

# SERGE PANINE - V3

GEORGES OHNET\*

BOOK 3.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE FIRST BREAK

The first two months of this union were truly enchanting. Serge and Micheline never left each other. After an absence of eight days they had returned to Paris with Madame Desvarenes, and the hitherto dull mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique was filled with joyful bustle. The splendid stables, formerly too large for the mistress's three horses, were now insufficient for the service of the Prince. There were eight splendid carriage-horses, a pair of charming ponies—bought especially for Micheline's use, but which the young wife had not been able to make up her mind to drive herself—four saddle-horses, upon which every morning about eight o'clock, when the freshness of night had perfumed the Bois de Boulogne, the young people took their ride round the lake.

A bright sun made the sheet of water sparkle between its borders of dark fir-trees; the flesh air played in Micheline's veil, and the tawny leather of the saddles creaked. Those were happy days for Micheline, who was delighted at having Serge near her, attentive to her every want, and controlling his thoroughbred English horse to her gentle pace. Every now and then his mount would wheel about and rear in revolt, she following him with fond looks, proud of the elegant cavalier who could subdue without apparent effort, by the mere pressure of his thighs, that impetuous steed.

Then she would give her horse a touch with the whip, and off she would go at a gallop, feeling happy with the wind blowing in her face, and he whom she loved by her side to smile on and encourage her. Then they would scamper along; the dog with his thin body almost touching the ground, racing and frightening the rabbits, which shot across the road swift as bullets. Out of breath by the violent ride, Micheline would stop, and pat the neck of her lovely chestnut horse. Slowly the young people would return to the Rue Saint-Dominique, and, on arriving in the courtyard,

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there was such a pawing of feet as brought the clerks to the windows, hiding behind the curtains. Tired with healthy exercise, Micheline would go smiling to the office where her mother was hard at work, and say:

”Here we are, mamma!”

The mistress would rise and kiss her daughter beaming with freshness. Then they would go up to breakfast.

Madame Desvarenes’s doubts were lulled to rest. She saw her daughter happy. Her son-in-law was in every respect cordial and charming toward her. Cayrol and his wife had scarcely been in Paris since their marriage. The banker had joined Herzog in his great scheme of the ”Credit,” and was travelling all over Europe establishing offices and securing openings. Jeanne accompanied him. They were then in Greece. The young wife’s letters to her adopted mother breathed calmness and satisfaction. She highly praised her husband’s kindness to her, and said it was unequalled.

No allusion was made to that evening of their marriage, when, escaping from Cayrol’s wrath, she had thrown herself in Madame Desvarenes’s arms, and had allowed her secret to be found out. The mistress might well think then that the thought which at times still troubled her mind was a remembrance of a bad dream.

What contributed especially to make her feel secure was Jeanne’s absence. If the young woman had been near Serge, Madame Desvarenes might have trembled. But Micheline’s beautiful rival was far away, and Serge seemed very much in love with his wife.

Everything was for the best. The formidable projects which Madame Desvarenes had formed in the heat of her passion had not been earned out. Serge had as yet not given Madame Desvarenes cause for real displeasure. Certainly he was spending money foolishly, but then his wife was so rich!

He had put his household on an extraordinary footing. Everything that most refined luxury had invented he had introduced as a matter of course, and for everyday use. He entertained magnificently several times a week. And Madame Desvarenes, from her apartments, for she would never appear at these grand receptions, heard the noise of these doings. This woman, modest and simple in her ideas, whose luxury had always been artistic, wondered that they could spend so much on frivolous entertainments. But Micheline was queen of these sumptuous ceremonies. She came in full dress to be admired by her mother, before going down to receive her guests, and the mistress had not courage to offer any remonstrances as to expense when she saw her daughter so brilliant and contented.

They played cards very much. The great colony of foreigners who came every week to Panine’s receptions brought with them their immoderate

passion for cards, and he was only too willing to give way to it. These gentlemen, among them all, almost without taking off their white kid gloves, would win or lose between forty and fifty thousand francs at bouillotte, just to give them an appetite before going to the club to finish the night at baccarat.

Meanwhile the ladies, with their graceful toilettes displayed on the low soft chairs, talked of dress behind their fans, or listened to the songs of a professional singer, while young men whispered soft nothings in their ears.

It was rumored that the Prince lost heavily. It was not to be wondered at; he was so happy in love! Madame Desvarenes, who used every means of gaining information on the subject, even to the gossip of the servants, heard that the sums were enormous. No doubt they were exaggerated, but the fact remained the same. The Prince was losing.

Madame Desvarenes could not resist the inclination of finding out whether Micheline knew what was going on, and one morning when the young wife came down to see her mother, dressed in a lovely pink gown, the mistress, while teasing her daughter, said, carelessly:

"It seems your husband lost heavily last night."

Micheline looked astonished at Madame Desvarenes, and in a quiet voice replied:

"A good host may not win from his guests; it would look as if he invited them to rob them. Losses at cards are included in the costs of a reception."

Madame Desvarenes thought that her daughter had become a very grand lady, and had soon acquired expanded ideas. But she dared not say anything more. She dreaded a quarrel with her daughter, and would have sacrificed everything to retain her cajoling ways.

She threw herself into her work with renewed vigor.

"If the Prince spends large sums," she said to herself, "I will earn larger ones. There can be no hole dug deep enough by him that I shall not be able, to fill up."

And she made the money come in at the door so that her son-in-law might throw it out of the window.

One fine day these great people who visited at the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique hastened away to the country. September had arrived, bringing with it the shooting season. The Prince and Micheline settled themselves at Cernay, not as in the first days of their marriage as lovers who sought quietude, but as people sure of their happiness, who

wished to make a great show. They took all the carriages with them, and there was nothing but bustle and movement. The four keepers, dressed in the Prince's livery, came daily for orders as to shooting arrangements. And every week shoals of visitors arrived, brought from the station in large breaks drawn by four horses.

The princely dwelling was in its full splendor. There was a continual going and coming of fashionable worldlings. From top to bottom of the castle was a constant rustling of silk dresses; groups of pretty women, coming downstairs with peals of merry laughter and singing snatches from the last opera. In the spacious hall they played billiards and other games, while one of the gentlemen performed on the large organ. There was a strange mixture of freedom and strictness. The smoke of Russian cigarettes mingled with the scent of opoponax. An elegant confusion which ended about six o'clock in a general flight, when the sportsmen came home, and the guests went to their rooms. An hour afterward all these people met in the large drawing-room; the ladies in low-bodied evening dresses; the gentlemen in dress-coats and white satin waistcoats, with a sprig of mignonette and a white rose in their buttonholes. After dinner, they danced in the drawing-rooms, where a mad waltz would even restore energy to the gentlemen tired out by six hours spent in the field.

Madame Desvarenes did not join in that wild existence. She had remained in Paris, attentive to business. On Saturdays she came down by the five o'clock train and regularly returned on the Monday morning. Her presence checked their wild gayety a little. Her black dress was like a blot among the brocades and satins. Her severe gravity, that of a woman who pays and sees the money going too fast, was like a reproach, silent but explicit, to that gay and thoughtless throng of idlers, solely taken up by their pleasure.

The servants made fun of her. One day the Prince's valet, who thought himself a clever fellow, said before all the other servants that Mother Damper had arrived. Of course they all roared with laughter and exclaimed:

"Bother the old woman! Why does she come and worry us? She had far better stop in the office and earn money; that's all she's good for!"

The disdain which the servants learned from their master grew rapidly. So much so that one Monday morning, toward nine o'clock, Madame Desvarenes came down to the courtyard, expecting to find the carriage which generally took her to the station. It was the second coachman's duty to drive her, and she did not see him. Thinking that he was a little late, she walked to the stable-yard. There, instead of the victoria which usually took her, she saw a large mail-coach to which two grooms were harnessing the Prince's four bays. The head coachman, an Englishman, dressed like a gentleman, with a stand-up collar, and a rose in his buttonhole, stood watching the operations with an air of

importance.

Madame Desvarences went straight to him. He had seen her coming, out of the corner of his eye, without disturbing himself.

"How is it that the carriage is not ready to take me to the station?" asked the mistress.

"I don't know, Madame," answered this personage, condescendingly, without taking his hat off.

"But where is the coachman who generally drives me?"

"I don't know. If Madame would like to see in the stables—"

And with a careless gesture, the Englishman pointed out to Madame Desvarences the magnificent buildings at the end of the courtyard.

The blood rose to the mistress's cheeks; she gave the coachman such a look that he moved away a little. Then glancing at her watch, she said, coldly:

"I have only a quarter of an hour before the train leaves, but here are horses that ought to go well. Jump on the box, my man, you shall drive me."

The Englishman shook his head.

"Those horses are not for service; they are only for pleasure," he answered. "I drive the Prince. I don't mind driving the Princess, but I am not here to drive you, Madame."

And with an insolent gesture, setting his hat firmly on his head, he turned his back upon the mistress. At the same moment, a sharp stroke from a light cane made his hat roll on the pavement. And as the Englishman turned round, red with rage, he found himself face to face with the Prince, whose approach neither Madame Desvarences nor he had heard.

Serge, in an elegant morning suit, was going round his stables when he had been attracted by this discussion. The Englishman, uneasy, sought to frame an excuse.

"Hold your tongue!" exclaimed the Prince, sharply, "and go and wait my orders."

And turning toward the mistress:

"Since this man refuses to drive you, I shall have the pleasure of taking you to the station myself," he said, with a charming smile.

And as Madame Desvarences remonstrated,

"Oh! I can drive four-in-hand," he added. "For once in my life that talent will have been of some use to me. Pray jump in."

And opening the door of the mail-coach he handed her into the vast carriage. Then, climbing with one bound to the box, he gathered the reins and, cigar in mouth, with all the coolness of an old coachman, he started the horses in the presence of all the grooms, and made a perfect semicircle on the gravel of the courtyard.

The incident was repeated favorably for Serge. It was agreed that he had behaved like a true nobleman. Micheline was proud of it, and saw in this act of deference to her mother a proof of his love for her. As to the mistress, she understood the advantage this clever manoeuvre gave to the Prince. At the same time she felt the great distance which henceforth separated her from the world in which her daughter lived.

The insolence of that servant was a revelation to her. They despised her. The Prince's coachman would not condescend to drive a plebeian like her. She paid the wages of these servants to no purpose. Her plebeian origin and business habits were a vice. They submitted to her; they did not respect her.

Although her son-in-law and daughter were perfect toward her in their behavior, she became gloomy and dull, and but seldom went now to Cernay. She felt in the way, and uncomfortable. The smiling and superficial politeness of the visitors irritated her nerves. These people were too well bred to be rude toward Panine's mother-in-law, but she felt that their politeness was forced. Under their affected nicety she detected irony. She began to hate them all.

Serge, sovereign lord of Cernay, was really happy. Every moment he experienced new pleasure in gratifying his taste for luxury. His love for horses grew more and more. He gave orders to have a model stud-house erected in the park amid the splendid meadows watered by the Oise; and bought stallions and breeding mares from celebrated English breeders. He contemplated starting a racing stable.

One day when Madame Desvarences arrived at Cernay, she was surprised to see the greensward bordering the woods marked out with white stakes. She asked inquiringly what these stakes meant? Micheline answered in an easy tone:

"Ah! you saw them? That is the track for training. We made Mademoiselle de Cernay gallop there to-day. She's a level-going filly with which Serge hopes to win the next Poule des Produits."

The mistress was amazed. A child who had been brought up so simply, in spite of her large fortune, a little commoner, speaking of level-going fillies and the Poule des Produits! What a change had come over her and what incredible influence this frivolous, vain Panine had over that young and right-minded girl! And that in a few months! What would it be later? He would succeed in imparting to her his tastes and would mould her to his whims, and the young modest girl whom he had received from the mother would become a horsey and fast woman.

Was it possible that Micheline could be happy in that hollow and empty life? The love of her husband satisfied her. His love was all she asked for, all else was indifferent to her. Thus of her mother, the impassioned toiler, was born the passionate lover! All the fervency which the mother had given to business, Micheline had given to love.

Moreover, Serge behaved irreproachably. One must do him that justice. Not even an appearance accused him. He was faithful, unlikely as that may seem in a man of his kind; he never left his wife. He had hardly ever gone out without her; they were a couple of turtle-doves. They were laughed at.

"The Princess has tied a string round Serge's foot," was said by some of Serge's former woman friends!

It was something to be sure of her daughter's happiness. That happiness was dearly bought; but as the proverb says:

"Money troubles are not mortal!"

And, besides, it was evident that the Prince did not keep account of his money; his hand was always open. And never did a great lord do more honor to his fortune. Panine, in marrying Micheline, had found the mistress's cash-box at his disposal.

This prodigious cash-box had seemed to him inexhaustible, and he had drawn on it like a Prince in the Arabian Nights on the treasure of the genii.

Perhaps it would suffice to let him see that he was spending the capital as well as the income to make him alter his line of conduct. At all events, the moment was not yet opportune, and, besides, the amount was not yet large enough. Cry out about some hundred thousand francs! Madame Desvarenes would be thought a miser and would be covered with shame. She must wait.

And, shut up in her office in the Rue Saint-Dominique with Marechal, who acted as her confidant, she worked with heart and soul full of passion and anger, making money. It was fine to witness the duel between these two beings: the one useful, the other useless; one sacrificing everything

to work, the other everything to pleasure.

Toward the end of October, the weather at Cernay became unsettled, and Micheline complained of the cold. Country life so pleased Serge that he turned a deaf ear to her complaints. But lost in that large house, the autumn winds rustling through the trees, whose leaves were tinted with yellow, Micheline became sad, and the Prince understood that it was time to go back to Paris.

The town seemed deserted to Serge. Still, returning to his splendid apartments was a great satisfaction and pleasure to him. Everything appeared new. He reviewed the hangings, the expensive furniture, the paintings and rare objects. He was charmed. It was really of wonderful beauty, and the cage seemed worthy of the bird. For several evenings he remained quietly at home with Micheline, in the little silver-gray drawing-room that was his favorite room. He looked through albums, too, while his wife played at her piano quietly or sang.

They retired early and came down late. Then he had become a gourmand. He spent hours in arranging menus and inventing unknown dishes about which he consulted his chef, a cook of note.

He rode in the Bois in the course of the day, but did not meet any one there; for of every two carriages one was a hackney coach with a worn-out sleepy horse, his head hanging between his knees, going the round of the lake. He ceased going to the Bois, and went out on foot in the Champs-Elysees. He crossed the Pont de la Concorde, and walked up and down the avenues near the Cirque.

He was wearied. Life had never appeared so monotonous to him. Formerly he had at least the preoccupations of the future. He asked himself how he could alter the sad condition in which he vegetated! Shut up in this happy existence, without a care or a cross, he grew weary like a prisoner in his cell. He longed for the unforeseen; his wife irritated him, she was of too equable a temperament. She always met him with the same smile on her lips. And then happiness agreed with her too well; she was growing stout.

One day, on the Boulevard des Italiens, Serge met an old friend, the Baron de Prefont, a hardened 'roue'. He had not seen him since his marriage. It was a pleasure to him. They had a thousand things to say to each other. And walking along, they came to the Rue Royale.

"Come to the club," said Prefont, taking Serge by the arm.

The Prince, having nothing else to do, allowed himself to be led away, and went. He felt a strange pleasure in those large rooms of the club, the Grand Cercle, with their glaring furniture. The common easy-chairs, covered with dark leather, seemed delightful. He did not notice the well-worn carpets burned here and there by the hot cigar-ash; the strong

smell of tobacco, impregnated in the curtains, did not make him feel qualmish. He was away from home, and was satisfied with anything for a change. He had been domesticated long enough.

One morning, taking up the newspaper, a name caught Madame Desvarennes's eye—that of the Prince. She read:

"The golden book of the Grand Cercle has just had another illustrious name inscribed in it. The Prince Panine was admitted yesterday, proposed by the Baron de Prefont and the Duc de Bligny."

These few lines made Madame Desvarennes's blood boil. Her ears tingled as if all the bells of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont had been rung together. In a rapid vision, she saw misfortune coming. Her son-in-law, that born gambler, at the Grand Cercle! No more smiles for Micheline; henceforth she had a terrible rival—the devouring love of play.

Then Madame Desvarennes reflected. The husband's deserting his fireside would be salvation for herself. The door by which he went out, would serve as an entrance for her. The plan which she had conceived at Cernay that terrible night of the marriage when Jeanne had confided in her, remained for her to execute. By opening her purse widely to the Prince, she would help him in his vice. And she would infallibly succeed in separating Serge and Micheline.

But the mistress checked herself. Lend her hands to the destruction of her son-in-law in a fit of fierce maternal egoism? Was it not unworthy of her? How many tears would the Prince's errors cost her whom she wished to regain at all price? And then would she always be there to compensate by her devoted affection the bitterly regretted estrangement from the husband? She would, in dying, leave the household disunited.

She was horrified at what she had for an instant dreamed of doing. And instead of helping the Prince on to destruction, she determined to do all in her power to keep him in the path of honor. That resolution formed, Madame Desvarennes was satisfied. She felt superior to Serge, and to a mind like hers the thought was strengthening.

The admission to the Grand Cercle gave Serge a powerful element of interest in life: He had to manoeuvre to obtain his liberty. His first evenings spent from home troubled Micheline deeply. The young wife was jealous when she saw her husband going out. She feared a rival, and trembled for her love. Serge's mysterious conduct caused her intolerable torture. She dared not say anything to her mother, and remained perfectly quiet on the subject before her husband. She sought discreetly, listened to the least word that might throw any light on the matter.

One day she found an ivory counter, bearing the stamp of the Grand Cercle, in her husband's dressing-room. It was in the Rue Royale then

that her husband spent his evenings. This discovery was a great relief to her. It was not very wrong to go there, and if the Prince did go and smoke a few cigars and have a game at bouillotte, it was not a very great crime. The return of his usual friends to Paris and the resumption of their receptions would bring him home again.

Serge now left Micheline about ten o'clock in the evening regularly and arrived at the club about eleven. High play did not commence until after midnight. Then he seated himself at the gaming-table with all the ardor of a professional gambler. His face changed its expression. When winning, it was animated with an expression of awful joy; when losing, he looked as hard as a stone, his features contracted, and his eyes were full of gloomy fire. He bit his mustache convulsively. Moreover, always silent, winning or losing with superb indifference.

He lost. His bad luck had followed him. At the club his losses were no longer limited. There was always some one willing to take a hand, and until dawn he played, wasting his life and energies to satisfy his insane love of gambling.

One morning, Marechal entered Madame Desvarenes's private office, holding a little square piece of paper. Without speaking a word, he placed it on the desk. The mistress took it, read what was written upon it in shaky handwriting, and suddenly becoming purple, rose. The paper bore these simple words:

"Received from Monsieur Salignon the sum of one hundred thousand francs. Serge Panine."

"Who brought this paper?" asked Madame Desvarenes, crushing it between her fingers.

"The waiter who attends the card-room at the club."

"The waiter?" cried Madame Desvarenes, astonished.

"Oh, he is a sort of banker," said Marechal. "These gentlemen apply to him when they run short of money. The Prince must have found himself in that predicament. Still he has just received the rents for the property in the Rue de Rivoli."

"The rents!" grumbled Madame Desvarenes, with an energetic movement. "The rents! A drop of water in a river! You don't know that he is a man to lose the hundred thousand francs which they claim, in one night."

The mistress paced up and down the room. She suddenly came to a standstill. "If I don't stop him, the rogue will sell the feather-bed from under my daughter! But he shall have a little of my mind! He has provoked me long enough. Pay it! I'll take my money's worth out of him."

And in a second, Madame Desvarences was in the Prince's room.

Serge, after a delicate breakfast, was smoking and dozing on the smoking-room sofa. The night had been a heavy one for him. He had won two hundred and fifty thousand francs from Ibrahim Bey, then he had lost all, besides five thousand louis advanced by the obliging Salignon. He had told the waiter to come to the Rue Saint-Dominique, and by mistake the man had gone to the office.

The sudden opening of the smoking-room door roused Serge. He unclosed his eyes and looked very much astonished at seeing Madame Desvarences appear. Pale, frowning, and holding the accusing paper in her hand, she angrily inquired:

"Do you recognize that?" and placed the receipt which he had signed, before him, as he slowly rose.

Serge seized it quickly, and then looking coldly at his mother-in-law, said:

"How did this paper come into your hands?"

"It has just been brought to my cashier. A hundred thousand francs! Faith! You are going ahead! Do you know how many bushels of corn must be ground to earn that?"

"I beg your pardon, Madame," said the Prince, interrupting Madame Desvarences. "I don't suppose you came here to give me a lesson in commercial statistics. This paper was presented to your cashier by mistake. I was expecting it, and here is the money ready to pay it. As you have been good enough to do so, pray refund yourself."

And taking a bundle of bank-notes from a cabinet, the Prince handed them to the astonished mistress.

"But," she sought to say, very much put out by this unexpected answer, "where did you get this money from? You must have inconvenienced yourself."

"I beg your pardon," said the Prince, quietly, "that only concerns myself. Be good enough to see whether the amount is there," added he with a smile. "I reckon so badly that it is possible I may have made a mistake to your disadvantage."

Madame Desvarences pushed away the hand which presented the bank-notes, and shook her head gravely:

"Keep this money," she said; "unfortunately you will need it. You have entered on a very dangerous path, which grieves me very much. I would

willingly give ten times the amount, at once, to be sure that you would never touch another card."

"Madame!" said the Prince with impatience.

"Oh! I know what I am risking by speaking thus. It weighs so heavily on my heart. I must give vent to it or I shall choke. You are spending money like a man who does not know what it is to earn it. And if you continue—"

Madame Desvarences raised her eyes and looked at the Prince. She saw him so pale with suppressed rage that she dared not say another word. She read deadly hatred in the young man's look. Frightened at what she had just been saying, she stepped back, and went quickly toward the door.

"Take this money, Madame," said Serge, in a trembling voice. "Take it, or all is over between us forever."

And, seizing the notes, he put them by force in Madame Desvarences's hands. Then tearing up with rage the paper that had been the cause of this painful scene, he threw the pieces in the fireplace.

Deeply affected, Madame Desvarences descended the stairs which she had a few minutes before gone up with so much resolution. She had a presentiment that an irreparable rupture had just taken place between herself and her son-in-law. She had ruffled Panine's pride. She felt that he would never forgive her. She went to her room sad and thoughtful. Life was becoming gloomy for this poor woman. Her confidence in herself had disappeared. She hesitated now, and was irresolute when she had to take a decision. She no longer went straight to the point by the shortest road. Her sonorous voice was softened. She was no longer the same willing energetic woman who feared no obstacles. She had known defeat.

The attitude of her daughter had changed toward her. It seemed as if Micheline wished to absolve herself of all complicity with Madame Desvarences. She kept away to prove to her husband that if her mother had displeased him in any way, she had nothing to do with it. This behavior grieved her mother, who felt that Serge was working secretly to turn Micheline against her. And the mad passion of the young wife for him whom she recognized as her master did not allow the mother to doubt which side she would take if ever she had to choose between husband and mother.

One day Micheline came down to see her mother. It was more than a month since she had visited her. In a moment Madame Desvarences saw that she had something of an embarrassing nature to speak of. To begin with she was more affectionate than usual, seeming to wish with the honey of her kisses to sweeten the bitter cross which the mistress was doomed to bear. Then she hesitated. She fidgeted about the room humming. At last she

said that the doctor had come at the request of Serge, who was most anxious about his wife's health. And that excellent Doctor Rigaud, who had known her from a child, had found her suffering from great weakness. He had ordered change of air.

At these words Madame Desvarences raised her head and gave her daughter a terrible look:

"Come, no nonsense! Speak the truth! He is taking you away!"

"But, mamma," said Micheline, disconcerted at this interruption, "I assure you, you are mistaken. Anxiety for my health alone guides my husband."

"Your husband!" broke forth Madame Desvarences. "Your husband! Ah, there; go away! Because if you stop here, I shall not be able to control myself, and shall say things about him that you will not forgive in a hurry! As you are ill, you are right to have change of air. I shall remain here, without you, fastened to my chain, earning money for you while you are far, away. Go along!"

And seizing her daughter by the arm with convulsive strength, she pushed her roughly; for the first time in her life, repeating, in a low tone:

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

Micheline suffered herself to be put outside the room, and went to her own apartments astonished and frightened. The young wife had hardly left the room when Madame Desvarences suffered the reaction of the emotion she had just felt. Her nerves were unstrung, and falling on a chair she remained immovable and humbled. Was it possible that her daughter, her adored child, would abandon her to obey the grudges of her husband? No, Micheline, when back in her room, would remember that she was carrying away all the joy of the house, and that it was cruel to deprive her mother of her only happiness in life.

Slightly reassured, she went down to the office. As she reached the landing, she saw the Prince's servants carrying up trunks belonging to their master to be packed. She felt sick at heart. She understood that this project had been discussed and settled beforehand. It seemed to her that all was over; that her daughter was going away forever, and that she would never see her again. She thought of going to beseech Serge and ask him what sum he would take in exchange for Micheline's liberty; but the haughty and sarcastic face of the Prince forcibly putting the bank-notes in her hands, passed before her, and she guessed that she would not obtain anything. Cast down and despairing, she entered her office and set to work.

The next day, by the evening express, the Prince and Princess left for

Nice with all their household, and the mansion in the Rue Saint-Dominique remained silent and deserted.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A SUDDEN JOURNEY

At the end of the Promenade des Anglais, on the pleasant road bordered with tamarind-trees, stands, amid a grove of cork-oaks and eucalypti, a charming white villa with pink shutters. A Russian lady, the Countess Woreseff, had it built five years ago, and occupied it one winter. Then, tired of the monotonous noise of the waves beating on the terrace and the brightness of the calm blue sky, she longed for the mists of her native country, and suddenly started for St. Petersburg, leaving that charming residence to be let.

It was there, amid rhododendrons and strawberry-trees in full bloom, that Micheline and Serge had taken up their abode. Until that day the Princess had scarcely travelled. Her mother, always occupied in commercial pursuits, had never left Paris. Micheline had remained with her. During this long journey, accomplished in most luxurious style, she had behaved like a child astonished at everything, and pleased at the least thing. With her face close to the window she saw through the transparent darkness of a lovely winter's night, villages and forests gliding past like phantoms. Afar off, in the depths of the country, she caught sight of a light glimmering, and she loved to picture a family gathered by the fire, the children asleep and the mother working in the silence.

Children! She often thought of them, and never without a sigh of regret rising to her lips. She had been married for some months, and her dreams of becoming a mother had not been realized. How happy she would have been to have a baby, with fair hair, to fondle and kiss! Then the idea of a child reminded her of her own mother. She thought of the deep love one must feel for a child. And the image of the mistress, sad and alone, in the large house of the Rue Saint-Dominique, came to her mind. A vague remorse seized her heart. She felt she had behaved badly. She said to herself: "If, to punish me, Heaven will not grant me a child!" She wept, and soon her grief and trouble vanished with her tears. Sleep overpowered her, and when she awoke it was broad daylight and they were in Provence.

From that moment everything was dazzling. The arrival at Marseilles; the journey along the coast, the approach to Nice, were all matters of ecstasy to Micheline. But it was when the carriage, which was waiting for them at the railway station, stopped at the gates of the villa, that

she broke into raptures. She could not feast her eyes enough on the scene which was before her. The blue sea, the sky without a cloud, the white houses rising on the hill amid the dark foliage, and in the distance the mountaintops covered with snow, and tinged with pink under the brilliant rays of the sun. All this vigorous and slightly wild nature surprised the Parisienne. It was a new experience. Dazzled by the light and intoxicated with the perfumes, a sort of languor came over her. She soon recovered and became quite strong—something altogether new for her, and she felt thoroughly happy.

The life of the Prince and the Princess became at Nice what it had been in Paris during the early days of their marriage. Visitors flocked to their house. All that the colony could reckon of well-known Parisians and foreigners of high repute presented themselves at the villa. The fetes recommenced. They gave receptions three times a week; the other evenings Serge went to the Cercle.

This absorbing life had gone on for two months. It was the beginning of February, and already nature was assuming a new appearance under the influence of spring. One evening, three people—two gentlemen and a lady—stepped out of a carriage at the villa gates, and found themselves face to face with a traveller who had come on foot. Two exclamations broke out simultaneously.

”Marechal!” ”Monsieur Savinien!”

”You! at Nice? And by what miracle?”

”A miracle which makes you travel fifteen leagues an hour in exchange for a hundred and thirty-three francs first-class, and is called the Marseilles express!”

”I beg your pardon, my dear friend. I have not introduced you to Monsieur and Mademoiselle Herzog.”

”I have already had the honor of meeting Mademoiselle Herzog at Madame Desvarences’s,” said Marechal, bowing to the young girl, without appearing to notice the father.

”You were going to the villa?” asked Savinien. ”We, too, were going. But how is my aunt? When did you leave her?”

”I have not left her.”

”What’s that you say?”

”I say that she is here.”

Savinien let his arms drop in profound consternation to show how difficult it was for him to believe what was going on. Then, in a faint

treble voice, he said:

"My aunt! At Nice! Promenade des Anglais! That's something more wonderful than the telephone and phonograph! If you had told me that the Pantheon had landed one fine night on the banks of the Paillon, I should not be more astonished. I thought Madame Desvarenes was as deeply rooted in Paris as the Colonne Vendome! But tell me, what is the object of this journey?"

"A freak."

"Which manifested itself--"

"Yesterday morning at breakfast. Pierre Delarue, who is going to finish his business in Algeria, and then settle in France, came to say 'Good-by' to Madame Desvarenes. A letter arrived from the Princess. She commenced reading it, then all at once she exclaimed 'Cayrol and his wife arrived at Nice two days ago!' Pierre and I were astonished at the tone in which she uttered these words. She was lost in thought for a few moments, then she said to Pierre: 'You are leaving tonight for Marseilles? Well, I shall go with you. You will accompany me to Nice.' And turning toward me, she added: 'Marechal, pack up your portmanteau. I shall take you with me.'"

While speaking, they had walked across the garden, and reached the steps leading to the villa.

"Nothing is easier than to explain this sudden journey," remarked Mademoiselle Herzog. "On learning that Monsieur and Madame Cayrol were at Nice with the Princess, Madame Desvarenes must have felt how very lonely she was in Paris. She had a longing to be near them, and started."

Herzog listened attentively, and seemed to be seeking the connection which should exist between the arrival of the Cayrols and the departure of Madame Desvarenes.

"The funniest thing to me is Marechal taking a holiday," observed Savinien. "They are still at dinner," he added, entering the drawing-room, through the great doors of which sounds of voices and rattling of plates were heard.

"Well, let us wait for them; we are in agreeable company," said Herzog, turning toward Marechal, who only answered by a cold bow.

"What are you going to do here, Marechal?" inquired Savinien. "You will be awfully bored."

"Why? Once in a way I am going to enjoy myself and be a swell. You will teach me, Monsieur Savinien. It cannot be very difficult. It is only

necessary to wear a dove-colored coat like you, a gardenia in my buttonhole like Monsieur Le Bride, frizzled hair like Monsieur du Tremblay, and to assail the bank at Monaco.”

”Like all these gentlemen,” said Suzanne, gayly, ”you are a gambler then?”

”I have never touched a card.”

”But then you ought to have great good luck,” said the young girl.

Herzog had come up to them.

”Will you go partners?” he asked of Marechal. ”We will divide the winnings.”

”You are too kind,” replied Marechal, dryly, turning away.

He could not get used to Herzog’s familiarity, and there was something in the man which displeased him greatly. There was, he thought, a police-court atmosphere about him.

Suzanne, on the contrary, interested him. The simple, lively, and frank young girl attracted him, and he liked to talk with her. On several occasions, at Madame Desvarennes’s, he had been her partner. There was through this a certain intimacy between them which he could not extend to the father.

Herzog had that faculty, fortunately for him, of never appearing offended at what was said to him. He took Savinien’s arm in a familiar manner and asked: ”Have you noticed that the Prince has looked very preoccupied for the last few days?”

”I don’t wonder at it,” replied Savinien. ”He has been very unlucky at cards. It is all very well for his wife, my charming cousin, to be rich, but if he is going on like that it won’t last long!”

The two men withdrew to the window.

Suzanne went up to Marechal. She had resumed her thoughtful air. He saw her advancing, and, guessing what she was going to say, felt uncomfortable at having to tell an untruth if he did not wish to hurt her feelings by brutal frankness.

”Monsieur Marechal,” she began, ”how is it that you are always so cold and formal with my father?”

”My dear young lady, there is a great difference between your father and me. I keep my place, that’s all.”

The young girl shook her head sadly.

"It is not that; you are amiable and ever friendly with me—"

"You are a woman, and the least politeness—"

"No! My father must have hurt your feelings unwittingly; for he is very good. I have asked him, and he did not seem to understand what I meant. But my questions drew his attention to you. He thinks highly of you and would like to see you filling a position more in harmony with your merit. You know that Monsieur Cayrol and my father have just launched a tremendous undertaking?"

"The 'Credit European'?"

"Yes. They will have offices in all the commercial centres of European commerce. Would you like the management of one of these branches?"

"I, Mademoiselle?" cried Marechal, astonished, and already asking himself what interest Herzog could have in making him leave the house of Desvarences.

"The enterprise is colossal," continued Suzanne, "and frightens me at times. Is it necessary to be so rich? I would like my father to retire from these enormous speculations into which he has thrown himself, body and soul. I have simple tastes. My father wishes to make a tremendous fortune for me, he says. All he undertakes is for me, I know. It seems to me that he runs a great risk. That is why I am talking to you. I am very superstitious, and I fancy if you were with us it would bring us luck."

Suzanne, while speaking, had leaned toward Marechal. Her face reflected the seriousness of her thoughts. Her lovely eyes implored. The young man asked himself how this charming girl could belong to that horrible Herzog.

"Believe me that I am deeply touched, Mademoiselle, by the favor you have done me," said he, with emotion. "I owe it solely to your kindness, I know; but I do not belong to myself. I am bound to Madame Desvarences by stronger ties than those of interest—those of gratitude."

"You refuse?" she cried, painfully.

"I must."

"The position you fill is humble."

"I was very glad to accept it at a time when my daily bread was not certain."

"You have been reduced," said the young girl, with trembling voice, "to such—"

"Wretchedness. Yes, Mademoiselle, my outset in life was hard. I am without relations. Mother Marechal, a kind fruiterer of the Rue Pavée au Marais, found me one morning by the curbstone, rolled in a number of the Constitutionnel, like an old pair of boots. The good woman took me home, brought me up and sent me to college. I must tell you that I was very successful and gained a scholarship. I won all the prizes. Yes, and I had to sell my gilt-edged books from the Lycee Charlemagne in the days of distress. I was eighteen when my benefactress, Mother Marechal, died. I was without help or succor. I tried to get along by myself. After ten years of struggling and privations I felt physical and moral vigor giving way. I looked around me and saw those who overcame obstacles were stronger than I. I felt that I was doomed not to make way in the world, not being one of those who could command, so I resigned myself to obey. I fill a humble position as you know, but one which satisfies my wants. I am without ambition. A little philosophical, I observe all that goes on around me. I live happily like Diogenes in his tub."

"You are a wise man," resumed Suzanne. "I, too, am a philosopher, and I live amid surroundings which do not please me. I, unfortunately, lost my mother when I was very young, and although my father is very kind, he has been obliged to neglect me a little. I see around me people who are millionaires or who aspire to be. I am doomed to receive the attentions of such men as Le Bride and Du Tremblay—empty-headed coxcombs, who court my money, and to whom I am not a woman, but a sack of ducats trimmed with lace."

"These gentlemen are the modern Argonauts. They are in search of the Golden Fleece," observed Marechal.

"The Argonauts!" cried Suzanne, laughing. "You are right. I shall never call them anything else."

"Oh, they will not understand you!" said Marechal, gayly. "I don't think they know much of mythology."

"Well, you see I am not very happy in the bosom of riches," continued the young girl. "Do not abandon me. Come and talk with me sometimes. You will not chatter trivialities. It will be a change from the others."

And, nodding pleasantly to Marechal, Mademoiselle Herzog joined her father, who was gleaned details about the house of Desvarenes from Savinien.

The secretary remained silent for a moment.

"Strange girl!" he murmured. "What a pity she has such a father."

The door of the room in which Monsieur and Mademoiselle Herzog, Marechal and Savinien were, opened, and Madame Desvarences entered, followed by her daughter, Cayrol, Serge and Pierre. The room, at the extreme end of the villa, was square, surrounded on three sides by a gallery shut in by glass and stocked with greenhouse plants. Lofty archways, half veiled with draperies, led to the gallery. This room had been the favorite one of Countess Woreseff. She had furnished it in Oriental style, with low seats and large divans, inviting one to rest and dream during the heat of the day. In the centre of the apartment was a large ottoman, the middle of which formed a flower-stand. Steps led down from the gallery to the terrace whence there was a most charming view of sea and land.

On seeing his aunt enter, Savinien rushed forward and seized both her hands. Madame Desvarences's arrival was an element of interest in his unoccupied life. The dandy guessed at some mysterious business and thought it possible that he might get to know it. With open ears and prying eyes, he sought the meaning of the least words.

"If you knew, my dear aunt, how surprised I am to see you here," he exclaimed in his hypocritical way.

"Not more so than I am to find myself here," said she, with a smile. "But, bah! I have slipped my traces for a week."

"And what are you going to do here?" continued Savinien.

"What everybody does. By-the-bye, what do they do?" asked Madame Desvarences, with vivacity.

"That depends," answered the Prince. "There are two distinct populations here. On the one hand, those who take care of themselves; on the other, those who enjoy themselves. For the former there is the constitutional every morning in the sun, with slow measured steps on the Promenade des Anglais. For the latter there are excursions, races, regattas. The first economize their life like misers; the second waste it like prodigals. Then night comes on, and the air grows cold. Those who take care of themselves go home, those who amuse themselves go out. The first put on dressing-gowns; the second put on ball-dresses. Here, the house is quiet, lit up by a night-light; there, the rooms sparkle with light, and resound with the noise of music and dancing. Here they cough, there they laugh. Infusion on the one hand, punch on the other. In fact, everywhere and always, a contrast. Nice is at once the saddest and the gayest town. One dies of over-enjoyment, and one amuses one's self at the risk of dying."

"A sojourn here is very dangerous, then?"

"Oh! aunt, not so dangerous, nor, above all, so amusing as the Prince says. We are a set of jolly fellows, who kill time between the dining-room of the hotel, pigeon-shooting, and the Cercle, which is not so very

amusing after all."

"The dining-room is bearable," said Marechal, "but pigeon-shooting must in time become—"

"We put some interest into the game."

"How so?"

"Oh! It is very simple: a gentleman with a gun in his hand stands before the boxes which contain the pigeons. You say to me: 'I bet fifty louis that the bird will fall.' I answer, 'Done.' The gentleman calls out, 'Pull;' the box opens, the pigeon flies, the shot follows. The bird falls or does not fall. I lose or win fifty louis."

"Most interesting!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Herzog.

"Pshaw!" said Savinien with ironical indifference, "it takes the place of 'trente et quarante,' and is better than 'odd or even' on the numbers of the cabs which pass."

"And what do the pigeons say to that?" asked Pierre, seriously.

"They are not consulted," said Serge, gayly.

"Then there are races and regattas," continued Savinien.

"In which case you bet on the horses?" interrupted Marechal.

"Or on the boats."

"In fact, betting is applied to all circumstances of life?"

"Exactly; and to crown all, we have the Cercle, where we go in the evening. Baccarat triumphs there. It is not very varied either: A hundred louis? Done—Five. I draw. There are some people who draw at five. Nine, I show up, I win or I lose, and the game continues."

"And that amid the glare of gas and the smoke of tobacco," said Marechal, "when the nights are so splendid and the orange-trees smell so sweetly. What a strange existence!"

"An existence for idiots, Marechal," sighed Savinien, "that I, a man of business, must submit to, through my aunt's domineering ways! You know now how men of pleasure spend their lives, my friend, and you might write a substantial resume entitled, 'The Fool's Breviary.' I am sure it would sell well."

Madame Desvarenes, who had heard the last words, was no longer listening. She was lost in a deep reverie. She was much altered since

grief and trouble had come upon her; her face was worn, her temples hollow, her chin was more prominent. Her eyes had sunk into her head, and were surrounded by dark rims.

Serge, leaning against the wall near the window, was observing her. He was wondering with secret anxiety what had brought Madame Desvarenes so suddenly to his house after a separation of two months, during which time she had scarcely written to Micheline. Was the question of money to be resumed? Since the morning Madame had been smiling, calm and pleased like a schoolgirl home for her holidays. This was the first time she had allowed a sad expression to rest on her face. Her gayety was feigned then.

A look crossing his made him start. Jeanne had just turned her eyes toward him. For a second they met his own. Serge could not help shuddering. Jeanne was calling his attention to Madame Desvarenes; she, too, was observing her. Was it on their account she had come to Nice? Had their secret fallen into her hands? He resolved to find out.

Jeanne had turned away her eyes from him. He could feast his on her now. She had become more beautiful. The tone of her complexion had become warmer. Her figure had developed. Serge longed to call her his own. For a moment his hands trembled; his throat was dry, his heart seemed to stop beating.

He tried to shake off this attraction, and walked to the centre of the room. At the same time visitors were announced. Le Bride, with his inseparable friend, Du Tremblay, escorting Lady Harton, Serge's beautiful cousin, who had caused Micheline some anxiety on the day of her marriage, but whom she no longer feared; then the Prince and Princess Odescalchi, Venetian nobles, followed by Monsieur Clement Souverain, a young Belgian, starter of the Nice races, a great pigeon shot, and a mad leader of cotillions.

"Oh, dear me! my lady, all in black?" said Micheline, pointing to the tight-fitting black satin worn by the English beauty.

"Yes, my dear Princess; mourning," replied Lady Harton, with a vigorous shake of the hands. "Ball-room mourning—one of my best partners; gentlemen, you know Harry Tornwall?"

"Countess Alberti's cavalier?" added Serge. "Well?"

"Well! he has just killed himself."

A concert of exclamations arose in the drawing-room, and the visitors suddenly surrounded her.

"What! did you not know? It was the sole topic of conversation at Monaco to-day. Poor Tornwall, being completely cleared out, went during

the night to the park belonging to the villa occupied by Countess Alberti, and blew his brains out under her window.”

”How dreadful!” exclaimed Micheline.

”It was very bad taste on your countryman’s part,” observed Serge.

”The Countess was furious, and said that Tornwall’s coming to her house to kill himself proved clearly to her that he did not know how to behave.”

”Do you wish to prevent those who are cleared out from blowing out their brains?” inquired Cayrol. ”Compel the pawnbrokers of Monaco to lend a louis on all pistols.”

”Well,” retorted young Monsieur Souverain, ”when the louis is lost the players will still be able to hang themselves.”

”Yes,” concluded Marechal, ”then at any rate the rope will bring luck to others.”

”Gentlemen, do you know that what you have been relating to us is very doleful?” said Suzanne Herzog. ”Suppose, to vary our impressions, you were to ask us to waltz?”

”Yes, on the terrace,” said Le Brede, warmly. ”A curtain of orange-trees will protect us from the vulgar gaze.”

”Oh! Mademoiselle, what a dream!” sighed Du Tremblay, approaching Suzanne. ”Waltzing with you! By moonlight.”

”Yes, friend Pierrot!” sang Suzanne, bursting into a laugh.

Already the piano, vigorously attacked by Pierre, desirous of making himself useful since he could not be agreeable, was heard in the next room. Serge had slowly approached Jeanne.

”Will you do me the favor of dancing with me?” he asked, softly.

The young woman started; her cheeks became pale, and in a sharp tone she answered:

”Why don’t you ask your wife?”

Serge smiled.

”You or nobody.”

Jeanne raised her eyes boldly, and looking at him in the face, said, defiantly:

"Well, then, nobody!"

And, rising, she took the arm of Cayrol, who was advancing toward her.

The Prince remained motionless for a moment, following them with his eyes. Then, seeing his wife alone with Madame Desvarenes, he went out on the terrace. Already the couples were dancing on the polished marble. Joyful bursts of laughter rose in the perfumed air that sweet March night. A deep sorrow came over Serge; an intense disgust with all things. The sea sparkled, lit up by the moon. He had a mad longing to seize Jeanne in his arms and carry her far away from the world, across that immense calm space which seemed made expressly to rock sweetly eternal loves.

## CHAPTER XV

### MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

Micheline intended following her husband, but Madame Desvarenes, without rising, took hold of her hand.

"Stay with me for a little while," she said, tenderly. "We have scarcely exchanged ten words since my arrival. Come, tell me, are you pleased to see me?"

"How can you ask me that?" answered Micheline, seating herself on the sofa beside her mother.

"I ask you so that you may tell me so," resumed Madame Desvarenes, softly. "I know what you think, but that is not enough." She added pleadingly:

"Kiss me, will you?"

Micheline threw her arms round her mother's neck, saying, "Dear mamma!" which made tears spring to the tortured mother's eyes. She folded her daughter in her arms, and clasped her as a miser holds his treasure.

"It is a long time since I have heard you speak thus to me. Two months! And I have been desolate in that large house you used to fill alone in the days gone by."

The young wife interrupted her mother, reproachfully:

"Oh! mamma; I beg you to be reasonable."

"To be reasonable? In other words, I suppose you mean that I am to get accustomed to living without you, after having for twenty years devoted my life to you? Bear, without complaining, that my happiness should be taken away, and now that I am old lead a life without aim, without joy, without trouble even, because I know if you had any troubles you would not tell me!"

There was a moment's pause. Then Micheline, in a constrained manner, said:

"What griefs could I have?"

Madame Desvarenes lost all patience, and giving vent to her feelings exclaimed, bitterly:

"Those which your husband causes you!"

Micheline arose abruptly.

"Mother!" she cried.

But the mistress had commenced, and with unrestrained bitterness, went on:

"That gentleman has behaved toward me in such a manner as to shake my confidence in him! After vowing that he would never separate you from me, he brought you here, knowing that I could not leave Paris."

"You are unjust," retorted Micheline. "You know the doctors ordered me to go to Nice."

"Pooh! You can make doctors order you anything you like!" resumed her mother, excitedly, and shaking her head disdainfully. "Your husband said to our good Doctor Rigaud: 'Don't you think that a season in the South would do my wife good?' The doctor answered: 'If it does not do her any good it certainly won't do her any harm.' Then your husband added, 'just take a sheet of paper and write out a prescription. You understand? It is for my mother-in-law, who will not be pleased at our going away.'"

And as Micheline seemed to doubt what she was saying, the latter added:

"The doctor told me when I went to see him about it. I never had much faith in doctors, and now--"

Micheline felt she was on delicate ground, and wanted to change the subject. She soothed her mother as in days gone by, saying:

"Come, mamma; will you never be able to get used to your part? Must you always be jealous? You know all wives leave their mothers to follow their husbands. It is the law of nature. You, in your day, remember, followed your husband, and your mother must have wept."

"Did my mother love me as I love you?" asked Madame Desvarenes, impetuously. "I was brought up differently. We had not time to love each other so much. We had to work. The happiness of spoiling one's child is a privilege of the rich. For you there was no down warm enough or silk soft enough to line your cradle. You have been petted and worshipped for twenty years. Yet, it only needed a man, whom you scarcely knew six months ago, to make you forget everything."

"I have not forgotten anything," replied Micheline, moved by these passionate expressions. "And in my heart you still hold the same place."

The mistress looked at the young wife, then, in a sad tone, said:

"It is no longer the first place."

This simple, selfish view made Micheline smile.

"It is just like you, you tyrant!" she exclaimed. "You must be first. Come, be satisfied with equality! Remember that you were first in the field, and that for twenty years I have loved you, while he has to make up for lost time. Don't try to make a comparison between my love for him and my affection for you. Be kind: instead of looking black at him, try to love him. I should be so happy to see you united, and to be able, without reservation, to think of you both with the same tenderness!"

"Ah! how you talk me over. How charming and caressing you can be when you like. And how happy Serge ought to be with a wife like you! It is always the way; men like him always get the best wives."

"I don't suppose, mamma, you came all the way from Paris to run down my husband to me."

Madame Desvarenes became serious again.

"No; I came to defend you."

Micheline looked surprised.

"It is time for me to speak. You are seriously menaced," continued the mother.

"In my love?" asked the young wife, in an altered tone.

"No; in your fortune."

Micheline smiled superbly.

"If that be all!"

This indifference made her mother positively jump.

"You speak very coolly about it! At the rate your husband is spending, there will be nothing left of your dowry in six months."

"Well!" said the Princess, gayly, "you will give us another."

Madame Desvarenes assumed her cold businesslike manner.

"Ta! ta! ta! Do you think there is no limit to my resources? I gave you four millions when you were married, represented by fifteen hundred thousand francs, in good stock, a house in the Rue de Rivoli, and eight hundred thousand francs which I prudently kept in the business, and for which I pay you interest. The fifteen hundred thousand francs have vanished. My lawyer came to tell me that the house in the Rue de Rivoli had been sold without a reinvestment taking place."

The mistress stopped. She had spoken in that frank, determined, way of hers that was part of her strength. She looked fixedly at Micheline, and asked:

"Did you know this, my girl?"

The Princess, deeply troubled, because now it was not a question of sentiment, but of serious moment, answered, in a low tone:

"No, mamma."

"How is that possible?" Madame Desvarenes demanded, hotly. "Nothing can be done without your signature."

"I gave it," murmured Micheline.

"You gave it!" repeated the mistress in a tone of anger. "When?"

"The day after my marriage."

"Your husband had the impudence to ask for it the day after your marriage?"

Micheline smiled.

"He did not ask for it, mamma," she replied, with sweetness; "I offered it to him. You had settled all on me."

"Prudently! With a fellow like your husband!"

"Your mistrust must have been humiliating to him. I was ashamed of it. I said nothing to you, because I knew you would rather prevent the marriage, and I loved Serge. I, therefore, signed the contract which you had had prepared. Only the next day I gave a general power of attorney to my husband."

Madame Desvarenes's anger was over. She was observing Micheline, and wished to find out the depth of the abyss into which her daughter had thrown herself with blind confidence.

"And what did he say then?" she inquired.

"Nothing," answered Micheline, simply. "Tears came to his eyes, and he kissed me. I saw that this delicacy touched his heart and I was happy. There, mamma," she added with eyes sparkling at the remembrance of the pleasure she had experienced, "he may spend as much as he likes; I am amply repaid beforehand."

Madame Desvarenes shrugged her shoulders, and said:

"My dear child, you are mad enough to be locked up. What is there about the fellow to turn every woman's brain?"

"Every woman's?" exclaimed Micheline, anxiously, looking at her mother.

"That is a manner of speaking. But, my dear, you must understand that I cannot be satisfied with what you have just told me. A tear and a kiss! Bah! That is not worth your dowry."

"Come, mamma, do let me be happy."

"You can be happy without committing follies. You do not need a racing-stable."

"Oh, he has chosen such pretty colors," interrupted Micheline, with a smile. "Pearl-gray and silver, and pink cap. It is charming!"

"You think so? Well, you are not difficult to please. And the club? What do you say to his gambling?"

Micheline turned pale, and with a constraint which hurt her mother, said:

"Is it necessary to make a fuss about a few games at bouillotte?"

This continual defense of Serge exasperated Madame Desvarenes.

"Don't talk to me," she continued, violently. "I am well informed on that subject. He leaves you alone every evening to go and play with

gentlemen who turn up the king with a dexterity the Legitimists must envy. My dear, shall I tell you his fortune? He commenced with cards; he continues with horses; he will finish with worthless women!"

"Mamma!" cried Micheline, wounded to the heart.

"And your money will pay the piper! But, happily, I am here to put your household matters right. I am going to keep your gentleman so well under that in future he will walk straight, I'll warrant you!"

Micheline rose and stood before her mother, looking so pale that the latter was frightened.

"Mother," she said, in trembling tones, "if ever you say one word to my husband, take care! I shall never see you again!"

Madame Desvarences flinched before her daughter. It was no longer the weak Micheline who trusted to her tears, but a vehement woman ready to defend him whom she loved. And as she remained silent, not daring to speak again:

"Mother," continued Micheline, with sadness, yet firmly, "this explanation was inevitable; I have suffered beforehand, knowing that I should have to choose between my affection for my husband and my respect for you."

"Between the one and the other," said the mistress, bitterly, "you don't hesitate, I see."

"It is my duty; and if I failed in it, you yourself, with your good sense, would see it."

"Oh! Micheline, could I have expected to find you thus?" cried the mother, in despair. "What a change! It is not you who are speaking; it is not my daughter. Fool that you are! Don't you see whither you are being led? You, yourself, are preparing your own misfortune. Don't think that my words are inspired by jealousy. A higher sentiment dictates them, and at this moment my maternal love gives me, I fear, a foresight of the future. There is only just time to rescue you from the danger into which you are running. You hope to retain your husband by your generosity? There where you think you are giving proofs of love he will only see proofs of weakness. If you make yourself cheap he will count you as nothing. If you throw yourself at his feet he will trample on you."

The Princess shook her head haughtily, and smiled.

"You don't know him, mamma. He is a gentleman; he understands all these delicacies, and there is more to be gained by submitting one's self to his discretion, than by trying to resist his will. You blame his manner

of existence, but you don't understand him. I know him. He belongs to a different race than you and I. He needs refinements of luxury which would be useless to us, but the deprivation of which would be hard to him. He suffered much when he was poor, he is making up for it now. We are guilty of some extravagances, 'tis true; but what does it matter? For whom have you made a fortune? For me! For what object? My happiness! Well, I am happy to surround my Prince with the glory and pomp which suits him so well. He is grateful to me; he loves me, and I hold his love dearer than all else in the world; for if ever he ceases to love me I shall die!"

"Micheline!" cried Madame Desvarences, beside herself, and seizing her daughter with nervous strength.

The young wife quietly allowed her fair head to fall on her mother's shoulder, and whispered faintly in her ear:

"You don't want to wreck my life. I understand your displeasure. It is natural; I feel it. You cannot think otherwise than you do, being a simple, hardworking woman; but I beg of you to banish all hatred, and confine these ideas within yourself. Say nothing more about them for love of me!"

The mother was vanquished. She had never been able to resist that suppliant voice.

"Ah! cruel child," she moaned, "what pain you are causing me!"

"You consent, don't you, dear mother?" murmured Micheline, falling into the arms of her by whom she knew she was adored.

"I will do as you wish," said Madame Desvarences, kissing her daughter's hair—that golden hair which, in former days, she loved to stroke.

The strains of the piano sounded on the terrace. In the shade, groups of merry dancers were enjoying themselves. Happy voices were heard approaching, and Savinien, followed by Marechal and Suzanne, came briskly up the steps.

"Oh, aunt, it is not fair," said the dandy. "If you have come here to monopolize Micheline, you will be sent back to Paris. We want a vis-a-vis for a quadrille. Come, Princess, it is delightfully cool outside, and I am sure you will enjoy it."

"Monsieur Le Brede has gathered some oranges, and is trying to play at cup and ball with them on his nose, while his friend, Monsieur du Tremblay, jealous of his success, talks of illuminating the trees with bowls of punch," said Marechal.

"And what is Serge doing?" inquired Micheline, smiling.

"He is talking to my wife on the terrace," said Cayrol, appearing in the gallery.

The young people went off and were lost in the darkness. Madame Desvarences looked at Cayrol. He was happy and calm. There was no trace of his former jealousy. During the six months which had elapsed since his marriage, the banker had observed his wife closely, her actions, her words: nothing had escaped him. He had never found her at fault. Thus, reassured, he had given her his confidence and this time forever. Jeanne was adorable; he loved her more than ever. She seemed very much changed to him. Her disposition, formerly somewhat harsh, had softened, and the haughty, capricious girl had become a mild, demure, and somewhat serious woman. Unable to read his companion's thoughts, Cayrol sincerely believed that he had been unnecessarily anxious, and that Jeanne's troubles had only been passing fancies. He took credit of the change in his wife to himself, and was proud of it.

"Cayrol, oblige me by removing that lamp; it hurts my eyes," said Madame Desvarences, anxious that the traces on her face, caused by her late discussion with her daughter, should not be visible. "Then ask Jeanne to come here for a few minutes. I have something to say to her."

"Certainly," said Cayrol, taking the lamp off the table and carrying it into the adjoining room.

Darkness did Madame Desvarences good. It refreshed her mind and calmed her brow. The noise of dancing reached her. She commenced thinking. So it had vainly tried to prove to her that a life of immoderate pleasure was not conducive to happiness. The young wife had stopped her ears so that she might not hear, and closed her eyes that she might not see. Her mother asked herself if she did not exaggerate the evil. Alas! no. She saw that she was not mistaken. Examining the society around her, men and women: everywhere was feverish excitement, dissipation, and nullity. You might rummage through their brains without finding one practical idea; in all their hearts, there was not one lofty aspiration. These people, in their daily life were like squirrels in a cage, and because they moved, they thought they were progressing. In them scepticism had killed belief; religion, family, country, were, as they phrased it, all humbug. They had only one aim, one passion—to enjoy themselves. Their watchword was "pleasure." All those who did not perish of consumption would die in lunatic asylums.

What was she doing in the midst of this rottenness? She, the woman of business? Could she hope to regenerate these poor wretches by her example? No! She could not teach them to be good, and they excelled in teaching others harm. She must leave this gilded vice, taking with her those she loved, and leave the idle and incompetent to consume and destroy themselves.

She felt disgusted, and resolved to do all to tear Micheline away from the contagion. In the meantime she must question Jeanne. A shadow appeared on the threshold: it was hers. In the darkness of the gallery Serge crept behind her without being seen. He had been watching Jeanne, and seeing her go away alone, had followed her. In the angle of the large bay-window, opening into the garden, he waited with palpitating heart. Madame Desvarences's voice was heard in the silence of the drawing-room; he listened.

"Sit down, Jeanne; our interview will be short, and it could not be delayed, for to-morrow I shall not be here."

"You are leaving so soon?"

"Yes; I only left Paris on my daughter's account, and on yours. My daughter knows what I had to tell her; now it is your turn! Why did you come to Nice?"

"I could not do otherwise."

"Because?"

"Because my husband wished it."

"You ought to have made him wish something else. Your power over him is absolute."

There was a moment's pause. Then Jeanne answered:

"I feared to insist lest I should awaken his suspicions."

"Good! But admitting that you came to Nice, why accept hospitality in this house?"

"Micheline offered it to us," said Jeanne.

"And even that did not make you refuse. What part do you purpose playing here? After six months of honesty, are you going to change your mind?"

Serge, behind his shelter, shuddered. Madame Desvarences's words were clear. She knew all.

Jeanne's voice was indignant when she replied:

"By what right do you insult me by such a suspicion?"

"By the right which you have given me in not keeping to your bargain. You ought to have kept out of the way, and I find you here, seeking danger and already trying those flirtations which are the forerunners of

sin, and familiarizing yourself with evil before wholly giving yourself up to it.”

”Madame!” cried Jeanne, passionately.

”Answer! Have you kept the promise you made me?”

”Have the hopes which you held out to me been realized?” replied Jeanne, with despair. ”For six months I have been away, and have I found peace of mind and heart? The duty which you pointed out to me as a remedy for the pain which tortured me I have fruitlessly followed. I have wept, hoping that the trouble within me would be washed away with my tears. I have prayed to Heaven, and asked that I might love my husband. But, no! That man is as odious to me as ever. Now I have lost all my illusions, and find myself joined to him for the rest of my days! I have to tell lies, to wear a mask, to smile! It is revolting, and I suffer! Now that you know what is passing within me, judge, and say whether your reproaches are not a useless cruelty.”

On hearing Jeanne, Madame Desvarences felt herself moved with deep pity. She asked herself whether it was not unjust for that poor child to suffer so much. She had never done anything wrong, and her conduct was worthy of esteem.

”Unhappy woman!” she said.

”Yes, unhappy, indeed,” resumed Jeanne, ”because I have nothing to cling to, nothing to sustain me. My mind is afflicted with feverish thoughts, my heart made desolate with bitter regrets. My will alone protects me, and in a moment of weakness it may betray me.”

”You still love him?” asked Madame Desvarences, in a deep voice which made Serge quiver.

”Do I know? There are times when I think I hate him. What I have endured since I have been here is incredible! Everything galls me, irritates me. My husband is blind, Micheline unsuspecting, and Serge smiles quietly, as if he were preparing some treachery. Jealousy, anger, contempt, are all conflicting within me. I feel that I ought to go away, and still I feel a, horrible delight in remaining.”

”Poor child!” said Madame Desvarences. ”I pity you from my soul. Forgive my unjust words; you have done all in your power. You have had momentary weaknesses like all human beings. You must be helped, and may rely on me. I will speak to your husband to-morrow; he shall take you away. Lacking happiness, you must have peace. Go you are a brave heart, and if Heaven be just, you will be rewarded.”

Serge heard the sound of a kiss. In an embrace, the mother had blessed her adopted daughter. Then the Prince saw Madame Desvarences go slowly

past him. And the silence was broken only by the sobs of Jeanne who was half lying on the sofa in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE TELLTALE KISS

Serge slipped from his hiding-place and came toward Jeanne. The carpet deadened the sound of his steps. The young woman was gazing into vacancy and breathing with difficulty. He looked at her for a moment without speaking; then, leaning over her shoulder.

"Is it true, Jeanne," he murmured, softly, "that you hate me?"

Jeanne arose, bewildered, exclaiming,

"Serge!"

"Yes, Serge," answered the Prince, "who has never ceased to love you."

A deep blush spread over the young woman's face.

"Leave me," she said. "Your language is unworthy of a man. I will not listen to you."

And with a quick step she walked toward the gallery. Serge threw himself in her way, saying:

"You must stop; you cannot escape me."

"But this is madness," exclaimed Jeanne, moving away. "Do you forget where we are?"

"Do you forget what you have just been saying?" retorted Serge. "I was there; I did not miss a word."

"If you heard me," said Jeanne, "you know that everything separates us. My duty, yours, and my will."

"A will which is enforced, and against which your heart rebels. A will to which I will not submit."

As he spoke, Serge advanced toward her, trying to seize her in his arms.

"Take care!" replied Jeanne. "Micheline and my husband are there. You must be mad to forget it. If you come a step farther I shall call out."

"Call, then!" cried Serge, clasping her in his arms.

Jeanne tried to free herself from him, but could not.

"Serge," she said, paling with mingled anguish and rapture in the arms of him whom she adored, "what you are doing is cowardly and base!"

A kiss stopped the words on her lips. Jeanne felt herself giving way. She made a supreme effort.

"I won't, Serge!" she stammered. "Have mercy!"

Tears of shame rolled down her face.

"No! you belong to me. The other, your husband, stole you from me. I take you back. I love you!"

The young woman fell on a seat.

Serge repeated,

"I love you! I love you! I love you!"

A fearful longing took possession of Jeanne. She no longer pushed away the arms which clasped her. She placed her hands on Serge's shoulder, and with a deep sigh gave herself up.

A profound silence reigned around. Suddenly a sound of approaching voices roused them, and at the same moment the heavy curtain which separated the room from the adjoining drawing-room was lifted. A shadow appeared on the threshold, as they were still in each other's arms. The stifled exclamation, "O God!" followed by a sob of agony, resounded. The door curtain fell, surrounding with its folds the unknown witness of that terrible scene.

Jeanne had risen, trying to collect her ideas. A sudden light dawned on her mind; she realized in a moment the extent of her crime, and uttering a cry of horror and despair, she escaped, followed by Serge, through the gallery.

Then the heavy curtain was lifted again, and tottering, livid, almost dead, Micheline entered the room. Pierre, serious and cold, walked behind her. The Princess, feeling tired, had come into the house. Chance had led her there to witness this proof of misfortune and treason.

Both she and Delarue looked at each other, silent and overwhelmed. Their thoughts whirled through their brains with fearful rapidity. In a moment they looked back on their existence. He saw the pale betrothed of whom he had dreamed as a wife, who had willingly given herself to another,

and who now found herself so cruelly punished. She measured the distance which separated these two men: the one good, loyal, generous; the other selfish, base, and unworthy. And seeing him whom she adored, so vile and base compared to him whom she had disdained, Micheline burst into bitter tears.

Pierre tremblingly hastened toward her. The Princess made a movement to check him, but she saw on the face of her childhood's friend such sincere grief and honest indignation, that she felt as safe, with him as if he had really been her brother. Overcome, she let her head fall on his shoulder, and wept.

The sound of approaching footsteps made Micheline arise. She recognized her husband's step, and hastily seizing Pierre's hand, said:

"Never breathe a word; forget what you have seen."

Then, with deep grief, she added:

"If Serge knew that I had seen him unawares he would never forgive me!"

Drying her tears, and still tottering from the shock, she left the room. Pierre remained alone, quite stunned; pitying, yet blaming the poor woman, who, in her outraged love, still had the absurd courage to hold her tongue and to resign herself. Anger seized on him, and the more timid Micheline seemed herself, the more violent and passionate he felt.

Serge came back to the room. After the first moment of excitement, he had reflected, and wanted to know by whom he had been observed. Was it Madame Desvarences, Micheline, or Cayrol, who had come in? At this idea he trembled, measuring the possible results of the imprudence he had been guilty of. He resolved to face the difficulty if it were either of these three interested parties, and to impose silence if he had to deal with an indifferent person. He took the lamp which Madame Desvarences had a short time before asked Cayrol to remove and went into the room. Pierre was there alone.

The two men measured each other with their looks. Delarue guessed the anxiety of Serge, and the Prince understood the hostility of Pierre. He turned pale.

"It was you who came in?" he asked, boldly.

"Yes," replied Pierre, with severity.

The Prince hesitated for a second. He was evidently seeking a polite form to express his request. He did not find one, and in a threatening manner, he resumed:

"You must hold your tongue, otherwise—"

"Otherwise?" inquired Pierre, aggressively.

"What is the use of threats?" replied Serge, already calmed. "Excuse me; I know that you will not tell; if not for my sake at least for that of others."

"Yes, for others," said Pierre, passionately; "for others whom you have basely sacrificed, and who deserve all your respect and love; for Madame Desvarences, whose high intelligence you have not been able to understand; for Micheline, whose tender heart you have not been able to appreciate. Yes, for their sakes I will hold my peace, not out of regard for you, because you neither deserve consideration nor esteem."

The Prince advanced a step, and exclaimed:

"Pierre!"

Pierre did not move, and looking Serge in the face, continued:

"The truth is unpleasant to you, still you must hear it. You act according to your fancies. Principles and morals, to which all men submit, are dead letters to you. Your own pleasure above all things, and always! That is your rule, eh? and so much the worse if ruin and trouble to others are the consequences? You only have to deal with two women, and you profit by it. But I warn you that if you continue to crush them I will be their defender."

Serge had listened to all this with disdainful impassibility, and when Pierre had finished, he smiled, snapped his fingers, and turning toward the young man:

"My dear fellow," said he, "allow me to tell you that I think you are very impertinent. You come here meddling with my affairs. What authority have you? Are you a relative? A connection? By what right do you preach this sermon?"

As he concluded, Serge seated himself and laughed with a careless air.

Pierre answered, gravely:

"I was betrothed to Micheline when she saw and loved you: that is my right! I could have married her, but sacrificed my love to hers: that is my authority! And it is in the name of my shattered hopes and lost happiness that I call you to account for her future peace."

Serge had risen, he was deeply embittered at what Delarue had just told him, and was trying to recover his calmness. Pierre, trembling with

emotion and anger, was also striving to check their influence.

"It seems to me," said the Prince, mockingly, "that in your claim there is more than the outcry of an irritated conscience; it is the complaint of a heart that still loves."

"And if that were so?" retorted Pierre. "Yes, I love her, but with a pious love, from the depth of my soul, as one would love a saint; and I only suffer the more to see her suffering."

Somewhat irritated the Prince exclaimed, impatiently:

"Oh, don't let us have a lyric recitation; let us be brief and clear. What do you want? Explain yourself. I don't suppose that you have addressed this rebuke to me solely for the purpose of telling me that you are in love with my wife!"

Pierre disregarded what was insulting in the Prince's answer, and calming himself, by force of will, replied:

"I desire, since you ask me, that you forget the folly and error of a moment, and that you swear to me on your honor never to see Madame Cayrol again."

Pierre's moderation wounded the Prince more than his rage had affected him. He felt petty beside this devoted friend, who only thought of the happiness of her whom he loved without hope. His temper increased.

"And what if I refuse to lend myself to those whims which you express so candidly?"

"Then," said Pierre, resolutely, "I shall remember that, when renouncing Micheline, I promised to be a brother to her, and if you compel me I will defend her."

"You are threatening me, I think," cried Serge, beside himself.

"No! I warn you."

"Enough," said the Prince, scarcely able to command himself. "For any little service you have rendered me, from henceforth we are quits. Don't think that I am one of those who yield to violence. Keep out of my path; it will be prudent."

"Listen, then, to this. I am not one of those who shirk a duty, whatever the peril be in accomplishing it. You know what price I put on Micheline's happiness; you are responsible for it, and I shall oblige you to respect it."

And leaving Serge dumb with suppressed rage, Pierre went out on the terrace.

On the high road the sound of the carriages bearing away Savinien, Herzog and his daughter, resounded in the calm starry night. In the villa everything was quiet. Pierre breathed with delight; he instinctively turned his eyes toward the brilliant sky, and in the far-off firmament, the star which he appropriated to himself long ago, and which he had so desperately looked for when he was unhappy, suddenly appeared bright and twinkling. He sighed and moved on.

The Prince spent a part of the night at the club; he was excessively nervous, and after alternate losses and gains, he retired, carrying off a goodly sum from his opponents. It was a long time since he had been so lucky, and on his way home he smiled when he thought how false was the proverb, "Lucky at play, unlucky in love." He thought of that adorable Jeanne whom he had held in his arms a few hours before, and who had so eagerly clung to him. He understood that she had never ceased to belong to him. The image of Cayrol, self-confident man, happy in his love, coming to his mind, caused Serge to laugh.

There was no thought for Micheline; she had been the stepping-stone to fortune for him; he knew that she was gentle and thought her not very discerning. He could easily deceive her; with a few caresses and a little consideration he could maintain the illusion of his love for her. Madame Desvarences alone inconvenienced him in his arrangements. She was sagacious, and on several occasions he had seen her unveil plots which he thought were well contrived. He must really beware of her. He had often noticed in her voice and look an alarming hardness. She was not a woman to be afraid of a scandal. On the contrary, she would hail it with joy, and be happy to get rid of him whom she hated with all her might.

In spite of himself, Serge remembered the night of his union to Micheline, when he had said to Madame Desvarences: "Take my life; it is yours!" She had replied seriously, and almost threateningly: "Very well; I accept it!" These words now resounded in his ears like a verdict. He promised himself to play a sure game with Madame Desvarences. As to Cayrol, he was out of the question; he had only been created as a plaything for princes such as Serge; his destiny was written on his forehead, and he could not escape. If it had not been Panine, some one else would have done the same thing for him. Besides, how could that ex-cowherd expect to keep such a woman as Jeanne was to himself. It would have been manifestly unfair.

The Prince found his valet asleep in the hall. He went quickly to his bedroom, and slept soundly without remorse, without dreams, until noon. Coming down to breakfast, he found the family assembled. Savinien had come to see his aunt, before whom he wanted to place a "colossal idea." This time, he said, it was worth a fortune. He hoped to draw six thousand francs from the mistress who, according to her usual custom,

could not fail to buy from him what he called his idea.

The dandy was thoughtful; he was preparing his batteries. Micheline, pale, and her eyes red for want of rest, was seated near the gallery, silently watching the sea, on which were passing, in the distance, fishing-smacks with their sails looking like white-winged birds. Madame Desvarences was serious, and was giving Marechal instructions respecting her correspondence, while at the same time watching her daughter out of the corner of her eye. Micheline's depressed manner caused her some anxiety; she guessed some mystery. Still the young wife's trouble might be the result of last evening's serious interview. But the sagacity of the mistress guessed a new incident. Perhaps some scene between Serge and Micheline in regard to the club. She was on the watch.

Cayrol and Jeanne had gone for a drive to Mentone. With a single glance the Prince took in the attitude of one and all, and after a polite exchange of words and a careless kiss on Micheline's brow, he seated himself at table. The repast was silent. Each one seemed preoccupied. Serge anxiously asked himself whether Pierre had spoken. Marechal, deeply interested in his plate, answered briefly, when addressed by Madame Desvarences. All the guests seemed constrained. It was a relief when they rose from the table.

Micheline took her husband's arm and leading him into the garden, under the shade of the magnolias, said to him:

"My mother leaves us to-night. She has received a letter recalling her to Paris. Her journey here was, you no doubt know, on our account. Our absence made her sad, and she could no longer refrain from seeing me, so she came. On her return to Paris she will feel very lonely, and as I am so often alone—"

"Micheline!" interrupted Serge, with astonishment.

"It is not a reproach, dear," continued the young wife, sweetly. "You have your engagements. There are necessities to which one must submit; you do what you think is expected of you, and it must be right. Only grant me a favor."

"A favor? To you?" replied Serge, troubled at the unexpected turn the interview was taking. "Speak, dear one; are you not at liberty to do as you like?"

"Well," said Micheline, with a faint smile, "as you are so kindly disposed, promise that we shall leave for Paris this week. The season is far advancing. All your friends will have returned. It will not be such a great sacrifice which I ask from you."

"Willingly," said Serge, surprised at Micheline's sudden resolution. "But, admit," added he, gravely, "that your mother has worried you a

little on the subject.”

”My mother knows nothing of my project,” returned the Princess, coldly. ”I did not care to say anything about it to her until I had your consent. A refusal on your part would have seemed too cruel. Already, you are not the best of friends, and it is one of my regrets. You must be good to my mother, Serge; she is getting old, and we owe her much gratitude and love.”

Panine remained silent. Could such a sudden change have come over Micheline in one day? She who lately sacrificed her mother for her husband now came and pleaded in favor of Madame Desvarences. What had happened?

He promptly decided on his course of action.

”All that you ask me shall be religiously fulfilled. No concession will be too difficult for me to make if it please you. You wish to return to Paris, we will go as soon as our arrangements have been made. Tell Madame Desvarences, then, and let her see in our going a proof that I wish to live on good terms with her.”

Micheline simply said: ”Thank you.” And Serge having gallantly kissed her hand, she regained the terrace.

Left alone, Serge asked himself the meaning of the transformation in his wife. For the first time she had shown signs of taking the initiative. Had the question of money been raised by Madame Desvarences, and was Micheline taking him back to Paris in the hope of inducing a change in his habits? They would see. The idea that Micheline had seen him with Jeanne never occurred to him. He did not think his wife capable of so much self-control. Loving as she was, she could not have controlled her feelings, and would have made a disturbance. Therefore he had no suspicions.

As to their leaving for Paris he was delighted at the idea. Jeanne and Cayrol were leaving Nice at the end of the week. Lost in the vastness of the capital, the lovers would be more secure. They could see each other at leisure. Serge would hire a small house in the neighborhood of the Bois de Boulogne, and there they could enjoy each other’s society without observation.

## CHAPTER XVII

CAYROL IS BLIND

Micheline, on her return to Paris, was a cause of anxiety to all her friends. Morally and physically she was changed. Her former gaiety had disappeared. In a few weeks she became thin and seemed to be wasting away. Madame Desvarenes, deeply troubled, questioned her daughter, who answered, evasively, that she was perfectly well and had nothing to trouble her. The mother called in Doctor Rigaud, although she did not believe in the profession, and, after a long conference, took him to see Micheline. The doctor examined her, and declared it was nothing but debility. Madame Desvarenes was assailed with gloomy forebodings. She spent sleepless nights, during which she thought her daughter was dead; she heard the funeral dirges around her coffin. This strong woman wept, not daring to show her anxiety, and trembling lest Micheline should suspect her fears.

Serge was careless and happy, treating the apprehensions of those surrounding him with perfect indifference. He did not think his wife was ill—a little tired perhaps, or it might be change of climate, nothing serious. He had quite fallen into his old ways, spending every night at the club, and a part of the day in a little house in the Avenue Maillot, near the Bois de Boulogne. He had found one charmingly furnished, and there he sheltered his guilty happiness.

It was here that Jeanne came, thickly veiled, since her return from Nice. They each had a latchkey belonging to the door opening upon the Bois. The one who arrived first waited for the other, within the house, whose shutters remained closed to deceive passers-by. Then the hour of departure came; the hope of meeting again did not lessen their sadness at parting.

Jeanne seldom went to the Rue Saint-Dominique. The welcome that Micheline gave her was the same as usual, but Jeanne thought she discovered a coldness which made her feel uncomfortable; and she did not care to meet her lover's wife, so she made her visits scarce.

Cayrol came every morning to talk on business matters with Madame Desvarenes. He had resumed the direction of his banking establishment. The great scheme of the European Credit Company had been launched by Herzog, and promised great results. Still Herzog caused Cayrol considerable anxiety. Although a man of remarkable intelligence, he had a great failing, and by trying to grasp too much often ended by accomplishing nothing. Scarcely was one scheme launched when another idea occurred to him, to which he sacrificed the former.

Thus, Herzog was projecting a still grander scheme to be based on the European Credit. Cayrol, less sanguine, and more practical, was afraid of the new scheme, and when Herzog spoke to him about it, said that things were well enough for him as they were, and that he would not be implicated in any fresh financial venture however promising.

Cayrol's refusal had vexed Herzog. The German knew what opinion he was

held in by the public, and that without the prestige of Cayrol's name, and behind that, the house of Desvarences, he would never have been able to float the European Credit as it had been. He was too cunning not to know this, and Cayrol having declined to join him, he looked round in search of a suitable person to inspire the shareholders with confidence.

His daughter often went to the Rue Saint-Dominique. Madame Desvarences and Micheline had taken a fancy to her, as she was serious, natural, and homelike. They liked to see her, although her father was not congenial to their taste. Herzog had not succeeded in making friends with the mistress; she disliked and instinctively mistrusted him.

One day it was rumored that Suzanne Herzog had gone in for an examination at the Hotel de Ville, and had gained a certificate: People thought it was very ridiculous. What was the good of so much learning for a girl who would have such a large fortune, and who would never know want. Savinien thought it was affectation and most laughable! Madame Desvarences thought it was most interesting; she liked workers, and considered that the richer people were, the more reason they had to work. Herzog had allowed his daughter to please herself and said nothing.

Springtime had come, and fine weather, yet Micheline's health did not improve. She did not suffer, but a sort of languor had come over her. For days she never quitted her reclining-chair. She was very affectionate toward her mother, and seemed to be making up for the lack of affection shown during the first months of her marriage.

She never questioned Serge as to his manner of spending his time, though she seldom saw him, except at meal hours. Every week she wrote to Pierre, who was buried in his mines, and after every despatch her mother noticed that she seemed sadder and paler.

Serge and Jeanne grew bolder. They felt that they were not watched. The little house seemed too small for them, and they longed to go beyond the garden, as the air of the Bois was so sweet and scented with violets. A feeling of bravado came over them, and they did not mind being seen together. People would think they were a newly-married couple.

One afternoon they sallied forth, Jeanne wearing a thick veil, and trembling at the risk she was running, yet secretly delighted at going. They chose the most unfrequented paths and solitary nooks. Then, after an hour's stroll, they returned briskly, frightened at the sounds of carriages rolling in the distance. They often went out after that, and chose in preference the paths near the pond of Madrid where, behind sheltering shrubs, they sat talking and listening to the busy hum of Parisian life, seemingly so far away.

One day, about four o'clock, Madame Desvarences was going to Saint-Cloud on business, and was crossing the Bois de Boulogne. Her coachman had

chosen the most unfrequented paths to save time. She had opened the carriage-window, and was enjoying the lovely scent from the shrubs. Suddenly a watering-cart stopped the way. Madame Desvarences looked through the window to see what was the matter, and remained stupefied. At the turning of a path she espied Serge, with a woman on his arm. She uttered a cry that caused the couple to turn round. Seeing that pale face, they sought to hide themselves.

In a moment Madame Desvarences was out of the carriage. The guilty couple fled down a path. Without caring what might be said of her, and goaded on by a fearful rage, she tried to follow them. She especially wished to see the woman who was closely veiled. She guessed her to be Jeanne. But the younger woman, terrified, fled like a deer down a side walk. Madame Desvarences, quite out of breath, was obliged to stop. She heard the slamming of a carriage-door, and a hired brougham that had been waiting at the end of the path swept by her bearing the lovers toward the town.

The mistress hesitated a moment, then said to her coachman:

"Drive home." And, abandoning her business, she arrived in the Rue Saint-Dominique a few minutes after the Prince.

With a bound, without going through the offices, without even taking off her bonnet and cloak, she went up to Serge's apartments. Without hesitating, she entered the smoking-room.

Panine was there. Evidently he was expecting her. On seeing Madame Desvarences he rose, with a smile:

"One can see that you are at home," said he, ironically; "you come in without knocking."

"No nonsense; the moment is ill-chosen," briefly retorted the mistress. "Why did you run away when you saw me a little while ago?"

"You have such a singular way of accosting people," he answered, lightly. "You come on like a charge of cavalry. The person with whom I was talking was frightened, she ran away and I followed her."

"She was doing wrong then if she was frightened. Does she know me?"

"Who does not know you? You are almost notorious—in the corn-market!"

Madame Desvarences allowed the insult to pass without remark, and advancing toward Serge, said:

"Who is this woman?"

"Shall I introduce her to you?" inquired the Prince, quietly. "She is one of my countrywomen, a Polish—"

"You are a liar!" cried Madame Desvarennnes, unable to control her temper any longer. "You are lying most impudently!"

And she was going to add, "That woman was Jeanne!" but prudence checked the sentence on her lips.

Serge turned pale.

"You forget yourself strangely, Madame," he said, in a dry tone.

"I forgot myself a year ago, not now! It was when I was weak that I forgot myself. When Micheline was between you and me I neither dared to speak nor act.

"But now, since after almost ruining my poor daughter, you deceive her, I have no longer any consideration for you. To make her come over to my side I have only to speak one word."

"Well, speak it! She is there. I will call her!"

Madame Desvarennnes, in that supreme moment, was assailed by a doubt. What if Micheline, in her blind love, did not believe her?

She raised her hand to stop Serge.

"Will not the fear of killing my daughter by this revelation stay you?" asked she, bitterly. "What manner of man are you to have so little heart and conscience?"

Panine burst into laughter.

"You see what your threats are worth, and what value I place on them. Spare them in the future. You ask me what manner of man I am? I will tell you. I have not much patience, I hate to have my liberty interfered with, and I have a horror of family jars. I expect to be master of my own house."

Madame Desvarennnes was roused at these words. Her rage had abated on her daughter's account, but now it rose to a higher pitch.

"Ah! so this is it, is it?" she said. "You would like perfect liberty, I see! You make such very good use of it. You don't like to hear remarks upon it. It is more convenient, in fact! You wish to be master in your own house? In your own house! But, in truth, what are you here to put on airs toward me? Scarcely more than a servant. A husband

receiving wages from me!"

Serge, with flashing eyes, made a terrible movement. He tried to speak, but his lips trembled, and he could not utter a sound. By a sign he showed Madame Desvarences the door. The latter looked resolutely at the Prince, and with energy which nothing could henceforth soften, added:

"You will have to deal with me in future! Good-day!"

And, leaving the room with as much calmness as she felt rage when entering it, she went down to the countinghouse.

Cayrol was sitting chatting with Marechal in his room. He was telling him that Herzog's rashness caused him much anxiety. Marechal did not encourage his confidence. The secretary's opinion on the want of morality on the part of the financier had strengthened. The good feeling he entertained toward the daughter had not counterbalanced the bad impression he had of the father, and he warmly advised Cayrol to break off all financial connection with such a man. Cayrol, indeed, had now very little to do with the European Credit. The office was still at his banking house, and the payments for shares were still made into his bank, but as soon as the new scheme which Herzog was preparing was launched, the financier intended settling in splendid offices which were being rapidly completed in the neighborhood of the Opera. Herzog might therefore commit all the follies which entered his head. Cayrol would be out of it.

Madame Desvarences entered. At the first glance, the men noticed the traces of the emotion she had just experienced. They rose and waited in silence. When the mistress was in a bad humor everybody gave way to her. It was the custom. She nodded to Cayrol, and walked up and down the office, absorbed in her own thoughts. Suddenly stopping, she said:

"Marechal, prepare Prince Panine's account."

The secretary looked up amazed, and did not seem to understand.

"Well! The Prince has had an overdraft; you will give me a statement; that's all! I wish to see how we two stand."

The two men, astonished to hear Madame Desvarences speak of her son-in-law as she would of a customer, exchanged looks.

"You have lent my son-in-law money, Cayrol?"

And as the banker remained silent, still looking at the secretary, Madame added:

"Does the presence of Marechal make you hesitate in answering me? Speak before him; I have told you more than a hundred times that he knows my

business as well as I do.”

”I have, indeed, advanced some money to the Prince,” replied Cayrol.

”How much?” inquired Madame Desvarences.

”I don’t remember the exact amount. I was happy to oblige your son-in-law.”

”You were wrong, and have acted unwisely in not acquainting me of the fact. It is thus that his follies have been encouraged by obliging friends. At all events, I ask you now not to lend him any more.”

Cayrol seemed put out, and, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up, replied:

”This is a delicate matter which you ask of me. You will cause a quarrel between the Prince and myself—”

”Do you prefer quarreling with me?” asked the mistress.

”Zounds! No!” replied the banker. ”But you place me in an embarrassing position! I have just promised to lend Serge a considerable sum to-night.”

”Well! you will not give it to him.”

”That is an act which he will scarcely forgive,” sighed Cayrol.

Madame Desvarences placed her hand on the shoulder of the banker, and looking seriously at him, said:

”You would not have forgiven me if I had allowed you to render him this service.”

A vague uneasiness filled Cayrol’s heart, a shadow seemed to pass before his eyes, and in a troubled voice he said to the mistress:

”Why so?”

”Because he would have repaid you badly.”

Cayrol thought the mistress was alluding to the money he had already lent, and his fears vanished. Madame Desvarences would surely repay it.

”So you are cutting off his resources?” he asked.

”Completely,” answered the mistress. ”He takes too much liberty, that young gentleman. He was wrong to forget that I hold the purse-strings. I don’t mind paying, but I want a little deference shown me for my money.

Good-by! Cayrol, remember my instructions.”

And, shaking hands with the banker, Madame Desvarences entered her own office, leaving the two men together.

There was a moment's pause: Cayrol was the first to break the silence.

”What do you think of the Prince's position?”

”His financial position?” asked Marechal.

”Oh, no! I know all about that! I mean his relation to Madame Desvarences.”

”Zounds! If we were in Venice in the days of the Aqua-Toffana, the sbirri and the bravi—”

”What rubbish!” interrupted Cayrol, shrugging his shoulders.

”Let me continue,” said the secretary, ”and you can shrug your shoulders afterward if you like. If we had been in Venice, knowing Madame Desvarences as I do, it would not have been surprising to me to have had Master Serge found at the bottom of the canal some fine morning.”

”You are not in earnest,” muttered the banker.

”Much more so than you think. Only you know we live in the nineteenth century, and we cannot make Providence interpose in the form of a dagger or poison so easily as in former days. Arsenic and verdigris are sometimes used, but it does not answer. Scientific people have had the meanness to invent tests by which poison can be detected even when there is none.”

”You are making fun of me,” said Cayrol, laughing.

”I! No. Come, do you wish to do a good stroke of business? Find a man who will consent to rid Madame Desvarences of her son-in-law. If he succeed, ask Madame Desvarences for a million francs. I will pay it at only twenty-five francs' discount, if you like!”

Cayrol was thoughtful. Marechal continued:

”You have known the house a long time, how is it you don't understand the mistress better? I tell you, and remember this: between Madame Desvarences and the Prince there is a mortal hatred. One of the two will destroy the other. Which? Betting is open.”

”But what must I do? The Prince relies on me—”

"Go and tell him not to do so any longer."

"Faith, no! I would rather he came to my office. I should be more at ease. Adieu, Marechal."

"Adieu, Monsieur Cayrol. But on whom will you bet?"

"Before I venture I should like to know on whose side the Princess is."

"Ah, dangler! You think too much of the women! Some day you will be let in through that failing of yours!"

Cayrol smiled conceitedly, and went away. Marechal sat down at his desk, and took out a sheet of paper.

"I must tell Pierre that everything is going on well here," he murmured. "If he knew what was taking place he would soon be back, and might be guilty of some foolery or other." So he commenced writing.