BAZIN RENÉ

# AUTUMN GLORY; OR, THE TOILERS OF THE FIELD

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# Содержание

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## CHAPTER I. LA FROMENTIÈRE

"Quiet! Bas-Rouge, down! Don't you know folk born and bred here?"

The dog thus addressed, a mongrel in which some twenty breeds were mixed, with grey long-haired coat changing to auburn silky fleece about the paws, at once left off barking at the gate, trotted along the grassy path bordering the field, and, content at having done his duty, sat down at the extreme edge of the line of cabbages which the farmer was trimming. Along the same path a man was approaching, clad in gaiters and a suit of well-worn corduroys. His pace was the even steady gait of a man accustomed to tramp the country. The face in its setting of black beard was drawn and pale, the eyes, accustomed to roam the hedges and rest nowhere, bore an expression of weariness and mistrust, the contested authority of an agent. He was the head-keeper and steward to the Marquis de la Fromentière.

He came to a halt behind Bas-Rouge, whose eyelids gave a furtive quiver, though his ears made not the slightest movement.

"Good day, Lumineau."

"Good day."

"I have a word to say to you. M. le Marquis has written."

Probably he expected the farmer to leave his cabbages and come towards him. Not a bit of it. The yeoman of the Marais bending double, a huge bundle of green leaves in his arms, stood some thirty feet off, looking askance at the keeper waiting motionless in the path. What did he want of him? His well-fed cheeks broadened into a smile, his clear, deep-set eyes lengthened. In order to show his independence, he bent down and resumed his labours for a moment without reply. He felt himself upon the ground that he looked upon as his own, which his race had cultivated by virtue of a contract indefinitely renewed. Around him, his cabbages formed an immense square, a billowy mass of superb growth, firm and heavy, their colour comprising every imaginable shade of green, blue, and violet, tinting in harmony with the hues of the setting sun. Of huge stature though he was, the farmer plunged to his middle, like a ship, in this compact sea of vegetation. All that was to be seen above it was the short coat and round felt hat, set well back on his head, from which hung velvet streamers, the headgear of La Vendée.

When by this period of silence and labour he had sufficiently marked the superiority of a tenant farmer over a hired labourer, Lumineau straightening himself, said:

"You can talk on; there's no one here but me and my dog."

Nettled, the man replied:

"M. le Marquis is displeased that you did not pay your rent at Midsummer. It will soon be three months in arrears."

"But he knows that I have lost two oxen this year; that the wheat is poor; and that one must live, I and my sons, and the 'Creatures.'"

By "Creatures" the farmer meant, as is customary in the Marais, his two daughters, Eléonore and Marie-Rose.

"Tut, tut," replied the keeper, "it is not reasons he wants from you, my good man, it's the money."

The farmer shrugged his shoulders.

"Were he here at the Château the Marquis would not require it; I would soon explain how things stand. He and I were friends, I may say, as his father and mine were before us. I could show him what changes time has brought about with me. He would understand. But now one only has to do with paid agents, no longer the Master; he is no more to be seen, and some folks say we shall never see him at La Fromentière any more. It is a bad thing for us."

"Very likely," returned the keeper, "but it is not my place to discuss orders. When will you pay?"

"It's easy to ask when will you pay, but it's another thing to find the money."

"Well then, I am to answer, No."

"You will answer, Yes, as it must be. I will pay at Michaelmas,

which is not far off now."

The farmer was about to stoop to resume his work when the keeper added:

"You will do well, too, Lumineau, to look after your man. I found some snares the other day in the preserves of La Cailleterie, which could only have been laid by him."

"Had he written his name upon them?"

"No. But he is known to be the most desperate poacher in the country round. You beware! The Marquis has written to me that you were to go out, bag and baggage, if I caught any one of you poaching again."

The farmer let fall his armful of cabbage leaves, and extending his two fists, cried:

"You liar! He cannot have said that. I know him better than you do, and he knows me. And it's not to a fellow of your sort that he would give any such instructions. M. le Marquis to turn me off his land, me, his old Lumineau! It is false."

"Those were his written instructions."

"Liar!" repeated the farmer.

"All very well; we shall see," quoth the agent, turning to resume his way. "You have been warned. That Jean Nesmy will pay you a bad turn one of these days; without taking into account, that for a penniless lad from the Bocage, he is rather too sweet on your daughter. People are talking, you know."

Ramming his hat down on his head, with crimsoned face and inflated chest, the farmer advanced a few steps, as though to fall

upon the man who had insulted him; but he, leaning on his stout thorn stick, had already walked on, and his discontented face was seen outlined against the hedge as he rapidly receded. He had a certain dread of the colossal farmer whose strength was still formidable despite his years, and, moreover, an uneasy sense of the past ill success of his threats, a recollection of having been, more than once, disavowed by the Marquis de la Fromentière, their joint master, whose leniency towards the Lumineau family he never could understand.

The farmer stopped short, following with his eyes the head-keeper's receding figure. He watched as it passed along the fence in the opposite corner to the gate, scaled it, and disappeared to the left of the farm buildings along the green path leading to the Château. When he had watched the man finally out of sight:

"No," the farmer exclaimed aloud. "No, the Marquis did not say it! Turn us out!"

For the moment the agent's evil insinuations against Marie-Rose, his youngest daughter, were completely forgotten, his mind wholly absorbed in the threat of being turned out. Slowly, with a harder look in them than was their wont, he suffered his eyes to wander around, as if to call all the familiar objects to witness that the man had lied; then, stooping down, he resumed his labours.

The sun, already low in the heavens, had nearly reached the row of young elms which bordered the field to the west, their lopped branches that ended in tufts of leaves resembling huge marguerites were bending to the strong sea breeze. It was the

beginning of September, the time of evening when a glow of heat seems to traverse the descending chills of night. The farmer worked on as quickly and unremittingly as any younger man; his outstretched hand snapped off the crisp leaves close down to the stem of the cabbages with a noise as of breaking glass, where they lay in heaps along the furrows beneath the over-arching rows of plants. Hidden in the gloom, whence was emitted the warm, moist smell of earth, he was lost amid the huge velvety leaves intersected with their purple veins of colour. In truth he made one with the vegetation, and it would have been difficult to discern which was corduroy and which cabbage in the billowy expanse of the blue-green field.

Withal, close to earth as was his bent body, his soul was agitated and deep in thought; and as he worked, the farmer continued to ponder many things. The irritation caused by the keeper's threats had subsided; it only needed reflection to dismiss all fear of hard treatment from the Marquis. Did they not both come of a good stock; and did they not acknowledge it, one of the other? For the yeoman's ancestor was a Lumineau who had fought in the great war; and although now in these changed times he never mentioned past glories, neither the nobles nor the peasants were ignorant that his ancestor, a giant, surnamed Brin d'Amour, in the war of La Vendée, had taken the generals of the insurrection across the marshes in his own punt, had fought brilliantly, and had received a sword of honour, which now hung, eaten with rust, behind one of the farm presses. The family was

one of the most widely connected in the country side. He claimed cousinship with thirty farmers, spread over that district which formed the Marais, extending from Saint Gilles to the Ile de Bouin. No one, himself included, could tell at what period his forefathers had begun to till the fields of La Fromentière. They had been there of right for generations, the Marquis in his Castle, the Lumineaus in their farm, united through long custom, each knowing the land and alike loving it; drinking the vintage of the soil together when they met; never dreaming that one or the other could ever forsake Château or farm bearing one and the same name.

And, in truth, eight years ago, great had been the astonishment when one Christmas morning, amid falling sleet, M. Henri, the present Marquis, a man of forty, a greater hunter, harder drinker, and more boorish mannered than any of his predecessors, had said to Toussaint Lumineau, "My Toussaint, I am going to live in Paris. My wife cannot accustom herself to this place; it is too dull and too cold for her. But do not worry; I shall come back." He had never come back, save on rare occasions for a day or two. But, of course, he had not forgotten the past. He still remained the same uncouth, kindly master known of old, and the keeper had lied when he talked of their being turned out.

No, the more Toussaint Lumineau thought of it the less did he believe that a master so rich, so liberal, so good at heart, could have written such words. Only the rent must be paid. Well, so it should. The farmer himself did not possess two hundred francs

ready-money in the walnut wood chest beside his bed; but his children were rich, having inherited over two thousand francs apiece from their mother, La Luminette, dead now these three years past. So he would ask François, his second son, to lend him the sum due to the master. François was not a lad without heart, he would not let his old father be in difficulties. Once again anxiety for the morrow would be dispelled, good harvests would come, prosperous years which should make all hearts light again.

Weary of his stooping posture, the farmer straightened himself, passed his flannel shirt sleeve over his perspiring face, then turned his eyes to the roof of La Fromentière with the expression of one gazing on some well beloved object. To wipe his brow he had taken off his hat; now, in the oblique ray of sunshine which no longer reached the grass or the cabbages, in the soft declining light like that of a happy old age, he raised his firm, square-cut face. His complexion, unlike the cadaverous hue of peasants accustomed to scant living, was clear and healthy; the full cheeks with their narrow line of black whisker, straight nose, broad at the base, square jaw, in fact the whole face and clear grey eyes – eyes that always looked a man full in the face, betokened health, vigour, and the habit of command, while the long lips, refined-looking despite the weather-beaten skin, drooping at the corners, bespoke the ready fluency and somewhat haughty spirit of a son of the Marshes, who looks down upon everyone not belonging to that favoured spot. The perfectly white hair, dishevelled and fine, formed a fitting setting to the head,

and shone with a silvery sheen.

Standing thus motionless with head uncovered in the waning light, the farmer of La Fromentière presented an imposing appearance, making it easy to understand the distinction of *la Seigneurie* commonly given him in the neighbourhood. He was called Lumineau l'Evêque, to single him out from others of the name, Lumineau le Pauvre; Lumineau Barbefine; Lumineau Tournevire.

He was looking at his beloved La Fromentière. Some hundred yards away to the south, among the stems of elms, the pale red tiles stood out like rough enamels. Borne on the evening wind there came the sound of the lowing of cattle going home to their sheds, the smell of the stables, the pungent aroma of camomile and fennel stored up in the barn. Nor was that all that presented itself to the farmer's mind as he gazed on his roof illuminated by the last rays of the declining sun; he called to his mental vision the two sons and two daughters living under that roof, Mathurin, François, Eléonore, and Marie-Rose, the heavy burdens, yet mixed with how much sweetness of his life. The eldest, his splendid eldest, doomed by a terrible misfortune to be a cripple, only to see others work, never to share it himself; Eléonore, who took the place of her dead mother; François, weak of nature, in whom could be seen but the incomplete, uncertain future master of the farm; Rousille, the youngest girl, just twenty… Had the keeper lied again when speaking of the farm-servant's love-making? Not unlikely. How could a servant,

the son of a poor widow in the Bocage, that heavy, unproductive land, how could he dare to pay court to the daughter of a farmer of the Marais? He might feel friendship and respect for the pretty girl, whose smiling face attracted many a remark on the way back from Mass on Sundays at Sallertaine; but anything more?.. Well, one must watch… It was but for a moment that Toussaint Lumineau pondered the man's insinuations; then with a sense of tenderness and comfort his thoughts flew to the absent one, the son next in age to Rousille, André, the Chasseur d'Afrique, now in Algiers as orderly to his Colonel, a brother of the Marquis de la Fromentière. But one month more and that youngest son would be home, his time of service expired. They would see him again, the fair, handsome young fellow, so tall, the living portrait of his father grown young again, full of noble vigour and love for Sallertaine and the farmstead. And all anxieties would be forgotten and merged in the joy of having the son home again, who used to make the ladies of Chalons turn as he passed, to say to each other: "That is a handsome lad, Lumineau's youngest son!"

The farmer often remained thus, the day's work done, sunk in thought before his farmstead. This time he remained longer than usual in the midst of the swaying masses of leaves, now grown grey, indistinct looking in the gathering darkness like some unfamiliar ground. The trees themselves had become but vague outlines bordering the fields. The large expanse of clear sky overhead, still bright with golden glory, suffered but faint rays

to fall to earth, making objects visible but only dimly. Lumineau, putting both hands to his mouth to carry the sound, turned towards the farm, and called out lustily:

"Ohé! Rousille?"

The first to respond to the call was the dog, Bas-Rouge, who, at the sound of his master's voice, flew like an arrow from the far end of the field. Then a young, clear voice was heard in the distance:

"Yes, father, I am coming."

The farmer stooped, took a cord, and bound a huge mass of leaves together, loaded it on his shoulder, and staggering under its weight, with arms raised to steady it, his head buried in the soft burden, followed the furrow, turned, and proceeded down the trodden path. As he reached the corner of the field a girl's slender form rose up before a break in the hedge. With agile movement Rousille cleared the fence; as she alighted her short petticoats revealed a pair of black stockings and sabots turned up at the toes.

"Good evening, father."

He could not refrain from thinking of what the keeper had said, and made no reply.

Marie-Rose, her two hands on her hips, nodding her little head as if meditating something grave, watched him go. Then entering in among the furrows she gathered together the remainder of the fallen leaves, knotted them with the cord she had brought, and, as her father had done, raised the green mass, and though bending

beneath the weight, proceeded with light step down the grassy path.

To go into the field, collect, and bind together the leaves must have taken some ten minutes; her father should have reached the farm by now. She neared the fence, when suddenly from the top of the slope, the foot of which she was skirting, came a whistle like that of a plover. She was not frightened. Now a man jumped over the brambles into the field. Rousille threw down her burden. He approached no nearer, and they began to talk in brief sentences.

"Oh, Rousille, what a heavy load you are carrying."

"I am strong enough. Have you seen my father?"

"No, I have only just come. Has he said anything against me?"

"He did not say a word. But he looked at me… Believe me, Jean, he mistrusts us. You ought not to stay out to-night, for he dislikes poaching and you will be scolded."

"What can it matter to him if I shoot at night, so long as I am as early next morning at my work as anyone else? Do I grumble over my work? Rousille, I was told at La Seulière, and the miller of Moque-Souris told me too, that plovers have been seen on the Marais. It will be full moon to-night, I mean to go out, and you shall have some to-morrow morning."

"Jean," she returned, "you ought not… I assure you."

The young man was carrying a gun slung across his shoulder; over his brown coat he wore a short blouse scarcely reaching to his waist-belt. He was slim, about the same height as Rousille,

dark, sinewy, pale, with regular features, and a small moustache, slightly curled at the corners of the mouth. The complexion alone served to show that he was not a native of the Marais, where the mists soften and tint the skin, but of a district where the soil is poor and chalky, and where small holdings and penury abound. Withal, from his lean, self-possessed countenance, straight-pencilled eyebrows, the fire and vivacity of the eyes, one could discern a fund of indomitable energy, a tenacity of purpose that would yield to no opposition.

Not for an instant did Rousille's fears move him. A little for love of her, but far more for the pleasure of sport and of nocturnal marauding so dear to the heart of primitive man, he had made up his mind to go shooting that night on the Marais. That being the case, nothing would have made him desist, not even the thought of displeasing Marie-Rose.

She looked but a child. Her girlish figure, her fresh young complexion, the full oval of her face, the pure brow with its bands of hair smoothly parted on either side, straight lips, which one never knew were they about to part in a smile or to droop for tears, gave her the appearance of a virgin in some sacred procession wearing a broad band across the shoulders. Her eyes alone were those of a woman, dark chestnut eyes the colour of the hair, wherein lay and shone a tenderness youthful yet grave, noble and enduring.

Without having known it, she had been loved for a long time by her father's farm-servant. For a year now they had

been secretly engaged. On Sundays, as she returned from Mass, wearing the flowered muslin coif in the form of a pyramid, the coif of Sallertaine, many a farmer's, or horse and cattle breeder's son, tried to attract her gaze. But she paid no attention to them; had she not betrothed herself to Jean Nesmy, the taciturn stranger, poor and friendless, who had no place, no authority, no friendship save in her young heart? Already she obeyed him. In her home they never spoke to each other. Out-of-doors when they could meet their talk was always hurried on account of her brothers' watchfulness, that of Mathurin especially, the cripple, who was ever jealously prowling about. This time, too, they must avoid being surprised.

Jean Nesmy, therefore, without stopping to consider Rousille's cause for uneasiness, asked abruptly:

"Have you brought everything?"

Without further insistence she gave in.

"Yes," she answered; and producing from her pocket a bottle of wine and slice of coarse bread, she held them out to him with a smile that irradiated her whole face, despite the darkness. "Here, my Jean," she said, "it was not easy; Lionore is always on the watch, and Mathurin follows me about everywhere;" there was melody in her voice, as though she was saying, "I love you."

"When will you be back?" she added.

"At dawn. I shall come by the dwarf orchard."

As he spoke, the youth raising his blouse had opened a linen ration bag, brought back from his military service, and which he

wore hung round his neck. In it he stored the wine and bread.

Absorbed in the action, intent on the thing of the moment, he did not notice that Rousille was bending forward listening to a sound from the farm. When he had finished fastening the two buttons of the ration bag, the girl was still listening.

"What am I to answer," she gravely said, "if father asks for you presently? He is now shutting the door of the barn."

With a smile that displayed two rows of teeth white as milk, Jean Nesmy, touching his hat, unadorned and wider than those worn in the Marais, said:

"Good night, Rousille. Tell your father that I am going to be out all night, and hope to bring back some plovers for my little sweetheart!"

He turned, sprang up the slope, jumped down into the neighbouring field, and the next second the barrel of his gun caught the light as it disappeared among the branches.

Rousille still stood before the break in the hedge, her heart had gone forth with the wanderer. Then, for the second time, a noise broke the stillness of evening. Now it was the sound of frightened fowls, the flapping of wings, the noise of a key turning in the lock – the sign that Eléonore, as always before supper, was locking the door of the fowl-house; Marie-Rose would be late. Hurriedly she caught up her load of leaves, cleared the fence, and hastened back to the farm. Soon she had reached the uneven grassy path, which, coming from the high lands, makes a bend ere, a little further on, it reaches the edge of the Marais. Crossing it, she pushed

open the side entrance of a large gate, followed a half-fallen wall covered with creepers, and passing through a ruined archway, whose gaping interstices had once formed the imposing centre of the ancient walls, she entered a courtyard, surrounded with farm buildings. The barn wherein was piled the green forage stood to the left beside the stables. The girl threw in the bundle of leaves she had brought, and shaking her damp dress, went towards the long, low, tiled dwelling-house forming the end of the courtyard. Arrived at the last door on the right, where light shone through chinks and keyhole, she paused a little. A feeling of dread, often experienced, had come over her. From inside could be heard the sound of spoons clinking against the sides of plates; men's voices, a dragging step along the floor. Softly as she could she opened the door and slipped in.

# CHAPTER II.
# THE FAMILY LUMINEAU

The family was assembled in the large living-room, or "house-place" of the farm. As the girl entered all eyes were turned upon her, but not a word was spoken. Feeling isolated, she crept along beside the wall, trying by lessening the noise of her sabots the sooner to escape observation, and having reached the chimney-corner, stooped down and held out her hands to the fire, as if she were cold.

Her sister Eléonore, a tall young woman with horse-like profile, lifeless blue eyes, and heavy apathetic face, drew back either to make way for her or to mark the ill-feeling existing between them, and continued to eat her slice of bread and few scraps of meat standing, the time-honoured custom among the women of La Vendée. The chimney-corner, blackened with smoke, hid them from the rest of the family as they stood one on either side; the dancing flames between them lit up, from time to time, the inmates and contents of the big house-place, built at a period when wood was plentiful, and houses and furniture were intended to last; while overhead numberless rafters discoloured with smoke and dust, joined the huge centre beam. The fitful flames anon rested on the woodwork of two four-post beds that stood against the wall, each with a walnut wood chest beside it,

by aid of which the occupants mounted to the heavy structures, two wardrobes, some photographs, and a rosary hung round a copper crucifix over the nearest bed.

The three men at the table in the centre of the room were seated on the same bench in order of precedence; first, at the farthest end from the door, the father, then Mathurin, then François. A small petroleum lamp shed its light upon their bent heads, upon the soup-tureen, a dish of cold bacon, and another of uncooked apples. They were not eating from the tureen as do many peasant farmers, but each had his plate, and beside it his metal spoon, fork, and knife, not a pocket-knife but a proper table one, a luxury introduced by François on his return from military service; from which the old farmer had drawn his conclusion that the outside world was full of changes.

Toussaint Lumineau looked worried and kept silence. His calm, strong face, though that of an old man, contrasted strangely with the deformed features of his eldest son, Mathurin. Formerly they had been alike; but since the misfortune of which they never spoke and which yet haunted the memories of all at La Fromentière, the son was only the grotesque suffering caricature of his father. The enormous head, covered with a bush of tawny hair, was sunk between his high, thickened shoulders. The width of chest, length of arms, and size of hands denoted a man of gigantic stature; but when this giant, supported by his crutches, stood up, one saw a poor twisted, thickened torso, with contorted powerless legs dragging after it; a prize-fighter's body

terminating in two wasted limbs, capable at most of supporting it for a few seconds, and from which even, powerless as they now were, the life was gradually ebbing. Scarce thirty years of age, the beard which grew almost to his cheek-bones was grey in places. Above the muddy-veined cheek-bones, from out the tangled mass of hair and beard which gave him the appearance of a wild animal, shone a pair of deep blue eyes, small, sad-looking, whence would flash all suddenly the wild exasperation of one condemned to a living death, who counted each stage of his torture. It was as though one half of him were assisting with impotent rage at the slow agony of the other. His forehead was lined with wrinkles which made deep furrows between the eyebrows.

"Our poor eldest son, the handsomest of them all, what a wreck he is!" their mother used sorrowfully to say.

She had reason to pity him. Six years ago he had come home from his military service as handsome a fellow as when he went. The three years of barrack life had passed over his simple peasant nature, over his dreams of ploughing the land and harvesting, over the tenets of faith he held in common with his race, with scarce a trace of harm. Innate contempt of the life led in towns had been his protection. "Lumineau's eldest son is not like other lads; he is not a bit changed," was the verdict of the neighbours.

One evening when he had taken a waggon-load of corn to the flour-miller of Chalons, he came back with empty sacks, but beside him, sitting upon a pile of them, was a laughing girl from

Sallertaine, Félicité Gauvrit, of La Seulière, whom he wished to take for wife. The dusk of evening was over the roads, it was hard to distinguish ruts from tufts of grass; but he, all absorbed in his sweetheart, confident that his horse knew the way, was not even holding the reins that had fallen and were dragging on the ground. And suddenly, as they were descending a hill close to La Fromentière, the horse, struck by a branch from a tree, started into a gallop. The waggon jerked from side to side, was in danger of being upset; the wheels were on the bank, the girl wanted to jump out.

"Don't be frightened, Félicité, I will manage him!" cried her lover. And standing up he leant forward to seize the horse by the bit and stop him. But whether the darkness, a jolt, or ill-luck deceived him, he overbalanced and fell along the harness. There were two simultaneous cries, one from the waggon, one from beneath it. The wheel had gone over his limbs. When Félicité Gauvrit could get to her lover's assistance, she found him trying in vain to struggle up from the ground. For eight months Mathurin was groaning in agony; then his groans ceased, his sufferings grew less acute; but first the feet became paralyzed, then the knees, and gradually the slow death mounted… At the present time he could only drag his lower limbs after him, crawling on his knees and wrists, grown to an enormous size. He could still guide a punt upon the canals of the Marais, but his strength was soon exhausted. In a hand-cart, such as farm children use for a plaything, the father or brother would draw him to the more

distant fields whither the plough had preceded them; and thus, utterly useless, the young man would look on at the work to which he was born, and which he still loved so passionately. "Our poor eldest Lumineau, the handsomest of them all!"

His gay spirits had flown; his character had become as changed and warped as his body. He had grown hard, suspicious, cruel. His brothers and sisters hid all their little concerns from the man who looked upon the happiness of others as a personal wrong to himself; they feared his skill at ferreting out any love-making; the treachery which would prompt him to try and mar it. He, who never could hope now to inspire love, could not brook that others should possess it. Above all, could not brook that another should take the place which came to him by right of birth, that of future master, of the father's successor to the farm.

On that account he was jealous of François, and still more of André, the handsome young Chasseur d'Afrique, their father's favourite. He even was jealous of the farm-servant, who might become dangerous, did he marry Rousille.

Sometimes Mathurin Lumineau said to himself:

"If only I could get well again! I believe I do feel better!" At other times a kind of rage would take possession of him, and he would not speak for days, would hide away in corners or in the stables, until a flood of tears would melt his passion. At those times one man only could go near him: his father. One thing alone softened the cripple's churlishness, and that was to look on the home fields, to see the oxen at work, the seed sown which should

yield abundantly in its season, and to gaze out on to the horizon where he had tasted of the fulness of life.

For the whole six years in which the girl he had loved had deserted him, he had never once been into the town of Sallertaine, even to Easter Communion, which he no longer attended. Nor had he ever met Félicité Gauvrit, of La Seulière, along the lanes.

He sometimes asked Eléonore:

"Do you ever hear any talk of her marrying? Is she still as handsome as when she loved me?"

When Marie-Rose went into the supper-room that night, it was Mathurin only whom she furtively glanced at, and his face seemed to her to wear a malicious smile, as though he had seen, or guessed Jean's absence.

Near Mathurin sat François, a very different looking man from the other, of middle height, stout, red faced, easy going. Of him, Rousille had no fear.

He was more pleasure-loving than the rest of the family. No great worker, extravagant, running off to all the fairs and markets, easy to get on with because he needed the indulgence of others. Physically and morally the counterpart of Eléonore, two years his senior, like her he had a broad face, dull blue eyes, and the same apathetic nature which so often called forth lectures from their father.

But while the girl in the protection of her home remained pure under the influence of her good mother, now dead, who, like so

many of the simple peasant women of those parts, had lived a humble saint-like life, François had been ruined by barrack life.

He had submitted to military discipline, but without understanding the necessity for it; therefore without deriving the corresponding benefit. He had been subject to his superiors, had received punishment, had been sent hither and thither for three years; but he had never made a friend, never felt himself encouraged in the few halting intentions for good that he had taken with him from the home life, never been treated as a man, who has a soul, and whom sacrifice, however humble, can ennoble. On the other hand, he fell an easy prey to all the evils of a soldier's life; the loose talk at mess, the drinking habits of his companions, the constant endeavour to shirk duty, the prejudices, in a word the hundred and one corruptions into which young men can sink who are taken from their homes and sent out into the world, new to the temptations of great cities, without a guide at the very period when most they stand in need of one.

Neither better nor worse than the average of men home from military training, he had brought back with him to La Fromentière a remembrance of illicit pleasures that followed him everywhere; defiance of all authority, a disgust for the hard, uncertain, often unproductive work of farming, which he contrasted with vague notions about civil employment of which the leisure and privileges had been vaunted to him. How far off was he now from the simple son of the marshes, with fearless eyes, the inseparable companion, model and protector of André,

who, twirling his tamarind stick, would make the round of the canals to see if the cows had strayed from the meadows, or to search for any ducks which might have wandered into the ditches! With unwilling spirit, and because he had nothing better to do, he had returned to the care of the animals and to follow the plough. The proximity of Chalons, its wine shops and taverns was a temptation to him; urged on by his companions, weak and passive, he suffered himself to be led away. On Tuesdays, particularly, market day, the poor old father too often saw his son of seven-and-twenty start off from the farm under various pretexts before it was dawn, to come back late at night, stupefied, insensible to reproaches. It was an ever abiding grief to the father. François had made La Fromentière no longer the sacred abode beloved by, defended by all, which no one had dreamed of deserting. In that room where they were now assembled what a long line of mothers and children, of grandsires and grandames, united or resigned, had lived and died!

In those high beds ranged against the walls how many children had been born, fed, and at last had slept their last sleep! There had been sorrow and weeping there, but never ingratitude.

A whole forest might have been re-planted if all the wood burned in that chimney, by those bearing the same name, could have re-taken root. What was in store for his descendants hereafter?

The old farmer had noticed for months past that François and Eléonore were plotting something; they received letters, one and

the other, of which they never spoke; they talked together in corners; sometimes of a Sunday, Eléonore would write a letter on plain paper, not such as she would use when writing to a friend. And the thought had come to him that his two children, weary of rule and scoldings, were on the look-out for a farm in some neighbouring parish, where they would be their own masters – it was a thought he dared not dwell upon; he cast it from him as unjust. Still it haunted his mind, for the future of La Fromentière was his one chief care, and, since his eldest son's misfortune, François was the heir. When work went well, the father would think joyfully, "After all, the lad is buckling to again."

In truth, of the four young people assembled that September evening in the farm house-place, one only personified intact all the characteristics, all the energy of the race, and this was little Rousille, who was eating the crust of bread given her by Eléonore; one face alone expressed the joy of living, the health of body and soul, the brave spirit of one who has not yet had to do battle but who bides her time, and this was the face of the girl to whom no one, as yet, had spoken a word, and who was standing erect in the chimney-corner.

"Now the soup is finished," said the farmer. "Come, Mathurin, try a slice of bacon with me."

"No. It is always the same thing with us."

"Well, and so much the better," replied the father, "bacon is very good fare; I like it."

But the cripple, shrugging his shoulders, pushed away the dish,

muttering:

"I suppose other meat is too dear for us now, eh?"

Toussaint Lumineau's brows contracted at the mention of former prosperity, but he replied, gently:

"You are right, my poor boy, it is a bad year, and expenses are heavy," then, wishing to change the subject – "Has Jean not come in yet?"

Three voices, in succession, replied:

"I have not seen him!"

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

After a silence, during which all eyes were turned towards the chimney-corner.

"It would be best to ask Rousille," exclaimed Eléonore, "she must know."

The girl half turning towards the table, her profile standing out in the firelight, answered:

"Of course I do. I met him at the turn of the road by our swing gate; he was going shooting."

"Again!" exclaimed the farmer. "Once for all this must be put a stop to. To-night, when I was tying up my cabbages, the keeper of M. le Marquis reprimanded me for that lad's poaching."

"But is he not free to shoot plovers?" asked Rousille. "Everyone does."

A simultaneous snort proceeding from Eléonore and François marked their hostility to the *Boquin*, the alien, Rousille's friend.

The farmer, reassured by the reflection that the keeper would not trouble himself about Nesmy's shooting in the neutral ground of the Marais, where anyone was free to go after wild-fowl as much as he pleased, resumed his supper.

François was already nodding, and ate no more.

The cripple drank slowly, his eyes fixed on space, perhaps he was thinking of the time when he, too, loved shooting.

There was an interval of apparent peace.

The summer breeze came through the chinks of the door with a gentle murmur, regular as the waves on a seashore.

The two girls sitting on either side of the chimney-corner, were each giving all their attention to the peeling of an apple, the conclusion of their supper. But the farmer's mind was unsettled by the keeper's words, and by Mathurin's "Meat is too dear for us, now." The old man was looking back to the long ago, when the four children before him had been busied with their own childish experiences, and could only take their little part in the parents' interests according to their age. First he looked at Mathurin, then at François, as though to appeal to their memory about the old days when as tiny boys they drove the cattle, or fished for eels. Too moved longer to keep silence, he ended by saying:

"Ah, the country side has changed greatly since M. le Marquis' time! Do you remember him, Mathurin?"

"Yes," returned Mathurin's thick voice. "I remember him. A big fellow, very red in the face, who used to call out when he came in, 'Good evening, my lads! Has father another bottle of old

wine in the cellar? Go and ask him, Mathurin, or you, François.'"

"Yes, that was just him all over," said the good farmer, with an affectionate smile.

"He knew how to drink; and you would never find noblemen so affable as ours; they would tell you stories that made you die with laughing. And rich, children! They never used to mind waiting for the rent if there had been a bad harvest. They have even made me a loan, more than once, to buy oxen or seed. They were hot-tempered, but not to those who knew how to manage them; while these agents…" he made a violent gesture as if to knock someone down.

"Yes," replied Mathurin, "they are a bad lot."

"And Mademoiselle Ambroisine! She used to come to play with you, Eléonore, but particularly with Rousille, for she was between Eléonore and Rousille for age. I should say she must be about twenty-five by now. How pretty she used to look, with her lace frocks, her hair dressed like one of the saints in a church, her pretty laughing nods to everyone she met when she went into Sallertaine. Ah, what a pity that they have gone away. There are people who do not regret them; but I am not one of those!"

Mathurin shook his tawny head, and in a voice that rose at the slightest contradiction, exclaimed:

"What else could they do? They are ruined."

"Oh, ruined! Not so bad as that."

"You only need to look at the Château, shut up these eight years like a prison; only need to hear what people say. All their

property is mortgaged; the notary makes no secret about it. You will see before long that La Fromentière is sold, and we with it!"

"No, Mathurin, that I shall not see, thank God, I shall be dead before that. Besides, our nobles are not like us, my boy; they always have property to come into when their own money runs a little short. I hope better things than you. It is my idea that M. Henri will one day come back to the Château, that he will stand just where you now are, and with outstretched hand, say: 'Good day, Father Lumineau!' and Mademoiselle Ambroisine too, who will be so delighted to kiss my two girls on both cheeks, as we do in the Marais, and cry, 'How do you do, Eléonore? How do you do, Marie-Rose?' Ah, it may all come about sooner than you suppose."

With eyes raised to the mantel-piece, the old man seemed to be seeing his master's daughter standing between his own two girls, while something like a tear moistened his eyelids.

But Mathurin, striking the table with his fist, said, as he turned his peevish face towards his father:

"Do you believe they are thinking of us? I tell you, no, unless it is about Midsummer. I'll wager that the keeper just now asked you again for the rent? The beggar only has that one word in his mouth."

Toussaint Lumineau leant back on the bench, thought for a moment, then said in a low voice:

"You are right. Only one never can tell if the master really did order him to speak as he did, Mathurin. He often invents words!"

"Yes, yes. And what did you answer?"

"That I would pay at Michaelmas."

"With what?"

A few minutes before the two girls had gone into the kitchen, to the left of the house-place, and thence came in the sound of running water and the washing of dishes. Every evening, at this hour, the men were left to themselves; it was the time when they discussed matters of interest. Already, in the previous year, the farmer had borrowed from his eldest son the larger portion of the money that he had inherited from his mother. He could therefore only hope for help from the younger; but of that he had so little doubt that, speaking in a low voice to avoid being overheard by his daughters, he said:

"I was thinking that François would help."

François, roused from his sleepiness by the foregoing talk, answered hastily:

"No, no. Do not count on me. It cannot be done…" He had not the courage to look his father in the face as he spoke, but fixed his gaze on the ground like a schoolboy.

His father was not angry, he only replied gently:

"I would have repaid you, François, as I shall repay your brother. One year is not like another. Good times will come back to us." And he waited, looking at the thick tawny hair and bull neck of his eldest son that scarcely rose above the table. But François must have already made up his mind, and that very decidedly, for in a half-smothered voice he made answer:

"Father, I cannot; nor can Eléonore. Our money is our own, is it not? and each of us is free to use it as he or she pleases? Ours is already invested. What does it matter to us if the Marquis does have to wait a year for his money? You say he is so rich."

"What matter to us, François?" Then, and not till then, the father's voice rose and became authoritative. He did not put himself into a passion, he rather felt hurt as though not recognising his own flesh and blood; it was as if, all suddenly, there had dawned upon him without his understanding it the wide gulf that existed between the feelings of the present generation and the past, and he said:

"What you say is not to my taste, François Lumineau. For my part, I consider it a duty to pay what I owe – the family at the Château have never done me a wrong. I and your mother, and Mathurin, who have known them better than you, have always respected them; do you understand? They are perfectly justified in spending their wealth as it seems them best; that is a matter that does not concern us… Not pay? And do you know that they could turn us out of La Fromentière?"

"Bah!" returned François. "And what does it matter whether we are here or elsewhere? as far as farming goes, it does not pay so mighty well anywhere."

Treacherously, without seeing the old man's pallor, struck to the heart, he thus seceded from La Fromentière. The sound of washing of dishes was heard no more in the adjacent kitchen, the girls were listening.

The farmer made no reply; but, rising, he drew himself up to his full height, passed before his son, his intimidated son, who watched him from the corner of his eye, and flung open the door that led into the courtyard. A rush of air, the scent of leaves, the breath of green fields, came into the heated room redolent of food. François, hastening to make off, sidled along the wall, passed through the kitchen, exchanging a few words with Eléonore as he went, and going through the girls' bedchamber went out into the night.

It was the farmer's custom every night to cross his threshold and breathe the fresh air before going to rest; to-night as usual he walked out to the middle of the courtyard to judge of the weather for the morrow. Some light clouds were gliding away towards the west, rear-guard of a bank of more extended clouds deep down in the horizon. Swept on by the wind to the neighbouring coast they formed themselves into transparent islands, separating abysses of deep-blue sky studded with stars. With the leisurely movement of a laden vessel the wind bore on towards the ever-changing sea the kiss of earth, the scent and thrill of vegetation, the scattered seeds, the germs entangled in the dust failing hither and thither in mysterious rain-showers, the voice of innumerable insects that sing in the grasses, and have no other witness than the winds.

There was a sense of content, a series of waves, as it were, of calm and fecundity following one upon the other, which should spread abroad in many a sea-solitude the scent of the harvests of France.

And the farmer, drinking in the air wherein floated the essence of his beloved Vendée, felt that love-thrill within him which, unable to express, he experienced for it to the very marrow of his bones.

"How is it with these young people," he thought, "that they can he indifferent to the farmstead? I have been young in my day, but it would have taken a good deal to make me leave La Fromentière. Perhaps they find it dull; the house is not like it was in my dear wife's time; I do not know how to keep them together as she did." And he thought of la mère Lumineau, the good, saving housewife, haughty towards strangers, loving to her own, who, with a word in the right place, could always so quietly influence and control her boys, and check the rivalry of her girls. Around him the stables, the barns, the huge hayrick glistened in the moonlight.

A distant shot resounded from the Marais. Toussaint heard it, and his thoughts turned at once to the man shooting. At the same instant a voice behind him exclaimed:

"There's another plover down for Rousille!"

"That's enough, Mathurin!" said his father, who, without looking back, had recognised the speaker. "Do not be telling tales, which you know irritate me, against your sister. I am troubled to-night, my boy, troubled enough about François."

The crutches striking on the gravel came nearer, and the farmer felt the shaggy head touch his shoulder as the cripple straightened himself.

"I am only speaking the truth, father," he said in a low voice, "these are no tales. It makes my blood boil to see this *Boquin* making love to my sister in order to get hold of our money, and play the master here. A fellow who has not a halfpenny to bless himself with! There is no time to be lost, if he is to be brought to his senses."

"Do you really believe," asked the father, bending down a little to him, "that a girl like Rousille would listen to my hired labourer? Does she care anything for him, Mathurin?"

It was a weakness of Toussaint Lumineau to lend too ready ear to the judgment and strictures of his eldest son. Even now that all hope had been abandoned of seeing him his successor; after all the many proofs experienced of the violence and malevolence of the cripple, he still retained predominant influence over the father.

"Father, they are lovers!" As a whispered breath the words came to the father's ear.

Rage at the happiness of others had distorted the younger man's features. Toussaint Lumineau looked down at the face raised to his, so white in the moonlight, and was struck by the air of suffering it wore.

"If you watched them as I do," continued his son, "you would see that though they never speak to each other indoors, outside they always contrive to meet. I have often caught them talking and laughing together like acknowledged lovers. You do not know that Jean Nesmy; he is audacity itself. He lets you think

that he likes shooting, and I do not say but what he may, but he does not carry his love for it to that extent, I'll be bound. Is it only for his own pleasure that he is off to the far end of the Marais to shoot plovers; only for his own pleasure that he risks malarial fever fishing for eels; that he spends whole nights out after being hard at work all day? No, I tell you, it is for Rousille, for Rousille, for Rousille!" His voice had risen, it could be heard from within the house.

"I will be on the watch, my boy," returned his father soothingly, "do not you worry yourself."

"Ah, if I were you, I would go at dawn to-morrow along the road to the Marais, and if I caught them together…"

"Enough!" exclaimed his father, "you do yourself no good by so much talking, Mathurin. Here is Eléonore coming to help you in."

Eléonore had come, as usual, to help Mathurin up the steps, and unlace his boots. No sooner did she touch his arm than turning, he went in with her. The sound of crutches and of footsteps died away; the father was alone again.

"Come," he thought aloud, "if this be true, I will not suffer the laugh to last long against me in the Marais!" He drew in a deep breath of pure air, as though it were a bumper of wine, then to make sure that Rousille had not gone out again, he entered the house by the door in the middle, which was that of his daughter's bedchamber. All was dark within; a ray of moonlight fell across the well-waxed wardrobes furnishing the sides of the room –

wardrobes always kept in perfect order by Eléonore and Rousille. The farmer felt his way round the huge walnut wood one which had formed his mother's dowry, had crossed the room, and was making his way out into the kitchen communicating with the large living-room where he and Mathurin slept, when behind him, in the angle of a bed, a shadowy form arose:

"Father!"

He stopped.

"Is it you, Rousille? Are you not in bed?"

"No, I was waiting for you. I wanted to say something to you." They were separated by the length of the room; the darkness was too great for them to see each other. "As François cannot give you his money, I have been thinking that I will give you mine."

"You are not afraid then that I shall not repay you?" the farmer asked harshly.

The girlish voice, as if discouraged by this reception, and checked in its enthusiasm, replied timidly:

"I will go to-morrow to fetch it … the Michelonne's nephew has it… I will, indeed, and you shall have it the day after to-morrow."

If a tear rolled down his cheeks, the farmer was unaware of it; he passed on into his own room.

Some minutes later, when Eléonore came into the room, a lighted candle in her hand, Marie-Rose was no longer beside her bed, but was standing before the open windows looking out on to the courtyard.

The farmhouse stood upon an eminence, and from this window there was a view over the low wall, and through the arched gateway to the slopes beyond, and even across the sedge-covered Marais.

The sisters often undressed without exchanging a word. Rousille was gazing straight before her into the clear moonlight; her accustomed eye could distinguish objects by it almost as accurately as by the light of day. Immediately beyond the wall came a group of elms, under shelter of which stood carts and ploughs, then a stretch of land lying fallow, and beyond that again the broad flat expanse of marshland, across which on most nights would come now faintly, now loudly, the sound of the roll of the ocean, as of some far-off chariot that never stopped. The immense grassy plain looked blue in the darkness; here and there the water of a dyke shone in the moonlight. A few distant lights, a window lit up, pierced the veil of mist that spread over the meadows. Unerringly Rousille could name each farmstead to herself by its beacon light, similar to that on the mast-head of a ship riding at anchor; La Pinçonnière, La Parée du Mont, both near; further away, Les Levrelles; then so distant that their lights were only visible at intervals, like tiny stars, La Terre-Aymont, La Seulière, Malabrit, and the flour-mill of Moque-Souris. By a group of starry points on the right, she could discern the town of Sallertaine standing out on an invisible mound in the middle of the Marais. Somewhere about there Jean Nesmy was wading among the reeds, for love of Rousille. So she continued to think

of him; she seemed to see him so far, so very far away, amid the dreamy shadows, and her lips pressed together, then parted in a long, silent kiss.

There was a sudden swish of wings over the tiles of La Fromentière.

"Do shut the window, Rousille," said Eléonore, waking up. "It is the turn of the night, and blows in cold."

The sky was clear, the clouds had dispersed. The lights of Moque-Souris were extinguished; those of Sallertaine had gradually diminished like a bunch of currants pecked by birds.

"Until to-morrow, my Jean, in the dwarf orchard," murmured Rousille. And slowly, musingly, the girl began unfastening her dress by the light reflected from her white sheet, her young heart filled with dreams of youth.

# CHAPTER III.
# THE DWARF ORCHARD

Towards four o'clock the stars began to fade in the sky, the first signs of daybreak to appear. A cock crowed. It was the same golden-feathered cock, with fiery eyes under his red crest, that crowed every morning. Marie-Rose had reared him. Now hearing it she thought, "Thank you, little cock!" Then began to dress quietly, for fear of rousing Eléonore, who still slept soundly.

She was quickly ready, and crossing the courtyard, turned to the left past the ruined wall by a grassy path on the farm property, strewn with fallen branches, which led down to the Marais. About some hundred yards from La Fromentière all vegetation abruptly ceased, and one came upon a low wall grown with lichen and moss, surrounding an orchard of about an acre in extent. Rousille, pushing open a gate in the middle of the wall, entered.

It was a curious sight, this dwarf orchard. The cider apple and pear trees with which it was planted had never been able to grow higher than the top of the wall on account of the strong winds that blew from the sea. Their stems were thick and gnarled, their branches all bent and driven towards the east; leafless above, they met and over-arched beneath. Looking at it from outside one simply saw a billowy mass of bare branches; but on making one's

way down the central path, one found oneself in a leafy shade some four feet high, safe from inquisitive eyes, from rain and heat, and from the gales which sweep over the Marais. It was a sailor's folly, such as might be found in far-off isles. As a child, it had been Rousille's playground; now grown up, it was here she had come to meet her betrothed.

Entering, she stooped and made a path for herself towards the western wall, then sitting upon the forked branch of an apple-tree, hidden among them like a partridge in a corn-field, she gazed out upon the vast plain along which Jean Nesmy must come.

At this early hour the Marais was covered with mists which did not rise, but parted ever and anon, undulating in the breeze. The solitude was unbroken, the atmosphere light, sensitive, nervous, carrying the faintest sound without diminution. The bark of a dog at Sallertaine came to her ears as if it were beside her. Great square corn-fields that looked like patches of grey fur stitched together faded away into nothing in the distance. Here and there canals, cutting each other at right angles, looked like tarnished mirrors, the mist curling in smoke above them. Then vaguely from out the fog darker outlines began to appear, like oases in the desert; they were farmhouses built on the low-lying ground of the marshland, with their outbuildings and groups of poplars to lend shade. Now the undulating veil of mist began to rise, rays of light touched the grasses, sheets of water sparkled like windows in a setting sun. For many a league, from the bay of Bourgneuf

to Saint Gilles, the Marais of La Vendée had awakened to the light of a fresh day.

Rousille rejoiced in it. She loved her native soil, faithful, true, generous soil, ever yielding its increase whether in rain or sunshine; where one would sleep one's last sleep to the sighing of the wind, under the shelter of the Cross. She loved nothing better than that horizon where every tiniest road was familiar to her, from the fence that ran along the first meadow of La Fromentière close at hand, to the paths on the embankment which must be traversed pole in hand to jump the dykes.

"Four o'clock," she said to herself, "and he has not come back yet! What will father say?" She was beginning to grow uneasy, when, as she was gazing into the distance towards the pointed clock tower of Sallertaine, a voice startled her with:

"Rousille!" On the rising path, the marshland behind him, standing looking at her in the light of the early morning, was Jean Nesmy.

"I did not see you come," she said.

He laughed, and with a proud air raised above his head a bundle of feathers, four plovers and a teal tied together. The next moment, resting the gun he carried against the inside of the wall, and flinging over the birds, he dropped down beside Rousille.

"Rousille," he said, taking her hand under the arching apple-trees, "I have had luck! Four plovers and such fine ones! I had a couple of hours' sleep in the barn at La Pinçonnière, and if the farmer had not dragged me out this morning, I should have been

late, I was so sound asleep. And you?"

"I," replied Marie-Rose, as he sat opposite to her, "I am afraid. Father spoke to me so angrily last night – he had been talking to Mathurin in the courtyard – they must know."

"Well, and if they do? I am doing nothing to anger them. I mean to win you by my work, to ask your father for your hand, and take you home as my wife."

She looked at him, happy, despite her fears, at the determination she read in the lad's face. And reserving her thought which answered yes, she said without direct reply:

"What is it like in your home?"

"In my home," replied Jean Nesmy, contracting his eyes as if to fix the picture thus evoked, and looking over Rousille's head – "in my home is my mother, who is old and poor. The house she lives in is called the Château, as I have told you before, in the parish of Châtelliers; but it is not by any means a castle, Rousille, only two rooms, in which live six little Nesmys besides myself, who am the eldest … it was, as you know, on account of our poverty and the number of children that I could only serve one year in the army."

"Oh, yes, I remember," she answered, laughing, "that year seemed to me longer than any other."

"I am the eldest; then come two girls, who are growing up. They are not dressed altogether like you, for instance…"

An idea seized him, and with his hand quite near yet without touching Rousille, he sketched about the young girl's shoulders

and waist, the little shawl and the long velvet ribbons encircling the bust. "All round there two rows of velvet; rich girls have even three. You would be charming, Rousille, in the costume of the Châtelliers and La Flocellière, for they dress in the same manner, the villages are quite close."

She laughed, as if caressed by the hand which never touched her, following its action with half-closed eyes.

"As you may suppose," he continued, "they only dress like that on Sundays! There would not be bread in the house every day if I did not send home the wages that your father gives me. Then I have two brothers who have finished their schooling, and look after cows and begin to do little odd jobs. The farmer who hires them gives them each one row of potatoes to dig up for their own. It is a great help!"

"So I should think!" returned Rousille, with an air of conviction

"But above all," continued the lad, "our air is superb. We have plenty of rain, indeed it rains without ceasing when the wind blows from Saint Michael, a place about one league from us. But immediately after we are in full sunshine; and as we have plenty of trees and moss and ferns about us, the air is a very joy to breathe, quite different from here; for our country is not at all like that of the Marais; it is all hills, here, there, and everywhere, big and little; there is no getting away from them. From any height it looks a perfect paradise. Ah, Rousille, if you only knew Le Bocage, and the moors of Nouzillac, you would never want to

leave them!"

"And is the land tilled like this?"

"Very nearly, but much deeper. It takes strong oxen, sometimes six or eight to plough."

"Father uses as many, when it pleases him."

"Yes, for the honour of it, Rousille, because your father is a rich man. But down there, believe me, the soil has more granite and is harder to turn."

She hesitated a little, the smile left her face as she asked:

"Do the women work in the fields?"

"Oh, no, of course not," answered the lad warmly. "We respect and care for them as much as men do here in your Marais. Even my mother, who goes gleaning at harvest-time and when the chestnuts are gathered, is never seen working in the fields like a man. No, you may depend on it, our women are more indoors spinning, than doing out-of-door work."

Recalled to the stern conditions of his daily life, the young man grew grave, and added slowly:

"Rest assured, I will never slacken in my work. I am known for more than two leagues round Châtelliers as a lad who has no fear of hard work. We will have our own little house to ourselves, and if only I have your love, Rousille, like my father and mother, I will never complain of any hardships."

He had scarcely ended his speech of humble love-making when a voice from the road called:

"Rousille!"

"We are betrayed!" she said, turning pale. "It is father."

They both remained motionless, with beating hearts, thinking only of the voice that would call again.

And, in truth, it was now heard nearer.

"Rousille!"

She did not resist. Signing to Jean Nesmy to remain under cover of the trees, and bending half double, she made her way out to the path that divided the orchard. There straightening herself, she saw her father standing before her in the road. He looked at his daughter for a moment, as she presented herself, pale, breathless, dishevelled by the branches, then said:

"What were you doing there?"

She would not lie; she felt herself lost. In her trouble involuntarily she turned her head as if to invoke the protection of him in hiding, and there just behind, erect, quite close to her, Rousille saw her lover, who had come to her aid in the moment of danger. With an air of defiance he drew himself up, and strode in front of her. Then the girl ventured to look again at her father. He was no longer occupied with her, nor had he the angry aspect she expected to see; his expression was grave and sad, and he looked steadily at Jean Nesmy, who, pressing forward on the grassy walk, had stopped at the opening, within three feet of him:

"You here, my farm-servant!" he said.

Jean Nesmy made answer:

"Yes, I am here."

"You have been with Rousille, then?"

"And what is the harm?" inquired the lad, with a slight tremor, which he could not control, not of fear, but of the hot blood of youth.

There was no anger in the farmer's voice. With head bent on his breast, as of a master whose kindness has been abused, and who is sorrowing, he said with a sigh:

"Come you here, at once, with me."

Not a word to Marie-Rose, not one look. It was a matter to be settled among men first; the daughter did not count at present.

The farmer was already retracing his steps, walking with leisurely stride towards La Fromentière; Jean Nesmy followed at a short distance, his gun slung on his back, swinging the birds he had shot in one hand. Far behind them came Rousille in sore distress, sometimes looking at Jean Nesmy, sometimes at the master who was to decide his fate.

When the two men had gone into the courtyard, she did not dare to follow them in, but leaning against a pillar of the ruined gateway, half hidden behind it, her head on her arm, she waited to see what would happen.

Her father and his man, crossing the yard, proceeded to Jean Nesmy's room, which was to the left beyond the stables. There was no sound but the noise of wooden shoes on the gravel; but Rousille had seen the cripple crouching down in the first rays of the sun, beyond the stables; he was nodding his head with an air of satisfaction, his malicious eyes never leaving the stranger he had denounced, who, yesterday so happy, was now the culprit.

Not far off, François, on a ladder, was cutting out a wedge of hay from a rick, firm and compact as a wall; he, too, was watching slyly from under the brim of his hat, but there was no malice upon his phlegmatic countenance, nothing more than a mild curiosity broadening his lips into a half smile under the heavy yellow moustache. He did his work as slowly as possible so as to be able to remain there and see the end of it.

Toussaint Lumineau and his man had soon reached the shed piled with empty casks, baskets, spades, and pickaxes, that had for many a year served as sleeping-place for the farm-servants. The master sat down on the foot of the bed. The look on his face had not changed; it was still the dignified paternal look of one who regrets parting from a good servant, and yet is resolutely determined to suffer no encroachment upon his authority, no disrespect to his position. Leaning his elbow upon an old cask showing marks of tallow, on which Jean Nesmy used to rest his candle at night, he slowly raised his head, and in the daylight that streamed in at the open door, he at length addressed the young man, who was standing bare-headed in the middle of the shed.

"I hired you for forty pistoles," he said. "You received your wages at Midsummer; how much is now owing to you?"

The lad, absorbed, began counting and recounting with his fingers on his blouse, the veins of his forehead swelling with the effort; his eyes were fixed on the ground, and not another thought disturbed the complicated operation of the countryman calculating the price of his labour. During this time, the farmer

mentally went over the brief history of his connection with the lad, who, come by chance to the Marais in search of burnt cow-dung, used by the Vendéens for manure, had been then and there hired by him, and had quickly fallen into the ways of his new master. The farmer thought of the three years that the stranger lad had lived under the roof of La Fromentière, one before his military training, two since; years of hard, thorough work, of good conduct, without having once given cause for serious reproof, of astonishing gentleness and submission despite his sons' hostility, which, manifested on the very first day, had never lessened.

"It should make ninety-five francs," said Jean Nesmy.

"That is what I make it," said the farmer. "Here is the money. Count and see if it is right." From his coat pocket where he had already placed them, Toussaint Lumineau drew out a number of silver pieces which he threw on the top of the cask. "Take it, lad."

Without touching the money Jean Nesmy had drawn back.

"You will not have me any longer at La Fromentière?"

"No, my lad, you are going." The old man's voice faltered, and he continued: "I am not sending you away because you are idle, nor even, though it did annoy me, because you are too fond of shooting wild-fowl. You have served me well. But my daughter is my own, Jean Nesmy, and I have not given my consent to your courting her."

"If she likes me, and I like her, Maître Lumineau?"

"You are not one of us, my poor boy. That a *Boquin* should

marry a girl like Rousille is an impossibility, as you know. You should have thought of it before."

For the first time Jean Nesmy's face grew a shade paler, he half closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth drooped as though he were about to burst into tears. In a low voice he said:

"I will wait for her as long as you think fit. She is young, and so am I. Only say how long it must be, and I will submit."

But the farmer answered:

"No, it cannot be. You must go."

The young man quivered from head to foot. He hesitated for a moment, with knitted brows, his eyes fixed on the ground, then decided not to speak his thought: I will not give her up. I will come back. She shall be mine. True to the taciturn race from which he sprang, he said nothing, took up the money, counted it, dropping the pieces one by one into his pocket as he did so. Then without another word, as though the farmer were not in existence, he began to collect his clothes and belongings. The blue blouse that he knotted by the sleeves to the barrel of his gun held them all, save a pair of boots that he slung on to a piece of string. When he had finished, he raised his hat, and went out.

It was broad sunshine. Jean Nesmy walked slowly; the strong will that dominated the slight youth made him hold his head high, and his eyes scanned the windows of the house seeking Rousille. She was nowhere to be seen. Then in the middle of the great courtyard, he, the hired servant, who had been dismissed, who had but another moment to tread the ground of La Fromentière,

called:

"Rousille!"

A pointed coif appeared at the angle of the gateway; Rousille came forth from her shelter and ran to him, tears streaming down her face. But almost at the same moment she stopped, intimidated by the sight of her father on the threshold of the shed, and stricken with terror at a cry which, rising from that side of the courtyard, some fifty paces off, had caused Nesmy to turn his head:

"*Dannion!*"

A monstrous apparition came out from the stables. The cripple, bare-headed, with eyes bloodshot, inspired by impotent rage, had rushed out, with arms rigid on his crutches, his huge body shaking with the effort. Roaring like some wild beast with wide-open mouth he hurled the old cry of hatred at the stranger, the cry with which the children of the Marais greet the despised dwellers of the Bocage.

"*Dannion! Dannion Sarraillon*– look to yourself!"

Rushing with a speed that betokened the violence and strength of the man, he neared Nesmy. The rage in his heart, the jealousy that tortured him, the agony caused by the effort he was making, rendered the convulsed face terrible to behold, as it was projected forward by jerks; while onlookers could not but think, with a shudder, what a powerful man this deformed, unearthly looking creature had once been.

Seeing him come close up to the farm-servant, Rousille was

terrified for the man she loved. She ran to Jean Nesmy, put her two hands on his arms, and drew him backward towards the road.

And, on her account, Jean Nesmy began to draw back, slowly, step by step, while the cripple, growing still more furious, shouted insultingly:

"Let go of my sister, *Dannion*!"

The farmer's loud voice interposed from the depths of the courtyard:

"Stop where you are, Mathurin; and you, Nesmy, loose your hold of my daughter!"

And he advanced to them, without haste, as a man not desiring to compromise his dignity. The cripple stopped short, let go of his crutches, and sank exhausted to the ground.

But Jean Nesmy continued to retreat. He had placed his hand in Rousille's; and soon they were within the portal of the gateway, framed in sunshine. There lay the road. The young man bent towards Rousille and kissed her cheek.

"Farewell, my Rousille," he said.

And she, running across the courtyard without looking back, her hands to her face, wept bitterly.

Having watched her disappear round the corner of the house by the barn, Nesmy called out:

"Mathurin Lumineau, I shall come back!"

"Only try!" retorted the cripple.

The whilom farm-servant of La Fromentière began to mount the hill beside the farm; clad in his russet work-day clothes he

walked with difficulty as if worn out with fatigue. His whole wardrobe, slung on to his gun, consisted of but one coat, a blouse, three shirts, a couple of boxwood bird calls for quails that clapped together as he walked, and yet the load seemed heavy. A feeling of dismay at having to go back to the daily seeking of employment had come over him while making up the modest bundle. He was already thinking of his mother's alarm at this sudden return. Every step was a wrench from some loved object, for he had lived three years in this Fromentière. His heart was heavy with memories; he walked on slowly, looking at nothing yet seeing every stick and stone. The trees he brushed past had all been pruned by him, or flicked by his whip; every inch of ground had been ploughed and reaped by him; he knew how every furrow was to be sown on the morrow.

Having reached the back of the farm, at the rise of the road where formerly four mills had been busily grinding corn and now only two were at work, he turned to look back that he might increase the pain of parting.

Below him, bathed in sunlight, lay the plain of the Marais, where rushes, taking on their autumn array, formed golden circles round the meadows; there were farms distinguishable by their groups of poplars, inhabited islands in the desert of marshland, where he was leaving good friends, and the recollection of happy hours that come back in sorrow; his eyes scanned the crowded houses of Sallertaine and its church dominating them all, recalling bygone Sundays. Then, with his

soul in his eyes, he bent them upon La Fromentière, as a bird would hover with wide extended wings.

From the height on which he stood the lad could discern the whole of the farm, even to its slightest details. One by one he counted the windows, the doors and gates, the paths round the fields along which every evening, for the last two years especially, he had never failed to sing as he drove the cattle homewards. When his eyes lighted on the dwarf orchard, so distant that it looked no larger than a pea-pod, he quickly turned away; as he did so, his foot struck against something in the path, it was a dog lying down, quite still.

"What, you, Bas-Rouge?" said Jean. "My poor doggie, you cannot follow me where I am going;" and, walking on, he stroked the dog's head between his ears, in the place where Rousille loved to fondle him. After some twenty paces, he said again:

"You must go back, Bas-Rouge. I do not belong to you any more."

Bas-Rouge trotted on a little further with his friend; but when they had reached the last hedge of La Fromentière, he stopped, and turned slowly homewards.

# CHAPTER IV.
# THE MICHELONNES

"Rousille," said her father, as shortly before noon she went into the house to help her sister prepare dinner, "you will not take your meals with us either to-day, or for some days to come. A girl like Eléonore, who respects herself, would be ashamed to eat her food beside a young woman who could allow a penniless *Boquin* to make love to her. A pretty kind of lover! A fellow from I don't know where, who would not even have a wardrobe to furnish his house with! All very well for a serving-maid, such as they are in those parts; but the whole kit of them are not worth their salt in the Marais, those *dannions*! I am cured of taking them into my service. There must have been some fine tales going the round at my expense. And now, Rousille, mind that you conduct yourself properly; and take yourself out of my sight!"

So the farmer spoke, far more harshly than he felt, because Mathurin had been talking to him a long time after Nesmy had gone, and had inspired him with some of his resentment.

Marie-Rose made no reply, shed no tear, but withdrew to her room. She had no thought of dinner, either with or without them; but began to dress herself in her best, as for Sunday, taking by turns from the wardrobe a black skirt, raised from the ground by a broad tuck, showing the pretty feet beneath; her most dainty

coif and embroidered pyramid of muslin kept in shape by silver paper that rested on her hair; open-work stockings; sabots, like the prow of a ship, so much did they turn up. A blue silk kerchief filled in the low bodice, as was the custom in the Marais; there only remained to smooth the bands of chestnut hair with a little water, to bathe her red eyes, then going out into the courtyard she turned off on the road to Sallertaine.

For the first time in her life she had a feeling of standing alone in the world. Mathurin did not love her; François did not understand her. André himself, the soldier brother so soon coming home, who had always been kind, only treated her as a child to be teased and petted. And she felt herself a woman – a woman who was learning to know sorrow, and one who needed to pour out her trouble to sympathetic ears.

Hitherto, if they were unkind, if they neglected her, she had never felt the need of telling her troubles to anyone; the thought of Jean Nesmy had been enough to make her forget them all. But now that he whom she loved had had to go, and that his going was the sorrow, her soul cried out for aid – sought some safe place wherein to rest. In her distress she thought of the sisters Michelonne. Rousille passed close beside the dwarf orchard; Rousille skirted the edge of the Marais whence can be seen Sallertaine upon its eminence. No, she had no other hope save in those two dear old friends; no other regret than that she had not before been to that little house in the town. The old sisters' warmth of heart seemed to her just now a thing of priceless

worth, which, hitherto, had not been valued half enough. The mere thought of their round faces, withered and smiling, was a goal to her. It seemed as if only to see the Michelonnes, even if she might not speak one word of her trouble, would be a consolation, because of their kind hearts, and because, old maids though they were, they were not the people to gossip about a young girl's red eyes. What excuse could she make for going to them? Oh, it was very simple. She had promised to draw out her money and lend it to her father to pay the rent. She had only to say, "I have come for my money; father needs it." Then if they guessed the slightest thing, she would tell all, all her trouble, all the grief she could not endure alone.

It was close upon one o'clock. A mist of heat quivered over the meadows. Rousille walked fast. Now she had reached the Grand Canal, smooth as a mirror; there was the bridge across it, the winding road flanked on either side by the white-washed houses of the outskirts of Sallertaine, their orchards at the back looking towards the Marais. Rousille walks faster. She is afraid of being hailed and stopped, for the Lumineaus are known to everyone in the district. But the good folks are either taking their noonday sleep, or else without quitting their shady corners they call to her, "Good day, little one! How fast you are walking!" "Yes, I am in a hurry. Sometimes one is." "Yes, indeed," they reply, and on she goes. She has reached the long open Place that narrows as it reaches the church. Now she has only eyes for the humble dwelling which stands at the extreme end where the street

is narrowest, facing the side door of the church by which the faithful enter on Sundays. It is a very little house, one window looks on to the Place, the other on to a steep lane, the three steps to the entrance are at the corner; it is also very old, and built under the shadow of the clock tower, beneath the peal of bells, thus nearer to Heaven.

The sisters Michelonne have lived there all their lives. Rousille can picture them within the walls; a half smile, a ray of hope crosses her sad face. She ascends the three steps, and pauses to regain breath.

When Rousille presses down the iron latch, the door opens to the tinkle of so tiny a bell that it would need the ears of a cat to hear it.

But they were true cats, ever on the watch, these two old sisters, cloak-makers to the whole of Sallertaine. Scarcely did they divine a visitor from the shadow cast through the glass door, than with simultaneous movement their chairs, always close together, were pushed back, their heads turned towards the door, and their busy hands sunk on their laps. The two sisters were very much alike; the same deep, arched wrinkles in the rosy faces, round the toothless mouths, round the short noses, round the blue, childlike eyes that had a light in them as of a perpetual laugh, and was the reflection of their sixty years of work, of sisterly affection, and their good consciences. There was also a twinkle in their eyes of fun without malice; a something as of the flame of youth economised in the course of their lives, and

leaving a fund for their old age. Poverty had not been wanting, but it had always been borne by them together. From childhood's day they had worked side by side in the light of the same window, day rising and setting on their busy needles never at rest. There was no one in all Sallertaine, nor in Perrier, nor Saint Gervais who could cut and make cloaks as skilfully as they could; and they were general favourites. As soon as the weather was mild enough for them to stand a pot of ivy geranium on the sill and to sit by the open window, there was not a person coming down the lane, whether fisherman, sportsman, drover, or horse-breeder, who did not call in as he passed "Good day and good luck, *les Michelonnes*." To which they would make some kind reply in soft voices, so alike that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. They were asked to St. Sylvester gatherings because they had an inexhaustible store of songs, when young folks had long come to the end of all they knew.

The Curé said of them: "The flower of my flock; it is a pity they have no successors."

When Rose-Marie entered, they did not get up, but said both together, Adelaide at the window, Véronique a little away:

"It is you, little Lumineau! Good day, pretty one!"

"Sit down, child," said Adelaide, "you are quite out of breath."

"But not ill?" asked Véronique. "Your eyes are as bright as if you had fever?"

"Thank you, aunts," answered Marie-Rose. She called them aunts on account of a distant relationship difficult to establish,

but principally on account of the old ladies' kindness. "I have been walking quickly, and I do feel a little tired. I have come for some of my money."

The sisters exchanged a side-look, laughing already at the thought of the coming marriage, and the eldest, Adelaide, drawing her needle across her lips as if to smooth out the wrinkles, asked:

"You are about to marry, then?"

"Oh, indeed no!" returned Marie-Rose, "I shall be married like you, my aunts, to my seat in church and my rosary. It is for father, who has not money to pay the rent of the farm; he is in arrears."

And as, while speaking, she did not look into her old friends' faces, but into the shade of the room, somewhere towards the two beds ranged along the side of the wall, the sisters Michelonne shook their heads as though to communicate the impression that, all the same, some disturbing element had entered into Rousille's life. But the sisters were more instinctively polite than curious. They reserved their thought for the long hours of chat together, and Adelaide, throwing down her half-finished work, clasping her white bony hands, and bending forward her thin body, said gaily:

"Well, my pretty one, you have come just at the right time! I had lent your money on interest to my nephew, who, you know, breeds foals, and very good ones, on the Marais. He is a sharp fellow, that François. Would you believe it, yesterday he actually

sold his dappled grey filly – that flies like a plover, and was the envy of all the breeders and dannions that went by the meadow – and for such a big price that he would not even tell us the amount. So, you see, it will be quite easy for him to pay back a good part of the loan. How much will you want?"

"A hundred and twenty pistoles."

"You shall have them. Are they wanted at once?"

"Yes, Aunt Adelaide. I promised them by to-morrow."

"Then, Véronique, my girl, suppose you were to go to our nephew? The cloak can well wait an hour."

The younger sister rose at once; she was so short standing, that she did not reach above the head of Marie-Rose sitting. Rapidly shaking off the threads of cotton from her black apron, she kissed the girl on both cheeks:

"Good-bye, Rousille. To-morrow the money will be here, and you will only have to come and fetch it."

In the quiet of the sleepy town, Véronique's gliding steps could be heard as they went down the lane. No sooner had she gone than Adelaide went up to Marie-Rose and fixing upon the girl her clear kind eyes, her eyelids quivering with uneasiness:

"Child," she said hurriedly, "you are in trouble; you have been crying. Why, you are crying now!" The wrinkled hand seized the girl's pink palm. "What is it, my Rousille? Tell me, as you would tell your own mother. I love you as she would do."

Marie-Rose repressed her tears. She would not cry when she could speak. Trembling at the contact of the hand which touched

her own, her eyes like diamonds, her face set, as though she were addressing those enemies before whom her tongue had been tied:

"They have sent away Jean Nesmy," she said rising.

"He, my dear? Such a good worker? And why?"

"Because I love him, Aunt Michelonne. They turned him out this morning. And they think that all is over between us because I shall not see him again. They little know the girls of these parts."

"Well said, *Maraîchine*," exclaimed the old aunt.

"I will give them all my money, yes, readily; but my love – where I have placed it there I will leave it. It is as sacred as my baptismal vows. I have no fear of poverty; no fear that he will forget me. The day he comes back, for he has promised to come back, I will go to meet him, and no one shall prevent me – had I to cross the Marais, were there snow and ice, and all the girls of the town to mock at me, did my father and my brothers forbid me to go, still I would do it!"

Erect, passionate, she made the walls of the little room unused to loud voices ring with the voice of love and bitterness. It was to herself, herself only, that she spoke, because she suffered. She was looking straight before her, vaguely, apparently unaware of the Michelonne's presence.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.