon it, it becomes desperate. I should be wrong to complain. Passion, a passive sentiment! This word has a contradictory meaning for me. I am a lover as Napoleon was an emperor: nobody forced the crown upon him, he took it and crowned himself with his own hand. If my crown happens to be a thorny one, whom can I accuse? Did not my brow crave it?

"I have loved this woman of my own choosing, above all others; the choice made, I have worked at my love as I would at a cherished poem; it has been the subject of all my meditations, the fairy of all my dreams, for more than a year. I have not had a thought in which I have not paid her homage. I have devoted my talents to her; it seemed to me that by loving and perpetually contemplating her image, I might at last become worthy of painting it. I was conscious of a grand future, if only she had understood me; I often thought of Raphael and his own Fornarina. There is a throne vacant in poetry; I had dreamed of this throne in order to lay it at Clemence's feet. Oh! although this may never be more than a

dream, this dream has given me hours of incomparable happiness! I should be ungrateful to deny it.

”And yet this love is only a fictitious sentiment; I realize it today. It is not with her that I am in love, it is with a woman created by my imagination, and whom I see clearly within this unfeeling marble shape. When we have meditated for a long time, our thoughts end by taking life and walking by our side. I can now understand the allegory of Adam taking Eve from his own substance; but flesh forms a palpitating flesh akin to itself; the mind creates only a shadow, and a shadow can not animate a dead body. Two dead bodies can not make a living one; a body without a soul is only a cadaver—and she has no soul.”

Gerfaut sat motionless for some time with his face buried in his hands; suddenly he raised his head and burst into harsh laughter.

”Enough of this soaring in the clouds!” he exclaimed; ”let us come down to earth again. It is permissible to think in verse, but one must act in prose, and that is what I shall do tomorrow. This woman’s caprices, which she takes for efforts of virtue, have made of me a cruel and inexorable man; I have begged in vain for peace; if she wishes war, very well, so be it, she shall have war.”

CHAPTER XVI

GERFAUT WINS A POINT

For several days, Gerfaut followed, with unrelenting perseverance, the plan which he had mapped out in that eventful night. The most exacting woman could but appear satisfied with the politeness he displayed toward Madame de Bergenheim, but nothing in his conduct showed the slightest desire for an explanation. He was so careful of every look, gesture, and word of his, that it would have been impossible to discover the slightest difference in his actions toward Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, and the manner in which he treated Clemence. His choicest attentions and most particular efforts at amiability were bestowed upon Aline. He used as much caution as cunning, in his little game, for he knew that in spite of her inclination to be jealous, Madame de Bergenheim would never believe in a sudden desertion, and that she would surely discover the object of his ruse, if he made the mistake of exaggerating it in the least.

While renouncing the idea of a direct attack, he did not work with any less care to fortify his position. He redoubled his activity in widening the breach between the old aunt and the husband, following the principles of military art, that one should become master of the exterior works of a stronghold before seriously attacking its ramparts.

It was, in a way, by reflection that Octave's passion reached Clemence. Every few moments she learned some detail of this indirect attack, to which it was impossible for her to raise any objections.

"Monsieur de Gerfaut has promised to spend a fortnight longer with us," said her aunt to her, in a jeering tone.

"Really, Gerfaut is very obliging," said her husband, in his turn; "he thinks it very strange that we have not had a genealogical tree made to put in the drawing-room. He pretends that it is an indispensable complement to my collection of family portraits, and he offers to do me the favor of assuming charge of it. It seems, from what your aunt tells me, that he is very learned in heraldry. Would you believe it, he spent the whole morning in the library looking over files of old manuscripts? I am delighted, for this will prolong his stay here. He is a very charming fellow; a Liberal in politics, but a gentleman at heart. Marillac, who is a superb penman, undertakes to make a fair copy of the genealogy and to illuminate the crests. Do you know, we can not find my great-grandmother Cantelescar's coat-of-arms? But, my darling, it seems to me that you are not very kindly disposed toward your cousin Gerfaut."

Madame de Bergenheim, when these remarks and various others of a similar nature came up, tried to change the conversation, but she felt an antipathy for her husband bordering upon aversion. For lack of intelligence is one of the faults women can pardon the least; they look upon a confidence which is lulled into security by faith in their honor, and a blindness which does not suspect the possibility of a fall, as positive crimes.

"Look at these pretty verses Monsieur de Gerfaut has written in my album, Clemence," said Aline, in her turn. During vacation, among her other pleasures forbidden her at the Sacred Heart, the young girl had purchased a superbly bound album, containing so far but two ugly sketches in sepia, one very bad attempt in water-colors, and the verses in question. She called this "my album!" as she called a certain little blank book, "my diary!" To the latter she confided every night the important events of the day. This book had assumed such proportions, during the last few days, that it threatened to reach the dimensions of the Duchesse d'Abrantes' memoirs, but if the album was free to public admiration, nobody ever saw the diary, and Justine herself never had been able to discover the sanctuary that concealed this mysterious manuscript.

Aline was not so pleasantly received as the others, and Madame de Bergenheim hardly concealed the ill-humor her pretty sister-in-law's beaming face caused her every time Octave's name was mentioned.

The latter's diplomatic conduct was bearing fruit, and his expectations were being fulfilled with a precision which proved the correctness of his calculations.

In the midst of all the contradictory sentiments of fear, remorse, vexation, love, and jealousy, Clemence's head was so turned, at times, that she did not know what she did want. She found herself in one of those situations when a woman of a complex and mobile character whom all sensations impress, passes, with surprising facility, from one resolve to another entirely opposed to it. After being frightened beyond measure by her lover's presence in her husband's house, she ended by becoming accustomed to it, and then by ridiculing her first terror.

"Truly," she thought, at times, "I was too silly thus to torment myself and make myself ill; I was wanting in self-respect to mistrust myself to such an extent, and to see danger where there was none. He can not expect to make himself so very formidable while scrawling this genealogical tree. If he came one hundred leagues from Paris for that, he really does not merit such severe treatment."

Then, having thus reassured herself against the perils of her position, without realizing that to fear danger less was to embolden love, she proceeded to examine her lover's conduct.

"He seems perfectly resigned," she said, to herself; "not one word or glance for two days! Since he resigns himself so easily, he might, it seems to me, obey me entirely and go away; or, if he wishes to disobey me, he might do it in a less disagreeable manner. For really, his manner is almost rude; he might at least remember that I am his hostess, and that he is in my house. I do not see what pleasure he can take in talking to this little girl. I wager that his only object is to annoy me! He deceives himself most assuredly; it is all the same to me! But Aline takes all this seriously! She has become very coquettish, the last few days! It certainly is very wrong for him to try to turn this child's head. I should like to know what he would say to justify himself."

Thus, little by little, she mentally reached the point to which Octave wished to bring her. The desire for an explanation with him, which she dared not admit to herself at first from a feeling of pride, became greater from day to day, and at last Octave himself could not have longed more ardently for an interview. Now that Octave seemed to forget her, she realized that she loved him almost to adoration. She reproached herself for her harshness toward him more than she had ever reproached herself for her weakness. Her antipathy for all that did not concern him increased to such a degree that the most simple of household duties became odious to her. It seemed to her that all the people about her were enemies bent upon separating her from happiness, for happiness was Octave; and this happiness, made up of words, letters, glances from him, was lost!

The evening of the fourth day, she found this torture beyond her strength.

"I shall become insane," she thought; "to-morrow I will speak to him."

Gerfaut was saying to himself, at nearly the same moment: "To-morrow I will have a talk with her." Thus, by a strange sympathy, their hearts seemed to understand each other in spite of their separation. But what was an irresistible attraction in Clemence was only a determination resulting from almost a mathematical calculation on her lover's part. By the aid of this gift of second sight which intelligent men who are in love sometimes possess, he had followed, degree by degree, the variations of her heart, without her saying one word; and in spite of the veil of scorn and indifference with which she still had the courage to shield herself, he had not lost a single one of the tortures she had endured for the last four days. Now he thought that he had discovered enough to allow him to risk a step that, until then, he would have deemed dangerous; and with the egotism common to all men, even the best of lovers, he trusted in the weakness born of sorrow.

The next day a hunting party was arranged with some of the neighbors. Early in the morning, Bergenheim and Marillac started for the rendezvous, which was at the foot of the large oak-tree where the artist's tete-a-tete had been so cruelly interrupted. Gerfaut refused to join them, under the pretence of finishing an article for the 'Revue de Paris', and remained at home with the three ladies. As soon as dinner was ended, he went to his room in order to give a semblance of truth to his excuse.

He had been busying himself for some time trimming a quill pen at the window, which looked out upon the park, when he saw in the garden, directly beneath him, Constance's forefeet and nose; soon the dog jumped upon the sill in order to warm herself in the sun.

"The old lady has entered her sanctuary," thought Gerfaut, who knew that it was as impossible to see Constance without her mistress as St.-Roch without his dog.

A moment later he saw Justine and Mademoiselle de Corandeuil's maid starting off, arm in arm, as if they were going for a promenade. Finally, he had hardly written half a page, when he noticed Aline opposite his window, with a straw hat upon her head and a watering-pot in her hand. A servant carried a bucket of water and placed it near a mass of dahlias, which the young girl had taken under her protection, and she at once set about her work with great zeal.

"Now," said Gerfaut, "let us see whether the place is approachable." And closing his desk, he stealthily descended the stairs.

After crossing the vestibule on the first floor, and a small gallery decorated with commonplace pictures, he found himself at the library door. Thanks to the genealogical tree which he had promised to compile, he possessed a key to this room, which was not usually open. By dint of preaching about the danger in certain reading for young girls,

Mademoiselle de Corandeuil had caused this system of locking-up, especially designed to preserve Aline from the temptation of opening certain novels which the old lady rejected en masse. "Young girls did not read novels in 1780," she would say. This put an end to all discussion and cut short the protestations of the young girl, who was brought up exclusively upon a diet of Le Ragois and Mentelle's geography, and such solid mental food.

Several large books and numerous manuscripts were spread out upon the table in the library, together with a wide sheet of Holland paper, upon which was sketched the family tree of the Bergenheims. Instead of going to work, however, Gerfaut locked the door, and then went across the room and pressed a little knob which opened a small door no one would have noticed at first.

Leather bands representing the binding of books, like those which covered the rest of the walls, made it necessary for one to be informed of the existence of this secret exit in order to distinguish it from the rest of the room. This door had had a singular attraction for Gerfaut ever since the day he first discovered it. After silently opening it, he found himself in a small passage at the end of which was a small spiral staircase leading to the floor above. A cat creeping to surprise a bird asleep could not have walked more stealthily than he, as he mounted the stairs.

When he crossed the last step, he found himself in a small room, filled with wardrobes, lighted by a small glass door covered with a muslin curtain. This door opened into a little parlor which separated Madame de Bergenheim's private sitting-room from her sleeping-apartment. The only window was opposite the closet and occupied almost the whole of the woodwork, the rest of which was hung with pearl-gray stuff with lilac figures upon it. A broad, low divan, covered with the same material as the hanging, occupied the space in front of the window. It was the only piece of furniture, and it seemed almost impossible to introduce even one chair more.

The blinds were carefully closed, as well as the double curtains, and they let in so little light that Octave had to accustom himself to the obscurity before he could distinguish Madame de Bergenheim through the muslin, curtains and the glass door. She was lying upon the divan, with her head turned in his direction and a book in her hand. He first thought her asleep, but soon noticed her gleaming eyes fastened upon the ceiling.

"She is not asleep, she does not read, then she is thinking of me!" said he to himself, by a logical deduction he believed incontestable.

After a moment's hesitation, seeing that the young woman remained motionless, Gerfaut tried to turn the handle of the door as softly as possible so as to make his entrance quietly. The bolt had just

noiselessly slipped in the lock when the drawing-room door suddenly opened, a flood of light inundated the floor, and Aline appeared upon the threshold, watering-pot in hand.

The young girl stopped an instant, for she thought her sister-in-law was asleep; but, meeting in the shade Clemence's sparkling eyes, she entered, saying in a fresh, silvery voice:

"All my flowers are doing well; I have come to water yours."

Madame de Bergenheim made no reply, but her eyebrows contracted slightly as she watched the young girl kneel before a superb datura. This almost imperceptible symptom, and the rather ill-humored look, foretold a storm. A few drops of water falling upon the floor gave her the needed pretext, and Gerfaut, as much in love as he was, could not help thinking of the fable of the wolf and the lamb, when he heard the lady of his thoughts exclaim, in an impatient tone:

"Let those flowers alone; they do not need to be watered. Do you not see that you are wetting the floor?"

Aline turned around and looked at the scolder for a moment; then, placing her watering-pot upon the floor, she darted toward the divan like a kitten that has just received a blow from its mother's paw and feels authorized to play with her. Madame de Bergenheim tried to rise at this unexpected attack; but before she could sit up, she was thrown back upon the cushions by the young girl, who seized both her hands and kissed her on each cheek.

"Good gracious! how cross you have been for the last few days!" cried Aline, pressing her sister's hands. "Are you going to be like your aunt? You do nothing but scold now. What have I done? Are you vexed with me? Do you not love me any longer?"

Clemence felt a sort of remorse at this question, asked with such a loving accent; but her jealousy she could not overcome. To make up for it, she kissed her sister-in-law with a show of affection which seemed to satisfy the latter.

"What are you reading?" asked the young girl, picking up the book which had fallen to the floor in their struggle—"Notre Dame de Paris. That must be interesting! Will you let me read it? Oh! do! will you?"

"You know very well that my aunt has forbidden you to read novels."

"Oh! she does that just to annoy me and for no other reason. Do you think that is right? Must I remain an idiot, and never read anything but history and geography the rest of my life? As if I did not know that Louis Thirteenth was the son of Henri Fourth, and that there are eighty-six departments in France. You read novels. Does it do you any harm?"

Clemence replied in a rather imperative tone, which should have put an end to the discussion

"When you are married you can do as you like. Until then you must leave your education in the hands of those who are interested in you."

"All my friends," replied Aline with a pout, "have relatives who are interested in them, at least as much as your aunt is in me, and they do not prevent their reading the books they like. There is Claire de Saponay, who has read all of Walter Scott's novels, Maleck-Adel, Eugenie and Mathilde—and I do not know how many more; Gessner, Mademoiselle de Lafayette—she has read everything; and I—they have let me read Numa Ponzpilus and Paul and Virginia. Isn't that ridiculous at sixteen years of age?"

"Do not get excited, but go into the library and get one of Walter Scott's novels; but do not let my aunt know anything about it."

At this act of capitulation, by which Madame de Bergenheim doubtless wished to atone for her disagreeableness, Aline made one joyous bound for the glass door. Gerfaut had barely time to leave his post of observation and to conceal himself between two wardrobes, under a cloak which was hanging there, when the young girl made her appearance, but she paid no attention to the pair of legs which were but imperfectly concealed. She bounded down the stairs and returned a moment later with the precious volumes in her hand.

"Waverley, or, Scotland Sixty Years Ago," said she, as she read the title. "I took the first one on the shelf, because you are going to lend them all to me, one by one, are you not? Claire says that a young girl can read Walter Scott, and that his books are very nice."

"We shall see whether you are sensible," replied Clemence, smiling; "but, above all things, do not let my aunt see these books, for I am the one who would get the scolding."

"Do not worry;—I will go and hide them in my room."

She went as far as the door, then stopped and came back a few steps.

"It seems," said she, "that Monsieur de Gerfaut worked in the library yesterday, for there are piles of books on the table. It is very kind of him to be willing to make this tree, is it not? Shall we both be in it? Do they put women in such things? I hope your aunt will not be there; she is not one of our family."

Clemence's face clouded again at the name of Gerfaut.

"I know no more about it than you," she replied, a little harshly.

"The reason I asked is because there are only pictures of men in the drawing-room; it is not very polite on their part. I should much prefer that there should be portraits of our grandmothers; it would be so amusing to see the beautiful dresses that they wore in those days rather than those old beards which frighten me. But perhaps they do not put young girls in genealogical trees," she continued, in a musing tone.

"You might ask Monsieur de Gerfaut; he wishes to please you too much to refuse to tell you," said Clemence, with an almost ironical smile.

"Do you think so?" asked Aline, innocently. "I should never dare to ask him."

"You are still afraid of him, then?"

"A little," replied the young girl, lowering her eyes, for she felt her face flush.

This symptom made Madame de Bergenheim more vexed than ever, and she continued, in a cutting, sarcastic tone:

"Has your cousin d'Artigues written you lately?"

Mademoiselle de Bergenheim raised her eyes and looked at her for a moment with an indifferent air:

"I don't know," she said, at last.

"What! you do not know whether you have received a letter from your cousin?" continued Clemence, laughing affectedly.

"Ah! Alphonse—no, that is, yes; but it was a long time ago."

"How cold and indifferent you are all of a sudden to this dear Alphonse! You do not remember, then, how you wept at his departure, a year ago, and how vexed you were with your brother who tried to tease you about this beautiful affection, and how you swore that you would never have any other husband than your cousin?"

"I was a simpleton, and Christian was right. Alphonse is only one year older than I! Think of it, what a fine couple we should make! I know that I am not very sensible, and so it is necessary that my husband should be wise enough for both. Christian is nine years older than you, is he not?"

"Do you think that is too much?" asked Madame de Bergenheim.

"Quite the contrary."

"What age should you like your husband to be?"

"Oh!—thirty," replied the young girl, after a slight hesitation.

"Monsieur de Gerfaut's age?"

They gazed at each other in silence. Octave, who, from his place of concealment heard the whole of this conversation, noticed the sad expression which passed over Clemence's face, and seemed to provoke entire confidence. The young girl allowed herself to be caught by this appearance of interest and affection.

"I will tell you something," said she, "if you will promise never to tell a soul."

"To whom should I repeat it? You know that I am very discreet as to your little secrets."

"It is because this might be perhaps a great secret," continued Aline.

Clemence took her sister-in-law's hand, and drew her down beside her.

"You know," said Aline, "that Christian has promised to give me a watch like yours, because I do not like mine. Yesterday, when we were out walking, I told him I thought it was very unkind of him not to have given it to me yet. Do you know what he replied?—It is true that he laughed a little—It is hardly worth while buying you one now; when you are the Vicomtesse de Gerfaut, your husband will give you one."

"Your brother was joking at your expense; how could you be such a child as not to perceive it?"

"I am not such a child!" exclaimed Aline, rising with a vexed air; "I know what I have seen. They were talking a long time together in the drawing-room last evening, and I am sure they were speaking of me."

Madame de Bergenheim burst into laughter, which increased her sister-in-law's vexation, for she was less and less disposed to be treated like a young girl.

"Poor Aline!" said the Baroness, at last; "they were talking about the fifth portrait; Monsieur de Gerfaut can not find the name of the original among the old papers, and he thinks he did not belong to the family. You know, that old face with the gray beard, near the door."

The young girl bent her head, like a child who sees her naughty sister throw down her castle of cards.

"And how do you know?" said she, after a moment's reflection. "You were at the piano. How could you hear at the other end of the room what Monsieur de Gerfaut was saying?"

It was Clemence's turn to hang her head, for it seemed to her that the girl had suspected the constant attention which, under an affectation of indifference, never allowed her to lose one of Octave's words. As usual, she concealed her embarrassment by redoubling her sarcasm.

"Very likely," said she, "I was mistaken, and you may be right after all. What day shall we have the honor of saluting Madame la Vicomtesse de Gerfaut?"

"I foolishly told you what I imagined, and you at once make fun of me," said Aline, whose round face lengthened at each word, and passed from rose-color to scarlet; "is it my fault that my brother said this?"

"I do not think it was necessary for him to speak of it, for you to think a great deal about the matter."

"Very well; must one not think of something?"

"But one should be careful of one's thoughts; it is not proper for a young girl to think of any man," replied Clemence, with an accent of severity which would have made her aunt recognize with pride the pure blood of the Corandeuils.

"I think it is more proper for a young girl to do so than for a married woman."

At this unexpected retort, Madame de Bergenheim lost countenance and sat speechless before the young maiden, like a pupil who has just been punished by his teacher.

"Where the devil did the little serpent get that idea?" thought Gerfaut, who was very ill at ease between the two wardrobes where he was concealed.

Seeing that her sister-in-law did not reply to her, Aline took this silence from confusion for an expression of bad temper, and at once became angry in her turn.

"You are very cross to-day," said she; "good-by, I do not want your books."

She threw the volumes of Waverley upon the sofa, picked up her watering-pot and went out, closing the door with a loud bang. Madame de Bergenheim sat motionless with a pensive, gloomy air, as if the young girl's remark had changed her into a statue.

"Shall I enter?" said Octave to himself, leaving his niche and putting his hand upon the door-knob. "This little simpleton has done me an infinite wrong with her silly speeches. I am sure that she is cruising with full sails set upon the stormy sea of remorse, and that those two rosebuds she is gazing at now seem to her like her husband's eyes."

Before the poet could make up his mind what to do, the Baroness arose and left the room, closing the door almost as noisily as her sister-in-law had done.

Gerfaut went downstairs, cursing, from the very depths of his heart, boarding-school misses and sixteen-year-old hearts. After walking up and down the library for a few moments, he left it and started to return to his room. As he passed the drawing-room, loud music reached his ear; chromatic fireworks, scales running with the rapidity of the cataract of Niagara, extraordinary arpeggios, hammering in the bass with a petulance and frenzy which proved that the 'furie francaise' is not the exclusive right of the stronger sex. In this jumble of grave, wild, and sad notes, Gerfaut recognized, by the clearness of touch and brilliancy of some of the passages, that this improvisation could not come from Aline's unpractised fingers. He understood that the piano must be at this moment Madame de Bergenheim's confidant, and that she was pouring out the contradictory emotions in which she had indulged for several days; for, to a heart deprived of another heart in which to confide its joys and woes, music is a friend that listens and replies.

Gerfaut listened for some time in silence, with his head leaning against the drawing-room door. Clemence wandered through vague melodies without fixing upon any one in particular. At last a thought seemed to captivate her. After playing the first measures of the romance from Saul, she resumed the motive with more precision, and when she had finished the ritornello she began to sing, in a soft, veiled voice,

"Assisa al pie d'un salice—"

Gerfaut had heard her sing this several times, in society, but never with this depth of expression. She sang before strangers with her lips; now it all came from her heart. At the third verse, when he believed her to be exalted by her singing and the passion exhaled in this exquisite song, the poet softly entered, judging it to be a favorable moment, and enough agitated himself to believe in the contagion of his agitation.

The first sight which met his eyes was Mademoiselle de Corandeuil stretched out in her armchair, head thrown back, arms drooping and letting escape by way of accompaniment a whistling, crackling, nasal melody. The old maid's spectacles hanging on the end of her nose had singularly compromised the harmony of her false front. The 'Gazette de France' had fallen from her hands and decorated the back of Constance, who, as usual, was lying at her mistress's feet.

"Horrible old witch!" said Gerfaut to himself. "Decidedly, the Fates are against me to-day." However, as both mistress and dog were sleeping soundly, he closed the door and tiptoed across the floor.

Madame de Bergenheim had ceased to sing, but her fingers still continued softly to play the motive of the song. As she saw Octave approaching her, she leaned over to look at her aunt, whom she had not noticed to be asleep, as the high back of her chair was turned toward her. Nobody sleeps in a very imposing manner, but the old lady's profile, with her false front awry, was so comical that it was too much for her niece's gravity. The desire to laugh was, for the moment, stronger than respect for melancholy; and Clemence, through that necessity for sympathy peculiar to acute merriment, glanced involuntarily at Octave, who was also smiling. Although there was nothing sentimental in this exchange of thoughts, the latter hastened to profit by it; a moment more, and he was seated upon a stool in front of the piano, at her left and only a few inches from her.

"How can a person sleep when you are singing?"

The most embarrassed freshman could have turned out as bright a speech as this; but the eloquence of it lay less in the words than in the expression. The ease and grace with which Octave seated himself, the elegant precision of his manner, the gracious way in which he bent his head toward Clemence, while speaking, showed a great aptitude in this kind of conversation. If the words were those of a freshman, the accent and pose were those of a graduate.

The Baroness's first thought was to rise and leave the room, but an invincible charm held her back. She was not mistress enough of her eyes to dare to let them meet Octave's; so she turned them away and pretended to look at the old lady.

"I have a particular talent for putting my aunt to sleep," said she, in a gay tone; "she will sleep until evening, if I like; when I stop playing, the silence awakens her."

"I beg of you, continue to play; never awaken her," said Gerfaut; and, as if he were afraid his wish would not be granted, he began to pound in the bass without being disturbed by the unmusical sounds.

"Do not play discords," said Clemence, laughing; "let us at least put her to sleep in tune."

She was wrong to say us; for her lover took this as complicity for whatever might happen. Us, in a tete-a-tete, is the most traitorous word in the whole language.

It may be that Clemence had no great desire that her aunt should awaken;

perhaps she wished to avoid a conversation; perhaps she wished to enjoy in silence the happiness of feeling that she was still loved, for since he had seated himself beside her Octave's slightest action had become a renewed avowal. Madame de Bergenheim began to play the Duke of Reichstadt's Waltz, striking only the first measure of the accompaniment, in order to show her lover where to put his fingers.

The waltz went on. Clemence played the air and Octave the bass, two of their hands remaining unoccupied—those that were close to each other. Now, what could two idle hands do, when one belonged to a man deeply in love, the other to a young woman who for some time had ill-treated her lover and exhausted her severity? Before the end of the first part, the long unoccupied, tapering fingers of the treble were imprisoned by those of the bass, without the least disturbance in the musical effect—and the old aunt slept on!

A moment later, Octave's lips were fastened upon this rather trembling hand, as if he wished to imbibe, to the very depths of his soul, the soft, perfumed tissue. Twice the Baroness tried to disengage herself, twice her strength failed her. It was beginning to be time for the aunt to awaken, but she slept more soundly than ever; and if a slight indecision was to be noticed in the upper hand, the lower notes were struck with an energy capable of metamorphosing Mademoiselle de Corandeuil into a second Sleeping Beauty.

When Octave had softly caressed this hand for a long time, he raised his head in order to obtain a new favor. This time Madame de Bergenheim did not turn away her eyes, but, after looking at Octave for an instant, she said to him in a coquettish, seductive way:

”Aline?”

The mute glance which replied to this question was such an eloquent denial that all words were superfluous. His sweet, knowing smile betrayed the secret of his duplicity; he was understood and forgiven. There was at this moment no longer any doubt, fear, or struggle between them. They did not feel the necessity of any explanation as to the mutual suffering they had undergone; the suffering no longer existed. They were silent for some time, happy to look at each other, to be together and alone—for the old aunt still slept. Not a sound was to be heard; one would have said that sleep had overcome the two lovers also. Suddenly the charm was broken by a terrible noise, like a trumpet calling the guilty ones to repentance.

CHAPTER XVII

A RUDE INTERRUPTION

Had a cannon-ball struck the two lovers in the midst of their ecstasy it would have been less cruel than the sensation caused by this horrible noise. Clemence trembled and fell back in her chair, frozen with horror. Gerfaut rose, almost as frightened as she; Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, aroused from her sleep, sat up in her chair as suddenly as a Jack-in-a-box that jumps in one's face when a spring is touched. As to Constance, she darted under her mistress's chair, uttering the most piteous howls.

One of the folding-doors opposite the window opened; the bell of a hunting-horn appeared in the opening, blown at full blast and waking the echoes in the drawing-room. The curtain of the drama had risen upon a parody, a second incident had changed the pantomime and sentiments of the performers. The old lady fell back in her chair and stopped up her ears with her fingers, as she stamped upon the floor; but it was in vain for her to try to speak, her words were drowned by the racket made by this terrible instrument. Clemence also stopped her ears. After running in her terror, under every chair in the room, Constance, half wild, darted, in a fit of despair, through the partly opened door. Gerfaut finally began to laugh heartily as if he thought it all great fun, for M. de Bergenheim's purple face took the place of the trumpet and his hearty laugh rang out almost as noisily.

"Ah! ha! you did not expect that kind of accompaniment," said the Baron, when his gayer had calmed a little; "this is the article that you were obliged to write for the *Revue de Paris*, is it? Do you think that I am going to leave you to sing Italian duets with Madame while I am scouring the woods? You must take me for a very careless husband, Vicomte. Now, then, right about face! March! Do me the kindness to take a gun. We are going to shoot a few hares in the Corne woods before supper."

"Monsieur de Bergenheim," exclaimed the old lady, when her emotion would allow her to speak, "this is indecorous—vulgar—the conduct of a common soldier—of a cannibal! My head is split open; I am sure to have an awful neuralgia in a quarter of an hour. It is the conduct of a herdsman."

"Do not think of your neuralgia, my dear aunt," replied Christian, whose good-humor seemed aroused by the day's sport; "you are as fresh as a rosebud—and Constance shall have some hares' heads roasted for her supper."

At this moment a second uproar was heard in the courtyard; a horn was evidently being played by an amateur, accompanied by the confused yelps and barks of a numerous pack of hounds; the whole was mingled with shouts

of laughter, the cracking of whips, and clamors of all kinds. In the midst of this racket, a cry, more piercing than the others, rang out, a cry of agony and despair.

"Constance!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Corandeuil, in a falsetto voice full of terror; she rushed to one of the windows and all followed her.

The spectacle in the courtyard was as noisy as it was picturesque. Marillac, seated upon a bench, was blowing upon a trumpet, trying to play the waltz from Robert-le-Diable in a true infernal manner. At his feet were seven or eight hunters and as many servants encouraging him by their shouts. The Baron's pack of hounds, of great renown in the country, was composed of about forty dogs, all branded upon their right thighs with the Bergenheim coat-of-arms. From time immemorial, the chateau's dogs had been branded thus with their master's crest, and Christian, who was a great stickler for old customs, had taken care not to drop this one. This feudal sign had probably acted upon the morals of the pack, for it was impossible to find, within twenty leagues, a collection of more snarly terriers, dissolute hounds, ugly bloodhounds, or more quarrelsome greyhounds. They were perfect hunters, but it seemed as if, on account of their being dogs of quality, all vices were permitted them.

In the midst of this horde, without respect for law or order, the unfortunate Constance had found herself after crossing the ante-chamber, vestibule, and outside steps, still pursued by the sounds from Christian's huge horn. An honest merchant surprised at the turn of the road by a band of robbers would not have been greeted any better than the poodle was at the moment she darted into the yard. It may have been that the quarrel between the Bergenheims and Corandeuils had reached the canine species; it may have been at the instigation of the footmen, who all cordially detested the beast—the sad fact remains that she was pounced upon in a moment as if she were a deer, snatched, turned topsy-turvy, rolled, kicked about, and bitten by the forty four-legged brigands, who each seemed determined to carry away as a trophy some portion of her cafe-au-lait colored blanket.

The person who took the most delight in this deplorable spectacle was Pere Rousselet. He actually clapped his hands together behind his back, spread his legs apart in the attitude of the Colossus of Rhodes, while his coat-skirts almost touched the ground, giving him the look of a kangaroo resting his paws under his tail. From his large cockatoo mouth escaped provoking hisses, which encouraged the assassins in their crime as much as did Marillac's racket.

"Constance!" exclaimed Mademoiselle de Corandeuil a second time, frozen with horror at the sight of her poodle lying upon its back among its enemies.

This call produced no effect upon the animal section of the actors in this scene, but it caused a sudden change among the servants and a few of

the hunters; the shouts of encouragement ceased at once; several of the participants prudently tried to efface themselves; as to Rousselet, more politic than the others, he boldly darted into the melee and picked up the fainting puppy in his arms, carrying her as tenderly as a mother would an infant, without troubling himself whether or not he was leaving part of his coat-tails with the savage hounds.

When the old lady saw the object of her love placed at her feet covered with mud, sprinkled with blood, and uttering stifled groans, which she took for the death-rattle, she fell back in her chair speechless.

"Let us go," said Bergenheim in a low voice, taking his guest by the arm. Gerfaut threw a glance around him and sought Clemence's eyes, but he did not find them. Without troubling herself as to her aunt's despair, Clemence had hurried to her room; for she felt the necessity of solitude in order to calm her emotions, or perhaps to live them over a second time. Octave resigned himself to following his companion. At the end of a few moments, the barking of the dogs, the joking of the hunters, even the wind in the trees and the rustling leaves, had bored Octave to such an extent that, in spite of himself, his face betrayed him.

"What a doleful face you have!" exclaimed his host, laughingly. "I am sorry that I took you away from Madame de Bergenheim; it seems that you decidedly prefer her society to ours."

"Would you be very jealous if I were to admit the fact?" replied Octave, making an effort to assume the same laughing tone as the Baron.

"Jealous! No, upon my honor! However, you are well constituted to give umbrage to a poor husband.

But jealousy is not one of my traits of character, nor among my principles."

"You are philosophical!" said the lover, with a forced smile.

"My philosophy is very simple. I respect my wife too much to suspect her, and I love her too much to annoy her in advance with an imaginary trouble. If this trouble should come, and I were sure of it, it would be time enough to worry myself about it. Besides, it would be an affair soon settled."

"What affair?" asked Marillac, slackening his pace in order to join in the conversation.

"A foolish affair, my friend, which does not concern you, Monsieur de Gerfaut, nor myself any longer, I hope; although I belong to the class exposed to danger. We were speaking of conjugal troubles."

The artist threw a glance at his friend which signified: "What the deuce

made you take it into your head to start up this hare?"

"There are many things to be said on this subject," said he, in a sententious tone, thinking that his intervention might be useful in getting his friend out of the awkward position in which he found himself, "an infinite number of things may be said; books without number have been written upon this subject. Every one has his own system and plan of conduct as to the way of looking at and acting upon it."

"And what would be yours, you consummate villain?" asked Christian; "would you be as cruel a husband as you are an immoral bachelor? That usually happens; the bolder a poacher one has been, the more intractable a gamekeeper one becomes. What would be your system?"

"Hum! hum! you are mistaken, Bergenheim; my boyish love adventures have disposed me to indulgence. 'Debilis caro', you know! Shakespeare has translated it, 'Frailty, thy name is woman!'"

"I am a little rusty in my; Latin and I never knew a word of English. What does that mean?"

"Upon my word, it means, if I were married and my wife deceived me, I should resign myself to it like a gentleman, considering the fragility of this enchanting sex."

"Mere boy's talk, my friend! And you, Gerfaut?"

"I must admit," replied the latter, a little embarrassed, "that I have never given the subject very much thought. However, I believe in the virtue of women."

"That is all very well, but in case of misfortune what would you do?"

"I think I should say with Lanoue: 'Sensation is for the fop, complaints for the fool, an honest man who is deceived goes away and says nothing.'"

"I partly agree with Lanoue; only I should make a little variation—instead of goes away should say avenges himself."

Marillac threw at his friend a second glance full of meaning.

"Per Bacco!" said he, "are you a Venetian or a Castilian husband?"

"Eh!" replied Bergenheim, "I suppose that without being either, I should kill my wife, the other man, and then myself, without even crying, 'Beware!' Here! Brichou! pay attention; Tambeau is separated from the rest."

As he said these words the Baron leaped over a broad ditch, which divided the road from the clearing which the hunters had already entered.

"What do you say to that?" murmured the artist, in a rather dramatic tone, in his friend's ear.

Instead of replying, the lover made a gesture which signified, according to all appearance: "I do not care."

The clearing they must cross in order to reach the woods formed a large, square field upon an inclined plane which sloped to the river side. Just as Marillac in his turn was jumping the ditch, his friend saw, at the extremity of the clearing, Madame de Bergenheim walking slowly in the avenue of sycamores. A moment later, she had disappeared behind a mass of trees without the other men noticing her.

"Take care that you do not slip," said the artist, "the ground is wet."

This warning brought misfortune to Gerfaut, who in jumping caught his foot in the root of a tree and fell.

"Are you hurt?" asked Bergenheim.

Octave arose and tried to walk, but was obliged to lean upon his gun.

"I think I have twisted my foot," said he, and he carried his hand to it as if he felt a sharp pain there.

"The devil! it may be a sprain," observed the Baron, coming toward them; "sit down. Do you think you will be able to walk?"

"Yes, but I fear hunting would be too much for me; I will return to the house."

"Do you wish us to make a litter and carry you?"

"You are laughing at me; it's not so bad as that. I will walk back slowly, and will take a foot-bath in my room."

"Lean upon me, then, and I will help you," said the artist, offering his arm.

"Thanks; I do not need you," Octave replied; "go to the devil!" he continued, in an expressive aside.

"Capisco!" Marillac replied, in the same tone, giving his arm an expressive pressure. "Excuse me," said he aloud, "I am not willing that you should go alone. I will be your Antigone—"

Antigone me reste, Antigone est and fille.

"Bergenheim, I will take charge of him. Go on with your hunting, the gentlemen are waiting for you. We will meet again at supper; around the table; legs are articles of luxury and sprains a delusion, provided that the throat and stomach are properly treated."

The Baron looked first at his guests, then at the group that had just reached the top of the clearing. For an instant Christian charity struggled against love of hunting, then the latter triumphed. As he saw that Octave, although limping slightly, was already in a condition to walk, especially with the aid of his friend's arm, he said:

"Do not forget to put your foot in water, and send for Rousselet; he understands all about sprains."

This advice having eased his conscience, he joined his companions, while the two friends slowly took the road back to the chateau, Octave resting one hand upon the artist's arm and the other upon his gun.

"The bourgeois is outwitted!" said Marillac with a stifled laugh, as soon as he was sure that Bergenheim could not hear him. "Upon my word, these soldiers have a primitive, baptismal candor! It is not so with us artists; they could not bamboozle us in this way. Your strain is an old story; it is taken from the 'Mariage de raison', first act, second scene."

"You will do me the favor to leave me as soon as we reach the woods," said Gerfaut, as he continued to limp with a grace which would have made Lord Byron envious; "you may go straight ahead, or you may turn to the left, as you choose; the right is forbidden you."

"Very well. Hearts are trumps, it seems, and, for the time being, you agree with Sganarelle, who places the heart on the right side."

"Do not return to the chateau, as it is understood that we are together. If you rejoin the hunting-party, say to Bergenheim that you left me seated at the foot of a tree and that the pain in my foot had almost entirely gone. You would have done better not to accompany me, as I tried to make you understand."

"I had reasons of my own for wishing to get out of Christian's crowd. To-day is Monday, and I have an appointment at four o'clock which interests you more than me. Now, will you listen to a little advice?"

"Listen, yes; follow it, not so sure."

"O race of lovers!" exclaimed the artist, in a sort of transport, "foolish, absurd, wicked, impious, and sacrilegious kind!"

"What of it?"

"What of it? I tell you this will all end with swords for two."

"Bah!"

"Do you know that this rabid Bergenheim, with his round face and good-natured smile, killed three or four men while he was in the service, on account of a game of billiards or some such trivial matter?"

"Requiescat in pace."

"Take care that he does not cause the 'De Profundis' to be sung for you. He was called the best swords man at Saint-Cyr: he has the devil of a lunge. As to pistol-shooting, I have seen him break nine plaster images at Lepage's one after another."

"Very well, if I have an engagement with him, we will fight it out with arsenic."

"By Jove, joking is out of place. I tell you that he is sure to discover something, and then your business will soon be settled; he will kill you as if you were one of the hares he is hunting this moment."

"You might find a less humiliating comparison for me," replied Gerfaut, with an indifferent smile; "however, you exaggerate. I have always noticed that these bullies with mysterious threats of their own and these slaughterers of plaster images were not such very dangerous fellows to meet. This is not disputing Bergenheim's bravery, for I believe it to be solid and genuine."

"I tell you, he is a regular lion! After all, you will admit that it is sheer folly to come and attack him in his cage and pull his whiskers through the bars. And that is what you are doing. To be in love with his wife and pay court to her in Paris, when he is a hundred leagues from you, is all very well, but to install yourself in his house, within reach of his clutches! that is not love, it is sheer madness. This is nothing to laugh at. I am sure that this will end in some horrible tragedy. You heard him speak of killing his wife and her lover just now, as if it were a very slight matter. Very well; I know him; he will do as he says without flinching. These ruddy-faced people are very devils, if you meddle with their family affairs! He is capable of murdering you in some corner of his park, and of burying you at the foot of some tree and then of forcing Madame de Bergenheim to eat your heart fricasseed in champagne, as they say Raoul de Coucy did."

"You will admit, at least, that it would be a very charming repast, and that there would be nothing bourgeois about it."

"Certainly, I boast of detesting the bourgeois; I am celebrated for that;

but I should much prefer to die in a worsted nightcap, flannel underwear, and cotton night-shirt, than to have Bergenheim assist me, too brusquely, in this little operation. He is such an out-and-out Goliath! Just look at him!"

And the artist forced his friend to turn about, and pointed at Christian, who stood with the other hunters upon the brow of the hill, a few steps from the spot where they had left him. The Baron was indeed a worthy representative of the feudal ages, when physical strength was the only incontestable superiority. In spite of the distance, they could hear his clear, ringing voice although they could not distinguish his words.

"He really has a look of the times of the Round Table," said Gerfaut; "five or six hundred years ago it would not have been very agreeable to find one's self face to face with him in a tournament; and if to-day, as in those times, feminine hearts were won by feats with double-edged swords, I admit that my chances would not be very good. Fortunately, we are emancipated from animal vigor; it is out, of fashion."

"Out of fashion, if you like; meanwhile, he will kill you."

"You do not understand the charms of danger nor the attractions that difficulties give to pleasure. I have studied Christian thoroughly since I have been here, and I know him as well as if I had passed my life with him. I am also sure that, at the very first revelation, he will kill me if he can, and I take a strange interest in knowing that I risk my life thus. Here we are in the woods," said Gerfaut, as he dropped the artist's arm and ceased limping; "they can no longer see us; the farce is played out. You know what I told you to say if you join them: you left me at the foot of a tree. You are forbidden to approach the sycamores, under penalty of receiving the shot from my gun in your moustache."

At these words he threw the gun which had served him as crutch over his shoulder, and darted off in the direction of the river.

CHAPTER XVIII

ESPIONAGE

At the extremity of the sycamore walk, the shore formed a bluff like the one upon which the chateau was built, but much more abrupt, and partly wooded. In order to avoid this stretch, which was not passable for carriages, the road leading into the principal part of the valley turned to the right, and reached by an easier ascent a more level plateau. There was only one narrow path by the river, which was shaded by branches of beeches and willows that hung over this bank into the river. After

walking a short distance through this shady path, one found himself before a huge triangular rock covered with moss, which nature had rolled from the top of the mountain as if to close up the passage.

This obstacle was not insurmountable; but in order to cross it, one must have a sure foot and steady head, for the least false step would precipitate the unlucky one into the river, which was rapid as well as deep. From the rock, one could reach the top of the cliff by means of some natural stone steps, and then, descending on the other side, could resume the path by the river, which had been momentarily interrupted. In this case, one would reach, in about sixty steps, a place where the river grew broader and the banks projected, forming here and there little islands of sand covered with bushes. Here was a ford well known to shepherds and to all persons who wished to avoid going as far as the castle bridge.

Near the mossy rock of which we have spoken as being close to the sycamore walk, at the foot of a wall against which it flowed, forming a rather deep excavation, the current had found a vein of soft, brittle stone which, by its incessant force, it had ended in wearing away. It was a natural grotto formed by water, but which earth, in its turn, had undertaken to embellish. An enormous willow had taken root in a few inches of soil in a fissure of the rock, and its drooping branches fell into the stream, which drifted them along without being able to detach them.

Madame de Bergenheim was seated at the front of this grotto, upon a seat formed by the base of the rock. She was tracing in the sand, with a stick which she had picked up on the way, strange figures which she carefully erased with her foot. Doubtless these hieroglyphics had some meaning to her, and perhaps she feared lest the slightest marks might be carelessly forgotten, as they would betray the secret they concealed. Clemence was plunged into one of those ecstatic reveries which abolish time and distance. The fibres of her heart, whose exquisite vibrating had been so suddenly paralyzed by Christian's arrival, had resumed their passionate thrills. She lived over again in her mind the tete-a-tete in the drawing-room; she could hear the entrancing waltz again; she felt her lover's breath in her hair; her hand trembled again under the pressure of his kiss. When she awoke from this dream it was a reality; for Octave was seated by her side without her having seen him arrive, and he had taken up the scene at the piano just where it had been interrupted.

She was not afraid. Her mind had reached that state of exaltation which renders imperceptible the transition from dreaming to reality. It seemed to her that Octave had always been there, that it was his place, and for a moment she no longer thought, but remained motionless in the arms which embraced her. But soon her reason came back to her. She arose trembling, and drew away a few steps, standing before her lover with lowered head and face suffused with blushes.

"Why are you afraid of me? Do you not think me worthy of your love?" he asked, in an altered voice, and, without trying to retain or approach her, he fell upon his knees with a movement of sweet, sad grace.

He had analyzed Madame de Bergenheim's character well enough to perceive the least variation in her capricious nature. By the young woman's frightened attitude, her burning cheeks and the flashes which he saw from her eyes through her long, drooping lashes, he saw that a reaction had taken place, and he feared the next outburst; for he knew that women, when overcome with remorse, always smite their lover by way of expiation for themselves.

"If I let this recovered virtue have the mastery, I am a lost man for a fortnight at least," he thought.

He quickly abandoned the dangerous ground upon which he had taken position, and passed, by an adroit transition, from the most passionate frenzy to the most submissive bearing. When Clemence raised her large eyes, in which was a threatening gleam, she saw, instead of an audacious man to be punished, an imploring slave.

There was something so flattering in this attitude of humility that she was completely disarmed. She approached Octave, and took him by the hand to raise him, seated herself again and allowed him to resume his position beside her. She softly pressed his hand, of which she had not let go, and, looking her lover in the eyes, said in that deep, penetrating voice that women sometimes have:

"My friend!"

"Friend!" he thought; "yes, certainly. I will raise no dispute as to the word, provided the fact is recognized. What matters the color of the flag? Only fools trouble themselves about that. 'Friend' is not the throne I aspire to, but it is the road that leads to it. So then, let it be 'friend,' while waiting for better. This word is very pleasant to hear when spoken in these siren's accents, and when at the same time the eyes say 'lover!'"

"Will you always love me thus?" Octave asked, whose face beamed with virtuous pledges.

"Always!" sighed Clemence, without lowering eyes under the burning glance which met hers.

"You will be the soul of my soul; the angel of my heaven?"

"Your sister," she said, with a sweet smile, as she caressed her lover's cheek with her hand.

He felt the blood mount to his face at this caress, and turned his eyes

away with a dreamy air.

"I probably am one of the greatest fools that has ever existed since the days of Joseph and Hippolytus," thought he.

He remained silent and apparently indifferent for several moments.

"Of what are you thinking?" asked Madame de Bergenheim, surprised by Octave's silence and rather listless air.

He gave a start of surprise at this question.

"May I die if I tell her!" he thought; "she must think me ridiculous enough as it is."

"Tell me, I wish you to speak out," she continued, in that despotic tone which a woman assumes when sure of her empire.

Instead of replying, as she demanded, he gave her a long, questioning glance, and it would have been impossible at that moment for her to keep a single secret from her lover. Madame de Bergenheim felt the magnetic influence of his penetrating glance so deeply that it seemed to her these sharp eyes were fathoming her very heart. She felt intensely disturbed to be gazed at in that way, and, in order to free herself from this mute questioning, she leaned her head upon Octave's shoulder, as she said softly:

"Do not look at me like that or I shall not love your eyes any more."

Her straw hat, whose ribbons were not tied, slipped and fell, dragging with it the comb which confined her beautiful hair, and it fell in disorder over her shoulders. Gerfaut passed his hand behind the charming head which rested upon his breast, in order to carry this silky, perfumed fleece to his lips. At the same time, he gently pressed the supple form which, as it bent toward him, seemed to ask for this caress.

Clemence made a sudden effort and arose, fastening her hair at the back of her head with an almost shamed haste.

"Will you refuse me one lock of your hair as a souvenir of this hour?" said Octave, stopping her gently as she was about to replace her comb.

"Do you need any souvenir?" she replied, giving him a glance which was neither a reproach nor a refusal.

"The souvenir is in my heart, the hair will never leave my bosom! We live in an unworthy age. I can not boast of wearing your colors in everybody's eyes, and yet I should like to wear a sign of my bondage."

She let her hair fall down her back again, but seemed embarrassed as to how to execute his wish.

"I can not cut my hair with my teeth," she said, with a smile which betrayed a double row of pearls.

Octave took a stiletto from his pocket.

"Why do you always carry this stiletto?" asked the young woman, in a changed voice; "it frightens me to see you armed thus."

"Fear nothing," said Gerfaut, who did not reply to her question, "I will respect the hair which serves you as a crown. I know where I must cut it, and, if my ambition is great, my hand shall be discreet."

Madame de Bergenheim had no confidence in his moderation, and, fearing to leave her beautiful hair to her lover's mercy, she took the stiletto and cut off a little lock which she drew through her fingers and then offered to him, with a loving gesture that doubled the value of the gift. At this moment, hunting-horns resounded in the distance.

"I must leave you now!" exclaimed Clemence, "I must. My dear love, let me go now; say good-by to me."

She leaned toward him and presented her forehead to receive this adieu. It was her lips which met Octave's, but this kiss was rapid and fleeting as a flash of light. Withdrawing from the arms which would yet retain her, she darted out of the grotto, and in a moment had disappeared in one of the shady paths.

For some time, plunged in deep reflection, Gerfaut stood on the same spot; but at last arousing himself from this dreamy languor, he climbed the rock so as to reach the top of the cliff. After taking a few steps he stopped with a frightened look, as if he had espied some venomous reptile in his path. He could see, through the bushes which bordered the crest of the plateau at the top of the ladder cut in the rock, Bergenheim, motionless, and in the attitude of a man who is trying to conceal himself in order that he may watch somebody. The Baron's eyes not being turned in Gerfaut's direction, he could not tell whether he was the object of this espionage, or whether the lay of the land allowed him to see Madame de Bergenheim, who must be under the sycamores by this time. Uncertain as to what he should do, he remained motionless, half crouched down upon the rock, behind the ledge of which, thanks to his position, he could hide from the Baron.

CHAPTER XIX

THE REVELATION

A few moments before the castle clock struck four, a man leaped across the ditch which served as enclosure to the park. Lambernier, for it was he who showed himself so prompt at keeping his promise, directed his steps through the thickets toward the corner of the Corne woods which he had designated to Marillac; but, after walking for some time, he was forced to slacken his steps. The hunting-party were coming in his direction, and Lambernier knew that to continue in the path he had first chosen would take him directly among the hunters; and, in spite of his insolence, he feared the Baron too much to wish to expose himself to the danger of another chastisement. He therefore retraced his steps and took a roundabout way through the thickets, whose paths were all familiar to him; he descended to the banks of the river ready to ascend to the place appointed for the rendezvous as soon as the hunting party had passed.

He had hardly reached the plateau covered with trees, which extended above the rocks, when, as he entered a clearing which had been recently made, he saw two men coming toward him who were walking very fast, and whom to meet in this place caused him a very disagreeable sensation. The first man was Mademoiselle de Corandeuil's coachman, as large a fellow as ever crushed the seats of landau or brougham with his rotundity. He was advancing with hands in the pockets of his green jacket and his broad shoulders thrown back, as if he had taken it upon himself to replace Atlas. His cap, placed in military fashion upon his head, his scowling brows, and his bombastic air, announced that he was upon the point of accomplishing some important deed which greatly interested him. Leonard Rousselet, walking by his side, moved his spider legs with equal activity, carefully holding up the skirts of his long coat as if they were petticoats.

Lambernier, at sight of them, turned to enter the woods again, but he was stopped in his retreat by a threatening shout.

"Stop, you vagabond!" exclaimed the coachman; "halt! If you take a trot, I shall take a gallop."

"What do you want? I have no business with you," replied the workman, in a surly tone.

"But I have business with you," replied the big domestic, placing himself in front of him and balancing himself first on his toes then on his heels, with a motion like the wooden rocking-horses children play with. "Come here, Rousselet; are you wheezy or foundered?"

"I have not as good legs as your horses," replied the old man, who

reached them at last, breathless, and took off his hat to wipe his forehead.

"What does this mean, jumping out upon one from a corner in the woods like two assassins?" asked Lambernier, foreseeing that this beginning might lead to some scene in which he was threatened to be forced to play a not very agreeable role.

"It means," said the coachman: "first, that Rousselet has nothing to do with it; I do not need anybody's help to punish an insignificant fellow like you; second, that you are going to receive your quietus in a trice."

At these words he pushed his cap down over his ears and rolled up his sleeves, in order to give freer action to his large, broad hands.

The three men were standing upon a plot of ground where charcoal had been burned the year before. The ground was black and slippery, but being rather level, it was a very favorable place for a duel with fists or any other weapons. When Lambernier saw the lackey's warlike preparations, he placed his cap and coat upon an old stump and stationed himself in front of his adversary. But, before the hostilities had begun, Rousselet advanced, stretching his long arms out between them, and said, in a voice whose solemnity seemed to be increased by the gravity of the occasion:

"I do not suppose that you both wish to kill each other; only uneducated people conduct themselves in this vulgar manner; you ought to have a friendly explanation, and see if the matter is not susceptible of arrangement. That was the way such things were done when I was in the twenty-fifth demi-brigade."

"The explanation is," said the coachman, in his gruff voice, "that here is a low fellow who takes every opportunity to undervalue me and my horses, and I have sworn to give him a good drubbing the first time I could lay my hands upon him. So, Pere Rousselet, step aside. He will see if I am a pickle; he will find out that the pickle is peppery!"

"If you made use of such a vulgar expression as that," observed Rousselet, turning to Lambernier, "you were at fault, and should beg his pardon as is the custom among educated people."

"It is false!" exclaimed Lambernier; "and besides, everybody calls the Corandeuls that, on account of the color of their livery."

"Did you not say Sunday, at the 'Femme-sans-Tete', and in the presence of Thiedot, that all the servants of the chateau were idlers and good-for-nothings, and that if you met one of them who tried to annoy you, you would level him with your plane?"

"If you used the word 'level,' it was very uncivil," observed Rousselet.

"Thiedot had better keep in his own house," growled the carpenter, clenching his fists.

"It looks well for a tramp like you to insult gentlemen like us," continued the lackey, in an imposing tone. "And did you not say that when I took Mademoiselle to mass I looked like a green toad upon the box, ..thus trying to dishonor my physique and my clothes? Did you not say that?"

"Only a joke about the color of your livery. They call the others measles and lobsters."

"Lobsters are lobsters," replied the coachman, in an imperative tone; "if that vexes them, they can take care of themselves. But I will not allow any one to attack my honor or that of my beasts by calling them screws—and that is what you did, you vagabond! And did you not say that I sent bags of oats to Remiremont to be sold, and that, for a month, my team had steadily been getting thin? Did you ever hear anything so scandalous, Pere Rousselet? to dare to say that I endanger the lives of my horses? Did you not say that, you rascal? And did you not say that Mademoiselle Marianne and I had little private feasts in her room, and that was why I could not eat more at the table? Here is Rousselet, who has been a doctor and knows that I am on a diet on account of my weak stomach." At these words, the servant, carried away by his anger, gave his stomach a blow with his fist.

"Lambertier," said Rousselet, turning up his lips with a look of contempt, "I must admit that, for a man well brought up, you have made most disgusting remarks."

"To say that I eat the horses' oats!" roared the coachman.

"I ought to have said that you drank them," replied Lambertier, with his usual sneer.

"Rousselet, out of the way!" exclaimed the burly lackey at this new insult; the old peasant not moving as quickly as he desired, he seized him by the arm and sent him whirling ten steps away.

At this moment, a new person completed the scene, joining in it, if not as actor at least as interested spectator. If the two champions had suspected his presence they would have probably postponed their fight until a more opportune moment, for this spectator was no other than the Baron himself. As he saw from a distance the trio gesticulating in a very animated manner, he judged that a disorderly scene was in preparation, and as he had wished for a long time to put an end to the quarrelsome ways of the chateau servants, he was not sorry to catch them in the very act, so as to make an example of them. At first, he stooped and concealed himself in the thickets, ready to appear for the denouement.

As Lambernier saw the giant's fist coming down upon him, he darted to one side and the blow only struck the air, making the coachman stumble from the force of his impetuosity. Lambernier profited by this position to gather all his strength, and threw himself upon his adversary, whom he seized by the flank and gave such a severe blow as to bring him down upon his knees. He then gave him a dozen more blows upon the head, and succeeded in overthrowing him completely.

If the coachman had not had a cranium as hard as iron, he probably could not have received such a storm of fisticuffs without giving up the ghost. Fortunately for him, he had one of those excellent Breton heads that break the sticks which beat them. Save for a certain giddiness, he came out of the scramble safe and sound. Far from losing his presence of mind by the disadvantageous position in which he found himself, he supported himself upon the ground with his left hand, and, passing his other arm behind him, he wound it around the workman's legs, who thus found himself reaped down, so to speak, and a moment later was lying on his back in front of his adversary. The latter, holding him fast with his strong hands, placed a knee, as large as a plate, upon his chest and then pulled off the cap that his enemy had pushed down over his eyes, and proceeded to administer full justice to him.

"Ah! you thought you'd attack me treacherously, did you?" said he, with a derisive chuckle as if to slacken the speed of his horses. "You know short reckonings make good friends. Oh! what a fine thrashing you are going to receive, my friend! Take care! if you try to bite my hand, I'll choke you with my two fingers, do you hear! Now, then, take this for the green toad; this, for my horses' sake; this, for Mademoiselle Marianne!"

He followed each "this" with a heavy blow from his fist. At the third blow the blood poured out of the mouth of the carpenter, who writhed under the pressure of his adversary's knee like a buffalo stifled by a boa-constrictor; he succeeded at last in freeing one hand, which he thrust into his trousers' pocket.

"Ah! you rascal! I am killed!" howled the coachman, giving a bound backward. Lambernier, profiting by his freedom, jumped upon his feet, and, without troubling himself as to his adversary, who had fallen on his knees and was pressing his hand to his left thigh; he picked up his cap and vest and started off through the clearing. Rousselet, who until then had prudently kept aside, tried to stop the workman, at a cry from his companion, but the scoundrel brandished his iron compass before his eyes with such an ugly look that the peasant promptly left the way open for him.

At this tragic and unexpected denouement, Bergenheim, who was getting ready to make his appearance from behind the trees and to interpose his authority, started in full pursuit of the would-be murderer. From the

direction he took, he judged that he would try to reach the river by passing over the rock. He walked in this direction, with his gun over his shoulder, until he reached the foot of the steps which descended into the grotto. Christian crouched behind some bushes to wait for Lambernier, who must pass this way, and it was at this moment that Gerfaut, who was forty feet below him, saw him without suspecting the reason for his attitude.

Bergenheim soon found out that he had calculated correctly when he heard a sound like that made by a wild boar when he rushes through the thickets and breaks the small branches in his path, as if they were no more than blades of grass. Soon Lambernier appeared with a haggard, wild look and a face bleeding from the blows he had received. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and to wipe off his compass with a handful of grass; he then staunched the blood streaming from his nose and mouth, and after putting on his coat started rapidly in the direction of the river.

"Halt!" exclaimed the Baron, suddenly, rising before him and barring his passage.

The workman jumped back in terror; then he drew out his compass a second time and made a movement as if to throw himself upon this new adversary, out of sheer desperation. Christian, at this threatening pantomime, raised his gun to his cheek with as much coolness and precision as he would have shown at firing into a body of soldiers.

"Down with your weapon!" he exclaimed, in his commanding voice, "or I will shoot you down like a rabbit."

The carpenter uttered a hoarse cry as he saw the muzzle of the gun within an inch of his head, ready to blow his brains out. Feeling assured that there was no escape for him, he closed his compass and threw it with an angry gesture at the Baron's feet.

"Now," said the latter, "you will walk straight ahead of me as far as the chateau, and if you turn one step to the right or left, I will send the contents of my gun into you. So right about march!"

As he said these words, he stooped, without losing sight of the workman, and picked up the compass, which he put in his pocket.

"Monsieur le Baron, it was the coachman who attacked me first; I had to defend myself," stammered Lambernier.

"All right, we will see about that later. March on!"

"You will deliver me up to the police—I am a ruined man!"

"That will make one rascal the less," exclaimed Christian, repelling with disgust the workman, who had thrown himself on his knees before him.

"I have three children, Monsieur, three children," he repeated, in a supplicating tone.

"Will you march!" replied Bergenheim imperiously, as he made a gesture with his gun as if to shoot him.

Lambertier arose suddenly, and the expression of terror upon his countenance gave place to one of resolution mingled with hatred and scorn.

"Very well," he exclaimed, "let us go on! but remember what I tell you; if you have me arrested, you will be the first to repent of it, Baron though you are. If I appear before a judge, I will tell something that you would pay a good price for."

Bergenheim looked fixedly at Lambertier.

"What do you mean by such insolence?" said he.

"I will tell you what I mean, if you will promise to let me go; if you give me into the hands of the police, I repeat it, you will repent not having listened to me to-day."

"This is some idle yarn, made to gain time; no matter, speak; I will listen."

The workman darted a defiant glance at Christian.

"Give me your word of honor to let me go afterward."

"If I do not do so, are you not at liberty to repeat your story?" replied the Baron, who, in spite of his curiosity, would not give his word to a scoundrel whose only aim probably was to escape justice.

This observation impressed Lambertier, who, after a moment's reflection, assumed a strange attitude of cool assurance, considering the position in which he found himself. Not a sound was to be heard; even the barking of the dogs in the distance had ceased. The deepest silence surrounded them; even Gerfaut, in the place where he was concealed, could no longer see them, now that Bergenheim had left the edge of the cliff; from time to time their voices reached him, but he could not distinguish the meaning of their words.

Leaning with one hand upon his gun, Christian waited for the carpenter to begin his story, gazing at him with his clear, piercing eyes. Lambertier bore this glance without flinching, returning it in his insolent way.

"You know, Monsieur, that when the alterations were made in Madame's apartment, I had charge of the carving for her chamber. When I took away

the old woodwork, I saw that the wall between the windows was constructed out of square, and I asked Madame if she wished that the panel should be fastened like the other or if she preferred it to open so that it would make a closet. She said to have it open by means of a secret spring. So I made the panel with concealed hinges and a little button hidden in the lower part of the woodwork; it only needs to be pressed, after turning it to the right, and the woodwork will open like a door."

Christian had now become extremely attentive.

"Monsieur will remember that he was in Nancy at the time, and that Madame's chamber was completed during his absence. As I was the only one who worked in this room, the other workmen not being capable of carving the wood as Madame wished, I was the only person who knew that the panel was not nailed down the length of the wall."

"Well?" asked the Baron, impatiently.

"Well," Lambernier replied, in a careless tone, "if, on account of the blow which I gave the coachman, it is necessary for me to appear in court, I shall be obliged to tell, in order to revenge myself, what I saw in that closet not more than a month ago."

"Finish your story," exclaimed Bergenheim, as he clenched the handle of his gun.

"Mademoiselle Justine took me into this room in order to hang some curtains; as I needed some nails, she went out to get them. While I was examining the woodwork, which I had not seen since it had been put in place, I saw that the oak had warped in one place because it was not dry enough when it was used. I wished to see if the same thing had happened between the windows, and if the panel could open. I pressed the spring, and when the door opened I saw a small package of letters upon the little shelf; it seemed very singular to me that Madame should choose this place to keep her letters, and the thought came to me that she wished to conceal them from Monsieur."

Bergenheim gave the workman a withering glance, and made a sign for him to continue.

"They were already talking about discharging me from the chateau's employ; I do not know how it happened, but the thought entered my head that perhaps one of these letters would be of use to me, and I took the first one in the package; I had only time to close the panel when Mademoiselle Justine returned."

"Very well! what is there in common between these letters and the criminal court that awaits you?" asked Christian, in an altered voice, although he tried to appear indifferent.

"Oh! nothing at all," replied the carpenter, with an air of indifference; "but I thought that you would not like people to know that Madame had a lover."

Bergenheim shivered as if he were taken with a chill, and his gun dropped from his hand to the ground.

As quick as thought Lambernier stooped over to seize the gun, but he did not have time to carry out his intention, for he was seized by the throat and half choked by an iron hand.

"That letter! that letter!" said Christian to him, in a low, trembling voice, and he put his face down close to the carpenter's, as if he feared that a breath of wind might carry away his words and repeat them.

"Let me alone first, I can not breathe—" stammered the workman, whose face, was becoming purple and his eyes starting out of his head, as if his adversary's fingers had been a rope.

The latter granted the prayer by loosening his hold of the carpenter's neck and seizing him by his vest in such a way as to take away all chance of escape while leaving him free to speak.

"This letter!" he repeated.

Frightened by the shaking he had just received, and not in a condition to reflect with his usual prudence, Lambernier mechanically obeyed this order; he hunted in his pockets for some time, and at last took a carefully folded paper from his vest-pocket, saying with a stunned air:

"Here it is. It is worth ten louis."

Christian seized the paper and opened it with his teeth, for he could not use his hands without releasing his prisoner. It was, like all notes of this kind, without address, seal, or signature. It did not differ from most of its kind save in the natural beauty of its style and its simple eloquence. Ardent protestations, sweet and loving complaints, those precious words that one bestows only upon the woman he loves and which betray a love that has yet much to desire but as much to hope. The handwriting was entirely unknown to Bergenheim, but Clemence's name, which was repeated several times, did not permit him to doubt for a moment that this note was written to his wife. When he had finished reading, he put it in his pocket with apparent serenity, and then looked at Lambernier, who, during this time, had remained motionless under the hand that detained him.

"You are mistaken, Lambernier," said he to him; "it is one of my letters before my marriage." And he tried to force himself to smile; but the muscles of his lips refused to act this falsehood, and drops of cold perspiration stood upon his forehead and at the roots of his hair.

The carpenter had watched the change in the Baron's countenance as he read the letter. He was persuaded that he could turn the capital importance of his revelations into profit for himself; he believed that the time had come when he might gain advantage by showing that he understood perfectly well the value of the secret he had just imparted. So he replied with a glance of intelligence:

"Monsieur's handwriting must have changed greatly, then; I have some of his orders which do not resemble this any more than a glass of water does a glass of wine."

Christian tried to find a response but failed. His eyebrows contracted in a manner that betokened a coming storm, but Lambernier was not disturbed by this symptom; he continued in a more and more assured voice:

"When I said that this letter was worth ten louis, I meant that it was worth that much to a mere stranger, and I am very sure I should not have to go very far to find one; but Monsieur le Baron is too sensible not to know the value of this secret. I do not wish to set a price upon it, but since I am obliged to go away on account of this coachman, and have no money—"

He did not have time to finish; Bergenheim seized him in the middle of the body and made him describe a horizontal half-circle without touching the ground, then threw him upon his knees on the edge of the path which descended almost perpendicularly alongside the rocks. Lambernier suddenly saw his haggard face reflected in the river fifty feet below. At this sight, and feeling a powerful knee between his shoulders which bent him over the abyss, as if to make him appreciate its dangers, the workman uttered a terrified cry; his hands clutched wildly at the tufts of grass and roots of plants which grew here and there on the sides of the rocks, and he struggled with all his might to throw himself back upon the ground. But it was in vain for him to struggle against the superior strength of his adversary, and his attempts only aggravated the danger of his position. After two or three powerless attempts, he found himself lying upon his stomach with half his body hanging over the precipice, having nothing to prevent him from falling over but Bergenheim's hand, which held him by the collar and at the same time hindered him from rising.

"Have you ever said one word about this?" asked the Baron, as he took hold of the trunk of a tree to steady himself upon this dangerous ground that he had chosen as the field of discussion.

"To nobody!—ah!—how my head swims!" replied the carpenter, closing his eyes in terror, for the blood rushing to his brain made him dizzy, and it seemed to him that the river was slowly reaching him.

"You see that if I make one gesture, you are a dead man," replied the

Baron, leaning upon him harder yet.

"Give me up to the police; I will say nothing about the letters; as sure as there is a God, I will say nothing. But do not let me fall—hold me tight—do not let go of me—I am slipping—oh! holy mother of God!"

Christian taking hold of the tree near him, leaned over and raised Lambernier up, for he really was incapable of doing so himself; fright and the sight of the water had given him vertigo. When he was upon his legs again, he reeled like a drunken man and his feet nearly gave way beneath him. The Baron looked at him a moment in silence, but at last he said:

"Go away, leave the country at once; you have time to fly before there will be any pursuit. But remember that if I ever hear one word of what has passed between us from your lips, I shall know how to find you and you will die by my hand."

"I swear by the Holy Virgin and by all the saints—" stammered Lambernier, who had suddenly become a very fervent Catholic.

Christian pointed with his finger to the stone steps beneath them.

"There is your road; pass over the rock, through the woods, and reach Alsace. If you conduct yourself well, I will assure your living. But remember; one single indiscreet word, and you are a dead man."

At these words he pushed him into the path with one of those quick movements which very powerful men can not always calculate the effect of. Lambernier, whose strength was almost exhausted by the struggles he had undergone, had not vigor enough left to stand, and he lost his balance at this violent as well as unexpected push. He stumbled over the first step, reeled as he tried to regain his footing, and fell head first down the almost vertical declivity. A ledge of the cliff, against which he first struck, threw him upon the loose rocks. He slowly glided downward, uttering lamentable cries; he clutched, for a moment, a little bush which had grown in a crevice of the rocks but he did not have strength enough to hold on to it, his arm having been broken in three places by his fall. He let go of it suddenly, and dropped farther and farther down uttering a last terrible shriek of despair; he rolled over twice again—and then fell into the torrent below, that swallowed him up like a mass already deprived of life.