Honoré de Balzac

Sons of the Soil

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Sons of the Soil

Honoré de Balzac

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DEDICATION

To Monsieur P. S. B. Gavault.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote these words at the beginning of his Nouvelle Heloise: “I have seen the morals of my time and I publish these letters.” May I not say to you, in imitation of that great writer, “I have studied the march of my epoch and I publish this work”?

The object of this particular study—startling in its truth so long as society makes philanthropy a principle instead of regarding it as an accident—is to bring to sight the leading characters of a class too long unheeded by the pens of writers who seek novelty as their chief object. Perhaps this forgetfulness is only prudence in these days when the people are heirs of all the sycophants of royalty. We make criminals poetic, we commiserate the hangman, we have all but deified the proletary. Sects have risen, and cried by every pen, “Arise, working-men!” just as formerly they cried, “Arise!” to the “tiers etat.” None of these Erostrates, however, have dared to face the country solitudes and study the unceasing conspiracy of those whom we term weak against those others who fancy themselves strong,—that of the peasant against the proprietor. It is necessary to enlighten not only the legislator of to-day but him of to-morrow. In the midst of the present democratic ferment, into which so many of our writers blindly rush, it becomes an urgent duty to exhibit the peasant who renders Law inapplicable, and who has made the ownership of land to be a thing that is, and that is not.

You are now to behold that indefatigable mole, that rodent which undermines and disintegrates the soil, parcels it out and divides an acre into a hundred fragments,—ever spurred on to his banquet by the lower middle classes who make him at once their auxiliary and their prey. This essentially unsocial element, created by the Revolution, will some day absorb the middle classes, just as the middle classes have destroyed the nobility. Lifted above the law by its own insignificance, this Robespierre, with one head and twenty million arms, is at work perpetually; crouching in country districts, intrenched in municipal councils, under arms in the national guard of every canton in France,—one result of the year 1830, which failed to remember that Napoleon preferred the chances of defeat to the danger of arming the masses.

If during the last eight years I have again and again given up the writing of this book (the most important of those I have undertaken to write), and as often returned to it, it was, as you and other friends can well imagine, because my

courage shrank from the many difficulties, the many essential details of a drama so doubly dreadful and so cruelly bloody. Among the reasons which render me now almost, it may be thought, foolhardy, I count the desire to finish a work long designed to be to you a proof of my deep and lasting gratitude for a friendship that has ever been among my greatest consolations in misfortune.

De Balzac.

SONS OF THE SOIL

PART I

Whoso land hath, contention hath.

CHAPTER I. THE CHATEAU

Les Aigues, August 6, 1823.

To Monsieur Nathan,

My dear Nathan,—You, who provide the public with such delightful dreams through the magic of your imagination, are now to follow me while I make you dream a dream of truth. You shall then tell me whether the present century is likely to bequeath such dreams to the Nathans and the Blondets of the year 1923; you shall estimate the distance at which we now are from the days when the Florines of the eighteenth century found, on awaking, a chateau like Les Aigues in the terms of their bargain.

My dear fellow, if you receive this letter in the morning, let your mind travel, as you lie in bed, fifty leagues or thereabouts from Paris, along the great mail road which leads to the confines of Burgundy, and behold two small lodges built of red brick, joined, or separated, by a rail painted green. It was there that the diligence deposited your friend and correspondent.

On either side of this double pavilion grows a quick-set hedge, from which the brambles straggle like stray locks of hair. Here and there a tree shoots boldly up; flowers bloom on the slopes of the wayside ditch, bathing their feet in its green and sluggish water. The hedge at both ends meets and joins two strips of woodland, and the double meadow thus inclosed is doubtless the result of a clearing.

These dusty and deserted lodges give entrance to a magnificent avenue of centennial elms, whose umbrageous heads lean toward each other and form a long and most majestic arbor. The grass grows in this avenue, and only a few wheel-tracks can be seen along its double width of way. The great age of the trees, the breadth of the avenue, the venerable construction of the lodges, the brown tints of their stone courses, all bespeak an approach to some half-regal residence.

Before reaching this enclosure from the height of an eminence such as we Frenchmen rather conceitedly call a mountain, at the foot of which lies the village of Conches (the last post-house), I had seen the long valley of Aigues, at the farther end of which the mail road turns to follow a straight line into the little sub-prefecture of La Ville-aux-Fayes, over which, as you know, the nephew of our friend des Lupeaulx lords it. Tall forests lying on the horizon, along vast slopes which skirt a river, command this rich valley, which is framed in the far distance by the mountains of a lesser Switzerland, called the Morvan. These forests belong to Les Aigues, and to the Marquis de Ronquerolles and the Comte de Soulanges,

whose castles and parks and villages, seen in the distance from these heights, give the scene a strong resemblance to the imaginary landscapes of Velvet Breughel.

If these details do not remind you of all the castles in the air you have desired to possess in France you are not worthy to receive the present narrative of an astounded Parisian. At last I have seen a landscape where art is blended with nature in such a way that neither of them spoils the other; the art is natural, and the nature artistic. I have found the oasis that you and I have dreamed of when reading novels,—nature luxuriant and adorned, rolling lines that are not confused, something wild withal, unkempt, mysterious, not common. Jump that green railing and come on!

When I tried to look up the avenue, which the sun never penetrates except when it rises or when it sets, striping the road like a zebra with its oblique rays, my view was obstructed by an outline of rising ground; after that is passed, the long avenue is obstructed by a copse, within which the roads meet at a cross-ways, in the centre of which stands a stone obelisk, for all the world like an eternal exclamation mark. From the crevices between the foundation stones of this erection, which is topped by a spiked ball (what an idea!), hang flowering plants, blue or yellow according to the season. Les Aigues must certainly have been built by a woman, or for a woman; no man would have had such dainty ideas; the architect no doubt had his cue.

Passing through the little wood placed there as sentinel, I came upon a charming declivity, at the foot of which foamed and gurgled a little brook, which I crossed on a culvert of mossy stones, superb in color, the prettiest of all the mosaics which time manufactures. The avenue continues by the brookside up a gentle rise. In the distance, the first tableau is now seen,—a mill and its dam, a causeway and trees, linen laid out to dry, the thatched cottage of the miller, his fishing-nets, and the tank where the fish are kept,—not to speak of the miller’s boy, who was already watching me. No matter where you are in the country, however solitary you may think yourself, you are certain to be the focus of the two eyes of a country bumpkin; a laborer rests on his hoe, a vine-dresser straightens his bent back, a little goat-girl, or shepherdess, or milkmaid climbs a willow to stare at you.

Presently the avenue merges into an alley of acacias, which leads to an iron railing made in the days when iron-workers fashioned those slender filagrees which are not unlike the copies set us by a writing-master. On either side of the railing is a ha-ha, the edges of which bristle with angry spikes,—regular porcupines in metal. The railing is closed at both ends by two porter’s-lodges, like those of the palace at Versailles, and the gateway is surmounted by colossal vases. The gold of the arabesques is ruddy, for rust has added its tints, but this entrance, called “the gate

of the Avenue," which plainly shows the hand of the Great Dauphin (to whom, indeed, Les Aigues owes it), seems to me none the less beautiful for that. At the end of each ha-ha the walls of the park, built of rough-hewn stone, begin. These stones, set in a mortar made of reddish earth, display their variegated colors, the warm yellows of the silex, the white of the lime carbonates, the russet browns of the sandstone, in many a fantastic shape. As you first enter it, the park is gloomy, the walls are hidden by creeping plants and by trees that for fifty years have heard no sound of axe. One might think it a virgin forest, made primeval again through some phenomenon granted exclusively to forests. The trunks of the trees are swathed with lichen which hangs from one to another. Mistletoe, with its viscid leaves, droops from every fork of the branches where moisture settles. I have found gigantic ivies, wild arabesques which flourish only at fifty leagues from Paris, here where land does not cost enough to make one sparing of it. The landscape on such free lines covers a great deal of ground. Nothing is smoothed off; rakes are unknown, ruts and ditches are full of water, frogs are tranquilly delivered of their tadpoles, the woodland flowers bloom, and the heather is as beautiful as that I have seen on your mantle-shelf in January in the elegant beau-pot sent by Florine. This mystery is intoxicating, it inspires vague desires. The forest odors, beloved of souls that are epicures of poesy, who delight in the tiny mosses, the noxious fungi, the moist mould, the willows, the balsams, the wild thyme, the green waters of a pond, the golden star of the yellow water-lily,—the breath of all such vigorous propagations came to my nostrils and filled me with a single thought; was it their soul? I seemed to see a rose-tinted gown floating along the winding alley.

The path ended abruptly in another copse, where birches and poplars and all the quivering trees palpitated,—an intelligent family with graceful branches and elegant bearing, the trees of a love as free! It was from this point, my dear fellow, that I saw a pond covered with the white water-lily and other plants with broad flat leaves and narrow slender ones, on which lay a boat painted white and black, as light as a nut-shell and dainty as the wherry of a Seine boatman. Beyond rose the chateau, built in 1560, of fine red brick, with stone courses and copings, and window-frames in which the sashes were of small leaded panes (O Versailles!). The stone is hewn in diamond points, but hollowed, as in the Ducal Palace at Venice on the facade toward the Bridge of Sighs. There are no regular lines about the castle except in the centre building, from which projects a stately portico with double flights of curving steps, and round balusters slender at their base and broadening at the middle. The main building is surrounded by clock-towers and sundry modern turrets, with galleries and vases more or less Greek. No harmony there, my dear Nathan! These heterogeneous erections are wrapped, so to speak, by

various evergreen trees whose branches shed their brown needles upon the roofs, nourishing the lichen and giving tone to the cracks and crevices where the eye delights to wander. Here you see the Italian pine, the stone pine, with its red bark and its majestic parasol; here a cedar two hundred years old, weeping willows, a Norway spruce, and a beech which overtops them all; and there, in front of the main tower, some very singular shrubs,—a yew trimmed in a way that recalls some long-decayed garden of old France, and magnolias with hortensias at their feet. In short, the place is the Invalides of the heroes of horticulture, once the fashion and now forgotten, like all other heroes.

A chimney, with curious copings, which was sending forth great volumes of smoke, assured me that this delightful scene was not an opera setting. A kitchen reveals human beings. Now imagine *me*, Blondet, who shiver as if in the polar regions at Saint-Cloud, in the midst of this glowing Burgundian climate. The sun sends down its warmest rays, the king-fisher watches on the shores of the pond, the cricket chirps, the grain-pods burst, the poppy drops its morphia in glutinous tears, and all are clearly defined on the dark-blue ether. Above the ruddy soil of the terraces flames that joyous natural punch which intoxicates the insects and the flowers and dazzles our eyes and browns our faces. The grape is beading, its tendrils fall in a veil of threads whose delicacy puts to shame the lace-makers. Beside the house blue larkspur, nasturtium, and sweet-peas are blooming. From a distance orange-trees and tuberoses scent the air. After the poetic exhalations of the woods (a gradual preparation) came the delectable pastilles of this botanic seraglio.

Standing on the portico, like the queen of flowers, behold a woman robed in white, with hair unpowdered, holding a parasol lined with white silk, but herself whiter than the silk, whiter than the lilies at her feet, whiter than the starry jasmine that climbed the balustrade,—a woman, a Frenchwoman born in Russia, who said as I approached her, “I had almost given you up.” She had seen me as I left the copse. With what perfection do all women, even the most guileless, understand the arrangement of a scenic effect? The movements of the servants, who were preparing to serve breakfast, showed me that the meal had been delayed until after the arrival of the diligence. She had not ventured to come to meet me.

Is this not our dream,—the dream of all lovers of the beautiful, under whatsoever form it comes; the seraphic beauty that Luini put into his Marriage of the Virgin, that noble fresco at Sarono; the beauty that Rubens grasped in the tumult of his “Battle of the Thermodon”; the beauty that five centuries have elaborated in the cathedrals of Seville and Milan; the beauty of the Saracens at Granada, the beauty

of Louis XIV. at Versailles, the beauty of the Alps, and that of this Limagne in which I stand?

Belonging to the estate, about which there is nothing too princely, nor yet too financial, where prince and farmer-general have both lived (which fact serves to explain it), are four thousand acres of woodland, a park of some nine hundred acres, the mill, three leased farms, another immense farm at Conches, and vineyards,—the whole producing a revenue of about seventy thousand francs a year. Now you know Les Aigues, my dear fellow; where I have been expected for the last two weeks, and where I am at this moment, in the chintz-lined chamber assigned to dearest friends.

Above the park, towards Conches, a dozen little brooks, clear, limpid streams coming from the Morvan, fall into the pond, after adorning with their silvery ribbons the valleys of the park and the magnificent gardens around the chateau. The name of the place, Les Aigues, comes from these charming streams of water; the estate was originally called in the old title-deeds “Les Aigues-Vives” to distinguish it from “Aigues-Mortes”; but the word “Vives” has now been dropped. The pond empties into the stream, which follows the course of the avenue, through a wide and straight canal bordered on both sides and along its whole length by weeping willows. This canal, thus arched, produces a delightful effect. Gliding through it, seated on a thwart of the little boat, one could fancy one’s self in the nave of some great cathedral, the choir being formed of the main building of the house seen at the end of it. When the setting sun casts its orange tones mingled with amber upon the casements of the chateau, the effect is that of painted windows. At the other end of the canal we see Blangy, the county-town, containing about sixty houses, and the village church, which is nothing more than a tumble-down building with a wooden clock-tower which appears to hold up a roof of broken tiles. One comfortable house and the parsonage are distinguishable; but the township is a large one,—about two hundred scattered houses in all, those of the village forming as it were the capital. The roads are lined with fruit-trees, and numerous little gardens are strewn here and there,—true country gardens with everything in them; flowers, onions, cabbages and grapevines, currants, and a great deal of manure. The village has a primitive air; it is rustic, and has that decorative simplicity which we artists are forever seeking. In the far distance is the little town of Soulanges overhanging a vast sheet of water, like the buildings on the lake of Thune.

When you stroll in the park, which has four gates, each superb in style, you feel that our mythological Arcadias are flat and stale. Arcadia is in Burgundy, not in

Greece; Arcadia is at Les Aigues and nowhere else. A river, made by scores of brooklets, crosses the park at its lower level with a serpentine movement; giving a dewy freshness and tranquillity to the scene,—an air of solitude, which reminds one of a convent of Carthusians, and all the more because, on an artificial island in the river, is a hermitage in ruins, the interior elegance of which is worthy of the luxurious financier who constructed it. Les Aigues, my dear Nathan, once belonged to that Bouret who spent two millions to receive Louis XV. on a single occasion under his roof. How many ardent passions, how many distinguished minds, how many fortunate circumstances have contributed to make this beautiful place what it is! A mistress of Henri IV. rebuilt the chateau where it now stands. The favorite of the Great Dauphin, Mademoiselle Choin (to whom Les Aigues was given), added a number of farms to it. Bouret furnished the house with all the elegancies of Parisian homes for an Opera celebrity; and to him Les Aigues owes the restoration of its ground floor in the style Louis XV.

I have often stood rapt in admiration at the beauty of the dining-room. The eye is first attracted to the ceiling, painted in fresco in the Italian manner, where lightsome arabesques are frolicking. Female forms, in stucco ending in foliage, support at regular distances corbeils of fruit, from which spring the garlands of the ceiling. Charming paintings, the work of unknown artists, fill the panels between the female figures, representing the luxuries of the table,—boar's-heads, salmon, rare shell-fish, and all edible things,—which fantastically suggest men and women and children, and rival the whimsical imagination of the Chinese,—the people who best understand, to my thinking at least, the art of decoration. The mistress of the house finds a bell-wire beneath her feet to summon servants, who enter only when required, disturbing no interviews and overhearing no secrets. The panels above the doorways represent gay scenes; all the embrasures, both of doors and windows, are in marble mosaics. The room is heated from below. Every window looks forth on some delightful view.

This room communicates with a bath-room on one side and on the other with a boudoir which opens into the salon. The bath-room is lined with Sevres tiles, painted in monochrome, the floor is mosaic, and the bath marble. An alcove, hidden by a picture painted on copper, which turns on a pivot, contains a couch in gilt wood of the truest Pompadour. The ceiling is lapis-lazuli starred with gold. The tiles are painted from designs by Boucher. Bath, table and love are therefore closely united.

After the salon, which, I should tell you, my dear fellow, exhibits the magnificence of the Louis XIV. manner, you enter a fine billiard-room unrivalled so far as I

know in Paris itself. The entrance to this suite of ground-floor apartments is through a semi-circular antechamber, at the lower end of which is a fairy-like staircase, lighted from above, which leads to other parts of the house, all built at various epochs—and to think that they chopped off the heads of the wealthy in 1793! Good heavens! why can't people understand that the marvels of art are impossible in a land where there are no great fortunes, no secure, luxurious lives? If the Left insists on killing kings why not leave us a few little princelings with money in their pockets?

At the present moment these accumulated treasures belong to a charming woman with an artistic soul, who is not content with merely restoring them magnificently, but who keeps the place up with loving care. Sham philosophers, studying themselves while they profess to be studying humanity, call these glorious things extravagance. They grovel before cotton prints and the tasteless designs of modern industry, as if we were greater and happier in these days than in those of Henri IV., Louis XIV., and Louis XVI., monarchs who have all left the stamp of their reigns upon Les Aigues. What palace, what royal castle, what mansions, what noble works of art, what gold brocaded stuffs are sacred now? The petticoats of our grandmothers go to cover the chairs in these degenerate days. Selfish and thieving interlopers that we are, we pull down everything and plant cabbages where marvels once were rife. Only yesterday the plough levelled Persan, that magnificent domain which gave a title to one of the most opulent families of the old parliament; hammers have demolished Montmorency, which cost an Italian follower of Napoleon untold sums; Val, the creation of Regnault de Saint-Jean d'Angely, Cassan, built by a mistress of the Prince de Conti; in all, four royal houses have disappeared in the valley of the Oise alone. We are getting a Roman campagna around Paris in advance of the days when a tempest shall blow from the north and overturn our plaster palaces and our pasteboard decorations.

Now see, my dear fellow, to what the habit of bombasticising in newspapers brings you to. Here am I writing a downright article. Does the mind have its ruts, like a road? I stop; for I rob the mail, and I rob myself, and you may be yawning—to be continued in our next; I hear the second bell, which summons me to one of those abundant breakfasts the fashion of which has long passed away, in the dining-rooms of Paris, be it understood.

Here's the history of my Arcadia. In 1815, there died at Les Aigues one of the famous wantons of the last century,—a singer, forgotten of the guillotine and the nobility, after preying upon exchequers, upon literature, upon aristocracy, and all but reaching the scaffold; forgotten, like so many fascinating old women who

expiate their golden youth in country solitudes, and replace their lost loves by another,—man by Nature. Such women live with the flowers, with the woodland scents, with the sky, with the sunshine, with all that sings and skips and shines and sprouts,—the birds, the squirrels, the flowers, the grass; they know nothing about these things, they cannot explain them, but they love them; they love them so well that they forget dukes, marshals, rivalries, financiers, follies, luxuries, their paste jewels and their real diamonds, their heeled slippers and their rouge,—all, for the sweetness of country life.

I have gathered, my dear fellow, much precious information about the old age of Mademoiselle Laguerre; for, to tell you the truth, the after life of such women as Florine, Mariette, Suzanne de Val Noble, and Tullia has made me, every now and then, extremely inquisitive, as though I were a child inquiring what had become of the old moons.

In 1790 Mademoiselle Laguerre, alarmed at the turn of public affairs, came to settle at Les Aigues, bought and given to her by Bouret, who passed several summers with her at the chateau. Terrified at the fate of Madame du Barry, she buried her diamonds. At that time she was only fifty-three years of age, and according to her lady's-maid, afterwards married to a gendarme named Soudry, "Madame was more beautiful than ever." My dear Nathan, Nature has no doubt her private reasons for treating women of this sort like spoiled children; excesses, instead of killing them, fatten them, preserve them, renew their youth. Under a lymphatic appearance they have nerves which maintain their marvellous physique; they actually preserve their beauty for reasons which would make a virtuous woman haggard. No, upon my word, Nature is not moral!

Mademoiselle Laguerre lived an irreproachable life at Les Aigues, one might even call it a saintly one, after her famous adventure,—you remember it? One evening in a paroxysm of despairing love, she fled from the opera-house in her stage dress, rushed into the country, and passed the night weeping by the wayside. (Ah! how they have calumniated the love of Louis XV.'s time!) She was so unused to see the sunrise, that she hailed it with one of her finest songs. Her attitude, quite as much as her tinsel, drew the peasants about her; amazed at her gestures, her voice, her beauty, they took her for an angel, and dropped on their knees around her. If Voltaire had not existed we might have thought it a new miracle. I don't know if God gave her much credit for her tardy virtue, for love after all must be a sickening thing to a woman as weary of it as a wanton of the old Opera. Mademoiselle Laguerre was born in 1740, and her hey-day was in 1760, when Monsieur (I forget his name) was called the "ministre de la guerre," on account of his liaison with her.

She abandoned that name, which was quite unknown down here, and called herself Madame des Aigues, as if to merge her identity in the estate, which she delighted to improve with a taste that was profoundly artistic. When Bonaparte became First Consul, she increased her property by the purchase of church lands, for which she used the proceeds of her diamonds. As an Opera divinity never knows how to take care of her money, she intrusted the management of the estate to a steward, occupying herself with her flowers and fruits and with the beautifying of the park.

After Mademoiselle was dead and buried at Blangy, the notary of Soulanges—that little town which lies between Ville-aux-Fayes and Blangy, the capital of the township—made an elaborate inventory, and sought out the heirs of the singer, who never knew she had any. Eleven families of poor laborers living near Amiens, and sleeping in cotton sheets, awoke one fine morning in golden ones. The property was sold at auction. Les Aigues was bought by Montcornet, who had laid by enough during his campaigns in Spain and Pomerania to make the purchase, which cost about eleven hundred thousand francs, including the furniture. The general, no doubt, felt the influence of these luxurious apartments; and I was arguing with the countess only yesterday that her marriage was a direct result of the purchase of Les Aigues.

To rightly understand the countess, my dear Nathan, you must know that the general is a violent man, red as fire, five feet nine inches tall, round as a tower, with a thick neck and the shoulders of a blacksmith, which must have amply filled his cuirass. Montcornet commanded the cuirassiers at the battle of Essling (called by the Austrians Gross-Aspern), and came near perishing when that noble corps was driven back on the Danube. He managed to cross the river astride a log of wood. The cuirassiers, finding the bridge down, took the glorious resolution, at Montcornet's command, to turn and resist the entire Austrian army, which carried off on the morrow over thirty wagon-loads of cuirasses. The Germans invented a name for their enemies on this occasion which means "men of iron."[*] Montcornet has the outer man of a hero of antiquity. His arms are stout and vigorous, his chest deep and broad; his head has a leonine aspect, his voice is of those that can order a charge in the thick of battle; but he has nothing more than the courage of a daring man; he lacks mind and breadth of view. Like other generals to whom military common-sense, the natural boldness of those who spend their lives in danger, and the habit of command gives an appearance of superiority, Montcornet has an imposing effect when you first meet him; he seems a Titan, but he contains a dwarf, like the pasteboard giant who saluted Queen Elizabeth at the gates of Kenilworth. Choleric though kind, and full of imperial hauteur, he has the caustic tongue of a soldier, and is quick at repartee, but quicker still with a blow. He may

have been superb on a battle-field; in a household he is simply intolerable. He knows no love but barrack love,—the love which those clever myth-makers, the ancients, placed under the patronage of Eros, son of Mars and Venus. Those delightful chroniclers of the old religions provided themselves with a dozen different Loves. Study the fathers and the attributes of these Loves, and you will discover a complete social nomenclature,—and yet we fancy that we originate things! When the world turns upside down like an hour-glass, when the seas become continents, Frenchmen will find canons, steamboats, newspapers, and maps wrapped up in seaweed at the bottom of what is now our ocean.

[*] I do not, on principle, like foot-notes, and this is the first I have ever allowed myself. Its historical interest must be my excuse; it will prove, moreover, that descriptions of battles should be something more than the dry particulars of technical writers, who for the last three thousand years have told us about left and right wings and centres being broken or driven in, but never a word about the soldier himself, his sufferings, and his heroism. The conscientious care with which I prepared myself to write the “Scenes from Military Life,” led me to many a battle-field once wet with the blood of France and her enemies. Among them I went to Wagram. When I reached the shores of the Danube, opposite Lobau, I noticed on the bank, which is covered with turf, certain undulations that reminded me of the furrows in a field of lucern. I asked the reason of it, thinking I should hear of some new method of agriculture: “There sleep the cavalry of the imperial guard,” said the peasant who served us as a guide; “those are their graves you see there.” The words made me shudder. Prince Frederic Schwartzenburg, who translated them, added that the man had himself driven one of the wagons laden with cuirasses. By one of the strange chances of war our guide had served a breakfast to Napoleon on the morning of the battle of Wagram. Though poor, he had kept the double napoleon which the Emperor gave him for his milk and his eggs. The curate of Gross-Aspern took us to the famous cemetery where French and Austrians struggled together knee-deep in blood, with a courage and obstinacy glorious to each. There, while explaining that a marble tablet (to which our attention had been attracted, and on which were inscribed the names of the owner of Gross-Aspern, who had been killed on the third day) was the sole compensation ever given to the family, he said, in a tone of deep sadness: “It was a time of great misery, and of great hopes; but now are the days of forgetfulness.” The saying seemed to me sublime in its simplicity; but when I came to reflect upon the matter, I felt there was some justification for the apparent ingratitude of the House of Austria. Neither nations nor kings are wealthy enough to reward all the devotions to which these tragic struggles give rise. Let those who serve a cause with a secret expectation of recompense, set a price upon their blood and become mercenaries. Those who wield either sword or pen for their country’s good ought to think of nothing but of *doing their best*, as our fathers used to say, and expect nothing, not even glory, except as a happy accident.
It was in rushing to retake this famous cemetery for the third time that Massena, wounded and carried in the box of a cabriolet, made this splendid harangue to his soldiers: “What! you rascally curs, who have only five sous a day while I have forty thousand, do you let me go

ahead of you?" All the world knows the order which the Emperor sent to his lieutenant by M. de Sainte-Croix, who swam the Danube three times: "Die or retake the village; it is a question of saving the army; the bridges are destroyed."
The Author.

Now, I must tell you that the Comtesse de Montcornet is a fragile, timid, delicate little woman. What do you think of such a marriage as that? To those who know society such things are common enough; a well-assorted marriage is the exception. Nevertheless, I have come to see how it is that this slender little creature handles her bobbins in a way to lead this heavy, solid, stolid general precisely as he himself used to lead his cuirassiers.

If Montcornet begins to bluster before his Virginie, Madame lays a finger on her lips and he is silent. He smokes his pipes and his cigars in a kiosk fifty feet from the chateau, and airs himself before he returns to the house. Proud of his subjection, he turns to her, like a bear drunk on grapes, and says, when anything is proposed, "If Madame approves." When he comes to his wife's room, with that heavy step which makes the tiles creak as though they were boards, and she, not wanting him, calls out: "Don't come in!" he performs a military volte-face and says humbly: "You will let me know when I can see you?"—in the very tones with which he shouted to his cuirassiers on the banks of the Danube: "Men, we must die, and die well, since there's nothing else we can do!" I have heard him say, speaking of his wife, "Not only do I love her, but I venerate her." When he flies into a passion which defies all restraint and bursts all bonds, the little woman retires into her own room and leaves him to shout. But four or five hours later she will say: "Don't get into a passion, my dear, you might break a blood-vessel; and besides, you hurt me." Then the lion of Essling retreats out of sight to wipe his eyes. Sometimes he comes into the salon when she and I are talking, and if she says: "Don't disturb us, he is reading to me," he leaves us without a word.

It is only strong men, choleric and powerful, thunder-bolts of war, diplomats with olympian heads, or men of genius, who can show this utter confidence, this generous devotion to weakness, this constant protection, this love without jealousy, this easy good humor with a woman. Good heavens! I place the science of the countess's management of her husband as far above the peevish, arid virtues as the satin of a causeuse is superior to the Utrecht velvet of a dirty bourgeois sofa.

My dear fellow, I have spent six days in this delightful country-house, and I never tire of admiring the beauties of the park, surrounded by forests where pretty wood-paths lead beside the brooks. Nature and its silence, these tranquil pleasures, this placid life to which she woos me,—all attract. Ah! here is true literature; no

fault of style among the meadows. Happiness forgets all things here,—even the Debats! It has rained all the morning; while the countess slept and Montcornet tramped over his domain, I have compelled myself to keep my rash, imprudent promise to write to you.

Until now, though I was born at Alencon, of an old judge and a prefect, so they say, and though I know something of agriculture, I supposed the tale of estates bringing in four or five thousand francs a month to be a fable. Money, to me, meant a couple of dreadful things,—work and a publisher, journalism and politics. When shall we poor fellows come upon a land where gold springs up with the grass? That is what I desire for you and for me and the rest of us in the name of the theatre, and of the press, and of book-making! Amen!

Will Florine be jealous of the late Mademoiselle Laguerre? Our modern Bourets have no French nobles now to show them how to live; they hire one opera-box among three of them; they subscribe for their pleasures; they no longer cut down magnificently bound quartos to match the octavos in their library; in fact, they scarcely buy even stitched paper books. What is to become of us?

Adieu; continue to care for
Your Blondet.

If this letter, dashed off by the idlest pen of the century, had not by some lucky chance been preserved, it would have been almost impossible to describe Les Aigues; and without this description the history of the horrible events that occurred there would certainly be less interesting.

After that remark some persons will expect to see the flashing of the cuirass of the former colonel of the guard, and the raging of his anger as he falls like a waterspout upon his little wife; so that the end of this present history may be like the end of all modern dramas,—a tragedy of the bed-chamber. Perhaps the fatal scene will take place in that charming room with the blue monochromes, where beautiful ideal birds are painted on the ceilings and the shutters, where Chinese monsters laugh with open jaws on the mantle-shelf, and dragons, green and gold, twist their tails in curious convolutions around rich vases, and Japanese fantasy embroiders its designs of many colors; where sofas and reclining-chairs and consoles and what-nots invite to that contemplative idleness which forbids all action.

No; the drama here to be developed is not one of private life; it concerns things higher, or lower. Expect no scenes of passion; the truth of this history is only too dramatic. And remember, the historian should never forget that his mission is to do justice to all; the poor and the prosperous are equals before his pen; to him the

peasant appears in the grandeur of his misery, and the rich in the pettiness of his folly. Moreover, the rich man has passions, the peasant only wants. The peasant is therefore doubly poor; and if, politically, his aggressions must be pitilessly repressed, to the eyes of humanity and religion he is sacred.

CHAPTER II. A BUCOLIC OVERLOOKED BY VIRGIL

When a Parisian drops into the country he is cut off from all his usual habits, and soon feels the dragging hours, no matter how attentive his friends may be to him. Therefore, because it is so impossible to prolong in a tete-a-tete conversations that are soon exhausted, the master and mistress of a country-house are apt to say, calmly, “You will be terribly bored here.” It is true that to understand the delights of country life one must have something to do, some interests in it; one must know the nature of the work to be done, and the alternating harmony of toil and pleasure,—eternal symbol of human life.

When a Parisian has recovered his powers of sleeping, shaken off the fatigues of his journey, and accustomed himself to country habits, the hardest period of the day (if he wears thin boots and is neither a sportsman nor an agriculturalist) is the early morning. Between the hours of waking and breakfasting, the women of the family are sleeping or dressing, and therefore unapproachable; the master of the house is out and about on his own affairs; a Parisian is therefore compelled to be alone from eight to eleven o’clock, the hour chosen in all country-houses for breakfast. Now, having got what amusement he can out of carefully dressing himself, he has soon exhausted that resource. Then, perhaps, he has brought with him some work, which he finds it impossible to do, and which goes back untouched, after he sees the difficulties of doing it, into his valise; a writer is then obliged to wander about the park and gape at nothing or count the big trees. The easier the life, the more irksome such occupations are,—unless, indeed, one belongs to the sect of shaking quakers or to the honorable guild of carpenters or taxidermists. If one really had, like the owners of estates, to live in the country, it would be well to supply one’s self with a geological, mineralogical, entomological, or botanical hobby; but a sensible man doesn’t give himself a vice merely to kill time for a fortnight. The noblest estate, and the finest chateaux soon pall on those who possess nothing but the sight of them. The beauties of nature seem rather squalid compared to the representation of them at the opera. Paris, by retrospection, shines from all its facets. Unless some particular interest attaches us, as it did in Blondet’s case, to scenes honored by the steps and lighted by the eyes of a certain person, one would envy the birds their wings and long to get back to the endless, exciting scenes of Paris and its harrowing strifes.

The long letter of the young journalist must make most intelligent minds suppose that he had reached, morally and physically, that particular phase of satisfied passions and comfortable happiness which certain winged creatures fed in Strasbourg so perfectly represent when, with their heads sunk behind their protruding gizzards, they neither see nor wish to see the most appetizing food. So, when the formidable letter was finished, the writer felt the need of getting away from the gardens of Armida and doing something to enliven the deadly void of the morning hours; for the hours between breakfast and dinner belonged to the mistress of the house, who knew very well how to make them pass quickly. To keep, as Madame de Montcornet did, a man of talent in the country without ever seeing on his face the false smile of satiety, or detecting the yawn of a weariness that cannot be concealed, is a great triumph for a woman. The affection which is equal to such a test certainly ought to be eternal. It is to be wondered at that women do not oftener employ it to judge of their lovers; a fool, an egoist, or a petty nature could never stand it. Philip the Second himself, the Alexander of dissimulation, would have told his secrets if condemned to a month's tete-a-tete in the country. Perhaps this is why kings seek to live in perpetual motion, and allow no one to see them more than fifteen minutes at a time.

Notwithstanding that he had received the delicate attentions of one of the most charming women in Paris, Emile Blondet was able to feel once more the long forgotten delights of a truant schoolboy; and on the morning of the day after his letter was written he had himself called by Francois, the head valet, who was specially appointed to wait on him, for the purpose of exploring the valley of the Avonne.

The Avonne is a little river which, being swollen above Conches by numerous rivulets, some of which rise in Les Aigues, falls at Ville-aux-Fayes into one of the large affluents of the Seine. The geographical position of the Avonne, navigable for over twelve miles, had, ever since Jean Bouvet invented rafts, given full money value to the forests of Les Aigues, Soulanges, and Ronquerolles, standing on the crest of the hills between which this charming river flows. The park of Les Aigues covers the greater part of the valley, between the river (bordered on both sides by the forest called des Aigues) and the royal mail road, defined by a line of old elms in the distance along the slopes of the Avonne mountains, which are in fact the foot-hills of that magnificent amphitheater called the Morvan.

However vulgar the comparison may be, the park, lying thus at the bottom of the valley, is like an enormous fish with its head at Conches and its tail in the village of Blangy; for it widens in the middle to nearly three hundred acres, while towards

Conches it counts less than fifty, and sixty at Blangy. The position of this estate, between three villages, and only three miles from the little town of Soulanges, from which the descent is rapid, may perhaps have led to the strife and caused the excesses which are the chief interest attaching to the place. If, when seen from the mail road or from the uplands beyond Ville-aux-Fayes, the paradise of Les Aigues induces mere passing travellers to commit the mortal sin of envy, why should the rich burghers of Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes who had it before their eyes and admired it every day of their lives, have been more virtuous?

This last topographical detail was needed to explain the site, also the use of the four gates by which alone the park of Les Aigues was entered; for it was completely surrounded by walls, except where nature had provided a fine view, and at such points sunk fences or ha-has had been placed. The four gates, called the gate of Conches, the gate of Avonne, the gate of Blangy, and the gate of the Avenue, showed the styles of the different periods at which they were constructed so admirably that a brief description, in the interest of archaeologists, will presently be given, as brief as the one Blondet has already written about the gate of the Avenue.

After eight days of strolling about with the countess, the illustrious editor of the “Journal des Debats” knew by heart the Chinese kiosk, the bridges, the isles, the hermitage, the dairy, the ruined temple, the Babylonian ice-house, and all the other delusions invented by landscape architects which some nine hundred acres of land can be made to serve. He now wished to find the sources of the Avonne, which the general and the countess daily extolled in the evening, making plans to visit them which were daily forgotten the next morning. Above Les Aigues the Avonne really had the appearance of an alpine torrent. Sometimes it hollowed a bed among the rocks, sometimes it went underground; on this side the brooks came down in cascades, there they flowed like the Loire on sandy shallows where rafts could not pass on account of the shifting channels. Blondet took a short cut through the labyrinths of the park to reach the gate of Conches. This gate demands a few words, which give, moreover, certain historical details about the property.

The original founder of Les Aigues was a younger son of the Soulanges family, enriched by marriage, whose chief ambition was to make his elder brother jealous,—a sentiment, by the bye, to which we owe the fairy-land of Isola Bella in the Lago Maggiore. In the middle ages the castle of Les Aigues stood on the banks of the Avonne. Of this old building nothing remains but the gateway, which has a porch like the entrance to a fortified town, flanked by two round towers with conical roofs. Above the arch of the porch are heavy stone courses, now draped with vegetation, showing three large windows with cross-bar sashes. A winding

stairway in one of the towers leads to two chambers, and a kitchen occupies the other tower. The roof of the porch, of pointed shape like all old timber-work, is noticeable for two weathercocks perched at each end of a ridge-pole ornamented with fantastic iron-work. Many an important place cannot boast of so fine a town hall. On the outside of this gateway, the keystone of the arch still bears the arms of Soulanges, preserved by the hardness of the stone on which the chisel of the artist carved them, as follows: Azure, on a pale, argent, three pilgrim's staff's sable; a fess bronchant, gules, charged with four grosses patee, fitched, or; with the heraldic form of a shield awarded to younger sons. Blondet deciphered the motto, "Je soule agir,"—one of those puns that crusaders delighted to make upon their names, and which brings to mind a fine political maxim, which, as we shall see later, was unfortunately forgotten by Montcornet. The gate, which was opened for Blondet by a very pretty girl, was of time-worn wood clamped with iron. The keeper, wakened by the creaking of the hinges, put his nose out of the window and showed himself in his night-shirt.

"So our keepers sleep till this time of day!" thought the Parisian, who thought himself very knowing in rural customs.

After a walk of about quarter of an hour, he reached the sources of the river above Conches, where his ravished eyes beheld one of those landscapes that ought to be described, like the history of France, in a thousand volumes or in only one. We must here content ourselves with two paragraphs.

A projecting rock, covered with dwarf trees and abraded at its base by the Avonne, to which circumstance it owes a slight resemblance to an enormous turtle lying across the river, forms an arch through which the eye takes in a little sheet of water, clear as a mirror, where the stream seems to sleep until it reaches in the distance a series of cascades falling among huge rocks, where little weeping willows with elastic motion sway back and forth to the flow of waters.

Beyond these cascades is the hillside, rising sheer, like a Rhine rock clothed with moss and heather, gullied like it, again, by sharp ridges of schist and mica sending down, here and there, white foaming rivulets to which a little meadow, always watered and always green, serves as a cup; farther on, beyond the picturesque chaos and in contrast to this wild, solitary nature, the gardens of Conches are seen, with the village roofs and the clock-tower and the outlying fields.

There are the two paragraphs, but the rising sun, the purity of the air, the dewy sheen, the melody of woods and waters—imagine them!

“Almost as charming as at the Opera,” thought Blondet, making his way along the banks of the unnavigable portion of the Avonne, whose caprices contrast with the straight and deep and silent stream of the lower river, flowing between the tall trees of the forest of Les Aigues.

Blondet did not proceed far on his morning walk, for he was presently brought to a stand-still by the sight of a peasant,—one of those who, in this drama, are supernumeraries so essential to its action that it may be doubted whether they are not in fact its leading actors.

When the clever journalist reached a group of rocks where the main stream is imprisoned, as it were, between two portals, he saw a man standing so motionless as to excite his curiosity, while the clothes and general air of this living statue greatly puzzled him.

The humble personage before him was a living presentment of the old men dear to Charlet’s pencil; resembling the troopers of that Homer of soldiery in a strong frame able to endure hardship, and his immortal skirmishers in a fiery, crimson, knotted face, showing small capacity for submission. A coarse felt hat, the brim of which was held to the crown by stitches, protected a nearly bald head from the weather; below it fell a quantity of white hair which a painter would gladly have paid four francs an hour to copy,—a dazzling mass of snow, worn like that in all the classical representations of Deity. It was easy to guess from the way in which the cheeks sank in, continuing the lines of the mouth, that the toothless old fellow was more given to the bottle than the trencher. His thin white beard gave a threatening expression to his profile by the stiffness of its short bristles. The eyes, too small for his enormous face, and sloping like those of a pig, betrayed cunning and also laziness; but at this particular moment they were gleaming with the intent look he cast upon the river. The sole garments of this curious figure were an old blouse, formerly blue, and trousers of the coarse burlap used in Paris to wrap bales. All city people would have shuddered at the sight of his broken sabots, without even a wisp of straw to stop the cracks; and it is very certain that the blouse and the trousers had no money value at all except to a paper-maker.

As Blondet examined this rural Diogenes, he admitted the possibility of a type of peasantry he had seen in old tapestries, old pictures, old sculptures, and which, up to this time, had seemed to him imaginary. He resolved for the future not to utterly condemn the school of ugliness, perceiving a possibility that in man beauty may be but the flattering exception, a chimera in which the race struggles to believe.

“What can be the ideas, the morals, the habits, of such a being? What is he thinking of?” thought Blondet, seized with curiosity. “Is he my fellow-creature? We have nothing in common but shape, and even that!—”

He noticed in the old man’s limbs the peculiar rigidity of the tissues of persons who live in the open air, accustomed to the inclemencies of the weather and to the endurance of heat and cold,—hardened to everything, in short,—which makes their leathern skin almost a hide, and their nerves an apparatus against physical pain almost as powerful as that of the Russians or the Arabs.

“Here’s one of Cooper’s Red-skins,” thought Blondet; “one needn’t go to America to study savages.”

Though the Parisian was less than ten paces off, the old man did not turn his head, but kept looking at the opposite bank with a fixity which the fakirs of India give to their vitrified eyes and their stiffened joints. Compelled by the power of a species of magnetism, more contagious than people have any idea of, Blondet ended by gazing at the water himself.

“Well, my good man, what do you see there?” he asked, after the lapse of a quarter of an hour, during which time he saw nothing to justify this intent contemplation.

“Hush!” whispered the old man, with a sign to Blondet not to ruffle the air with his voice; “You will frighten it—”

“What?”

“An otter, my good gentleman. If it hears us it’ll go quick under water. I’m certain it jumped there; see! see! there, where the water bubbles! Ha! it sees a fish, it is after that! But my boy will grab it as it comes back. The otter, don’t you know, is very rare; it is scientific game, and good eating, too. I get ten francs for every one I carry to Les Aigues, for the lady fasts Fridays, and to-morrow is Friday. Years agone the deceased madame used to pay me twenty francs, and gave me the skin to boot! Mouche,” he called, in a low voice, “watch it!”

Blondet now perceived on the other side of the river two bright eyes, like those of a cat, beneath a tuft of alders; then he saw the tanned forehead and tangled hair of a boy about ten years of age, who was lying on his stomach and making signs towards the otter to let his master know he kept it well in sight. Blondet, completely mastered by the eagerness of the old man and boy, allowed the demon of the chase to get the better of him,—that demon with the double claws of hope and curiosity, who carries you whithersoever he will.

“The hat-makers buy the skin,” continued the old man; “it’s so soft, so handsome! They cover caps with it.”

“Do you really think so, my old man?” said Blondet, smiling.

“Well truly, my good gentleman, you ought to know more than I, though I am seventy years old,” replied the old fellow, very humbly and respectfully, falling into the attitude of a giver of holy water; “perhaps you can tell me why conductors and wine-merchants are so fond of it?”

Blondet, a master of irony, already on his guard from the word “scientific,” recollected the Marechal de Richelieu and began to suspect some jest on the part of the old man; but he was reassured by his artless attitude and the perfectly stupid expression of his face.

“In my young days we had lots of otters,” whispered the old fellow; “but they’ve hunted ‘em so that if we see the tail of one in seven years it is as much as ever we do. And the sub-prefect at Ville-aux-Fayes,—doesn’t monsieur know him? though he be a Parisian, he’s a fine young man like you, and he loves curiosities,—so, as I was saying, hearing of my talent for catching otters, for I know ‘em as you know your alphabet, he says to me like this: ‘Pere Fourchon,’ says he, ‘when you find an otter bring it to me, and I’ll pay you well; and if it’s spotted white on the back,’ says he, ‘I’ll give you thirty francs.’ That’s just what he did say to me as true as I believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And there’s a learned man at Soulanges, Monsieur Gourdon, our doctor, who is making, so they tell me, a collection of natural history which hasn’t its mate at Dijon even; indeed he is first among the learned men in these parts, and he’ll pay me a fine price, too; he stuffs men and beasts. Now my boy there stands me out that that otter has got the white spots. ‘If that’s so,’ says I to him, ‘then the good God wishes well to us this morning!’ Ha! didn’t you see the water bubble? yes, there it is! there it is! Though it lives in a kind of a burrow, it sometimes stays whole days under water. Ha, there! it heard you, my good gentleman; it’s on its guard now; for there’s not a more suspicious animal on earth; it’s worse than a woman.”

“So you call women suspicious, do you?” said Blondet.

“Faith, monsieur, if you come from Paris you ought to know about that better than I. But you’d have done better for me if you had stayed in your bed and slept all the morning; don’t you see that wake there? that’s where she’s gone under. Get up, Mouche! the otter heard monsieur talking, and now she’s scary enough to keep us at her heels till midnight. Come, let’s be off! and good-bye to our thirty francs!”

Mouche got up reluctantly; he looked at the spot where the water bubbled, pointed to it with his finger and seemed unable to give up all hope. The child, with curly hair and a brown face, like the angels in a fifteenth-century picture, seemed to be in breeches, for his trousers ended at the knee in a ragged fringe of brambles and dead leaves. This necessary garment was fastened upon him by cords of tarred oakum in guise of braces. A shirt of the same burlap which made the old man's trousers, thickened, however, by many darns, open in front showed a sun-burnt little breast. In short, the attire of the being called Mouche was even more startlingly simple than that of Pere Fourchon.

"What a good-natured set of people they are here," thought Blondet; "if a man frightened away the game of the people of the suburbs of Paris, how their tongues would maul him!"

As he had never seen an otter, even in a museum, he was delighted with this episode of his early walk. "Come," said he, quite touched when the old man walked away without asking him for a compensation, "you say you are a famous otter catcher. If you are sure there is an otter down there—"

From the other side of the water Mouche pointed his finger to certain air-bubbles coming up from the bottom of the Avonne and bursting on its surface.

"It has come back!" said Pere Fourchon; "don't you see it breathe, the beggar? How do you suppose they manage to breathe at the bottom of the water? Ah, the creature's so clever it laughs at science."

"Well," said Blondet, who supposed the last word was a jest of the peasantry in general rather than of this peasant in particular, "wait and catch the otter."

"And what are we to do about our day's work, Mouche and I?"

"What is your day worth?"

"For the pair of us, my apprentice and me?—Five francs," said the old man, looking Blondet in the eye with a hesitation which betrayed an enormous overcharge.

The journalist took ten francs from his pocket, saying, "There's ten, and I'll give you ten more for the otter."

"And it won't cost you dear if there's white on its back; for the sub-prefect told me there wasn't one o' them museums that had the like; but he knows everything, our sub-prefect,—no fool he! If I hunt the otter, he, M'sieur des Lupeaulx, hunts Mademoiselle Gaubertin, who has a fine white 'dot' on her back. Come now, my good gentleman, if I may make so bold, plunge into the middle of the Avonne and

get to that stone down there. If we head the otter off, it will come down stream; for just see their slyness, the beggars! they always go above their burrow to feed, for, once full of fish, they know they can easily drift down, the sly things! Ha! if I'd been trained in their school I should be living now on an income; but I was a long time finding out that you must go up stream very early in the morning if you want to bag the game before others. Well, somebody threw a spell over me when I was born. However, we three together ought to be slyer than the otter."

"How so, my old necromancer?"

"Why, bless you! we are as stupid as the beasts, and so we come to understand the beasts. Now, see, this is what we'll do. When the otter wants to get home Mouche and I'll frighten it here, and you'll frighten it over there; frightened by us and frightened by you it will jump on the bank, and when it takes to earth, it is lost! It can't run; it has web feet for swimming. Ho, ho! it will make you laugh, such floundering! you don't know whether you are fishing or hunting! The general up at Les Aigues, I have known him to stay here three days running, he was so bent on getting an otter."

Blondet, armed with a branch cut for him by the old man, who requested him to whip the water with it when he called to him, planted himself in the middle of the river by jumping from stone to stone.

"There, that will do, my good gentleman."

Blondet stood where he was told without remarking the lapse of time, for every now and then the old fellow made him a sign as much as to say that all was going well; and besides, nothing makes time go so fast as the expectation that quick action is to succeed the perfect stillness of watching.

"Pere Fourchon," whispered the boy, finding himself alone with the old man, "there's *really* an otter!"

"Do you see it?"

"There, see there!"

The old fellow was dumb-founded at beholding under water the reddish-brown fur of an actual otter.

"It's coming my way!" said the child.

"Hit him a sharp blow on the head and jump into the water and hold him fast down, but don't let him go!"

Mouche dove into the water like a frightened frog.

“Come, come, my good gentleman,” cried Pere Fourchon to Blondet, jumping into the water and leaving his sabots on the bank, “frighten him! frighten him! Don’t you see him? he is swimming fast your way!”

The old man dashed toward Blondet through the water, calling out with the gravity that country people retain in the midst of their greatest excitements:—

“Don’t you see him, there, along the rocks?”

Blondet, placed by direction of the old fellow in such a way that the sun was in his eyes, thrashed the water with much satisfaction to himself.

“Go on, go on!” cried Pere Fourchon; “on the rock side; the burrow is there, to your left!”

Carried away by excitement and by his long waiting, Blondet slipped from the stones into the water.

“Ha! brave you are, my good gentleman! Twenty good Gods! I see him between your legs! you’ll have him!—Ah! there! he’s gone—he’s gone!” cried the old man, in despair.

Then, in the fury of the chase, the old fellow plunged into the deepest part of the stream in front of Blondet.

“It’s your fault we’ve lost him!” he cried, as Blondet gave him a hand to pull him out, dripping like a triton, and a vanquished triton. “The rascal, I see him, under those rocks! He has let go his fish,” continued Fourchon, pointing to something that floated on the surface. “We’ll have that at any rate; it’s a tench, a real tench.”

Just then a groom in livery on horseback and leading another horse by the bridle galloped up the road toward Conches.

“See! there’s the chateau people sending after you,” said the old man. “If you want to cross back again I’ll give you a hand. I don’t mind about getting wet; it saves washing!”

“How about rheumatism?”

“Rheumatism! don’t you see the sun has browned our legs, Mouche and me, like tobacco-pipes. Here, lean on me, my good gentleman—you’re from Paris; you don’t know, though you *do* know so much, how to walk on our rocks. If you stay here long enough, you’ll learn a deal that’s written in the book o’ nature,—you who write, so they tell me, in the newspapers.”

Blondet had reached the bank before Charles, the groom, perceived him.

“Ah, monsieur!” he cried; “you don’t know how anxious Madame has been since she heard you had gone through the gate of Conches; she was afraid you were drowned. They have rung the great bell three times, and Monsieur le cure is hunting for you in the park.”

“What time is it, Charles?”

“A quarter to twelve.”

“Help me to mount.”

“Ha!” exclaimed the groom, noticing the water that dripped from Blondet’s boots and trousers, “has monsieur been taken in by Pere Fourchon’s otter?”

The words enlightened the journalist.

“Don’t say a word about it, Charles,” he cried, “and I’ll make it all right with you.”

“Oh, as for that!” answered the man, “Monsieur le comte himself has been taken in by that otter. Whenever a visitor comes to Les Aigues, Pere Fourchon sets himself on the watch, and if the gentleman goes to see the sources of the Avonne he sells him the otter; he plays the trick so well that Monsieur le comte has been here three times and paid him for six days’ work, just to stare at the water!”

“Heavens!” thought Blondet. “And I imagined I had seen the greatest comedians of the present day!—Potier, the younger Baptiste, Michot, and Monrose. What are they compared to that old beggar?”

“He is very knowing at the business, Pere Fourchon is,” continued Charles; “and he has another string to his bow, besides. He calls himself a rope-maker, and has a walk under the park wall by the gate of Blangy. If you merely touch his rope he’ll entangle you so cleverly that you will want to turn the wheel and make a bit of it yourself; and for that you would have to pay a fee for apprenticeship. Madame herself was taken in, and gave him twenty francs. Ah! he is the king of tricks, that old fellow!”

The groom’s gossip set Blondet thinking of the extreme craftiness and wiliness of the French peasant, of which he had heard a great deal from his father, a judge at Alencon. Then the satirical meaning hidden beneath Pere Fourchon’s apparent guilelessness came back to him, and he owned himself “gulled” by the Burgundian beggar.

“You would never believe, monsieur,” said Charles, as they reached the portico at Les Aigues, “how much one is forced to distrust everybody and everything in the country,—especially here, where the general is not much liked—”

“Why not?”

“That’s more than I know,” said Charles, with the stupid air servants assume to shield themselves when they wish not to answer their superiors, which nevertheless gave Blondet a good deal to think of.

“Here you are, truant!” cried the general, coming out on the terrace when he heard the horses. “Here he is; don’t be uneasy!” he called back to his wife, whose little footfalls were heard behind him. “Now the Abbe Brossette is missing. Go and find him, Charles,” he said to the groom.

CHAPTER III. THE TAVERN

The gate of Blangy, built by Bouret, was formed of two wide pilasters of projecting rough-hewn stone; each surmounted by a dog sitting on his haunches and holding an escutcheon between his fore paws. The proximity of a small house where the steward lived dispensed with the necessity for a lodge. Between the two pilasters, a sumptuous iron gate, like those made in Buffon's time for the Jardin des Plantes, opened on a short paved way which led to the country road (formerly kept in order by Les Aigues and the Soulanges family) which unites Conches, Cerneux, Blangy, and Soulanges to Ville-aux-Fayes, like a wreath, for the whole road is lined with flowering hedges and little houses covered with roses and honey-suckle and other climbing plants.

There, along a pretty wall which extends as far as a terrace from which the land of Les Aigues falls rapidly to the valley till it meets that of Soulanges, are the rotten posts, the old wheel, and the forked stakes which constituted the manufactory of the village rope-maker.

Soon after midday, while Blondet was seating himself at table opposite the Abbe Brossette and receiving the tender expostulations of the countess, Pere Fourchon and Mouche arrived at this establishment. From that vantage-ground Pere Fourchon, under pretence of rope-making, could watch Les Aigues and see every one who went in and out. Nothing escaped him, the opening of the blinds, tete-a-tete loiterings, or the least little incidents of country life, were spied upon by the old fellow, who had set up this business within the last three years,—a trifling circumstance which neither the masters, nor the servants, nor the keepers of Les Aigues had as yet remarked upon.

"Go round to the house by the gate of the Avonne while I put away the tackle," said Pere Fourchon to his attendant, "and when you have blabbed about the thing, they'll no doubt send after me to the Grand-I-Vert, where I am going for a drop of drink,—for it makes one thirsty enough to wade in the water that way. If you do just as I tell you, you'll hook a good breakfast out of them; try to meet the countess, and give a slap at me, and that will put it into her head to come and preach morality or something! There's lots of good wine to get out of it."

After these last instructions, which the sly look in Mouche's face rendered quite superfluous, the old peasant, hugging the otter under his arm, disappeared along the country road.

Half-way between the gate and the village there stood, at the time when Emile Blondet stayed at Les Aigues, one of those houses which are never seen but in parts of France where stone is scarce. Bits of bricks picked up anywhere, cobblestones set like diamonds in the clay mud, formed very solid walls, though worn in places; the roof was supported by stout branches and covered with rushes and straw, while the clumsy shutters and the broken door—in short, everything about the cottage was the product of lucky finds, or of gifts obtained by begging.

The peasant has an instinct for his habitation like that of an animal for its nest or its burrow, and this instinct was very marked in all the arrangements of this cottage. In the first place, the door and the window looked to the north. The house, placed on a little rise in the stoniest angle of a vineyard, was certainly healthful. It was reached by three steps, carefully made with stakes and planks filled in with broken stone and gravel, so that the water ran off rapidly; and as the rain seldom comes from the northward in Burgundy, no dampness could rot the foundations, slight as they were. Below the steps and along the path ran a rustic paling, hidden beneath a hedge of hawthorn and sweet-brier. An arbor, with a few clumsy tables and wooden benches, filled the space between the cottage and the road, and invited the passers-by to rest themselves. At the upper end of the bank by the house roses grew, and wall-flowers, violets, and other flowers that cost nothing. Jessamine and honey-suckle had fastened their tendrils on the roof, mossy already, though the building was far from old.

To the right of the house, the owner had built a stable for two cows. In front of this erection of old boards, a sunken piece of ground served as a yard where, in a corner, was a huge manure-heap. On the other side of the house and the arbor stood a thatched shed, supported on trunks of trees, under which the various outdoor properties of the peasantry were put away,—the utensils of the vine-dressers, their empty casks, logs of wood piled about a mound which contained the oven, the mouth of which opened, as was usual in the houses of the peasantry, under the mantle-piece of the chimney in the kitchen.

About an acre of land adjoined the house, inclosed by an evergreen hedge and planted with grape-vines; tended as peasants tend them,—that is to say, well-manured, and dug round, and layered so that they usually set their fruit before the vines of the large proprietors in a circuit of ten miles round. A few trees, almond, plum, and apricot, showed their slim heads here and there in this enclosure. Between the rows of vines potatoes and beans were planted. In addition to all this, on the side towards the village and beyond the yard was a bit of damp low ground, favorable for the growth of cabbages and onions (favorite vegetables

of the working-classes), which was closed by a wooden gate, through which the cows were driven, trampling the path into mud and covering it with dung.

The house, which had two rooms on the ground-floor, opened upon the vineyard. On this side an outer stairway, roofed with thatch and resting against the wall of the house, led up to the garret, which was lighted by one round window. Under this rustic stairway opened a cellar built of Burgundy brick, containing several casks of wine.

Though the kitchen utensils of the peasantry are usually only two, namely, a frying-pan and an iron pot, with which they manage to do all their cooking, exceptions to this rule, in the shape of two enormous saucepans hanging beneath the mantle-shelf and above a small portable stove, were to be seen in this cottage. In spite, however, of this indication of luxury, the furniture was in keeping with the external appearance of the place. A jar held water, the spoons were of wood or pewter, the dishes, of red clay without and white within, were scaling off and had been mended with pewter rivets; the heavy table and chairs were of pine wood, and for flooring there was nothing better than the hardened earth. Every fifth year the walls received a coat of white-wash and so did the narrow beams of the ceiling, from which hung bacon, strings of onions, bundles of tallow candles, and the bags in which a peasant keeps his seeds; near the bread-box stood an old-fashioned wardrobe in walnut, where the scanty household linen, and the one change of garments together with the holiday attire of the entire family were kept.

Above the mantel of the chimney gleamed a poacher’s old gun, not worth five francs,—the wood scorched, the barrel to all appearances never cleaned. An observer might reflect that the protection of a hovel with only a latch, and an outer gate that was only a paling and never closed, needed no better weapon; but still the wonder was to what use it was put. In the first place, though the wood was of the commonest kind, the barrel was carefully selected, and came from a valuable gun, given in all probability to a game-keeper. Moreover, the owner of this weapon never missed his aim; there was between him and his gun the same intimate acquaintance that there is between a workman and his tool. If the muzzle must be raised or lowered the merest fraction in its aim, because it carries just an atom above or below the range, the poacher knows it; he obeys the rule and never misses. An officer of artillery would have found the essential parts of this weapon in good condition notwithstanding its uncleanly appearance. In all that the peasant appropriates to his use, in all that serves him, he displays just the amount of force that is needed, neither more nor less; he attends to the essential and to nothing beyond. External perfection he has no conception of. An unerring judge of the

necessary in all things, he thoroughly understands degrees of strength, and knows very well when working for an employer how to give the least possible for the most he can get. This contemptible-looking gun will be found to play a serious part in the life of the family inhabiting this cottage, and you will presently learn how and why.

Have you now taken in all the many details of this hovel, planted about five hundred feet away from the pretty gate of Les Aigues? Do you see it crouching there, like a beggar beside a palace? Well, its roof covered with velvet mosses, its clacking hens, its grunting pig, its straying heifer, all its rural graces have a horrible meaning.

Fastened to a pole, which was stuck in the ground beside the entrance through the fence, was a withered bunch of three pine branches and some old oak-leaves tied together with a rag. Above the door of the house a roving artist had painted, probably in return for his breakfast, a huge capital “I” in green on a white ground two feet square; and for the benefit of those who could read, this witty joke in twelve letters: “Au Grand-I-Vert” (hiver). On the left of the door was a vulgar sign bearing, in colored letters, “Good March beer,” and the picture of a foaming pot of the same, with a woman, in a dress excessively low-necked, on one side, and an hussar on the other,—both coarsely colored. Consequently, in spite of the blooming flowers and the fresh country air, this cottage exhaled the same strong and nauseous odor of wine and food which assails you in Paris as you pass the door of the cheap cook-shops of the faubourg.

Now you know the surroundings. Behold the inhabitants and hear their history, which contains more than one lesson for philanthropists.

The proprietor of the Grand-I-Vert, named Francois Tonsard, commends himself to the attention of philosophers by the manner in which he had solved the problem of an idle life and a busy life, so as to make the idleness profitable, and occupation nil.

A jack-of-all-trades, he knew how to cultivate the ground, but for himself only. For others, he dug ditches, gathered fagots, barked the trees, or cut them down. In all such work the employer is at the mercy of the workman. Tonsard owned his plot of ground to the generosity of Mademoiselle Laguerre. In his early youth he had worked by the day for the gardener at Les Aigues; and he really had not his equal in trimming the shrubbery-trees, the hedges, the horn-beams, and the horse-chestnuts. His very name shows hereditary talent. In remote country-places privileges exist which are obtained and preserved with as much care as the merchants of a city display in getting theirs. Mademoiselle Laguerre was one day walking in the garden, when she overheard Tonsard, then a strapping fellow, say, “All I need to

live on, and live happily, is an acre of land." The kind creature, accustomed to make others happy, gave him the acre of vineyard near the gate of Blangy, in return for one hundred days' work (a delicate regard for his feelings which was little understood), and allowed him to stay at Les Aigues, where he lived with her servants, who thought him one of the best fellows in Burgundy.

Poor Tonsard (that is what everybody called him) worked about thirty days out of the hundred that he owed; the rest of the time he idled about, talking and laughing with Mademoiselle's women, particularly with Mademoiselle Cochet, the lady's maid, though she was ugly, like all confidential maids of handsome actresses. Laughing with Mademoiselle Cochet signified so many things that Soudry, the fortunate gendarme mentioned in Blondet's letter, still looked askance at Tonsard after the lapse of nearly twenty-five years. The walnut wardrobe, the bedstead with the tester and curtains, and the ornaments about the bedroom were doubtless the result of the said laughter.

Once in possession of his care, Tonsard replied to the first person who happened to mention that Mademoiselle Laguerre had given it to him, "I've bought it deuced hard, and paid well for it. Do rich folks ever give us anything? Are one hundred days' work nothing? It has cost me three hundred francs, and the land is all stones." But that speech never got beyond the regions of his own class.

Tonsard built his house himself, picking up the materials here and there as he could,—getting a day's work out of this one and that one, gleaning in the rubbish that was thrown away, often asking for things and always obtaining them. A discarded door cut in two for convenience in carrying away became the door of the stable; the window was the sash of a green-house. In short, the rubbish of the chateau, served to build the fatal cottage.

Saved from the draft by Gaubertin, the steward of Les Aigues, whose father was prosecuting-attorney of the department, and who, moreover, could refuse nothing to Mademoiselle Cochet, Tonsard married as soon as his house was finished and his vines had begun to bear. A well-grown fellow of twenty-three, in everybody's good graces at Les Aigues, on whom Mademoiselle had bestowed an acre of her land, and who appeared to be a good worker, he had the art to ring the praises of his negative merits, and so obtained the daughter of a farmer on the Ronquerolles estate, which lies beyond the forest of Les Aigues.

This farmer held the lease of half a farm, which was going to ruin in his hands for want of a helpmate. A widower, and inconsolable for the loss of his wife, he tried to drown his troubles, like the English, in wine, and then, when he had put the poor deceased out of his mind, he found himself married, so the village maliciously

declared, to a woman named Boisson. From being a farmer he became once more a laborer, but an idle and drunken laborer, quarrelsome and vindictive, capable of any ill-deed, like most of his class when they fall from a well-to-do state of life into poverty. This man, whose practical information and knowledge of reading and writing placed him far above his fellow-workmen, while his vices kept him at the level of pauperism, you have already seen on the banks of the Avonne, measuring his cleverness with that of one of the cleverest men in Paris, in a bucolic overlooked by Virgil.

Pere Fourchon, formerly a schoolmaster at Blangy, lost that place through misconduct and his singular ideas as to public education. He helped the children to make paper boats with their alphabets much oftener than he taught them how to spell; he scolded them in so remarkable a manner for pilfering fruit that his lectures might really have passed for lessons on the best way of scaling the walls. From teacher he became a postman. In this capacity, which serves as a refuge to many an old soldier, Pere Fourchon was daily reprimanded. Sometimes he forgot the letters in a tavern, at other times he kept them in his pocket. When he was drunk he left those for one village in another village; when he was sober he read them. Consequently, he was soon dismissed. No longer able to serve the State, Pere Fourchon ended by becoming a manufacturer. In the country a poor man can always get something to do, and make at least a pretence of gaining an honest livelihood. At sixty-eight years of age the old man started his rope-walk, a manufactory which requires the very smallest capital. The workshop is, as we have seen, any convenient wall; the machinery costs about ten francs. The apprentice slept, like his master, in a hay-loft, and lived on whatever he could pick up. The rapacity of the law in the matter of doors and windows expires “sub dio.” The tow to make the first rope can be borrowed. But the principal revenue of Pere Fourchon and his satellite Mouche, the natural son of one of his natural daughters, came from the otters; and then there were breakfasts and dinners given them by peasants who could neither read nor write, and were glad to use the old fellow’s talents when they had a bill to make out, or a letter to dispatch. Besides all this, he knew how to play the clarionet, and he went about with his friend Vermichel, the miller of Soulanges, to village weddings and the grand balls given at the Tivoli of Soulanges.

Vermichel’s name was Michel Vert, but the transposition was so generally used that Brunet, the clerk of the municipal court of Soulanges, was in the habit of writing Michel-Jean-Jerome Vert, called Vermichel, practitioner. Vermichel, a famous violin in the Burgundian regiment of former days, had procured for Pere Fourchon, in recognition of certain services, a situation as practitioner, which in

remote country-places usually devolves on those who are able to sign their name. Pere Fourchon therefore added to his other avocations that of witness, or practitioner of legal papers, whenever the Sieur Brunet came to draw them in the districts of Cerneux, Conches, and Blangy. Vermichel and Fourchon, allied by a friendship of twenty years' tippling, might really be considered a business firm.

Mouche and Fourchon, bound together by vice as Mentor and Telemachus by virtue, travelled like the latter, in search of their father, "panis angelorum,"—the only Latin words which the old fellow's memory had retained. They went about scraping up the pickings of the Grand-I-Vert, and those of the adjacent chateaux; for between them, in their busiest and most prosperous years, they had never contrived to make as much as three hundred and sixty fathoms of rope. In the first place, no dealer within a radius of fifty miles would have trusted his tow to either Mouche or Fourchon. The old man, surpassing the miracles of modern chemistry, knew too well how to resolve the tow into the all-benignant juice of the grape. Moreover, his triple functions of public writer for three townships, legal practitioner for one, and clarionet-player at large, hindered, so he said, the development of his business.

Thus it happened that Tonsard was disappointed from the start in the hope he had indulged of increasing his comfort by an increase of property in marriage. The idle son-in-law had chanced, by a very common accident, on an idler father-in-law. Matters went all the worse because Tonsard's wife, gifted with a sort of rustic beauty, being tall and well-made, was not fond of work in the open air. Tonsard blamed his wife for her father's short-comings, and ill-treated her, with the customary revenge of the common people, whose minds take in only an effect and rarely look back to causes.

Finding her fetters heavy, the woman lightened them. She used Tonsard's vices to get the better of him. Loving comfort and good eating herself, she encouraged his idleness and gluttony. In the first place, she managed to procure the good-will of the servants of the chateau, and Tonsard, in view of the results, made no complaint as to the means. He cared very little what his wife did, so long as she did all he wanted of her. That is the secret agreement of many a household. Madame Tonsard established the wine-shop of the Grand-I-Vert, her first customers being the servants of Les Aigues and the keepers and huntsmen.

Gaubertin, formerly steward to Mademoiselle Laguerre, one of La Tonsard's chief patrons, gave her several puncheons of excellent wine to attract custom. The effect of these gifts (continued as long as Gaubertin remained a bachelor) and the fame of her rather lawless beauty commended this beauty to the Don Juans of the valley,

and filled the wine-shop of the Grand-I-Vert. Being a lover of good eating, La Tonsard was naturally an excellent cook; and though her talents were only exercised on the common dishes of the country, jugged hare, game sauce, stewed fish and omelets, she was considered in all the country round to be an admirable cook of the sort of food which is eaten at a counter and spiced in a way to excite a desire for drink. By the end of two years, she had managed to rule Tonsard, and turn him to evil courses, which, indeed, he asked no better than to indulge in.

The rascal was continually poaching, and with nothing to fear from it. The intimacies of his wife with Gaubertin and the keepers and the rural authorities, together with the laxity of the times, secured him impunity. As soon as his children were large enough he made them serviceable to his comfort, caring no more for their morality than for that of his wife. He had two sons and two daughters. Tonsard, who lived, as did his wife, from hand to mouth, might have come to an end of this easy life if he had not maintained a sort of martial law over his family, which compelled them to work for the preservation of it. When he had brought up his children, at the cost of those from whom his wife was able to extort gifts, the following charter and budget were the law at the Grand-I-Vert.

Tonsard's old mother and his two daughters, Catherine and Marie, went into the woods at certain seasons twice a-day, and came back laden with fagots which overhung the crutch of their poles at least two feet beyond their heads. Though dried sticks were placed on the outside of the heap, the inside was made of live wood cut from young trees. In plain words, Tonsard helped himself to his winter's fuel in the woods of Les Aigues. Besides this, father and sons were constantly poaching. From September to March, hares, rabbits, partridges, deer, in short, all the game that was not eaten at the chateau, was sold at Blangy and at Soulanges, where Tonsard's two daughters peddled milk in the early mornings,—coming back with the news of the day, in return for the gossip they carried about Les Aigues, and Cerneux, and Conches. In the months when the three Tonsards were unable to hunt with a gun, they set traps. If the traps caught more game than they could eat, La Tonsard made pies of it and sent them to Ville-aux-Fayes. In harvest-time seven Tonsards—the old mother, the two sons (until they were seventeen years of age), the two daughters, together with old Fourchon and Mouche—gleaned, and generally brought in about sixteen bushels a day of all grains, rye, barley, wheat, all good to grind.

The two cows, led to the roadside by the youngest girl, always managed to stray into the meadows of Les Aigues; but as, if it ever chanced that some too flagrant trespass compelled the keepers to take notice of it, the children were either

whipped or deprived of a coveted dainty, they had acquired such extraordinary aptitude in hearing the enemy's footfall that the bailiff or the park-keeper of Les Aigues was very seldom able to detect them. Besides, the relations of those estimable functionaries with Tonsard and his wife tied a bandage over their eyes. The cows, held by long ropes, obeyed a mere twitch or a special low call back to the roadside, knowing very well that, the danger once past, they could finish their browsing in the next field. Old mother Tonsard, who was getting more and more infirm, succeeded Mouche in his duties, after Fourchon, under pretence of caring for his natural grandson's education, kept him to himself; while Marie and Catherine made hay in the woods. These girls knew the exact spots where the fine forest-grass abounded, and there they cut and spread and cocked and garnered it, supplying two thirds, at least, of the winter fodder, and leading the cows on all fine days to sheltered nooks where they could still find pasture. In certain parts of the valley of Les Aigues, as in all places protected by a chain of mountains, in Piedmont and in Lombardy for instance, there are spots where the grass keeps green all the year. Such fields, called in Italy "marciti," are of great value; though in France they are often in danger of being injured by snow and ice. This phenomenon is due, no doubt, to some favorable exposure, and to the infiltration of water which keeps the ground at a warmer temperature.

The calves were sold for about eighty francs. The milk, deducting the time when the cows calved or went dry, brought in about one hundred and sixty francs a year besides supplying the wants of the family. Tonsard himself managed to earn another hundred and sixty by doing odd jobs of one kind or another.

The sale of food and wine in the tavern, after all costs were paid, returned a profit of about three hundred francs, for the great drinking-bouts happened only at certain times and in certain seasons; and as the topers who indulged in them gave Tonsard and his wife due notice, the latter bought in the neighboring town the exact quantity of provisions needed and no more. The wine produced by Tonsard's vineyard was sold in ordinary years for twenty francs a cask to a wine-dealer at Soulanges with whom Tonsard was intimate. In very prolific years he got as much as twelve casks from his vines; but eight was the average; and Tonsard kept half for his own traffic. In all wine-growing districts the gleaning of the large vineyards gives a good perquisite, and out of it the Tonsard family usually managed to obtain three casks more. But being, as we have seen, sheltered and protected by the keepers, they showed no conscience in their proceedings,—entering vineyards before the harvesters were out of them, just as they swarmed into the wheat-fields before the sheaves were made. So, the seven or eight casks of wine, as much gleaned as harvested, were sold for a good price. However, out of these various proceeds the

Grand-I-Vert was mulcted in a good sum for the personal consumption of Tonsard and his wife, who wanted the best of everything to eat, and better wine than they sold,—which they obtained from their friend at Soulanges in payment for their own. In short, the money scraped together by this family amounted to about nine hundred francs, for they fattened two pigs a year, one for themselves and the other to sell.

The idlers and scapegraces and also the laborers took a fancy to the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert, partly because of La Tonsard's merits, and partly on account of the hail-fellow-well-met relation existing between this family and the lower classes of the valley. The two daughters, both remarkably handsome, followed the example of their mother as to morals. Moreover, the long established fame of the Grand-I-Vert, dating from 1795, made it a venerable spot in the eyes of the common people. From Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes, workmen came there to meet and make their bargains and hear the news collected by the Tonsard women and by Mouche and old Fourchon, or supplied by Vermichel and Brunet, that renowned official, when he came to the tavern in search of his practitioner. There the price of hay and of wine was settled; also that of a day's work and of piece-work. Tonsard, a sovereign judge in such matters, gave his advice and opinion while drinking with his guests. Soulanges, according to a saying in these parts, was a town for society and amusement only, while Blangy was a business borough; crushed, however, by the great commercial centre of Ville-aux-Fayes, which had become in the last twenty-five years the capital of this flourishing valley. The cattle and grain market was held at Blangy, in the public square, and the prices there obtained served as a tariff for the whole arrondissement.

By staying in the house and doing no out-door work, La Tonsard continued fresh and fair and dimpled, in comparison with the women who worked in the fields and faded as rapidly as the flowers, becoming old and haggard before they were thirty. She liked to be well-dressed. In point of fact, she was only clean, but in a village cleanliness is a luxury. The daughters, better dressed than their means warranted, followed their mother's example. Beneath their outer garment, which was relatively handsome, they wore linen much finer than that of the richest peasant women. On fete-days they appeared in dresses that were really pretty, obtained, Heaven knows how! For one thing, the men-servants at Les Aigues sold to them, at prices that were easily paid, the cast-off clothing of the lady's-maids, which, after sweeping the streets of Paris and being made over to fit Marie and Catherine, appeared triumphantly in the precincts of the Grand-I-Vert. These girls, bohemians of the valley, received not one penny in money from their parents, who gave them food only, and the wretched pallets on which they slept with their grandmother in

the barn, where their brothers also slept, curled up in the hay like animals. Neither father nor mother paid any heed to this propinquity.

The iron age and the age of gold are more alike than we think for. In the one nothing aroused vigilance; in the other, everything rouses it; the result to society is, perhaps, very much the same. The presence of old Mother Tonsard, which was more a necessity than a precaution, was simply one immorality the more. And thus it was that the Abbe Brossette, after studying the morals of his parishioners, made this pregnant remark to his bishop:—

“Monseigneur, when I observe the stress that the peasantry lay on their poverty, I realize how they fear to lose that excuse for their immorality.”

Though everybody knew that the family had no principles and no scruples, nothing was ever said against the morals of the Grand-I-Vert. At the beginning of this book it is necessary to explain, once for all, to persons accustomed to the decencies of middle-class life, that the peasants have no decency in their domestic habits and customs. They make no appeal to morality when their daughters are seduced, unless the seducer is rich and timid. Children, until the State takes possession of them, are used either as capital or as instruments of convenience. Self-interest has become, specially since 1789, the sole motive of the masses; they never ask if an action is legal or immoral, but only if it is profitable. Morality, which is not to be confounded with religion, begins only at a certain competence,—just as one sees, in a higher sphere, how delicacy blossoms in the soul when fortune decorates the furniture. A positively moral and upright man is rare among the peasantry. Do you ask why? Among the many reasons that may be given for this state of things, the principal one is this: Through the nature of their social functions, the peasants live a purely material life which approximates to that of savages, and their constant union with nature tends to foster it. When toil exhausts the body it takes from the mind its purifying action, especially among the ignorant. The Abbe Brossette was right in saying that the state policy of the peasant is his poverty.

Meddling in everybody’s interests, Tonsard heard everybody’s complaints, and often instigated frauds to benefit the needy. His wife, a kindly appearing woman, had a good word for evil-doers, and never withheld either approval or personal help from her customers in anything they undertook against the rich. This inn, a nest of vipers, brisk and venomous, seething and active, was a hot-bed for the hatred of the peasants and the workingmen against the masters and the wealthy.

The prosperous life of the Tonsards was, therefore, an evil example. Others asked themselves why they should not take their wood, as the Tonsards did, from the forest; why not pasture their cows and have game to eat and to sell as well as they;

why not harvest without sowing the grapes and the grain. Accordingly, the pilfering thefts which thin the woods and tithe the ploughed lands and meadows and vineyards became habitual in this valley, and soon existed as a right throughout the districts of Blangy, Conches, and Cerneux, all adjacent to the domain of Les Aigues. This sore, for certain reasons which will be given in due time, did far greater injury to Les Aigues than to the estates of Ronquerolles or Soulanges. You must not, however, fancy that Tonsard, his wife and children, and his old mother ever deliberately said to themselves, “We will live by theft, and commit it as cleverly as we can.” Such habits grow slowly. To the dried sticks they added, in the first instance, a single bit of good wood; then, emboldened by habit and a carefully prepared immunity (necessary to plans which this history will unfold), they ended at last in cutting “their wood,” and stealing almost their entire livelihood. Pasturage for the cows and the abuses of gleaning were established as customs little by little. When the Tonsards and the do-nothings of the valley had tasted the sweets of these four rights (thus captured by rural paupers, and amounting to actual robbery) we can easily imagine they would never give them up unless compelled by a power greater than their own audacity.

At the time when this history begins Tonsard, then about fifty years of age, tall and strong, rather stout than thin, with curly black hair, skin highly colored and marbled like a brick with purple blotches, yellow whites to the eyes, large ears with broad flaps, a muscular frame, encased, however, in flabby flesh, a retreating forehead, and a hanging lip,—Tonsard, such as you see him, hid his real character under an external stupidity, lightened at times by a show of experience, which seemed all the more intelligent because he had acquired in the company of his father-in-law a sort of bantering talk, much affected by old Fourchon and Vermichel. His nose, flattened at the end as if the finger of God intended to mark him, gave him a voice which came from his palate, like that of all persons disfigured by a disease which thickens the nasal passages, through which the air then passes with difficulty. His upper teeth overlapped each other, and this defect (which Lavater calls terrible) was all the more apparent because they were as white as those of a dog. But for a certain lawless and slothful good humor, and the free-and-easy ways of a rustic tippler, the man would have alarmed the least observing of spectators.

If the portraits of Tonsard, his inn, and his father-in-law take a prominent place in this history, it is because that place belongs to him and to the inn and to the family. In the first place, their existence, so minutely described, is the type of a hundred other households in the valley of Les Aigues. Secondly, Tonsard, without being other than the instrument of deep and active hatreds, had an immense influence on

the struggle that was about to take place, being the friend and counsellor of all the complainants of the lower classes. His inn, as we shall presently see, was the rendezvous for the aggressors; in fact, he became their chief, partly on account of the fear he inspired throughout the valley—less, however, by his actual deeds than by those that were constantly expected of him. The threat of this man was as much dreaded as the thing threatened, so that he never had occasion to execute it.

Every revolt, open or concealed, has its banner. The banner of the marauders, the drunkards, the idlers, the sluggards of the valley des Aigues was the terrible tavern of the Grand-I-Vert. Its frequenters found amusement there,—as rare and much-desired a thing in the country as in a city. Moreover, there was no other inn along the country-road for over twelve miles, a distance which conveyances (even when laden) could easily do in three hours; so that those who went from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes always stopped at the Grand-I-Vert, if only to refresh themselves. The miller of Les Aigues, who was also assistant-mayor, and his men came there. The grooms and valets of the general were not averse to Tonsard's wine, rendered attractive by Tonsard's daughters; so the Grand-I-Vert held subterraneous communication with the chateau through the servants, and knew immediately everything that they knew. It is impossible either by benefits or through their own self-interests, to break up the perpetual understanding that exists between the servants of a household and the people from whom they come. Domestic service is of the masses, and to the masses it will ever remain attached. This fatal comradeship explains the reticence of the last words of Charles the groom, as he and Blondet reached the portico of the chateau.

CHAPTER IV. ANOTHER IDYLL

“Ha! by my pipe, papa!” exclaimed Tonsard, seeing his father-in-law as the old man entered and supposing him in quest of food, “your stomach is lively this morning! We haven’t anything to give you. How about that rope,—the rope, you know, you were to make for us? It is amazing how much you make over night and how little there is made in the morning! You ought long ago to have twisted the one that is to twist you out of existence; you are getting too costly for us.”

The wit of a peasant or laborer is very Attic; it consists in speaking out his mind and giving it a grotesque expression. We find the same thing in a drawing-room. Delicacy of wit takes the place of picturesque vulgarity, and that is really all the difference there is.

“That’s enough for the father-in-law!” said the old man. “Talk business; I want a bottle of the best.”

So saying, Fourchon rapped a five-franc piece that gleamed in his hand on the old table at which he was seated,—which, with its coating of grease, its scorched black marks, its wine stains, and its gashes, was singular to behold. At the sound of coin Marie Tonsard, as trig as a sloop about to start on a cruise, glanced at her grandfather with a covetous look that shot from her eyes like a spark. La Tonsard came out of her bedroom, attracted by the music of metal.

“You are always rough to my poor father,” she said to her husband, “and yet he has earned a deal of money this year; God grant he came by it honestly. Let me see that,” she added, springing at the coin and snatching it from Fourchon’s fingers.

“Marie,” said Tonsard, gravely, “above the board you’ll find some bottled wine. Go and get a bottle.”

Wine is of only one quality in the country, but it is sold as of two kinds,—cask wine and bottled wine.

“Where did you get this, papa” demanded La Tonsard, slipping the coin into her pocket.

“Philippine! you’ll come to a bad end,” said the old man, shaking his head but not attempting to recover his money. Doubtless he had long realized the futility of a struggle between his daughter, his terrible son-in-law, and himself.

“Another bottle of wine for which you get five francs out of me,” he added, in a peevish tone. “But it shall be the last. I shall give my custom to the Cafe de la Paix.”

“Hold your tongue, papa!” remarked his fair and fat daughter, who bore some resemblance to a Roman matron. “You need a shirt, and a pair of clean trousers, and a hat; and I want to see you with a waistcoat. That’s what I take the money for.”

“I have told you again and again that such things would ruin me,” said the old man. “People would think me rich and stop giving me anything.”

The bottle brought by Marie put an end to the loquacity of the old man, who was not without that trait, characteristic of those whose tongues are ready to tell out everything, and who shrink from no expression of their thought, no matter how atrocious it may be.

“Then you don’t want to tell where you filched that money?” said Tonsard. “We might go and get more where that came from,—the rest of us.”

He was making a snare, and as he finished it the ferocious innkeeper happened to glance at his father-in-law’s trousers, and there he spied a raised round spot which clearly defined a second five-franc piece.

“Having become a capitalist I drink your health,” said Pere Fourchon.

“If you choose to be a capitalist you can be,” said Tonsard; “you have the means, you have! But the devil has bored a hole in the back of your head through which everything runs out.”

“Hey! I only played the otter trick on that young fellow they have got at Les Aigues. He’s from Paris. That’s all there is to it.”

“If crowds of people would come to see the sources of the Avonne, you’d be rich, Grandpa Fourchon,” said Marie.

“Yes,” he said, drinking the last glassful the bottle contained, “and I’ve played the sham otter so long, the live otters have got angry, and one of them came right between my legs to-day; Mouche caught it, and I am to get twenty francs for it.”

“I’ll bet your otter is made of tow,” said Tonsard, looking slyly at his father-in-law.

“If you will give me a pair of trousers, a waistcoat, and some list braces, so as not to disgrace Vermichel on the music stand at Tivoli (for old Socquard is always scolding about my clothes), I’ll let you keep that money, my daughter; your idea is a good one. I can squeeze that rich young fellow at Les Aigues; may be he’ll take to otters.”

“Go and get another bottle,” said Tonsard to his daughter. “If your father really had an otter, he would show it to us,” he added, speaking to his wife and trying to touch up Fourchon.

“I’m too afraid it would get into your frying-pan,” said the old man, winking one of his little green eyes at his daughter. “Philippine has already hooked my five-franc piece; and how many more haven’t you bagged under pretence of clothing me and feeding me? and now you say that my stomach is too lively, and that I go half-naked.”

“You sold your last clothes to drink boiled wine at the Cafe de la Paix, papa,” said his daughter, “though Vermichel tried to prevent it.”

“Vermichel! the man I treated! Vermichel is incapable of betraying my friendship. It must have been that lump of old lard on two legs that he is not ashamed to call his wife!”

“He or she,” replied Tonsard, “or Bonnebault.”

“If it was Bonnebault,” cried Fourchon, “he who is one of the pillars of the place, I’ll—I’ll—Enough!”

“You old sot, what has all that got to do with having sold your clothes? You sold them because you did sell them; you’re of age!” said Tonsard, slapping the old man’s knee. “Come, do honor to my drink and redden up your throat! The father of Mam Tonsard has a right to do so; and isn’t that better than spending your silver at Socquard’s?”

“What a shame it is that you have been fifteen years playing for people to dance at Tivoli and you have never yet found out how Socquard cooks his wine,—you who are so shrewd!” said his daughter; “and yet you know very well that if we had the secret we should soon get as rich as Rigou.”

Throughout the Morvan, and in that region of Burgundy which lies at its feet on the side toward Paris, this boiled wine with which Mam Tonsard reproached her father is a rather costly beverage which plays a great part in the life of the peasantry, and is made by all grocers and wine-dealers, and wherever a drinking-shop exists. This precious liquor, made of choice wine, sugar, and cinnamon and other spices, is preferable to all those disguises or mixtures of brandy called ratafia, one-hundred-and-seven, brave man’s cordial, black currant wine, vespetro, spirit-of-sun, etc. Boiled wine is found throughout France and Switzerland. Among the Jura, and in the wild districts trodden only by a few special tourists, the innkeepers call it, on the word of commercial travellers, the wine of Syracuse. Excellent it is, however, and their guests, hungry as hounds after ascending the

surrounding peaks, very gladly pay three and four francs a bottle for it. In the homes of the Morvan and in Burgundy the least illness or the slightest agitation of the nerves is an excuse for boiled wine. Before and after childbirth the women take it with the addition of burnt sugar. Boiled wine has soaked up the property of many a peasant, and more than once the seductive liquid has been the cause of marital chastisement.

“Ha! there’s no chance of grabbing that secret,” replied Fourchon, “Socquard always locks himself in when he boils his wine; he never told how he does it to his late wife. He sends to Paris for his materials.”

“Don’t plague your father,” cried Tonsard; “doesn’t he know? well, then, he doesn’t know! People can’t know everything!”

Fourchon grew very uneasy on seeing how his son-in-law’s countenance softened as well as his words.

“What do you want to rob me of now?” he asked, candidly.

“I?” said Tonsard, “I take none but my legitimate dues; if I get anything from you it is in payment of your daughter’s portion, which you promised me and never paid.”

Fourchon, reassured by the harshness of this remark, dropped his head on his breast as though vanquished and convinced.

“Look at that pretty snare,” resumed Tonsard, coming up to his father-in-law and laying the trap upon his knee. “Some of these days they’ll want game at Les Aigues, and we shall sell them their own, or there will be no good God for the poor folks.”

“A fine piece of work,” said the old man, examining the mischievous machine.

“It is very well to pick up the sous now, papa,” said Mam Tonsard, “but you know we are to have our share in the cake of Les Aigues.”

“Oh, what chatterers women are!” cried Tonsard. “If I am hanged it won’t be for a shot from my gun, but for the gabble of your tongue.”

“And do you really suppose that Les Aigues will be cut up and sold in lots for your pitiful benefit?” asked Fourchon. “Pshaw! haven’t you discovered in the last thirty years that old Rigou has been sucking the marrow out of your bones that the middle-class folks are worse than the lords? Mark my words, when that affair happens, my children, the Soudrys, the Gaubertins, the Rigous, will make you kick your heels in the air. ‘I’ve the good tobacco, it never shall be thine,’ that’s the national air of the rich man, hey? The peasant will always be the peasant. Don’t you see (but you never did understand anything of politics!) that government puts

such heavy taxes on wine only to hinder our profits and keep us poor? The middle classes and the government, they are all one. What would become of them if everybody was rich? Could they till their fields? Would they gather the harvest? No, they *want* the poor! I was rich for ten years and I know what I thought of paupers."

"Must hunt with them, though," replied Tonsard, "because they mean to cut up the great estates; after that's done, we can turn against them. If I'd been Courtecuisse, whom that scoundrel Rigou is ruining, I'd have long ago paid his bill with other balls than the poor fellow gives him."

"Right enough, too," replied Fourchon. "As Pere Niseron says (and he stayed republican long after everybody else), 'The people are tough; they don't die; they have time before them.'"

Fourchon fell into a sort of reverie; Tonsard profited by his inattention to take back the trap, and as he took it up he cut a slip below the coin in his father-in-law's pocket at the moment when the old man raised his glass to his lips; then he set his foot on the five-franc piece as it dropped on the earthen floor just where it was always kept damp by the heel-taps which the customers flung from their glasses. Though quickly and lightly done, the old man might, perhaps, have felt the theft, if Vermichel had not happened to appear at that moment.

"Tonsard, do you know where you father is?" called that functionary from the foot of the steps.

Vermichel's shout, the theft of the money, and the emptying of old Fourchon's glass, were simultaneous.

"Present, captain!" cried Fourchon, holding out a hand to Vermichel to help him up the steps.

Of all Burgundian figures, Vermichel would have seemed to you the most Burgundian. The practitioner was not red, he was scarlet. His face, like certain tropical portions of the globe, was fissured, here and there, with small extinct volcanoes, defined by flat and greenish patches which Fourchon called, not unpoetically, the "flowers of wine." This fiery face, the features of which were swelled out of shape by continual drunkenness, looked cyclopic; for it was lighted on the right side by a gleaming eye, and darkened on the other by a yellow patch over the left orb. Red hair, always tousled, and a beard like that of Judas, made Vermichel as formidable in appearance as he was meek in reality. His prominent nose looked like an interrogation-mark, to which the wide-slit mouth seemed to be always answering, even when it did not open. Vermichel, a short man, wore

hob-nail shoes, bottle-green velveteen trousers, an old waistcoat patched with diverse stuffs which seemed to have been originally made of a counterpane, a jacket of coarse blue cloth and a gray hat with a broad brim. All this luxury, required by the town of Soulanges where Vermichel fulfilled the combined functions of porter at the town-hall, drummer, jailer, musician, and practitioner, was taken care of by Madame Vermichel, an alarming antagonist of Rabelaisian philosophy. This virago with moustachios, about one yard in width and one hundred and twenty kilograms in weight (but very active), ruled Vermichel with a rod of iron. Thrashed by her when drunk, he allowed her to thrash him still when sober; which caused Pere Fourchon to say, with a sniff at Vermichel's clothes, "It is the livery of a slave."

"Talk of the sun and you'll see its beams," cried Fourchon, repeating a well-worn allusion to the rutilant face of Vermichel, which really did resemble those copper suns painted on tavern signs in the provinces. "Has Mam Vermichel spied too much dust on your back, that you're running away from your four-fifths,—for I can't call her your better half, that woman! What brings you here at this hour, drum-major?"

"Politics, always politics," replied Vermichel, who seemed accustomed to such pleasantries.

"Ah! business is bad in Blangy, and there'll be notes to protest, and writs to issue," remarked Pere Fourchon, filling a glass for his friend.

"That APE of ours is right behind me," replied Vermichel, with a backward gesture.

In workmen's slang "ape" meant master. The word belonged to the dictionary of the worthy pair.

"What's Monsieur Brunet coming bothering about here?" asked Tonsard.

"Hey, by the powers, you folks!" said Vermichel, "you've brought him in for the last three years more than you are worth. Ha! that master at Les Aigues, he has his eye upon you; he'll punch you in the ribs; he's after you, the Shopman! Brunet says, if there were three such landlords in the valley his fortune would be made."

"What new harm are they going to do to the poor?" asked Marie.

"A pretty wise thing for themselves," replied Vermichel. "Faith! you'll have to give in, in the end. How can you help it? They've got the power. For the last two years haven't they had three foresters and a horse-patrol, all as active as ants, and a

field-keeper who is a terror? Besides, the gendarmerie is ready to do their dirty work at any time. They'll crush you—"

"Bah!" said Tonsard, "we are too flat. That which can't be crushed isn't the trees, it's ground."

"Don't you trust to that," said Fourchon to his son-in-law; "you own property."

"Those rich folks must love you," continued Vermichel, "for they think of nothing else from morning till night! They are saying to themselves now like this: 'Their cattle eat up our pastures; we'll seize their cattle; they can't eat grass themselves.' You've all been condemned, the warrants are out, and they have told our ape to take your cows. We are to begin this morning at Conches by seizing old mother Bonnebault's cow and Godin's cow and Mitant's cow."

The moment the name of Bonnebault was mentioned, Marie, who was in love with the old woman's grandson, sprang into the vineyard with a nod to her father and mother. She slipped like an eel through a break in the hedge, and was off on the way to Conches with the speed of a hunted hare.

"They'll do so much," remarked Tonsard, tranquilly, "that they'll get their bones broken; and that will be a pity, for their mothers can't make them any new ones."

"Well, perhaps so," said old Fourchon, "but see here, Vermichel, I can't go with you for an hour or more, for I have important business at the chateau."

"More important than serving three warrants at five sous each? 'You shouldn't spit into the vintage,' as Father Noah says."

"I tell you, Vermichel, that my business requires me to go to the chateau des Aigues," repeated the old man, with an air of laughable self-importance.

"And anyhow," said Mam Tonsard, "my father had better keep out of the way. Do you really mean to find the cows?"

"Monsieur Brunet, who is a very good fellow, would much rather find nothing but their dung," answered Vermichel. "A man who is obliged to be out and about day and night had better be careful."

"If he is, he has good reason to be," said Tonsard, sententiously.

"So," continued Vermichel, "he said to Monsieur Michaud, 'I'll go as soon as the court is up.' If he had wanted to find the cows he'd have gone at seven o'clock in the morning. But that didn't suit Michaud, and Brunet has had to be off. You can't take in Michaud, he's a trained hound! Ha, the brigand!"

“Ought to have stayed in the army, a swaggerer like that,” said Tonsard; “he is only fit to deal with enemies. I wish he would come and ask me my name. He may call himself a veteran of the young guard, but I know very well that if I measured spurs with him, I’d keep my feathers up longest.”

“Look here!” said Mam Tonsard to Vermichel, “when are the notices for the ball at Soulanges coming out? Here it is the eighth of August.”

“I took them yesterday to Monsieur Bournier at Ville-aux-Fayes, to be printed,” replied Vermichel; “they do talk of fireworks on the lake.”

“What crowds of people we shall have!” cried Fourchon.

“Profits for Socquard!” said Tonsard, spitefully.

“If it doesn’t rain,” said his wife, by way of comfort.

At this moment the trot of a horse coming from the direction of Soulanges was heard, and five minutes later the sheriff’s officer fastened his horse to a post placed for the purpose near the wicket gate through which the cows were driven. Then he showed his head at the door of the Grand-I-Vert.

“Come, my boys, let’s lose no time,” he said, pretending to be in a hurry.

“Hey!” said Vermichel. “Here’s a refractory, Monsieur Brunet; Pere Fourchon wants to drop off.”

“He has had too many drops already,” said the sheriff; “but the law in this case does not require that he shall be sober.”

“Please excuse me, Monsieur Brunet,” said Fourchon, “I am expected at Les Aigues on business; they are in treaty for an otter.”

Brunet, a withered little man dressed from head to foot in black cloth, with a bilious skin, a furtive eye, curly hair, lips tight-drawn, pinched nose, anxious expression, and gruff in speech, exhibited the phenomenon of a character and bearing in perfect harmony with his profession. He was so well-informed as to the law, or, to speak more correctly, the quibbles of the law, that he had come to be both the terror and the counsellor of the whole canton. He was not without a certain popularity among the peasantry, from whom he usually took his pay in kind. The compound of his active and negative qualities and his knowledge of how to manage matters got him the custom of the canton, to the exclusion of his coadjutor Plissoud, about whom we shall have something to say later. This chance combination of a sheriff’s officer who does everything and a sheriff’s officer who does nothing is not at all uncommon in the country justice courts.

“So matters are getting warm, are they?” said Tonsard to little Brunet.

“What can you expect? you pilfer the man too much, and he’s going to protect himself,” replied the officer. “It will be a bad business for you in the end; government will interfere.”

“Then we, poor unfortunates, must give up the ghost!” said Mam Tonsard, offering him a glass of brandy on a saucer.

“The unfortunate may all die, yet they’ll never be lacking in the land,” said Fourchon, sententiously.

“You do great damage to the woods,” retorted the sheriff.

“Now don’t believe that, Monsieur Brunet,” said Mam Tonsard; “they make such a fuss about a few miserable fagots!”

“We didn’t crush the rich low enough during the Revolution, that’s what’s the trouble,” said Tonsard.

Just then a horrible, and quite incomprehensible noise was heard. It seemed to be a rush of hurried feet, accompanied with a rattle of arms, half-drowned by the rustling of leaves, the dragging of branches, and the sound of still more hasty feet. Two voices, as different as the two footsteps, were venting noisy exclamations. Everybody inside the inn guessed at once that a man was pursuing a woman; but why? The uncertainty did not last long.

“It is mother!” said Tonsard, jumping up; “I know her shriek.”

Then suddenly, rushing up the broken steps of the Grand-I-Vert by a last effort that can be made only by the sinews of smugglers, old Mother Tonsard fell flat on the floor in the middle of the room. The immense mass of wood she carried on her head made a terrible noise as it crashed against the top of the door and then upon the ground. Every one had jumped out of the way. The table, the bottles, the chairs were knocked over and scattered. The noise was as great as if the cottage itself had come tumbling down.

“I’m dead! The scoundrel has killed me!”

The words and the flight of the old woman were explained by the apparition on the threshold of a keeper, dressed in green livery, wearing a hat edged with silver cord, a sabre at his side, a leathern shoulder-belt bearing the arms of Montcornet charged with those of the Troisvilles, the regulation red waistcoat, and buckskin gaiters which came above the knee.

After a moment's hesitation the keeper said, looking at Brunet and Vermichel, "Here are witnesses."

"Witnesses of what?" said Tonsard.

"That woman has a ten-year-old oak, cut into logs, inside those fagots; it is a regular crime!"

The moment the word "witness" was uttered Vermichel thought best to breathe the fresh air of the vineyard.

"Of what? witnesses of what?" cried Tonsard, standing in front of the keeper while his wife helped up the old woman. "Do you mean to show your claws, Vatel? Accuse persons and arrest them on the highway, brigand,—that's your domain; but get out of here! A man's house is his castle."

"I caught her in the act, and your mother must come with me."

"Arrest my mother in my house? You have no right to do it. My house is inviolable,—all the world knows that, at least. Have you got a warrant from Monsieur Guerbet, the magistrate? Ha! you must have the law behind you before you come in here. You are not the law, though you have sworn an oath to starve us to death, you miserable forest-gauger, you!"

The fury of the keeper waxed so hot that he was on the point of seizing hold of the wood, when the old woman, a frightful bit of black parchment endowed with motion, the like of which can be seen only in David's picture of "The Sabines," screamed at him, "Don't touch it, or I'll fly at your eyes!"

"Well, then, undo that pile in presence of Monsieur Brunet," said the keeper.

Though the sheriff's officer had assumed the indifference that the routine of business does really give to officials of his class, he threw a glance at Tonsard and his wife which said plainly, "A bad business!" Old Fourchon looked at his daughter, and slyly pointed at a pile of ashes in the chimney. Mam Tonsard, who understood in a moment from that significant gesture both the danger of her mother-in-law and the advice of her father, seized a handful of ashes and flung them in the keeper's eyes. Vatel roared with pain; Tonsard pushed him roughly upon the broken door-steps where the blinded man stumbled and fell, and then rolled nearly down to the gate, dropping his gun on the way. In an instant the load of sticks was unfastened, and the oak logs pulled out and hidden with a rapidity no words can describe. Brunet, anxious not to witness this manoeuvre, which he readily foresaw, rushed after the keeper to help him up; then he placed him on the

bank and wet his handkerchief in water to wash the eyes of the poor fellow, who, in spite of his agony, was trying to reach the brook.

“You are in the wrong, Vatel,” said Brunet; “you have no right to enter houses, don’t you see?”

The old woman, a little hump-backed creature, stood on the sill of the door, with her hands on her hips, darting flashes from her eyes and curses from her foaming lips shrill enough to be heard at Blangy.

“Ha! the villain, ‘twas well done! May hell get you! To suspect me of cutting trees!—*me*, the most honest woman in the village. To hunt me like vermin! I’d like to see you lose your cursed eyes, for then we’d have peace. You are birds of ill-omen, the whole of you; you invent shameful stories to stir up strife between your master and us.”

The keeper allowed the sheriff to bathe his eyes and all the while the latter kept telling him that he was legally wrong.

“The old thief! she has tired us out,” said Vatel at last. “She has been at work in the woods all night.”

As the whole family had taken an active hand in hiding the live wood and putting things straight in the cottage, Tonsard presently appeared at the door with an insolent air. “Vatel, my man, if you ever again dare to force your way into my domain, my gun shall answer you,” he said. “To-day you have had the ashes; the next time you shall have the fire. You don’t know your own business. That’s enough. Now if you feel hot after this affair take some wine, I offer it to you; and you may come in and see that my old mother’s bundle of fagots hadn’t a scrap of live wood in it; it is every bit brushwood.”

“Scoundrel!” said the keeper to the sheriff, in a low voice, more enraged by this speech than by the smart of his eyes.

Just then Charles, the groom, appeared at the gate of the Grand-I-Vert.

“What is the matter, Vatel?” he said.

“Ah!” said the keeper, wiping his eyes, which he had plunged wide open into the rivulet to give them a final cleansing. “I have some debtors in there that I’ll cause to rue the day they saw the light.”

“If you take it that way, Monsieur Vatel,” said Tonsard, coldly, “you will find we don’t want for courage in Burgundy.”

Vatel departed. Not feeling much curiosity to know what the trouble was, Charles went up the steps and looked into the house.

“Come to the chateau, you and your otter,—if you really have one,” he said to Pere Fourchon.

The old man rose hurriedly and followed him.

“Well, where is it,—that otter of yours?” said Charles, smiling doubtfully.

“This way,” said the old fellow, going toward the Thune.

The name is that of a brook formed by the overflow of the mill-race and of certain springs in the park of Les Aigues. It runs by the side of the county road as far as the lakelet of Soulanges, which it crosses, and then falls into the Avonne, after feeding the mills and ponds on the Soulanges estate.

“Here it is; I hid it in the brook, with a stone around its neck.”

As he stooped and rose again the old man missed the coin out of his pocket, where metal was so uncommon that he was likely to notice its presence or its absence immediately.

“Ah, the sharks!” he cried. “If I hunt otters they hunt fathers-in-law! They get out of me all I earn, and tell me it is for my good! If it were not for my poor Mouche, who is the comfort of my old age, I’d drown myself. Children! they are the ruin of their fathers. You haven’t married, have you, Monsieur Charles? Then don’t; never get married, and then you can’t reproach yourself for spreading bad blood. I, who expected to buy my tow with that money, and there it is filched, stolen! That monsieur up at Les Aigues, a fine young fellow, gave me ten francs; ha! well! it’ll put up the price of my otter now.”

Charles distrusted the old man so profoundly that he took his grievances (this time very sincere) for the preliminary of what he called, in servant’s slang, “varnish,” and he made the great mistake of letting his opinion appear in a satirical grin, which the spiteful old fellow detected.

“Come, come! Pere Fourchon, now behave yourself; you are going to see Madame,” said Charles, noticing how the rubies flashed on the nose and cheeks of the old drunkard.

“I know how to attend to business, Charles; and the proof is that if you will get me out of the kitchen the remains of the breakfast and a bottle or two of Spanish wine, I’ll tell you something which will save you from a ‘foul.’”

“Tell me, and Francois shall get Monsieur’s own order to give you a glass of wine,” said the groom.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Well then, I know you meet my granddaughter Catherine under the bridge of the Avonne. Godain is in love with her; he saw you, and he is fool enough to be jealous,—I say fool, for a peasant oughtn’t to have feelings which belong only to rich folks. If you go to the ball of Soulanges at Tivoli and dance with her, you’ll dance higher than you’ll like. Godain is rich and dangerous; he is capable of breaking your arm without your getting a chance to arrest him.”

“That would be too dear; Catherine is a fine girl, but she is not worth all that,” replied Charles. “Why should Godain be so angry? others are not.”

“He loves her enough to marry her.”

“If he does, he’ll beat her,” said Charles.

“I don’t know about that,” said the old man. “She takes after her mother, against whom Tonsard never raised a finger,—he’s too afraid she’ll be off, hot foot. A woman who knows how to hold her own is mighty useful. Besides, if it came to fisticuffs with Catherine, Godain, though he’s pretty strong, wouldn’t give the last blow.”

“Well, thank you, Pere Fourchon; here’s forty sous to drink my health in case I can’t get you the sherry.”

Pere Fourchon turned his head aside as he pocketed the money lest Charles should see the expression of amusement and sarcasm which he was unable to repress.

“Catherine,” he resumed, “is a proud minx; she likes sherry. You had better tell her to go and get it at Les Aigues.”

Charles looked at Pere Fourchon with naive admiration, not suspecting the eager interest the general’s enemies took in slipping one more spy into the chateau.

“The general ought to feel happy now,” continued Fourchon; “the peasants are all quiet. What does he say? Is he satisfied with Sibilet?”

“It is only Monsieur Michaud who finds fault with Sibilet. They say he’ll get him sent away.”

“Professional jealousy!” exclaimed Fourchon. “I’ll bet you would like to get rid of Francois and take his place.”

“Hang it! he has twelve hundred francs wages,” said Charles; “but they can’t send him off,—he knows the general’s secrets.”

“Just as Madame Michaud knows the countess’s,” remarked Fourchon, watching the other carefully. “Look here, my boy, do you know whether Monsieur and Madame have separate rooms?”

“Of course; if they didn’t, Monsieur wouldn’t be so fond of Madame.”

“Is that all you know?” said Fourchon.

As they were now before the kitchen windows nothing more was said.

CHAPTER V. ENEMIES FACE TO FACE

While breakfast was in progress at the chateau, Francois, the head footman, whispered to Blondet, but loud enough for the general to overhear him,—

“Monsieur, Pere Fourchon’s boy is here; he says they have caught the otter, and wants to know if you would like it, or whether they shall take it to the sub-prefect at Ville-aux-Fayes.”

Emile Blondet, though himself a past-master of hoaxing, could not keep his cheeks from blushing like those of a virgin who hears an indecorous story of which she knows the meaning.

“Ha! ha! so you have hunted the otter this morning with Pere Fourchon?” cried the general, with a roar of laughter.

“What is it?” asked the countess, uneasy at her husband’s laugh.

“When a man of wit and intelligence is taken in by old Fourchon,” continued the general, “a retired cuirassier need not blush for having hunted that otter; which bears an enormous resemblance to the third posthorse we are made to pay for and never see.” With that he went off into further explosions of laughter, in the midst of which he contrived to say: “I am not surprised you had to change your boots—and your trousers; I have no doubt you have been wading! The joke didn’t go as far as that with me,—I stayed on the bank; but then, you know, you are so much more intelligent than I—”

“But you forget,” interrupted Madame de Montcornet, “that I do not know what you are talking of.”

At these words, said with some pique, the general grew serious, and Blondet told the story of his fishing for the otter.

“But if they really have an otter,” said the countess, “those poor people are not to blame.”

“Oh, but it is ten years since an otter has been seen about here,” said the pitiless general.

“Monsieur le comte,” said Francois, “the boy swears by all that’s sacred that he has got one.”

“If they have one I’ll buy it,” said the general.

“I don’t suppose,” remarked the Abbe Brossette, “that God has condemned Les Aigues to never have otters.”

“Ah, Monsieur le cure!” cried Blondet, “if you bring the Almighty against me—”

“But what is all this? Who is here?” said the countess, hastily.

“Mouche, madame,—the boy who goes about with old Fourchon,” said the footman.

“Bring him in—that is, if Madame will allow it?” said the general; “he may amuse you.”

Mouche presently appeared, in his usual state of comparative nudity. Beholding this personification of poverty in the middle of this luxurious dining-room, the cost of one panel of which would have been a fortune to the bare-legged, bare-breasted, and bare-headed child, it was impossible not to be moved by an impulse of charity. The boy’s eyes, like blazing coals, gazed first at the luxuries of the room, and then at those on the table.

“Have you no mother?” asked Madame de Montcornet, unable otherwise to explain the child’s nakedness.

“No, ma’am; m’ma died of grief for losing p’pa, who went to the army in 1812 without marrying her with papers, and got frozen, saving your presence. But I’ve my Grandpa Fourchon, who is a good man,—though he does beat me bad sometimes.”

“How is it, my dear, that such wretched people can be found on your estate?” said the countess, looking at the general.

“Madame la comtesse,” said the abbe, “in this district we have none but voluntary paupers. Monsieur le comte does all he can; but we have to do with a class of persons who are without religion and who have but one idea, that of living at your expense.”

“But, my dear abbe,” said Blondet, “you are here to improve their morals.”

“Monsieur,” replied the abbe, “my bishop sent me here as if on a mission to savages; but, as I had the honor of telling him, the savages of France cannot be reached. They make it a law unto themselves not to listen to us; whereas the church does get some hold on the savages of America.”

“M’sieur le cure, they do help me a bit now,” remarked Mouche; “but if I went to your church they *wouldn’t*, and the other folks would make game of my breeches.”

“Religion ought to begin by giving him trousers, my dear abbe,” said Blondet. “In your foreign missions don’t you begin by coaxing the savages?”

“He would soon sell them,” answered the abbe, in a low tone; “besides, my salary does not enable me to begin on that line.”

“Monsieur le cure is right,” said the general, looking at Mouche.

The policy of the little scamp was to appear not to hear what they were saying when it was against himself.

“The boy is intelligent enough to know good from evil,” continued the count, “and he is old enough to work; yet he thinks of nothing but how to commit evil without being found out. All the keepers know him. He is very well aware that the master of an estate may witness a trespass on his property and yet have no right to arrest the trespasser. I have known him keep his cows boldly in my meadows, though he knew I saw him; but now, ever since I have been mayor, he runs away fast enough.”

“Oh, that is very wrong,” said the countess; “you should not take other people’s things, my little man.”

“Madame, we must eat. My grandpa gives me more slaps than food, and they don’t fill my stomach, slaps don’t. When the cows come in I milk ‘em just a little and I live on that. Monseigneur isn’t so poor but what he’ll let me drink a drop o’ milk the cows get from his grass?”

“Perhaps he hasn’t eaten anything to-day,” said the countess, touched by his misery. “Give him some bread and the rest of that chicken; let him have his breakfast,” she added, looking at the footman. “Where do you sleep, my child?”

“Anywhere, madame; under the stars in summer, and wherever they’ll let us in winter.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

“There is still time to bring him up to better ways,” said the countess to her husband.

“He will make a good soldier,” said the general, gruffly; “he is well toughened. I went through that kind of thing myself, and here I am.”

“Excuse me, general, I don’t belong to nobody,” said the boy. “I can’t be drafted. My poor mother wasn’t married, and I was born in a field. I’m a son of the ‘airth,’ as grandpa says. M’ma saved me from the army, that she did! My name ain’t no

more Mouche than nothing at all. Grandpa keeps telling me all my advantages. I'm not on the register, and when I'm old enough to be drafted I can go all over France and they can't take me."

"Are you fond of your grandfather?" said the countess, trying to look into the child's heart.

"My! doesn't he box my ears when he feels like it! but then, after all, he's such fun; he's such good company! He says he pays himself that way for having taught me to read and write."

"Can you read?" asked the count.

"Yah, I should think so, Monsieur le comte, and fine writing too—just as true as we've got that otter."

"Read that," said the count, giving him a newspaper.

"The Qu-o-ti-dienne," read Mouche, hesitating only three times.

Every one, even the abbe, laughed.

"Why do you make me read that newspaper?" cried Mouche, angrily. "My grandpa says it is made up to please the rich, and everybody knows later just what's in it."

"The child is right, general," said Blondet; "and he makes me long to see my hoaxing friend again."

Mouche understood perfectly that he was posing for the amusement of the company; the pupil of Pere Fourchon was worthy of his master, and he forthwith began to cry.

"How can you tease a child with bare feet?" said the countess.

"And who thinks it quite natural that his grandfather should recoup himself for his education by boxing his ears," said Blondet.

"Tell me, my poor little fellow, have you really caught an otter?"

"Yes, madame; as true as that you are the prettiest lady I have seen, or ever shall see," said the child, wiping his eyes.

"Then show me the otter," said the general.

"Oh M'sieur le comte, my grandpa has hidden it; but it was kicking still when we were at work at the rope-walk. Send for my grandpa, please; he wants to sell it to you himself."

"Take him into the kitchen," said the countess to Francois, "and give him his breakfast, and send Charles to fetch Pere Fourchon. Find some shoes, and a pair of

trousers and a waistcoat for the poor child; those who come here naked must go away clothed."

"May God bless you, my beautiful lady," said Mouche, departing. "M'sieur le cure may feel quite sure that I'll keep the things and wear 'em fete-days, because you give 'em to me."

Emile and Madame Montcornet looked at each other with some surprise, and seemed to say to the abbe, "The boy is not a fool!"

"It is quite true, madame," said the abbe after the child had gone, "that we cannot reckon with Poverty. I believe it has hidden excuses of which God alone can judge,—physical excuses, often congenital; moral excuses, born in the character, produced by an order of things that are often the result of qualities which, unhappily for society, have no vent. Deeds of heroism performed upon the battle-field ought to teach us that the worst scoundrels may become heroes. But here in this place you are living under exceptional circumstances; and if your benevolence is not controlled by reflection and judgment you run the risk of supporting your enemies."

"Our enemies?" exclaimed the countess.

"Cruel enemies," said the general, gravely.

"Pere Fourchon and his son-in-law Tonsard," said the abbe, "are the strength and the intelligence of the lower classes of this valley, who consult them on all occasions. The Machiavelism of these people is beyond belief. Ten peasants meeting in a tavern are the small change of great political questions."

Just then Francois announced Monsieur Sibilet.

"He is my minister of finance," said the general, smiling; "ask him in. He will explain to you the gravity of the situation," he added, looking at his wife and Blondet.

"Because he has reasons of his own for not concealing it," said the cure, in a low tone.

Blondet then beheld a personage of whom he had heard much ever since his arrival, and whom he desired to know, the land-steward of Les Aigues. He saw a man of medium height, about thirty years of age, with a sulky look and a discontented face, on which a smile sat ill. Beneath an anxious brow a pair of greenish eyes evaded the eyes of others, and so disguised their thought. Sibilet was dressed in a brown surtout coat, black trousers and waistcoat, and wore his hair long and flat to the head, which gave him a clerical look. His trousers barely concealed that he was

knock-kneed. Though his pallid complexion and flabby flesh gave the impression of an unhealthy constitution, Sibilet was really robust. The tones of his voice, which were a little thick, harmonized with this unflattering exterior.

Blondet gave a hasty look at the abbe, and the glance with which the young priest answered it showed the journalist that his own suspicions about the steward were certainties to the curate.

“Did you not tell me, my dear Sibilet,” said the general, “that you estimate the value of what the peasants steal from us at a quarter of the whole revenue?”

“Much more than that, Monsieur le comte,” replied the steward. “The poor about here get more from your property than the State exacts in taxes. A little scamp like Mouche can glean his two bushels a day. Old women, whom you would really think at their last gasp, become at the harvest and vintage times as active and healthy as girls. You can witness that phenomenon very soon,” said Sibilet, addressing Blondet, “for the harvest, which was put back by the rains in July will begin next week, when they cut the rye. The gleaners must have a certificate of pauperism from the mayor of the district, and no district should allow any one to glean except the paupers; but the districts of one canton do glean in those of another without certificate. If we have sixty real paupers in our district, there are at least forty others who could support themselves if they were not so idle. Even persons who have a business leave it to glean in the fields and in the vineyards. All these people, taken together, gather in this neighborhood something like three hundred bushels a day; the harvest lasts two weeks, and that makes four thousand five hundred bushels in this district alone. The gleaning takes more from an estate than the taxes. As to the abuse of pasturage, it robs us of fully one-sixth the produce of the meadows; and as to that of the woods, it is incalculable,—they have actually come to cutting down six-year-old trees. The loss to you, Monsieur le comte, amounts to fully twenty-odd thousand francs a year.”

“Do you hear that, madame?” said the general to his wife.

“Is it not exaggerated?” asked Madame de Montcornet.

“No, madame, unfortunately not,” said the abbe. “Poor Niseron, that old fellow with the white head, who combines the functions of bell-ringer, beadle, grave-digger, sexton, and clerk, in defiance of his republican opinions,—I mean the grandfather of the little Genevieve whom you placed with Madame Michaud—”

“La Pechina,” said Sibilet, interrupting the abbe.

“Pechina!” said the countess, “whom do you mean?”

“Madame la comtesse, when you met little Genevieve on the road in a miserable condition, you cried out in Italian, ‘Piccina!’ The word became a nickname, and is now corrupted all through the district into Pechina,” said the abbe. “The poor girl comes to church with Madame Michaud and Madame Sibilet.”

“And she is none the better for it,” said Sibilet, “for the others ill-treat her on account of her religion.”

“Well, that poor old man of seventy gleans, honestly, about a bushel and a half a day,” continued the priest; “but his natural uprightness prevents him from selling his gleanings as others do,—he keeps them for his own consumption. Monsieur Langlume, your miller, grinds his flour gratis at my request, and my servant bakes his bread with mine.”

“I had quite forgotten my little protegee,” said the countess, troubled at Sibilet’s remark. “Your arrival,” she added to Blondet, “has quite turned my head. But after breakfast I will take you to the gate of the Avonne and show you the living image of those women whom the painters of the fifteenth century delighted to perpetuate.”

The sound of Pere Fourchon’s broken sabots was now heard; after depositing them in the antechamber, he was brought to the door of the dining-room by Francois. At a sign from the countess, Francois allowed him to pass in, followed by Mouche with his mouth full and carrying the otter, hanging by a string tied to its yellow paws, webbed like those of a palmiped. He cast upon his four superiors sitting at table, and also upon Sibilet, that look of mingled distrust and servility which serves as a veil to the thoughts of the peasantry; then he brandished his amphibian with a triumphant air.

“Here it is!” he cried, addressing Blondet.

“My otter!” returned the Parisian, “and well paid for.”

“Oh, my dear gentleman,” replied Pere Fourchon, “yours got away; she is now in her burrow, and she won’t come out, for she’s a female,—this is a male; Mouche saw him coming just as you went away. As true as you live, as true as that Monsieur le comte covered himself and his cuirassiers with glory at Waterloo, the otter is mine, just as much as Les Aigues belongs to Monseigneur the general. But the otter is *yours* for twenty francs; if not I’ll take it to the sub-prefect. If Monsieur Gourdon thinks it too dear, then I’ll give you the preference; that’s only fair, as we hunted together this morning!”

“Twenty francs!” said Blondet. “In good French you can’t call that *giving* the preference.”

“Hey, my dear gentleman,” cried the old fellow. “Perhaps I don’t know French, and I’ll ask it in good Burgundian; as long as I get the money, I don’t care, I’ll talk Latin: ‘latinus, latina, latinum’! Besides, twenty francs is what you promised me this morning. My children have already stolen the silver you gave me; I wept about it, coming along,—ask Charles if I didn’t. Not that I’d arrest ‘em for the value of ten francs and have ‘em up before the judge, no! But just as soon as I earn a few pennies, they make me drink and get ‘em out of me. Ah! it is hard, hard to be reduced to go and get my wine elsewhere. But just see what children are these days! That’s what we got by the Revolution; it is all for the children now-a-days, and parents are suppressed. I’m bringing up Mouche on another tack; he loves me, the little scamp,”—giving his grandson a poke.

“It seems to me you are making him a little thief, like all the rest,” said Sibilet; “he never lies down at night without some sin on his conscience.”

“Ha! Monsieur Sibilet, his conscience is as clean as yours any day! Poor child! what can he steal? A little grass! that’s better than throttling a man! He don’t know mathematics like you, nor subtraction, nor addition, nor multiplication,—you are very unjust to us, that you are! You call us a nest of brigands, but you are the cause of the misunderstandings between our good landlord here, who is a worthy man, and the rest of us, who are all worthy men,—there ain’t an honester part of the country than this. Come, what do you mean? do I own property? don’t I go half-naked, and Mouche too? Fine sheets we slept in, washed by the dew every morning! and unless you want the air we breathe and the sunshine we drink, I should like to know what we have that you can take away from us! The rich folks rob as they sit in their chimney-corners,—and more profitably, too, than by picking up a few sticks in the woods. I don’t see no game-keepers or patrols after Monsieur Gaubertin, who came here as naked as a worm and is now worth his millions. It’s easy said, ‘Robbers!’ Here’s fifteen years that old Guerbet, the tax-gatherer at Soulanges, carries his money along the roads by the dead of night, and nobody ever took a farthing from him; is that like a land of robbers? has robbery made us rich? Show me which of us two, your class or mine, live the idlest lives and have the most to live on without earning it.”

“If you were to work,” said the abbe, “you would have property. God blesses labor.”

“I don’t want to contradict you, M’sieur l’abbe, for you are wiser than I, and perhaps you’ll know how to explain something that puzzles me. Now see, here I am, ain’t I?—that drunken, lazy, idle, good-for-nothing old Fourchon, who had an education and was a farmer, and got down in the mud and never got up

again,—well, what difference is there between me and that honest and worthy old Niseron, seventy years old (and that's my age) who has dug the soil for sixty years and got up every day before it was light to go to his work, and has made himself an iron body and a fine soul? Well, isn't he as bad off as I am? His little granddaughter, Pechina, is at service with Madame Michaud, whereas my little Mouche is as free as air. So that poor good man gets rewarded for his virtues in exactly the same way that I get punished for my vices. He don't know what a glass of good wine is, he's as sober as an apostle, he buries the dead, and I—I play for the living to dance. He is always in a peck o' troubles, while I slip along in a devil-may-care way. We have come along about even in life; we've got the same snow on our heads, the same funds in our pockets, and I supply him with rope to ring his bell. He's a republican and I'm not even a publican,—that's all the difference as far as I can see. A peasant may do good or do evil (according to your ideas) and he'll go out of the world just as he came into it, in rags; while you wear the fine clothes."

No one interrupted Pere Fourchon, who seemed to owe his eloquence to his potations. At first Sibilet tried to cut him short, but desisted at a sign from Blondet. The abbe, the general, and the countess, all understood from the expression of the writer's eye that he wanted to study the question of pauperism from life, and perhaps take his revenge on Pere Fourchon.

"What sort of education are you giving Mouche?" asked Blondet. "Do you expect to make him any better than your daughters?"

"Does he ever speak to him of God?" said the priest.

"Oh, no, no! Monsieur le cure, I don't tell him to fear God, but men. God is good; he has promised us poor folks, so you say, the kingdom of heaven, because the rich people keep the earth to themselves. I tell him: 'Mouche! fear the prison, and keep out of it,—for that's the way to the scaffold. Don't steal anything, make people give it to you. Theft leads to murder, and murder brings down the justice of men. The razor of justice,—*that's* what you've got to fear; it lets the rich sleep easy and keeps the poor awake. Learn to read. Education will teach you ways to grab money under cover of the law, like that fine Monsieur Gaubertin; why, you can even be a land-steward like Monsieur Sibilet here, who gets his rations out of Monsieur le comte. The thing to do is to keep well with the rich, and pick up the crumbs that fall from their tables.' That's what I call giving him a good, solid education; and you'll always find the little rascal on the side of the law,—he'll be a good citizen and take care of me."

"What do you mean to make of him?" asked Blondet.

“A servant, to begin with,” returned Fourchon, “because then he’ll see his masters close by, and learn something; he’ll complete his education, I’ll warrant you. Good example will be a fortune to him, with the law on his side like the rest of you. If M’sieur le comte would only take him in his stables and let him learn to groom the horses, the boy will be mighty pleased, for though I’ve taught him to fear men, he don’t fear animals.”

“You are a clever fellow, Pere Fourchon,” said Blondet; “you know what you are talking about, and there’s sense in what you say.”

“Oh, sense? no; I left my sense at the Grand-I-Vert when I lost those silver pieces.”

“How is it that a man of your capacity should have dropped so low? As things are now, a peasant can only blame himself for his poverty; he is a free man, and he can become a rich one. It is not as it used to be. If a peasant lays by his money, he can always buy a bit of land and become his own master.”

“I’ve seen the olden time and I’ve seen the new, my dear wise gentleman,” said Fourchon; “the sign over the door has changed, that’s true, but the wine is the same,—to-day is the younger brother of yesterday, that’s all. Put that in your newspaper! Are we poor folks free? We still belong to the same parish, and its lord is always there,—I call him Toil. The hoe, our sole property, has never left our hands. Let it be the old lords or the present taxes which take the best of our earnings, the fact remains that we sweat our lives out in toil.”

“But you could undertake a business, and try to make your fortune,” said Blondet.

“Try to make my fortune! And where shall I try? If I wish to leave my own province, I must get a passport, and that costs forty sous. Here’s forty years that I’ve never had a slut of a forty-sous piece jingling against another in my pocket. If you want to travel you need as many crowns as there are villages, and there are mighty few Fourchons who have enough to get to six of ‘em. It is only the draft that gives us a chance to get away. And what good does the army do us? The colonels live by the solider, just as the rich folks live by the peasant; and out of every hundred of ‘em you won’t find more than one of our breed. It is just as it is the world over, one rolling in riches, for a hundred down in the mud. Why are we in the mud? Ask God and the usurers. The best we can do is to stay in our own parts, where we are penned like sheep by the force of circumstances, as our fathers were by the rule of the lords. As for me, what do I care what shackles they are that keep me here? let it be the law of public necessity or the tyranny of the old lords, it is all the same; we are condemned to dig the soil forever. There, where we are born, there we dig it, that earth! and spade it, and manure it, and delve in it, for you

who are born rich just as we are born poor. The masses will always be what they are, and stay what they are. The number of us who manage to rise is nothing like the number of you who topple down! We know that well enough, if we have no education! You mustn't be after us with your sheriff all the time,—not if you're wise. We let you alone, and you must let us alone. If not, and things get worse, you'll have to feed us in your prisons, where we'd be much better off than in our homes. You want to remain our masters, and we shall always be enemies, just as we were thirty years ago. You have everything, we have nothing; you can't expect we should ever be friends."

"That's what I call a declaration of war," said the general.

"Monseigneur," retorted Fourchon, "when Les Aigues belonged to that poor Madame (God keep her soul and forgive her the sins of her youth!) we were happy. *She* let us get our food from the fields and our fuel from the forest; and was she any the poorer for it? And you, who are at least as rich as she, you hunt us like wild beasts, neither more nor less, and drag the poor before the courts. Well, evil will come of it! you'll be the cause of some great calamity. Haven't I just seen your keeper, that shuffling Vatel, half kill a poor old woman for a stick of wood? It is such fellows as that who make you an enemy to the poor; and the talk is very bitter against you. They curse you every bit as hard as they used to bless the late Madame. The curse of the poor, monseigneur, is a seed that grows,—grows taller than your tall oaks, and oak-wood builds the scaffold. Nobody here tells you the truth; and here it is, yes, the truth! I expect to die before long, and I risk very little in telling it to you, the *truth*! I, who play for the peasants to dance at the great fetes at Soulanges, I heed what the people say. Well, they're all against you; and they'll make it impossible for you to stay here. If that damned Michaud of yours doesn't change, they'll force you to change him. There! that information *and* the otter are worth twenty francs, and more too."

As the old fellow uttered the last words a man's step was heard, and the individual just threatened by Fourchon entered unannounced. It was easy to see from the glance he threw at the old man that the threat had reached his ears, and all Fourchon's insolence sank in a moment. The look produced precisely the same effect upon him that the eye of a policeman produces on a thief. Fourchon knew he was wrong, and that Michaud might very well accuse him of saying these things merely to terrify the inhabitants of Les Aigues.

"This is the minister of war," said the general to Blondet, nodding at Michaud.

“Pardon me, madame, for having entered without asking if you were willing to receive me,” said the newcomer to the countess; “but I have urgent reasons for speaking to the general at once.”

Michaud, as he said this, took notice of Sibilet, whose expression of keen delight in Fourchon’s daring words was not seen by the four persons seated at the table, because they were so preoccupied by the old man; whereas Michaud, who for secret reasons watched Sibilet constantly, was struck with his air and manner.

“He has earned his twenty francs, Monsieur le comte,” said Sibilet; “the otter is fully worth it.”

“Give him twenty francs,” said the general to the footman.

“Do you mean to take my otter away from me?” said Blondet to the general.

“I shall have it stuffed,” replied the latter.

“Ah! but that good gentleman said I might keep the skin,” cried Fourchon.

“Well, then,” exclaimed the countess, hastily, “you shall have five francs more for the skin; but go away now.”

The powerful odor emitted by the pair made the dining-room so horribly offensive that Madame de Montcornet, whose senses were very delicate, would have been forced to leave the room if Fourchon and Mouche had remained. To this circumstance the old man was indebted for his twenty-five francs. He left the room with a timid glance at Michaud, making him an interminable series of bows.

“What I was saying to monseigneur, Monsieur Michaud,” he added, “was really for your good.”

“Or for that of those who pay you,” replied Michaud, with a searching look.

“When you have served the coffee, leave the room,” said the general to the servants, “and see that the doors are shut.”

Blondet, who had not yet seen the bailiff of Les Aigues, was conscious, as he now saw him, of a totally different impression from that conveyed by Sibilet. Just as the steward inspired distrust and repulsion, so Michaud commanded respect and confidence. The first attraction of his presence was a happy face, of a fine oval, pure in outline, in which the nose bore part,—a regularity which is lacking in the majority of French faces. Though the features were correct in drawing, they were not without expression, due, perhaps, to the harmonious coloring of the warm brown and ochre tints, indicative of physical health and strength. The clear brown eyes, which were bright and piercing, kept no reserves in the expression of his

thought; they looked straight into the eyes of others. The broad white forehead was thrown still further into relief by his abundant black hair. Honesty, decision, and a saintly serenity were the animating points of this noble face, where a few deep lines upon the brow were the result of the man's military career. Doubt and suspicion could there be read the moment they had entered his mind. His figure, like that of all men selected for the elite of the cavalry service, though shapely and elegant, was vigorously built. Michaud, who wore moustachios, whiskers, and a chin beard, recalled that martial type of face which a deluge of patriotic paintings and engravings came very near to making ridiculous. This type had the defect of being common in the French army; perhaps the continuance of the same emotions, the same camp sufferings from which none were exempt, neither high nor low, and more especially the same efforts of officers and men upon the battle-fields, may have contributed to produce this uniformity of countenance. Michaud, who was dressed in dark blue cloth, still wore the black satin stock and high boots of a soldier, which increased the slight stiffness and rigidity of his bearing. The shoulders sloped, the chest expanded, as though the man were still under arms. The red ribbon of the Legion of honor was in his buttonhole. In short, to give a last touch in one word about the moral qualities beneath this purely physical presentment, it may be said that while the steward, from the time he first entered upon his functions, never failed to call his master "Monsieur le comte," Michaud never addressed him otherwise than as "General."

Blondet exchanged another look with the Abbe Brossette, which meant, "What a contrast!" as he signed to him to observe the two men. Then, as if to know whether the character and mind and speech of the bailiff harmonized with his form and countenance, he turned to Michaud and said:—

"I was out early this morning, and found your under-keepers still sleeping."

"At what hour?" said the late soldier, anxiously.

"Half-past seven."

Michaud gave a half-roguish glance at the general.

"By what gate did monsieur leave the park?" he asked.

"By the gate of Conches. The keeper, in his night-shirt, looked at me through the window," replied Blondet.

"Gaillard had probably just gone to bed," answered Michaud. "You said you were out early, and I thought you meant day-break. If my man were at home at that time, he must have been ill; but at half-past seven he was sure to be in bed. We are up all night," added Michaud, after a slight pause, replying to a surprised look on the

countess's face, "but our watchfulness is often wasted. You have just given twenty-five francs to a man who, not an hour ago, was quietly helping to hide the traces of a robbery committed upon you this very morning. I came to speak to you about it, general, when you have finished breakfast; for something will have to be done."

"You are always for maintaining the right, my dear Michaud, and 'summum jus, summum injuria.' If you are not more tolerant, you will get into trouble, so Sibilet here tells me. I wish you could have heard Pere Fourchon just now; the wine he had been drinking made him speak out."

"He frightened me," said the countess.

"He said nothing I did not know long ago," replied the general.

"Oh! the rascal wasn't drunk; he was playing a part; for whose benefit I leave you to guess. Perhaps you know?" returned Michaud, fixing an eye on Sibilet which caused the latter to turn red.

"O rus!" cried Blondet, with another look at the abbe.

"But these poor creatures suffer," said the countess, "and there is a great deal of truth in what old Fourchon has just screamed at us,—for I cannot call it speaking."

"Madame," replied Michaud, "do you suppose that for fourteen years the soldiers of the Emperor slept on a bed of roses? My general is a count, he is a grand officer of the Legion of honor, he has had perquisites and endowments given to him; am I jealous of him, I who fought as he did? Do I wish to cheat him of his glory, to steal his perquisites, to deny him the honor due to his rank? The peasant should obey as the soldier obeys; he should feel the loyalty of a soldier, his respect for acquired rights, and strive to become an officer himself, honorably, by labor and not by theft. The sabre and the plough are twins; though the soldier has something more than the peasant,—he has death hanging over him at any minute."

"I want to say that from the pulpit," cried the abbe.

"Tolerant!" continued the keeper, replying to the general's remark about Sibilet, "I would tolerate a loss of ten per cent upon the gross returns of Les Aigues; but as things are now thirty per cent is what you lose, general; and, if Monsieur Sibilet's accounts show it, I don't understand his tolerance, for he benevolently gives up a thousand or twelve hundred francs a year."

"My dear Monsieur Michaud," replied Sibilet, in a snappish tone, "I have told Monsieur le comte that I would rather lose twelve hundred francs a year than my life. Think of it seriously; I have warned you often enough."

“Life!” exclaimed the countess; “you can’t mean that anybody’s life is in danger?”

“Don’t let us argue about state affairs here,” said the general, laughing. “All this, my dear, merely means that Sibilet, in his capacity of financier, is timid and cowardly, while the minister of war is brave and, like his general, fears nothing.”

“Call me prudent, Monsieur le comte,” interposed Sibilet.

“Well, well!” cried Blondet, laughing, “so here we are, like Cooper’s heroes in the forests of America, in the midst of sieges and savages.”

“Come, gentlemen, it is your business to govern without letting me hear the wheels of the administration,” said Madame de Montcornet.

“Ah! madame,” said the cure, “but it may be right that you should know the toil from which those pretty caps you wear are derived.”

“Well, then, I can go without them,” replied the countess, laughing. “I will be very respectful to a twenty-franc piece, and grow as miserly as the country people themselves. Come, my dear abbe, give me your arm. Leave the general with his two ministers, and let us go to the gate of the Avonne to see Madame Michaud, for I have not had time since my arrival to pay her a visit, and I want to inquire about my little protegee.”

And the pretty woman, already forgetting the rags and tatters of Mouche and Fourchon, and their eyes full of hatred, and Sibilet’s warnings, went to have herself made ready for the walk.

The abbe and Blondet obeyed the behest of the mistress of the house and followed her from the dining-room, waiting till she was ready on the terrace before the chateau.

“What do you think of all this?” said Blondet to the abbe.

“I am a pariah; they dog me as they would a common enemy. I am forced to keep my eyes and ears perpetually open to escape the traps they are constantly laying to get me out of the place,” replied the abbe. “I am even doubtful, between ourselves, as to whether they will not shoot me.”

“Why do you stay?” said Blondet.

“We can’t desert God’s cause any more than that of an emperor,” replied the priest, with a simplicity that affected Blondet. He took the abbe’s hand and shook it cordially.

“You see how it is, therefore, that I know very little of the plots that are going on,” continued the abbe. “Still, I know enough to feel sure that the general is under what in Artois and in Belgium is called an ‘evil grudge.’”

A few words are here necessary about the curate of Blangy.

This priest, the fourth son of a worthy middle-class family of Autun, was an intelligent man carrying his head high in his collar. Small and slight, he redeemed his rather puny appearance by the precise and carefully dressed air that belongs to Burgundians. He accepted the second-rate post of Blangy out of pure devotion, for his religious convictions were joined to political opinions that were equally strong. There was something of the priest of the olden time about him; he held to the Church and to the clergy passionately; saw the bearings of things, and no selfishness marred his one ambition, which was *to serve*. That was his motto,—to serve the Church and the monarchy wherever it was most threatened; to serve in the lowest rank like a soldier who feels that he is destined, sooner or later, to attain command through courage and the resolve to do his duty. He made no compromises with his vows of chastity, and poverty, and obedience; he fulfilled them, as he did the other duties of his position, with that simplicity and cheerful good-humor which are the sure indications of an honest heart, constrained to do right by natural impulses as much as by the power and consistency of religious convictions.

The priest had seen at first sight Blondet’s attachment to the countess; he saw that between a Troisville and a monarchical journalist he could safely show himself to be a man of broad intelligence, because his calling was certain to be respected. He usually came to the chateau very evening to make the fourth at a game of whist. The journalist, able to recognize the abbe’s real merits, showed him so much deference that the pair grew into sympathy with each other; as usually happens when men of intelligence meet their equals, or, if you prefer it, the ears that are able to hear them. Swords are fond of their scabbards.

“But to what do you attribute this state of things, Monsieur l’abbe, you who are able, through your disinterestedness, to look over the heads of things?”

“I shall not talk platitudes after such a flattering speech as that,” said the abbe, smiling. “What is going on in this valley is spreading more or less throughout France; it is the outcome of the hopes which the upheaval of 1789 caused to infiltrate, if I may use that expression, the minds of the peasantry, the sons of the soil. The Revolution affected certain localities more than others. This side of Burgundy, nearest to Paris, is one of those places where the revolutionary ideas spread like the overrunning of the Franks by the Gauls. Historically, the peasants

are still on the morrow of the Jacquerie; that defeat is burnt in upon their brain. They have long forgotten the facts which have now passed into the condition of an instinctive idea. That idea is bred in the peasant blood, just as the idea of superiority was once bred in noble blood. The revolution of 1789 was the retaliation of the vanquished. The peasants then set foot in possession of the soil which the feudal law had denied them for over twelve hundred years. Hence their desire for land, which they now cut up among themselves until actually they divide a furrow into two parts; which, by the bye, often hinders or prevents the collection of taxes, for the value of such fractions of property is not sufficient to pay the legal costs of recovering them."

"Very true, for the obstinacy of the small owners—their aggressiveness, if you choose—on this point is so great that in at least one thousand cantons of the three thousand of French territory, it is impossible for a rich man to buy an inch of land from a peasant," said Blondet, interrupting the abbe. "The peasants who are willing to divide up their scraps of land among themselves would not sell a fraction on any condition or at any price to the middle classes. The more money the rich man offers, the more the vague uneasiness of the peasant increases. Legal dispossession alone is able to bring the landed property of the peasant into the market. Many persons have noticed this fact without being able to find a reason for it."

"This is the reason," said the abbe, rightly believing that a pause with Blondet was equivalent to a question: "twelve centuries have done nothing for a caste whom the historic spectacle of civilization has never yet diverted from its one predominating thought,—a caste which still wears proudly the broad-brimmed hat of its masters, ever since an abandoned fashion placed it upon their heads. That all-pervading thought, the roots of which are in the bowels of the people, and which attached them so vehemently to Napoleon (who was personally less to them than he thought he was) and which explains the miracle of his return in 1815,—that desire for land is the sole motive power of the peasant's being. In the eyes of the masses Napoleon, ever one with them through his million of soldiers, is still the king born of the Revolution; the man who gave them possession of the soil and sold to them the national domains. His anointing was saturated with that idea."

"An idea to which 1814 dealt a blow, an idea which monarchy should hold sacred," said Blondet, quickly; "for the people may some day find on the steps of the throne a prince whose father bequeathed to him the head of Louis XVI. as an heirloom."

"Here is madame; don't say any more," said the abbe, in a low voice. "Fourchon has frightened her; and it is very desirable to keep her here in the interests of religion and of the throne, and, indeed, in those of the people themselves."

Michaud, the bailiff of Les Aigues, had come to the chateau in consequence of the assault on Vatel's eyes. But before we relate the consultation which then and there took place, the chain of events requires a succinct account of the circumstances under which the general purchased Les Aigues, the serious causes which led to the appointment of Sibilet as steward of that magnificent property, and the reasons why Michaud was made bailiff, with all the other antecedents to which were due the tension of the minds of all, and the fears expressed by Sibilet.

This rapid summary will have the merit of introducing some of the principal actors in this drama, and of exhibiting their individual interests; we shall thus be enabled to show the dangers which surrounded the General comte de Montcornet at the moment when this history opens.

CHAPTER VI. A TALE OF THIEVES

When Mademoiselle Laguerre first visited her estate, in 1791, she took as steward the son of the ex-bailiff of Soulanges, named Gaubertin. The little town of Soulanges, at present nothing more than the chief town of a canton, was once the capital of a considerable county, in the days when the House of Burgundy made war upon France. Ville-aux-Fayes, now the seat of the sub-prefecture, then a mere fief, was a dependency of Soulanges, like Les Aigues, Ronquerolles, Cerneux, Conches, and a score of other parishes. The Soulanges have remained counts, whereas the Ronquerolles are now marquises by the will of that power, called the Court, which made the son of Captain du Plessis duke over the heads of the first families of the Conquest. All of which serves to prove that towns, like families, are variable in their destiny.

Gaubertin, a young man without property of any kind, succeeded a steward enriched by a management of thirty years, who preferred to become a partner in the famous firm of Minoret rather than continue to administer Les Aigues. In his own interests he introduced into his place as land-steward Francois Gaubertin, his accountant for five years, whom he now relied on to cover his retreat, and who, out of gratitude for his instructions, promised to obtain for him a release in full of all claims from Madame Laguerre, who by this time was terrified at the Revolution. Gaubertin’s father, the attorney-general of the department, henceforth protected the timid woman. This provincial Fouquier-Tinville raised a false alarm of danger in the mind of the opera-divinity on the ground of her former relations to the aristocracy, so as to give his son the equally false credit of saving her life; on the strength of which Gaubertin the younger obtained very easily the release of his predecessor. Mademoiselle Laguerre then made Francois Gaubertin her prime minister, as much through policy as from gratitude. The late steward had not spoiled her. He sent her, every year, about thirty thousand francs, though Les Aigues brought in at that time at least forty thousand. The unsuspecting opera-singer was therefore much delighted when the new steward Gaubertin promised her thirty-six thousand.

To explain the present fortune of the land-steward of Les Aigues before the judgment-seat of probability, it is necessary to state its beginnings. Pushed by his father’s influence, he became mayor of Blangy. Thus he was able, contrary to law, to make the debtors pay in coin, by “terrorizing” (a phrase of the day) such of them as might, in his opinion, be subjected to the crushing demands of the Republic. He himself paid the citizens in assignats as long as the system of paper money

lasted,—a system which, if it did not make the nation prosperous, at least made the fortunes of private individuals. From 1793 to 1795, that is, for three years, Francois Gaubertin wrung one hundred and fifty thousand francs out of Les Aigues, with which he speculated on the stock-market in Paris. With her purse full of assignats Mademoiselle was actually obliged to obtain ready money from her diamonds, now useless to her. She gave them to Gaubertin, who sold them, and faithfully returned to her their full price. This proof of honesty touched her heart; henceforth she believed in Gaubertin as she did in Piccini.

In 1796, at the time of his marriage with the citoyenne Isaure Mouchon, daughter of an old "conventional," a friend of his father, Gaubertin possessed about three hundred and fifty thousand francs in money. As the Directory seemed to him likely to last, he determined, before marrying, to have the accounts of his five years' stewardship ratified by Mademoiselle, under pretext of a new departure.

"I am to be the head of a family," he said to her; "you know the reputation of land-stewards; my father-in-law is a republican of Roman austerity, and a man of influence as well; I want to prove to him that I am as upright as he."

Mademoiselle Laguerre accepted his accounts at once in very flattering terms.

In those earlier days the steward had endeavored, in order to win the confidence of Madame des Aigues (as Mademoiselle was then called) to repress the depredations of the peasantry; fearing, and not without reason, that the revenues would suffer too severely, and that his private bonus from the buyers of the timber would sensibly diminish. But in those days the sovereign people felt the soil was their own everywhere; Madame was afraid of the surrounding kings and told her Richelieu that the first desire of her soul was to die in peace. The revenues of the late singer were so far in excess of her expenses that she allowed all the worst, and, as it proved, fatal precedents to be established. To avoid a lawsuit, she allowed the neighbors to encroach upon her land. Knowing that the park walls were sufficient protection, she did not fear any interruption of her personal comfort, and cared for nothing but her peaceful existence, true philosopher that she was! A few thousand a year more or less, the indemnities exacted by the wood-merchants for the damages committed by the peasants,—what were they to a careless and extravagant Opera-girl, who had gained her hundred thousand francs a year at the cost of pleasure only, and who had just submitted, without a word of remonstrance, to a reduction of two thirds of an income of sixty thousand francs?

"Dear me!" she said, in the easy tone of the wantons of the old time, "people must live, even if they are republicans."

The terrible Mademoiselle Cochet, her maid and female vizier, had tried to enlighten her mistress when she saw the ascendency Gaubertin was obtaining over one whom he began by calling “Madame” in defiance of the revolutionary laws about equality; but Gaubertin, in his turn, enlightened Mademoiselle Cochet by showing her a so-called denunciation sent to his father, the prosecuting attorney, in which she was vehemently accused of corresponding with Pitt and Coburg. From that time forward the two powers went on shares—shares a la Montgomery. Cochet praised Gaubertin to Madame, and Gaubertin praised Cochet. The waiting-maid had already made her own bed, and knew she was down for sixty thousand francs in the will. Madame could not do without Cochet, to whom she was accustomed. The woman knew the secrets of dear mistress’s toilet; she alone could put dear mistress to sleep at night with her gossip, and get her up in the morning with her flattery; to the day of dear mistress’s death the maid never could see the slightest change in her, and when dear mistress lay in her coffin, she doubtless thought she had never seen her looking so well.

The annual pickings of Gaubertin and Mademoiselle Cochet, their wages and perquisites, became so large that the most affectionate relative could not possibly have been more devoted than they to their kindly mistress. There is really no describing how a swindler cossets his dupe. A mother is not so tender nor so solicitous for a beloved daughter as the practitioner of tartuferie for his milch cow. What brilliant success attends the performance of Tartufe behind the closed doors of a home! It is worth more than friendship. Moliere died too soon; he would otherwise have shown us the misery of Orgon, wearied by his family, harassed by his children, regretting the blandishments of Tartufe, and thinking to himself, “Ah, those were the good times!”

During the last eight years of her life the mistress of Les Aigues received only thirty thousand francs of the fifty thousand really yielded by the estate. Gaubertin had reached the same administrative results as his predecessor, though farm rents and territorial products were notably increased between 1791 and 1815,—not to speak of Madame’s continual purchases. But Gaubertin’s fixed idea of acquiring Les Aigues at the old lady’s death led him to depreciate the value of the magnificent estate in the matter of its ostensible revenues. Mademoiselle Cochet, a sharer in the scheme, was also to share the profits. As the ex-divinity in her declining years received an income of twenty thousand francs from the Funds called consolidated (how readily the tongue of politics can jest!), and with difficulty spent the said sum yearly, she was much surprised at the annual purchases made by her steward to use up the accumulating revenues, remembering how in former times she had always drawn them in advance. The result of having

few wants in her old age seemed, to her mind, a proof of the honesty and uprightness of Gaubertin and Mademoiselle Cochet.

“Two pearls!” she said to the persons who came to see her.

Gaubertin kept his accounts with apparent honesty. He entered all rentals duly. Everything that could strike the feeble mind of the late singer, so far as arithmetic went, was clear and precise. The steward took his commission on all disbursements,—on the costs of working the estate, on rentals made, on suits brought, on work done, on repairs of every kind,—details which Madame never dreamed of verifying, and for which he sometimes charged twice over by collusion with the contractors, whose silence was bought by permission to charge the highest prices. These methods of dealing conciliated public opinion in favor of Gaubertin, while Madame’s praise was on every lip; for besides the payments she disbursed for work, she gave away large sums of money in alms.

“May God preserve her, the dear lady!” was heard on all sides.

The truth was, everybody got something out of her, either indirectly or as a downright gift. In reprisals, as it were, of her youth the old actress was pillaged; so discreetly pillaged, however, that those who throve upon her kept their depredations within certain limits lest even her eyes might be opened and she should sell Les Aigues and return to Paris.

This system of “pickings” was, alas! the cause of Paul-Louis Carter’s assassination; he committed the mistake of advertising the sale of his estate and allowing it to be known that he should take away his wife, on whom a number of the Tonsards of Lorraine were battening. Fearing to lose Madame des Aigues, the marauders on the estate forbore to cut the young trees, unless pushed to extremities by finding no branches within reach of shears fastened to long poles. In the interests of robbery, they did as little harm as they could; although, during the last years of Madame’s life, the habit of cutting wood became more and more barefaced. On certain clear nights not less than two hundred bundles were taken. As to the gleaning of fields and vineyards, Les Aigues lost, as Sibilet had pointed out, not less than one quarter of its products.

Madame des Aigues had forbidden Cochet to marry during her lifetime, with the selfishness often shown in all countries by a mistress to a maid; which is not more irrational than the mania for keeping possession, until our last gasp, of property that is utterly useless to our material comfort, at the risk of being poisoned by impatient heirs. Twenty days after the old lady’s burial Mademoiselle Cochet married the brigadier of the gendarmerie of Soulanges, named Soudry, a handsome man,

forty-two years of age, who, ever since 1800 (in which year the gendarmerie was formed) had come every day to Les Aigues to see the waiting-maid, and dined with her at least three times a week at the Gaubertins'.

During Madame's lifetime dinner was served to her and to her company by themselves. Neither Cochet nor Gaubertin, in spite of their great familiarity with the mistress, was ever admitted to her table; the leading lady of the Academie Royale retained, to her last hour, her sense of etiquette, her style of dress, her rouge and her heeled slippers, her carriage, her servants, and the majesty of her deportment. A divinity at the Opera, a divinity within her range of Parisian social life, she continued a divinity in the country solitudes, where her memory is still worshipped, and still holds its own against that of the old monarchy in the minds of the "best society" of Soulanges.

Soudry, who had paid his addresses to Mademoiselle Cochet from the time he first came into the neighborhood, owned the finest house in Soulanges, an income of six thousand francs, and the prospect of a retiring pension whenever he should quit the service. As soon as Cochet became Madame Soudry she was treated with great consideration in the town. Though she kept the strictest secrecy as to the amount of her savings,—which were intrusted, like those of Gaubertin, to the commissary of wine-merchants of the department in Paris, a certain Leclercq, a native of Soulanges, to whom Gaubertin supplied funds as sleeping partner in his business,—public opinion credited the former waiting-maid with one of the largest fortunes in the little town of twelve hundred inhabitants.

To the great astonishment of every one, Monsieur and Madame Soudry acknowledged as legitimate, in their marriage contract, a natural son of the gendarme, to whom, in future, Madame Soudry's fortune was to descend. At the time when this son was legally supplied with a mother, he had just ended his law studies in Paris and was about to enter into practice, with the intention of fitting himself for the magistracy.

It is scarcely necessary to remark that a mutual understanding of twenty years had produced the closest intimacy between the families of Gaubertin and Soudry. Both reciprocally declared themselves, to the end of their days, "urbi et orbi," to be the most upright and honorable persons in all France. Such community of interests, based on the mutual knowledge of the secret spots on the white garment of conscience, is one of the ties least recognized and hardest to untie in this low world. You who read this social drama, have you never felt a conviction as to two persons which has led you to say to yourself, in order to explain the continuance of

a faithful devotion which made your own egotism blush, “They must surely have committed some crime together”?

After an administration of twenty-five years, Gaubertin, the land-steward, found himself in possession of six hundred thousand francs in money, and Cochet had accumulated nearly two hundred and fifty thousand. The rapid and constant turning over and over of their funds in the hands of Leclercq and Company (on the quai Bethume, Ile Saint Louis, rivals of the famous house of Grandet) was a great assistance to the fortunes of all parties. On the death of Mademoiselle Laguerre, Jenny, the steward’s eldest daughter was asked in marriage by Leclercq. Gaubertin expected at that time to become owner of Les Aigues by means of a plot laid in the private office of Lupin, the notary, whom the steward had set up and maintained in business within the last twelve years.

Lupin, a son of the former steward of the estate of Soulanges, had lent himself to various slight peculations,—investments at fifty per cent below par, notices published surreptitiously, and all the other manoeuvres, unhappily common in the provinces, to wrap a mantle, as the saying is, over the clandestine manipulations of property. Lately a company has been formed in Paris, so they say, to levy contributions upon such plotters under a threat of outbidding them. But in 1816 France was not, as it is now, lighted by a flaming publicity; the accomplices might safely count on dividing Les Aigues among them, that is, between Cochet, the notary, and Gaubertin, the latter of whom reserved to himself, “in petto,” the intention of buying the others out for a sum down, as soon as the property fairly stood in his own name. The lawyer employed by the notary to manage the sale of the estate was under personal obligations to Gaubertin, so that he favored the spoliation of the heirs, unless any of the eleven farmers of Picardy should take it into their heads to think they were cheated, and inquire into the real value of the property.

Just as those interested expected to find their fortunes made, a lawyer came from Paris on the evening before the final settlement, and employed a notary at Ville-aux-Fayes, who happened to be one of his former clerks, to buy the estate of Les Aigues, which he did for eleven hundred thousand francs. None of the conspirators dared outbid an offer of eleven hundred thousand francs. Gaubertin suspected some treachery on Soudry’s part, and Soudry and Lupin thought they were tricked by Gaubertin. But a statement on the part of the purchasing agent, the notary of Ville-aux-Fayes, disabused them of these suspicions. The latter, though suspecting the plan formed by Gaubertin, Lupin, and Soudry, refrained from informing the lawyer in Paris, for the reason that if the new owners indiscreetly

repeated his words, he would have too many enemies at his heels to be able to stay where he was. This reticence, peculiar to provincials, was in this particular case amply justified by succeeding events. If the dwellers in the provinces are dissemblers, they are forced to be so; their excuse lies in the danger expressed in the old proverb, “We must howl with the wolves,” a meaning which underlies the character of Phillinte.

When General Montcornet took possession of Les Aigues, Gaubertin was no longer rich enough to give up his place. In order to marry his daughter to a rich banker he was obliged to give her a dowry of two hundred thousand francs; he had to pay thirty thousand for his son’s practice; and all that remained of his accumulations was three hundred and seventy thousand, out of which he would be forced, sooner or later, to pay the dowry of his remaining daughter, Elise, for whom he hoped to arrange a marriage at least as good as that of her sister. The steward determined to study the general, in order to find out if he could disgust him with the place,—hoping still to be able to carry out his defeated plan in his own interests.

With the peculiar instinct which characterizes those who make their fortunes by craft, Gaubertin believed in a resemblance of nature (which was not improbable) between an old soldier and an Opera-singer. An actress, and a general of the Empire,—surely they would have the same extravagant habits, the same careless prodigality? To the one as to the other, riches came capriciously and by lucky chances. If some soldiers are wily and astute and clever politicians, they are exceptions; a soldier is, usually, especially an accomplished cavalry officer like Montcornet, guileless, confident, a novice in business, and little fitted to understand details in the management of an estate. Gaubertin flattered himself that he could catch and hold the general with the same net in which Mademoiselle Laguerre had finished her days. But it so happened that the Emperor had once, intentionally, allowed Montcornet to play the same game in Pomerania that Gaubertin was playing at Les Aigues; consequently, the general fully understood a system of plundering.

In planting cabbages, to use the expression of the first Duc de Biron, the old cuirassier sought to divert his mind, by occupation, from dwelling on his fall. Though he had yielded his “corps d’armee” to the Bourbons, that duty (performed by other generals and termed the disbanding of the army of the Loire) could not atone for the crime of having followed the man of the Hundred-Days to his last battle-field. In presence of the allied army it was impossible for the peer of 1815 to remain in the service, still less at the Luxembourg. Accordingly, Montcornet betook himself to the country by advice of a dismissed marshal, to plunder Nature

herself. The general was not deficient in the special cunning of an old military fox; and after he had spent a few days in examining his new property, he saw that Gaubertin was a steward of the old system,—a swindler, such as the dukes and marshals of the Empire, those mushrooms bred from the common earth, were well acquainted with.

The wily general, soon aware of Gaubertin's great experience in rural administration, felt it was politic to keep well with him until he had himself learned the secrets of it; accordingly, he passed himself off as another Mademoiselle Laguerre, a course which lulled the steward into false security. This apparent simple-mindedness lasted all the time it took the general to learn the strength and weakness of Les Aigues, to master the details of its revenues and the manner of collecting them, and to ascertain how and where the robberies occurred, together with the betterments and economies which ought to be undertaken. Then, one fine morning, having caught Gaubertin with his hand in the bag, as the saying is, the general flew into one of those rages peculiar to the imperial conquerors of many lands. In doing so he committed a capital blunder,—one that would have ruined the whole life of a man of less wealth and less consistency than himself, and from which came the evils, both small and great, with which the present history teems. Brought up in the imperial school, accustomed to deal with men as a dictator, and full of contempt for "civilians," Montcornet did not trouble himself to wear gloves when it came to putting a rascal of a land-steward out of doors. Civil life and its precautions were things unknown to the soldier already embittered by his loss of rank. He humiliated Gaubertin ruthlessly, though the latter drew the harsh treatment upon himself by a cynical reply which roused Montcornet's anger.

"You are living off my land," said the general, with jesting severity.

"Do you think I can live off the sky?" returned Gaubertin, with a sneer.

"Out of my sight, blackguard! I dismiss you!" cried the general, striking him with his whip,—blows which the steward always denied having received, for they were given behind closed doors.

"I shall not go without my release in full," said Gaubertin, coldly, keeping at a distance from the enraged soldier.

"We will see what is thought of you in a police court," replied Montcornet, shrugging his shoulders.

Hearing the threat, Gaubertin looked at the general and smiled. The smile had the effect of relaxing Montcornet's arms as though the sinews had been cut. We must explain that smile.

For the last two years, Gaubertin's brother-in-law, a man named Gendrin, long a justice of the municipal court of Ville-aux-Fayes, had become the president of that court through the influence of the Comte de Soulanges. The latter was made peer of France in 1814, and remained faithful to the Bourbons during the Hundred-Days, therefore the Keeper of the Seals readily granted an appointment at his request. This relationship gave Gaubertin a certain importance in the country. The president of the court of a little town is, relatively, a greater personage than the president of one of the royal courts of a great city, who has various equals, such as generals, bishops, and prefects; whereas the judge of the court of a small town has none,—the attorney-general and the sub-prefect being removable at will. Young Soudry, a companion of Gaubertin's son in Paris as well as at Les Aigues, had just been appointed assistant attorney in the capital of the department. Before the elder Soudry, a quartermaster in the artillery, became a brigadier of gendarmes, he had been wounded in a skirmish while defending Monsieur de Soulanges, then adjutant-general. At the time of the creation of the gendarmerie, the Comte de Soulanges, who by that time had become a colonel, asked for a brigade for his former protector, and later still he solicited the post we have named for the younger Soudry. Besides all these influences, the marriage of Mademoiselle Gaubertin with a wealthy banker of the quai Bethume made the unjust steward feel that he was far stronger in the community than a lieutenant-general driven into retirement.

If this history provided no other instruction that that offered by the quarrel between the general and his steward, it would still be useful to many persons as a lesson for their conduct in life. He who reads Machiavelli profitably, knows that human prudence consists in never threatening; in doing but not saying; in promoting the retreat of an enemy and never stepping, as the saying is, on the tail of the serpent; and in avoiding, as one would murder, the infliction of a blow to the self-love of any one lower than one's self. An injury done to a person's interest, no matter how great it may be at the time, is forgiven or explained in the long run; but self-love, vanity, never ceases to bleed from a wound given, and never forgives it. The moral being is actually more sensitive, more living as it were, than the physical being. The heart and the blood are less impressible than the nerves. In short, our inward being rules us, no matter what we do. You may reconcile two families who have half-killed each other, as in Brittany and in La Vendee during the civil wars, but you can no more reconcile the calumniators and the calumniated than you can the spoilers and the despoiled. It is only in epic poems that men curse each other before they kill. The savage, and the peasant who is much like a savage, seldom speak unless to deceive an enemy. Ever since 1789 France has been trying to make man believe, against all evidence, that they are equal. To say to a man, "You are a

swindler," may be taken as a joke; but to catch him in the act and prove it to him with a cane on his back, to threaten him with a police-court and not follow up the threat, is to remind him of the inequality of conditions. If the masses will not brook any species of superiority, is it likely that a swindler will forgive that of an honest man?

Montcornet might have dismissed his steward under pretext of paying off a military obligation by putting some old soldier in his place; Gaubertin and the general would have understood the matter, and the latter, by sparing the steward's self-love would have given him a chance to withdraw quietly. Gaubertin, in that case, would have left his late employer in peace, and possibly he might have taken himself and his savings to Paris for investment. But being, as he was, ignominiously dismissed, the man conceived against his late master one of those bitter hatreds which are literally a part of existence in provincial life, the persistency, duration, and plots of which would astonish diplomatists who are trained to let nothing astonish them. A burning desire for vengeance led him to settle at Ville-aux-Fayes, and to take a position where he could injure Montcornet and stir up sufficient enmity against to force him to sell Les Aigues.

The general was deceived by appearances; for Gaubertin's external behavior was not of a nature to warn or to alarm him. The late steward followed his old custom of pretending, not exactly poverty, but limited means. For years he had talked of his wife and three children, and the heavy expenses of a large family. Mademoiselle Laguerre, to whom he had declared himself too poor to educate his son in Paris, paid the costs herself, and allowed her dear godson (for she was Claude Gaubertin's sponsor) two thousand francs a year.

The day after the quarrel, Gaubertin came, with a keeper named Courtecuisse, and demanded with much insolence his release in full of all claims, showing the general the one he had obtained from his late mistress in such flattering terms, and asking, ironically, that a search should be made for the property, real and otherwise, which he was supposed to have stolen. If he had received fees from the wood-merchants on their purchases and from the farmers on their leases, Mademoiselle Laguerre, he said, had always allowed it; not only did she gain by the bargains he made, but everything went on smoothly without troubling her. The country-people would have died, he remarked, for Mademoiselle, whereas the general was laying up for himself a store of difficulties.

Gaubertin—and this trait is frequently to be seen in the majority of those professions in which the property of others can be taken by means not foreseen by the Code—considered himself a perfectly honest man. In the first place, he had so

long had possession of the money extorted from Mademoiselle Laguerre's farmers through fear, and paid in assignats, that he regarded it as legitimately acquired. It was a mere matter of exchange. He thought that in the end he should have quite as much risk with coin as with paper. Besides, legally, Mademoiselle had no right to receive any payment except in assignats. "Legally" is a fine, robust adverb, which bolsters up many a fortune! Moreover, he reflected that ever since great estates and land-agents had existed, that is, ever since the origin of society, the said agents had set up, for their own use, an argument such as we find our cooks using in this present day. Here it is, in its simplicity:—

"If my mistress," says the cook, "went to market herself, she would have to pay more for her provisions than I charge her; she is the gainer, and the profits I make do more good in my hands than in those of the dealers."

"If Mademoiselle," thought Gaubertin, "were to manage Les Aigues herself, she would never get thirty thousand francs a year out of it; the peasants, the dealers, the workmen would rob her of the rest. It is much better that I should have it, and so enable her to live in peace."

The Catholic religion, and it alone, is able to prevent these capitulations of conscience. But, ever since 1789 religion has no influence on two thirds of the French people. The peasants, whose minds are keen and whose poverty drives them to imitation, had reached, specially in the valley of Les Aigues, a frightful state of demoralization. They went to mass on Sundays, but only at the outside of the church, where it was their custom to meet and transact business and make their weekly bargains.

We can now estimate the extent of the evil done by the careless indifference of the great singer to the management of her property. Mademoiselle Laguerre betrayed, through mere selfishness, the interests of those who owned property, who are held in perpetual hatred by those who own none. Since 1792 the land-owners of Paris have become of necessity a combined body. If, alas, the feudal families, less numerous than the middle-class families, did not perceive the necessity of combining in 1400 under Louis XI., nor in 1600 under Richelieu, can we expect that in this nineteenth century of progress the middle classes will prove to be more permanently and solidly combined that the old nobility? An oligarchy of a hundred thousand rich men presents all the dangers of a democracy with none of its advantages. The principle of "every man for himself and for his own," the selfishness of individual interests, will kill the oligarchical selfishness so necessary to the existence of modern society, and which England has practised with such success for the last three centuries. Whatever may be said or done, land-owners

will never understand the necessity of the sort of internal discipline which made the Church such an admirable model of government, until, too late, they find themselves in danger from one another. The audacity with which communism, that living and acting logic of democracy, attacks society from the moral side, shows plainly that the Samson of to-day, grown prudent, is undermining the foundations of the cellar, instead of shaking the pillars of the hall.

CHAPTER VII. CERTAIN LOST SOCIAL SPECIES

The estate of Les Aigues could not do without a steward; for the general had no intention of renouncing his winter pleasures in Paris, where he owned a fine house in the rue Neuve-des-Mathurines. He therefore looked about for a successor to Gaubertin; but it is very certain that his search was not as eager as that of Gaubertin himself, who was seeking for the right person to put in his way.

Of all confidential positions there is none that requires more trained knowledge of its kind, or more activity, than that of land-steward to a great estate. The difficulty of finding the right man is only fully known to those wealthy landlords whose property lies beyond a certain circle around Paris, beginning at a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles. At that point agricultural productions for the markets of Paris, which warrant rentals on long leases (collected often by other tenants who are rich themselves), cease to be cultivated. The farmers who raise them drive to the city in their own cabriolets to pay their rents in good bank-bills, unless they send the money through their agents in the markets. For this reason, the farms of the Seine-et-Oise, Seine-et-Marne, the Oise, the Eure-et-Loir, the Lower Seine, and the Loiret are so desirable that capital cannot always be invested there at one and a half per cent. Compared to the returns on estates in Holland, England, and Belgium, this result is enormous. But at one hundred miles from Paris an estate requires such variety of working, its products are so different in kind, that it becomes a business, with all the risks attendant on manufacturing. The wealthy owner is really a merchant, forced to look for a market for his products, like the owner of ironworks or cotton factories. He does not even escape competition; the peasant, the small proprietor, is at his heels with an avidity which leads to transactions to which well-bred persons cannot condescend.

A land-steward must understand surveying, the customs of the locality, the methods of sale and of labor, together with a little quibbling in the interests of those he serves; he must also understand book-keeping and commercial matters, and be in perfect health, with a liking for active life and horse exercise. His duty being to represent his master and to be always in communication with him, the steward ought not to be a man of the people. As the salary of his office seldom exceeds three thousand francs, the problem seems insoluble. How is it possible to obtain so many qualifications for such a very moderate price,—in a region, moreover, where the men who are provided with them are admissible to all other employments?

Bring down a stranger to fill the place, and you will pay dear for the experience he must acquire. Train a young man on the spot, and you are more than likely to get a thorn of ingratitude in your side. It therefore becomes necessary to choose between incompetent honesty, which injures your property through its blindness and inertia, and the cleverness which looks out for itself. Hence the social nomenclature and natural history of land-stewards as defined by a great Polish noble.

“There are,” he said, “two kinds of stewards: he who thinks only of himself, and he who thinks of himself and of us; happy the land-owner who lays his hands on the latter! As for the steward who would think only of us, he is not to be met with.”

Elsewhere can be found a steward who thought of this master’s interests as well as of his own. (“Un Debut dans la vie,” “Scenes de la vie privee.”) Gaubertin is the steward who thinks of himself only. To represent the third figure of the problem would be to hold up to public admiration a very unlikely personage, yet one that was not unknown to the old nobility, though he has, alas! disappeared with them. (See “Le Cabinet des Antiques,” “Scenes de la vie de province.”) Through the endless subdivision of fortunes aristocratic habits and customs are inevitably changed. If there be not now in France twenty great fortunes managed by intendants, in fifty years from now there will not be a hundred estates in the hands of stewards, unless a great change is made in the law. Every land-owner will be brought by that time to look after his own interests.

This transformation, already begun, suggested the following answer of a clever woman when asked why, since 1830, she stayed in Paris during the summer. “Because,” she said, “I do not care to visit chateaux which are now turned into farms.” What is to be the future of this question, getting daily more and more imperative,—that of man to man, the poor man and the rich man? This book is written to throw some light upon that terrible social question.

It is easy to understand the perplexities which assailed the general after he had dismissed Gaubertin. While saying to himself, vaguely, like other persons free to do or not to do a thing, “I’ll dismiss that scamp”; he had overlooked the risk and forgotten the explosion of his boiling anger,—the anger of a choleric fire-eater at the moment when a flagrant imposition forced him to raise the lids of his wilfully blind eyes.

Montcornet, a land-owner for the first time and a denizen of Paris, had not provided himself with a steward before coming to Les Aigues; but after studying the neighborhood carefully he saw it was indispensable to a man like himself to have an intermediary to manage so many persons of low degree.

Gaubertin, who discovered during the excitement of the scene (which lasted more than two hours) the difficulties in which the general would soon be involved, jumped on his pony after leaving the room where the quarrel took place, and galloped to Soulanges to consult the Soudrys. At his first words, “The general and I have parted; whom can we put in my place without his suspecting it?” the Soudrys understood their friend’s wishes. Do not forget that Soudry, for the last seventeen years chief of police of the canton, was doubly shrewd through his wife, an adept in the particular wiliness of a waiting-maid of an Opera divinity.

“We may go far,” said Madame Soudry, “before we find any one to suit the place as well as our poor Sibilet.”

“Made to order!” exclaimed Gaubertin, still scarlet with mortification. “Lupin,” he added, turning to the notary, who was present, “go to Ville-aux-Fayes and whisper it to Marechal, in case that big fire-eater asks his advice.”

Marechal was the lawyer whom his former patron, when buying Les Aigues for the general, had recommended to Monsieur de Montcornet as legal adviser.

Sibilet, eldest son of the clerk of the court at Ville-aux-Fayes, a notary’s clerk, without a penny of his own, and twenty-five years old, had fallen in love with the daughter of the chief-magistrate of Soulanges. The latter, named Sarcus, had a salary of fifteen hundred francs, and was married to a woman without fortune, the eldest sister of Monsieur Vermut, the apothecary of Soulanges. Though an only daughter, Mademoiselle Sarcus, whose beauty was her only dowry, could scarcely have lived on the salary paid to a notary’s clerk in the provinces. Young Sibilet, a relative of Gaubertin, by a connection rather difficult to trace through family ramifications which make members of the middle classes in all the smaller towns cousins to each other, owed a modest position in a government office to the assistance of his father and Gaubertin. The unlucky fellow had the terrible happiness of being the father of two children in three years. His own father, blessed with five, was unable to assist him. His wife’s father owned nothing beside his house at Soulanges and an income of two thousand francs. Madame Sibilet the younger spent most of her time at her father’s home with her two children, where Adolphe Sibilet, whose official duty obliged him to travel through the department, came to see her from time to time.

Gaubertin’s exclamation, though easy to understand from this summary of young Sibilet’s life, needs a few more explanatory details.

Adolphe Sibilet, supremely unlucky, as we have shown by the foregoing sketch of him, was one of those men who cannot reach the heart of a woman except by way

of the altar and the mayor's office. Endowed with the suppleness of a steel-spring, he yielded to pressure, certain to revert to his first thought. This treacherous habit is prompted by cowardice; but the business training which Sibilet underwent in the office of a provincial notary had taught him the art of concealing this defect under a gruff manner which simulated a strength he did not possess. Many false natures mask their hollowness in this way; be rough with them in return and the effect produced is that of a balloon collapsed by a prick. Such was Sibilet. But as most men are not observers, and as among observers three fourths observe only after a thing has taken place, Adolphe Sibilet's grumbling manner was considered the result of an honest frankness, of a capacity much praised by his master, and of a stubborn uprightness which no temptation could shake. Some men are as much benefited by their defects as others by their good qualities.

Adeline Sarcus, a pretty young woman, brought up by a mother (who died three years before her marriage) as well as a mother can educate an only daughter in a remote country town, was in love with the handsome son of Lupin, the Soulanges notary. At the first signs of this romance, old Lupin, who intended to marry his son to Mademoiselle Elise Gaubertin, lost no time in sending young Amaury Lupin to Paris, to the care of his friend and correspondent Crottat, the notary, where, under pretext of drawing deeds and contracts, Amaury committed a variety of foolish acts, and made debts, being led thereto by a certain Georges Marest, a clerk in the same office, but a rich young man, who revealed to him the mysteries of Parisian life. By the time Lupin the elder went to Paris to bring back his son, Adeline Sarcus had become Madame Sibilet. In fact, when the adoring Adolphe offered himself, her father, the old magistrate, prompted by young Lupin's father, hastened the marriage, to which Adeline yielded in sheer despair.

The situation of clerk in a government registration office is not a career. It is, like other such places which admit of no rise, one of the many holes of the government sieve. Those who start in life in these holes (the topographical, the professorial, the highway-and-canal departments) are apt to discover, invariably too late, that cleverer men then they, seated beside them, are fed, as the Opposition writers say, on the sweat of the people, every time the sieve dips down into the taxation-pot by means of a machine called the budget. Adolphe, working early and late and earning little, soon found out the barren depths of his hole; and his thoughts busied themselves, as he trotted from township to township, spending his salary in shoe-leather and costs of travelling, with how to find a permanent and more profitable place.

No one can imagine, unless he happens to squint and to have two legitimate children, what ambitions three years of misery and love had developed in this young man, who squinted both in mind and vision, and whose happiness halted, as it were, on one leg. The chief cause of secret evil deeds and hidden meanness is, perhaps, an incompleted happiness. Man can better bear a state of hopeless misery than those terrible alternations of love and sunshine with continual rain. If the body contracts disease, the mind contracts the leprosy of envy. In petty minds that leprosy becomes a base and brutal cupidity, both insolent and shrinking; in cultivated minds it fosters anti-social doctrines, which serve a man as footholds by which to rise above his superiors. May we not dignify with the title of proverb the pregnant saying, “Tell me what thou hast, and I will tell thee of what thou art thinking”?

Though Adolphe loved his wife, his hourly thought was: “I have made a mistake; I have three balls and chains, but I have only two legs. I ought to have made my fortune before I married. I could have found an Adeline any day; but Adeline stands in the way of my getting a fortune now.”

Adolphe had been to see his relation Gaubertin three times in three years. A few words exchanged between them let Gaubertin see the muck of a soul ready to ferment under the hot temptations of legal robbery. He warily sounded a nature that could be warped to the exigencies of any plan, provided it was profitable. At each of the three visits Sibilet grumbled at his fate.

“Employ me, cousin,” he said; “take me as a clerk and make me your successor. You shall see how I work. I am capable of overthrowing mountains to give my Adeline, I won’t say luxury, but a modest competence. You made Monsieur Leclercq’s fortune; why won’t you put me in a bank in Paris?”

“Some day, later on, I’ll find you a place,” Gaubertin would say; “meantime make friends and acquaintance; such things help.”

Under these circumstances the letter which Madame Soudry hastily dispatched brought Sibilet to Soulanges through a region of castles in the air. His father-in-law, Sarcus, whom the Soudrys advised to take steps in the interest of his daughter, had gone in the morning to see the general and to propose Adolphe for the vacant post. By advice of Madame Soudry, who was the oracle of the little town, the worthy man had taken his daughter with him; and the sight of her had had a favorable effect upon the Comte de Montcornet.

“I shall not decide,” he answered, “without thoroughly informing myself about all applicants; but I will not look elsewhere until I have examined whether or not your

son-in-law possesses the requirements for the place." Then, turning to Madame Sibilet he added, "The satisfaction of settling so charming a person at Les Aigues—"

"The mother of two children, general," said Adeline, adroitly, to evade the gallantry of the old cuirassier.

All the general's inquiries were cleverly anticipated by the Soudrys, Gaubertin, and Lupin, who quietly obtained for their candidate the influence of the leading lawyers in the capital of the department, where a royal court held sessions,—such as Counsellor Gendrin, a distant relative of the judge at Ville-aux-Fayes; Baron Bourlac, attorney-general; and another counsellor named Sarcus, a cousin thrice removed of the candidate. The verdict of every one to whom the general applies was favorable to the poor clerk,—"so interesting," as they called him. His marriage had made Sibilet as irreproachable as a novel of Miss Edgeworth's, and presented him, moreover, in the light of a disinterested man.

The time which the dismissed steward remained at Les Aigues until his successor could be appointed was employed in creating troubles and annoyances for his late master; one of the little scenes which he thus played off will give an idea of several others.

The morning of his final departure he contrived to meet, as it were accidentally, Courtecuisse, the only keeper then employed at Les Aigues, the great extent of which really needed at least three.

"Well, Monsieur Gaubertin," said Courtecuisse, "so you have had trouble with the count?"

"Who told you that?" answered Gaubertin. "Well, yes; the general expected to order us about as he did his cavalry; he didn't know Burgundians. The count is not satisfied with my services, and as I am not satisfied with his ways, we have dismissed each other, almost with fisticuffs, for he raged like a whirlwind. Take care of yourself, Courtecuisse! Ah! my dear fellow, I expected to give you a better master."

"I know that," said the keeper, "and I'd have served you well. Hang it, when friends have known each other for twenty years, you know! You put me here in the days of the poor dear sainted Madame. Ah, what a good woman she was! none like her now! The place has lost a mother."

"Look here, Courtecuisse, if you are willing, you might help us to a fine stroke."

"Then you are going to stay here? I heard you were off to Paris."

“No; I shall wait to see how things turn out; meantime I shall do business at Ville-aux-Fayes. The general doesn’t know what he is dealing with in these parts; he’ll make himself hated, don’t you see? I shall wait for what turns up. Do your work here gently; he’ll tell you to manage the people with a high hand, for he begins to see where his crops and his woods are running to; but you’ll not be such a fool as to let the country-folk maul you, and perhaps worse, for the sake of his timber.”

“But he would send me away, dear Monsieur Gaubertin, he would get rid of me! and you know how happy I am living there at the gate of the Avonne.”

“The general will soon get sick of the whole place,” replied Gaubertin; “you wouldn’t be long out even if he did happen to send you away. Besides, you know those woods,” he added, waving his hand at the landscape; “I am stronger there than the masters.”

This conversation took place in an open field.

“Those ‘Arminac’ Parisian fellows ought to stay in their own mud,” said the keeper.

Ever since the quarrels of the fifteenth century the word ‘Arminac’ (Armagnacs, Parisians, enemies of the Dukes of Burgundy) has continued to be an insulting term along the borders of Upper Burgundy, where it is differently corrupted according to locality.

“He’ll go back to it when beaten,” said Gaubertin, “and we’ll plough up the park; for it is robbing the people to allow a man to keep nine hundred acres of the best land in the valley for his own pleasure.”

“Four hundred families could get their living from it,” said Courtecuisse.

“If you want two acres for yourself you must help us to drive that cur out,” remarked Gaubertin.

At the very moment that Gaubertin was fulminating this sentence of excommunication, the worthy Sarcus was presenting his son-in-law Sibilet to the Comte de Montcornet. They had come with Adeline and the children in a wicker carryall, lent by Sarcus’s clerk, a Monsieur Gourdon, brother of the Soulanges doctor, who was richer than the magistrate himself. The general, pleased with the candor and dignity of the justice of the peace, and with the graceful bearing of Adeline (both giving pledges in good faith, for they were totally ignorant of the plans of Gaubertin), at once granted all requests and gave such advantages to the

family of the new land-steward as to make the position equal to that of a sub-prefect of the first class.

A lodge, built by Bouret as an object in the landscape and also as a home for the steward, an elegant little building, the architecture of which was sufficiently shown in the description of the gate of Blangy, was promised to the Sibilets for their residence. The general also conceded the horse which Mademoiselle Laguerre had provided for Gaubertin, in consideration of the size of the estate and the distance he had to go to the markets where the business of the property was transacted. He allowed two hundred bushels of wheat, three hogsheads of wine, wood in sufficient quantity, oats and barley in abundance, and three per cent on all receipts of income. Where the latter in Mademoiselle Laguerre's time had amounted to forty thousand francs, the general now, in 1818, in view of the purchases of land which Gaubertin had made for her, expected to receive at least sixty thousand. The new land-steward might therefore receive before long some two thousand francs in money. Lodged, fed, warmed, relieved of taxes, the costs of a horse and a poultry-yard defrayed for him, and allowed to plant a kitchen-garden, with no questions asked as to the day's work of the gardener, certainly such advantages represented much more than another two thousand francs; for a man who was earning a miserable salary of twelve hundred francs in a government office to step into the stewardship of Les Aigues was a change from poverty to opulence.

"Be faithful to my interests," said the general, "and I shall have more to say to you. Doubtless I could get the collection of the rents of Conches, Blangy, and Cerneux taken away from the collection of those of Soulanges and given to you. In short, when you bring me in a clear sixty thousand a year from Les Aigues you shall be still further rewarded."

Unfortunately, the worthy justice and his daughter, in the flush of their joy, told Madame Soudry the promise the general had made about these collections, without reflecting that the present collector of Soulanges, a man named Guerbet, brother of the postmaster of Conches, was closely allied, as we shall see later, with Gaubertin and the Gendrins.

"It won't be so easy to do it, my dear," said Madame Soudry; "but don't prevent the general from making the attempt; it is wonderful how easily difficult things are done in Paris. I have seen the Chevalier Gluck at dear Madame's feet to get her to sing his music, and she did,—she who so adored Piccini, one of the finest men of his day; never did *he* come into Madame's room without catching me round the waist and calling me a dear rogue."

“Ha!” cried Soudry, when his wife reported this news, “does he think he is going to lead the notary by the nose, and upset everything to please himself and make the whole valley march in line, as he did his cuirassiers? These military fellows have a habit of command!—but let’s have patience; Monsieur de Soulanges and Monsieur de Ronquerolles will be on our side. Poor Guerbet! he little suspects who is trying to pluck the best roses out of his garland!”

Pere Guerbet, the collector of Soulanges, was the wit, that is to say, the jovial companion of the little town, and a hero in Madame Soudry’s salon. Soudry’s speech gives a fair idea of the opinion which now grew up against the master of Les Aigues from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes, and wherever else the public mind could be reached and poisoned by Gaubertin.

The installation of Sibilet took place in the autumn of 1817. The year 1818 went by without the general being able to set foot at Les Aigues, for his approaching marriage with Mademoiselle de Troisville, which was celebrated in January, 1819, kept him the greater part of the summer near Alencon, in the country-house of his prospective father-in-law. General Montcornet possessed, besides Les Aigues and a magnificent house in Paris, some sixty thousand francs a year in the Funds and the salary of a retired lieutenant-general. Though Napoleon had made him a count of the Empire and given him the following arms, a field quarterly, the first, azure, bordure or, three pyramids argent; the second, vert, three hunting horns argent; the third, gules, a cannon or on a gun-carriage sable, and, in chief, a crescent or; the fourth, or, a crown vert, with the motto (eminently of the middle ages!), “Sound the charge,”—Montcornet knew very well that he was the son of a cabinet-maker in the faubourg Saint-Antoine, though he was quite ready to forget it. He was eaten up with the desire to be a peer of France, and dreamed of his grand cordon of the Legion of honor, his Saint-Louis cross, and his income of one hundred and forty thousand francs. Bitten by the demon of aristocracy, the sight of the blue ribbon put him beside himself. The gallant cuirassier of Essling would have licked up the mud on the Pont-Royal to be invited to the house of a Navarreins, a Lenoncourt, a Grandlieu, a Maufrigneuse, a d’Espard, a Vandenesse, a Verneuil, a Herouville, or a Chaulieu.

From 1818, when the impossibility of a change in favor of the Bonaparte family was made clear to him, Montcornet had himself trumpeted in the faubourg Saint-Germain by the wives of some of his friends, who offered his hand and heart, his mansion and his fortune in return for an alliance with some great family.

After several attempts, the Duchesse de Carigliano found a match for the general in one of the three branches of the Troisville family,—that of the viscount in the

service of Russia ever since 1789, who had returned to France in 1815. The viscount, poor as a younger son, had married a Princess Scherbellof, worth about a million, but the arrival of two sons and three daughters kept him poor. His family, ancient and formerly powerful, now consisted of the Marquis de Troisville, peer of France, head of the house and scutcheon, and two deputies, with numerous offspring, who were busy, for their part, with the budget and the ministries and the court, like fishes round bits of bread. Therefore, when Montcornet was presented by Madame de Carigliano,—the Napoleonic duchess, who was now a most devoted adherent of the Bourbons, he was favorably received. The general asked, in return for his fortune and tender indulgence to his wife, to be appointed to the Royal Guard, with the rank of marquis and peer of France; but the branches of the Troisville family would do no more than promise him their support.

“You know what that means,” said the duchess to her old friend, who complained of the vagueness of the promise. “They cannot oblige the king to do as they wish; they can only influence him.”

Montcornet made Virginie de Troisville his heir in the marriage settlements. Completely under the control of his wife, as Blondet’s letter has already shown, he was still without children, but Louis XVIII. had received him, and given him the cordon of Saint-Louis, allowing him to quarter his ridiculous arms with those of the Troisvilles, and promising him the title of marquis as soon as he had deserved the peerage by his services.

A few days after the audience at which this promise had been given, the Duc de Barry was assassinated; the Marsan clique carried the day; the Villele ministry came into power, and all the wires laid by the Troisvilles were snapped; it became necessary to find new ways of fastening them upon the ministry.

“We must bide our time,” said the Troisvilles to Montcornet, who was always overwhelmed with politeness in the faubourg Saint-Germain.

This will explain how it was that the general did not return to Les Aigues until May, 1820.

The ineffable happiness of the son of a shop-keeper of the faubourg Saint-Antoine in possessing a young, elegant, intelligent, and gentle wife, a Troisville, who had given him an entrance into all the salons of the faubourg Saint-Germain, and the delight of making her enjoy the pleasures of Paris, had kept him from Les Aigues and made him forget about Gaubertin, even to his very name. In 1820 he took the countess to Burgundy to show her the estate, and he accepted Sibilet’s accounts and leases without looking closely into them; happiness never cavils. The countess,

well pleased to find the steward's wife a charming young woman, made presents to her and to the children, with whom she occasionally amused herself. She ordered a few changes at Les Aigues, having sent to Paris for an architect; proposing, to the general's great delight, to spend six months of every year on this magnificent estate. Montcornet's savings were soon spent on the architectural work and the exquisite new furniture sent from Paris. Les Aigues thus received the last touch which made it a choice example of all the diverse elegancies of four centuries.

In 1821 the general was almost peremptorily urged by Sibilet to be at Les Aigues before the month of May. Important matters had to be decided. A lease of nine years, to the amount of thirty thousand francs, granted by Gaubertin in 1812 to a wood-merchant, fell in on the 15th of May of the current year. Sibilet, anxious to prove his rectitude, was unwilling to be responsible for the renewal of the lease. "You know, Monsieur le comte," he wrote, "that I do not choose to profit by such matters." The wood-merchant claimed an indemnity, extorted from Madame Laguerre, through her hatred of litigation, and shared by him with Gaubertin. This indemnity was based on the injury done to the woods by the peasants, who treated the forest of Les Aigues as if they had a right to cut the timber. Messrs. Gravelot Brothers, wood-merchants in Paris, refused to pay their last quarter dues, offering to prove by an expert that the woods were reduced one-fifth in value, through, they said, the injurious precedent established by Madame Laguerre.

"I have already," wrote Sibilet, "sued these men in the courts at Ville-aux-Fayes, for they have taken legal residence there, on account of this lease, with my old employer, Maitre Corbinet. I fear we shall lose the suit."

"It is a question of income, my dear," said the general, showing the letter to his wife. "Will you go down to Les Aigues a little earlier this year than last?"

"Go yourself, and I will follow you when the weather is warmer," said the countess, not sorry to remain in Paris alone.

The general, who knew very well the canker that was eating into his revenues, departed without his wife, resolved to take vigorous measures. In so doing he reckoned, as we shall see, without his Gaubertin.

CHAPTER VIII. THE GREAT REVOLUTIONS OF A LITTLE VALLEY

“Well, Maitre Sibilet,” said the general to his steward, the morning after his arrival, giving him a familiar title which showed how much he appreciated his services, “so we are, to use a ministerial phrase, at a crisis?”

“Yes, Monsieur le comte,” said Sibilet, following the general.

The fortunate possessor of Les Aigues was walking up and down in front of the steward’s house, along a little terrace where Madame Sibilet grew flowers, at the end of which was a wide stretch of meadow-land watered by the canal which Blondet has described. From this point the chateau of Les Aigues was seen in the distance, and in like manner the profile, as it were, of the steward’s lodge was seen from Les Aigues.

“But,” resumed the general, “what’s the difficulty? If I do lose the suit against the Gravelots, a money wound is not mortal, and I’ll have the leasing of my forest so well advertised that there will be competition, and I shall sell the timber at its true value.”

“Business is not done in that way, Monsieur le comte,” said Sibilet. “Suppose you get no lessees, what will you do?”

“Cut the timber myself and sell it—”

“You, a wood merchant?” said Sibilet. “Well, without looking at matters here, how would it be in Paris? You would have to hire a wood-yard, pay for a license and the taxes, also for the right of navigation, and duties, and the costs of unloading; besides the salary of a trustworthy agent—”

“Yes, it is impracticable,” said the general hastily, alarmed at the prospect. “But why can’t I find persons to lease the right of cutting timber as before?”

“Monsieur le comte has enemies.”

“Who are they?”

“Well, in the first place, Monsieur Gaubertin.”

“Do you mean the scoundrel whose place you took?”

“Not so loud, Monsieur le comte,” said Sibilet, showing fear; “I beg of you, not so loud,—my cook might hear us.”

“Do you mean to tell me that I am not to speak on my own estate of a villain who robbed me?” cried the general.

“For the sake of your own peace and comfort, come further away, Monsieur le comte. Monsieur Gaubertin is mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes.”

“Ha! I congratulate Ville-aux-Fayes. Thunder! what a nobly governed town!—”

“Do me the honor to listen, Monsieur le comte, and to believe that I am talking of serious matters which may affect your future life in this place.”

“I am listening; let us sit down on this bench here.”

“Monsieur le comte, when you dismissed Gaubertin, he had to find some employment, for he was not rich—”

“Not rich! when he stole twenty thousand francs a year from this estate?”

“Monsieur le comte, I don’t pretend to excuse him,” replied Sibilet. “I want to see Les Aigues prosperous, if it were only to prove Gaubertin’s dishonest; but we ought not to abuse him openly for he is one of the most dangerous scoundrels to be found in all Burgundy, and he is now in a position to injure you.”

“In what way?” asked the general, sobering down.

“Gaubertin has control of nearly one third of the supplies sent to Paris. As general agent of the timber business, he orders all the work of the forests,—the felling, chopping, floating, and sending to market. Being in close relations with the workmen, he is the arbiter of prices. It has taken him three years to create this position, but he holds it now like a fortress. He is essential to all dealers, never favoring one more than another; he regulates the whole business in their interests, and their affairs are better and more cheaply looked after by him than they were in the old time by separate agents for each firm. For instance, he has so completely put a stop to competition that he has absolute control of the auction sales; the crown and the State are both dependent on him. Their timber is sold under the hammer and falls invariably to Gaubertin’s dealers; in fact, no others attempt now to bid against them. Last year Monsieur Mariotte, of Auxerre, urged by the commissioner of domains, did attempt to compete with Gaubertin. At first, Gaubertin let him buy the standing wood at the usual prices; but when it came to cutting it, the Avonnais workmen asked such enormous prices that Monsieur Mariotte was obliged to bring laborers from Auxerre, whom the Ville-aux-Fayes workmen attacked and drove away. The head of the coalition, and the ringleader of the brawl were brought before the police court, and the suits cost Monsieur Mariotte a great deal of money; for, besides the odium of having convicted and

punished poor men, he was forced to pay all costs, because the losing side had not a farthing to do it with. A suit against laboring men is sure to result in hatred to those who live among them. Let me warn you of this; for if you follow the course you propose, you will have to fight against the poor of this district at least. But that's not all. Counting it over, Monsieur Mariotte, a worthy man, found he was the loser by his original lease. Forced to pay ready money, he was nevertheless obliged to sell on time; Gaubertin delivered his timber at long credits for the purpose of ruining his competitor. He undersold him by at least five per cent, and the end of it is that poor Mariotte's credit is badly shaken. Gaubertin is now pressing and harassing the poor man so that he is driven, they tell me, to leave not only Auxerre, but even Burgundy itself; and he is right. In this way land-owners have long been sacrificed to dealers who now set the market-prices, just as the furniture-dealers in Paris dictate values to appraisers. But Gaubertin saves the owners so much trouble and worry that they are really gainers."

"How so?" asked the general.

"In the first place, because the less complicated a business is, the greater the profits to the owners," answered Sibilet. "Besides which, their income is more secure; and in all matters of rural improvement and development that is the main thing, as you will find out. Then, too, Monsieur Gaubertin is the friend and patron of working-men; he pays them well and keeps them always at work; therefore, though their families live on the estates, the woods leased to dealers and belonging to the land-owners who trust the care of their property to Gaubertin (such as MM. de Soulanges and de Ronquerolles) are not devastated. The dead wood is gathered up, but that is all—"

"That rascal Gaubertin has lost no time!" cried the general.

"He is a bold man," said Sibilet. "He really is, as he calls himself, the steward of the best half of the department, instead of being merely the steward of Les Aigues. He makes a little out of everybody, and that little on every two millions brings him in forty to fifty thousand francs a year. He says himself, 'The fires on the Parisian hearths pay it all.' He is your enemy, Monsieur le comte. My advice to you is to capitulate and be reconciled with him. He is intimate, as you know, with Soudry, the head of the gendarmerie at Soulanges; with Monsieur Rigou, our mayor at Blangy; the patrols are under his influence; therefore you will find it impossible to repress the pilferings which are eating into your estate. During the last two years your woods have been devastated. Consequently the Gravelots are more than likely to win their suit. They say, very truly: 'According to the terms of the lease, the care of the woods is left to the owner; he does not protect them, and we are injured; the

owner is bound to pay us damages.' That's fair enough; but it doesn't follow that they should win their case."

"We must be ready to defend this suit at all costs," said the general, "and then we shall have no more of them."

"You shall gratify Gaubertin," remarked Sibilet.

"How so?"

"Suing the Gravelots is the same as a hand to hand fight with Gaubertin, who is their agent," answered Sibilet. "He asks nothing better than such a suit. He declares, so I hear, that he will bring you if necessary before the Court of Appeals."

"The rascal! the—"

"If you attempt to work your own woods," continued Sibilet, turning the knife in the wound, "you will find yourself at the mercy of workmen who will force you to pay rich men's prices instead of market-prices. In short, they'll put you, as they did that poor Mariotte, in a position where you must sell at a loss. If you then try to lease the woods you will get no tenants, for you cannot expect that any one should take risks for himself which Mariotte only took for the crown and the State. Suppose a man talks of his losses to the government! The government is a gentleman who is, like your obedient servant when he was in its employ, a worthy man with a frayed overcoat, who reads the newspapers at a desk. Let his salary be twelve hundred or twelve thousand francs, his disposition is the same, it is not a whit softer. Talk of reductions and releases from the public treasury represented by the said gentleman! He'll only pooh-pooh you as he mends his pen. No, the law is the wrong road for you, Monsieur le comte."

"Then what's to be done?" cried the general, his blood boiling as he tramped up and down before the bench.

"Monsieur le comte," said Sibilet, abruptly, "what I say to you is not for my own interests, certainly; but I advise you to sell Les Aigues and leave the neighborhood."

On hearing these words the general sprang back as if a cannon-ball had struck him; then he looked at Sibilet with a shrewd, diplomatic eye.

"A general of the Imperial Guard running away from the rascals, when Madame la comtesse likes Les Aigues!" he said. "No, I'll sooner box Gaubertin's ears on the market-place of Ville-aux-Fayes, and force him to fight me that I may shoot him like a dog."

“Monsieur le comte, Gaubertin is not such a fool as to let himself be brought into collision with you. Besides, you could not openly insult the mayor of so important a place as Ville-aux-Fayes.”

“I’ll have him turned out; the Troisvilles can do that for me; it is a question of income.”

“You won’t succeed, Monsieur le comte; Gaubertin’s arms are long; you will get yourself into difficulties from which you cannot escape.”

“Let us think of the present,” interrupted the general. “About that suit?”

“That, Monsieur le comte, I can manage to win for you,” replied Sibilet, with a knowing glance.

“Bravo, Sibilet!” said the general, shaking his steward’s hand; “how are you going to do it?”

“You will win it on a writ of error,” replied Sibilet. “In my opinion the Gravelots have the right of it. But it is not enough to be in the right, they must also be in order as to legal forms, and that they have neglected. The Gravelots ought to have summoned you to have the woods better watched. They can’t ask for indemnity, at the close of a lease, for damages which they know have been going on for nine years; there is a clause in the lease as to this, on which we can file a bill of exceptions. You will lose the suit at Ville-aux-Fayes, possibly in the upper court as well, but we will carry it to Paris and you will win at the Court of Appeals. The costs will be heavy and the expenses ruinous. You will have to spend from twelve to fifteen thousand francs merely to win the suit,—but you will win it, if you care to. The suit will only increase the enmity of the Gravelots, for the expenses will be even heavier on them. You will be their bugbear; you will be called litigious and calumniated in every way; still, you can win—”

“Then, what’s to be done?” repeated the general, on whom Sibilet’s arguments were beginning to produce the effect of a violent poison.

Just then the remembrance of the blows he had given Gaubertin with his cane crossed his mind, and made him wish he had bestowed them on himself. His flushed face was enough to show Sibilet the irritation that he felt.

“You ask me what can be done, Monsieur le comte? Why, only one thing, compromise; but of course you can’t negotiate that yourself. I must be thought to cheat you! We, poor devils, whose only fortune and comfort is in our good name, it is hard on us to even seem to do a questionable thing. We are always judged by appearances. Gaubertin himself saved Mademoiselle Laguerre’s life during the

Revolution, but it seemed to others that he was robbing her. She rewarded him in her will with a diamond worth ten thousand francs, which Madame Gaubertin now wears on her head."

The general gave Sibilet another glance still more diplomatic than the first; but the steward seemed to take no notice of the challenge it expressed.

"If I were to appear dishonest, Monsieur Gaubertin would be so overjoyed that I could instantly obtain his help," continued Sibilet. "He would listen with all his ears if I said to him: 'Suppose I were to extort twenty thousand francs from Monsieur le comte for Messrs. Gravelot, on condition that they shared them with me?' If your adversaries consented to that, Monsieur le comte, I should return you ten thousand francs; you lose only the other ten, you save appearances, and the suit is quashed."

"You are a fine fellow, Sibilet," said the general, taking his hand and shaking it. "If you can manage the future as well as you do the present, I'll call you the prince of stewards."

"As to the future," said Sibilet, "you won't die of hunger if no timber is cut for two or three years. Let us begin by putting proper keepers in the woods. Between now and then things will flow as the water does in the Avonne. Gaubertin may die, or get rich enough to retire from business; at any rate, you will have sufficient time to find him a competitor. The cake is too rich not to be shared. Look for another Gaubertin to oppose the original."

"Sibilet," said the old soldier, delighted with this variety of solutions. "I'll give you three thousand francs if you'll settle the matter as you propose. For the rest, we'll think about it."

"Monsieur le comte," said Sibilet, "first and foremost have the forest properly watched. See for yourself the condition in which the peasantry have put it during your two years' absence. What could I do? I am steward; I am not a bailiff. To guard Les Aigues properly you need a mounted patrol and three keepers."

"I certainly shall have the estate properly guarded. So it is to be war, is it? Very good, then we shall make war. That doesn't frighten me," said Montcornet, rubbing his hands.

"A war of francs," said Sibilet; "and you may find that more difficult than the other kind; men can be killed but you can't kill self-interest. You will fight your enemy on the battle-field where all landlords are compelled to fight,—I mean cash results. It is not enough to produce, you must sell; and in order to sell, you must be on good terms with everybody."

“I shall have the country people on my side.”

“By what means?”

“By doing good among them.”

“Doing good to the valley peasants! to the petty shopkeepers of Soulanges!” exclaimed Sibilet, squinting horribly, by reason of the irony which flamed brighter in one eye than in the other. “Monsieur le comte doesn’t know what he undertakes. Our Lord Jesus Christ would die again upon the cross in this valley! If you wish an easy life, follow the example of the late Mademoiselle Laguerre; let yourself be robbed, or else make people afraid of you. Women, children, and the masses are all governed by fear. That was the great secret of the Convention, and of the Emperor, too.”

“Good heavens! is this the forest of Bondy?” cried the general.

“My dear,” said Sibilet’s wife, appearing at this moment, “your breakfast is ready. Pray excuse him, Monsieur le comte; he has eaten nothing since morning for he was obliged to go to Ronquerolles to deliver some barley.”

“Go, go, Sibilet,” said the general.

The next morning the count rose early, before daylight, and went to the gate of the Avonne, intending to talk with the one forester whom he employed and find out what the man’s sentiments really were.

Some seven or eight hundred acres of the forest of Les Aigues lie along the banks of the Avonne; and to preserve the majestic beauty of the river the large trees that border it have been left untouched for a distance of three leagues on both sides in an almost straight line. The mistress of Henri IV., to whom Les Aigues formerly belonged, was as fond of hunting as the king himself. In 1593 she ordered a bridge to be built of a single arch with shelving roadway by which to ride from the lower side of the forest to a much larger portion of it, purchased by her, which lay upon the slopes of the hills. The gate of the Avonne was built as a place of meeting for the huntsmen; and we know the magnificence bestowed by the architects of that day upon all buildings intended for the delight of the crown and the nobility. Six avenues branched away from it, their place of meeting forming a half-moon. In the centre of the semi-circular space stood an obelisk surmounted by a round shield, formerly gilded, bearing on one side the arms of Navarre and on the other those of the Countess de Moret. Another half-moon, on the side toward the river, communicated with the first by a straight avenue, at the opposite end of which the steep rise of the Venetian-shaped bridge could be seen. Between two elegant iron railings of the same character as that of the magnificent railing which formerly

surrounded the garden of the Place Royale in Paris, now so unfortunately destroyed, stood a brick pavilion, with stone courses hewn in facets like those of the chateau, with a very pointed roof and window-casings of stone cut in the same manner. This old style, which gave the building a regal air, is suitable only to prisons when used in cities; but standing in the heart of forests it derives from its surroundings a splendor of its own. A group of trees formed a screen, behind which the kennels, an old falconry, a pheasantry, and the quarters of the huntsmen were falling into ruins, after being in their day the wonder and admiration of Burgundy.

In 1595, the royal hunting-parties set forth from this magnificent pavilion, preceded by those fine dogs so dear to Rubens and to Paul Veronese; the huntsmen mounted on high-steeping steeds with stout and blue-white satiny haunches, seen no longer except in Wouverman's amazing work, followed by footmen in livery; the scene enlivened by whippers-in, wearing the high top-boots with facings and the yellow leathern breeches which have come down to the present day on the canvas of Van der Meulen. The obelisk was erected in commemoration of the visit of the Bearnais, and his hunt with the beautiful Comtesse de Moret; the date is given below the arms of Navarre. That jealous woman, whose son was afterwards legitimatized, would not allow the arms of France to figure on the obelisk, regarding them as a rebuke.

At the time of which we write, when the general's eyes rested on this splendid ruin, moss had gathered for centuries on the four faces of the roof; the hewn-stone courses, mangled by time, seemed to cry with yawning mouths against the profanation; disjointed leaden settings let fall their octagonal panes, so that the windows seemed blind of an eye here and there. Yellow wallflowers bloomed about the copings; ivy slid its white rootlets into every crevice.

All things bespoke a shameful want of care,—the seal set by mere life-possessors on the ancient glories that they possess. Two windows on the first floor were stuffed with hay. Through another, on the ground-floor, was seen a room filled with tools and logs of wood; while a cow pushed her muzzle through a fourth, proving that Courtecuisse, to avoid having to walk from the pavilion to the pheasantry, had turned the large hall of the central building into a stable,—a hall with panelled ceiling, and in the centre of each panel the arms of all the various possessors of Les Aigues!

Black and dirty palings disgraced the approach to the pavilion, making square inclosures with plank roofs for pigs, ducks, and hens, the manure of which was taken away every six months. A few ragged garments were hung to dry on the brambles which boldly grew unchecked here and there. As the general came along

the avenue from the bridge, Madame Courtecuisse was scouring a saucepan in which she had just made her coffee. The forester, sitting on a chair in the sun, considered his wife as a savage considers his. When he heard a horse's hoofs he turned round, saw the count, and seemed taken aback.

"Well, Courtecuisse, my man," said the general, "I'm not surprised that the peasants cut my woods before Messrs. Gravelot can do so. So you consider your place a sinecure?"

"Indeed, Monsieur le comte, I have watched the woods so many nights that I'm ill from it. I've got a chill, and I suffer such pain this morning that my wife has just made me a poultice in that saucepan."

"My good fellow," said the count, "I don't know of any pain that a coffee poultice cures except that of hunger. Listen to me, you rascal! I rode through my forest yesterday, and then through those of Monsieur de Soulanges and Monsieur de Ronquerolles. Theirs are carefully watched and preserved, while mine is in a shameful state."

"Ah, monsieur! but they are the old lords of the neighborhood; everybody respects their property. How can you expect me to fight against six districts? I care for my life more than for your woods. A man who would undertake to watch your woods as they ought to be watched would get a ball in his head for wages in some dark corner of the forest—"

"Coward!" cried the general, trying to control the anger the man's insolent reply provoked in him. "Last night was as clear as day, yet it cost me three hundred francs in actual robbery and over a thousand in future damages. You will leave my service unless you do better. All wrong-doing deserves some mercy; therefore these are my conditions: You may have the fines, and I will pay you three francs for every indictment you bring against these depredators. If I don't get what I expect, you know what you have to expect, and no pension either. Whereas, if you serve me faithfully and contrive to stop these depredations, I'll give you an annuity of three hundred francs for life. You can think it over. Here are six ways," continued the count, pointing to the branching roads; "there's only one for you to take,—as for me also, who am not afraid of balls; try and find the right one."

Courtecuisse, a small man about forty-six years of age, with a full-moon face, found his greatest happiness in doing nothing. He expected to live and die in that pavilion, now considered by him *his* pavilion. His two cows were pastured in the forest, from which he got his wood; and he spent his time in looking after his garden instead of after the delinquents. Such neglect of duty suited Gaubertin, and

Courtecuisse knew it did. The keeper chased only those depredators who were the objects of his personal dislike,—young women who would not yield to his wishes, or persons against whom he held a grudge; though for some time past he had really felt no dislikes, for every one yielded to him on account of his easy-going ways with them.

Courtecuisse had a place always kept for him at the table of the Grand-I-Vert; the wood-pickers feared him no longer; indeed, his wife and he received many gifts in kind from them; his wood was brought in; his vineyard dug; in short, all delinquents at whom he blinked did him service.

Counting on Gaubertin for the future, and feeling sure of two acres whenever Les Aigues should be brought to the hammer, he was roughly awakened by the curt speech of the general, who, after four quiescent years, was now revealing his true character,—that of a bourgeois rich man who was determined to be no longer deceived. Courtecuisse took his cap, his game-bag, and his gun, put on his gaiters and his belt (which bore the very recent arms of Montcornet), and started for Ville-aux-Fayes, with the careless, indifferent air and manner under which country-people often conceal very deep reflections, while he gazed at the woods and whistled to the dogs to follow him.

“What! you complain of the Shopman when he proposes to make your fortune?” said Gaubertin. “Doesn’t the fool offer to give you three francs for every arrest you make, and the fines to boot? Have an understanding with your friends and you can bring as many indictments as you please,—hundreds if you like! With one thousand francs you can buy La Bachelerie from Rigou, become a property owner, live in your own house, and work for yourself, or rather, make others work for you, and take your ease. Only—now listen to me—you must manage to arrest only such as haven’t a penny in the world. You can’t shear sheep unless the wool is on their backs. Take the Shopman’s offer and leave him to collect the costs,—if he wants them; tastes differ. Didn’t old Mariotte prefer losses to profits, in spite of my advice?”

Courtecuisse, filled with admiration for these words of wisdom, returned home burning with the desire to be a land-owner and a bourgeois like the rest.

When the general reached Les Aigues he related his expedition to Sibilet.

“Monsieur le comte did very right,” said the steward, rubbing his hands; “but he must not stop short half-way. The field-keeper of the district who allows the country-people to prey upon the meadows and rob the harvests ought to be changed. Monsieur le comte should have himself chosen mayor, and appoint one of

his old soldiers, who would have the courage to carry out his orders, in place of Vaudoyer. A great land-owner should be master in his own district. Just see what difficulties we have with the present mayor!”

The mayor of the district of Blangy, formerly a Benedictine, named Rigou, had married, in the first year of the Republic, the servant-woman of the late priest of Blangy. In spite of the repugnance which a married monk excited at the Prefecture, he had continued to be mayor after 1815, for the reason that there was no-one else at Blangy who was capable of filling the post. But in 1817, when the bishop sent the Abbe Brossette to the parish of Blangy (which had then been vacant over twenty-five years), a violent opposition not unnaturally broke out between the old apostate and the young ecclesiastic, whose character is already known to us. The war which was then and there declared between the mayor’s office and the parsonage increased the popularity of the magistrate, who had hitherto been more or less despised. Rigou, whom the peasants had disliked for usurious dealings, now suddenly represented their political and financial interests, supposed to be threatened by the Restoration, and more especially by the clergy.

A copy of the “Constitutionnel,” that great organ of liberalism, after making the rounds of the Cafe de la Paix, came back to Rigou on the seventh day,—the subscription, standing in the name of old Socquard the keeper of the coffee-house, being shared by twenty persons. Rigou passed the paper on to Langlume the miller, who, in turn, gave it in shreds to any one who knew how to read. The “Paris items,” and the anti-religion jokes of the liberal sheet formed the public opinion of the valley des Aigues. Rigou, like the *venerable* Abbe Gregoire, became a hero. For him, as for certain Parisian bankers, politics spread a mantle of popularity over his shameful dishonesty.

At this particular time the perjured monk, like Francois Keller the great orator, was looked upon as a defender of the rights of the people,—he who, not so very long before, dared not walk in the fields after dark, lest he should stumble into pitfalls where he would seem to have been killed by accident! Persecute a man politically and you not only magnify him, but you redeem his past and make it innocent. The liberal party was a great worker of miracles in this respect. Its dangerous journal, which had the wit to make itself as commonplace, as calumniating, as credulous, and as sillily perfidious as every audience made up the general masses, did in all probability as much injury to private interests as it did to those of the Church.

Rigou flattered himself that he should find in a Bonapartist general now laid on the shelf, in a son of the people raised from nothing by the Revolution, a sound enemy to the Bourbons and the priests. But the general, bearing in mind his private

ambitions, so arranged matters as to evade the visit of Monsieur and Madame Rigou when he first came to Les Aigues.

When you have become better acquainted with the terrible character of Rigou, the lynx of the valley, you will understand the full extent of the second capital blunder which the general's aristocratic ambitions led him to commit, and which the countess made all the greater by an offence which will be described in the further history of Rigou.

If Montcornet had courted the mayor's good-will, if he had sought his friendship, perhaps the influence of the renegade might have neutralized that of Gaubertin. Far from that, three suits were now pending in the courts of Ville-aux-Fayes between the general and the ex-monk. Until the present time the general had been so absorbed in his personal interests and in his marriage that he had never remembered Rigou, but when Sibilet advised him to get himself made mayor in Rigou's place, he took post-horses and went to see the prefect.

The prefect, Comte Martial de la Roche-Hugon, had been a friend of the general since 1804; and it was a word from him said to Montcornet in a conversation in Paris, which brought about the purchase of Les Aigues. Comte Martial, a prefect under Napoleon, remained a prefect under the Bourbons, and courted the bishop to retain his place. Now it happened that Monseigneur had several times requested him to get rid of Rigou. Martial, to whom the condition of the district was perfectly well known, was delighted with the general's request; so that in less than a month the Comte de Montcornet was mayor of Blangy.

By one of those accidents which come about naturally, the general met, while at the prefecture where his friend put him up, a non-commissioned officer of the ex-Imperial guard, who had been cheated out of his retiring pension. The general had already, under other circumstances, done a service to the brave cavalryman, whose name was Groison; the man, remembering it, now told him his troubles, admitting that he was penniless. The general promised to get him his pension, and proposed that he should take the place of field-keeper to the district of Blangy, as a way of paying off his score of gratitude by devotion to the new mayor's interests. The appointments of master and man were made simultaneously, and the general gave, as may be supposed, very firm instructions to his subordinate.

Vaudoyer, the displaced keeper, a peasant on the Ronquerolles estate, was only fit, like most field-keepers, to stalk about, and gossip, and let himself be petted by the poor of the district, who asked nothing better than to corrupt at subaltern authority,—the advanced guard, as it were, of the land-owners. He knew Soudry, the brigadier at Soulanges, for brigadiers of gendarmerie, performing functions that

are semi-judicial in drawing up criminal indictments, have much to do with the rural keepers, who are, in fact, their natural spies. Soudry, being appealed to, sent Vaudoyer to Gaubertin, who received his old acquaintance very cordially, and invited him to drink while listening to the recital of his troubles.

“My dear friend,” said the mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes, who could talk to every man in his own language, “what has happened to you is likely to happen to us all. The nobles are back upon us. The men to whom the Emperor gave titles make common cause with the old nobility. They all want to crush the people, re-establish their former rights and take our property from us. But we are Burgundians; we must resist, and drive those Arminacs back to Paris. Return to Blangy; you shall be agent for Monsieur Polissard, the wood-merchant, who is contractor for the forest of Ronquerolles. Don’t be uneasy, my lad; I’ll find you enough to do for the whole of the coming year. But remember one thing; the wood is for ourselves! Not a single depredation, or the thing is at an end. Send all interlopers to Les Aigues. If there’s brush or fagots to sell make people buy ours; don’t let them buy of Les Aigues. You’ll get back to your place as field-keeper before long; this thing can’t last. The general will get sick of living among thieves. Did you know that that Shopman called me a thief, me!—son of the stanchest and most incorruptible of republicans; me!—the son in law of Mouchon, that famous representative of the people, who died without leaving me enough to bury him?”

The general raised the salary of the new field-keeper to three hundred francs; and built a town-hall, in which he gave him a residence. Then he married him to a daughter of one of his tenant-farmers, who had lately died, leaving her an orphan with three acres of vineyard. Groison attached himself to the general as a dog to his master. This legitimate fidelity was admitted by the whole community. The keeper was feared and respected, but like the captain of a vessel whose ship’s company hate him; the peasantry shunned him as they would a leper. Met either in silence or with sarcasms veiled under a show of good-humor, the new keeper was a sentinel watched by other sentinels. He could do nothing against such numbers. The delinquents took delight in plotting depredations which it was impossible for him to prove, and the old soldier grew furious at his helplessness. Groison found the excitement of a war of factions in his duties, and all the pleasures of the chase,—a chase after petty delinquents. Trained in real war to a loyalty which consists in part of playing a fair game, this enemy of traitors came at last to hate these people, so treacherous in their conspiracies, and so clever in their thefts that they mortified his self-esteem. He soon observed that the depredations were committed only at Les Aigues; all the other estates were respected. At first he despised a peasantry ungrateful enough to pillage a general of the Empire, an essentially kind and

generous man; presently, however, he added hatred to contempt. But multiply himself as he would, he could not be everywhere, and the enemy pillaged everywhere that he was not. Groison made the general understand that it was necessary to organize the defence on a war footing, and proved to him the insufficiency of his own devoted efforts and the evil disposition of the inhabitants of the valley.

“There is something behind it all, general,” he said; “these people are so bold they fear nothing; they seem to rely on the favor of the good God.”

“We shall see,” replied the count.

Fatal word! The verb “to see” has no future tense for politicians.

At the moment, Montcornet was considering another difficulty, which seemed to him more pressing. He needed an alter ego to do his work in the mayor’s office during the months he lived in Paris. Obliged to find some man who knew how to read and write for the position of assistant mayor, he knew of none and could hear of none throughout the district but Langlume, the tenant of his own flour-mill. The choice was disastrous. Not only were the interests of mayor and miller diametrically opposed, but Langlume had long hatched swindling projects with Rigou, who lent him money to carry on his business, or to acquire property. The miller had bought the right to the hay of certain fields for his horses, and Sibilet could not sell it except to him. The hay of all the fields in the district was sold at better prices than that of Les Aigues, though the yield of the latter was the best.

Langlume, then, became the provisional mayor; but in France the provisional is eternal,—though Frenchmen are suspected of loving change. Acting by Rigou’s advice, he played a part of great devotion to the general; and he was still assistant-mayor at the moment when, by the omnipotence of the historian, this drama begins.

In the absence of the mayor, Rigou, necessarily a member of the district council, reigned supreme, and brought forward resolutions all injuriously affecting the general. At one time he caused money to be spent for purposes that were profitable to the peasants only,—the greater part of the expenses falling upon Les Aigues, which, by reason of its great extent, paid two thirds of the taxes; at other times the council refused, under his influence, certain useful and necessary allowances, such as an increase in salary for the abbe, repairs or improvements to the parsonage, or “wages” to the school-master.

“If the peasants once know how to read and write, what will become of us?” said Langlume, naively, to the general, to excuse this anti-liberal action taken against a

brother of the Christian Doctrine whom the Abbe Brossette wished to establish as a public school-master in Blangy.

The general, delighted with his old Groison, returned to Paris and immediately looked about him for other old soldiers of the late imperial guard, with whom to organize the defence of Les Aigues on a formidable footing. By dint of searching out and questioning his friends and many officers on half-pay, he unearthed Michaud, a former quartermaster at headquarters of the cuirassiers of the guard; one of those men whom troopers call “hard-to-cook,” a nickname derived from the mess kitchen where refractory beans are not uncommon. Michaud picked out from among his friends and acquaintances, three other men fit to be his helpers, and able to guard the estate without fear and without reproach.

The first, named Steingel, a pure-blooded Alsacian, was a natural son of the general of that name, who fell in one of Bonaparte’s first victories with the army of Italy. Tall and strong, he belonged to the class of soldiers accustomed, like the Russians, to obey, passively and absolutely. Nothing hindered him in the performance of his duty; he would have collared an emperor or a pope if such were his orders. He ignored danger. Perfectly fearless, he had never received the smallest scratch during his sixteen years’ campaigning. He slept in the open air or in his bed with stoical indifference. At any increased labor or discomfort, he merely remarked, “It seems to be the order of the day.”

The second man, Vatel, son of the regiment, corporal of voltigeurs, gay as a lark, rather free and easy with the fair sex, brave to foolhardiness, was capable of shooting a comrade with a laugh if ordered to execute him. With no future before him and not knowing how to employ himself, the prospect of finding an amusing little war in the functions of keeper, attracted him; and as the grand army and the Emperor had hitherto stood him in place of a religion, so now he swore to serve the brave Montcornet against and through all and everything. His nature was of that essentially wrangling quality to which a life without enemies seems dull and objectless,—the nature, in short, of a litigant, or a policeman. If it had not been for the presence of the sheriff’s officer, he would have seized Tonsard and the bundle of wood at the Grand-I-Vert, snapping his fingers at the law on the inviolability of a man’s domicile.

The third man, Gaillard, also an old soldier, risen to the rank of sub-lieutenant, and covered with wounds, belonged to the class of mechanical soldiers. The fate of the Emperor never left his mind and he became indifferent to everything else. With the care of a natural daughter on his hands, he accepted the place that was now offered

to him as a means of subsistence, taking it as he would have taken service in a regiment.

When the general reached Les Aigues, whither he had gone in advance of his troopers, intending to send away Courtecuisse, he was amazed at discovering the impudent audacity with which the keeper had fulfilled his commands. There is a method of obeying which makes the obedience of the servant a cutting sarcasm on the master's order. But all things in this world can be reduced to absurdity, and Courtecuisse in this instance went beyond its limits.

One hundred and twenty-six indictments against depredators (most of whom were in collusion with Courtecuisse) and sworn to before the justice court of Soulanges, had resulted in sixty-nine commitments for trial, in virtue of which Brunet, the sheriff's officer, delighted at such a windfall of fees, had rigorously enforced the warrants in such a way as to bring about what is called, in legal language, a declaration of insolvency; a condition of pauperism where the law becomes of course powerless. By this declaration the sheriff proves that the defendant possesses no property of any kind, and is therefore a pauper. Where there is absolutely nothing, the creditor, like the king, loses his right to sue. The paupers in this case, carefully selected by Courtecuisse, were scattered through five neighboring districts, whither Brunet betook himself duly attended by his satellites, Vermichel and Fourchon, to serve the writs. Later he transmitted the papers to Sibilet with a bill of costs for five thousand francs, requesting him to obtain the further orders of Monsieur le comte de Montcornet.

Just as Sibilet, armed with these papers, was calmly explaining to the count the result of the rash orders he had given to Courtecuisse, and witnessing, as calmly, a burst of the most violent anger a general of the French cavalry was ever known to indulge in, Courtecuisse entered to pay his respects to his master and to bring his own account of eleven hundred francs, the sum to which his promised commission now amounted. The natural man took the bit in his teeth and ran off with the general, who totally forgot his coronet and his field rank; he was a trooper once more, vomiting curses of which he probably was ashamed when he thought of them later.

"Ha! eleven hundred francs!" he shouted, "eleven hundred slaps in your face! eleven hundred kicks!—Do you think I can't see straight through your lies? Out of my sight, or I'll strike you flat!"

At the mere look of the general's purple face and before that warrior could get out the last words, Courtecuisse was off like a swallow.

“Monsieur le comte,” said Sibilet, gently, “you are wrong.”

“Wrong! I, wrong?”

“Yes, Monsieur le comte, take care, you will have trouble with that rascal; he will sue you.”

“What do I care for that? Tell the scoundrel to leave the place instantly! See that he takes nothing of mine, and pay him his wages.”

Four hours later the whole country-side was gossiping about this scene. The general, they said, had assaulted the unfortunate Courtecuisse, and refused to pay his wages and two thousand francs besides, which he owed him. Extraordinary stories went the rounds, and the master of Les Aigues was declared insane. The next day Brunet, who had served all the warrants for the general, now brought him on behalf of Courtecuisse a summon to appear before the police court. The lion was stung by gnats; but his misery was only just beginning.

The installation of a keeper is not done without a few formalities; he must, for instance, file an oath in the civil court. Some days therefore elapsed before the three keepers really entered upon their functions. Though the general had written to Michaud to bring his wife without waiting until the lodge at the gate of the Avonne was ready for them, the future head-keeper, or rather bailiff, was detained in Paris by his marriage and his wife’s family, and did not reach Les Aigues until a fortnight later. During those two weeks, and during the time still further required for certain formalities which were carried out with very ill grace by the authorities at Ville-aux-Fayes, the forest of Les Aigues was shamefully devastated by the peasantry, who took advantage of the fact that there was practically no watch over it.

The appearance of three keepers handsomely dressed in green cloth, the Emperor’s color, with faces denoting firmness, and each of them well-made, active, and capable of spending their nights in the woods, was a great event in the valley, from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes.

Throughout the district Groison was the only man who welcomed these veterans. Delighted to be thus reinforced, he let fall a few threats against thieves, who before long, he said, would be watched so closely that they could do no damage. Thus the usual proclamation of all great commanders was not lacking to the present war; in this case it was said aloud and also whispered in secret.

Sibilet called the general’s attention to the fact that the gendarmerie of Soulanges, and especially its brigadier, Soudry, were thoroughly and hypocritically hostile to

Les Aigues. He made him see the importance of substituting another brigade, which might show a better spirit.

“With a good brigadier and a company of gendarmes devoted to your interests, you could manage the country,” he said to him.

The general went to the Prefecture and obtained from the general in command of the division the retirement of Soudry and the substitution of a man named Viallet, an excellent gendarme at headquarters, who was much praised by his general and the prefect. The company of gendarmes at Soulanges were dispersed to other places in the department by the colonel of the gendarmerie, an old friend of Montcornet, and chosen men were put in their places with secret orders to keep watch over the estate of the Comte de Montcornet, and prevent all future attempts to injure it; they were also particularly enjoined not to allow themselves to be gained over by the inhabitants of Soulanges.

This last revolutionary measure, carried out with such rapidity that there was no possibility of countermining it created much astonishment in Soulanges and in Ville-aux-Fayes. Soudry, who felt himself dismissed, complained bitterly, and Gaubertin managed to get him appointed mayor, which put the gendarmerie under his orders. An outcry was made about tyranny. Montcornet became an object of general hatred. Not only were five or six lives radically changed by him, but many personal vanities were wounded. The peasants, taking their cue from words dropped by the small tradesmen of Ville-aux-Fayes and Soulanges, and by Rigou, Langlume, Guerbet, and the postmaster at Conches, thought they were on the eve of losing what they called their rights.

The general stopped the suit brought by Courtecuisse by paying him all he demanded. The man then purchased, nominally for two thousand francs, a little property surrounded on all sides but one by the estate of Les Aigues,—a sort of cover into which the game escaped. Rigou, the owner, had never been willing to part with La Bachelerie, as it was called, to the possessors of the estate, but he now took malicious pleasure in selling it, at fifty per cent discount, to Courtecuisse; which made the ex-keeper one of Rigou’s numerous henchmen, for all he actually paid for the property was one thousand francs.

The three keepers, with Michaud the bailiff, and Groison the field-keeper of Blangy, led henceforth the life of guerrillas. Living night and day in the forest, they soon acquired that deep knowledge of woodland things which becomes a science among foresters, saving them much loss of time; they studied the tracks of animals, the species of the trees, and their habits of growth, training their ears to every sound and to every murmur of the woods. Still further, they observed faces,

watched and understood the different families in the various villages of the district, and knew the individuals in each family, their habits, characters, and means of living,—a far more difficult matter than most persons suppose. When the peasants who obtained their living from Les Aigues saw these well-planned measures of defence, they met them with dumb resistance or sneering submission.

From the first, Michaud and Sibilet mutually disliked each other. The frank and loyal soldier, with the sense of honor of a subaltern of the young “garde,” hated the servile brutality and the discontented spirit of the steward. He soon took note of the objections with which Sibilet opposed all measures that were really judicious, and the reasons he gave for those that were questionable. Instead of calming the general, Sibilet, as the reader has already seen, constantly excited him and drove him to harsh measures, all the while trying to daunt him by drawing his attention to countless annoyances, petty vexations, and ever-recurring and unconquerable difficulties. Without suspecting the role of spy and exasperator undertaken by Sibilet (who secretly intended to eventually make choice in his own interests between Gaubertin and the general) Michaud felt that the steward’s nature was bad and grasping, and he was unable to explain to himself its apparent honesty. The enmity which separated the two functionaries was satisfactory to the general. Michaud’s hatred led him to watch the steward, though he would not have condescended to play the part of spy if the general had not required it. Sibilet fawned upon the bailiff and flattered him, without being able to get anything from him beyond an extreme politeness which the loyal soldier established between them as a barrier.

Now, all preliminary details having been made known, the reader will understand the conduct of the general’s enemies and the meaning of the conversation which he had with what he called his two ministers, after Madame de Montcornet, the abbe, and Blondet left the breakfast-table.

CHAPTER IX. CONCERNING THE MEDIOCRACY

“Well, Michaud, what’s the news?” asked the general as soon as his wife had left the room.

“General, if you will permit me to say so, it would be better not to talk over matters in this room. Walls have ears, and I should like to be certain that what we say reaches none but our own.”

“Very good,” said the general, “then let us walk towards the steward’s lodge by the path through the fields; no one can overhear us there.”

A few moments later the general, with Michaud and Sibilet, was crossing the meadows, while Madame de Montcornet, with the abbe and Blondet, was on her way to the gate of the Avonne.

Michaud related the scene that had just taken place at the Grand-I-Vert.

“Vatel did wrong,” said Sibilet.

“They made that plain to him at once,” replied Michaud, “by blinding him; but that’s nothing. General, you remember the plan we agreed upon,—to seize the cattle of those depredators against whom judgment was given? Well, we can’t do it. Brunet, like his colleague Plissoud, is not loyal in his support. They both warn the delinquents when they are about to make a seizure. Vermichel, Brunet’s assistant, went to the Grand-I-Vert this morning, ostensibly after Pere Fourchon; and Marie Tonsard, who is intimate with Bonnebault, ran off at once to give the alarm at Conches. The depredations have begun again.”

“A strong show of authority is becoming daily more and more necessary,” said Sibilet.

“What did I tell you?” cried the general. “We must demand the enforcement of the judgment of the court, which carried with it imprisonment; we must arrest for debt all those who do not pay the damages I have won and the costs of the suits.”

“These fellows imagine the law is powerless, and tell each other that you dare not arrest them,” said Sibilet. “They think they frighten you! They have confederates at Ville-aux-Fayes; for even the prosecuting attorney seems to have ignored the verdicts against them.”

“I think,” said Michaud, seeing that the general looked thoughtful, “that if you are willing to spend a good deal of money you can still protect the property.”

“It is better to spend money than to act harshly,” remarked Sibilet.

“What is your plan?” asked the general of his bailiff.

“It is very simple,” said Michaud. “Inclose the whole forest with walls, like those of the park, and you will be safe; the slightest depredation then becomes a criminal offence and is taken to the assizes.”

“At a franc and a half the square foot for the material only, Monsieur le comte would find his wall would cost him a third of the whole value of Les Aigues,” said Sibilet, with a laugh.

“Well, well,” said Montcornet, “I shall go and see the attorney-general at once.”

“The attorney-general,” remarked Sibilet, gently, “may perhaps share the opinion of his subordinate; for the negligence shown by the latter is probably the result of an agreement between them.”

“Then I wish to know it!” cried Montcornet. “If I have to get the whole of them turned out, judges, civil authorities, and the attorney-general to boot, I’ll do it; I’ll go the Keeper of the Seals, or to the king himself.”

At a vehement sign made by Michaud the general stopped short and said to Sibilet, as he turned to retrace his steps, “Good day, my dear fellow,”—words which the steward understood.

“Does Monsieur le comte intend, as mayor, to enforce the necessary measures to repress the abuse of gleaning?” he said, respectfully. “The harvest is coming on, and if we are to publish the statutes about certificates of pauperism and the prevention of paupers from other districts gleaning our land, there is no time to be lost.”

“Do it at once, and arrange with Groison,” said the count. “With such a class of people,” he added, “we must follow out the law.”

So, without a moment’s reflection, Montcornet gave in to a measure that Sibilet had been proposing to him for more than a fortnight, to which he had hitherto refused to consent; but now, in the violence of anger caused by Vatel’s mishap, he instantly adopted it as the right thing to do.

When Sibilet was at some distance the general said in a low voice to his bailiff:—

“Well, my dear Michaud, what is it; why did you make me that sign?”

“You have an enemy within the walls, general, yet you tell him plans which you ought not to confide even to the secret police.”

“I share your suspicions, my dear friend,” replied Montcornet, “but I don’t intend to commit the same fault twice over. I shall not part with another steward till I’m sure of a better. I am waiting to get rid of Sibilet, till you understand the business of steward well enough to take his place, and till Vatel is fit to succeed you. And yet, I have no ground of complaint against Sibilet. He is honest and punctual in all his dealings; he hasn’t kept back a hundred francs in all these five years. He has a perfectly detestable nature, and that’s all one can say against him. If it were otherwise, what would be his plan in acting as he does?”

“General,” said Michaud, gravely, “I will find out, for undoubtedly he has one; and if you would only allow it, a good bribe to that old scoundrel Fourchon will enable me to get at the truth; though after what he said just now I suspect the old fellow of having more secrets than one in his pouch. That swindling old cordwainer told me himself they want to drive you from Les Aigues. And let me tell you, for you ought to know it, that from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes there is not a peasant, a petty tradesman, a farmer, a tavern-keeper who isn’t laying by his money to buy a bit of the estate. Fourchon confided to me that Tonsard has already put in his claim. The idea that you can be forced to sell Les Aigues has gone from end to end of the valley like an infection in the air. It may be that the steward’s present house, with some adjoining land, will be the price paid for Sibilet’s spying. Nothing is ever said among us that is not immediately known at Ville-aux-Fayes. Sibilet is a relative of your enemy Gaubertin. What you have just said about the attorney-general and the others will probably be reported before you have reached the Prefecture. You don’t know what the inhabitants of this district are.”

“Don’t I know them? I know they are the scum of the earth! Do you suppose I am going to yield to such blackguards?” cried the general. “Good heavens, I’d rather burn Les Aigues myself!”

“No need to burn it; let us adopt a line of conduct which will baffle the schemes of these Lilliputians. Judging by threats, general, they are resolved on war to the knife against you; and therefore since you mention incendiarism, let me beg of you to insure all your buildings, and all your farmhouses.”

“Michaud, do you know whom they mean by ‘Shopman’? Yesterday, as I was riding along by the Thune, I heard some little rascals cry out, ‘The Shopman! here’s the Shopman!’ and then they ran away.”

“Ask Sibilet; the answer is in his line, he likes to make you angry,” said Michaud, with a pained look. “But—if you will have an answer—well, that’s a nickname these brigands have given you, general.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means, general—well, it refers to your father.”

“Ha! the curs!” cried the count, turning livid. “Yes, Michaud, my father was a shopkeeper, an upholsterer; the countess doesn’t know it. Oh! that I should ever—well! after all, I have waltzed with queens and empresses. I’ll tell her this very night,” he cried, after a pause.

“They also call you a coward,” continued Michaud.

“Ha!”

“They ask how you managed to save yourself at Essling when nearly all your comrades perished.”

The accusation brought a smile to the general’s lips. “Michaud, I shall go at once to the Prefecture!” he cried, with a sort of fury, “if it is only to get the policies of insurance you ask for. Let Madame la comtesse know that I have gone. Ha, ha! they want war, do they? Well, they shall have it; I’ll take my pleasure in thwarting them,—every one of them, those bourgeois of Soulanges, and their peasantry! We are in the enemy’s country, therefore prudence! Tell the foresters to keep within the limits of the law. Poor Vatel, take care of him. The countess is inclined to be timid; she must know nothing of all this; otherwise I could never get her to come back here.”

Neither the general nor Michaud understood their real peril. Michaud had been too short a time in this Burgundian valley to realize the enemy’s power, though he saw its action. The general, for his part, believed in the supremacy of the law.

The law, such as the legislature of these days manufactures it, has not the virtue we attribute to it. It strikes unequally; it is so modified in many of its modes of application that it virtually refutes its own principles. This fact may be noted more or less distinctly throughout all ages. Is there any historian ignorant enough to assert that the decrees of the most vigilant of powers were ever enforced throughout France?—for instance, that the requisitions of the Convention for men, commodities, and money were obeyed in Provence, in the depths of Normandy, on the borders of Brittany, as they were at the great centres of social life? What philosopher dares deny that a head falls to-day in such or such department, while in a neighboring department another head stays on its shoulders though guilty of a crime identically the same, and often more horrible? We ask for equality in life, and inequality reigns in law and in the death penalty!

When the population of a town falls below a certain figure the administrative system is no longer the same. There are perhaps a hundred cities in France where the laws are vigorously enforced, and there the intelligence of the citizens rises to the conception of the problem of public welfare and future security which the law seeks to solve; but throughout the rest of France nothing is comprehended beyond immediate gratification; people rebel against all that lessens it. Therefore in nearly one half of France we find a power of inertia which defeats all legal action, both municipal and governmental. This resistance, be it understood, does not affect the essential things of public polity. The collection of taxes, recruiting, punishment of great crimes, as a general thing do systematically go on; but outside of such recognized necessities, all legislative decrees which affect customs, morals, private interests, and certain abuses, are a dead letter, owing to the sullen opposition of the people. At the very moment when this book is going to press, this dumb resistance, which opposed Louis XIV. in Brittany, may still be seen and felt. See the unfortunate results of the game-laws, to which we are now sacrificing yearly the lives of some twenty or thirty men for the sake of preserving a few animals.

In France the law is, to at least twenty million of inhabitants, nothing more than a bit of white paper posted on the doors of the church and the town-hall. That gives rise to the term “papers,” which Mouche used to express legality. Many mayors of cantons (not to speak of the district mayors) put up their bundles of seeds and herbs with the printed statutes. As for the district mayors, the number of those who do not know how to read and write is really alarming, and the manner in which the civil records are kept is even more so. The danger of this state of things, well-known to the governing powers, is doubtless diminishing; but what centralization (against which every one declaims, as it is the fashion in France to declaim against all things good and useful and strong),—what centralization cannot touch, the Power against which it will forever fling itself in vain, is that which the general was now about to attack, and which we shall take leave to call the Mediocracy.

A great outcry was made against the tyranny of the nobles; in these days the cry is against that of capitalists, against abuses of power, which may be merely the inevitable galling of the social yoke, called Compact by Rousseau, Constitution by some, Charter by others; Czar here, King there, Parliament in Great Britain; while in France the general levelling begun in 1789 and continued in 1830 has paved the way for the juggling dominion of the middle classes, and delivered the nation into their hands without escape. The portrayal of one fact alone, unfortunately only too common in these days, namely, the subjection of a canton, a little town, a sub-prefecture, to the will of a family clique,—in short, the power acquired by Gaubertin,—will show this social danger better than all dogmatic statements put

together. Many oppressed communities will recognize the truth of this picture; many persons secretly and silently crushed by this tyranny will find in these words an obituary, as it were, which may half console them for their hidden woes.

At the very moment when the general imagined himself to be renewing a warfare in which there had really been no truce, his former steward had just completed the last meshes of the net-work in which he now held the whole arrondissement of Ville-aux-Fayes. To avoid too many explanations it is necessary to state, once for all, succinctly, the genealogical ramifications by means of which Gaubertin wound himself about the country, as a boa-constrictor winds around a tree,—with such art that a passing traveller thinks he beholds some natural effect of the tropical vegetation.

In 1793 there were three brothers of the name of Mouchon in the valley of the Avonne. After 1793 they changed the name of the valley to that of the Valley des Aigues, out of hatred to the old nobility.

The eldest brother, steward of the property of the Ronquerolles family, was elected deputy of the department to the Convention. Like his friend, Gaubertin's father, the prosecutor of those days, who saved the Soulanges family, he saved the property and the lives of the Ronquerolles. He had two daughters; one married to Gendrin, the lawyer, the other to Gaubertin. He died in 1804.

The second, through the influence of his elder brother, was made postmaster at Conches. His only child was a daughter, married to a rich farmer named Guerbet. He died in 1817.

The last of the Mouchons, who was a priest, and the curate of Ville-aux-Fayes before the Revolution, was again a priest after the re-establishment of Catholic worship, and again the curate of the same little town. He was not willing to take the oath, and was hidden for a long time in the hermitage of Les Aigues, under the protection of the Gaubertins, father and son. Now about sixty-seven years of age, he was treated with universal respect and affection, owing to the harmony of his nature with that of the inhabitants. Parsimonious to the verge of avarice, he was thought to be rich, and the credit of being so increased the respect that was shown to him. Monseigneur the bishop paid the greatest attention to the Abbe Mouchon, who was always spoken of as the venerable curate of Ville-aux-Fayes; and the fact that he had several times refused to go and live in a splendid parsonage attached to the Prefecture, where Monseigneur wished to settle him, made him dearer still to his people.

Gaubertin, now mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes, received steady support from his brother-in-law Gendrin, who was judge of the municipal court. Gaubertin the younger, the solicitor who had the most practice before this court and much repute in the arrondissement, was already thinking of selling his practice after five years' exercise of it. He wanted to succeed his Uncle Gendrin as counsellor whenever the latter should retire from the profession. Gendrin's only son was commissioner of mortgages.

Soudry's son, who for the last two years had been prosecuting-attorney at the prefecture, was Gaubertin's henchman. The clever Madame Soudry had secured the future of her husband's son by marrying him to Rigou's only daughter. The united fortunes of the Soudrys and the ex-monk, which would come eventually to the attorney, made that young man one of the most important personages of the department.

The sub-prefect of Ville-aux-Fayes, Monsieur des Lupeaulx, nephew of the general-secretary of one of the most important ministries in Paris, was the prospective husband of Mademoiselle Elise Gaubertin, the mayor's youngest daughter, whose dowry, like that of her elder sister, was two hundred thousand francs, not to speak of "expectations." This functionary showed much sense, though not aware of it, in falling in love with Mademoiselle Elise when he first arrived at Ville-aux-Fayes, in 1819. If it had not been for his social position, which made him "eligible," he would long ago have been forced to ask for his exchange. But Gaubertin in marrying him to his daughter thought much more of the uncle, the general-secretary, than of the nephew; and in return, the uncle, for the sake of his nephew, gave all his influence to Gaubertin.

Thus the Church, the magistracy both removable and irremovable, the municipality, and the prefecture, the four feet of power, walked as the mayor pleased. Let us now see how that functionary strengthened himself in the spheres above and below that in which he worked.

The department to which Ville-aux-Fayes belongs is one the number of whose population gives it the right to elect six deputies. Ever since the creation of the Left Centre of the Chamber, the arrondissement of Ville-aux-Fayes had sent a deputy named Leclercq, formerly banking agent of the wine department of the custom-house, a son-in-law of Gaubertin, and now a governor of the Bank of France. The number of electors which this rich valley sent to the electoral college was sufficient to insure, if only through private dealing, the constant appointment of Monsieur de Ronquerolles, the patron of the Mouchon family. The voters of Ville-aux-Fayes lent their support to the prefect, on condition that the Marquis de

Ronquerolles was maintained in the college. Thus Gaubertin, who was the first to broach the idea of this arrangement, was favorably received at the Prefecture, which he often, in return, saved from petty annoyances. The prefect always selected three firm ministerialists, and two deputies of the Left Centre. The latter, one of them being the Marquis de Ronquerolles, brother-in-law of the Comte de Serisy, and the other a governor of the Bank of France, gave little or no alarm to the cabinet, and the elections in this department were rated excellent at the ministry of the interior.

The Comte de Soulanges, peer of France, selected to be the next marshal, and faithful to the Bourbons, knew that his forests and other property were all well-managed by the notary Lupin, and well-watched by Soudry. He was a patron of Gendrin's, having obtained his appointment as judge partly by the help of Monsieur de Ronquerolles.

Messieurs Leclercq and de Ronquerolles sat in the Left Centre, but nearer to the left than to the centre,—a political position which offers great advantages to those who regard their political conscience as a garment.

The brother of Monsieur Leclercq had obtained the situation of collector at Ville-aux-Fayes, and Leclercq himself, Gaubertin's son-in-law, had lately bought a fine estate beyond the valley of the Avonne, which brought him in a rental of thirty thousand francs, with park and chateau and a controlling influence in its own canton.

Thus, in the upper regions of the State, in both Chambers, and in the chief ministerial department, Gaubertin could rely on an influence that was powerful and also active, and which he was careful not to weary with unimportant requests.

The counsellor Gendrin, appointed judge by the Chamber, was the leading spirit of the Supreme Court; for the chief justice, one of the three ministerial deputies, left the management of it to Gendrin during half the year. The counsel for the Prefecture, a cousin of Sarcus, called "Sarcus the rich," was the right-hand man of the prefect, himself a deputy. Even without the family reasons which allied Gaubertin and young des Lupeaulx, a brother of Madame Sarcus would still have been desirable as sub-prefect to the arrondissement of Ville-aux-Fayes. Madame Sarcus, the counsellor's wife, was a Vallat of Soulanges, a family connected with the Gaubertins, and she was said to have "distinguished" the notary Lupin in her youth. Though she was now forty-five years old, with a son in the school of engineers, Lupin never went to the Prefecture without paying his respects and dining with her.

The nephew of Guerbet, the postmaster, whose father was, as we have seen, collector of Soulanges, held the important situation of examining judge in the municipal court of Ville-aux-Fayes. The third judge, son of Corbinet, the notary, belonged body and soul to the all-powerful mayor; and, finally, young Vigor, son of the lieutenant of the gendarmerie, was the substitute judge.

Sibilet's father, sheriff of the court, had married his sister to Monsieur Vigor the lieutenant, and that individual, father of six children, was cousin of the father of Gaubertin through his wife, a Gaubertin-Vallat. Eighteen months previously the united efforts of the two deputies, Monsieur de Soulanges and Gaubertin, had created the place of commissary of police for the sheriff's second son.

Sibilet's eldest daughter married Monsieur Herve, a school-master, whose school was transformed into a college as a result of this marriage, so that for the past year Soulanges had rejoiced in the presence of a professor.

The sheriff's youngest son was employed on the government domains, with the promise of succeeding the clerk of registrations so soon as that officer had completed the term of service which enabled him to retire on a pension.

The youngest Sibilet girl, now sixteen years old, was betrothed to Corbinet, brother of the notary. And an old maid, Mademoiselle Gaubertin-Vallat, sister of Madame Sibilet, the sheriff's wife, held the office for the sale of stamped paper.

Thus, wherever we turn in Ville-aux-Fayes we meet some member of the invisible coalition, whose avowed chief, recognized as such by every one, great and small, was the mayor of the town, the general agent for the entire timber business, Gaubertin!

If we turn to the other end of the valley of the Avonne we shall see that Gaubertin ruled at Soulanges through the Soudrys, through Lupin the assistant mayor and steward of the Soulanges estate, who was necessarily in constant communication with the Comte de Soulanges, through Sarcus, justice of the peace, through Guerbet, the collector, through Gourdon, the doctor, who had married a Gendrin-Vatebled. He governed Blangy through Rigou, Conches through the post-master, the despotic ruler of his own district.

Gaubertin's influence was so great and powerful that even the investments and the savings of Rigou, Soudry, Gendrin, Guerbet, Lupin, even Sarcus the rich himself, were managed by his advice. The town of Ville-aux-Fayes believed implicitly in its mayor. Gaubertin's ability was not less extolled than his honesty and his kindness; he was the servant of his relatives and constituents (always with an eye to a return of benefits), and the whole municipality adored him. The town never ceased to

blame Monsieur Mariotte, of Auxerre, for having opposed and thwarted that worthy Monsieur Gaubertin.

Not aware of their strength, no occasion for displaying it having arisen, the bourgeoisie of Ville-aux-Fayes contented themselves with boasting that no strangers intermeddled in their affairs and they believed themselves excellent citizens and faithful public servants. Nothing, however, escaped their despotic rule, which in itself was not perceived, the result being considered a triumph of the locality.

The only stranger in this family community was the government engineer in the highway department; and his dismissal in favor of the son of Sarcus the rich was now being pressed, with a fair chance that this one weak thread in the net would soon be strengthened. And yet this powerful league, which monopolized all duties both public and private, sucked the resources of the region, and fastened on power like limpets to a ship, escaped all notice so completely that General Montcornet had no suspicion of it. The prefect boasted of the prosperity of Ville-aux-Fayes and its arrondissement; even the minister of the interior was heard to remark: “There’s a model sub-prefecture, which runs on wheels; we should be lucky indeed if all were like it.” Family designs were so involved with local interests that here, as in many other little towns and even prefectures, a functionary who did not belong to the place would have been forced to resign within a year.

When this despotic middle-class cousinry seizes a victim, he is so carefully gagged and bound that complaint is impossible; he is smeared with slime and wax like a snail in a beehive. This invisible, imperceptible tyranny is upheld by powerful reasons,—such as the wish to be surrounded by their own family, to keep property in their own hands, the mutual help they ought to lend each other, the guarantees given to the administration by the fact that their agent is under the eyes of his fellow-citizens and neighbors. What does all this lead to? To the fact that local interests supersede all questions of public interest; the centralized will of Paris is frequently overthrown in the provinces, the truth of things is disguised, and country communities snap their fingers at government. In short, after the main public necessities have been attended to, it will be seen that the laws, instead of acting upon the masses, receive their impulse from them; the populations adapt the law to themselves and not themselves to the law.

Whoever has travelled in the south or west of France, or in Alsace, in any other way than from inn to inn to see buildings and landscapes, will surely admit the truth of these remarks. The results of middle-class nepotism may be, at present, merely isolated evils; but the tendency of existing laws is to increase them. This

low-level despotism can and will cause great disasters, and the events of the drama about to be played in the valley of Les Aigues will prove it.

The monarchical and imperial systems, more rashly overthrown than people realize, remedied these abuses by means of certain consecrated lives, by classifications and categories and by those particular counterpoises since so absurdly defined as “privileges.” There are no privileges now, when every human being is free to climb the greased pole of power. But surely it would be safer to allow open and avowed privileges than those which are underhand, based on trickery, subversive of what should be public spirit, and continuing the work of despotism to a lower and baser level than heretofore. May we not have overthrown noble tyrants devoted to their country’s good, to create the tyranny of selfish interests? Shall power lurk in secret places, instead of radiating from its natural source? This is worth thinking about. The spirit of local sectionalism, such as we have now depicted, will soon be seen to invade the Chamber.

Montcornet’s friend, the late prefect, Comte de la Roche-Hugon, had lost his position just before the last arrival of the general at Les Aigues. This dismissal drove him into the ranks of the Liberal opposition, where he became one of the chorus of the Left, a position he soon after abandoned for an embassy. His successor, luckily for Montcornet, was a son-in-law of the Marquis de Troisville, uncle of the countess, the Comte de Casteran. He welcomed Montcornet as a relation and begged him to continue his intimacy at the Prefecture. After listening to the general’s complaints the Comte de Casteran invited the bishop, the attorney-general, the colonel of the gendarmerie, counsellor Sarcus, and the general commanding the division to meet him the next day at breakfast.

The attorney-general, Baron Bourlac (so famous in the Chanterie and Rifael suits), was one of those men well-known to all governments, who attach themselves to power, no matter in whose hands it is, and who make themselves invaluable by such devotion. Having owed his elevation in the first place to his fanaticism for the Emperor, he now owed the retention of his official rank to his inflexible character and the conscientiousness with which he fulfilled his duties. He who once implacably prosecuted the remnant of the Chouans now prosecuted the Bonapartists as implacably. But years and turmoils had somewhat subdued his energy and he had now become, like other old devils incarnate, perfectly charming in manner and ways.

The general explained his position and the fears of his bailiff, and spoke of the necessity of making an example and enforcing the rights of property.

The high functionaries listened gravely, making, however, no reply beyond mere platitudes, such as, “Undoubtedly, the laws must be upheld”; “Your cause is that of all land-owners”; “We will consider it; but, situated as we are, prudence is very necessary”; “A monarchy could certainly do more for the people than the people would do for itself, even if it were, as in 1793, the sovereign people”; “The masses suffer, and we are bound to do as much for them as for ourselves.”

The relentless attorney-general expressed such kindly and benevolent views respecting the condition of the lower classes that our future Utopians, had they heard him, might have thought that the higher grade of government officials were already aware of the difficulties of that problem which modern society will be forced to solve.

It may be well to say here that at this period of the Restoration, various bloody encounters had taken place in remote parts of the kingdom, caused by this very question of the pillage of woods, and the marauding rights which the peasants were everywhere arrogating to themselves. Neither the government nor the court liked these outbreaks, nor the shedding of blood which resulted from repression. Though they felt the necessity of rigorous measures, they nevertheless treated as blunderers the officials who were compelled to employ them, and dismissed them on the first pretence. The prefects were therefore anxious to shuffle out of such difficulties whenever possible.

At the very beginning of the conversation Sarcus (the rich) had made a sign to the prefect and the attorney-general which Montcornet did not see, but which set the tone of the discussion. The attorney-general was well aware of the state of mind of the inhabitants of the valley des Aigues through his subordinate, Soudry the young attorney.

“I foresee a terrible struggle,” the latter had said to him. “They mean to kill the gendarmes; my spies tell me so. It will be very hard to convict them for it. The instant the jury feel they are incurring the hatred of the friends of the twenty or thirty prisoners, they will not sustain us,—we could not get them to convict for death, nor even for the galleys. Possibly by prosecuting in person you might get a few years’ imprisonment for the actual murderers. Better shut our eyes than open them, if by opening them we bring on a collision which costs bloodshed and several thousand francs to the State,—not to speak of the cost of keeping the guilty in prison. It is too high a price to pay for a victory which will only reveal our judicial weakness to the eyes of all.”

Montcornet, who was wholly without suspicion of the strength and influence of the Mediocracy in his happy valley, did not even mention Gaubertin, whose hand kept

these embers of opposition always alive, though smouldering. After breakfast the attorney-general took Montcornet by the arm and led him to the Prefect's study. When the general left that room after their conference, he wrote to his wife that he was starting for Paris and should be absent a week. We shall see, after the execution of certain measures suggested by Baron Bourlac, the attorney-general, whether the secret advice he gave to Montcornet was wise, and whether in conforming to it the count and Les Aigues were enabled to escape the "Evil grudge."

Some minds, eager for mere amusement, will complain that these various explanations are far too long; but we once more call attention to the fact that the historian of the manners, customs, and morals of his time must obey a law far more stringent than that imposed on the historian of mere facts. He must show the probability of everything, even the truth; whereas, in the domain of history, properly so-called, the impossible must be accepted for the sole reason that it did happen. The vicissitudes of social or private life are brought about by a crowd of little causes derived from a thousand conditions. The man of science is forced to clear away the avalanche under which whole villages lie buried, to show you the pebbles brought down from the summit which alone can determine the formation of the mountain. If the historian of human life were simply telling you of a suicide, five hundred of which occur yearly in Paris, the melodrama is so commonplace that brief reasons and explanations are all that need be given; but how shall he make you see that the self-destruction of an estate could happen in these days when property is reckoned of more value than life? "De re vestra agitur," said a maker of fables; this tale concerns the affairs and interests of all those, no matter who they be, who possess anything.

Remember that this coalition of a whole canton and of a little town against a general, who, in spite of his rash courage, had escaped the dangers of actual war, is going on in other districts against other men who seek only to do what is right by those districts. It is a coalition which to-day threatens every man, the man of genius, the statesman, the modern agriculturalist,—in short, all innovators.

This last explanation not only gives a true presentation of the personages of this drama, and a serious meaning even to its petty details, but it also throws a vivid light upon the scene where so many social interests are now marshalling.

CHAPTER X. THE SADNESS OF A HAPPY WOMAN

At the moment when the general was getting into his caleche to go to the Prefecture, the countess and the two gentlemen reached the gate of the Avonne, where, for the last eighteen months, Michaud and his wife Olympe had made their home.

Whose remembered the pavilion in the state in which we lately described it would have supposed it had been rebuilt. The bricks fallen or broken by time, and the cement lacking to their edges, were replaced; the slate roof had been cleaned, and the effect of the white balustrade against its bluish background restored the gay character of the architecture. The approaches to the building, formerly choked up and sandy, were now cared for by the man whose duty it was to keep the park roadways in order. The poultry-yard, stables, and cow-shed, relegated to the buildings near the pheasantry and hidden by clumps of trees, instead of afflicting the eye with their foul details, now blended those soft murmurs and cooings and the sound of flapping wings, which are among the most delightful accompaniments of Nature’s eternal harmony, with the peculiar rustling sounds of the forest. The whole scene possessed the double charm of a natural, untouched forest and the elegance of an English park. The surroundings of the pavilion, in keeping with its own exterior, presented a certain noble, dignified, and cordial effect; while the hand of a young and happy woman gave to its interior a very different look from what it wore under the coarse neglect of Courtecuisse.

Just now the rich season of the year was putting forth its natural splendors. The perfume of the flowerbeds blended with the wild odor of the woods; and the meadows near by, where the grass had been lately cut, sent up the fragrance of new-mown hay.

When the countess and her guests reached the end of one of the winding paths which led to the pavilion, they saw Madame Michaud, sitting in the open air before the door, employed in making a baby’s garment. The young woman thus placed, thus employed, added the human charm that was needed to complete the scene,—a charm so touching in its actuality that painters have committed the error of endeavoring to convey it in their pictures. Such artists forget that the SOUL of a landscape, if they represent it truly, is so grand that the human element is crushed by it; whereas such a scene added to Nature limits her to the proportions of the personality, like a frame to which the mind of the spectator confines it. When

Poussin, the Raffaelle of France, made a landscape accessory to his Shepherds of Arcadia he perceived plainly enough that man becomes diminutive and abject when Nature is made the principal feature on a canvas. In that picture August is in its glory, the harvest is ready, all simple and strong human interests are represented. There we find realized in nature the dream of many men whose uncertain life of mingled good and evil harshly mixed makes them long for peace and rest.

Let us now relate, in few words, the romance of this home. Justin Michaud did not reply very cordially to the advances made to him by the illustrious colonel of cuirassiers when first offered the situation of bailiff at Les Aigues. He was then thinking of re-entering the service. But while the negotiations, which naturally took him to the Hotel Montcornet, were going on, he met the countess's head waiting-maid. This young girl, who was entrusted to Madame de Montcornet by her parents, worthy farmers in the neighborhood of Alencon, had hopes of a little fortune, some twenty or thirty thousand francs, when the heirs were all of age. Like other farmers who marry young, and whose own parents are still living, the father and mother of the girl, being pinched for immediate means, placed her with the young countess. Madame de Montcornet had her taught to sew and to make dresses, arranged that she should take her meals alone, and was rewarded for the care she bestowed on Olympe Charel by one of those unconditional attachments which are so precious to Parisians.

Olympe Charel, a pretty Norman girl, rather stout, with fair hair of a golden tint, an animated face lighted by intelligent eyes, and distinguished by a finely curved thoroughbred nose, with a maidenly air in spite of a certain swaying Spanish manner of carrying herself, possessed all the points that a young girl born just above the level of the masses is likely to acquire from whatever close companionship a mistress is willing to allow her. Always suitably dressed, with modest bearing and manner, and able to express herself well, Michaud was soon in love with her,—all the more when he found that his sweetheart's dowry would one day be considerable. The obstacles came from the countess, who could not bear to part with so invaluable a maid; but when Montcornet explained to her the affairs at Les Aigues, she gave way, and the marriage was no longer delayed, except to obtain the consent of the parents, which, of course, was quickly given.

Michaud, like his general, looked upon his wife as a superior being, to whom he owed military obedience without a single reservation. He found in the peace of his home and his busy life out-of-doors the elements of a happiness soldiers long for when they give up their profession,—enough work to keep his body healthy,

enough fatigue to let him know the charms of rest. In spite of his well-known intrepidity, Michaud had never been seriously wounded, and he had none of those physical pains which often sour the temper of veterans. Like all really strong men, his temper was even; his wife, therefore, loved him utterly. From the time they took up their abode in the pavilion, this happy home was the scene of a long honey-moon in harmony with Nature and with the art whose creations surrounded them,—a circumstance rare indeed! The things about us are seldom in keeping with the condition of our souls!

The picture was so pretty that the countess stopped short and pointed it out to Blondet and the abbe; for they could see Madame Michaud from where they stood, without her seeing them.

“I always come this way when I walk in the park,” said the countess, softly. “I delight in looking at the pavilion and its two turtle-doves, as much as I delight in a fine view.”

She leaned significantly on Blondet’s arm, as if to make him share sentiments too delicate for words but which all women feel.

“I wish I were a gate-keeper at Les Aigues,” said Blondet, smiling. “Why! what troubles you?” he added, noticing an expression of sadness on the countess’s face.

“Nothing,” she replied.

Women are always hiding some important thought when they say, hypocritically, “It is nothing.”

“A woman may be the victim of ideas which would seem very flimsy to you,” she added, “but which, to us, are terrible. As for me, I envy Olympe’s lot.”

“God hears you,” said the abbe, smiling as though to soften the sternness of his remark.

Madame de Montcornet grew seriously uneasy when she noticed an expression of fear and anxiety in Olympe’s face and attitude. By the way a woman draws out her needle or sets her stitches another woman understands her thoughts. In fact, though wearing a rose-colored dress, with her hair carefully braided about her head, the bailiff’s wife was thinking of matters that were out of keeping with her pretty dress, the glorious day, and the work her hands were engaged on. Her beautiful brow, and the glance she turned sometimes on the ground at her feet, sometimes on the foliage around, evidently seeing nothing, betrayed some deep anxiety,—all the more unconsciously because she supposed herself alone.

“Just as I was envying her! What can have saddened her?” whispered the countess to the abbe.

“Madame,” he replied in the same tone, “tell me why man is often seized with vague and unaccountable presentiments of evil in the very midst of some perfect happiness?”

“Abbe!” said Blondet, smiling, “you talk like a bishop. Napoleon said, ‘Nothing is stolen, all is bought!’”

“Such a maxim, uttered by those imperial lips, takes the proportions of society itself,” replied the priest.

“Well, Olympe, my dear girl, what is the matter?” said the countess going up to her former maid. “You seem sad and thoughtful; is it a lover’s quarrel?”

Madame Michaud’s face, as she rose, changed completely.

“My dear,” said Emile Blondet, in a fatherly tone, “I should like to know what clouds that brow of yours, in this pavilion where you are almost as well lodged as the Comte d’Artois at the Tuileries. It is like a nest of nightingales in a grove! And what a husband we have!—the bravest fellow of the young garde, and a handsome one, who loves us to distraction! If I had known the advantages Montcornet has given you here I should have left my diatribing business and made myself a bailiff.”

“It is not the place for a man of your talent, monsieur,” replied Olympe, smiling at Blondet as an old acquaintance.

“But what troubles you, dear?” said the countess.

“Madame, I’m afraid—”

“Afraid! of what?” said the countess, eagerly; for the word reminded her of Mouche and Fourchon.

“Afraid of the wolves, is that it?” said Emile, making Madame Michaud a sign, which she did not understand.

“No, monsieur,—afraid of the peasants. I was born in Le Perche, where of course there are some bad people, but I had no idea how wicked people could be until I came here. I try not to meddle in Michaud’s affairs, but I do know that he distrusts the peasants so much that he goes armed, even in broad daylight, when he enters the forest. He warns his men to be always on the alert. Every now and then things happen about here that bode no good. The other day I was walking along the wall, near the source of that little sandy rivulet which comes from the forest and enters

the park through a culvert about five hundred feet from here,—you know it, madame? it is called Silver Spring, because of the star-flowers Bouret is said to have sown there. Well, I overheard the talk of two women who were washing their linen just where the path to Conches crosses the brook; they did not know I was there. Our house can be seen from that point, and one old woman pointed it out to the other, saying: 'See what a lot of money they have spent on the man who turned out Courtecuisse.' 'They ought to pay a man well when they set him to harass poor people as that man does,' answered the other. 'Well, it won't be for long,' said the first one; 'the thing is going to end soon. We have a right to our wood. The late Madame allowed us to take it. That's thirty years ago, so the right is ours.' 'We'll see what we shall see next winter,' replied the second. 'My man has sworn the great oath that all the gendarmerie in the world sha'n't keep us from getting our wood; he says he means to get it himself, and if the worst happens so much the worse for them!' 'Good God!' cried the other; 'we can't die of cold, and we must bake bread to eat! They want for nothing, *those others*! the wife of that scoundrel of a Michaud will be taken care of, I warrant you!' And then, Madame, they said such horrible things of me and of you and of Monsieur le comte; and they finally declared that the farms would all be burned, and then the chateau."

"Bah!" said Emile, "idle talk! They have been robbing the general, and they will not be allowed to rob him any longer. These people are furious, that's the whole of it. You must remember that the law and the government are always strongest everywhere, even in Burgundy. In case of an outbreak the general could bring a regiment of cavalry here, if necessary."

The abbe made a sign to Madame Michaud from behind the countess, telling her to say no more about her fears, which were doubtless the effect of that second sight which true passion bestows. The soul, dwelling exclusively on one only being, grasps in the end the moral elements that surround it, and sees in them the makings of the future. The woman who loves feels the same presentiments that later illuminate her motherhood. Hence a certain melancholy, a certain inexplicable sadness which surprises men, who are one and all distracted from any such concentration of their souls by the cares of life and the continual necessity for action. All true love becomes to a woman an active contemplation, which is more or less lucid, more or less profound, according to her nature.

"Come, my dear, show your home to Monsieur Emile," said the countess, whose mind was so pre-occupied that she forgot La Pechina, who was the ostensible object of her visit.

The interior of the restored pavilion was in keeping with its exterior. On the ground-floor the old divisions had been replaced, and the architect, sent from Paris with his own workmen (a cause of bitter complaint in the neighborhood against the master of Les Aigues), had made four rooms out of the space. First, an ante-chamber, at the farther end of which was a winding wooden staircase, behind which came the kitchen; on either side of the antechamber was a dining-room and a parlor panelled in oak now nearly black, with armorial bearings in the divisions of the ceilings. The architect chosen by Madame de Montcornet for the restoration of Les Aigues had taken care to put the furniture of this room in keeping with its original decoration.

At the time of which we write fashion had not yet given an exaggerated value to the relics of past ages. The carved settee, the high-backed chairs covered with tapestry, the consoles, the clocks, the tall embroidery frames, the tables, the lustres, hidden away in the second-hand shops of Auxerre and Ville-aux-Fayes were fifty per-cent cheaper than the modern, ready-made furniture of the faubourg Saint Antoine. The architect had therefore bought two or three cartloads of well-chosen old things, which, added to a few others discarded at the chateau, made the little salon of the gate of the Avonne an artistic creation. As to the dining-room, he painted it in browns and hung it with what was called a Scotch paper, and Madame Michaud added white cambric curtains with green borders at the windows, mahogany chairs covered with green cloth, two large buffets and a table, also in mahogany. This room, ornamented with engravings of military scenes, was heated by a porcelain stove, on each side of which were sporting-guns suspended on the walls. These adornments, which cost but little, were talked of throughout the whole valley as the last extreme of oriental luxury. Singular to say, they, more than anything else, excited the envy of Gaubertin, and whenever he thought of his fixed determination to bring Les Aigues to the hammer and cut it in pieces, he reserved for himself, “in petto,” this beautiful pavilion.

On the next floor three chambers sufficed for the household. At the windows were muslin curtains which reminded a Parisian of the particular taste and fancy of bourgeois requirements. Left to herself in the decoration of these rooms, Madame Michaud had chosen satin papers; on the mantel-shelf of her bedroom—which was furnished in that vulgar style of mahogany and Utrecht velvet which is seen everywhere, with its high-backed bed and canopy to which embroidered muslin curtains are fastened—stood an alabaster clock between two candelabra covered with gauze and flanked by two vases filled with artificial flowers protected by glass shades, a conjugal gift of the former cavalry sergeant. Above, under the roof, the

bedrooms of the cook, the man-of-all-work, and La Pechina had benefited by the recent restoration.

“Olympe, my dear, you did not tell me all,” said the countess, entering Madame Michaud’s bedroom, and leaving Emile and the abbe on the stairway, whence they descended when they heard her shut the door.

Madame Michaud, to whom the abbe had contrived to whisper a word, was now anxious to say no more about her fears, which were really greater than she had intimated, and she therefore began to talk of a matter which reminded the countess of the object of her visit.

“I love Michaud, madame, as you know. Well, how would you like to have, in your own house, a rival always beside you?”

“A rival?”

“Yes, madame; that swarthy girl you gave me to take care of loves Michaud without knowing it, poor thing! The child’s conduct, long a mystery to me, has been cleared up in my mind for some days.”

“Why, she is only thirteen years old!”

“I know that, madame. But you will admit that a woman who is three months pregnant and means to nurse her child herself may have some fears; but as I did not want to speak of this before those gentlemen, I talked a great deal of nonsense when you questioned me,” said the generous creature, adroitly.

Madame Michaud was not really afraid of Genevieve Niseron, but for the last three days she was in mortal terror of some disaster from the peasantry.

“How did you discover this?” said the countess.

“From everything and from nothing,” replied Olympe. “The poor little thing moves with the slowness of a tortoise when she is obliged to obey me, but she runs like a lizard when Justin asks for anything, she trembles like a leaf at the sound of his voice; and her face is that of a saint ascending to heaven when she looks at him. But she knows nothing about love; she has no idea that she loves him.”

“Poor child!” said the countess with a smile and tone that were full of naivete.

“And so,” continued Madame Michaud, answering with a smile the smile of her late mistress, “Genevieve is gloomy when Justin is out of the house; if I ask her what she is thinking of she replies that she is afraid of Monsieur Rigou, or some such nonsense. She thinks people envy her, though she is as black as the inside of a chimney. When Justin is patrolling the woods at night the child is as anxious as I

am. If I open my window to listen for the trot of his horse, I see a light in her room, which shows me that La Pechina (as they call here) is watching and waiting too. She never goes to bed, any more than I do, till he comes in."

"Thirteen!" exclaimed the countess; "unfortunate child!"

"Unfortunate? no. This passion will save her."

"From what?" asked Madame de Montcornet.

"From the fate which overtakes nearly all the girls of her age in these parts. Since I have taught her cleanliness she is much less ugly than she was; in fact, there is something odd and wild about her which attracts men. She is so changed that you would hardly recognize her. The son of that infamous innkeeper of the Grand-I-Vert, Nicolas, the worst fellow in the whole district, wants her; he hunts her like game. Though I can't believe that Monsieur Rigou, who changes his servant-girls every year or two is persecuting such a little fright, it is quite certain that Nicolas Tonsard is. Justin told me so. It would be a dreadful fate, for the people of this valley actually live like beasts; but Justin and our two servants and I watch her carefully. Therefore don't be uneasy, madame; she never goes out alone except in broad daylight, and then only as far as the gate of Conches. If by chance she fell into an ambush, her feeling for Justin would give her strength and wit to escape; for all women who have a preference in their hearts can resist a man they hate."

"It was about her that I came," said the countess, "and I little thought my visit could be so useful to you. That child, you know, can't remain thirteen; and she will probably grow better-looking."

"Oh, madame," replied Olympe, smiling, "I am quite sure of Justin. What a man! what a heart!—If you only knew what a depth of gratitude he feels for his general, to whom, he says, he owes his happiness. He is only too devoted; he would risk his life for him here, as he would on the field of battle, and he forgets sometimes that he will one day be father of a family."

"Ah! I once regretted losing you," said the countess, with a glance that made Olympe blush; "but I regret it no longer, for I see you happy. What a sublime and noble thing is married love!" she added, speaking out the thought she had not dared express before the abbe.

Virginie de Troisville dropped into a revery, and Madame Michaud kept silence.

"Well, at least the girl is honest, is she not?" said the countess, as if waking from a dream.

“As honest as I am myself, madame.”

“Discreet?”

“As the grave.”

“Grateful?”

“Ah! madame; she has moments of humility and gentleness towards me which seem to show an angelic nature. She will kiss my hands and say the most upsetting things. ‘Can we die of love?’ she asked me yesterday. ‘Why do you ask me that?’ I said. ‘I want to know if love is a disease.’”

“Did she really say that?”

“If I could remember her exact words I would tell you a great deal more,” replied Olympe; “she appears to know much more than I do.”

“Do you think, my dear, that she could take your place in my service. I can’t do without an Olympe,” said the countess, smiling in a rather sad way.

“Not yet, madame,—she is too young; but in two years’ time, yes. If it becomes necessary that she should go away from here I will let you know. She ought to be educated, and she knows nothing of the world. Her grandfather, Pere Niseron, is a man who would let his throat be cut sooner than tell a lie; he would die of hunger in a baker’s shop; he has the strength of his opinions, and the girl was brought up to all such principles. La Pechina would consider herself your equal; for the old man has made her, as he says, a republican,—just as Pere Fourchon has made Mouche a bohemian. As for me, I laugh at such ideas, but you might be displeased. She would revere you as her benefactress, but never as her superior. It can’t be otherwise; she is wild and free like the swallows—her mother’s blood counts for a good deal in what she is.”

“Who was her mother?”

“Doesn’t madame know the story?” said Olympe. “Well, the son of the old sexton at Blangy, a splendid fellow, so the people about here tell me, was drafted at the great conscription. In 1809 young Niseron was still only an artilleryman, in a corps d’armee stationed in Illyria and Dalmatia when it received sudden orders to advance through Hungary and cut off the retreat of the Austrian army in case the Emperor won the battle of Wagram. Michaud told me all about Dalmatia, for he was there. Niseron, being so handsome a man, captivated a Montenegrin girl of Zahara among the mountains, who was not averse to the French garrison. This lost her the good-will of her compatriots, and life in her own town became impossible after the departure of the French. Zena Kropoli, called in derision the

Frenchwoman, followed the artillery, and came to France after the peace. Auguste Niseron asked permission to marry her; but the poor woman died at Vincennes in January, 1810, after giving birth to a daughter, our Genevieve. The papers necessary to make the marriage legal arrived a few days later. Auguste Niseron then wrote to his father to come and take the child, with a wetnurse he had got from its own country; and it was lucky he did, for he was killed soon after by the bursting of a shell at Montereau. Registered by the name of Genevieve and baptized at Soulanges, the little Dalmatian was taken under the protection of Mademoiselle Laguerre, who was touched by her story. It seems as if it were the destiny of the child to be taken care of by the owners of Les Aigues! Pere Niseron obtained its clothes, and now and then some help in money from Mademoiselle."

The countess and Olympe were just then standing before a window from which they could see Michaud approaching the abbe and Blondet, who were walking up and down the wide, semi-circular gravelled space which repeated on the park side of the pavilion the exterior half-moon; they were conversing earnestly.

"Where is she?" said the countess; "you make me anxious to see her."

"She is gone to carry milk to Mademoiselle Gaillard at the gate of Conches; she will soon be back, for it is more than an hour since she started."

"Well, I'll go and meet her with those gentlemen," said Madame de Montcornet, going downstairs.

Just as the countess opened her parasol, Michaud came up and told her that the general had left her a widow for probably two days.

"Monsieur Michaud," said the countess, eagerly, "don't deceive me, there is something serious going on. Your wife is frightened, and if there are many persons like Pere Fourchon, this part of the country will be uninhabitable—"

"If it were so, madame," answered Michaud, laughing, "we should not be in the land of the living, for nothing would be easier than to make away with us. The peasant's grumble, that is all. But as to passing from growls to blows, from pilfering to crime, they care too much for life and the free air of the fields. Olympe has been saying something that frightened you, but you know she is in state to be frightened at nothing," he added, drawing his wife's hand under his arm and pressing it to warn her to say no more.

"Cornevin! Juliette!" cried Madame Michaud, who soon saw the head of her old cook at the window. "I am going for a little walk; take care of the premises."

Two enormous dogs, who began to bark, proved that the effectiveness of the garrison at the gate of the Avonne was not to be despised. Hearing the dogs, Cornevin, an old Percheron, Olympe's foster-father, came from behind the trees, showing a head such as no other region than La Perche can manufacture. Cornevin was undoubtedly a Chouan in 1794 and 1799.

The whole party accompanied the countess along that one of the six forest avenues which led directly to the gate of Conches, crossing the Silver-spring rivulet. Madame de Montcornet walked in front with Blondet. The abbe and Michaud and his wife talked in a low voice of the revelation that had just been made to the countess of the state of the country.

"Perhaps it is providential," said the abbe; "for if madame is willing, we might, perhaps, by dint of benefits and constant consideration of their wants, change the hearts of these people."

At about six hundred feet from the pavilion and below the brooke, the countess caught sight of a broken red jug and some spilt milk.

"Something has happened to the poor child!" she cried, calling to Michaud and his wife, who were returning to the pavilion.

"A misfortune like Perrette's," said Blondet, laughing.

"No; the poor child has been surprised and pursued, for the jug was thrown outside the path," said the abbe, examining the ground.

"Yes, that is certainly La Pechina's step," said Michaud; "the print of the feet, which have turned, you see, quickly, shows sudden terror. The child must have darted in the direction of the pavilion, trying to get back there."

Every one followed the traces which the bailiff pointed out as he walked along examining them. Presently he stopped in the middle of the path about a hundred feet from the broken jug, where the girl's foot-prints ceased.

"Here," he said, "she turned towards the Avonne; perhaps she was headed off from the direction of the pavilion."

"But she has been gone more than an hour," cried Madame Michaud.

Alarm was in all faces. The abbe ran towards the pavilion, examining the state of the road, while Michaud, impelled by the same thought, went up the path towards Conches.

“Good God! she fell here,” said Michaud, returning from a place where the footsteps stopped near the brook, to that where they had turned in the road, and pointing to the ground, he added, “See!”

The marks were plainly seen of a body lying at full length on the sandy path.

“The footprints which have entered the wood are those of some one who wore knitted soles,” said the abbe.

“A woman, then,” said the countess.

“Down there, by the broken pitcher, are the footsteps of a man,” added Michaud.

“I don’t see traces of any other foot,” said the abbe, who was tracking into the wood the prints of the woman’s feet.

“She must have been lifted and carried into the wood,” cried Michaud.

“That can’t be, if it is really a woman’s foot,” said Blondet.

“It must be some trick of that wretch, Nicolas,” said Michaud. “He has been watching La Pechina for some time. Only this morning I stood two hours under the bridge of the Avonne to see what he was about. A woman may have helped him.”

“It is dreadful!” said the countess.

“They call it amusing themselves,” added the priest, in a sad and grieved tone.

“Oh! La Pechina would never let them keep her,” said the bailiff; “she is quite able to swim across the river. I shall look along the banks. Go home, my dear Olympe; and you gentlemen and madame, please to follow the avenue towards Conches.”

“What a country!” exclaimed the countess.

“There are scoundrels everywhere,” replied Blondet.

“Is it true, Monsieur l’abbe,” asked Madame de Montcornet, “that I saved the poor child from the clutches of Rigou?”

“Every young girl over fiften years of age whom you may protect at the chateau is saved from that monster,” said the abbe. “In trying to get possession of La Pechina from her earliest years, the apostate sought to satisfy both his lust and his vengeance. When I took Pere Niseron as sexton I told him what Rigou’s intentions were. That is one of the causes of the late mayor’s rancor against me; his hatred grew out of it. Pere Niseron said to him solemnly that he would kill him if any harm came to Genevieve, and he made him responsible for all attempts upon the poor child’s honor. I can’t help thinking that this pursuit of Nicolas is the result of

some infernal collusion with Rigou, who thinks he can do as he likes with these people."

"Doesn't he fear the law?"

"In the first place, he is father-in-law of the prosecuting-attorney," said the abbe, pausing to listen. "And then," he resumed, "you have no conception of the utter indifference of the rural police to what is done around them. So long as the peasants do not burn the farm-houses and buildings, commit no murders, poison no one, and pay their taxes, they let them do as they like; and as these people are not restrained by any religious principle, horrible things happen every day. On the other side of the Avonne helpless old men are afraid to stay in their own homes, for they are allowed nothing to eat; they wander out into the fields as far as their tottering legs can bear them, knowing well that if they take to their beds they will die for want of food. Monsieur Sarcus, the magistrate, tells me that if they arrested and tried all criminals, the costs would ruin the municipality."

"Then he at least sees how things are?" said Blondet.

"Monseigneur thoroughly understands the condition of the valley, and especially the state of this district," continued the abbe. "Religion alone can cure such evils; the law seems to me powerless, modified as it is now—"

The words were interrupted by loud cries from the woods, and the countess, preceded by Emile and the abbe, sprang bravely into the brushwood in the direction of the sounds.

CHAPTER XI. THE OARISTYS, EIGHTEENTH ECLOGUE OF THEOCRITUS

LITTLE ADMIRED ON THE POLICE CALENDAR

The sagacity of a savage, which Michaud's new occupation had developed among his faculties, joined to an acquaintance with the passions and interests of Blangy, enabled him partially to understand a third idyll in the Greek style, which poor villagers like Tonsard, and middle-aged rich men like Rigou, translate *freely*—to use the classic word—in the depths of their country solitudes.

Nicolas, Tonsard's second son, had drawn an unlucky number at a recent conscription. Two years earlier his elder brother had been pronounced, through the influence of Soudry, Gaubertin, and Sarcus the rich, unfit for military service, on account of a pretended weakness in the muscles of the right arm; but as Jean-Louis had since wielded instruments of husbandry with remarkable force and skill, a good deal of talk on the subject had gone through the district. Soudry, Rigou, and Gaubertin, who were the special protectors of the family, had warned Tonsard that he must not expect to save Nicolas, who was tall and vigorous, from being recruited if he drew a fatal number. Nevertheless Gaubertin and Rigou were so well aware of the importance of conciliating bold men able and willing to do mischief, if properly directed against Les Aigues, that Rigou held out certain hopes of safety to Tonsard and his son. The late monk was occasionally visited by Catherine Tonsard who was very devoted to her brother Nicolas; on one such occasion Rigou advised her to appeal to the general and the countess.

"They may be glad to do you this service to cajole you; in that case, it is just so much gained from the enemy," he said. "If the Shopman refuses, then we shall see what we shall see."

Rigou foresaw that the general's refusal would pass as one wrong the more done by the land-owner to the peasantry, and would bind Tonsard by an additional motive of gratitude to the coalition, in case the crafty mind of the innkeeper could suggest to him some plausible way of liberating Nicolas.

Nicolas, who was soon to appear before the examining board, had little hope of the general's intervention because of the harm done to Les Aigues by all the members

of the Tonsard family. His passion, or to speak more correctly, his caprice and obstinate pursuit of La Pechina, were so aggravated by the prospect of his immediate departure, which left him no time to seduce her, that he resolved on attempting violence. The child's contempt for her prosecutor, plainly shown, excited the Lovelace of the Grand-I-Vert to a hatred whose fury was equalled only by his desires. For the last three days he had been watching La Pechina, and the poor child knew she was watched. Between Nicolas and his prey the same sort of understanding existed which there is between the hunter and the game. When the girl was at some little distance from the pavilion she saw Nicolas in one of the paths which ran parallel to the walls of the park, leading to the bridge of the Avonne. She could easily have escaped the man's pursuit had she appealed to her grandfather; but all young girls, even the most unsophisticated, have a strange fear, possibly instinctive, of trusting to their natural protectors under the like circumstances.

Genevieve had heard Pere Niseron take an oath to kill any man, no matter who he was, who should dare to *touch* (that was his word) his granddaughter. The old man thought the child amply protected by the halo of white hair and honor which a spotless life of three-score years and ten had laid upon his brow. The vision of bloody scenes terrifies the imagination of young girls so that they need not dive to the bottom of their hearts for other numerous and inquisitive reasons which seal their lips.

When La Pechina started with the milk which Madame Michaud had sent to the daughter of Gaillard, the keeper of the gate of Conches, whose cow had just calved, she looked about her cautiously, like a cat when it ventures out onto the street. She saw no signs of Nicolas; she listened to the silence, as the poet says, and hearing nothing, she concluded that the rascal had gone to his day's work. The peasants were just beginning to cut the rye; for they were in the habit of getting in their own harvests first, so as to benefit by the best strength of the mowers. But Nicolas was not a man to mind losing a day's work,—especially now that he expected to leave the country after the fair at Soulanges and begin, as the country people say, the new life of a soldier.

When La Pechina, with the jug on her head, was about half-way, Nicolas slid like a wild-cat down the trunk of an elm, among the branches of which he was hiding, and fell like a thunderbolt in front of the girl, who flung away her pitcher and trusted to her fleet legs to regain the pavilion. But a hundred feet farther on, Catherine Tonsard, who was on the watch, rushed out of the wood and knocked so violently against the flying girl that she was thrown down. The violence of the fall

made her unconscious. Catherine picked her up and carried her into the woods to the middle of a tiny meadow where the Silver-spring brook bubbled up.

Catherine Tonsard was tall and strong, and in every respect the type of woman whom painters and sculptors take, as the Republic did in former days, for their figures of Liberty. She charmed the young men of the valley of the Avonne with her voluminous bosom, her muscular legs, and a waist as robust as it was flexible; with her plump arms, her eyes that could flash and sparkle, and her jaunty air; with the masses of hair twisted in coils around her head, her masculine forehead and her red lips curling with that same ferocious smile which Eugene Delacroix and David (of Angers) caught and represented so admirably. True image of the People, this fiery and swarthy creature seemed to emit revolt through her piercing yellow eyes, blazing with the insolence of a soldier. She inherited from her father so violent a nature that the whole family, except Tonsard, and all who frequented the tavern feared her.

“Well, how are you now?” she said to La Pechina as the latter recovered consciousness.

Catherine had placed her victim on a little mound beside the brook and was bringing her to her senses with dashes of cold water. “Where am I?” said the child, opening her beautiful black eyes through which a sun-ray seemed to glide.

“Ah!” said Catherine, “if it hadn’t been for me you’d have been killed.”

“Thank you,” said the girl, still bewildered; “what happened to me?”

“You stumbled over a root and fell flat in the road over there, as if shot. Ha! how you did run!”

“It was your brother who made me,” said La Pechina, remembering Nicolas.

“My brother? I did not see him,” said Catherine. “What did he do to you, poor fellow, that should make you fly as if he were a wolf? Isn’t he handsomer than your Monsieur Michaud?”

“Oh!” said the girl, contemptuously.

“See here, little one; you are laying up a crop of evils for yourself by loving those who persecute us. Why don’t you keep to our side?”

“Why don’t you come to church; and why do you steal things night and day?” asked the child.

“So you let those people talk you over!” sneered Catherine. “They love us, don’t they?—just as they love their food which they get out of us, and they want new

dishes every day. Did you ever know one of them to marry a peasant-girl? Not they! Does Sarcus the rich let his son marry that handsome Gatienne Giboulard? Not he, though she is the daughter of a rich upholsterer. You have never been at the Tivoli ball at Soulanges in Socquard's tavern; you had better come. You'll see 'em all there, these bourgeois fellows, and you'll find they are not worth the money we shall get out of them when we've pulled them down. Come to the fair this year!"

"They say it's fine, that Soulanges fair!" cried La Pechina, artlessly.

"I'll tell you what it is in two words," said Catherine. "If you are handsome, you are well ogled. What is the good of being as pretty as you are if you are not admired by the men? Ha! when I heard one of them say for the first time, 'What a fine sprig of a girl!' all my blood was on fire. It was at Socquard's, in the middle of a dance; my grandfather, Fourchon, who was playing the clarionet, heard it and laughed. Tivoli seemed to me as grand and fine as heaven itself. It's lighted up, my dear, with glass lamps, and you'll think you are in paradise. All the gentlemen of Soulanges and Auxerre and Ville-aux-Fayes will be there. Ever since that first night I've loved the place where those words rang in my ears like military music. It's worthy giving your eternity to hear such words said of you by a man you love."

"Yes, perhaps," replied La Pechina, thoughtfully.

"Then come, and get the praise of men; you're sure of it!" cried Catherine. "Ha! you'll have a fine chance, handsome as you are, to pick up good luck. There's the son of Monsieur Lupin, Amaury, he might marry you. But that's not all; if you only knew what comforts you can find there against vexation and worry. Why, Socquard's boiled wine will make you forget every trouble you ever had. Fancy! it can make you dream, and feel as light as a bird. Didn't you ever drink boiled wine? Then you don't know what life is."

The privilege enjoyed by older persons to wet their throats with boiled wine excites the curiosity of the children of the peasantry over twelve years of age to such a degree that Genevieve had once put her lips to a glass of boiled wine ordered by the doctor for her grandfather when ill. The taste had left a sort of magic influence in the memory of the poor child, which may explain the interest with which she listened, and on which the evil-minded Catherine counted to carry out a plan already half-successful. No doubt she was trying to bring her victim, giddy from the fall, to the moral intoxication so dangerous to young women living in the wilds of nature, whose imagination, deprived of other nourishment, is all the more ardent when the occasion comes to exercise it. Boiled wine, which Catherine had held in reserve, was to end the matter by intoxicating the victim.

“What do they put into it?” asked La Pechina.

“All sorts of things,” replied Catherine, glancing back to see if her brother were coming; “in the first place, those what d’ ye call ‘ems that come from India, cinnamon, and herbs that change you by magic,—you fancy you have everything you wish for; boiled wine makes you happy! you can snap your fingers at all your troubles!”

“I should be afraid to drink boiled wine at a dance,” said La Pechina.

“Afraid of what?” asked Catherine. “There’s not the slightest danger. Think what lots of people there will be. All the bourgeois will be looking at us! Ah! it is one of those days that make up for all our misery. See it and die,—for it’s enough to satisfy any one.”

“If Monsieur and Madame Michaud would only take me!” cried La Pechina, her eyes blazing.

“Ask your grandfather Niseron; you have not given him up, poor dear man, and he’d be pleased to see you admired like a little queen. Why do you like those Arminacs the Michauds better than your grandfather and the Burgundians. It’s bad to neglect your own people. Besides, why should the Michauds object if your grandfather takes you to the fair? Oh! if you knew what it is to reign over a man and put him beside himself, and say to him, as I say to Godain, ‘Go there!’ and he goes, ‘Do that!’ and he does it! You’ve got it in you, little one, to turn the head of a bourgeois like that son of Monsieur Lupin. Monsieur Amaury took a fancy to my sister Marie because she is fair and because he is half-afraid of me; but he’d adore you, for ever since those people at the pavilion have spruced you up a bit you’ve got the airs of an empress.”

Adroitly leading the innocent heart to forget Nicolas and so put it off its guard, Catherine distilled into the girl the insidious nectar of compliments. Unawares, she touched a secret wound. La Pechina, without being other than a poor peasant girl, was a specimen of alarming precocity, like many another creature doomed to die as prematurely as it blooms. Strange product of Burgundian and Montenegrin blood, conceived and born amid the toils of war, the girl was doubtless in many ways the result of her congenital circumstances. Thin, slender, brown as a tobacco leaf, and short in stature, she nevertheless possessed extraordinary strength,—a strength unseen by the eyes of peasants, to whom the mysteries of the nervous system are unknown. Nerves are not admitted into the medical rural mind.

At thirteen years of age Genevieve had completed her growth, though she was hardly as tall as an ordinary girl of her age. Did her face owe its topaz skin, so dark

and yet so brilliant, dark in tone and brilliant in the quality of its tissue, giving a look of age to the childish face, to her Montenegrin origin, or to the ardent sun of Burgundy? Medical science may dismiss the inquiry. The premature old age on the surface of the face was counterbalanced by the glow, the fire, the wealth of light which made the eyes two stars. Like all eyes which fill with sunlight and need, perhaps, some sheltering screen, the eyelids were fringed with lashes of extraordinary length. The hair, of a bluish black, long and fine and abundant, crowned a brow moulded like that of the Farnese Juno. That magnificent diadem of hair, those grand Armenian eyes, that celestial brow eclipsed the rest of the face. The nose, though pure in form as it left the brow, and graceful in curve, ended in flattened and flaring nostrils. Anger increased this effect at times, and then the face wore an absolutely furious expression. All the lower part of the face, like the lower part of the nose, seemed unfinished, as if the clay in the hands of the divine sculptor had proved insufficient. Between the lower lip and the chin the space was so short that any one taking La Pechina by the chin would have rubbed the lip; but the teeth prevented all notice of this defect. One might almost believe those little bones had souls, so brilliant were they, so polished, so transparent, so exquisitely shaped, disclosed as they were by too wide a mouth, curved in lines that bore resemblance to the fantastic shapes of coral. The shells of the ears were so transparent to the light that in the sunshine they were rose-colored. The complexion, though sun-burned, showed a marvellous delicacy in the texture of the skin. If, as Buffon declared, love lies in touch, the softness of the girl's skin must have had the penetrating and inciting influence of the fragrance of daturas. The chest and indeed the whole body was alarmingly thin; but the feet and hands, of alluring delicacy, showed remarkable nervous power, and a vigorous organism.

This mixture of diabolical imperfections and divine beauties, harmonious in spite of discords, for they blended in a species of savage dignity, also this triumph of a powerful soul over a feeble body, as written in those eyes, made the child, when once seen, unforgettable. Nature had wished to make that frail young being a woman; the circumstances of her conception moulded her with the face and body of a boy. A poet observing the strange creature would have declared her native clime to be Arabia the Blest; she belonged to the Afrite and Genii of Arabian tales. Her face told no lies. She had the soul of that glance of fire, the intellect of those lips made brilliant by the bewitching teeth, the thought enshrined within that glorious brow, the passion of those nostrils ready at all moments to snort flame. Therefore love, such as we imagine it on burning sands, in lonely deserts, filled that heart of twenty in the breast of a child, doomed, like the snowy heights of Montenegro, to wear no flowers of the spring.

Observers ought now to understand how it was that La Pechina, from whom passion issued by every pore, awakened in perverted natures the feelings deadened by abuse; just as water fills the mouth at sight of those twisted, blotched, and speckled fruits which gourmands know by experience, and beneath whose skin nature has put the rarest flavors and perfumes. Why did Nicolas, that vulgar laborer, pursue this being who was worthy of a poet, while the eyes of the country-folk pitied her as a sickly deformity? Why did Rigou, the old man, feel the passion of a young one for this girl? Which of the two men was young, and which was old? Was the young peasant as blase as the old usurer? Why did these two extremes of life meet in one common and devilish caprice? Does the vigor that draws to its close resemble the vigor that is only dawning? The moral perversities of men are gulfs guarded by sphinxes; they begin and end in questions to which there is no answer.

The exclamation, formerly quoted, of the countess, “Piccina!” when she first saw Genevieve by the roadside, open-mouthed at sight of the carriage and the elegantly dressed woman within it, will be understood. This girl, almost a dwarf, of Montenegrin vigor, loved the handsome, noble bailiff, as children of her age love, when they do love, that is to say, with childlike passion, with the strength of youth, with the devotion which in truly virgin souls gives birth to divinest poesy. Catherine had just swept her coarse hands across the sensitive strings of that choice harp, strung to the breaking-point. To dance before Michaud, to shine at the Soulanges ball and inscribe herself on the memory of that adored master! What glorious thoughts! To fling them into that volcanic head was like casting live coals upon straw dried in the August sun.

“No, Catherine,” replied La Pechina, “I am ugly and puny; my lot is to sit in a corner and never to be married, but live alone in the world.”

“Men like weaklings,” said Catherine. “You see me, don’t you?” she added, showing her handsome, strong arms. “I please Godain, who is a poor stick; I please that little Charles, the count’s groom; but Lupin’s son is afraid of me. I tell you it is the small kind of men who love me, and who say when they see me go by at Ville-aux-Fayes and at Soulanges, ‘Ha! what a fine girl!’ Now YOU, that’s another thing; you’ll please the fine men.”

“Ah! Catherine, if it were true—that!” cried the bewitched child.

“It is true, it is so true that Nicolas, the handsomest man in the canton, is mad about you; he dreams of you, he is losing his mind; and yet all the other girls are in love with him. He is a fine lad! If you’ll put on a white dress and yellow ribbons, and come to Socquard’s for the midsummer ball, you’ll be the handsomest girl there,

and all the fine people from Ville-aux-Fayes will see you. Come, won't you?—See here, I've been cutting grass for the cows, and I brought some boiled wine in my gourd; Socquard gave it me this morning," she added quickly, seeing the half-delirious expression in La Pechina's eyes which women understand so well. "We'll share it together, and you'll fancy the men are in love with you."

During this conversation Nicolas, choosing the grassy spots to step on, had noiselessly slipped behind the trunk of an old oak near which his sister had seated La Pechina. Catherine, who had now and then cast her eyes behind her, saw her brother as she turned to get the boiled wine.

"Here, take some," she said, offering it.

"It burns me!" cried Genevieve, giving back the gourd, after taking two or three swallows from it.

"Silly child!" replied Catherine; "see here!" and she emptied the rustic bottle without taking breath. "See how it slips down; it goes like a sunbeam into the stomach."

"But I ought to be carrying the milk to Mademoiselle Gaillard," cried Genevieve; "and it is all spilt! Nicolas frightened me so!"

"Don't you like Nicolas?"

"No," answered Genevieve. "Why does he persecute me? He can get plenty other girls, who are willing."

"But if he likes you better than all the other girls in the valley—"

"So much the worse for him."

"I see you don't know him," answered Catherine, as she seized the girl rapidly by the waist and flung her on the grass, holding her down in that position with her strong arms. At this moment Nicolas appeared. Seeing her odious persecutor, the child screamed with all her might, and drove him five feet away with a violent kick in the stomach; then she twisted herself like an acrobat, with a dexterity for which Catherine was not prepared, and rose to run away. Catherine, still on the ground, caught her by one foot and threw her headlong on her face. This frightful fall stopped the brave child's cries for a moment. Nicolas attempted, furiously, to seize his victim, but she, though giddy from the wine and the fall, caught him by the throat in a grip of iron.

"Help! she's strangling me, Catherine," cried Nicolas, in a stifled voice.

La Pechina uttered piercing screams, which Catherine tried to choke by putting her hands over the girl's mouth, but she bit them and drew blood. It was at this moment that Blondet, the countess, and the abbe appeared at the edge of the wood.

"Here are those Aigues people!" exclaimed Catherine, helping Genevieve to rise.

"Do you want to live?" hissed Nicolas in the child's ear.

"What then?" she asked.

"Tell them we were all playing, and I'll forgive you," said Nicolas, in a threatening voice.

"Little wretch, mind you say it!" repeated Catherine, whose glance was more terrifying than her brother's murderous threat.

"Yes, I will, if you let me alone," replied the child. "But anyhow I will never go out again without my scissors."

"You are to hold your tongue, or I'll drown you in the Avonne," said Catherine, ferociously.

"You are monsters," cried the abbe, coming up; "you ought to be arrested and taken to the assizes."

"Ha! and pray what do you do in your drawing-rooms?" said Nicolas, looking full at the countess and Blondet. "You play and amuse yourselves, don't you? Well, so do we, in the fields which are ours. We can't always work; we must play sometimes,—ask my sister and La Pechina."

"How do you fight if you call that playing?" cried Blondet.

Nicolas gave him a murderous look.

"Speak!" said Catherine, gripping La Pechina by the forearm and leaving a blue bracelet on the flesh. "Were not we amusing ourselves?"

"Yes, madame, we were amusing ourselves," said the child, exhausted by her display of strength, and now breaking down as though she were about to faint.

"You hear what she says, madame," said Catherine, boldly, giving the countess one of those looks which women give each other like dagger thrusts.

She took her brother's arm, and the pair walked off, not mistaking the opinion they left behind them in the minds of the three persons who had interrupted the scene. Nicolas twice looked back, and twice encountered Blondet's gaze. The journalist continued to watch the tall scoundrel, who was broad in the shoulders, healthy and vigorous in complexion, with black hair curling tightly, and whose rather soft face

showed upon its lips and around the mouth certain lines which reveal the peculiar cruelty that characterizes sluggards and voluptuaries. Catherine swung her petticoat, striped blue and white, with an air of insolent coquetry.

“Cain and his wife!” said Blondet to the abbe.

“You are nearer the truth than you know,” replied the priest.

“Ah! Monsieur le cure, what will they do to me?” said La Pechina, when the brother and sister were out of sight.

The countess, as white as her handkerchief, was so overcome that she heard neither Blondet nor the abbe nor La Pechina.

“It is enough to drive one from this terrestrial paradise,” she said at last. “But the first thing of all is to save that child from their claws.”

“You are right,” said Blondet in a low voice. “That child is a poem, a living poem.”

Just then the Montenegrin girl was in a state where soul and body smoke, as it were, after the conflagration of an anger which has driven all forces, physical and intellectual, to their utmost tension. It is an unspeakable and supreme splendor, which reveals itself only under the pressure of some frenzy, be it resistance or victory, love or martyrdom. She had left home in a dress with alternate lines of brown and yellow, and a collarette which she pleated herself by rising before daylight; and she had not yet noticed the condition of her gown soiled by her struggle on the grass, and her collar torn in Catherine’s grasp. Feeling her hair hanging loose, she looked about her for a comb. At this moment Michaud, also attracted by the screams, came upon the scene. Seeing her god, La Pechina recovered her full strength. “Monsieur Michaud,” she cried, “he did not even touch me!”

The cry, the look, the action of the girl were an eloquent commentary, and told more to Blondet and the abbe than Madame Michaud had told the countess about the passion of that strange nature for the bailiff, who was utterly unconscious of it.

“The scoundrel!” cried Michaud.

Then, with an involuntary and impotent gesture, such as mad men and wise men can both be forced into giving, he shook his fist in the direction in which he had caught sight of Nicolas disappearing with his sister.

“Then you were not playing?” said the abbe with a searching look at La Pechina.

“Don’t fret her,” interposed the countess; “let us return to the pavilion.”

Genevieve, though quite exhausted, found strength under Michaud's eyes to walk. The countess followed the bailiff through one of the by-paths known to keepers and poachers where only two can go abreast, and which led to the gate of the Avonne.

"Michaud," said the countess when they reached the depth of the wood, "We must find some way of ridding the neighborhood of such vile people; that child is actually in danger of death."

"In the first place," replied Michaud, "Genevieve shall not leave the pavilion. My wife will be glad to take the nephew of Vatel, who has the care of the park roads, into the house. With Gounod (that is his name) and old Cornevin, my wife's foster-father, always at hand, La Pechina need never go out without a protector."

"I will tell Monsieur to make up this extra expense to you," said the countess. "But this does not rid us of that Nicolas. How can we manage that?"

"The means are easy and right at hand," answered Michaud. "Nicolas is to appear very soon before the court of appeals on the draft. The general, instead of asking for his release, as the Tonsards expect, has only to advise his being sent to the army—"

"If necessary, I will go myself," said the countess, "and see my cousin, de Casteran, the prefect. But until then, I tremble for that child—"

The words were said at the end of the path close to the open space by the bridge. As they reached the edge of the bank the countess gave a cry; Michaud advanced to help her, thinking she had struck her foot against a stone; but he shuddered at the sight that met his eyes.

Marie Tonsard and Bonnebault, seated below the bank, seemed to be conversing, but were no doubt hiding there to hear what passed. Evidently they had left the wood as the party advanced towards them.

Bonnebault, a tall, wiry fellow, had lately returned to Conches after six years' service in the cavalry, with a permanent discharge due to his evil conduct,—his example being likely to ruin better men. He wore moustachios and a small chin-tuft; a peculiarity which, joined to his military carriage, made him the reigning fancy of all the girls in the valley. His hair, in common with that of other soldiers, was cut very short behind, but he frizzed it on the top of his head, brushing up the ends with a dandy air; on it his foraging cap was jauntily tilted to one side. Compared to the peasants, who were mostly in rags, like Mouche and Fourchon, he seemed gorgeous in his linen trousers, boots, and short waistcoat. These articles, bought at the time of his liberation, were, it is true, somewhat the worse for a life in the fields; but this village cock-of-the-walk had others in reserve for balls and

holidays. He lived, it must be said, on the gifts of his female friends, which, liberal as they were, hardly sufficed for the libations, the dissipations, and the squanderings of all kinds which resulted from his intimacy with the Cafe de la Paix.

Cowardice is like courage; of both there are various kinds. Bonnebault would have fought like a brave soldier, but he was weak in presence of his vices and his desires. Lazy as a lizard, that is to say, active only when it suited him, without the slightest decency, arrogant and base, able for much but neglectful of all, the sole pleasure of this “breaker of hearts and plates,” to use a barrack term, was to do evil or inflict damage. Such a nature does as much harm in rural communities as it does in a regiment. Bonnebault, like Tonsard and like Fourchon, desired to live well and do nothing; and he had his plans laid. Making the most of his gallant appearance with increasing success, and of his talents for billiards with alternate loss and gain, he flattered himself that the day would come when he could marry Mademoiselle Aglae Socquard, only daughter of the proprietor of the Cafe de la Paix, a resort which was to Soulanges what, relatively speaking, Ranelagh is to the Bois de Boulogne. To get into the business of tavern-keeping, to manage the public balls, what a fine career for the marshal’s baton of a ne’er-do-well! These morals, this life, this nature, were so plainly stamped upon the face of the low-lived profligate that the countess was betrayed into an exclamation when she beheld the pair, for they gave her the sensation of beholding snakes.

Marie, desperately in love with Bonnebault, would have robbed for his benefit. Those moustachios, the swaggering gait of a trooper, the fellow’s smart clothes, all went to her heart as the manners and charms of a de Marsay touch that of a pretty Parisian. Each social sphere has its own standard of distinction. The jealous Marie rebuffed Amaury Lupin, the other dandy of the little town, her mind being made up to become Madame Bonnebault.

“Hey! you there, hi! come on!” cried Nicolas and Catherine from afar, catching sight of Marie and Bonnebault.

The sharp call echoed through the woods like the cry of savages.

Seeing the pair at his feet, Michaud shuddered and deeply repented having spoken. If Bonnebault and Marie Tonsard had overheard the conversation, nothing but harm could come of it. This event, insignificant as it seems, was destined, in the irritated state of feeling then existing between Les Aigues and the peasantry, to have a decisive influence on the fate of all,—just as victory or defeat in battle sometimes depends upon a brook which shepherds jump while cannon are unable to pass it.

Gallantly bowing to the countess, Bonnebault passed Marie's arm through his own with a conquering air and took himself off triumphantly.

"The King of Hearts of the valley," muttered Michaud to the countess. "A dangerous man. When he loses twenty francs at billiards he would murder Rigou to get them back. He loves a crime as he does a pleasure."

"I have seen enough for to-day; take me home, gentlemen," murmured the countess, putting her hand on Emile's arm.

She bowed sadly to Madame Michaud, after watching La Pechina safely back to the pavilion. Olympe's depression was transferred to her mistress.

"Ah, madame," said the abbe, as they continued their way, "can it be that the difficulty of doing good is about to deter you? For the last five years I have slept on a pallet in a parsonage which has no furniture; I say mass in a church without believers; I preach to no hearers; I minister without fees or salary; I live on the six hundred francs the law allows me, asking nothing of my bishop, and I give the third of that in charity. Still, I am not hopeless. If you knew what my winters are in this place you would understand the strength of those words,—I am not hopeless. I keep myself warm with the belief that we can save this valley and bring it back to God. No matter for ourselves, madame; think of the future! If it is our duty to say to the poor, 'Learn how to be poor; that is, how to work, to endure, to strive,' it is equally our duty to say to the rich, 'Learn your duty as prosperous men,'—that is to say, 'Be wise, be intelligent in your benevolence; pious and virtuous in the place to which God has called you.' Ah! madame, you are only the steward of Him who grants you wealth; if you do not obey His behests you will never transmit to your children the prosperity He gives you. You will rob your posterity. If you follow in the steps of that poor singer's selfishness, which caused the evils that now terrify us, you will bring back the scaffolds on which your fathers died for the faults of their fathers. To do good humbly, in obscurity, in country solitudes, as Rigou now does evil,—ah! that indeed is prayer in action and dear to God. If in every district three souls only would work for good, France, our country, might be saved from the abyss that yawns; into which we are rushing headlong, through spiritual indifference to all that is not our own self-interest. Change! you must change your morals, change your ethics, and that will change your laws."

Though deeply moved as she listened to this grand utterance of true catholic charity, the countess answered in the fatal words, "We will consider it,"—words of the rich, which contain that promise to the ear which saves their purses and enables them to stand with arms crossed in presence of all disaster, under pretext that they were powerless.

Hearing those words, the abbe bowed to Madame de Montcornet and turned off into a path which led him direct to the gate of Blangy.

“Belshazzar’s feast is the everlasting symbol of the dying days of a caste, of an oligarchy, of a power!” he thought as he walked away. “My God! if it be Thy will to loose the poor like a torrent to reform society, I know, I comprehend, why it is that Thou hast abandoned the wealthy to their blindness!”

CHAPTER XII. SHOWETH HOW THE TAVERN IS THE PEOPLE'S PARLIAMENT

Old Mother Tonsard's screams brought a number of people from Blangy to know what was happening at the Grand-I-Vert, the distance from the village to the inn not being greater than that from the inn to the gate of Blangy. One of these inquiring visitors was old Niseron, La Pechina's grandfather, who was on his way, after ringing the second Angelus, to dig the vine-rows in his last little bit of ground.

Bent by toil, with pallid face and silvery hair, the old vinedresser, now the sole representative of civic virtue in the community, had been, during the Revolution, president of the Jacobin club at Ville-aux-Fayes, and a juror in the revolutionary tribunal of the district. Jean-Francois Niseron, carved out of the wood that the apostles were made of, was of the type of Saint Peter; whom painters and sculptors have united in representing with the square brow of the people, the thick, naturally curling hair of the laborer, the muscles of the man of toil, the complexion of a fisherman; with the large nose, the shrewd, half-mocking lips that scoff at fate, the neck and shoulders of the strong man who cuts his wood to cook his dinner while the doctrinaires of his opinions talk.

Such, at forty years of age on the breaking out of the Revolution, was this man, strong as iron, pure as gold. Advocate of the people, he believed in a republic through the very roll of that name, more formidable in sound perhaps than in reality. He believed in the republic of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in the brotherhood of man, in the exchange of noble sentiments, in the proclamation of virtue, in the choice of merit without intrigue,—in short, in all that the narrow limits of one arrondissement like Sparta made possible, and which the vast proportions of an empire make chimerical. He signed his beliefs with his blood,—his only son went to war; he did more, he signed them with the prosperity of his life,—last sacrifice of self. Nephew and sole heir of the curate of Blangy, the then all-powerful tribune might have enforced his rights and recovered the property left by the priest to his pretty servant-girl, Arsene; but he respected his uncle's wishes and accepted poverty, which came upon him as rapidly as the fall of his cherished republic came upon France.

Never a farthing's worth, never so much as the branch of a tree belonging to another passed into the hands of this notable republican, who would have made the

republic acceptable to the world if he and such as he could have guided it. He refused to buy the national domains; he denied the right of the Republic to confiscate property. In reply to all demands of the committee of public safety he asserted that the virtue of citizens would do for their sacred country what low political intriguers did for money. This patriot of antiquity publicly reproved Gaubertin's father for his secret treachery, his underhand bargaining, his malversations. He reprimanded the virtuous Mouchon, that representative of the people whose virtue was nothing more nor less than incapacity,—as it is with so many other legislators who, gorged with the greatest political resources that any nation ever gave, armed with the whole force of a people, are still unable to bring forth from them the grandeur which Richelieu wrung for France out of the weakness of a king. Consequently, citizen Niseron became a living reproach to the people about him. They endeavored to put him out of sight and mind with the reproachful remark, "Nothing satisfies that man."

The patriot peasant returned to his cot at Blangy and watched the destruction, one by one, of his illusions; he saw his republic come to an end at the heels of an emperor, while he himself fell into utter poverty, to which Rigou stealthily managed to reduce him. And why? Because Niseron had never been willing to accept anything from him. Reiterated refusals showed the ex-priest in what profound contempt the nephew of the curate held him; and now that icy scorn was revenged by the terrible threat as to his little granddaughter, about which the Abbe Brossette spoke to the countess.

The old man had composed in his own mind a history of the French republic, filled with the glorious features which gave immortality to that heroic period to the exclusion of all else. The infamous deeds, the massacres, the spoliations, his virtuous soul ignored; he admired, with a single mind, the devotedness of the people, the "Vengeur," the gifts to the nation, the uprising of the country to defend its frontier; and he still pursued his dream that he might sleep in peace.

The Revolution produced many poets like old Niseron, who sang their poems in the country solitudes, in the army, openly or secretly, by deeds buried beneath the whirlwind of that storm, just as the wounded left behind to die in the great wars of the empire cried out, "Long live the Emperor!" This sublimity of soul belongs especially to France. The Abbe Brossette respected the convictions of the old man, who became simply but deeply attached to the priest from hearing him say, "The true republic is in the Gospel." The stanch republican carried the cross, and wore the sexton's robe, half-red, half-black, and was grave and dignified in church,—supporting himself by the triple functions with which he was invested by

the abbe, who was able to give the fine old man, not, to be sure, enough to live on, but enough to keep him from dying of hunger.

Niseron, the Aristides of Blangy, spoke little, like all noble dupes who wrap themselves in the mantle of resignation; but he was never silent against evil, and the peasants feared him as thieves fear the police. He seldom came more than six times a year to the Grand-I-Vert, though he was always warmly welcomed there. The old man cursed the want of charity of the rich,—their selfishness disgusted him; and through this fiber of his mind he seemed to the peasants to belong to them; they were in the habit of saying, “Pere Niseron doesn’t like the rich; he’s one of us.”

The civic crown won by this noble life throughout the valley lay in these words: “That good old Niseron! there’s not a more honest man.” Often taken as umpire in certain kinds of disputes, he embodied the meaning of that archaic term,—the village elder. Always extremely clean, though threadbare, he wore breeches, coarse woollen stockings, hob-nailed shoes, the distinctively French coat with large buttons and the broad-brimmed felt hat to which all old peasants cling; but for daily wear he kept a blue jacket so patched and darned that it looked like a bit of tapestry. The pride of a man who feels he is free, and knows he is worthy of freedom, gave to his countenance and his whole bearing a *something* that was inexpressibly noble; you would have felt he wore a robe, not rags.

“Hey! what’s happening so unusual?” he said, “I heard the noise down here from the belfry.”

They told him of Vatel’s attack on the old woman, talking all at once after the fashion of country-people.

“If she didn’t cut the tree, Vatel was wrong; but if she did cut it, you have done two bad actions,” said Pere Niseron.

“Take some wine,” said Tonsard, offering a full glass to the old man.

“Shall we start?” said Vermichel to the sheriff’s officer.

“Yes,” replied Brunet, “we must do without Pere Fourchon and take the assistant at Conches. Go on before me; I have a paper to carry to the chateau. Rigou has gained his second suit, and I’ve got to deliver the verdict.”

So saying, Monsieur Brunet, all the livelier for a couple of glasses of brandy, mounted his gray mare after saying good-bye to Pere Niseron; for the whole valley were desirous in their hearts of the good man’s esteem.

No science, not even that of statistics, can explain the rapidity with which news flies in the country, nor how it spreads over those ignorant and untaught regions which are, in France, a standing reproach to the government and to capitalists. Contemporaneous history can show that a famous banker, after driving post-horses to death between Waterloo and Paris (everybody knows why—he gained what the Emperor had lost, a commission!) carried the fatal news only three hours in advance of rumor. So, not an hour after the encounter between old mother Tonsard and Vatel, a number of the customers of the Grand-I-Vert assembled there to hear the tale.

The first to come was Courtecuisse, in whom you would scarcely have recognized the once jovial forester, the rubicund do-nothing, whose wife made his morning coffee as we have before seen. Aged, and thin, and haggard, he presented to all eyes a lesson that no one learned. “He tried to climb higher than the ladder,” was what his neighbors said when others pitied him and blamed Rigou. “He wanted to be a bourgeois himself.”

In fact, Courtecuisse did intend to pass for a bourgeois in buying the Bachelerie, and he even boasted of it; though his wife went about the roads gathering up the horse-droppings. She and Courtecuisse got up before daylight, dug their garden, which was richly manured, and obtained several yearly crops from it, without being able to do more than pay the interest due to Rigou for the rest of the purchase-money. Their daughter, who was living at service in Auxerre, sent them her wages; but in spite of all their efforts, in spite of this help, the last day for the final payment was approaching, and not a penny in hand with which to meet it. Madame Courtecuisse, who in former times occasionally allowed herself a bottle of boiled wine or a bit of roast meat, now drank nothing but water. Courtecuisse was afraid to go to the Grand-I-Vert lest he should have to leave three sous behind him. Deprived of power, he had lost his privilege of free drinks, and he bitterly complained, like all other fools, of man’s ingratitude. In short, he found, according to the experience of all peasants bitten with the demon of proprietorship, that toil had increased and food decreased.

“Courtecuisse has done too much to the property,” the people said, secretly envying his position. “He ought to have waited till he had paid the money down and was master before he put up those fruit palings.”

With the help of his wife he had managed to manure and cultivate the three acres of land sold to him by Rigou, together with the garden adjoining the house, which was beginning to be productive; and he was in danger of being turned out of it all. Clothed in rags like Fourchon, poor Courtecuisse, who lately wore the boots and

gaiters of a huntsman, now thrust his feet into sabots and accused “the rich” of Les Aigues of having caused his destitution. These wearing anxieties had given to the fat little man and his once smiling and rosy face a gloomy and dazed expression, as though he were ill from the effects of poison or with some chronic malady.

“What’s the matter with you, Monsieur Courtecuisse; is your tongue tied?” asked Tonsard, as the man continued silent after he had told him about the battle which had just taken place.

“No, no!” cried Madame Tonsard; “he needn’t complain of the midwife who cut his string,—she made a good job of it.”

“It is enough to make a man dumb, thinking from morning till night of some way to escape Rigou,” said the premature old man, gloomily.

“Bah!” said old Mother Tonsard, “you’ve got a pretty daughter, seventeen years old. If she’s a good girl you can easily manage matters with that old jail bird—”

“We sent her to Auxerre two years ago to Madame Mariotte the elder, to keep her out of harm’s way; I’d rather die than—”

“What a fool you are!” said Tonsard, “look at my girls,—are they any the worse? He who dares to say they are not as virtuous as marble images will have to do with my gun.”

“It’ll be hard to have to come to that,” said Courtecuisse, shaking his head. “I’d rather earn the money by shooting one of those Arminacs.”

“Well, I call it better for a girl to save a father than to wrap up her virtue and let it mildew,” retorted the innkeeper.

Tonsard felt a sharp tap on his shoulder, delivered by Pere Niseron.

“That is not a right thing to say!” cried the old man. “A father is the guardian of the honor of his family. It is by behaving as you do that scorn and contempt are brought upon us; it is because of such conduct that the People are accused of being unfit for liberty. The People should set an example of civic virtue and honor to the rich. You all sell yourselves to Rigou for gold; and if you don’t sell him your daughters, at any rate you sell him your honor,—and it’s wrong.”

“Just see what a position Courtecuisse is in,” said Tonsard.

“See what a position I am in,” replied Pere Niseron; “but I sleep in peace; there are no thorns in my pillow.”

“Let him talk, Tonsard,” whispered his wife, “you know they’re just *his notions*, poor dear man.”

Bonnebault and Marie, Catherine and her brother came in at this moment in a state of exasperation, which had begun with Nicolas's failure, and was raised to the highest pitch by Michaud's advice to the countess about Bonnebault. As Nicolas entered the tavern he was uttering frightful threats against the Michaud family and Les Aigues.

"The harvest's coming; well, I vow I'll not go before I've lighted my pipe at their wheat-stacks," he cried, striking his fist on the table as he sat down.

"Mustn't yelp like that before people," said Godain, showing him Pere Niseron.

"If the old fellow tells, I'll wring his neck," said Catherine. "He's had his day, that old peddler of foolish reasons! They call him virtuous; it's his temperament that keeps him so, that's all."

Strange and noteworthy sight!—that of those lifted heads, that group of persons gathered in the reeking hovel, while old Mother Tonsard stood sentinel at the door as security for the secret words of the drinkers.

Of all those faces, that of Godain, Catherine's suitor, was perhaps the most alarming, though the least pronounced. Godain,—a miser without money,—the cruelest of misers, for he who seeks money surely takes precedence of him who hoards it, one turning his eagerness within himself, the other looking outside with terrible intentness,—Godain represented the type of the majority of peasant faces.

He was a journeyman, small in frame, and saved from the draft by not attaining the required military height; naturally lean and made more so by hard work and the enforced sobriety under which reluctant workers like Courtecuisse succumb. His face was no bigger than a man's fist, and was lighted by a pair of yellow eyes with greenish strips and brown spots, in which a thirst for the possession of property was mingled with a concupiscence which had no heat,—for desire, once at the boiling-point, had now stiffened like lava. His skin, brown as that of a mummy, was glued to his temples. His scanty beard bristled among his wrinkles like stubble in the furrows. Godain never perspired, he reabsorbed his substance. His hairy hands, formed like claws, nervous, never still, seemed to be made of old wood. Though scarcely twenty-seven years of age, white lines were beginning to show in his rusty black hair. He wore a blouse, through the breast opening of which could be seen a shirt of coarse linen, so black that he must have worn it a month and washed it himself in the Thune. His sabots were mended with old iron. The original stuff of his trousers was unrecognizable from the darns and the infinite number of patches. On his head was a horrible cap, evidently cast off and picked up in the doorway of some bourgeois house in Ville-aux-Fayes.

Clear-sighted enough to estimate the elements of good fortune that centred in Catherine Tonsard, his ambition was to succeed her father at the Grand-I-Vert. He made use of all his craftiness and all his actual powers to capture her; he promised her wealth, he also promised her the license her mother had enjoyed; besides this, he offered his prospective father-in-law an enormous rental, five hundred francs a year, for his inn, until he could buy him out, trusting to an agreement he had made with Monsieur Brunet to pay these costs by notes on stamped paper. By trade a journeyman tool-maker, this gnome worked for the wheelwrights when work was plentiful, but he also hired himself out for any extra labor which was well paid. Though he possessed, unknown to the whole neighborhood, eighteen hundred francs now in Gaubertin's hands, he lived like a beggar, slept in a barn, and gleaned at the harvests. He wore Gaubertin's receipt for his money sewn into the waist-belt of his trousers,—having it renewed every year with its own added interest and the amount of his savings.

"Hey! what do I care," cried Nicolas, replying to Godain's prudent advice not to talk before Niseron. "If I'm doomed to be a soldier I'd rather the sawdust of the basket sucked up my blood than have it dribbled out drop by drop in the battles. I'll deliver this country of at least one of those Arminacs that the devil has launched upon us."

And he related what he called Michaud's plot against him, which Marie and Bonnebault had overheard.

"Where do you expect France to find soldiers?" said the white-haired old man, rising and standing before Nicolas during the silence which followed the utterance of this threat.

"We serve our time and come home again," remarked Bonnebault, twirling his moustache.

Observing that all the worst characters of the neighborhood were collecting, Pere Niseron shook his head and left the tavern, after offering a farthing to Madame Tonsard in payment for his glass of wine. When the worthy man had gone down the steps a movement of relief and satisfaction passed through the assembled drinkers which would have told whoever watched them that each man in that company felt he was rid of the living image of his own conscience.

"Well, what do you say to all that, hey, Courtecuisse?" asked Vaudoyer, who had just come in, and to whom Tonsard had related Vatel's attempt.

Courtecuisse clacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and set his glass on the table.

"Vatel put himself in the wrong," he said. "If I were Mother Tonsard, I'd give myself a few wounds and go to bed and say I was ill, and have that Shopman and his keeper up before the assizes and get twenty crowns damages. Monsieur Sarcus would give them."

"In any case the Shopman would give them to stop the talk it would make," said Godain.

Vaudoyer, the former field-keeper, a man five feet six inches tall, with a face pitted with the small-pox and furrowed like a nut-cracker, kept silence with a hesitating air.

"Well, you old ninny, does that ruffle you?" asked Tonsard, attracted by the idea of damages. "If they had broken twenty crowns' worth of my mother's bones we could turn it into good account; we might make a fine fuss for three hundred francs; Monsieur Gourdon would go to Les Aigues and tell them that the mother had got a broken hip—"

"And break it, too," interrupted Madame Tonsard; "they do that in Paris."

"It would cost too much," remarked Godain.

"I have been too long among the people who rule us to believe that matters will go as you want them," said Vaudoyer at last, remembering his past official intercourse with the courts and the gendarmerie. "If it were at Soulanges, now, it might be done; Monsieur Soudry represents the government there, and he doesn't wish well to the Shopman; but if you attack the Shopman and Vatel they'll defend themselves viciously; they'll say, 'The woman was to blame; she had a tree, otherwise she would have let her bundle be examined on the highroad; she wouldn't have run away; if an accident happened to her it was through her own fault.' No, you can't trust to that plan."

"The Shopman didn't resist when I sued him," said Courtecuisse; "he paid me at once."

"I'll go to Soulanges, if you like," said Bonnebault, "and consult Monsieur Gourdon, the clerk of the court, and you shall know to-night if *there's money in it*."

"You are only making an excuse to be after that big goose of a girl, Socquard's daughter," said Marie Tonsard, giving Bonnebault a slap on the shoulder that made his lungs hum.

Just then a verse of an old Burgundian Christmas carol was heard:—

"One fine moment of his life
Was at the wedding feast;

He changed the water into wine,—
Madeira of the best."

Every one recognized the vinous voice of old Fourchon, to whom the verse must have been peculiarly agreeable; Mouche accompanied in his treble tones.

"Ha! they're full!" cried old Mother Tonsard to her daughter-in-law; "your father is as red as a grid-iron, and that chip o' the block as pink as vine-shoot."

"Your healths!" cried the old man, "and a fine lot of scoundrels you are! All hail!" he said to his granddaughter, whom he spied kissing Bonnebault, "hail, Marie, full of vice! Satan is with three; cursed art thou among women, etcetera. All hail, the company present! you are done for, every one of you! you may just say good-bye to your sheaves. I being news. I always told you the rich would crush us; well now, the Shopman is going to have the law of you! Ha! see what it is to struggle against those bourgeois fellows, who have made so many laws since they got into power that they've a law to enforce every trick they play—"

A violent hiccough gave a sudden turn to the ideas of the distinguished orator.

"If Vermichel were only here I'd blow in his gullet, and he'd get an idea of sherry wine. Hey! what a wine it is! If I wasn't a Burgundian I'd be a Spaniard! It's God's own wine! the pope says mass with it—Hey! I'm young again! Say, Courtecuisse! if your wife were only here we'd be young together. Don't tell me! Spanish wine is worth a dozen of boiled wine. Let's have a revolution if it's only to empty the cellars!"

"But what's your news, papa?" said Tonsard.

"There'll be no harvest for you; the Shopman has given orders to stop the gleaning."

"Stop the gleaning!" cried the whole tavern, with one voice, in which the shrill tones of the four women predominated.

"Yes," said Mouche, "he is going to issue an order, and Groison is to take it round, and post it up all over the canton. No one is to glean except those who have pauper certificates."

"And what's more," said Fourchon, "the folks from the other districts won't be allowed here at all."

"What's that?" cried Bonnebault, "do you mean to tell me that neither my grandmother nor I, nor your mother, Godain, can come here and glean? Here's

tomfoolery for you; a pretty show of authority! Why, the fellow is a devil let loose from hell,—that scoundrel of a mayor!”

“Shall you glean whether or no, Godain?” said Tonsard to the journeyman wheelwright, who was saying a few words to Catherine.

“I? I’ve no property; I’m a pauper,” he replied; “I shall ask for a certificate.”

“What did they give my father for his otter, bibi?” said Madame Tonsard to Mouche.

Though nearly at his last gasp from an over-taxed digestion and two bottles of wine, Mouche, sitting on Madame Tonsard’s lap, laid his head on his aunt’s neck and whispered slyly in her ear:—

“I don’t know, but he has got gold. If you’ll feed me high for a month, perhaps I can find out his hiding-place; he has one, I know that.”

“Father’s got gold!” whispered La Tonsard to her husband, whose voice was loudest in the uproar of the excited discussion, in which all present took part.

“Hush! here’s Groison,” cried the old sentinel.

Perfect silence reigned in the tavern. When Groison had got to a safe distance, Mother Tonsard made a sign, and the discussion began again on the question as to whether they should persist in gleaning, as before, without a certificate.

“You’ll have to give in,” said Pere Fourchon; “for the Shopman has gone to see the prefect and get troops to enforce the order. They’ll shoot you like dogs,—and that’s what we are!” cried the old man, trying to conquer the thickening of his speech produced by his potations of sherry.

This fresh announcement, absurd as it was, made all the drinkers thoughtful; they really believed the government capable of slaughtering them without pity.

“I remember just such troubles near Toulouse, when I was stationed there,” said Bonnebault. “We were marched out, and the peasants were cut and slashed and arrested. Everybody laughed to see them try to resist cavalry. Ten were sent to the galleys, and eleven put in prison; the whole thing was crushed. Hey! what? why, soldiers are soldiers, and you are nothing but civilian beggars; they’ve a right, they think, to sabre peasants, the devil take you!”

“Well, well,” said Tonsard, “what is there in all that to frighten you like kids? What can they get out of my mother and daughters? Put ‘em in prison? well, then they must feed them; and the Shopman can’t imprison the whole country. Besides,

prisoners are better fed at the king's expense than they are at their own; and they're kept warmer, too."

"You are a pack of fools!" roared Fourchon. "Better gnaw at the bourgeois than attack him in front; otherwise, you'll get your backs broke. If you like the galleys, so be it,—that's another thing! You don't work as hard there as you do in the fields, true enough; but you don't have your liberty."

"Perhaps it would be well," said Vaudoyer, who was among the more valiant in counsel, "if some of us risked our skins to deliver the neighborhood of that Languedoc fellow who has planted himself at the gate of the Avonne."

"Do Michaud's business for him?" said Nicolas; "I'm good for that."

"Things are not ripe for it," said old Fourchon. "We should risk too much, my children. The best way is to make ourselves look miserable and cry famine; then the Shopman and his wife will want to help us, and you'll get more out of them that way than you will by gleaning."

"You are all blind moles," shouted Tonsard, "let 'em pick a quarrel with their law and their troops, they can't put the whole country in irons, and we've plenty of friends at Ville-aux-Fayes and among the old lords who'll sustain us."

"That's true," said Courtecuisse; "none of the other land-owners complain, it is only the Shopman; Monsieur de Soulanges and Monsieur de Ronquerolles and others, they are satisfied. When I think that if that cuirassier had only had the courage to let himself be killed like the rest I should still be happy at the gate of the Avonne, and that it was he that turned my life topsy-turvy, it just puts me beside myself."

"They won't call out the troops for a Shopman who has set every one in the district against him," said Godain. "The fault's his own; he tried to ride over everybody here, and upset everything; and the government will just say to him, 'Hush up.'"

"The government never says anything else; it can't, poor government!" said Fourchon, seized with a sudden tenderness for the government. "Yes, I pity it, that good government; it is very unlucky,—it hasn't a penny, like us; but that's very stupid of a government that makes the money itself, very stupid! Ah! if I were the government—"

"But," cried Courtecuisse, "they tell me in Ville-aux-Fayes that Monsieur de Ronquerolles talked about our rights in the Assembly."

"That's in Monsieur Rigou's newspaper," said Vaudoyer, who in his capacity of ex-field-keeper knew how to read and write; "I read it—"

In spite of his vinous tenderness, old Fourchon, like many of the lower classes whose faculties are stimulated by drunkenness, was following, with an intelligent eye and a keen ear, this curious discussion which a variety of asides rendered still more curious. Suddenly, he stood up in the middle of the room.

“Listen to the old one, he’s drunk!” said Tonsard, “and when he is, he is twice as full of deviltry; he has his own and that of the wine—”

“Spanish wine, and that trebles it!” cried Fourchon, laughing like a satyr. “My sons, don’t butt your head straight at the thing,—you’re too weak; go at it sideways. Lay low, play dead; the little woman is scared. I tell you, the thing’ll come to an end before long; she’ll leave the place, and if she does the Shopman will follow her, for she’s his passion. That’s your plan. Only, to make ‘em go faster, my advice is to get rid of their counsellor, their support, our spy, our ape—”

“Who’s that?”

“The damned abbe, of course,” said Tonsard; “that hunter after sins, who thinks the host is food enough for us.”

“That’s true,” cried Vaudoyer; “we were happy enough till he came. We ought to get rid of that eater of the good God,—he’s the real enemy.”

“Finikin,” added Fourchon, using a nickname which the abbe owed to his prim and rather puny appearance, “might be led into temptation and fall into the power of some sly girl, for he fasts so much. Then if we could catch him in the act and drum him up with a good charivari, the bishop would be obliged to send him elsewhere. It would please old Rigou devilish well. Now if your daughter, Courtecuisse, would leave Auxerre—she’s a pretty girl, and if she’d take to piety, she might save us all. Hey! ran tan plan!—”

“Why don’t *you* do it?” said Godain to Catherine, in a low voice; “there’d be scuttles full of money to hush up the talk; and for the time being you’d be mistress here—”

“Shall we glean, or shall we not glean? that’s the point,” said Bonnebault. “I don’t care two straws for your abbe, not I; I belong to Conches, where we haven’t a black-coat to poke up our consciences.”

“Look here,” said Vaudoyer, “we had better go and ask Rigou, who knows the law, whether the Shopman can forbid gleaning, and he’ll tell us if we’ve got the right of it. If the Shopman has the law on his side, well, then we must do as the old one says,—see about taking things sideways.”

“Blood will be spilt,” said Nicolas, darkly, as he rose after drinking a whole bottle of wine, which Catherine drew for him in order to keep him silent. “If you’d only listen to me you’d down Michaud; but you are miserable weaklings,—nothing but poor trash!”

“I’m not,” said Bonnebault. “If you are all safe friends who’ll keep your tongues between your teeth, I’ll aim at the Shopman—Hey! how I’d like to put a plum through his bottle; wouldn’t it avenge me on those cursed officers?”

“Tut! tut!” cried Jean-Louis Tonsard, who was supposed to be, more or less, Gaubertin’s son, and who had just entered the tavern. This fellow, who was courting Rigou’s pretty servant-girl, had succeeded his nominal father as clipper of hedges and shrubberies and other Tonsardial occupations. Going about among the well-to-do houses, he talked with masters and servants and picked up ideas which made him the man of the world of the family, the shrewd head. We shall presently see that in making love to Rigou’s servant-girl, Jean-Louis deserved his reputation for shrewdness.

“Well, what have you to say, prophet?” said the innkeeper to his son.

“I say that you are playing into the hands of the rich folk,” replied Jean-Louis. “Frighten the Aigues people to maintain your rights if you choose; but if you drive them out of the place and make them sell the estate, you are doing just what the bourgeois of the valley want, and it’s against your own interest. If you help the bourgeois to divide the great estates among them, where’s the national domain to be bought for nothing at the next Revolution? Wait till then, and you’ll get your land without paying for it, as Rigou got his; whereas if you go and thrust this estate into the jaws of the rich folk of the valley, the rich folk will dribble it back to you impoverished and at twice the price they paid for it. You are working for their interests, I tell you; so does everybody who works for Rigou,—look at Courtecuisse.”

The policy contained in this allocution was too deep for the drunken heads of those present, who were all, except Courtecuisse, laying by their money to buy a slice of the Aigues cake. So they let Jean-Louis harangue, and continued, as in the Chamber of Deputies, their private confabs with one another.

“Yes, that’s so; you’ll be Rigou’s cats-paw!” cried Fourchon, who alone understood his grandson.

Just then Langlume, the miller of Les Aigues, passed the tavern. Madame Tonsard hailed him.

“Is it true,” she said, “that gleaning is to be forbidden?”

Langlume, a jovial white man, white with flour and dressed in grayish-white clothes, came up the steps and looked in. Instantly all the peasants became as sober as judges.

“Well, my children, I am forced to answer yes, and no. None but the poor are to glean; but the measures they are going to take will turn out to your advantage.”

“How so?” asked Godain.

“Why, they can prevent any but paupers from gleaning here,” said the miller, winking in true Norman fashion; “but that doesn’t prevent you from gleaning elsewhere,—unless all the mayors do as the Blangy mayor is doing.”

“Then it is true,” said Tonsard, in a threatening voice.

“As for me,” said Bonnebault, putting his foraging-cap over one ear and making his hazel stick whiz in the air, “I’m off to Conches to warn the friends.”

And the Lovelace of the valley departed, whistling the tune of the martial song,—

“You who know the hussars of the Guard,
Don’t you know the trombone of the regiment?”

“I say, Marie! he’s going a queer way to get to Conches, that friend of yours,” cried old Mother Tonsard to her granddaughter.

“He’s after Aglae!” said Marie, who made one bound to the door. “I’ll have to thrash her once for all, that baggage!” she cried, viciously.

“Come, Vaudoyer,” said Tonsard, “go and see Rigou, and then we shall know what to do; he’s our oracle, and his spittle doesn’t cost anything.”

“Another folly!” said Jean-Louis, in a low voice, “Rigou betrays everybody; Annette tells me so; she says he’s more dangerous when he listens to you than other folks are when they bluster.”

“I advise you to be cautious,” said Langlume. “The general has gone to the prefecture about your misdeeds, and Sibilet tells me he has sworn an oath to go to Paris and see the Chancellor of France and the King himself, and the whole pack of them if necessary, to get the better of his peasantry.”

“His peasantry!” shouted every one.

“Ha, ha! so we don’t belong to ourselves any longer?”

As Tonsard asked the question, Vaudoyer left the house to see Rigou.

Langlume, who had already gone out, turned on the door-step, and answered:—

“Crowd of do-nothings! are you so rich that you think you are your own masters?”

Though said with a laugh, the meaning contained in those words was understood by all present, as horses understand the cut of a whip.

“Ran tan plan! masters indeed!” shouted old Fourchon. “I say, my lad,” he added to Nicolas, “after your performance this morning it’s not my clarionet that you’ll get between your thumb and four fingers!”

“Don’t plague him, or he’ll make you throw up your wine by a punch in the stomach,” said Catherine, roughly.

CHAPTER XIII. A TYPE OF THE COUNTRY USURER

Strategically, Rigou's position at Blangy was that of a picket sentinel. He watched Les Aigues, and watched it well. The police have no spies comparable to those that serve hatred.

When the general first came to Les Aigues Rigou apparently formed some plans about him which Montcornet's marriage with a Troisville put an end to; he seemed to have wished to patronize the new land-owner. In fact his intentions were so patent that Gaubertin thought best to let him into the secrets of the coalition against Les Aigues. Before accepting any part in the affair, Rigou determined, as he said, to put the general between two stools.

One day, after the countess was fairly installed, a little wicker carriage painted green entered the grand courtyard of the chateau. The mayor, who was flanked by his mayoress, got out and came round to the portico on the garden side. As he did so Rigou saw Madame le comtesse at a window. She, however, devoted to the bishop and to religion and to the Abbe Brossette, sent word by Francois that "Madame was out."

This act of incivility, worthy of a woman born in Russia, turned the face of the ex-Benedictine yellow. If the countess had seen the man whom the abbe told her was "a soul in hell who plunged into iniquity as into a bath in his efforts to cool himself," if she had seen his face then she might have refrained from exciting the cold, deliberate hatred felt by the liberals against the royalists, increased as it was in country-places by the jealousies of neighborhood, where the recollections of wounded vanity are kept constantly alive.

A few details about this man and his morals will not only throw light on his share of the plot, called "the great affair" by his two associates, but it will have the merit of picturing an extremely curious type of man,—one of those rural existences which are peculiar to France, and which no writer has hitherto sought to depict. Nothing about this man is without significance,—neither his house, nor his manner of blowing the fire, nor his ways of eating; his habits, morals, and opinions will vividly illustrate the history of the valley. This renegade serves to show the utility of democracy; he is at once its theory and its practice, its alpha and its omega, in short, its "summum."

Perhaps you will remember certain masters of avarice pictured in former scenes of this comedy of human life: in the first place the provincial minister, Pere Grandet of Saumur, miserly as a tiger is cruel; next Gobseck, the usurer, that Jesuit of gold, delighting only in its power, and relishing the tears of the unfortunate because gold produced them; then Baron Nucingen, lifting base and fraudulent money transactions to the level of State policy. Then, too, you may remember that portrait of domestic parsimony, old Hochon of Issoudun, and that other miser in behalf of family interests, little la Baudraye of Sancerre. Well, human emotions—above all, those of avarice—take on so many and diverse shades in the diverse centres of social existence that there still remains upon the stage of our comedy another miser to be studied, namely, Rigou,—Rigou, the miser-egoist; full of tenderness for his own gratifications, cold and hard to others; the ecclesiastical miser; the monk still a monk so far as he can squeeze the juice of the fruit called good-living, and becoming secular only to put a paw upon the public money. In the first place, let us explain the continual pleasure that he took in sleeping under his own roof.

Blangy—by that we mean the sixty houses described by Blondet in his letter to Nathan—stands on a rise of land to the left of the Thune. As all the houses are surrounded by gardens, the village is a very pretty one. Some houses are built on the banks of the stream. At the upper end of the long rise stands the church, formerly flanked by a parsonage, its apse surrounded, as in many other villages, by a graveyard. The sacrilegious old Rigou had bought the parsonage, which was originally built by an excellent Catholic, Mademoiselle Choin, on land which she had bought for the purpose. A terraced garden, from which the eye looked down upon Blangy, Cerneux, and Soulanges standing between the two great seignorial parks, separated the late parsonage from the church. On its opposite side lay a meadow, bought by the last curate of the parish not long before his death, which the distrustful Rigou had since surrounded with a wall.

The ex-monk and mayor having refused to sell back the parsonage for its original purpose, the parish was obliged to buy a house belonging to a peasant, which adjoined the church. It was necessary to spend five thousand francs to repair and enlarge it and to enclose it in a little garden, one wall of which was that of the sacristy, so that communication between the parsonage and the church was still as close as it ever was.

These two houses, built on a line with the church, and seeming to belong to it by their gardens, faced a piece of open ground planted by trees, which might be called the square of Blangy,—all the more because the count had lately built, directly opposite to the new parsonage, a communal building intended for the mayor’s

office, the home of the field-keeper, and the quarters of that school of the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine, for which the Abbe Brossette had hitherto begged in vain. Thus, not only were the houses of the ex-monk and the young priest connected and yet separated by the church, but they were in a position to watch each other. Indeed, the whole village spied upon the abbe. The main street, which began at the Thune, crept tortuously up the hill to the church. Vineyards, the cottages of the peasantry, and a small grove crowned the heights.

Rigou's house, the handsomest in the village, was built of the large rubble-stone peculiar to Burgundy, imbedded in yellow mortar smoothed by the trowel, which produced an uneven surface, still further broken here and there by projecting points of the stone, which was mostly black. A band of cement, in which no stones were allowed to show, surrounded each window with a sort of frame, where time had made some slight, capricious cracks, such as appear on plastered ceilings. The outer blinds, of a clumsy pattern, were noticeable for their color, which was dragon-green. A few mosses grew among the slates of the roof. The type is that of Burgundian homesteads; the traveller will see thousands like it when visiting this part of France.

A double door opened upon a passage, half-way down which was the well of the staircase. By the entrance was the door of a large room with three windows looking out upon the square. The kitchen, built behind and beneath the staircase, was lighted from the courtyard, which was neatly paved with cobble-stones and entered by a porte-cochere. Such was the ground-floor. The first floor contained three bedrooms, above them a small attic chamber.

A wood-shed, a coach-house, and a stable adjoined the kitchen, and formed two sides of a square around the courtyard. Above these rather flimsy buildings were lofts containing hay and grain, a fruit-room, and one servant's-chamber.

A poultry-yard, the stable, and a pigsty faced the house across the courtyard.

The garden, about an acre in size and enclosed by walls, was a true priest's garden; that is, it was full of wall-fruit and fruit-trees, grape-arbors, gravel-paths, closely trimmed box-trees, and square vegetable patches, made rich with the manure from the stable.

Within, the large room, panelled in wainscot, was hung with old tapestry. The walnut furniture, brown with age and covered with stuffs embroidered in needle-work, was in keeping with the wainscot and with the ceiling, which was also panelled. The latter had three projecting beams, but these were painted, and between them the space was plastered. The mantel, also in walnut, surmounted by a

mirror in the most grotesque frame, had no other ornament than two brass eggs standing on a marble base, each of which opened in the middle; the upper half when turned over showed a socket for a candle. These candlesticks for two lights, festooned with chains (an invention of the reign of Louis XV.), were becoming rare. On a green and gold bracket fastened to the wall opposite to the window was a common but excellent clock. The curtains, which squeaked upon their rods, were at least fifty years old; their material, of cotton in a square pattern like that of mattresses, alternately pink and white, came from the Indies. A sideboard and dinner-table completed the equipment of the room, which was kept with extreme nicety.

At the corner of the fireplace was an immense sofa, Rigou's especial seat. In the angle, above a little "bonheur du jour," which served him as a desk, and hanging to a common screw, was a pair of bellows, the origin of Rigou's fortune.

From this succinct description, in style like that of an auction sale, it will be easy to imagine that the bedrooms of Monsieur and Madame Rigou were limited to mere necessaries; yet it would be a mistake to suppose that such parsimony affected the essential excellence of those necessaries. For instance, the most fastidious of women would have slept well in Rigou's bed, with fine linen sheets, excellent mattresses, made luxurious by a feather-bed (doubtless bought for some abbe by a pious female parishioner) and protected from draughts by thick curtains. All the rest of Rigou's belongings were made comfortable for his use, as we shall see.

In the first place, he had reduced his wife, who could neither read, write, nor cipher, to absolute obedience. After having ruled her deceased master, the poor creature was now the servant of her husband; she cooked and did the washing, with very little help from a pretty girl named Annette, who was nineteen years old and as much a slave to Rigou as her mistress, and whose wages were thirty francs a year.

Tall, thin, and withered, Madame Rigou, a woman with a yellow face red about the cheek-bones, her head always wrapped in a colored handkerchief, and wearing the same dress all the year round, did not leave the house for two hours in a month's time, but kept herself in exercise by doing the hard work of a devoted servant. The keenest observer could not have found a trace of the fine figure, the Rubens coloring, the splendid lines, the superb teeth, the virginal eyes which first drew the attention of the Abbe Niseron to the young girl. The birth of her only daughter, Madame Soudry, Jr., had blighted her complexion, decayed her teeth, dimmed her eyes, and even caused the dropping of their lashes. It almost seemed as if the finger of God had fallen upon the wife of the priest. Like all well-to-do country

house-wives, she liked to see her closets full of silk gowns, made and unmade, and jewels and laces which did her no good and only excited the sin of envy and a desire for her death in the minds of all the young women who served Rigou. She was one of those beings, half-woman, half-animal, who are born to live by instinct. This ex-beautiful Arsene was disinterested; and the bequest left to her by the late Abbe Niseron would be inexplicable were it not for the curious circumstance which prompted it, and which we give here for the edification of the vast tribe of expectant heirs.

Madame Niseron, the wife of the old republican sexton, always paid the greatest attention to her husband's uncle, the priest of Blangy; the forty or fifty thousand francs soon to be inherited from the old man of seventy would put the family of his only nephew into a condition of affluence which she impatiently awaited, for besides her only son (the father of La Pechina) Madame Niseron had a charming little daughter, lively and innocent,—one of those beings that seem perfected only because they are to die, which she did at the age of fourteen from "pale color," the popular name for chlorosis among the peasantry. The darling of the parsonage, where the child fluttered about her great uncle the abbe as she did in her home, bringing clouds and sunshine with her, she grew to love Mademoiselle Arsene, the pretty servant whom the old abbe engaged in 1789. Arsene was the niece of his housekeeper, whose place the girl took by request of the latter on her deathbed.

In 1791, just about the time that the Abbe Niseron offered his house as an asylum to Rigou and his brother Jean, the little girl played one of her mischievous but innocent tricks. She was playing with Arsene and some other children at a game which consists in hiding an object which the rest seek, and crying out, "You burn!" or "You freeze!" according as the searchers approach or leave the hidden article. Little Genevieve took it into her head to hide the bellows in Arsene's bed. The bellows could not be found, and the game came to an end; Genevieve was taken home by her mother and forgot to put the bellows back on the nail. Arsene and her aunt searched more than a week for them; then they stopped searching and managed to do without them, the old abbe blowing his fire with an air-cane made in the days when air-canes were the fashion,—a fashion which was no doubt introduced by some courtier of the reign of Henri III. At last, about a month before her death, the housekeeper, after a dinner at which the Abbe Mouchon, the Niseron family, and the curate of Soulanges were present, returned to her jeremiades about the loss of the bellows.

“Why! they’ve been these two weeks in Arsene’s bed!” cried the little one, with a peal of laughter. “Great lazy thing! if she had taken the trouble to make her bed she would have found them.”

As it was 1791 everybody laughed; but a dead silence succeeded the laugh.

“There is nothing laughable in that,” said the housekeeper; “since I have been ill Arsene sleeps in my room.”

In spite of this explanation the Abbe Niseron looked thunderbolts at Madame Niseron and his nephew, thinking they were plotting mischief against him. The housekeeper died. Rigou contrived to work up the abbe’s resentment to such a pitch that he made a will disinheriting Jean-Francois Niseron in favor of Arsene Pichard.

In 1823 Rigou, perhaps out of a sense of gratitude, still blew the fire with an air-cane, and left the bellows hanging to the screw.

Madame Niseron, idolizing her daughter, did not long survive her. Mother and child died in 1794. The old abbe, too, was dead, and citizen Rigou took charge of Arsene’s affairs by marrying her. A former convert in the monastery, attached to Rigou as a dog is to his master, became the groom, gardener, herdsman, valet, and steward of the sensual Harpagon. Arsene Rigou, the daughter, married in 1821 without dowry to the prosecuting-attorney, inheriting something of her mother’s rather vulgar beauty, together with the crafty mind of her father.

Now about sixty-seven years of age, Rigou had never been ill in his life, and nothing seemed able to lessen his aggressively good health. Tall, lean, with brown circles round his eyes, the lids of which were nearly black, any one who saw him of a morning, when as he dressed he exposed the wrinkled, red, and granulated skin of his neck, would have compared him to a condor,—all the more because his long nose, sharp at the tip, increased the likeness by its sanguineous color. His head, partly bald, would have frightened phrenologists by the shape of its skull, which was like an ass’s backbone, an indication of despotic will. His grayish eyes, half-covered by filmy, red-veined lids, were predestined to aid hypocrisy. Two scanty locks of hair of an undecided color overhung the large ears, which were long and without rim, a sure sign of cruelty, but cruelty of the moral nature only, unless where it means actual insanity. The mouth, very broad, with thin lips, indicated a sturdy eater and a determined drinker by the drop of its corners, which turned downward like two commas, from which drooled gravy when he ate and saliva when he talked. Heliogabalus must have been like this.

His dress, which never varied, consisted of a long blue surtout with a military collar, a black cravat, with waistcoat and trousers of black cloth. His shoes, very thick soled, had iron nails outside, and inside woollen linings knit by his wife in the winter evenings. Annette and her mistress also knit the master's stockings. Rigou's name was Gregoire.

Though this sketch gives some idea of the man's character, no one can imagine the point to which, in his private and unthwarted life, the ex-Benedictine had pushed the science of selfishness, good living, and sensuality. In the first place, he dined alone, waited upon by his wife and Annette, who themselves dined with Jean in the kitchen, while the master digested his meal and disposed of his wine as he read "the news."

In the country the special names of journals are never mentioned; they are all called by the general name of "the news."

Rigou's dinner, like his breakfast and supper, was always of choice delicacies, cooked with the art which distinguishes a priest's housekeeper from all other cooks. Madame Rigou made the butter herself twice a week. Cream was a concomitant of many sauces. The vegetables came at a jump, as it were, from their frames to the saucepan. Parisians, who are accustomed to eat the fruits of the earth after they have had a second ripening in the sun of a city, infected by the air of the streets, fermenting in close shops, and watered from time to time by the market-women to give them a deceitful freshness, have little idea of the exquisite flavors of really fresh produce, to which nature has lent fugitive but powerful charms when eaten as it were alive.

The butcher of Soulanges brought his best meat under fear of losing Rigou's custom. The poultry, raised on the premises, was of the finest quality.

This system of secret pampering embraced everything in which Rigou was personally concerned. Though the slippers of the knowing Thelemist were of stout leather they were lined with lamb's wool. Though his coat was of rough cloth it did not touch his skin, for his shirt, washed and ironed at home, was of the finest Frisian linen. His wife, Annette, and Jean drank the common wine of the country, the wine he reserved from his own vineyards; but in his private cellar, as well stocked as the cellars of Belgium, the finest vintages of Burgundy rubbed sides with those of Bordeaux, Champagne, Roussillon, not to speak of Spanish and Rhine wines, all bought ten years in advance of use and bottled by Brother Jean. The liqueurs in that cellar were those of the Isles, and came originally from Madame Amphoux. Rigou had laid in a supply to last him the rest of his days, at the national sale of a chateau in Burgundy.

The ex-monk ate and drank like Louis XIV. (one of the greatest consumers of food and drink ever known), which reveals the costs of a life that was more than voluptuous. Careful and very shrewd in managing his secret prodigalities, he disputed all purchases as only churchmen can dispute. Instead of taking infinite precautions against being cheated, the sly monk kept patterns and samples, had the agreements reduced to writing, and warned those who forwarded his wines or his provisions that if they fell short of the mark in any way he should refuse to accept their consignments.

Jean, who had charge of the fruit-room, was trained to keep fresh the finest fruits grown in the department; so that Rigou ate pears and apples and sometimes grapes, at Easter.

No prophet regarded as a God was ever more blindly obeyed than was Rigou in his own home. A mere motion of his black eyelashes could plunge his wife, Annette, and Jean into the deepest anxiety. He held his three slaves by the multiplicity of their many duties, which were like a chain in his hands. These poor creatures were under the perpetual yoke of some ordered duty, with an eye always on them; but they had come to take a sort of pleasure in accomplishing these tasks, and did not suffer under them. All three had the comfort and well-being of that one man before their minds as the sole end and object of all their thoughts.

Annette was (since 1795) the tenth pretty girl in Rigou's service, and he expected to go down to his grave with relays of such servants. Brought to him at sixteen, she would be sent away at nineteen. All these girls, carefully chosen at Auxerre, Clamecy, or in the Morvan, were enticed by the promise of future prosperity; but Madame Rigou persisted in living. So at the end of every three years some quarrel, usually brought about by the insolence of the servant to the poor mistress, caused their dismissal.

Annette, who was a picture of delicate beauty, ingenuous and sparkling, deserved to be a duchess. Rigou knew nothing of the love affair between her and Jean-Louis Tonsard, which proves that he had let himself be fooled by the girl,—the only one of his many servants whose ambition had taught her to flatter the lynx as the only way to blind him.

This uncrowned Louis XV. did not keep himself wholly to his pretty Annette. Being the mortgagee of lands bought by peasants who were unable to pay for them, he kept a harem in the valley, from Soulanges to five miles beyond Conches on the road to La Brie, without making other payments than "extension of time," for those fugitive pleasures which eat into the fortunes of so many old men.

This luxurious life, a life like that of Bouret, cost Rigou almost nothing. Thanks to his white slaves, he could cut and mow down and gather in his wood, hay, and grain. To the peasant manual labor is a small matter, especially if it serves to postpone the payment of interest due. And so Rigou, while requiring little premiums on each month's delay, squeezed a great deal of manual labor out of his debtors,—positive drudgery, to which they submitted thinking they gave little because nothing left their pockets. Rigou sometimes obtained in this way more than the principal of a debt.

Deep as a monk, silent as a Benedictine in the throes of writing history, sly as a priest, deceitful as all misers, carefully keeping within the limits of the law, the man might have been Tiberius in Rome, Richelieu under Louis XIII., or Fouche, had the ambition seized him to go to the Convention; but, instead of all that, Rigou had the common sense to remain a Lucullus without ostentation, in other words, a parsimonious voluptuary. To occupy his mind he indulged a hatred manufactured out of the whole cloth. He harassed the Comte de Montcornet. He worked the peasants like puppets by hidden wires, the handling of which amused him as though it were a game of chess where the pawns were alive, the knights caracoled, the bishops, like Fourchon, gabbled, the feudal castles shone in the sun, and the queen maliciously checkmated the king. Every day, when he got out of bed and saw from his window the proud towers of Les Aigues, the chimneys of the pavilions, and the noble gates, he said to himself: "They shall fall! I'll dry up the brooks, I'll chop down the woods." But he had two victims in mind, a chief one and a lesser one. Though he meditated the dismemberment of the chateau, the apostate also intended to make an end of the Abbe Brossette by pin-pricks.

To complete the portrait of the ex-priest it will suffice to add that he went to mass regretting that his wife still lived, and expressed the desire to be reconciled with the Church as soon as he became a widower. He bowed deferentially to the Abbe Brossette whenever he met him, and spoke to him courteously and without heat. As a general thing all men who belong to the Church, or who have come out of it, have the patience of insects; they owe this to the obligation they have been under, ecclesiastically, to preserve decorum,—a training which has been lacking for the last twenty years to the vast majority of the French nation, even those who think themselves well-bred. All the monks which the Revolution brought out of their monasteries and forced into business, public or private, showed in their coldness and reserve the great advantage which ecclesiastical discipline gives to the sons of the Church, even those who desert her.

Gaubertin had understood Rigou from the days when the Abbe Niseron made his will and the ex-monk married the heiress; he fathomed the craft hidden behind the jaundiced face of that accomplished hypocrite; and he made himself the man's fellow-worshipper before the altar of the Golden Calf. When the banking-house of Leclercq was first started he advised Rigou to put fifty thousand francs into it, guaranteeing their security himself. Rigou was all the more desirable as an investor, or sleeping partner, because he drew no interest but allowed his capital to accumulate. At the period of which we write it amounted to over a hundred thousand francs, although in 1816 he had taken out one hundred and eighty thousand for investment in the Public Funds, from which he derived an income of seventeen thousand francs. Lupin the notary had cognizance of at least one hundred thousand francs which Rigou had lent on small mortgages upon good estates. Ostensibly, Rigou derived about fourteen thousand francs a year from landed property actually owned by him. But as to his amassed hoard, it was represented by an "x" which no rule of equations could evolve, just as the devil alone knew the secret schemes he plotted with Langlume.

This dangerous usurer, who proposed to live a score of years longer, had established fixed rules to work upon. He lent nothing to a peasant who bought less than seven acres, and who could not pay one-half of the purchase-money down. Rigou well understood the defects of the law of dispossession when applied to small holdings, and the danger both to the Public Treasury and to land-owners of the minute parcelling out of the soil. How can you sue a peasant for the value of one row of vines when he owns only five? The bird's-eye view of self-interest is always twenty-five years ahead of the perceptions of a legislative body. What a lesson for a nation! Law will ever emanate from one brain, that of a man of genius, and not from the nine hundred legislative heads, which, great as they may be in themselves, are belittled and lost in a crowd. Rigou's law contains the essential element which has yet to be found and introduced into public law to put an end to the absurd spectacle of landed property reduced to halves, quarters, tenths, hundredths,—as in the district of Argenteuil, where there are thirty thousand plots of land.

Such operations as those Rigou was concerned in require extensive collusion, like those we have seen existing in this arrondissement. Lupin, the notary, whom Rigou employed to draw at least one third of the deeds annually entrusted to his notarial office, was devoted to him. This shark could thus include in the mortgage note (signed always in presence of the wife, when the borrower was married) the amount of the illegal interest. The peasant, delighted to feel he had to pay only his five per cent interest annually, always imagined he should be able to meet the

payment by working doubly hard or by improving the land and getting double returns upon it.

Hence the deceitful hopes excited by what imbecile economists call “small farming,”—a political blunder to which we owe such mistakes as sending French money to Germany to buy horses which our own land had ceased to breed; a blunder which before long will reduce the raising of cattle until meat will be unattainable not only by the people, but by the lower middle classes (see “Le Cure de Village.”)

So, not a little sweat bedewed men’s brows between Conches and Ville-aux-Fayes to Rigou’s profit, all being willing to give it; whereas the labor dearly paid for by the general, the only man who did spend money in the district, brought him curses and hatred, which were showered upon him simply because he was rich. How could such facts be understood unless we had previously taken that rapid glance at the Mediocracy. Fourchon was right; the middle classes now held the position of the former lords. The small land-owners, of whom Courtecuisse is a type, were tenants in mortmain of a Tiberius in the valley of the Avonne, just as, in Paris, traders without money are the peasantry of the banking system.

Soudry followed Rigou’s example from Soulanges to a distance of fifteen miles beyond Ville-aux-Fayes. These two usurers shared the district between them.

Gaubertin, whose rapacity was in a higher sphere, not only did not compete against that of his associates, but he prevented all other capital in Ville-aux-Fayes from being employed in the same fruitful manner. It is easy to imagine what immense influence this triumvirate—Rigou, Soudry, and Gaubertin—wielded in election periods over electors whose fortunes depended on their good-will.

Hate, intelligence, and means at command, such were the three sides of the terrible triangle which describes the general’s closest enemy, the spy ever watching Les Aigues,—a shark having constant dealings with sixty to eighty small land-owners, relations or connections of the peasantry, who feared him as such men always fear their creditor.

Rigou was in his way another Tonsard. The one throve on thefts from nature, the other waxed fat on legal plunder. Both liked to live well. It was the same nature in two species,—the one natural, the other whetted by his training in a cloister.

It was about four o’clock when Vaudoyer left the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert to consult the former mayor. Rigou was at dinner. Finding the front door locked, Vaudoyer looked above the window blinds and called out:—

“Monsieur Rigou, it is I,—Vaudoyer.”

Jean came round from the porte-cochere and said to Vaudoyer:—

“Come into the garden; Monsieur has company.”

The company was Sibilet, who, under pretext of discussing the verdict Brunet had just handed in, was talking to Rigou of quite other matters. He had found the usurer finishing his dessert. On a square dinner-table covered with a dazzling white cloth—for, regardless of his wife and Annette who did the washing, Rigou exacted clean table-linen every day—the steward noted strawberries, apricots, peaches, figs, and almonds, all the fruits of the season in profusion, served in white porcelain dishes on vine-leaves as daintily as at Les Aigues.

Seeing Sibilet, Rigou told him to run the bolts of the inside double-doors, which were added to the other doors as much to stifle sounds as to keep out the cold air, and asked him what pressing business brought him there in broad daylight when it was so much safer to confer together at night.

“The Shopman talks of going to Paris to see the Keeper of the Seals; he is capable of doing you a great deal of harm; he may ask for the dismissal of your son-in-law, and the removal of the judges at Ville-aux-Fayes, especially after reading the verdict just rendered in your favor. He has turned at bay; he is shrewd, and he has an adviser in that abbe, who is quite able to tilt with you and Gaubertin. Priests are powerful. Monseigneur the bishop thinks a great deal of the Abbe Brossette. Madame la comtesse talks of going herself to her cousin the prefect, the Comte de Casteran, about Nicolas. Michaud begins to see into our game.”

“You are frightened,” said Rigou, softly, casting a look on Sibilet which suspicion made less impassive than usual, and which was therefore terrific. “You are debating whether it would not be better on the whole to side with the Comte de Montcornet.”

“I don’t see where I am to get the four thousand francs I save honestly and invest every year, after you have cut up and sold Les Aigues,” said Sibilet, shortly. “Monsieur Gaubertin has made me many fine promises; but the crisis is coming on; there will be fighting, surely. Promising before victory and keeping a promise after it are two very different things.”

“I will talk to him about it,” replied Rigou, imperturbably. “Meantime this is what I should say to you if I were in his place: ‘For the last five years you have taken Monsieur Rigou four thousand francs a year, and that worthy man gives you seven and a half per cent; which makes your property in his hands at this moment over twenty-seven thousand francs, as you have not drawn the interest. But there exists a private signed agreement between you and Rigou, and the Shopman will dismiss

his steward whenever the Abbe Brossette lays that document before his eyes; the abbe will be able to do so after receiving an anonymous letter which will inform him of your double-dealing. You would therefore do better for yourself by keeping well with us instead of clamoring for your pay in advance,—all the more because Monsieur Rigou, who is not legally bound to give you seven and a half per cent and the interest on your interest, will make you in court a legal tender of your twenty thousand francs, and you will not be able to touch that money until your suit, prolonged by legal trickery, shall be decided by the court at Ville-aux-Fayes. But if you act wisely you will find that when Monsieur Rigou gets possession of your pavilion at Les Aigues, you will have very nearly thirty thousand francs in his hands and thirty thousand more which the said Rigou may entrust to you,—which will be all the more advantageous to you then because the peasantry will have flung them themselves upon the estate of Les Aigues, divided into small lots like the poverty of the world.' That's what Monsieur Gaubertin might say to you. As for me, I have nothing to say, for it is none of my business. Gaubertin and I have our own quarrel with that son of the people who is ashamed of his own father, and we follow our own course. If my friend Gaubertin feels the need of using you, I don't; I need no one, for everybody is at my command. As to the Keeper of the Seals, that functionary is often changed; whereas we—WE are always here, and can bide our time."

"Well, I've warned you," returned Sibilet, feeling like a donkey under a pack-saddle.

"Warned me of what?" said Rigou, artfully.

"Of what the Shopman is going to do," answered the steward, humbly. "He started for the Prefecture in a rage."

"Let him go! If the Montcornets and their kind didn't use wheels, what would become of the carriage-makers?"

"I shall bring you three thousand francs to-night," said Sibilet, "but you ought to make over some of your maturing mortgages to me,—say, one or two that would secure to me good lots of land."

"Well, there's that of Courtecuisse. I myself want to be easy on him because he is the best shot in the canton; but if I make over his mortgage to you, you will seem to be harassing him on the Shopman's account, and that will be killing two birds with one stone; when Courtecuisse finds himself a beggar, like Fourchon, he'll be capable of anything. Courtecuisse has ruined himself on the Bachelerie; he has cultivated all the land, and trained fruit on the walls. The little property is now

worth four thousand francs, and the count will gladly pay you that to get possession of the three acres that jut right into his land. If Courtecuisse were not such an idle hound he could have paid his interest with the game he might have killed there."

"Well, transfer the mortgage to me, and I'll make my butter out of it; the count shall buy the three acres, and I shall get the house and garden for nothing."

"What are you going to give me out of it?"

"Good heavens! you'd milk an ox!" exclaimed Sibilet,—"when I have just done you such a service, too. I have at last got the Shopman to enforce the laws about gleaning—"

"Have you, my dear fellow?" said Rigou, who a few days earlier had suggested this means of exasperating the peasantry to Sibilet, telling him to advise the general to try it. "Then we've got him; he's lost! But it isn't enough to hold him with one string; we must wind it round and round him like a roll of tobacco. Slip the bolts of the door, my lad; tell my wife to bring my coffee and the liqueurs, and tell Jean to harness up. I'm off to Soulanges; will see you to-night!—Ah! Vaudoyer, good afternoon," said the late mayor as his former field-keeper entered the room. "What's the news?"

Vaudoyer related the talk which had just taken place at the tavern, and asked Rigou's opinion as to the legality of the rules which the general thought of enforcing.

"He has the law with him," said Rigou, curtly. "We have a hard landlord; the Abbe Brossette is a malignant priest; he advises all such measures because you don't go to mass, you miserable unbelievers. I go; there's a God, I tell you. You peasants will have to bear everything, for the Shopman will always get the better of you—"

"We shall glean," said Vaudoyer, in that determined tone which characterizes Burgundians.

"Without a certificate of pauperism?" asked the usurer. "They say the Shopman has gone to the Prefecture to ask for troops so as to force you to keep the law."

"We shall glean as we have always gleaned," repeated Vaudoyer.

"Well, glean then! Monsieur Sarcus will decide whether you have the right to," said Rigou, seeming to promise the help of the justice of the peace.

"We shall glean, and we shall do it in force, or Burgundy won't be Burgundy any longer," said Vaudoyer. "If the gendarmes have sabres we have scythes, and we'll see what comes of it!"

At half-past four o'clock the great green gate of the former parsonage turned on its hinges, and the bay horse, led by Jean, was brought round to the front door. Madame Rigou and Annette came out on the steps and looked at the little wicker carriage, painted green, with a leathern hood, where their lord and master was comfortably seated on good cushions.

"Don't be late home, monsieur," said Annette, with a little pout.

The village folk, already informed of the measures the general proposed to take, were at their doors or standing in the main street as Rigou drove by, believing that he was going to Soulanges in their defence.

"Well, Madame Courtecuisse, so our mayor is on his way to protect us," remarked an old woman as she knitted; the question of depredating in the forest was of great interest to her, for her husband sold the stolen wood at Soulanges.

"Ah! the good man, his heart bleeds to see the way we are treated; he is as unhappy as we are about it," replied the poor woman, who trembled at the very name of her husband's creditor, and praised him out of fear.

"And he himself, too,—they've shamefully ill-used him! Good-day, Monsieur Rigou," said the old knitter to the usurer, who bowed to her and to his debtor's wife.

As Rigou crossed the Thune, fordable at all seasons, Tonsard came out of the tavern and met him on the high-road.

"Well, Pere Rigou," he said, "so the Shopman means to make dogs of us?"

"We'll see about that," said the usurer, whipping up his horse.

"He'll protect us," said Tonsard, turning to a group of women and children who were near him.

"Rigou is thinking as much about you as a cook thinks of the gudgeons he is frying in his pan," called out Fourchon.

"Take the clapper out of your throat when you are drunk," said Mouche, pulling his grandfather by the blouse, and tumbling him down on a bank under a poplar tree. "If that hound of a mayor heard you say that, he'd never buy any more of your tales."

The truth was that Rigou was hurrying to Soulanges in consequence of the warning given him by the steward of Les Aigues, which, in his heart, he regarded as threatening the secret coalition of the valley.

PART II

CHAPTER I. THE LEADING SOCIETY OF SOULANGES

About six kilometres (speaking legally) from Blangy, and at the same distance from Ville-aux-Fayes, on an elevation radiating from the long hillside at the foot of which flows the Avonne, stands the little town of Soulanges, surnamed La Jolie, with, perhaps, more right to that title than Mantes.

At the foot of the hill, the Thune broadens over a clay bottom to a space of some seventy acres, at the end of which the Soulanges mills, placed on numerous little islets, present as graceful a group of buildings as any landscape architect could devise. After watering the park of Soulanges, where it feeds various other streams and artificial lakes, the Thune falls into the Avonne through a fine broad channel.

The chateau of Soulanges, rebuilt under Louis XIV. from designs of Jules Mansart, and one of the finest in Burgundy, stands facing the town; so that Soulanges and its chateau mutually present to each other a charming and even elegant vista. The main road winds between the town and the pond, called by the country people, rather pompously, the lake of Soulanges.

The little town is one of those natural compositions which are extremely rare in France, where *prettiness* of its own kind is absolutely wanting. Here you would indeed find, as Blondet said in his letter, the charm of Switzerland, the prettiness of the environs of Neuf-chatel; while the bright vineyards which encircle Soulanges complete the resemblance,—leaving out, be it said, the Alps and the Jura. The streets, placed one above another on the slope of the hill, have but few houses; for each house stands in its own garden, which produces a mass of greenery rarely seen in a town. The roofs, red or blue, rising among flower-gardens, trees, and trellised terraces, present an harmonious variety of aspects.

The church, an old Middle-Age structure, built of stone, thanks to the munificence of the lords of Soulanges, who reserved for themselves first a chapel near the chancel, then a crypt as their necropolis, has, by way of portal, an immense arcade, like that of the church at Lonjumeau, and is bordered by flower-beds adorned with statues, and flanked on either side by columns with niches, which terminate in spires. This portal, often seen in churches of the same period when chance has saved them from the ravages of Calvinism, is surmounted by a triglyph, above which stands a statue of the Virgin holding the infant Jesus. The sides of the structure are externally of five arches, defined by stone ribs and lighted by windows with small panes. The apse rests on arched abutments that are worthy of a

cathedral. The clock-tower, placed in a transept of the cross, is square and surmounted by a belfry. The church can be seen from a great distance, for it stands at the top of the great square, at the lower end of which the high-road passes through the town.

This square, large for the size of the town, is surrounded by very original buildings, all of different epochs. Many, half-wood, half-brick, with their timbers faced with slate, date back to the Middle Ages. Others, of stone, with balconies, show the form of gable so dear to our ancestors, which belongs to the twelfth century. Several charm the eye with those old projecting beams, carved with grotesque faces, which form the roof of a sort of shed, and recall the days when the middle classes were exclusively commercial. The finest house among them was that of the chief magistrate of former days,—a house with a sculptured front on a line with the church, to which it forms a fine accompaniment. Sold as national property, it was bought in by the commune, which turned it into a town-hall and court-house, where Monsieur Sarcus had presided ever since the establishment of municipal judges.

This slight sketch will give an idea of the square of Soulanges, adorned in the centre with a charming fountain brought from Italy in 1520 by the Marechal de Soulanges, which was not unworthy of a great capital. An unfailing jet of water, coming from a spring higher up the hill, was shed by four Cupids in white marble, bearing shells in their arms and baskets of grapes upon their heads.

Literary travellers who may pass this way (should any such follow Emile Blondet) might imagine the spot to have inspired Moliere and the Spanish drama, which held its footing so long on French boards, showing that comedy is native to warm countries where so much of life is passed in the public streets. The square of Soulanges is all the more a reminder of that classic stage because the two principal streets, opening just on a line with the fountain, afford the exit and entrances so necessary for the dramatic masters and valets whose business it is either to meet or to avoid each other. At the corner of one of these streets, called the rue de la Fontaine, shone the notarial escutcheon of Maitre Lupin. The houses of Messieurs Sarcus, Guerbet the collector, Brunet, Gourdon, clerk of the court, and that of his brother the doctor, also that of old Monsieur Gendrin-Vatebled, the keeper of the forests and streams,—all these houses, kept with extreme neatness by their owners, who held firmly to the flattering surname of their native town, stand in the neighborhood of the square and form the aristocratic quarter of Soulanges.

The house of Madame Soudry—for the powerful individuality of Mademoiselle Laguerre’s former waiting-maid took the lead of her husband in the community—was modern, having been built by a rich wine-merchant, born in

Soulanges, who, after making his money in Paris, returned there in 1793 to buy wheat for his native town. He was slain as an “accapareur,” a monopolist, by the populace, instigated by a mason, the uncle of Godain, with whom he had had some quarrel about the building of his ambitious house. The settlement of his estate, sharply contested by collateral heirs, dragged slowly along until, in 1798, Soudry, who had then returned to Soulanges, was able to buy the wine-merchant’s palace for three thousand francs in specie. He then let it, in the first instance, to the government for the headquarters of the gendarmerie. In 1811 Mademoiselle Cochet, whom Soudry consulted about all his affairs, strongly objected to the renewal of the lease, making the house uninhabitable, she declared, with barracks. The town of Soulanges, assisted by the department, then erected a building for the gendarmerie in a street running at right angles from the town-hall. Thereupon Soudry cleaned up his house and restored its primitive lustre, not a little dimmed by the stabling of horses and the occupancy of gendarmes.

The house, only one story high, with projecting windows in the roof, has a view on three sides; one to the square, another to a lake, the third to a garden. The fourth side looks on a courtyard which separates the Soudrys from the adjoining house occupied by a grocer named Wattebled, a man of the SECOND-CLASS society of Soulanges, father of the beautiful Madame Plissoud, of whom we shall presently have occasion to speak.

All little towns have a renowned beauty, just as they have a Socquard and a Cafe de la Paix.

It will be apparent to every one that the frontage of the Soudry mansion on the lake must have a terraced garden confined by a stone balustrade which overlooks both the lake and the main road. A flight of steps leads down from the terrace to the road, and on it an orange-tree, a pomegranate, a myrtle, and other ornamental shrubs are placed, necessitating a greenhouse. On the side toward the square the house is entered from a portico raised several steps above the level of the street. According to the custom of small towns the gate of the courtyard, used only for the service of the house or for any unusual arrival, was seldom opened. Visitors, who mostly came on foot, entered by the portico.

The style of the Hotel Soudry is plain. The courses are indicated by projecting lines; the windows are framed by mouldings alternately broad and slender, like those of the Gabriel and Perronnet pavilion in the place Louis XV. These ornaments in so small a town give a certain solid and monumental air to the building which has become celebrated.

Opposite to this house, in another angle of the square stands the famous Cafe de la Paix, the characteristics of which, together with the fascinations of its Tivoli, will require, somewhat later, a less succinct description than that we have given of the Soudry mansion.

Rigou very seldom came to Soulanges; everybody was in the habit of going to him,—Lupin and Gaubertin, Soudry and Gendrin,—so much were they afraid of him. But we shall presently understand why any educated man, such as the ex-Benedictine, would have done as Rigou did, and kept away from the little town, after reading the following sketch of the personages who composed what was called in those parts “the leading society of Soulanges.”

Of its principal figures, the most original, as you have already suspected, was that of Madame Soudry, whose personality, to be duly rendered, needs a minute and careful brush.

Madame Soudry, respectfully imitating Mademoiselle Laguerre, began by allowing herself a “mere touch of rouge”; but this delicate tint had changed through force of habit to those vermilion patches picturesquely described by our ancestors as “carriage-wheels.” The wrinkles growing deeper and deeper, it occurred to the ex-lady’s-maid to fill them up with paint. Her forehead becoming unduly yellow, and the temples too shiny, she “laid on” a little white, and renewed the veins of her youth with a tracery of blue. All this color gave an exaggerated liveliness to her eyes which were already tricksy enough, so that the mask of her face would seem to a stranger even more than fantastic, though her friends and acquaintances, accustomed to this fictitious brilliancy, actually declared her handsome.

This ungainly creature, always decolletee, showed a bosom and a pair of shoulders that were whitened and polished by the same process employed upon her face; happily, for the sake of exhibiting her magnificent laces, she partially veiled the charms of these chemical products. She always wore the body of her dress stiffened with whalebone and made in a long point and garnished with knots of ribbon, even on the point! Her petticoats gave forth a creaking noise,—so much did the silk and the furbelows abound.

This attire, which deserves the name of apparel (a word that before long will be inexplicable), was, on the evening in question, of costly brocade,—for Madame Soudry possessed over a hundred dresses, each richer than the others, the remains of Mademoiselle Laguerre’s enormous and splendid wardrobe, made over to fit Madame Soudry in the last fashion of the year 1808. Her blond wig, frizzed and powdered, sustained a superb cap with knots of cherry satin ribbon matching those on her dress. If you will kindly imagine beneath this ultra-coquettish cap the face of

a monkey of extreme ugliness, on which a flat nose, fleshless as that of Death, is separated by a strong hairy line from a mouth filled with false teeth, whence issue sounds like the confused clacking of hunting-horns, you will have some difficulty in understanding why the leading society of Soulanges (all the town, in fact) thought this quasi-queen a beauty,—unless, indeed, you remember the succinct statement recently made “ex professo,” by one of the cleverest women of our time, on the art of making her sex beautiful by surrounding accessories.

As to accessories, in the first place, Madame Soudry was surrounded by the magnificent gifts accumulated by her late mistress, which the ex-Benedictine called “fructus belli.” Then she made the most of her ugliness by exaggerating it, and by assuming that indescribable air and manner which belongs only to Parisian women, the secret of which is known even to the most vulgar among them,—who are always more or less mimics. She laced tight, wore an enormous bustle, also diamond earrings, and her fingers were covered with rings. At the top of her corsage, between two mounds of flesh well plastered with pearl-white, shone a beetle made of topaz with a diamond head, the gift of dear mistress,—a jewel renowned throughout the department. Like the late dear mistress, she wore short sleeves and bare arms, and flirted an ivory fan, painted by Boucher with two little rose-diamonds in the handle.

When she went out Madame Soudry carried a parasol of the true eighteenth-century style; that is to say, a tall cane at the end of which opened a green sun-shade with a green fringe. When she walked about the terrace a stranger on the high-road, seeing her from afar, might have thought her one of Watteau’s dames.

In her salon, hung with red damask, with curtains of the same lined with silk, a fire on the hearth, a mantel-shelf adorned with bibelots of the good time of Louis XV., and bearing candelabra in the form of lilies upheld by Cupids—in this salon, filled with furniture in gilded wood of the “pied de biche” pattern, it is not impossible to understand why the people of Soulanges called the mistress of the house, “The beautiful Madame Soulanges.” The mansion had actually become the civic pride of this capital of a canton.

If the leading society of the little town believed in its queen, the queen as surely believed in herself. By a phenomenon not in the least rare, which the vanity of mothers and authors carries on at all moments under our very eyes in behalf of their literary works or their marriageable daughters, the late Mademoiselle Cochet was, at the end of seven years, so completely buried under Madame Soudry, the mayoress, that she not only did not remember her past, but she actually believed

herself a well-bred woman. She had studied the airs and graces, the dulcet tones, the gestures, the ways of her mistress, so long that when she found herself in the midst of an opulence of her own she was able to practice the natural insolence of it. She knew her eighteenth century, and the tales of its great lords and all their belongings, by heart. This back-stairs erudition gave to her conversation a flavor of "oeil-de-boeuf"; her soubrette gossip passed muster for courtly wit. Morally, the mayoress was, if you wish to say so, tinsel; but to savages paste diamonds are as good as real ones.

The woman found herself courted and worshipped by the society in which she lived, just as her mistress had been worshipped in former days. She gave weekly dinners, with coffee and liqueurs to those who came in after the dessert. No female head could have resisted the exhilarating force of such continual adulation. In winter the warm salon, always well-lighted with wax candles, was well-filled with the richest people of Soulanges, who paid for the good liqueurs and the fine wines which came from dear mistress's cellars, with flatteries to their hostess. These visitors and their wives had a life-interest, as it were, in this luxury; which was to them a saving of lights and fuel. Thus it came to pass that in a circuit of fifteen miles and even as far as Ville-aux-Fayes, every voice was ready to declare: "Madame Soudry does the honors admirably. She keeps open house; every one enjoys her salon; she knows how to carry herself and her fortune; she always says the witty thing, she makes you laugh. And what splendid silver! There is not another house like it short of Paris—"

The silver had been given to Mademoiselle Laguerre by Bouret. It was a magnificent service made by the famous Germain, and Madame Soudry had literally stolen it. At Mademoiselle Laguerre's death she merely took it into her own room, and the heirs, who knew nothing of the value of their inheritance, never claimed it.

For some time past the twelve or fifteen personages who composed the leading society of Soulanges spoke of Madame Soudry as the *intimate friend* of Mademoiselle Laguerre, recoiling at the term "waiting-woman," and making believe that she had sacrificed herself to the singer as her friend and companion.

Strange yet true! all these illusions became realities, and spread even to the actual regions of the heart; Madame Soudry reigned supreme, in a way, over her husband.

The gendarme, required to love a woman ten years older than himself who kept the management of her fortune in her own hands, behaved to her in the spirit of the ideas she had ended by adopting about her beauty. But sometimes, when persons envied him or talked to him of his happiness, he wished they were in his place, for,

to hide his peccadilloes, he was forced to take as many precautions as the husband of a young and adoring wife; and it was not until very recently that he had been able to introduce into the family a pretty servant-girl.

This portrait of the Queen of Soulanges may seem a little grotesque, but many specimens of the same kind could be found in the provinces at that period,—some more or less noble in blood, others belonging to the higher banking-circles, like the widow of a receiver-general in Touraine who still puts slices of veal upon her cheeks. This portrait, drawn from nature, would be incomplete without the diamonds in which it is set; without the surrounding courtiers, a sketch of whom is necessary, if only to explain how formidable such Lilliputians are, and who are the makers of public opinion in remote little towns. Let no one mistake me, however; there are many localities which, like Soulanges, are neither hamlets, villages, nor little towns, which have, nevertheless, the characteristics of all. The inhabitants are very different from those of the large and busy and vicious provincial cities. Country life influences the manners and morals of the smaller places, and this mixture of tints will be found to produce some truly original characters.

The most important personage after Madame Soudry was Lupin, the notary. Though forty-five springs had bloomed for Lupin, he was still fresh and rosy, thanks to the plumpness which fills out the skin of sedentary persons; and he still sang ballads. Also, he retained the elegant evening dress of society warblers. He looked almost Parisian in his carefully-varnished boots, his sulphur-yellow waistcoats, his tight-fitting coats, his handsome silk cravats, his fashionable trousers. His hair was curled by the barber of Soulanges (the gossip of the town), and he maintained the attitude of a man “a bonne fortunes” by his liaison with Madame Sarcus, wife of Sarcus the rich, who was to his life, without too close a comparison, what the campaigns of Italy were to Napoleon. He alone of the leading society of Soulanges went to Paris, where he was received by the Soulanges family. It was enough to hear him talk to imagine the supremacy he wielded in his capacity as dandy and judge of elegance. He passed judgment on all things by the use of three terms: “out of date,” “antiquated,” “superannuated.”[*] A man, a woman, or a piece of furniture might be “out of date”; next, by a greater degree of imperfection, “antiquated”; but as to the last term, it was the superlative of contempt. The first might be remedied, the second was hopeless, but the third,—oh, better far never to have left the void of nothingness! As to praise, a single word sufficed him, doubly and trebly uttered: “Charming!” was the positive of his admiration. “Charming, charming!” made you feel you were safe; but after “Charming, charming, charming!” the ladder might be discarded, for the heaven of perfection was attained.

[*] “Croute,” “crouton,” and “croute-au-pot,” untranslatable, and without equivalent in English. A “croute” is the slang term for a man behind the age.—Tr.

The tabellion,—he called himself “tabellion,” petty notary, and keeper of notes (making fun of his calling in order to seem above it),—the tabellion was on terms of spoken gallantry with Madame Soudry, who had a weakness for Lupin, though he was blond and wore spectacles. Hitherto the late Cochet had loved none but dark men, with moustachios and hairy hands, of the Alcides type. But she made an exception in favor of Lupin on account of his elegance, and, moreover, because she thought her glory at Soulanges was not complete without an adorer; but, to Soudry’s despair, the queen’s adorers never carried their adoration so far as to threaten his rights.

Lupin had married an heiress in wooden shoes and blue woollen stockings, the only daughter of a salt-dealer, who made his money during the Revolution,—a period when contraband salt-traders made enormous profits by reason of the reaction that set in against the gabelle. He prudently left his wife at home, where Bebelle, as he called her, was supported under his absence by a platonic passion for a handsome clerk who had no other means than his salary,—a young man named Bonnac, belonging to the second-class society, where he played the same role that his master, the notary, played in the first.

Madame Lupin, a woman without any education whatever, appeared on great occasions only, under the form of an enormous Burgundian barrel dressed in velvet and surmounted by a little head sunken in shoulders of a questionable color. No efforts could retain her waist-belt in its natural place. “Bebelle” candidly admitted that prudence forbade her wearing corsets. The imagination of a poet or, better still, that of an inventor, could not have found on Bebelle’s back the slightest trace of that seductive sinuosity which the vertebrae of all women who are women usually produce. Bebelle, round as a tortoise, belonged to the genus of invertebrate females. This alarming development of cellular tissue no doubt reassured Lupin on the subject of the platonic passion of his fat wife, whom he boldly called Bebelle without raising a laugh.

“Your wife, what is she?” said Sarcus the rich, one day, when unable to digest the fatal word “superannuated,” applied to a piece of furniture he had just bought at a bargain.

“My wife is not like yours,” replied Lupin; “she is not defined as yet.”

Beneath his rosy exterior the notary possessed a subtle mind, and he had the sense to say nothing about his property, which was fully as large as that of Rigou.

Monsieur Lupin's son, Amaury, was a great trouble to his father. An only son, and one of the Don Juans of the valley, he utterly refused to follow the paternal profession. He took advantage of his position as only son to bleed the strong-box cruelly, without, however, exhausting the patience of his father, who would say after every escapade, "Well, I was like that in my young days." Amaury never came to Madame Soudry's; he said she bored him; for, with a recollection of her early days, she attempted to "educate" him, as she called it, whereas he much preferred the pleasures and billiards of the Cafe de la Paix. He frequented the worst company of Soulanges, even down to Bonnebault. He continued sowing his wild oats, as Madame Soudry remarked, and replied to all his father's remonstrances with one perpetual request: "Send me back to Paris, for I am bored to death here."

Lupin ended, alas! like other gallants, by an attachment that was semi-conjugal. His known passion, in spite of his former liaison with Madame Sarcus, was for the wife of the under-sheriff of the municipal court,—Madame Euphemie Plissoud, daughter of Wattebled the grocer, who reigned in the second-class society as Madame Soudry did in the first. Monsieur Plissoud, a competitor of Brunet, belonged to the under-world of Soulanges on account of his wife's conduct, which it was said he authorized,—a report that drew upon him the contempt of the leading society.

If Lupin was the musician of the leading society, Monsieur Gourdon, the doctor, was its man of science. The town said of him, "We have here in our midst a scientific man of the first order." Madame Soudry (who believed she understood music because she had ushered in Piccini and Gluck and had dressed Mademoiselle Laguerre for the Opera) persuaded society, and even Lupin himself, that he might have made his fortune by his voice, and, in like manner, she was always regretting that the doctor did not publish his scientific ideas.

Monsieur Gourdon merely repeated the ideas of Cuvier and Buffon, which might not have enabled him to pose as a scientist before the Soulanges world; but besides this he was making a collection of shells, and he possessed an herbarium, and he knew how to stuff birds. He lived upon the glory of having bequeathed his cabinet of natural history to the town of Soulanges. After this was known he was considered throughout the department as a great naturalist and the successor of Buffon. Like a certain Genevese banker, whose pedantry, coldness, and puritan propriety he copied, without possessing either his money or his shrewdness, Monsieur Gourdon exhibited with great complacency the famous collection, consisting of a bear and a monkey (both of which had died on their way to Soulanges), all the rodents of the department, mice and field-mice and dormice,

rats, muskrats, and moles, etc.; all the interesting birds ever shot in Burgundy, and an Alpine eagle caught in the Jura. Gourdon also possessed a collection of lepidoptera,—a word which led society to hope for monstrosities, and to say, when it saw them, “Why, they are only butterflies!” Besides these things he had a fine array of fossil shells, mostly the collections of his friends which they bequeathed to him, and all the minerals of Burgundy and the Jura.

These treasures, laid out on shelves with glass doors (the drawers beneath containing the insects), occupied the whole of the first floor of the doctor’s house, and produced a certain effect through the oddity of the names on the tickets, the magic effect of the colors, and the gathering together of so many things which no one pays the slightest attention to when seen in nature, though much admired under glass. Society took a regular day to go and look at Monsieur Gourdon’s collection.

“I have,” he said to all inquirers, “five hundred ornithological objects, two hundred mammifers, five thousand insects, three thousand shells, and seven thousand specimens of minerals.”

“What patience you have had!” said the ladies.

“One must do something for one’s country,” replied the collector.

He drew an enormous profit from his carcasses by the mere repetition of the words, “I have bequeathed everything to the town by my will.” Visitors lauded his philanthropy; the authorities talked of devoting the second floor of the town hall to the “Gourdon Museum,” after the collector’s death.

“I rely upon the gratitude of my fellow-citizens to attach my name to the gift,” he replied; “for I dare not hope they would place a marble bust of me—”

“It would be the very least we could do for you,” they rejoined; “are you not the glory of our town?”

Thus the man actually came to consider himself one of the celebrities of Burgundy. The surest incomes are not from consols after all; those our vanity obtains for us have better security. This man of science was, to employ Lupin’s superlatives, happy! happy!! happy!!!

Gourdon, the clerk of the court, brother of the doctor, was a pitiful little creature, whose features all gathered about his nose, so that the nose seemed the point of departure for the forehead, the cheeks, and the mouth, all of which were connected with it just as the ravines of a mountain begin at the summit. This pinched little man was thought to be one of the greatest poets in Burgundy,—a Piron, it was the fashion to say. The dual merits of the two brothers gave rise to the remark: “We

have the brothers Gourdon at Soulanges—two very distinguished men; men who could hold their own in Paris."

Devoted to the game of cup-and-ball, the clerk of the court became possessed by another mania,—that of composing an ode in honor of an amusement which amounted to a passion in the eighteenth century. Manias among mediocrats often run in couples. Gourdon junior gave birth to his poem during the reign of Napoleon. That fact is sufficient to show the sound and healthy school of poesy to which he belonged; Luce de Lancival, Parny, Saint-Lambert, Rouche, Vigee, Andrieux, Berchoux were his heroes. Delille was his god, until the day when the leading society of Soulanges raised the question as to whether Gourdon were not superior to Delille; after which the clerk of the court always called his competitor "Monsieur l'Abbe Delille," with exaggerated politeness.

The poems manufactured between 1780 and 1814 were all of one pattern, and the one which Gourdon composed upon the Cup-and-Ball will give an idea of them. They required a certain knack or proficiency in the art. "The Chorister" is the Saturn of this abortive generation of jocular poems, all in four cantos or thereabouts, for it was generally admitted that six would wear the subject threadbare.

Gourdon's poem entitled "Ode to the Cup-and-Ball" obeyed the poetic rules which governed these works, rules that were invariable in their application. Each poem contained in the first canto a description of the "object sung," preceded (as in the case of Gourdon) by a species of invocation, of which the following is a model:—

I sing the good game that belongeth to all,
The game, be it known, of the Cup and the Ball;
Dear to little and great, to the fools and the wise;
Charming game! where the cure of all tedium lies;
When we toss up the ball on the point of a stick
Palamedus himself might have envied the trick;
O Muse of the Loves and the Laughs and the Games,
Come down and assist me, for, true to your aims,
I have ruled off this paper in syllable squares.
Come, help me—

After explaining the game and describing the handsomest cup-and-balls recorded in history, after relating what fabulous custom it had formerly brought to the Singe-Vert and to all dealers in toys and turned ivories, and finally, after proving that the game attained to the dignity of statics, Gourdon ended the first canto with

the following conclusion, which will remind the erudite reader of all the conclusions of the first cantos of all these poems:—

‘Tis thus that the arts and the sciences, too,
Find wisdom in things that seemed silly to you.

The second canto, invariably employed to depict the manner of using “the object,” explaining how to exhibit it in society and before women, and the benefit to be derived therefrom, will be readily conceived by the friends of this virtuous literature from the following quotation, which depicts the player going through his performance under the eyes of his chosen lady:—

Now look at the player who sits in your midst,
On that ivory ball how his sharp eye is fixt;
He waits and he watches with keenest attention,
Its least little movement in all its precision;
The ball its parabola thrice has gone round,
At the end of the string to which it is bound.
Up it goes! but the player his triumph has missed,
For the disc has come down on his maladroit wrist;
But little he cares for the sting of the ball,
A smile from his mistress consoles for it all.

It was this delineation, worthy of Virgil, which first raised a doubt as to Delille’s superiority over Gourdon. The word “disc,” contested by the opinionated Brunet, gave matter for discussions which lasted eleven months; in fact, until Gourdon the scientist, one evening when all present were on the point of getting seriously angry, annihilated the anti-discers by observing:—

“The moon, called a *disc* by poets, is undoubtedly a ball.”

“How do you know that?” retorted Brunet. “We have never seen but one side.”

The third canto told the regulation story,—in this instance, the famous anecdote of the cup-and-ball which all the world knows by heart, concerning a celebrated minister of Louis XVI. According to the sacred formula delivered by the “Debats” from 1810 to 1814, in praise of these glorious words, Gourdon’s ode “borrowed fresh charms from poesy to embellish the tale.”

The fourth canto summed up the whole, and concluded with these daring words,—not published, be it remarked, from 1810 to 1814; in fact, they did not see the light till 1824, after Napoleon’s death.

‘Twas thus that I sang in the time of alarms.
Oh, if kings would consent to bear no other arms,
And people enjoyed what was best for them all,
The sweet little game of the Cup and the Ball,
Our Burgundy then might be free of all fear,
And return to the good days of Saturn and Rhea.

These fine verses were published in a first and only edition from the press of Bournier, printer of Ville-aux-Fayes. One hundred subscribers, in the sum of three francs, guaranteed the dangerous precedent of immortality to the poem,—a liberality that was all the greater because these hundred persons had heard the poem from beginning to end a hundred times over.

Madame Soudry had lately suppressed the cup-and-ball, which usually lay on a pier-table in the salon and for the last seven years had given rise to endless quotations, for she finally discovered in the toy a rival to her own attractions.

As to the author, who boasted of future poems in his desk, it is enough to quote the terms in which he mentioned to the leading society of Soulanges a rival candidate for literary honors.

“Have you heard a curious piece of news?” he had said, two years earlier. “There is another poet in Burgundy! Yes,” he added, remarking the astonishment on all faces, “he comes from Macon. But you could never imagine the subjects he takes up,—a perfect jumble, absolutely unintelligible,—lakes, stars, waves, billows! not a single philosophical image, not even a didactic effort! he is ignorant of the very meaning of poetry. He calls the sky by its name. He says ‘moon,’ bluntly, instead of naming it ‘the planet of night.’ That’s what the desire to be thought original brings men to,” added Gourdon, mournfully. “Poor young man! A Burgundian, and sing such stuff as that!—the pity of it! If he had only consulted me, I would have pointed out to him the noblest of all themes, wine,—a poem to be called the Baccheide; for which, alas! I now feel myself too old.”

This great poet is still ignorant of his finest triumph (though he owes it to the fact of being a Burgundian), namely, that of living in the town of Soulanges, so rounded and perfected within itself that it knows nothing of the modern Pleiades, not even their names.

A hundred Gourdons made poetry under the Empire, and yet they tell us it was a period that neglected literature! Examine the “Journal de la Libraire” and you will find poems on the game of draughts, on backgammon, on tricks with cards, on geography, typography, comedy, etc.,—not to mention the vaunted masterpieces of

Delille on Piety, Imagination, Conversation; and those of Berchoux on Gastromania and Dansomania, etc. Who can foresee the chances and changes of taste, the caprices of fashion, the transformations of the human mind? The generations as they pass along sweep out of sight the last fragments of the idols they found on their path and set up other gods,—to be overthrown like the rest.

Sarcus, a handsome little man with a dapple-gray head, devoted himself in turn to Themis and to Flora,—in other words, to legislation and a greenhouse. For the last twelve years he had been meditating a book on the History of the Institution of Justices of the Peace, "whose political and judiciary role," he said, "had already passed through several phases, all derived from the Code of Brumaire, year IV.; and to-day that institution, so precious to the nation, had lost its power because the salaries were not in keeping with the importance of its functions, which ought to be performed by irremovable officials." Rated in the community as an able man, Sarcus was the accepted statesman of Madame Soudry's salon; you can readily imagine that he was the leading bore. They said he talked like a book. Gaubertin prophesied he would receive the cross of the Legion of honor, but not until the day when, as Leclercq's successor, he should take his seat on the benches of the Left Centre.

Guerbet, the collector, a man of parts, a heavy, fat, individual with a buttery face, a toupet on his bald spot, gold earrings, which were always in difficulty with his shirt-collar, had the hobby of pomology. Proud of possessing the finest fruit-garden in the arrondissement, he gathered his first crops a month later than those of Paris; his hot-beds supplied him with pine-apples, nectarines, and peas, out of season. He brought bunches of strawberries to Madame Soudry with pride when the fruit could be bought for ten sous a basket in Paris.

Soulanges possessed a pharmaceutist named Vermut, a chemist, who was more of a chemist than Sarcus was a statesman, or Lupin a singer, or Gourdon the elder a scientist, or his brother a poet. Nevertheless, the leading society of Soulanges did not take much notice of Vermut, and the second-class society took none at all. The instinct of the first may have led them to perceive the real superiority of this thinker, who said little but smiled at their absurdities so satirically that they first doubted his capacity and then whispered tales against it; as for the other class they took no notice of him one way or the other.

Vermut was the butt of Madame Soudry's salon. No society is complete without a victim,—without an object to pity, ridicule, despise, and protect. Vermut, full of his scientific problems, often came with his cravat untied, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and his little green surtout spotted.

The little man, gifted with the patience of a chemist, could not enjoy (that is the term employed in the provinces to express the abolition of domestic rule) Madame Vermut,—a charming woman, a lively woman, capital company (for she could lose forty sous at cards and say nothing), a woman who railed at her husband, annoyed him with epigrams, and declared him to be an imbecile unable to distil anything but dulness. Madame Vermut was one of those women who in the society of a small town are the life and soul of amusement and who set things going. She supplied the salt of her little world, kitchen-salt, it is true; her jokes were somewhat broad, but society forgave them; though she was capable of saying to the cure Taupin, a man of seventy years of age, with white hair, “Hold your tongue, my lad.”

The miller of Soulanges, possessing an income of fifty thousand francs, had an only daughter whom Lupin desired for his son Amaury, since he had lost the hope of marrying him to Gaubertin’s daughter. This miller, a Sarcus-Taupin, was the Nucingen of the little town. He was supposed to be thrice a millionaire; but he never transacted business with others, and thought only of grinding his wheat and keeping a monopoly of it; his most noticeable point was a total absence of politeness and good manners.

The elder Guerbet, brother of the post-master at Conches, possessed an income of ten thousand francs, besides his salary as collector. The Gourdons were rich; the doctor had married the only daughter of old Monsieur Gendrin-Vatebled, keeper of the forests and streams, whom the family were now *expecting to die*, while the poet had married the niece and sole heiress of the Abbe Taupin, the curate of Soulanges, a stout priest who lived in his cure like a rat in his cheese.

This clever ecclesiastic, devoted to the leading society, kind and obliging to the second, apostolic to the poor and unfortunate, made himself beloved by the whole town. He was cousin of the miller and cousin of the Sarcuses, and belonged therefore to the neighborhood and to its mediocracy. He always dined out and saved expenses; he went to weddings but came away before the ball; he paid the costs of public worship, saying, “It is my business.” And the parish let him do it, with the remark, “We have an excellent priest.” The bishop, who knew the Soulanges people and was not at all misled as to the true value of the abbe, was glad enough to keep in such a town a man who made religion acceptable, and who knew how to fill his church and preach to sleepy heads.

It is unnecessary to remark that not only each of these worthy burghers possessed some one of the special qualifications which are necessary to existence in the provinces, but also that each cultivated his field in the domain of vanity without a rival. Pere Guerbet understood finance, Soudry might have been minister of war; if

Cuvier had passed that way incognito, the leading society of Soulanges would have proved to him that he knew nothing in comparison with Monsieur Gourdon the doctor. “Adolphe Nourrit with his thread of a voice,” remarked the notary with patronizing indulgence, “was scarcely worthy to accompany the nightingale of Soulanges.” As to the author of the “Cup-and-Ball” (which was then being printed at Bournier’s), society was satisfied that a poet of his force could not be met with in Paris, for Delille was now dead.

This provincial bourgeoisie, so comfortably satisfied with itself, took the lead through the various superiorities of its members. Therefore the imagination of those who ever resided, even for a short time, in a little town of this kind can conceive the air of profound satisfaction upon the faces of these people, who believed themselves the solar plexus of France, all of them armed with incredible dexterity and shrewdness to do mischief,—all, in their wisdom, declaring that the hero of Essling was a coward, Madame de Montcornet a manoeuvring Parisian, and the Abbe Brossette an ambitious little priest.

If Rigou, Soudry, and Gaubertin had lived at Ville-aux-Fayes, they would have quarrelled; their various pretensions would have clashed; but fate ordained that the Lucullus of Blangy felt too strongly the need of solitude, in which to wallow at his ease in usury and sensuality, to live anywhere but at Blangy; that Madame Soudry had sense enough to see that she could reign nowhere else except at Soulanges; and that Ville-aux-Fayes was Gaubertin’s place of business. Those who enjoy studying social nature will admit that General Montcornet was pursued by special ill-luck in this accidental separation of his dangerous enemies, who thus accomplished the evolutions of their individual power and vanity at such distances from each other that neither star interfered with the orbit of the other,—a fact which doubled and trebled their powers of mischief.

Nevertheless, though all these worthy bourgeois, proud of their accomplishments, considered their society as far superior in attractions to that of Ville-aux-Fayes, and repeated with comic pomposity the local dictum, “Soulanges is a town of society and social pleasures,” it must not be supposed that Ville-aux-Fayes accepted this supremacy. The Gaubertin salon ridiculed (“in petto”) the salon Soudry. By the manner in which Gaubertin remarked, “We are a financial community, engaged in actual business; we have the folly to fatigue ourselves in making fortunes,” it was easy to perceive a latent antagonism between the earth and the moon. The moon believed herself useful to the earth, and the earth governed the moon. Earth and moon, however, lived in the closest intimacy. At the carnival the leading society of Soulanges went in a body to four balls given by Gaubertin, Gendrin, Leclercq, and

Soudry, junior. Every Sunday the latter, his wife, Monsieur, Madame, and Mademoiselle Elise Gaubertin dined with the Soudrys at Soulanges. When the sub-prefect was invited, and when the postmaster of Conches arrived to take pot-luck, Soulanges enjoyed the sight of four official equipages drawn up at the door of the Soudry mansion.

CHAPTER II. THE CONSPIRATORS IN THE QUEEN'S SALON

Reaching Soulanges about half-past five o'clock, Rigou was sure of finding the usual party assembled at the Soudrys'. There, as everywhere else in town, the dinner-hour was three o'clock, according to the custom of the last century. From five to nine the notables of Soulanges met in Madame Soudry's salon to exchange the news, make their political speeches, comment upon the private lives of every one in the valley, and talk about Les Aigues, which latter topic kept the conversation going for at least an hour every day. It was everybody's business to learn at least something of what was going on, and also to pay their court to the mistress of the house.

After this preliminary talk they played at boston, the only game the queen understood. When the fat old Guerbet had mimicked Madame Isaure, Gaubertin's wife, laughed at her languishing airs, imitated her thin voice, her pinched mouth, and her juvenile ways; when the Abbe Taupin had related one of the tales of his repertory; when Lupin had told of some event at Ville-aux-Fayes, and Madame Soudry had been deluged with compliments ad nauseum, the company would say: "We have had a charming game of boston."

Too self-indulgent to be at the trouble of driving over to the Soudrys' merely to hear the vapid talk of its visitors and to see a Parisian monkey in the guise of an old woman, Rigou, far superior in intelligence and education to this petty society, never made his appearance unless business brought him over to meet the notary. He excused himself from visiting on the ground of his occupations, his habits, and his health, which latter did not allow him, he said, to return at night along a road which led by the foggy banks of the Thune.

The tall, stiff usurer always had an imposing effect upon Madame Soudry's company, who instinctively recognized in his nature the cruelty of the tiger with steel claws, the craft of a savage, the wisdom of one born in a cloister and ripened by the sun of gold,—a man to whom Gaubertin had never yet been willing to fully commit himself.

The moment the little green carriole and the bay horse passed the Cafe de la Paix, Urbain, Soudry's man-servant, who was seated on a bench under the dining-room windows, and was gossipping with the tavern-keeper, shades his eyes with his hand to see who was coming.

“It’s Pere Rigou,” he said. “I must go round and open the door. Take his horse, Socquard.” And Urbain, a former trooper, who could not get into the gendarmerie and had therefore taken service with Soudry, went round the house to open the gates of the courtyard.

Socquard, a famous personage throughout the valley, was treated, as you see, with very little ceremony by the valet. But so it is with many illustrious people who are so kind as to walk and to sneeze and to sleep and to eat precisely like common mortals.

Socquard, born a Hercules, could carry a weight of eleven hundred pounds; a blow of his fist applied on a man’s back would break the vertebral column in two; he could bend an iron bar, or hold back a carriage drawn by one horse. A Milo of Crotona in the valley, his fame had spread throughout the department, where all sorts of foolish stories were current about him, as about all celebrities. It was told how he had once carried a poor woman and her donkey and her basket on his back to market; how he had been known to eat a whole ox and drink the fourth of a hogshead of wine in one day, etc. Gentle as a marriageable girl, Socquard, who was a stout, short man, with a placid face, broad shoulders, and a deep chest, where his lungs played like the bellows of a forge, possessed a flute-like voice, the limpid tones of which surprised all those who heard them for the first time.

Like Tonsard, whose renown released him from the necessity of giving proofs of his ferocity, in fact, like all other men who are backed by public opinion of one kind or another, Socquard never displayed his extraordinary muscular force unless asked to do so by friends. He now took the horse as the usurer drew up at the steps of the portico.

“Are you all well at home, Monsieur Rigou?” said the illustrious innkeeper.

“Pretty well, my good friend,” replied Rigou. “Do Plissoud and Bonnebault and Viollet and Amaury still continue good customers?”

This question, uttered in a tone of good-natured interest, was by no means one of those empty speeches which superiors are apt to bestow upon inferiors. In his leisure moments Rigou thought over the smallest details of “the affair,” and Fourchon had already warned him that there was something suspicious in the intimacy between Plissoud, Bonnebault, and the brigadier, Viollet.

Bonnebault, in payment of a few francs lost at cards, might very likely tell the secrets he heard at Tonsard’s to Viollet; or he might let them out over his punch without realizing the importance of such gossip. But as the information of the old otter man might be instigated by thirst, Rigou paid no attention except so far as it

concerned Plissoud, whose situation was likely to inspire him with a desire to counteract the coalition against Les Aigues, if only to get his paws greased by one or the other of the two parties.

Plissoud combined with his duties of under-sheriff other occupations which were poorly remunerated, that of agent of insurance (a new form of enterprise just beginning to show itself in France), agent, also, of a society providing against the chances of recruitment. His insufficient pay and a love of billiards and boiled wine made his future doubtful. Like Fourchon, he cultivated the art of doing nothing, and expected his fortune through some lucky but problematic chance. He hated the leading society, but he had measured its power. He alone knew the middle-class coalition organized by Gaubertin to its depths; and he continued to sneer at the rich men of Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes, as if he alone represented the opposition. Without money and not respected, he did not seem a person to be feared professionally, and so Brunet, glad to have a despised competitor, protected him and helped him along, to prevent him selling his business to some eager young man, like Bonnac for instance, who might force him, Brunet, to divide the patronage of the canton between them.

“Thanks to those fellows, we keep the ball a-rolling,” said Socquard. “But folks are trying to imitate my boiled wine.”

“Sue them,” said Rigou, sententiously.

“That would lead too far,” replied the innkeeper.

“Do your clients get on well together?”

“Tolerably, yes; sometimes they’ll have a row, but that’s only natural for players.”

All heads were at the window of the Soudry salon which looked to the square. Recognizing the father of his daughter-in-law, Soudry came to the portico to receive him.

“Well, comrade,” said the mayor of Soulanges, “is Annette ill, that you give us your company of an evening?”

Through an old habit acquired in the gendarmerie Soudry always went direct to the point.

“No,—There’s trouble brewing,” replied Rigou, touching his right fore-finger to the hand which Soudry held out to him. “I came to talk about it, for it concerns our children in a way—”

Soudry, a handsome man dressed in blue, as though he were still a gendarme, with a black collar, and spurs at his heels, took Rigou by the arm and led him up to his

imposing better-half. The glass door to the terrace was open, and the guests were walking about enjoying the summer evening, which brought out the full beauty of the glorious landscape which we have already described.

“It is a long time since we have seen you, my dear Rigou,” said Madame Soudry, taking the arm of the ex-Benedictine and leading him out upon the terrace.

“My digestion is so troublesome!” he replied; “see! my color is almost as high as yours.”

Rigou’s appearance on the terrace was the sign for an explosion of jovial greetings on the part of the assembled company.

“And how may the lord of Blangy be?” said little Sarcus, justice of the peace.

“Lord!” replied Rigou, bitterly, “I am not even cock of my own village now.”

“The hens don’t say so, scamp!” exclaimed Madame Soudry, tapping her fan on his arm.

“All well, my dear master?” said the notary, bowing to his chief client.

“Pretty well,” replied Rigou, again putting his fore-finger into his interlocutor’s hand.

This gesture, by which Rigou kept down the process of hand-shaking to the coldest and stiffest of demonstrations would have revealed the whole man to any observer who did not already know him.

“Let us find a corner where we can talk quietly,” said the ex-monk, looking at Lupin and at Madame Soudry.

“Let us return to the salon,” replied the queen.

“What has the Shopman done now?” asked Soudry, sitting down beside his wife and putting his arm about her waist.

Madame Soudry, like other old women, forgave a great deal in return for such public marks of tenderness.

“Why,” said Rigou, in a low voice, to set an example of caution, “he has gone to the Prefecture to demand the enforcement of the penalties; he wants the help of the authorities.”

“Then he’s lost,” said Lupin, rubbing his hands; “the peasants will fight.”

“Fight!” cried Soudry, “that depends. If the prefect and the general, who are friends, send a squadron of cavalry the peasants can’t fight. They might at a pinch get the better of the gendarmes, but as for resisting a charge of cavalry!—”

“Sibilet heard him say something much more dangerous than that,” said Rigou; “and that’s what brings me here.”

“Oh, my poor Sophie!” cried Madame Soudry, sentimentally, alluding to her *friend*, Mademoiselle Laguerre, “into what hands Les Aigues has fallen! This is what we have gained by the Revolution!—a parcel of swaggering epaulets! We might have foreseen that whenever the bottle was turned upside down the dregs would spoil the wine!”

“He means to go to Paris and cabal with the Keeper of the Seals and others to get the whole judiciary changed down here,” said Rigou.

“Ha!” cried Lupin, “then he sees his danger.”

“If they appoint my son-in-law attorney-general we can’t help ourselves; the general will get him replaced by some Parisian devoted to his interests,” continued Rigou. “If he gets a place in Paris for Gendrin and makes Guerbet chief-justice of the court at Auxerre, he’ll knock down our skittles! The gendarmerie is on his side now, and if he gets the courts as well, and keeps such advisers as the abbe and Michaud we sha’n’t dance at the wedding; he’ll play us some scurvy trick or other.”

“How is it that in all these five years you have never managed to get rid of that abbe?” said Lupin.

“You don’t know him; he’s as suspicious as a blackbird,” replied Rigou. “He is not a man at all, that priest; he doesn’t care for women; I can’t find out that he has any passion; there’s no point at which one can attack him. The general lays himself open by his temper. A man with a vice is the servant of his enemies if they know how to pull its string. There are no strong men but those who lead their vices instead of being led by them. The peasants are all right; their hatred against the abbe keeps up; but we can do nothing as yet. He’s like Michaud, in his way; such men are too good for this world,—God ought to call them to himself.”

“It would be a good plan to find some pretty servant-girl to scrub his staircase,” remarked Madame Soudry. The words caused Rigou to give the little jump with which crafty natures recognize the craft of others.

“The Shopman has another vice,” he said; “he loves his wife; we might get hold of him that way.”

“We ought to find out how far she really influences him,” said Madame Soudry.

“There’s the rub!” said Lupin.

“As for you, Lupin,” said Rigou, in a tone of authority, “be off to the Prefecture and see the beautiful Madame Sarcus at once! You must get her to tell you all the Shopman says and does at the Prefecture.”

“Then I shall have to stay all night,” replied Lupin.

“So much the better for Sarcus the rich; he’ll be the gainer,” said Rigou. “She is not yet out of date, Madame Sarcus—”

“Oh! Monsieur Rigou,” said Madame Soudry, in a mincing tone, “are women ever out of date?”

“You may be right about Madame Sarcus; she doesn’t paint before the glass,” retorted Rigou, who was always disgusted by the exhibition of the Cochet’s ancient charms.

Madame Soudry, who thought she used only a “suspicion” of rouge, did not perceive the sarcasm and hastened to say:—

“Is it possible that women paint?”

“Now, Lupin,” said Rigou, without replying to this naivete, “go over to Gaubertin’s to-morrow morning. Tell him that my fellow-mayor and I” (striking Soudry on the thigh) “will break bread with him at breakfast somewhere about midday. Tell him everything, so that we may all have thought it over before we meet, for now’s the time to make an end of that damned Shopman. As I drove over here I came to the conclusion it would be best to get up a quarrel between the courts and him, so that the Keeper of the Seals would be wary of making the changes he may ask in their members.”

“Bravo for the son of the Church!” cried Lupin, slapping Rigou on the shoulder.

Madame Soudry was here struck by an idea which could come only to a former waiting-maid of an Opera divinity.

“If,” she said, “one could only get the Shopman to the fete at Soulanges, and throw some fine girl in his way who would turn his head, we could easily set his wife against him by letting her know that the son of an upholsterer has gone back to the style of his early loves.”

“Ah, my beauty!” said Soudry, “you have more sense in your head than the Prefecture of police in Paris.”

“That’s an idea which proves that Madame reigns by mind as well as by beauty,” said Lupin, who was rewarded by a grimace which the leading society of Soulanges were in the habit of accepting without protest for a smile.

“One might do better still,” said Rigou, after some thought; “if we could only turn it into a downright scandal.”

“Complaint and indictment! affair in the police court!” cried Lupin. “Oh! that would be grand!”

“Glorious!” said Soudry, candidly. “What happiness to see the Comte de Montcornet, grand cross of the Legion of honor, commander of the Order of Saint Louis, and lieutenant-general, accused of having attempted, in a public resort, the virtue—just think of it!”

“He loves his wife too well,” said Lupin, reflectively. “He couldn’t be got to that.”

“That’s no obstacle,” remarked Rigou; “but I don’t know a single girl in the whole arrondissement who is capable of making a sinner of a saint. I have been looking out for one for the abbe.”

“What do you say to that handsome Gatienne Giboulard, of Auxerre, whom Sarcus, junior, is mad after?” asked Lupin.

“That’s the only one,” answered Rigou, “but she is not suitable; she thinks she has only to be seen to be admired; she’s not complying enough; we want a witch and a sly-boots, too. Never mind, the right one will turn up sooner or later.”

“Yes,” said Lupin, “the more pretty girls he sees the greater the chances are.”

“But perhaps you can’t get the Shopman to the fair,” said the ex-gendarme. “And if he does come, will he go to the Tivoli ball?”

“The reason that has always kept him away from the fair doesn’t exist this year, my love,” said Madame Soudry.

“What reason, dearest?” asked Soudry.

“The Shopman wanted to marry Mademoiselle de Soulanges,” said the notary. “The family replied that she was too young, and that mortified him. That is why Monsieur de Soulanges and Monsieur de Montcornet, two old friends who both served in the Imperial Guard, are so cool to each other that they never speak. The Shopman doesn’t want to meet the Soulanges at the fair; but this year the family are not coming.”

Usually the Soulanges party stayed at the chateau from July to October, but the general was then in command of the artillery in Spain, under the Duc d’Angouleme, and the countess had accompanied him. At the siege of Cadiz the Comte de Soulanges obtained, as every one knows, the marshal’s baton, which he kept till 1826.

“Very true,” cried Lupin. “Well, it is for you, papa,” he added, addressing Rigou, “to manoeuvre the matter so that we can get him to the fair; once there, we ought to be able to entrap him.”

The fair of Soulanges, which takes place on the 15th of August, is one of the features of the town, and carries the palm over all other fairs in a circuit of sixty miles, even those of the capital of the department. Ville-aux-Fayes has no fair, for its fete-day, the Saint-Sylvestre, happens in winter.

From the 12th to the 15th of August all sorts of merchants abounded at Soulanges, and set up their booths in two parallel lines, two rows of the well-known gray linen huts, which gave a lively appearance to the usually deserted streets. The two weeks of the fair brought in a sort of harvest to the little town, for the festival has the authority and prestige of tradition. The peasants, as old Fourchon said, flocked in from the districts to which labor bound them for the rest of the year. The wonderful show on the counters of the improvised shops, the collection of all sorts of merchandise, the coveted objects of the wants or the vanities of these sons of the soil, who have no other shows or exhibitions to enjoy exercise a periodical seduction over the minds of all, especially the women and children. So, after the first of August the authorities posted advertisements signed by Soudry, throughout the whole arrondissement, offering protection to merchants, jugglers, mountebanks, prodigies of all kinds, and stating how long the fair would last, and what would be its principal attractions.

On these posters, about which it will be remembered Madame Tonsard inquired of Vermichel, there was always, on the last line, the following announcement:

“Tivoli will be illuminated with colored-glass lamps.”

The town had adopted as the place for public a dance-ground created by Socquard out of a stony garden (stony, like the rest of the hill on which Soulanges is built, where the gardens are of made land), and called by him a Tivoli. This character of the soil explains the peculiar flavor of the Soulanges wine,—a white wine, dry and spirituous, very like Madeira or the Vouvray wine, or Johannisberger,—three vintages which resemble one another.

The powerful effect produced by the Socquard ball upon the imaginations of the whole country-side made the inhabitants thereof very proud of their Tivoli. Such as had ventured as far as Paris declared that the Parisian Tivoli was superior to that of Soulanges only in size. Gaubertin boldly declared that, for his part, he preferred the Socquard ball to the Parisian ball.

“Well, we’ll think it all over,” continued Rigou. “That Parisian fellow, the editor of a newspaper, will soon get tired of his present amusement and be glad of a change; perhaps we could through the servants give him the idea of coming to the fair, and he’d bring the others; I’ll consider it. Sibilet might—although, to be sure, his influence is devilishly decreased of late—but he might get the general to think he could curry popularity by coming.”

“Find out if the beautiful countess keeps the general at arm’s length,” said Lupin; “that’s the point if you want him to fall into the farce at Tivoli.”

“That little woman,” cried Madame Soudry, “is too much of a Parisian not to know how to run with the hare and hold with the hounds.”

“Fourchon has got his granddaughter Catherine on good terms, he tells me, with Charles, the Shopman’s groom. That gives us one ear more in Les Aigues—Are you sure of the Abbe Taupin,” he added, as the priest entered the room from the terrace.

“We hold him and the Abbe Mouchon, too, just as I hold Soudry,” said the queen, stroking her husband’s chin; “you are not unhappy, dearest, are you?” she said to Soudry.

“If I can plan a scandal against that Tartufe of a Brossette we can win,” said Rigou, in a low voice. “But I am not sure if the local spirit can succeed against the Church spirit. You don’t realize what that is. I, myself, who am no fool, I can’t say what I’ll do when I fall ill. I believe I shall try to be reconciled with the Church.”

“Suffer me to hope it,” said the Abbe Taupin, for whose benefit Rigou had raised his voice on the last words.

“Alas! the wrong I did in marrying prevents it,” replied Rigou. “I cannot kill off Madame Rigou.”

“Meantime, let us think of Les Aigues,” said Madame Soudry.

“Yes,” said the ex-monk. “Do you know, I begin to think that our associate at Ville-aux-Fayes may be cleverer than the rest of us. I fancy that Gaubertin wants Les Aigues for himself, and that he means to trick us in the end.”

“But Les Aigues will not belong to any one of us; it will have to come down, from roof to cellar,” said Soudry.

“I shouldn’t be surprised if there were treasure buried in those cellars,” observed Rigou, cleverly.

“Nonsense!”

“Well, in the wars of the olden time the great lords, who were often besieged and surprised, did bury their gold until they should be able to recover it; and you know that the Marquis de Soulanges-Hautemer (in whom the younger branch came to an end) was one of the victims of the Biron conspiracy. The Comtesse de Moret received the property from Henri IV. when it was confiscated.”

“See what it is to know the history of France!” said Soudry. “You are right. It is time to come to an understanding with Gaubertin.”

“If he shirks,” said Rigou, “we must smoke him out.”

“He is rich enough now,” said Lupin, “to be an honest man.”

“I’ll answer for him as I would for myself,” said Madame Soudry; “he’s the most loyal man in the kingdom.”

“We all believe in his loyalty,” said Rigou, “but nevertheless nothing should be neglected, even among friends—By the bye, I think there is some one in Soulanges who is hindering matters.”

“Who’s that?” asked Soudry.

“Plissoud,” replied Rigou.

“Plissoud!” exclaimed Soudry. “Poor fool! Brunet holds him by the halter, and his wife by the gullet; ask Lupin.”

“What can he do?” said Lupin.

“He means to warn Montcornet,” replied Rigou, “and get his influence and a place—”

“It wouldn’t bring him more than his wife earns for him at Soulanges,” said Madame Soudry.

“He tells everything to his wife when he is drunk,” remarked Lupin. “We shall know it all in good time.”

“The beautiful Madame Plissoud has no secrets from you,” said Rigou; “we may be easy about that.”

“Besides, she’s as stupid as she is beautiful,” said Madame Soudry. “I wouldn’t change with her; for if I were a man I’d prefer an ugly woman who has some mind, to a beauty who can’t say two words.”

“Ah!” said the notary, biting his lips, “but she can make others say three.”

“Puppy!” cried Rigou, as he made for the door.

“Well, then,” said Soudry, following him to the portico, “to-morrow, early.”

“I’ll come and fetch you—Ha! Lupin,” he said to the notary, who came out with him to order his horse, “try to make sure that Madame Sarcus hears all the Shopman says and does against us at the Prefecture.”

“If she doesn’t hear it, who will?” replied Lupin.

“Excuse me,” said Rigou, smiling blandly, “but there are such a lot of ninnies in there that I forgot there was one clever man.”

“The wonder is that I don’t grow rusty among them,” replied Lupin, naively.

“Is it true that Soudry has hired a pretty servant?”

“Yes,” replied Lupin; “for the last week our worthy mayor has set the charms of his wife in full relief by comparing her with a little peasant-girl about the age of an old ox; and we can’t yet imagine how he settles it with Madame Soudry, for, would you believe it, he has the audacity to go to bed early.”

“I’ll find out to-morrow,” said the village Sardanapalus, trying to smile.

The two plotters shook hands as they parted.

Rigou, who did not like to be on the road after dark for, notwithstanding his present popularity, he was cautious, called to his horse, “Get up, Citizen,”—a joke this son of 1793 was fond of letting fly at the Revolution. Popular revolutions have no more bitter enemies than those they have trained themselves.

“Pere Rigou’s visits are pretty short,” said Gourdon the poet to Madame Soudry.

“They are pleasant, if they are short,” she answered.

“Like his own life,” said the doctor; “his abuse of pleasures will cut that short.”

“So much the better,” remarked Soudry, “my son will step into the property.”

“Did he bring you any news about Les Aigues?” asked the Abbe Taupin.

“Yes, my dear abbe,” said Madame Soudry. “Those people are the scourge of the neighborhood. I can’t comprehend how it is that Madame de Montcornet, who is certainly a well-bred woman, doesn’t understand their interests better.”

“And yet she has a model before her eyes,” said the abbe.

“Who is that?” asked Madame Soudry, smirking.

“The Soulanges.”

“Ah, yes!” replied the queen after a pause.

“Here I am!” cried Madame Vermut, coming into the room; “and without my re-active,—for Vermut is so inactive in all that concerns me that I can’t call him an active of any kind.”

“What the devil is that cursed old Rigou doing there?” said Soudry to Guerbet, as they saw the green chaise stop before the gate of the Tivoli. “He is one of those tiger-cats whose every step has an object.”

“You may well say cursed,” replied the fat little collector.

“He has gone into the Cafe de la Paix,” remarked Gourdon, the doctor.

“And there’s some trouble there,” added Gourdon the poet; “I can hear them yelping from here.”

“That cafe,” said the abbe, “is like the temple of Janus; it was called the Cafe de la Guerre under the Empire, and then it was peace itself; the most respectable of the bourgeoisie met there for conversation—”

“Conversation!” interrupted the justice of the peace. “What kind of conversation was it which produced all the little Bourniers?”

“—but ever since it has been called, in honor of the Bourbons, the Cafe de la Paix, fights take place there every day,” said Abbe Taupin, finishing the sentence which the magistrate had taken the liberty of interrupting.

This idea of the abbe was, like the quotations from “The Cup-and-Ball,” of frequent recurrence.

“Do you mean that Burgundy will always be the land of fisticuffs?” asked Pere Guerbet.

“That’s not ill said,” remarked the abbe; “not at all; in fact it’s almost an exact history of our country.”

“I don’t know anything about the history of France,” blurted Soudry; “and before I try to learn it, it is more important to me to know why old Rigou has gone into the Cafe de la Paix with Socquard.”

“Oh!” returned the abbe, “wherever he goes and wherever he stays, you may be quite certain it is for no charitable purpose.”

“That man gives me goose-flesh whenever I see him,” said Madame Vermut.

“He is so much to be feared,” remarked the doctor, “that if he had a spite against me I should have no peace till he was dead and buried; he would get out of his coffin to do you an ill-turn.”

“If any one can force the Shopman to come to the fair, and manage to catch him in a trap, it’ll be Rigou,” said Soudry to his wife, in a low tone.

“Especially,” she replied, in a loud one, “if Gaubertin and you, my love, help him.”

“There! didn’t I tell you so?” cried Guerbet, poking the justice of the peace. “I knew he would find some pretty girl at Socquard’s,—there he is, putting her into his carriage.”

“You are quite wrong, gentlemen,” said Madame Soudry; “Monsieur Rigou is thinking of nothing but the great affair; and if I’m not mistaken, that girl is only Tonsard’s daughter.”

“He is like the chemist who lays in a stock of vipers,” said old Guerbet.

“One would think you were intimate with Monsieur Vermut to hear you talk,” said the doctor, pointing to the little apothecary, who was then crossing the square.

“Poor fellow!” said the poet, who was suspected of occasionally sharpening his wit with Madame Vermut; “just look at that waddle of his! and they say he is learned!”

“Without him,” said the justice of the peace, “we should be hard put to it about post-mortems; he found poison in poor Pigeron’s stomach so cleverly that the chemists of Paris testified in the court at Auxerre that they couldn’t have done better—”

“He didn’t find anything at all,” said Soudry; “but, as President Gendrin says, it is a good thing to let people suppose that poison will always be found—”

“Madame Pigeron was very wise to leave Auxerre,” said Madame Vermut; “she was silly and wicked both. As if it were necessary to have recourse to drugs to annul a husband! Are not there other ways quite as sure, but innocent, to rid ourselves of that incumbrance? I would like to have a man dare to question my conduct! The worthy Monsieur Vermut doesn’t hamper me in the least,—but he has never been ill yet. As for Madame de Montcornet, just see how she walks about the woods and the hermitage with that journalist whom she brought from Paris at her own expense, and how she pets him under the very eyes of the general!”

“At her own expense!” cried Madame Soudry. “Are you sure? If we could only get proof of it, what a fine subject for an anonymous letter to the general!”

“The general!” cried Madame Vermut, “he won’t interfere with things; he plays his part.”

“What part, my dear?” asked Madame Soudry.

“Oh! the paternal part.”

“If poor little Pigeron had had the wisdom to play it, instead of harassing his wife, he’d be alive now,” said the poet.

Madame Soudry leaned over to her neighbor, Monsieur Guerbet, and made one of those apish grimaces which she had inherited from dear mistress, together with her silver, by right of conquest, and twisting her face into a series of them she made him look at Madame Vermut, who was coquetting with the author of “The Cup-and-Ball.”

“What shocking style that woman has! what talk, what manners!” she said. “I really don’t think I can admit her any longer into *our society*,—especially,” she added, “when Monsieur Gourdon, the poet, is present.”

“There’s social morality!” said the abbe, who had heard and observed all without saying a word.

After this epigram, or rather, this satire on the company, so true and so concise that it hit every one, the usual game of boston was proposed.

Is not this a picture of life as it is at all stages of what we agree to call society? Change the style, and you will find that nothing more and nothing less is said in the gilded salons of Paris.

CHAPTER III. THE CAFE DE LA PAIX

It was about seven o'clock when Rigou drove by the Cafe de la Paix. The setting sun, slanting its beams across the little town, was diffusing its ruddy tints, and the clear mirror of the lake contrasted with the flashing of the resplendent window-panes, which originated the strangest and most improbable colors.

The deep schemer, who had grown pensive as he revolved his plots, let his horse proceed so slowly that in passing the Cafe de la Paix he heard his own name banded about in one of those noisy disputes which, according to the Abbe Taupin, made the name of the establishment a gain-saying of its customary condition.

For a clear understanding of the following scene we must explain the topography of this region of plenty and of misrule, which began with the cafe on the square, and ended on the country road with the famous Tivoli where the conspirators proposed to entrap the general. The ground-floor of the cafe, which stood at the angle of the square and the road, and was built in the style of Rigou's house, had three windows on the road and two on the square, the latter being separated by a glass door through which the house was entered. The cafe had, moreover, a double door which opened on a side alley that separated it from the neighboring house (that of Vallet the Soulanges mercer), which led to an inside courtyard.

The house, which was painted wholly in yellow, except the blinds, which were green, is one of the few houses in the little town which has two stories and an attic. And this is why: Before the astonishing rise in the prosperity of Ville-aux-Fayes the first floor of this house, which had four chambers, each containing a bed and the meagre furniture thought necessary to justify the term "furnished lodgings," was let to strangers who were obliged to come to Soulanges on matters connected with the courts, or to visitors who did not sleep at the chateau; but for the last twenty-five years these rooms had had no other occupants than the mountebanks, the merchants, the vendors of quack medicines who came to the fair, or else commercial travellers. During the fair-time they were let for four francs a day; and brought Socquard about two hundred and fifty francs, not to speak of the profits on the consumption of food which the guests took in his cafe.

The front of the house on the square was adorned with painted signs; on the spaces that separated the windows from the glass door billiard-cues were represented, lovingly tied together with ribbons, and above these bows were depicted smoking bowls of punch, the bowls being in the form of Greek vases. The words "Cafe de la Paix" were over the door, brilliantly painted in yellow on a green ground, at each

end of which rose pyramids of tricolored billiard-balls. The window-sashes, painted green, had small panes of the commonest glass.

A dozen arbor-vitae, which ought to be called cafe-trees, stood to the left and right in pots, and presented their usual pretensions and sickly appearance. Awnings, with which shopkeepers of the large cities protect their windows from the head of the sun, were as yet an unknown luxury in Soulanges. The beneficent liquids in the bottles which stood on boards just behind the window-panes went through a periodic cooking. When the sun concentrated its rays through the lenticular knobs in the glass it boiled the Madeira, the syrups, the liqueurs, the preserved plums, and the cherry-brandy set out for show; for the heat was so great that Aglae, her father, and the waiter were forced to sit outside on benches poorly shaded by the wilted shrubs,—which Mademoiselle kept alive with water that was almost hot. All three, father, daughter, and servant, might be seen at certain hours of the day stretched out there, fast asleep, like domestic animals.

In 1804, the period when “Paul and Virginia” was the rage, the inside of the cafe was hung with a paper which represented the chief scenes of that romance. There could be seen Negroes gathering the coffee-crop, though coffee was seldom seen in the establishment, not twenty cups of that beverage being served in the month. Colonial products were of so little account in the consumption of the place that if a stranger had asked for a cup of chocolate Socquard would have been hard put to it to serve him. Still, he would have done so with a nauseous brown broth made from tablets in which there were more flour, crushed almonds, and brown sugar than pure sugar and cacao, concoctions which were sold at two sous a cake by village grocers, and manufactured for the purpose of ruining the sale of the Spanish commodity.

As for coffee, Pere Socquard simply boiled it in a utensil known to all such households as the “big brown pot”; he let the dregs (that were half chicory) settle, and served the decoction, with a coolness worthy of a Parisian waiter, in a china cup which, if flung to the ground, would not have cracked.

At this period the sacred respect felt for sugar under the Emperor was not yet dispelled in the town of Soulanges, and Aglae Socquard boldly served three bits of it of the size of hazel-nuts to a foreign merchant who had rashly asked for the literary beverage.

The wall decoration of the cafe, relieved by mirrors in gilt frames and brackets on which the hats were hung, had not been changed since the days when all Soulanges came to admire the romantic paper, also a counter painted like mahogany with a Saint-Anne marble top, on which shone vessels of plated metal and lamps with

double-burners, which were, rumor said, given to the beautiful Madame Socquard by Gaubertin. A sticky coating of dirt covered everything, like that found on old pictures put away and long forgotten in a garret. The tables painted to resemble marble, the benches covered in red Utrecht velvet, the hanging glass lamp full of oil, which fed two lights, fastened by a chain to the ceiling and adorned with glass pendants, were the beginning of the celebrity of the then Cafe de la Guerre.

There, from 1802 to 1804, all the bourgeois of Soulanges played at dominoes and a game of cards called “brelan,” drank tiny glasses of liqueur or boiled wine, and ate brandied fruits and biscuits; for the dearness of colonial products had banished coffee, sugar, and chocolate. Punch was a great luxury; so was “bavaroise.” These infusions were made with a sugary substance resembling molasses, the name of which is now lost, but which, at the time, made the fortune of its inventor.

These succinct details will recall to the memory of all travellers many others that are analogous; and those persons who have never left Paris can imagine the ceiling blackened with smoke and the mirrors specked with millions of spots, showing in what freedom and independence the whole order of diptera lived in the Cafe de la Paix.

The beautiful Madame Socquard, whose gallant adventures surpassed those of the mistress of the Grand-I-Vert, sat there, enthroned, dressed in the last fashion. She affected the style of a sultana, and wore a turban. Sultanas, under the Empire, enjoyed a vogue equal to that of the “angel” of to-day. The whole valley took pattern from the turbans, the poke-bonnets, the fur caps, the Chinese head-gear of the handsome Socquard, to whose luxury the big-wigs of Soulanges contributed. With a waist beneath her arm-pits, after the fashion of our mothers, who were proud of their imperial graces, Junie (she was named Junie!) made the fortune of the house of Socquard. Her husband owed to her the ownership of a vineyard, of the house they lived in, and also the Tivoli. The father of Monsieur Lupin was said to have committed some follies for the handsome Madame Socquard; and Gaubertin, who had taken her from him, certainly owed him the little Bournier.

These details, together with the deep mystery with which Socquard manufactured his boiled wine, are sufficient to explain why his name and that of the Cafe de la Paix were popular; but there were other reasons for their renown. Nothing better than wine could be got at Tonsard’s and the other taverns in the valley; from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes, in a circumference of twenty miles, the Cafe Socquard was the only place where the guests could play billiards and drink the punch so admirably concocted by the proprietor. There alone could be found a display of foreign wines, fine liqueurs, and brandied fruits. Its name resounded daily

throughout the valley, accompanied by ideas of superfine sensual pleasures such as men whose stomachs are more sensitive than their hearts dream about. To all these causes of popularity was added that of being an integral part of the great festival of Soulanges. The Cafe de la Paix was to the town, in a superior degree, what the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert was to the peasantry,—a centre of venom; it was the point of contact and transmission between the gossip of Ville-aux-Fayes and that of the valley. The Grand-I-Vert supplied the milk and the Cafe de la Paix the cream, and Tonsard's two daughters were in daily communication between the two.

To Socquard's mind the square of Soulanges was merely an appendage to his cafe. Hercules went from door to door, talking with this one and that one, and wearing in summer no other garment than a pair of trousers and a half-buttoned waistcoat. If any one entered the tavern, the people with whom he gossiped warned him, and he slowly and reluctantly returned.

Rigou stopped his horse, and getting out of the chaise, fastened the bridle to one of the posts near the gate of the Tivoli. Then he made a pretext to listen to what was going on without being noticed, and placed himself between two windows through one of which he could, by advancing his head, see the persons in the room, watch their gestures, and catch the louder tones which came through the glass of the windows and which the quiet of the street enabled him to hear.

"If I were to tell old Rigou that your brother Nicolas is after La Pechina," cried an angry voice, "and that he waylays her, he'd rip the entrails out of every one of you,—pack of scoundrels that you are at the Grand-I-Vert!"

"If you play me such a trick as that, Aglae," said the shrill voice of Marie Tonsard, "you sha'n't tell anything more except to the worms in your coffin. Don't meddle with my brother's business or with mine and Bonnebault's either."

Marie, instigated by her grandmother, had, as we see, followed Bonnebault; she had watched him through the very window where Rigou was now standing, and had seen him displaying his graces and paying compliments so agreeable to Mademoiselle Socquard that she was forced to smile upon him. That smile had brought about the scene in the midst of which the revelation that interested Rigou came out.

"Well, well, Pere Rigou, what are you doing here?" said Socquard, slapping the usurer on the shoulder; he was coming from a barn at the end of the garden, where he kept various contrivances for the public games, such as weighing-machines, merry-go-rounds, see-saws, all in readiness for the Tivoli when opened. Socquard

stepped noiselessly, for he was wearing a pair of those yellow leather-slippers which cost so little by the gross that they have an enormous sale in the provinces.

“If you have any fresh lemons, I’d like a glass of lemonade,” said Rigou; “it is a warm evening.”

“Who is making that racket?” said Socquard, looking through the window and seeing his daughter and Marie Tonsard.

“They are quarrelling for Bonnebault,” said Rigou, sardonically.

The anger of the father was at once controlled by the interest of the tavern-keeper. The tavern-keeper judged it prudent to listen outside, as Rigou was doing; the father was inclined to enter and declare that Bonnebault, possessed of admirable qualities in the eyes of a tavern-keeper, had none at all as son-in-law to one of the notables of Soulanges. And yet Pere Socquard had received but few offers for his daughter. At twenty-two Aglae already rivalled in size and weight Madame Vermichel, whose agility seemed phenomenal. Sitting behind a counter increased the adipose tendency which she derived from her father.

“What devil is it that gets into girls?” said Socquard to Rigou.

“Ha!” replied the ex-Benedictine, “of all the devils, that’s the one the Church has most to do with.”

Just then Bonnebault came out of the billiard-room with a cue in his hand, and struck Marie sharply, saying:—

“You’ve made me miss my stroke; but I’ll not miss you, and I’ll give it to you till you muffle that clapper of yours.”

Socquard and Rigou, who now thought it wise to interfere, entered the cafe by the front door, raising such a crowd of flies that the light from the windows was obscured; the sound was like that of the distant practising of a drum-corps. After their first excitement was over, the big flies with the bluish bellies, accompanied by the stinging little ones, returned to their quarters in the windows, where on three tiers of planks, the paint of which was indistinguishable under the fly-specks, were rows of viscous bottles ranged like soldiers.

Marie was crying. To be struck before a rival by the man she loves is one of those humiliations that no woman can endure, no matter what her place on the social ladder may be; and the lower that place is, the more violent is the expression of her wrath. The Tonsard girl took no notice of Rigou or of Socquard; she flung herself on a bench, in gloomy and sullen silence, which the ex-monk carefully watched.

“Get a fresh lemon, Aglae,” said Pere Socquard, “and go and rinse that glass yourself.”

“You did right to send her away,” whispered Rigou, “or she might have been hurt”; and he glanced significantly at the hand with which Marie grasped a stool she had caught up to throw at Aglae’s head.

“Now, Marie,” said Socquard, standing before her, “people don’t come here to fling stools; if you were to break one of my mirrors, the milk of your cows wouldn’t pay for the damage.”

“Pere Socquard, your daughter is a reptile; I’m worth a dozen of her, I’d have you know. If you don’t want Bonnebault for a son-in-law, it is high time for you to tell him to go and play billiards somewhere else; he’s losing a hundred sous every minute.”

In the middle of this flux of words, screamed rather than said, Socquard took Marie round the waist and flung her out of the door, in spite of her cries and resistance. It was none too soon; for Bonnebault rushed out of the billiard-room, his eyes blazing.

“It sha’n’t end so!” cried Marie Tonsard.

“Begone!” shouted Bonnebault, whom Viollet held back round the body lest he should do the girl some hurt. “Go to the devil, or I will never speak to you or look at you again!”

“You!” said Marie, flinging him a furious glance. “Give me back my money, and I’ll leave you to Mademoiselle Socquard if she is rich enough to keep you.”

Thereupon Marie, frightened when she saw that even Socquard-Alcides could scarcely hold Bonnebault, who sprang after her like a tiger, took to flight along the road.

Rigou followed, and told her to get into his carriole to escape Bonnebault, whose shouts reached the hotel Soudry; then, after hiding Marie under the leather curtains, he came back to the cafe to drink his lemonade and examine the group it now contained, composed of Plissoud, Amaury, Viollet, and the waiter, who were all trying to pacify Bonnebault.

“Come, hussar, it’s your turn to play,” said Amaury, a small, fair young man, with a dull eye.

“Besides, she’s taken herself off,” said Viollet.

If any one ever betrayed astonishment it was Plissoud when he beheld the usurer of Blangy sitting at one of the tables, and more occupied in watching him, Plissoud, than in noticing the quarrel that was going on. In spite of himself, the sheriff allowed his face to show the species of bewilderment which a man feels at an unexpected meeting with a person whom he hates and is plotting against, and he speedily withdrew into the billiard-room.

“Adieu, Pere Socquard,” said Rigou.

“I’ll get your carriage,” said the innkeeper; “take your time.”

“How shall I find out what those fellows have been saying over their pool?” Rigou was asking himself, when he happened to see the waiter’s face in the mirror beside him.

The waiter was a jack at all trades; he cultivated Socquard’s vines, swept out the cafe and the billiard-room, kept the garden in order, and watered the Tivoli, all for fifty francs a year. He was always without a jacket, except on grand occasions; usually his sole garments were a pair of blue linen trousers, heavy shoes, and a striped velvet waistcoat, over which he wore an apron of homespun linen when at work in the cafe or billiard-room. This apron, with strings, was the badge of his functions. The fellow had been hired by Socquard at the last annual fair; for in this valley, as throughout Burgundy, servants are hired in the market-place by the year, exactly as one buys horses.

“What’s your name?” said Rigou.

“Michel, at your service,” replied the waiter.

“Doesn’t old Fourchon come here sometimes?”

“Two or three times a week, with Monsieur Vermichel, who gives me a couple of sous to warn him if his wife’s after them.”

“He’s a fine old fellow, Pere Fourchon; knows a great deal and is full of good sense,” said Rigou, paying for his lemonade and leaving the evil-smelling place when he saw Pere Socquard leading his horse round.

Just as he was about to get into the carriage, Rigou noticed the chemist crossing the square and hailed him with a “Ho, there, Monsieur Vermut!” Recognizing the rich man, Vermut hurried up. Rigou joined him, and said in a low voice:—

“Are there any drugs that can eat into the tissue of the skin so as to produce a real disease, like a whitlow on the finger, for instance?”

“If Monsieur Gourdon would help, yes,” answered the little chemist.

“Vermut, not a word of all this, or you and I will quarrel; but speak of the matter to Monsieur Gourdon, and tell him to come and see me the day after to-morrow. I may be able to procure him the delicate operation of cutting off a forefinger.”

Then, leaving the little man thoroughly bewildered, Rigou got into the carriole beside Marie Tonsard.

“Well, you little viper,” he said, taking her by the arm when he had fastened the reins to a hook in front of the leathern apron which closed the carriole and the horse had started on a trot, “do you think you can keep Bonnebault by giving way to such violence? If you were a wise girl you would promote his marriage with that hogshead of stupidity and take your revenge afterwards.”

Marie could not help smiling as she answered:—

“Ah, how bad you are! you are the master of us all in wickedness.”

“Listen to me, Marie; I like the peasants, but it won’t do for any one of you to come between my teeth and a mouthful of game. Your brother Nicolas, as Aglae said, is after La Pechina. That must not be; I protect her, that girl. She is to be my heiress for thirty thousand francs, and I intend to marry her well. I know that Nicolas, helped by your sister Catherine, came near killing the little thing this morning. You are to see your brother and sister at once, and say to them: ‘If you let La Pechina alone, Pere Rigou will save Nicolas from the conscription.’”

“You are the devil incarnate!” cried Marie. “They do say you’ve signed a compact with him. Is that true?”

“Yes,” replied Rigou, gravely.

“I heard it, but I didn’t believe it.”

“He has guaranteed that no attacks aimed at me shall hurt me; that I shall never be robbed; that I shall live a hundred years and succeed in everything I undertake, and be as young to the day of my death as a two-year old cockerel—”

“Well, if that’s so,” said Marie, “it must be *devilishly* easy for you to save my brother from the conscription—”

“If he chooses, that’s to say. He’ll have to lose a finger,” returned Rigou. “I’ll tell him how.”

“Look out, you are taking the upper road!” exclaimed Marie.

“I never go by the lower at night,” said the ex-monk.

“On account of the cross?” said Marie, naively.

“That’s it, sly-boots,” replied her diabolical companion.

They had reached a spot where the high-road cuts through a slight elevation of ground, making on each side of it a rather steep slope, such as we often see on the mail-roads of France. At the end of this little gorge, which is about a hundred feet long, the roads to Ronquerolles and to Cerneux meet and form an open space, in the centre of which stands a cross. From either slope a man could aim at a victim and kill him at close quarters, with all the more ease because the little hill is covered with vines, and the evil-doer could lie in ambush among the briers and brambles that overgrow them. We can readily imagine why the usurer did not take that road after dark. The Thune flows round the little hill; and the place is called the Close of the Cross. No spot was ever more adapted for revenge or murder, for the road to Ronquerolles continues to the bridge over the Avonne in front of the pavilion of the Rendezvous, while that to Cerneux leads off above the mail-road; so that between the four roads,—to Les Aigues, Ville-aux-Fayes, Ronquerolles, and Cerneux,—a murderer could choose his line of retreat and leave his pursuers in uncertainty.

“I shall drop you at the entrance of the village,” said Rigou when they neared the first houses of Blangy.

“Because you are afraid of Annette, old coward!” cried Marie. “When are you going to send her away? you have had her now three years. What amuses me is that your old woman still lives; the good God knows how to revenge himself.”

CHAPTER IV. THE TRIUMVIRATE OF VILLE-AUX-FAYES

The cautious usurer compelled his wife and Jean to go to bed and to rise by daylight; assuring them that the house would never be attacked if he sat up till midnight, and he never himself rose till late. Not only had he thus secured himself from interruption between seven at night and five the next morning but he had accustomed his wife and Jean to respect his morning sleep and that of Hagar, whose room was directly behind his.

So, on the following morning, about half past six, Madame Rigou, who herself took care of the poultry-yard with some assistance from Jean, knocked timidly at her husband's door.

"Monsieur Rigou," she said, "you told me to wake you."

The tones of that voice, the attitude of the woman, her frightened air as she obeyed an order the execution of which might be ill-received, showed the utter self-abnegation in which the poor creature lived, and the affection she still bore to her petty tyrant.

"Very good," replied Rigou.

"Shall I wake Annette?" she asked.

"No, let her sleep; she has been up half the night," he replied, gravely.

The man was always grave, even when he allowed himself to jest. Annette had in fact opened the door secretly to Sibilet, Fourchon, and Catherine Tonsard, who all came at different hours between eleven and two o'clock.

Ten minutes later Rigou, dressed with more care than usual, came downstairs and greeted his wife with a "Good-morning, my old woman," which made her happier than if counts had knelt at her feet.

"Jean," he said to the ex-lay-brother, "don't leave the house; if any one robs me it will be worse for you than for me."

By thus mingling mildness and severity, hopes and rebuffs, the clever egoist kept his three slaves faithful and close at his heels, like dogs.

Taking the upper-road, so-called, to avoid the Close of the Cross, Rigou reached the square of Soulanges about eight o'clock.

Just as he was fastening his rein to the post nearest the little door with three steps, a blind opened and Soudry showed his face, pitted with the small-pox, which the expression of his small black eyes rendered crafty.

“Let’s begin by taking a crust here before we start,” he said; “we sha’n’t get breakfast at Ville-aux-Fayes before one o’clock.”

Then he softly called a servant-girl, as young and pretty as Annette, who came down noiselessly, and received his order for ham and bread; after which he went himself to the cellar and fetched some wine.

Rigou contemplated for the hundredth time the well-known dining-room, floored in oak, with stuccoed ceiling and cornice, its high wainscot and handsome cupboards finely painted, its porcelain stone and magnificent tall clock,—all the property of Mademoiselle Laguerre. The chair-backs were in the form of lyres, painted white and highly varnished; the seats were of green morocco with gilt nails. A massive mahogany table was covered with green oilcloth, with large squares of a deeper shade of green, and a plain border of the lighter. The floor, laid in Hungarian point, was carefully waxed by Urbain and showed the care which ex-waiting-women know how to exact out of their servants.

“Bah! it cost too much,” thought Rigou for the hundredth time. “I can eat as good a dinner in my room as here, and I have the income of the money this useless splendor would have wasted. Where is Madame Soudry?” he asked, as the mayor returned armed with a venerable bottle.

“Asleep.”

“And you no longer disturb her slumbers?” said Rigou.

The ex-gendarme winked with a knowing air, and pointed to the ham which Jeannette, the pretty maid, was just bringing in.

“That will pick you up, a pretty bit like that,” he said. “It was cured in the house; we cut into it only yesterday.”

“Where did you find her?” said the ex-Benedictine in Soudry’s ear.

“She is like the ham,” replied the ex-gendarme, winking again; “I have had her only a week.”

Jeannette, still in her night-cap, with a short petticoat and her bare feet in slippers, had slipped on a bodice made with straps over the arms in true peasant fashion, over which she had crossed a neckerchief which did not entirely hide her fresh and youthful attractions, which were at least as appetizing as the ham she carried. Short and plump, with bare arms mottled red, ending in large, dimpled hands with short

but well-made fingers, she was a picture of health. The face was that of a true Burgundian,—ruddy, but white about the temples, throat, and ears; the hair was chestnut; the corners of the eyes turned up towards the top of the ears; the nostrils were wide, the mouth sensual, and a little down lay along the cheeks; all this, together with a jaunty expression, tempered however by a deceitfully modest attitude, made her the model of a roguish servant-girl.

“On my honor, Jeannette is as good as the ham,” said Rigou. “If I hadn’t an Annette I should want a Jeannette.”

“One is as good as the other,” said the ex-gendarme, “for your Annette is fair and delicate. How is Madame Rigou,—is she asleep?” added Soudry, roughly, to let Rigou see he understood his joke.

“She wakes with the cock, but she goes to roost with the hens,” replied Rigou. “As for me, I sit up and read the ‘Constitutionnel.’ My wife lets me sleep at night and in the morning too; she wouldn’t come into my room for all the world.”

“It’s just the other way here,” replied Jeanette. “Madame sits up with the company playing cards; sometimes there are sixteen of them in the salon; Monsieur goes to bed at eight o’clock, and we get up at daylight—”

“You think that’s different,” said Rigou, “but it comes to the same thing in the end. Well, my dear, you come to me and I’ll send Annette here, and that will be the same thing and different too.”

“Old scamp, you’ll make her ashamed,” said Soudry.

“Ha! gendarme; you want your field to yourself! Well, we all get our happiness where we can find it.”

Jeanette, by her master’s order, disappeared to lay out his clothes.

“You must have promised to marry her when your wife dies,” said Rigou.

“At your age and mine,” replied Soudry, “there’s no other way.”

“With girls of any ambition it would be one way to become a widower,” added Rigou; “especially if Madame Soudry found fault with Jeannette for her way of scrubbing the staircase.”

The remark made the two husbands pensive. When Jeannette returned and announced that all was ready, Soudry said to her, “Come and help me!”—a precaution which made the ex-monk smile.

“There’s a difference, indeed!” said he. “As for me, I’d leave you alone with Annette, my good friend.”

A quarter of an hour later Soudry, in his best clothes, got into the wicker carriage, and the two friends drove round the lake of Soulanges to Ville-aux-Fayes.

“Look at it!” said Rigou, as they reached an eminence from which the chateau of Soulanges could be seen in profile.

The old revolutionary put into the tone of his words all the hatred which the rural middle classes feel to the great chateaux and the great estates.

“Yes, but I hope it will never be destroyed as long as I live,” said Soudry. “The Comte de Soulanges was my general; he did me kindness; he got my pension, and he allows Lupin to manage the estate. After Lupin some of us will have it, and as long as the Soulanges family exists they and their property will be respected. Such folks are large-minded; they let every one make his profit, and they find it pays.”

“Yes, but the Comte de Soulanges has three children, who, at his death, may not agree,” replied Rigou. “The husband of his daughter and his sons may go to law, and end by selling the lead and iron mines to manufacturers, from whom we shall manage to get them back.”

The chateau just then showed up in profile, as if to defy the ex-monk.

“Ah! look at it; in those days they built well,” cried Soudry. “But just now Monsieur le Comte is economizing, so as to make Soulanges the entailed estate of his peerage.”

“My dear friend,” said Rigou, “entailed estates won’t exist much longer.”

When the topic of public matters was exhausted, the worthy pair began to discuss the merits of their pretty maids in terms too Burgundian to be printed here. That inexhaustible subject carried them so far that before they knew it they saw the capital of the arrondissement over which Gaubertin reigned, and which we hope excites enough curiosity in the reader’s mind to justify a short digression.

The name of Ville-aux-Fayes, singular as it is, is explained as the corruption of the words (in low Latin) “Villa in Fago,”—the manor of the woods. This name indicates that a forest once covered the delta formed by the Avonne before it joins its confluent the Yonne. Some Frank doubtless built a fortress on the hill which slopes gently to the long plain. The savage conqueror separated his vantage-ground from the delta by a wide and deep moat and made the position a formidable one, essentially seignorial, convenient for enforcing tolls across the bridges and for protecting his rights of profit on all grains ground in the mills.

That is the history of the beginning of Ville-aux-Fayes. Wherever feudal or ecclesiastical dominion established there we find gathered together interests,

inhabitants, and, later, towns when the localities were in a position to maintain them and to found and develop great industries. The method of floating timber discovered by Jean Rouvet in 1549, which required certain convenient stations to intercept it, was the making of Ville-aux-Fayes, which, up to that time, had been, compared to Soulanges, a mere village. Ville-aux-Fayes became a storage place for timber, which covered the shores of the two rivers for a distance of over thirty miles. The work of taking out of the water, computing the lost logs, and making the rafts which the Yonne carried down to the Seine, brought together a large concourse of workmen. Such a population increased consumption and encouraged trade. Thus Ville-aux-Fayes, which had but six hundred inhabitants at the end of the seventeenth century, had two thousand in 1790, and Gaubertin had now raised the number to four thousand, by the following means.

When the legislative assembly decreed the new laying out of territory, Ville-aux-Fayes, which was situated where, geographically, a sub-prefecture was needed, was chosen instead of Soulanges as chief town or capital of the arrondissement. The increased population of Paris, by increasing the demand for and the value of wood as fuel, necessarily increased the commerce of Ville-aux-Fayes. Gaubertin had founded his fortune, after losing his stewardship, on this growing business, estimating the effect of peace on the population of Paris, which did actually increase by over one-third between 1815 and 1825.

The shape of Ville-aux-Fayes followed the conformation of the ground. Each side of the promontory was lined with wharves. The dam to stop the timber from floating further down was just below a hill covered by the forest of Soulanges. Between the dam and the town lay a suburb. The lower town, covering the greater part of the delta, came down to the shores of the lake of the Avonne.

Above the lower town some five hundred houses with gardens, standing on the heights, were grouped round three sides of the promontory, and enjoyed the varied scene of the diamond waters of the lake, the rafts in construction along its edge, and the piles of wood upon the shores. The waters, laden with timber from the river and the rapids which fed the mill-races and the sluices of a few manufactories, presented an animated scene, all the more charming because inclosed in the greenery of forests, while the long valley of Les Aigues offered a glorious contrast to the dark foil of the heights above the town itself.

Gaubertin had built himself a house on the level of the delta, intending to make a place which should improve the locality and render the lower town as desirable as the upper. It was a modern house built of stone, with a balcony of iron railings, outside blinds, painted windows, and no ornament but a line of fret-work under the

eaves, a slate roof, one story in height with a garret, a fine courtyard, and behind it an English garden bathed by the waters of the Avonne. The elegance of the place compelled the department to build a fine edifice nearly opposite to it for the sub-prefecture, provisionally lodged in a mere kennel. The town itself also built a town-hall. The law-courts had lately been installed in a new edifice; so that Ville-aux-Fayes owed to the active influence of its present mayor a number of really imposing public buildings. The gendarmerie had also built barracks which completed the square formed by the marketplace.

These changes, on which the inhabitants prided themselves, were due to the impetus given by Gaubertin, who within a day or two had received the cross of the Legion of honor, in anticipation of the coming birthday of the king. In a town so situated and so modern there was of course, neither aristocracy nor nobility. Consequently, the rich merchants of Ville-aux-Fayes, proud of their own independence, willingly espoused the cause of the peasantry against a count of the Empire who had taken sides with the Restoration. To them the oppressors were the oppressed. The spirit of this commercial town was so well known to the government that they send there as sub-prefect a man with a conciliatory temper, a pupil of his uncle, the well-known des Lupeaulx, one of those men, accustomed to compromise, who are familiar with the difficulties and necessities of administration, but whom puritan politicians, doing infinitely worse things, call corrupt.

The interior of Gaubertin’s house was decorated with the unmeaning commonplaces of modern luxury. Rich papers with gold borders, bronze chandeliers, mahogany furniture of a new pattern, astral lamps, round tables with marble tops, white china with gilt lines for dessert, red morocco chairs and mezzo-tint engravings in the dining-room, and blue cashmere furniture in the salon,—all details of a chilling and perfectly unmeaning character, but which to the eyes of Ville-aux-Fayes seemed the last efforts of Sardanapalian luxury. Madame Gaubertin played the role of elegance with great effect; she assumed little airs and was lackadaisical at forty-five years of age, as though certain of the homage of her court.

We ask those who really know France, if these houses—those of Rigou, Soudry, and Gaubertin—are not a perfect presentation of the village, the little town, and the seat of a sub-prefecture?

Without being a man of mind, or a man of talent, Gaubertin had the appearance of being both. He owed the accuracy of his perception and his consummate art to an extreme keenness after gain. He desired wealth, not for his wife, not for his

children, not for himself, not for his family, not for the reputation that money gives; after the gratification of his revenge (the hope of which kept him alive) he loved the touch of money, like Nucingen, who, it was said, kept fingering the gold in his pockets. The rush of business was Gaubertin's wine; and though he had his belly full of it, he had all the eagerness of one who was empty. As with valets of the drama, intrigues, tricks to play, mischief to organize, deceptions, commercial over-reachings, accounts to render and receive, disputes, and quarrels of self-interest, exhilarated him, kept his blood in circulation, and his bile flowing. He went and came on foot, on horseback, in a carriage, by water; he was at all auctions and timber sales in Paris, thinking of everything, keeping hundreds of wires in his hands and never getting them tangled.

Quick, decided in his movements as in his ideas, short and squat in figure, with a thin nose, a fiery eye, an ear on the "qui vive," there was something of the hunting-dog about him. His brown face, very round and sunburned, from which the tanned ears stood out predominantly,—for he always wore a cap,—was in keeping with that character. His nose turned up; his tightly-closed lips could never have opened to say a kindly thing. His bushy whiskers formed a pair of black and shiny tufts beneath the highly-colored cheek-bones, and were lost in his cravat. Hair that was pepper-and-salt in color and frizzled naturally in stages like those of a judge's wig, seeming scorched by the fury of the fire which heated his brown skull and gleamed in his gray eyes surrounded by circular wrinkles (no doubt from a habit of always blinking when he looked across the country in full sunlight), completed the characteristics of his physiognomy. His lean and vigorous hands were hairy, knobbed, and claw-like, like those of men who do their share of labor. His personality was agreeable to those with whom he had to do, for he wrapped it in a misleading gayety; he knew how to talk a great deal without saying a word of what he meant to keep unsaid. He wrote little, so as to deny anything that escaped him which might prove unfavorable in its after effects upon his interests. His books and papers were kept by a cashier,—an honest man, whom men of Gaubertin's stamp always seek to get hold of, and whom they make, in their own selfish interests, their first dupe.

When Rigou's little green chaise appeared, towards twelve o'clock, in the broad avenue which skirts the river, Gaubertin, in cap, boots, and jacket, was returning from the wharves. He hastened his steps,—feeling very sure that Rigou's object in coming over could only be "the great affair."

“Good morning, gendarme; good morning, paunch of gall and wisdom,” he said, giving a little slap to the stomachs of his two visitors. “We have business to talk over, and, faith! we’ll do it glass in hand; that’s the true way to take things.”

“If you do your business that way, you ought to be fatter than you are,” said Rigou.

“I work too hard; I’m not like you two, confined to the house and bewitched there, like old dotards. Well, well, after all that’s the best way; you can do your business comfortably in an arm-chair, with your back to the fire and your belly at table; custom goes to you, I have to go after it. But now, come in, come in! the house is yours for the time you stay.”

A servant, in blue livery edged with scarlet, took the horse by the bridle and led him into the courtyard, where were the offices and the stable.

Gaubertin left his guests to walk about the garden for a moment, while he went to give his orders and arrange about the breakfast.

“Well, my wolves,” he said, as he returned, rubbing his hands, “the gendarmerie of Soulanges were seen this morning at daybreak, marching towards Conches; no doubt they mean to arrest the peasants for depredations; ha, ha! things are getting warm, warm! By this time,” he added, looking at his watch, “those fellows may have been arrested.”

“Probably,” said Rigou.

“Well, what do you all say over there? Has anything been decided?”

“What is there to decide?” asked Rigou. “We have no part in it,” he added, looking at Soudry.

“How do you mean nothing to decide? If Les Aigues is sold as the result of our coalition, who is to gain five or six hundred thousand francs out of it? Do you expect me to, all alone? No, my inside is not strong enough to split up two millions, with three children to establish, and a wife who hasn’t the first idea about the value of money; no, I must have associates. Here’s the gendarme, he has plenty of funds all ready. I know he doesn’t hold a single mortgage that isn’t ready to mature; he only lends now on notes at sight of which I endorse. I’ll go into this thing by the amount of eight hundred thousand francs; my son, the judge, two hundred thousand; and I count on the gendarme for two hundred thousand more; now, how much will you put in, skull-cap?”

“All the rest,” replied Rigou, stiffly.

“The devil! well, I wish I had my hand where your heart is!” exclaimed Gaubertin. “Now what are you going to do?”

“Whatever you do; tell your plan.”

“My plan,” said Gaubertin, “is to take double, and sell half to the Conches, and Cerneux, and Blangy folks who want to buy. Soudry has his clients, and you yours, and I, mine. That’s not the difficulty. The thing is, how are we going to arrange among ourselves? How shall we divide up the great lots?”

“Nothing easier,” said Rigou. “We’ll each take what we like best. I, for one, shall stand in nobody’s way; I’ll take the woods in common with Soudry and my son-in-law; the timber has been so injured that you won’t care for it now, and you may have all the rest. Faith, it is worth the money you’ll put into it!”

“Will you sign that agreement?” said Soudry.

“A written agreement is worth nothing,” replied Gaubertin. “Besides, you know I am playing above board; I have perfect confidence in Rigou, and he shall be the purchaser.”

“That will satisfy me,” said Rigou.

“I will make only one condition,” added Gaubertin. “I must have the pavilion of the Rendezvous, with all its appurtenances, and fifty acres of the surrounding land. I shall make it my country-house, and it shall be near my woods. Madame Gaubertin—Madame Isaure, for that’s what she wants people to call her—says she shall make it her villa.”

“I’m willing,” said Rigou.

“Well, now, between ourselves,” continued Gaubertin, after looking about him on all sides and making sure that no one could overhear him, “do you think they are capable of striking a blow?”

“Such as?” asked Rigou, who never allowed himself to understand a hint.

“Well, if the worst of the band, the best shot, sent a ball whistling round the ears of the count—just to frighten him?”

“He’s a man to rush at an assailant and collar him.”

“Michaud, then.”

“Michaud would do nothing at the moment, but he’d watch and spy till he found out the man and those who instigated him.”

“You are right,” said Gaubertin; “those peasants must make a riot and a few must be sent to the galleys. Well, so much the better for us; the authorities will catch the worst, whom we shall want to get rid of after they’ve done the work. There are those blackguards, the Tonsards and Bonnebault—”

“Tonsard is ready for mischief,” said Soudry, “I know that; and we’ll work him up by Vaudoyer and Courtecuisse.”

“I’ll answer for Courtecuisse,” said Rigou.

“And I hold Vaudoyer in the hollow of my hand.”

“Be cautious!” said Rigou; “before everything else be cautious.”

“Now, papa skull-cap, do you mean to tell me that there’s any harm in speaking of things as they are? Is it we who are indicting and arresting, or gleaning or depredating? If Monsieur le comte knows what he’s about and leases the woods to the receiver-general it is all up with our schemes,—‘Farewell baskets, the vintage is o’er’; in that case you will lose more than I. What we say here is between ourselves and for ourselves; for I certainly wouldn’t say a word to Vaudoyer that I couldn’t repeat to God and man. But it is not forbidden, I suppose, to profit by any events that may take place. The peasantry of this canton are hot-headed; the general’s exactions, his severity, Michaud’s persecutions, and those of his keepers have exasperated them; to-day things have come to a crisis and I’ll bet there’s a rumpus going on now with the gendarmerie. And so, let’s go and breakfast.”

Madame Gaubertin came into the garden just then. She was a rather fair woman with long curls, called English, hanging down her cheeks, who played the style of sentimental virtue, pretended never to have known love, talked platonics to all the men about her, and kept the prosecuting-attorney at her beck and call. She was given to caps with large bows, but preferred to wear only her hair. She danced, and at forty-five years of age had the mincing manner of a girl; her feet, however, were large and her hands frightful. She wished to be called Isaure, because among her other oddities and absurdities she had the taste to repudiate the name of Gaubertin as vulgar. Her eyes were light and her hair of an undecided color, something like dirty nankeen. Such as she was, she was taken as a model by a number of young ladies, who stabbed the skies with their glances, and posed as angels.

“Well, gentlemen,” she said, bowing, “I have some strange news for you. The gendarmerie have returned.”

“Did they make any prisoners?”

“None; the general, it seems, had previously obtained the pardon of the depredators. It was given in honor of this happy anniversary of the king’s restoration to France.”

The three associates looked at each other.

“He is cleverer than I thought for, that big cuirassier!” said Gaubertin. “Well, come to breakfast. After all, the game is not lost, only postponed; it is your affair now, Rigou.”

Soudry and Rigou drove back disappointed, not being able as yet to plan any other catastrophe to serve their ends and relying, as Gaubertin advised, on what might turn up. Like certain Jacobins at the outset of the Revolution who were furious with Louis XVI.‘s conciliations, and who provoked severe measures at court in the hope of producing anarchy, which to them meant fortune and power, the formidable enemies of General Montcornet staked their present hopes on the severity which Michaud and his keepers were likely to employ against future depredators. Gaubertin promised them his assistance, without explaining who were his co-operators, for he did not wish them to know about his relations with Sibilet. Nothing can equal the prudence of a man of Gaubertin’s stamp, unless it be that of an ex-gendarme or an unfrocked priest. This plot could not have been brought to a successful issue,—a successfully evil issue,—unless by three such men as these, steeped in hatred and self-interest.

CHAPTER V. VICTORY WITHOUT A FIGHT

Madame Michaud's fears were the effect of that second sight which comes of true passion. Exclusively absorbed by one only being, the soul finally grasps the whole moral world which surrounds that being; it sees clearly. A woman when she loves feels the same presentiments which disquiet her later when a mother.

While the poor young woman listened to the confused voices coming from afar across an unknown space, a scene was really happening in the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert which threatened her husband's life.

About five o'clock that morning early risers had seen the gendarmerie of Soulanges on its way to Conches. The news circulated rapidly; and those whom it chiefly interested were much surprised to learn from others, who lived on high ground, that a detachment commanded by the lieutenant of Ville-aux-Fayes had marched through the forest of Les Aigues. As it was a Monday, there were already good reasons why the peasants should be at the tavern; but it was also the eve of the anniversary of the restoration of the Bourbons, and though the frequenters of Tonsard's den had no need of that "august cause" (as they said in those days) to explain their presence at the Grand-I-Vert, they did not fail to make the most of it if the mere shadow of an official functionary appeared.

Vaudoyer, Courtecuisse, Tonsard and his family, Godain, and an old vine-dresser named Laroche, were there early in the morning. The latter was a man who scratched a living from day to day; he was one of the delinquents collected in Blangy under the sort of subscription invented by Sibilet and Courtecuisse to disgust the general by the results of his indictments. Blangy had supplied three men, twelve women, also eight girls and five boys for whom parent were answerable, all of whom were in a condition of pauperism; but they were the only ones who could be found that were so. The year 1823 had been a very profitable one to the peasantry, and 1826 as likely, through the enormous quantity of wine yielded, to bring them in a good deal of money; add to this the works at Les Aigues, undertaken by the general, which had put a great deal more in circulation throughout the three districts which bordered on the estate. It had therefore been quite difficult to find in Blangy, Conches, and Cerneux, one hundred and twenty indigent persons against whom to bring the suits; and in order to do so, they had taken old women, mothers, and grandmothers of those who owned property but who possessed nothing of their own, like Tonsard's mother. Laroche, an old

laborer, possessed absolutely nothing; he was not, like Tonsard, hot-blooded and vicious,—his motive power was a cold, dull hatred; he toiled in silence with a sullen face; work was intolerable to him, but he had to work to live; his features were hard and their expression repulsive. Though sixty years old, he was still strong, except that his back was bent; he saw no future before him, no spot that he could call his own, and he envied those who possessed the land; for this reason he had no pity on the forests of Les Aigues, and took pleasure in despoiling them uselessly.

“Will they be allowed to put us in prison?” he was saying. “After Conches they’ll come to Blangy. I’m an old offender, and I shall get three months.”

“What can we do against the gendarmerie, old drunkard?” said Vaudoyer.

“Why! cut the legs of their horses with our scythes. That’ll bring them down; their muskets are not loaded, and when they find us ten to one against them they’ll decamp. If the three villages all rose and killed two or three gendarmes, they couldn’t guillotine the whole of us. They’d have to give way, as they did on the other side of Burgundy, where they sent a regiment. Bah! that regiment came back again, and the peasants cut the woods just as much as they ever did.”

“If we kill,” said Vaudoyer; “it is better to kill one man; the question is, how to do it without danger and frighten those Arminacs so that they’ll be driven out of the place.”

“Which one shall we kill?” asked Laroche.

“Michaud,” said Courtecuisse. “Vaudoyer is right, he’s perfectly right. You’ll see that when a keeper is sent to the shades there won’t be one of them willing to stay even in broad daylight to watch us. Now they’re there night and day,—demons!”

“Wherever one goes,” said old Mother Tonsard,—who was seventy-eight years old, and presented a parchment face honey-combed with the small-pox, lighted by a pair of green eyes, and framed with dirty-white hair, which escaped in strands from a red handkerchief,—“wherever one goes, there they are! they stop us, they open our bundles, and if there’s a single branch, a single twig of a miserable hazel, they seize the whole bundle, and they say they’ll arrest us. Ha, the villains! there’s no deceiving them; if they suspect you, you’ve got to undo the bundle. Dogs! all three are not worth a farthing! Yes, kill ‘em, and it won’t ruin France, I tell you.”

“Little Vatel is not so bad,” said Madame Tonsard.

“He!” said Laroche, “he does his business, like the others; when there’s a joke going he’ll joke with you, but you are none the better with him for that. He’s worse than the rest,—heartless to poor folks, like Michaud himself.”

“Michaud has got a pretty wife, though,” said Nicolas Tonsard.

“She’s with young,” said the old woman; “and if this thing goes on there’ll be a queer kind of baptism for the little one when she calves.”

“Oh! those Arminacs!” cried Marie Tonsard; “there’s no laughing with them; and if you did, they’d threaten to arrest you.”

“You’ve tried your hand at cajoling them, have you?” said Courtecuisse.

“You may bet on that.”

“Well,” said Tonsard with a determined air, “they are men like other men, and they can be got rid of.”

“But I tell you,” said Marie, continuing her topic, “they won’t be cajoled; I don’t know what’s the matter with them; that bully at the pavilion, he’s married, but Vatel, Gaillard, and Steingel are not; they’ve not a woman belonging to them; indeed, there’s not a woman in the place who would marry them.”

“Well, we shall see how things go at the harvest and the vintage,” said Tonsard.

“They can’t stop the gleaning,” said the old woman.

“I don’t know that,” remarked Madame Tonsard. “Groison said that the mayor was going to publish a notice that no one should glean without a certificate of pauperism; and who’s to give that certificate? Himself, of course. He won’t give many, I tell you! And they say he is going to issue an order that no one shall enter the fields till the carts are all loaded.”

“Why, the fellow’s a pestilence!” cried Tonsard, beside himself with rage.

“I heard that only yesterday,” said Madame Tonsard. “I offered Groison a glass of brandy to get something out of him.”

“Groison! there’s another lucky fellow!” said Vaudoyer, “they’ve built him a house and given him a good wife, and he’s got an income and clothes fit for a king. There was I, field-keeper for twenty years, and all I got was the rheumatism.”

“Yes, he’s very lucky,” said Godain, “he owns property—”

“And we go without, like the fools that we are,” said Vaudoyer. “Come, let’s be off and find out what’s going on at Conches; they are not so patient over there as we are.”

“Come on,” said Laroche, who was none too steady on his legs. “If I don’t exterminate one of two of those fellows may I lose my name.”

“You!” said Tonsard, “you’d let them put the whole district in prison; but I—if they dare to touch my old mother, there’s my gun and it never misses.”

“Well,” said Laroche to Vaudoyer, “I tell you that if they make a single prisoner at Conches one gendarme shall fall.”

“He has said it, old Laroche!” cried Courtecuisse.

“He has said it,” remarked Vaudoyer, “but he hasn’t done it, and he won’t do it. What good would it do to get yourself guillotined for some gendarme or other? No, if you kill, I say, kill Michaud.”

During this scene Catherine Tonsard stood sentinel at the door to warn the drinkers to keep silent if any one passed. In spite of their half-drunken legs they sprang rather than walked out of the tavern, and their bellicose temper started them at a good pace on the road to Conches, which led for over a mile along the park wall of Les Aigues.

Conches was a true Burgundian village, with one street, which was crossed by the main road. The houses were built either of brick or of cobblestones, and were squalid in aspect. Following the mail-road from Ville-aux-Fayes, the village was seen from the rear and there it presented rather a picturesque effect. Between the road and the Ronquerolles woods, which continued those of Les Aigues and crowned the heights, flowed a little river, and several houses, rather prettily grouped, enlivened the scene. The church and the parsonage stood alone and were seen from the park of Les Aigues, which came nearly up to them. In front of the church was a square bordered by trees, where the conspirators of the Grand-I-Vert saw the gendarmerie and hastened their already hasty steps. Just then three men on horseback rode rapidly out of the park of Les Aigues and the peasants at once recognized the general, his groom, and Michaud the bailiff, who came at a gallop into the square. Tonsard and his party arrived a minute or two after them. The delinquents, men and women, had made no resistance, and were standing between five of the Soulanges gendarmes and fifteen of those from Ville-aux-Fayes. The whole village had assembled. The fathers, mothers, and children of the prisoners were going and coming and bringing them what they might want in prison. It was a curious scene, that of a population one and all exasperated, but nearly all silent, as though they had made up their minds to a course of action. The old women and the young ones alone spoke. The children, boys and girls, were perched on piles of wood and heaps of stones to get a better sight of what was happening.

“They have chosen their time, those hussars of the guillotine,” said one old woman; “they are making a fete of it.”

“Are you going to let ‘em carry of your man like that? How shall you manage to live for three months?—the best of the year, too, when he could earn so much.”

“It’s they who rob us,” replied the woman, looking at the gendarmes with a threatening air.

“What do you mean by that, old woman?” said the sergeant. “If you insult us it won’t take long to settle you.”

“I meant nothing,” said the old woman, in a humble and piteous tone.

“I heard you say something just now you may have cause to repent of.”

“Come, come, be calm, all of you,” said the mayor of Conches, who was also the postmaster. “What the devil is the use of talking? These men, as you know very well, are under orders and must obey.”

“That’s true; it’s the owner of Les Aigues who persecutes us—But patience!”

Just then the general rode into the square and his arrival caused a few groans which did not trouble him in the least. He rode straight up to the lieutenant in command, and after saying a few words gave him a paper; the officer then turned to his men and said: “Release your prisoners; the general has obtained their pardon.”

General Montcornet was then speaking to the mayor; after a few moments’ conversation in a low tone, the latter, addressing the delinquents, who expected to sleep in prison and were a good deal surprised to find themselves free, said to them:—

“My friends, thank Monsieur le comte. You owe your release to him. He went to Paris and obtained your pardon in honor of the anniversary of the king’s restoration. I hope that in future you will conduct yourself properly to a man who has behaved so well to you, and that you will in future respect his property. Long live the King!”

The peasants shouted “Long live the King!” with enthusiasm, to avoid shouting, “Hurrah for the Comte de Montcornet!”

The scene was a bit of policy arranged between the general, the prefect, and the attorney-general; for they were all anxious, while showing enough firmness to keep the local authorities up to their duty and awe the country-people, to be as gentle as possible, fully realizing as they did the difficulties of the question. In fact, if

resistance had occurred, the government would have been in a tight place. As Laroche truly said, they could not guillotine or even convict a whole community.

The general invited the mayor of Conches, the lieutenant, and the sergeant to breakfast. The conspirators of the Grand-I-Vert adjourned to the tavern of Conches, where the delinquents spent in drink the money their relations had given them to take to prison, sharing it with the Blangy people, who were naturally part of the wedding,—the word "wedding" being applied indiscriminately in Burgundy to all such rejoicings. To drink, quarrel, fight, eat and go home drunk and sick,—that is a wedding to these peasants.

The general, who had come by the park, took his guests back through the forest that they might see for themselves the injury done to the timber, and so judge of the importance of the question.

Just as Rigou and Soudry were on their way back to Blangy, the count and countess, Emile Blondet, the lieutenant of gendarmerie, the sergeant, and the mayor of Conches were finishing their breakfast in the splendid dining-room where Bouret's luxury had left the delightful traces already described by Blondet in his letter to Nathan.

"It would be a terrible pity to abandon this beautiful home," said the lieutenant, who had never before been at Les Aigues, and who was glancing over a glass of champagne at the circling nymphs that supported the ceiling.

"We intend to defend it to the death," said Blondet.

"If I say that," continued the lieutenant, looking at his sergeant as if to enjoin silence, "it is because the general's enemies are not only among the peasantry—"

The worthy man was quite moved by the excellence of the breakfast, the magnificence of the silver service, the imperial luxury that surrounded him, and Blondet's clever talk excited him as much as the champagne he had imbibed.

"Enemies! have I enemies?" said the general, surprised.

"He, so kind!" added the countess.

"But you are on bad terms with our mayor, Monsieur Gaubertin," said the lieutenant. "It would be wise, for the sake of the future, to be reconciled with him."

"With him!" cried the count. "Then you don't know that he was my former steward, and a swindler!"

"A swindler no longer," said the lieutenant, "for he is mayor of Ville-aux-Fayes."

“Ha, ha!” laughed Blondet, “the lieutenant’s wit is keen; evidently a mayor is essentially an honest man.”

The lieutenant, convinced by the count’s words that it was useless to attempt to enlighten him, said no more on that subject, and the conversation changed.

CHAPTER VI. THE FOREST AND THE HARVEST

The scene at Conches had, apparently, a good effect on the peasantry; on the other hand, the count's faithful keepers were more than ever watchful that only dead wood should be gathered in the forest of Les Aigues. But for the last twenty years the woods had been so thoroughly cleared out that very little else than live wood was now there; and this the peasantry set about killing, in preparation for winter, by a simple process, the results of which could only be discovered in the course of time. Tonsard's mother went daily into the forest; the keepers saw her enter; knew where she would come out; watched for her and made her open her bundle, where, to be sure, were only fallen branches, dried chips, and broken and withered twigs. The old woman would whine and complain at the distance she had to go at her age to gather such a miserable bunch of fagots. But she did not tell that she had been in the thickest part of the wood and had removed the earth at the base of certain young trees, round which she had then cut off a ring of bark, replacing the earth, moss, and dead leaves just as they were before she touched them. It was impossible that any one could discover this annular incision, made, not like a cut, but more like the ripping or gnawing of animals or those destructive insects called in different regions borers, or turks, or white worms, which are the first stage of cockchafers. These destructive pests are fond of the bark of trees; they get between the bark and the sap-wood and eat their way round. If the tree is large enough for the insect to pass into its second state (of larvae, in which it remains dormant until its second metamorphose) before it has gone round the trunk, the tree lives, because so long as even a small bit of the sap-wood remains covered by the bark, the tree will still grow and recover itself. To realize to what a degree entomology affects agriculture, horticulture, and all earth products, we must know that naturalists like Latreille, the Comte Dejean, Klugg of Berlin, Gene of Turin, etc., find that the vast majority of all known insects live at the sacrifice of vegetation; that the coleoptera (a catalogue of which has lately been published by Monsieur Dejean) have twenty-seven thousand species, and that, in spite of the most earnest research on the part of entomologists of all countries, there is an enormous number of species of whom they cannot trace the triple transformations which belong to all insects; that there is, in short, not only a special insect to every plant, but that all terrestrial products, however much they may be manipulated by human industry, have their particular parasite. Thus flax, after covering the human body and hanging the human being, after roaming the world on the back of an army, becomes writing-paper; and those

who write or who read are familiar with the habits and morals of an insect called the “paper-louse,” an insect of really marvellous celerity and behavior; it undergoes its mysterious transformations in a ream of white paper which you have carefully put away; you see it gliding and frisking along in its shining robe, that looks like isinglass or mica,—truly a little fish of another element.

The borer is the despair of the land-owner; he works underground; no Sicilian vespers for him until he becomes a cockchafer! If the populations only realized with what untold disasters they are threatened in case they let the cockchafers and the caterpillars get the upper hand, they would pay more attention than they do to municipal regulations.

Holland came near perishing; its dikes were undermined by the teredo, and science is unable to discover the insect from which that mollusk derives, just as science still remains ignorant of the metamorphoses of the cochineal. The ergot, or spur, of rye is apparently a population of insects where the genius of science has been able, so far, to discover only one slight movement. Thus, while awaiting the harvest and gleaning, fifty old women imitated the borer at the feet of five or six hundred trees which were fated to become skeletons and to put forth no more leaves in the spring. They were carefully chosen in the least accessible places, so that the surrounding branches concealed them.

Who conveyed the secret information by which this was done? No one. Courtecuisse happened to complain in Tonsard’s tavern of having found a tree wilting in his garden; it seemed he said, to have a disease, and he suspected a borer; for he, Courtecuisse, knew what borers were, and if they once circled a tree just below the ground, the tree died. Thereupon he explained the process. The old women at once set to work at the same destruction, with the mystery and cleverness of gnomes; and their efforts were doubled by the rules now enforced by the mayor of Blangy and necessarily followed by the mayors of the adjoining districts.

The great land-owners of the department applauded General de Montcornet’s course; and the prefect in his private drawing-room declared that if, instead of living in Paris, other land-owners would come and live on their estates and follow such a course together, a solution of the difficulty could be obtained; for certain measures, added the prefect, ought to be taken, and taken in concert, modified by benefactions and by an enlightened philanthropy, such as every one could see actuated in General Montcornet.

The general and his wife, assisted by the abbe, tried the effects of such benevolence. They studied the subject, and endeavored to show by incontestable results to those who pillaged them that more money could be made by legitimate

toil. They supplied flax and paid for the spinning; the countess had the thread woven into linen suitable for towels, aprons, and coarse napkins for kitchen use, and for underclothing for the very poor. The general began improvements which needed many laborers, and he employed none but those in the adjoining districts. Sibilet was in charge of the works and the Abbe Brossette gave the countess lists of the most needy, and often brought them to her himself. Madame de Montcornet attended to these matters personally in the great antechamber which opened upon the portico. It was a beautiful waiting-room, floored with squares of white and red marble, warmed by a porcelain stove, and furnished with benches covered with red plush.

It was there that one morning, just before harvest, old Mother Tonsard brought her granddaughter Catherine, who had to make, she said, a dreadful confession,—dreadful for the honor of a poor but honest family. While the old woman addressed the countess Catherine stood in an attitude of conscious guilt. Then she related on her own account the unfortunate “situation” in which she was placed, which she had confided to none but her grandmother; for her mother, she knew, would turn her out, and her father, an honorable man, might kill her. If she only had a thousand francs she could be married to a poor laborer named Godain, who *knew all*, and who loved her like a brother; he could buy a poor bit of ground and build a cottage if she had that sum. It was very touching. The countess promised the money; resolving to devote the price of some fancy to this marriage. The happy marriages of Michaud and Groison encouraged her. Besides, such a wedding would be a good example to the people of the neighborhood and stimulate to virtuous conduct. The marriage of Catherine Tonsard and Godain was accordingly arranged by means of the countess’s thousand francs.

Another time a horrible old woman, Mother Bonnebault, who lived in a hut between the gate of Conches and the village, brought back a great bundle of skeins of linen thread.

“Madame la comtesse has done wonders,” said the abbe, full of hope as to the moral progress of his savages. “That old woman did immense damage to your woods, but now she has no time for it; she stays at home and spins from morning till night; her time is all taken up and well paid for.”

Peace reigned everywhere. Groison made very satisfactory reports; depredations seemed to have ceased, and it is even possible that the state of the neighborhood and the feeling of the inhabitants might really have changed if it had not been for the revengeful eagerness of Gaubertin, the cabals of the leading society of Soulanges, and the intrigues of Rigou, who one and all, with “the affair” in view,

blew the embers of hatred and crime in the hearts of the peasantry of the valley des Aigues.

The keepers still complained of finding a great many branches cut with shears in the deeper parts of the wood and left to dry, evidently as a provision for winter. They watched for the delinquents without ever being able to catch them. The count, assisted by Groison, had given certificates of pauperism to only thirty or forty of the real poor of the district; but the other two mayors had been less strict. The more clement the count showed himself in the affair at Conches the more determined he was to enforce the laws about gleaning, which had now degenerated into theft. He did not interfere with the management of three of his farms which were leased to tenants, nor with those whose tenants worked for his profit, of which he had a number; but he managed six farms himself, each of about two hundred acres, and he now published a notice that it was forbidden, under pain of being arrested and made to pay the fine imposed by the courts, to enter those fields before the crop was carried away. The order concerned only his own immediate property. Rigou, who knew the country well, had let his farm-lands in portions and on short leases to men who knew how to get in their own crops, and who paid him in grain; therefore gleaning did not affect him. The other proprietors were peasants, and no nefarious gleaning was attempted on their land.

When the harvest began the count went himself to Michaud to see how things were going on. Groison, who advised him to do this, was to be present himself at the gleaning of each particular field. The inhabitants of cities can have no idea what gleaning is to the inhabitants of the country; the passion of these sons of the soil for it seems inexplicable; there are women who will give up well-paid employments to glean. The wheat they pick up seems to them sweeter than any other; and the provision they thus make for their chief and most substantial food has to them an extraordinary attraction. Mothers take their babes and their little girls and boys; the feeblest old men drag themselves into the wheat-fields; and even those who own property are paupers for the nonce. All gleaners appear in rags.

The count and Michaud were present on horseback when the first tattered batch entered the first fields from which the wheat had been carried. It was ten o’clock in the morning. August had been a hot month, the sky was cloudless, blue as a periwinkle; the earth was baked, the wheat flamed, the harvestmen worked with their faces scorched by the reflection of the sun-rays on the hard and arid earth. All were silent, their shirts wet with perspiration; while from time to time, they slaked their thirst with water from round, earthenware jugs, furnished with two handles and a mouth-piece stoppered with a willow stick.

At the father end of the stubble-field stood the carts which contained the sheaves, and near them a group of at least a hundred beings who far exceeded the hideous conceptions of Murillo and Teniers, the boldest painters of such scenes, or of Callot, that poet of the fantastic in poverty. The pictured bronze legs, the bare heads, the ragged garments so curiously faded, so damp with grease, so darned and spotted and discolored, in short, the painters' ideal of the material of abject poverty was far surpassed by this scene; while the expression on those faces, greedy, anxious, doltish, idiotic, savage, showed the everlasting advantage which nature possesses over art by its comparison with the immortal compositions of those princes of color. There were old women with necks like turkeys, and hairless, scarlet eyelids, who stretched their heads forward like setters before a partridge; there were children, silent as soldiers under arms, little girls who stamped like animals waiting for their food; the natures of childhood and old age were crushed beneath the fierceness of a savage greed,—greed for the property of others now their own by long abuse. All eyes were savage, all gestures menacing; but every one kept silence in presence of the count, the field-keeper, and the bailiff. At this moment all classes were represented,—the great land-owners, the farmers, the working men, the paupers; the social question was defined to the eye; hunger had convoked the actors in the scene. The sun threw into relief the hard and hollow features of those faces; it burned the bare feet dusty with the soil; children were present with no clothing but a torn blouse, their blond hair tangled with straw and chips; some women brought their babes just able to walk, and left them rolling in the furrows.

The gloomy scene was harrowing to the old soldier, whose heart was kind, and he said to Michaud: "It pains me to see it. One must know the importance of these measures to be able to insist upon them."

"If every land-owner followed your example, lived on his property, and did the good that you and yours are doing, general, there would be, I won't say no poor, for they are always with us, but no poor man who could not live by his labor."

"The mayors of Conches, Cerneux, and Soulanges have sent us all their paupers," said Groison, who had now looked at the certificates; "they had no right to do so."

"No, but our people will go to their districts," said the general. "For the time being we have done enough by preventing the gleaning before the sheaves were taken away; we had better go step by step," he added, turning to leave the field.

"Did you hear him?" said Mother Tonsard to the old Bonnebault woman, for the general's last words were said in a rather louder tone than the rest, and reached the ears of the two old women who were posted in the road which led beside the field.

“Yes, yes! we haven’t got to the end yet,—a tooth to-day and to-morrow an ear; if they could find a sauce for our livers they’d eat ‘em as they do a calf’s!” said old Bonnebault, whose threatening face was turned in profile to the general as he passed her, though in the twinkling of an eye she changed its expression to one of hypocritical softness and submission as she hastened to make him a profound curtsey.

“So you are gleaning, are you, though my wife helps you to earn so much money?”

“Hey! my dear gentleman, may God preserve you in good health! but, don’t you see, my grandson squanders all I earn, and I’m forced to scratch up a little wheat to get bread in the winter,—yes, yes, I glean just a bit; it all helps.”

The gleaning proved of little profit to the gleaners. The farmers and tenant-farmers, finding themselves backed up, took care that their wheat was well reaped, and superintended the making of the sheaves and their safe removal, so that little or none of the pillage of former years could take place.

Accustomed to get a good proportion of wheat in their gleaning, the false as well as the true poor, forgetting the count’s pardon at Conches, now felt a deep but silent anger against him, which was aggravated by the Tonsards, Courtecuisse, Bonnebault, Laroche, Vaudoyer, Godain, and their adherents. Matters went worse still after the vintage; for the gathering of the refuse grape was not allowed until Sibilet had examined the vines with extreme care. This last restriction exasperated these sons of the soil to the highest pitch; but when so great a social distance separates the angered class from the threatened class, words and threats are lost; nothing comes to the surface or is perceived but facts; meantime the malcontents work underground like moles.

The fair of Soulanges took place as usual quite peacefully, except for certain jarrings between the leading society and the second-class society of Soulanges, brought about by the despotism of the queen, who could not tolerate the empire founded and established over the heart of the brilliant Lupin by the beautiful Euphemie Plissoud, for she herself laid permanent claim to his fickle fervors.

The count and countess did not appear at the fair nor at the Tivoli fete; and that, again, was counted a wrong by the Soudrys, the Gaubertins, and their adherents; it was pride, it was disdain, said the Soudry salon. During this time the countess was filling the void caused by Emile’s return to Paris with the immense interest and pleasure all fine souls take in the good they are doing, or think they do; and the count, for his part, applied himself no less zealously to changes and ameliorations in the management of his estate, which he expected and believed would modify and

benefit the condition of the people and hence their characters. Madame de Montcornet, assisted by the advice and experience of the Abbe Brossette, came, little by little, to have a thorough and statistical knowledge of all the poor families of the district, their respective condition, their wants, their means of subsistence, and the sort of help she must give to each to obtain work so as not to make them lazy or idle.

The countess had placed Genevieve Niseron, La Pechina, in a convent at Auxerre, under pretext of having her taught to sew that she might employ her in her own house, but really to save her from the shameful attempts of Nicolas Tonsard, whom Rigou had managed to save from the conscription. The countess also believed that a religious education, the cloister, and monastic supervision, would subdue the ardent passions of the precocious little girl, whose Montenegrin blood seemed to her like a threatening flame which might one day set fire to the domestic happiness of her faithful Olympe.

So all was at peace at the chateau des Aigues. The count, misled by Sibilet, reassured by Michaud, congratulated himself on his firmness, and thanked his wife for having contributed by her benevolence to the immense comfort of their tranquillity. The question of the sale of his timber was laid aside till he should go to Paris and arrange with the dealers. He had not the slightest notion of how to do business, and he was in total ignorance of the power wielded by Gaubertin over the current of the Yonne,—the main line of conveyance which supplied the timber of the Paris market.

CHAPTER VII. THE GREYHOUND

Towards the middle of September Emile Blondet, who had gone to Paris to publish a book, returned to refresh himself at Les Aigues and to think over the work he was planning for the winter. At Les Aigues, the loving and sincere qualities which succeed adolescence in a young man's soul reappeared in the used-up journalist.

"What a fine soul!" was the comment of the count and the countess when they spoke of him.

Men who are accustomed to move among the abysses of social nature, to understand all and to repress nothing, make themselves an oasis in the heart, where they forget their perversities and those of others; they become within that narrow and sacred circle,—saints; there, they possess the delicacy of women, they give themselves up to a momentary realization of their ideal, they become angelic for some one being who adores them, and they are not playing comedy; they join their soul to innocence, so to speak; they feel the need to brush off the mud, to heal their sores, to bathe their wounds. At Les Aigues Emile Blondet was without bitterness, without sarcasm, almost without wit; he made no epigrams, he was gentle as a lamb, and platonically tender.

"He is such a good young fellow that I miss him terribly when he is not here," said the general. "I do wish he could make a fortune and not lead that Paris life of his."

Never did the glorious landscape and park of Les Aigues seem as luxuriantly beautiful as it did just then. The first autumn days were beginning, when the earth, languid from her procreations and delivered of her products, exhales the delightful odors of vegetation. At this time the woods, especially, are delicious; they begin to take the russet warmth of Sienna earth, and the green-bronze tones which form the lovely tapestry beneath which they hide from the cold of winter.

Nature, having shown herself in springtime jaunty and joyous as a brunette glowing with hope, becomes in autumn sad and gentle as a blonde full of pensive memories; the turf yellows, the last flowers unfold their pale corollas, the white-eyed daisies are fewer in the grass, only their crimson calices are seen. Yellows abound; the shady places are lighter for lack of leafage, but darker in tone; the sun, already oblique, slides its furtive orange rays athwart them, leaving long luminous traces which rapidly disappear, like the train of a woman's gown as she bids adieu.

On the morning of the second day after his arrival, Emile was at a window of his bedroom, which opened upon a terrace with a balustrade from which a noble view

could be seen. This balcony ran the whole length of the apartments of the countess, on the side of the chateau towards the forests and the Blangy landscape. The pond, which would have been called a lake were Les Aigues nearer Paris, was partly in view, so was the long canal; the Silver-spring, coming from across the pavilion of the Rendezvous, crossed the lawn with its sheeny ribbon, reflecting the yellow sand.

Beyond the park, between the village and the walls, lay the cultivated parts of Blangy,—meadows where the cows were grazing, small properties surrounded by hedges, filled with fruit of all kinds, nut and apple trees. By way of frame, the heights on which the noble forest-trees were ranged, tier above tier, closed in the scene. The countess had come out in her slippers to look at the flowers in her balcony, which were sending up their morning fragrance; she wore a cambric dressing-gown, beneath which the rosy tints of her white shoulders could be seen; a coquettish little cap was placed in a bewitching manner on her hair, which escaped it recklessly; her little feet showed their warm flesh color through the transparent stockings; the cambric gown, unconfined at the waist, floated open as the breeze took it, and showed an embroidered petticoat.

“Oh! are you there?” she said.

“Yes.”

“What are you looking at?”

“A pretty question! You have torn me from the contemplation of Nature. Tell me, countess, will you go for a walk in the woods this morning before breakfast?”

“What an idea! You know I have a horror of walking.”

“We will only walk a little way; I’ll drive you in the tilbury and take Joseph to hold the horses. You have never once set foot in your forest; and I have just noticed something very curious, a phenomenon; there are spots where the tree-tops are the color of Florentine bronze, the leaves are dried—”

“Well, I’ll dress.”

“Oh, if you do, we can’t get off for two hours. Take a shawl, put on a bonnet, and boots; that’s all you want. I shall tell them to harness.”

“You always make me do what you want; I’ll be ready in a minute.”

“General,” said Blondet, waking the count, who grumbled and turned over, like a man who wants his morning sleep. “We are going for a drive; won’t you come?”

A quarter of an hour later the tilbury was slowly rolling along the park avenue, followed by a liveried groom on horseback.

The morning was a September morning. The dark blue of the sky burst forth here and there from the gray of the clouds, which seemed the sky itself, the ether seeming to be the accessory; long lines of ultramarine lay upon the horizon, but in strata, which alternated with other lines like sand-bars; these tones changed and grew green at the level of the forests. The earth beneath this overhanging mantle was moistly warm, like a woman when she rises; it exhaled sweet, luscious odors, which yet were wild, not civilized,—the scent of cultivation was added to the scents of the woods. Just then the Angelus was ringing at Blangy, and the sounds of the bell, mingling with the wild concert of the forest, gave harmony to the silence. Here and there were rising vapors, white, diaphanous.

Seeing these lovely preparations of Nature, the fancy had seized Olympe Michaud to accompany her husband, who had to give an order to a keeper whose house was not far off. The Soulanges doctor advised her to walk as long as she could do so without fatigue; she was afraid of the midday heat and went out only in the early morning or evening. Michaud now took her with him, and they were followed by the dog he loved best,—a handsome greyhound, mouse-colored with white spots, greedy, like all greyhounds, and as full of vices as most animals who know they are loved and petted.

So, then the tilbury reached the pavilion of the Rendezvous, the countess, who stopped to ask how Madame Michaud felt, was told she had gone into the forest with her husband.

“Such weather inspires everybody,” said Blondet, turning his horse at hazard into one of the six avenues of the forest; “Joseph, you know the woods, don’t you?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

And away they went. The avenue they took happened to be one of the most delightful in the forest; it soon turned and grew narrower, and presently became a winding way, on which the sunshine flickered through rifts in the leafy roof, and where the breeze brought odors of lavender, and thyme, and the wild mint, and that of falling leaves, which sighed as they fell. Dew-drops on the trees and on the grass were scattered like seeds by the passing of the light carriage; the occupants as they rolled along caught glimpses of the mysterious visions of the woods,—those cool depths, where the verdure is moist and dark, where the light softens as it fades; those white-birch glades o’ertopped by some centennial tree, the Hercules of the forest; those glorious assemblages of knotted, mossy trunks, whitened and

furrowed, and the banks of delicate wild plants and fragile flowers which grow between a woodland road and the forest. The brooks sang. Truly there is a nameless pleasure in driving a woman along the ups and downs of a slippery way carpeted with moss, where she pretends to be afraid or really is so, and you are conscious that she is drawing closer to you, letting you feel, voluntarily or involuntarily, the cool moisture of her arm, the weight of her round, white shoulder, though she merely smiles when told that she hinders you in driving. The horse seems to know the secret of these interruptions, and he looks about him from right to left.

It was a new sight to the countess; this nature so vigorous in its effects, so little seen and yet so grand, threw her into a languid revery; she leaned back in the tilbury and yielded herself up to the pleasure of being there with Emile; her eyes were charmed, her heart spoke, she answered to the inward voice that harmonized with hers. He, too, glanced at her furtively; he enjoyed that dreamy meditation, while the ribbons of the bonnet floated on the morning breeze with the silky curls of the golden hair. In consequence of going they knew not where, they presently came to a locked gate, of which they had not the key. Joseph was called up, but neither had he a key.

“Never mind, let us walk; Joseph can take care of the tilbury; we shall easily find it again.”

Emile and the countess plunged into the forest, and soon reached a small interior cleared space, such as is often met with in the woods. Twenty years earlier the charcoal-burners had made it their kiln, and the place still remained open, quite a large circumference having been burned over. But during those twenty years Nature had made herself a garden of flowers, a blooming “parterre” for her own enjoyment, just as an artist gives himself the delight of painting a picture for his own happiness. The enchanting spot was surrounded by fine trees, whose tops hung over like vast fringes and made a dais above this flowery couch where slept the goddess. The charcoal-burners had followed a path to a pond, always full of water. The path is there still; it invites you to step into it by a turn full of mystery; then suddenly it stops short and you come upon a bank where a thousand roots run down to the water and make a sort of canvas in the air. This hidden pond has a narrow grassy edge, where a few willows and poplars lend their fickle shade to a bank of turf which some lazy or pensive charcoal-burner must have made for his enjoyment. The frogs hop about, the teal bathe in the pond, the water-fowl come and go, a hare starts; you are the master of this delicious bath, decorated with iris and bulrushes. Above your head the trees take many attitudes; here the trunks twine

down like boa-constrictors, there the beeches stand erect as a Greek column. The snails and the slugs move peacefully about. A tench shows its gills, a squirrel looks at you; and at last, after Emile and the countess, tired with her walk, were seated, a bird, but I know not what bird it was, sang its autumn song, its farewell song, to which the other songsters listened,—a song welcome to love, and heard by every organ of the being.

“What silence!” said the countess, with emotion and in a whisper, as if not to trouble this deep peace.

They looked at the green patches on the water,—worlds where life was organizing; they pointed to the lizard playing in the sun and escaping at their approach,—behavior which has won him the title of “the friend of man.” “Proving, too, how well he knows him,” said Emile. They watched the frogs, who, less distrustful, returned to the surface of the pond, winking their carbuncle eyes as they sat upon the water-cresses. The sweet and simple poetry of Nature permeated these two souls surfeited with the conventional things of life, and filled them with contemplative emotion. Suddenly Blondet shuddered. Turning to the countess he said,—

“Did you hear that?”

“What?” she asked.

“A curious noise.”

“Ah, you literary men who live in your studies and know nothing of the country! that is only a woodpecker tapping a tree. I dare say you don’t even know the most curious fact in the history of that bird. As soon as he has given his tap, and he gives millions to pierce an oak, he flies behind the tree to see if he is yet through it; and he does this every instant.”

“The noise I heard, dear instructress of natural history, was not a noise made by an animal; there was evidence of mind in it, and that proclaims a man.”

The countess was seized with panic, and she darted back through the wild flower-garden, seeking the path by which to leave the forest.

“What is the matter?” cried Blondet, rushing after her.

“I thought I saw eyes,” she said, when they regained the path through which they had reached the charcoal-burner’s open.

Just then they heard the low death-rattle of a creature whose throat was suddenly cut, and the countess, with her fears redoubled, fled so quickly that Blondet could scarcely follow her. She ran like a will-o’-the-wisp, and did not listen to Blondet

who called to her, “You are mistaken.” On she ran, and Emile with her, till they suddenly came upon Michaud and his wife, who were walking along arm-in-arm. Emile was panting and the countess out of breath, and it was some time before they could speak; then they explained. Michaud joined Blondet in laughing at the countess’s terror; then the bailiff showed the two wanderers the way to find the tilbury. When they reached the gate Madame Michaud called, “Prince!”

“Prince! Prince!” called the bailiff; then he whistled,—but no greyhound.

Emile mentioned the curious noise that began their adventure.

“My wife heard that noise,” said Michaud, “and I laughed at her.”

“They have killed Prince!” exclaimed the countess. “I am sure of it; they killed him by cutting his throat at one blow. What I heard was the groan of a dying animal.”

“The devil!” cried Michaud; “the matter must be cleared up.”

Emile and the bailiff left the two ladies with Joseph and the horses, and returned to the wild garden of the open. They went down the bank to the pond; looked everywhere along the slope, but found no clue. Blondet jumped back first, and as he did so he saw, in a thicket which stood on higher ground, one of those trees he had noticed in the morning with withered heads. He showed it to Michaud, and proposed to go to it. The two sprang forward in a straight line across the forest, avoiding the trunks and going round the matted tangles of brier and holly until they found the tree.

“It is a fine elm,” said Michaud, “but there’s a worm in it,—a worm which gnaws round the bark close to the roots.”

He stopped and took up a bit of the bark, saying: “See how they work.”

“You have a great many worms in this forest,” said Blondet.

Just then Michaud noticed a red spot; a moment more and he saw the head of his greyhound. He sighed.

“The scoundrels!” he said. “Madame was right.”

Michaud and Blondet examined the body and found, just as the countess had said, that some one had cut the greyhound’s throat. To prevent his barking he had been decoyed with a bit of meat, which was still between his tongue and his palate.

“Poor brute; he died of self-indulgence.”

“Like all princes,” said Blondet.

“Some one, whoever it is, has just gone, fearing that we might catch him or her,” said Michaud. “A serious offence has been committed. But for all that, I see no branches about and no lopped trees.”

Blondet and the bailiff began a cautious search, looking at each spot where they set their feet before setting them. Presently Blondet pointed to a tree beneath which the grass was flattened down and two hollows made.

“Some one knelt there, and it must have been a woman, for a man would not have left such a quantity of flattened grass around the impression of his two knees; yes, see! that is the outline of a petticoat.”

The bailiff, after examining the base of the tree, found the beginning of a hole beneath the bark; but he did not find the worm with the tough skin, shiny and squamous, covered with brown specks, ending in a tail not unlike that of a cockchafer, and having also the latter’s head, antennae, and the two vigorous hooks or shears with which the creature cuts into the wood.

“My dear fellow,” said Blondet, “now I understand the enormous number of *dead* trees that I noticed this morning from the terrace of the chateau, and which brought me here to find out the cause of the phenomenon. Worms are at work; but they are no other than your peasants.”

The bailiff gave vent to an oath and rushed off, followed by Blondet, to rejoin the countess, whom he requested to take his wife home with her. Then he jumped on Joseph’s horse, leaving the man to return on foot, and disappeared with great rapidity to cut off the retreat of the woman who had killed his dog, hoping to catch her with the bloody bill-hook in her hand and the tool used to make the incisions in the bark of the tree.

“Let us go and tell the general at once, before he breakfasts,” cried the countess; “he might die of anger.”

“I’ll prepare him,” said Blondet.

“They have killed the dog,” said Olympe, in tears.

“You loved the poor greyhound, dear, enough to weep for him?” said the countess.

“I think of Prince as a warning; I fear some danger to my husband.”

“How they have ruined this beautiful morning for us,” said the countess, with an adorable little pout.

“How they have ruined the country,” said Olympe, gravely.

They met the general near the chateau.

“Where have you been?” he asked.

“You shall know in a minute,” said Blondet, mysteriously, as he helped the countess and Madame Michaud to alight. A moment more and the two gentlemen were alone on the terrace of the apartments.

“You have plenty of moral strength, general; you won’t put yourself in a passion, will you?”

“No,” said the general; “but come to the point or I shall think you are making fun of me.”

“Do you see those trees with dead leaves?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see those others that are wilting?”

“Yes.”

“Well, every one of them has been killed by the peasants you think you have won over by your benefits.”

And Blondet related the events of the morning.

The general was so pale that Blondet was frightened.

“Come, curse, swear, be furious! your self-control may hurt you more than anger!”

“I’ll go and smoke,” said the general, turning toward the kiosk.

During breakfast Michaud came in; he had found no one. Sibilet, whom the count had sent for, came also.

“Monsieur Sibilet, and you, Monsieur Michaud, are to make it known, cautiously, that I will pay a thousand francs to whoever will arrest *in the act* the person or persons who are killing my trees; they must also discover the instrument with which the work is done, and where it was bought. I have settled upon a plan.”

“Those people never betray one another,” said Sibilet, “if the crime done is for their benefit and premeditated. There is no denying that this diabolical business has been planned, carefully planned and contrived.”

“Yes, but a thousand francs means a couple of acres of land.”

“We can try,” said Sibilet; “fifteen hundred francs might buy you a traitor, especially if you promise secrecy.”

“Very good; but let us act as if we suspected nothing, I especially; if not, we shall be the victims of some collusion; one has to be as wary with these brigands as with the enemy in war.”

“But the enemy is here,” said Blondet.

Sibilet threw him the furtive glance of a man who understood the meaning of the words, and then he withdrew.

“I don’t like your Sibilet,” said Blondet, when he had seen the steward leave the house. “That man is playing false.”

“Up to this time he has done nothing I could complain of,” said the general.

Blondet went off to write letters. He had lost the careless gayety of his first arrival, and was now uneasy and preoccupied; but he had no vague presentiments like those of Madame Michaud; he was, rather, in full expectation of certain foreseen misfortunes. He said to himself, “This affair will come to some bad end; and if the general does not take decisive action and will not abandon a battle-field where he is overwhelmed by numbers there must be a catastrophe; and who knows who will come out safe and sound,—perhaps neither he nor his wife. Good God! that adorable little creature! so devoted, so perfect! how can he expose her thus! He thinks he loves her! Well, I’ll share their danger, and if I can’t save them I’ll suffer with them.”

CHAPTER VIII. RURAL VIRTUE

That night Marie Tonsard was stationed on the road to Soulanges, sitting on the rail of a culvert waiting for Bonnebault, who had spent the day, as usual, at the Cafe de la Paix. She heard him coming at some distance, and his step told her that he was drunk, and she knew also that he had lost money, for he always sang if he won.

“Is that you, Bonnebault?”

“Yes, my girl.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I owe twenty-five francs, and they may wring my neck twenty-five times before I can pay them.”

“Well, I know how you can get five hundred,” she said in his ear.

“Oh! by killing a man; but I prefer to live.”

“Hold your tongue. Vaudoyer will give us five hundred francs if you will let him catch your mother at a tree.”

“I’d rather kill a man than sell my mother. There’s your old grandmother; why don’t you sell her?”

“If I tried to, my father would get angry and stop the trick.”

“That’s true. Well, anyhow, my mother sha’n’t go to prison, poor old thing! She cooks my food and keeps me in clothes, I’m sure I don’t know how. Go to prison,—and through me! I shouldn’t have any bowels within me; no, no! And for fear any one else should sell her, I’ll tell her this very night not to kill any more trees.”

“Well, my father may say and do what he likes, but I shall tell him there are five hundred francs to be had, and perhaps he’ll ask my grandmother if she’ll earn them. They’ll never put an old woman seventy-eight years of age in prison,—though, to be sure, she’d be better off there than in her garret.”

“Five hundred francs! well, yes; I’ll speak to my mother,” said Bonnebault, “and if it suits her to give ‘em to me, I’ll let her have part to take to prison. She could knit, and amuse herself; and she’d be well fed and lodged, and have less trouble than she has at Conches. Well, to-morrow, my girl, I’ll see you about it; I haven’t time to stop now.”

The next morning at daybreak Bonnebault and his old mother knocked at the door of the Grand-I-Vert. Mother Tonsard was the only person up.

“Marie!” called Bonnebault, “that matter is settled.”

“You mean about the trees?” said Mother Tonsard; “yes, it is all settled; I’ve taken it.”

“Nonsense!” cried Mother Bonnebault, “my son has got the promise of an acre of land from Monsieur Rigou—”

The two old women squabbled as to which of them should be sold by her children. The noise of the quarrel woke up the household. Tonsard and Bonnebault took sides for their respective mothers.

“Pull straws,” suggested Tonsard’s wife.

The short straw gave it in favor of the tavern.

Three days later, in the forest of Ville-aux-Fayes at daybreak, the gendarmes arrested old Mother Tonsard caught “in flagrante delicto” by the bailiff, his assistants, and the field-keeper, with a rusty file which served to tear the tree, and a chisel, used by the delinquent to scoop round the bark just as the insect bores its way. The indictment stated that sixty trees thus destroyed were found within a radius of five hundred feet. The old woman was sent to Auxerre, the case coming under the jurisdiction of the assize-court.

Michaud could not refrain from saying when he discovered Mother Tonsard at the foot of the tree: “These are the persons on whom the general and Madame la comtesse have showered benefits! Faith, if Madame would only listen to me, she wouldn’t give that dowry to the Tonsard girl, who is more worthless than her grandmother.”

The old woman raised her gray eyes and darted a venomous look at Michaud. When the count learned who the guilty person was, he forbade his wife to give the money to Catherine Tonsard.

“Monsieur le comte is perfectly right,” said Sibilet. “I know that Godain bought that land three days before Catherine came to speak to Madame. She is quite capable, that girl, of pretending she is with child, to get the money; very likely Godain has had nothing to do with it.”

“What a community!” said Blondet; “the scoundrels of Paris are saints by comparison.”

“Ah, monsieur,” said Sibilet, “self-interest makes people guilty of horrors everywhere. Do you know who betrayed the old woman?”

“No.”

“Her granddaughter Marie; she was jealous of her sister’s marriage, and to get the money for her own—”

“It is awful!” said the count. “Why! they’d murder!”

“Oh yes,” said Sibilet, “for a very small sum. They care so little for life, those people; they hate to have to work all their lives. Ah monsieur, queer things happen in country places, as queer as those of Paris,—but you will never believe it.”

“Let us be kind and benevolent,” said the countess.

The evening after the arrest Bonnebault came to the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert, where all the Tonsard family were in great jubilation. “Oh yes, yes!” said he, “make the most of your rejoicing; but I’ve just heard from Vaudoyer that the countess, to punish you, withdraws the thousand francs promised to Godain; her husband won’t let her give them.”

“It’s that villain of a Michaud who has put him up to it,” said Tonsard. “My mother heard him say he would; she told me at Ville-aux-Fayes where I went to carry her some money and her clothes. Well; let that countess keep her money! our five hundred francs shall help Godain buy the land; and we’ll revenge ourselves for this thing. Ha! Michaud meddles with our private matters, does he? it will bring him more harm than good. What business is it of his, I’d like to know? let him keep to the woods! It’s he who is at the bottom of all this trouble—he found the clue that day my mother cut the throat of his dog. Suppose I were to meddle in the affairs of the chateau? Suppose I were to tell the general that his wife is off walking in the woods before he is up in the morning, with a young man.”

“The general, the general!” sneered Courtecuisse; “they can do what they like with him. But it’s Michaud who stirs him up, the mischief-maker! a fellow who don’t know his business; in my day, things went differently.”

“Ah!” said Tonsard, “those were the good days for all of us—weren’t they, Vaudoyer?”

“Yes,” said the latter, “and the fact is that if Michaud were got rid of we should be left in peace.”

“Enough said,” replied Tonsard. “We’ll talk of this later—by moonlight—in the open field.”

Towards the end of October the countess returned to Paris, leaving the general at Les Aigues. He was not to rejoin her till some time later, but she did not wish to lose the first night of the Italian Opera, and moreover she was lonely and bored; she missed Emile, who was recalled by his avocations, for he had helped her to pass the hours when the general was scouring the country or attending to business.

November was a true winter month, gray and gloomy, a mixture of snow and rain, frost and thaw. The trial of Mother Tonsard had required witnesses at Auxerre, and Michaud had given his testimony. Monsieur Rigou had interested himself for the old woman, and employed a lawyer on her behalf who relied in his defence on the absence of disinterested witnesses; but the testimony of Michaud and his assistants and the field-keeper was found to outweigh this objection. Tonsard's mother was sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and the lawyer said to her son:—

"It was Michaud's testimony which got her that."

CHAPTER IX THE CATASTROPHE

One Saturday evening, Courtecuisse, Bonnebault, Godain, Tonsard, his daughters, wife, and Pere Fourchon, also Vaudoyer and several mechanics were supping at the tavern. The moon was at half-full, the first snow had melted, and frost had just stiffened the ground so that a man's step left no traces. They were eating a stew of hare caught in a trap; all were drinking and laughing. It was the day after the wedding of Catherine and Godain, and the wedded pair were to be conducted to their new home, which was not far from that of Courtecuisse; for when Rigou sold an acre of land it was sure to be isolated and close to the woods. Courtecuisse and Vaudoyer had brought their guns to accompany the bride. The neighborhood was otherwise fast asleep; not a light was to be seen; none but the wedding party were awake, but they made noise enough. In the midst of it the old Bonnebault woman entered, and every one looked at her.

"I think she is going to lie-in," she whispered in Tonsard's ear. "*He* has saddled his horse and is going for the doctor at Soulanges."

"Sit down," said Tonsard, giving her his place at the table, and going himself to lie on a bench.

Just then the gallop of a horse passing rapidly along the road was heard. Tonsard, Courtecuisse, and Vaudoyer went out hurriedly, and saw Michaud on his way to the village.

"He knows what he's about," said Courtecuisse; "he came down by the terrace and he means to go by Blangy and the road,—it's the safest way."

"Yes," said Tonsard, "but he will bring the doctor back with him."

"He won't find him," said Courtecuisse, "the doctor has been sent for to Conches for the postmistress."

"Then he'll go from Soulanges to Conches by the mail-road; that's shortest."

"And safest too, for us," said Courtecuisse, "there's a fine moon, and there are no keepers on the roads as there are in the woods; one can hear much farther; and down there, by the pavilions, behind the hedges, just where they join the little wood, one can aim at a man from behind, like a rabbit, at five hundred feet."

"It will be half-past eleven before he comes past there," said Tonsard, "it will take him half an hour to go to Soulanges and as much more to get back,—but look here! suppose Monsieur Gourdon were on the road?"

“Don’t trouble about that,” said Courtecuisse, “I’ll stand ten minutes away from you to the right on the road towards Blangy, and Vaudoyer will be ten minutes away on your left towards Conches; if anything comes along, the mail, or the gendarmes, or whatever it is, we’ll fire a shot into the ground,—a muffled sound, you’ll know it.”

“But suppose I miss him?” said Tonsard.

“He’s right,” said Courtecuisse, “I’m the best shot; Vaudoyer, I’ll go with you; Bonnebault may watch in my place; he can give a cry; that’s easier heard and less suspicious.”

All three returned to the tavern and the wedding festivities went on; but about eleven o’clock Vaudoyer, Courtecuisse, Tonsard, and Bonnebault went out, carrying their guns, though none of the women took any notice of them. They came back in about three-quarters of an hour, and sat drinking till past one o’clock. Tonsard’s girls and their mother and the old Bonnebault woman had plied the miller, the mechanics, and the two peasants, as well as Fourchon, with so much drink that they were all on the ground and snoring when the four men left the tavern; on their return, the sleepers were shaken and roused, and every one seemed to them, as before, in his place.

While this orgy was going on Michaud’s household was in a scene of mortal anxiety. Olympe had felt false pains, and her husband, thinking she was about to be delivered, rode off instantly in haste for the doctor. But the poor woman’s pains ceased as soon as she realized that Michaud was gone; for her mind was so preoccupied by the danger her husband ran at that hour of the night, in a lawless region filled with determined foes, that the anguish of her soul was powerful enough to deaden and momentarily subdue those of the body. In vain her servant-woman declared her fears were imaginary; she seemed not to comprehend a word that was said to her, and sat by the fire in her bed-chamber listening to every sound. In her terror, which increased every moment, she had the man wakened, meaning to give him some order which still she did not give. At last, the poor woman wandered up and down, coming and going in feverish agitation; she looked out of all the windows and opened them in spite of the cold; then she went downstairs and opened the door into the courtyard, looking out and listening. “Nothing! nothing!” she said. Then she went up again in despair. About a quarter past twelve, she cried out: “Here he is! I hear the horse!” Again she went down, followed by the man who went to open the iron gate of the courtyard. “It is strange,” she said, “that he should return by the Conches woods!”

As she spoke she stood still, horrorstruck, motionless, voiceless. The man shared her terror, for, in the furious gallop of the horse, the clang of the empty stirrups, the neigh of the frightened animal, there was something, they scarcely knew what, of unspeakable warning. Soon, too soon for the unhappy wife, the horse reached the gate, panting and sweating, but alone; he had broken the bridle, no doubt by entangling it. Olympe gazed with haggard eyes at the servant as he opened the gate; she saw the horse, and then, without a word, she ran to the chateau like a madwoman; when she reached it she fell to the ground beneath the general's windows crying out: "Monsieur, they have murdered him!"

The cry was so terrible it awoke the count; he rang violently, bringing the whole household to their feet; and the groans of Madame Michaud, who as she lay on the ground, gave birth to a child that died in being born, brought the general and all the servants about her. They raised the poor dying woman, who expired, saying to the general: "They have murdered him!"

"Joseph!" cried the count to his valet, "go for the doctor; there may yet be time to save her. No, better bring the curate; the poor woman is dead, and her child too. My God! my God! how thankful I am that my wife is not here. And you," he said to the gardener, "go and find out what has happened."

"I can tell you," said the pavilion servant, coming up, "Monsieur Michaud's horse has come back alone, the reins broke, his legs bloody; and there's a spot of blood on the saddle."

"What can be done at this time of night?" cried the count. "Call up Groison, send for the keepers, saddle the horses; we'll beat the country."

By daybreak, eight persons—the count, Groison, the three keepers, and two gendarmes sent from Soulanges with their sergeant—searched the country. It was not till the middle of the morning that they found the body of the bailiff in a copse between the mail-road and the smaller road leading to Ville-aux-Fayes, at the end of the park of Les Aigues, not far from Conches. Two gendarmes started, one to Ville-aux-Fayes for the prosecuting attorney, the other to Soulanges for the justice of the peace. Meantime the general, assisted by the sergeant, noted down the facts. They found on the road, just above the two pavilions, the print of the stamping of the horse's feet as he roared, and the traces of his frightened gallop from there to the first opening in the woods above the hedge. The horse, no longer guided, turned into the wood-path. Michaud's hat was found there. The animal evidently took the nearest way to reach his stable. The bailiff had a ball though his back which broke the spine.

Groison and the sergeant studied the ground around the spot where the horse reared (which might be called, in judicial language, the theatre of the crime) with remarkable sagacity, but without obtaining any clue. The earth was too frozen to show the footprints of the murderer, and all they found was the paper of a cartridge. When the attorney and the judge and Monsieur Gourdon, the doctor, arrived and raised the body to make the autopsy, it was found that the ball, which corresponded with the fragments of the wad, was an ammunition ball, evidently from a military musket; and no such musket existed in the district of Blangy. The judge and Monsieur Soudry the attorney, who came that evening to the chateau, thought it best to collect all the facts and await events. The same opinion was expressed by the sergeant and the lieutenant of the gendarmerie.

“It is impossible that it can be anything but a planned attack on the part of the peasants,” said the sergeant; “but there are two districts, Conches and Blangy, in each of which there are five or six persons capable of being concerned in the murder. The one that I suspect most, Tonsard, passed the night carousing in the Grand-I-Vert; but your assistant, general, the miller Langlume, was there, and he says that Tonsard did not leave the tavern. They were all so drunk they could not stand; they took the bride home at half-past one; and the return of the horse proves that Michaud was murdered between eleven o’clock and midnight. At a quarter past ten Groison saw the whole company assembled at table, and Monsieur Michaud passed there on his way to Soulanges, which he reached at eleven. His horse reared between the two pavilions on the mail-road; but he may have been shot before reaching Blangy and yet have stayed in the saddle for some little time. We should have to issue warrants for at least twenty persons and arrest them; but I know these peasants, and so do these gentlemen; you might keep them a year in prison and you would get nothing out of them but denials. What could you do with all those who were at Tonsard’s?”

They sent for Langlume, the miller, and the assistant of General Montcornet as mayor; he related what had taken place in the tavern, and gave the names of all present; none had gone out except for a minute or two into the courtyard. He had left the room for a moment with Tonsard about eleven o’clock; they had spoken of the moon and the weather, and heard nothing. At two o’clock the whole party had taken the bride and bridegroom to their own house.

The general arranged with the sergeant, the lieutenant, and the civil authorities to send to Paris for the cleverest detective in the service of the police, who should come to the chateau as a workman, and behave so ill as to be dismissed; he should then take to drinking and frequent the Grand-I-Vert and remain in the

neighborhood in the character of an ill-wisher to the general. The best plan they could follow was to watch and wait for a momentary revelation, and then make the most of it.

“If I have to spend twenty thousand francs I’ll discover the murderer of my poor Michaud,” the general was never weary of saying.

He went off with that idea in his head, and returned from Paris in the month of January with one of the shrewdest satellites of the chief of the detective police, who was brought down ostensibly to do some work to the interior of the chateau. The man was discovered poaching. He was arrested, and turned off, and soon after—early in February—the general rejoined his wife in Paris.

CHAPTER X. THE TRIUMPH OF THE VANQUISHED

One evening in the month of May, when the fine weather had come and the Parisians had returned to Les Aigues, Monsieur de Troisville,—who had been persuaded to accompany his daughter,—Blondet, the Abbe Brossette, the general, and the sub-prefect of Ville-aux-Fayes, who was on a visit to the chateau, were all playing either whist or chess. It was about half-past eleven o'clock when Joseph entered and told his master that the worthless poaching workman who had been dismissed wanted to see him,—something about a bill which he said the general still owed him. "He is very drunk," added Joseph.

"Very good, I'll go and speak to him."

The general went out upon the lawn to some distance from the house.

"Monsieur le comte," said the detective, "nothing will ever be got out of these people. All that I have been able to gather is that if you continue to stay in this place and try to make the peasants renounce the pilfering habits which Mademoiselle Laguerre allowed them to acquire, they will shoot you as well as your bailiff. There is no use in my staying here; for they distrust me even more than they do the keepers."

The count paid his spy, who left the place the next day, and his departure justified the suspicions entertained about him by the accomplices in the death of Michaud.

When the general returned to the salon there were such signs of emotion upon his face that his wife asked him, anxiously, what news he had just heard.

"Dear wife," he said, "I don't want to frighten you, and yet it is right you should know that Michaud's death was intended as a warning for us to leave this part of the country."

"If I were in your place," said Monsieur de Troisville, "I would not leave it. I myself have had just such difficulties in Normandy, only under another form; I persisted in my course, and now everything goes well."

"Monsieur le marquis," said the sub-prefect, "Normandy and Burgundy are two very different regions. The grape heats the blood far more than the apple. We know much less of law and legal proceedings; we live among the woods; the large industries are unknown among us; we are still savages. If I might give my advice to Monsieur le comte it would be to sell this estate and put the money in the Funds; he

would double his income and have no anxieties. If he likes living in the country he could buy a chateau near Paris with a park as beautiful as that of Les Aigues, surrounded by walls, where no one can annoy him, and where he can let all his farms and receive the money in good bank-bills, and have no law suits from one year's end to another. He could come and go in three or four hours, and Monsieur Blondet and Monsieur le marquis would not be so often away from you, Madame la comtesse."

"I, retreat before the peasantry when I did not recoil before the Danube!" cried the general.

"Yes, but what became of your cuirassiers?" asked Blondet.

"Such a fine estate!"

"It will sell to-day for over two millions."

"The chateau alone must have cost that," remarked Monsieur de Troisville.

"One of the best properties in a circumference of sixty miles," said the sub-prefect; "but you can find a better near Paris."

"How much income does one get from two millions?" asked the countess.

"Now-a-days, about eighty thousand francs," replied Blondet.

"Les Aigues does not bring in, all told, more than thirty thousand," said the countess; "and lately you have been at such immense expenses,—you have surrounded the woods this year with ditches."

"You could get," added Blondet, "a royal chateau for four hundred thousand francs near Paris. In these days people buy the follies of others."

"I thought you cared for Les Aigues!" said the count to his wife.

"Don't you feel that I care a thousand times more for your life?" she replied. "Besides, ever since the death of my poor Olympe and Michaud's murder the country is odious to me; all the faces I meet seem to wear a treacherous or threatening expression."

The next evening the sub-prefect, having ended his visit at the chateau, was welcomed in the salon of Monsieur Gaubertin at Ville-aux-Fayes in these words:—

"Well, Monsieur des Lupeaulx, so you have returned from Les Aigues?"

"Yes," answered the sub-prefect with a little air of triumph and a look of tender regard at Mademoiselle Elise, "and I am very much afraid to say we may lose the general; he talks of selling his property—"

“Monsieur Gaubertin, I speak for my pavilion. I can on longer endure the noise, the dust of Ville-aux-Fayes; like a poor imprisoned bird I gasp for the air of the fields, the woodland breezes,” said Madame Isaure, in a lackadaisical voice, with her eyes half-closed and her head bending to her left shoulder as she played carelessly with the long curls of her blond hair.

“Pray be prudent, madame!” said her husband in a low voice; “your indiscretions will not help me to buy the pavilion.” Then, turning to the sub-prefect, he added, “Haven’t they yet discovered the men who were concerned in the murder of the bailiff?”

“It seems not,” replied the sub-prefect.

“That will injure the sale of Les Aigues,” said Gaubertin to the company generally, “I know very well that I would not buy the place. The peasantry over there are such a bad set of people; even in the days of Mademoiselle Laguerre I had trouble with them, and God knows she let them do as they liked.”

At the end of the month of May the general still gave no sign that he intended to sell Les Aigues; in fact, he was undecided. One night, about ten o’clock, he was returning from the forest through one of the six avenues that led to the pavilion of the Rendezvous. He dismissed the keeper who accompanied him, as he was then so near the chateau. At a turn of the road a man armed with a gun came from behind a bush.

“General,” he said, “this is the third time I have had you at the end of my barrel, and the third time that I give you your life.”

“Why do you want to kill me, Bonnebault?” said the general, without showing the least emotion.

“Faith, if I don’t, somebody else will; but I, you see, I like the men who served the Emperor, and I can’t make up my mind to shoot you like a partridge. Don’t question me, for I’ll tell you nothing; but you’ve got enemies, powerful enemies, cleverer than you, and they’ll end by crushing you. I am to have a thousand crowns if I kill you, and then I can marry Marie Tonsard. Well, give me enough to buy a few acres of land and a bit of a cottage, and I’ll keep on saying, as I have done, that I’ve found no chances. That will give you time to sell your property and get away; but make haste. I’m an honest lad still, scamp as I am; but another fellow won’t spare you.”

“If I give you what you ask, will you tell me who offered you those three thousand francs?” said the general.

“I don’t know myself; and the person who is urging me to do the thing is some one I love too well to tell of. Besides, even if you did know it was Marie Tonsard, that wouldn’t help you; Marie Tonsard would be as silent as that wall, and I should deny every word I’ve said.”

“Come and see me to-morrow,” said the general.

“Enough,” replied Bonnebault; “and if they begin to say I’m too dilatory, I’ll let you know in time.”

A week after that singular conversation the whole arrondissement, indeed the whole department, was covered with posters, advertising the sale of Les Aigues at the office of Maitre Corbineau, the notary of Soulanges. All the lots were knocked down to Rigou, and the price paid amounted to two millions five hundred thousand francs. The next day Rigou had the names changed; Monsieur Gaubertin took the woods, Rigou and Soudry the vineyards and the farms. The chateau and the park were sold over again in small lots among the sons of the soil, the peasantry,—excepting the pavilion, its dependencies, and fifty surrounding acres, which Monsieur Gaubertin retained as a gift to his poetic and sentimental spouse.

Many years after these events, during the year 1837, one of the most remarkable political writers of the day, Emile Blondet, reached the last stages of a poverty which he had so far hidden beneath an outward appearance of ease and elegance. He was thinking of taking some desperate step, realizing, as he did, that his writings, his mind, his knowledge, his ability for the direction of affairs, had made him nothing better than a mere functionary, mechanically serving the ends of others; seeing that every avenue was closed to him and all places taken; feeling that he had reached middle-life without fame and without fortune; that fools and middle-class men of no training had taken the places of the courtiers and incapables of the Restoration, and that the government was reconstituted such as it was before 1830. One evening, when he had come very near committing suicide (a folly he had so often laughed at), while his mind travelled back over his miserable existence calumniated and worn down with toil far more than with the dissipations charged against him, the noble and beautiful face of a woman rose before his eyes, like a statue rising pure and unbroken amid the saddest ruins. Just then the porter brought him a letter sealed with black from the Comtesse de Montcornet, telling him of the death of her husband, who had again taken service in the army and commanded a division. The count had left her his property, and she had no children. The letter, though dignified, showed Blondet very plainly that the woman of forty whom he had loved in his youth offered him a friendly hand and a large fortune.

A few days ago the marriage of the Comtesse de Montcornet with Monsieur Blondet, appointed prefect in one of the departments, was celebrated in Paris. On their way to take possession of the prefecture, they followed the road which led past what had formerly been Les Aigues. They stopped the carriage near the spot where the two pavilions had once stood, wishing to see the places so full of tender memories for each. The country was no longer recognizable. The mysterious woods, the park avenues, all were cleared away; the landscape looked like a tailor's pattern-card. The sons of the soil had taken possession of the earth as victors and conquerors. It was cut up into a thousand little lots, and the population had tripled between Conches and Blangy. The levelling and cultivation of the noble park, once so carefully tended, so delightful in its beauty, threw into isolated relief the pavilion of the Rendezvous, now the Villa Buen-Retiro of Madame Isaure Gaubertin; it was the only building left standing, and it commanded the whole landscape, or as we might better call it, the stretch of cornfields which now constituted the landscape. The building seemed magnified into a chateau, so miserable were the little houses which the peasants had built around it.

"This is progress!" cried Emile. "It is a page out of Jean-Jacques' 'Social Compact'! and I—I am harnessed to the social machine that works it! Good God! what will the kings be soon? More than that, what will the nations themselves be fifty years hence under this state of things?"

"But you love me; you are beside me. I think the present delightful. What do I care for such a distant future?" said his wife.

"Oh yes! by your side, hurrah for the present!" cried the lover, gayly, "and the devil take the future."

Then he signed to the coachman, and as the horses sprang forward along the road, the wedded pair returned to the enjoyment of their honeymoon.

1845.

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