

DU BOISGOBEY FORTUNÉ

THE RED LOTTERY TICKET

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I

One day early in April, the month when the lilacs flower and when women begin to display light apparel, a cab could be seen crossing the bridge which spans the Seine between the Faubourg St. Germain and the Louvre, and which is known to the Parisians as the Pont des Saints Pères. The vehicle was going at a quiet trot, and it was driven by a jovial jehu, who hummed a song as he cracked his whip and jerked his reins. Both windows were down, and from each of them came a cloud of bluish smoke – the smoke of the cigars of two young fellows who were gaily chatting inside, and who, although they came from the so-called "Latin Quarter" of Paris, were quite unlike the students immortalised by Gavarni's pencil. They were, indeed, dressed with careful taste, and displayed none of the questionable manners which may be acquired in the drinking dens of the Boulevard St. Michel. One of them, a fair-haired young fellow with soft blue eyes, was named George Caumont, and was the son of a Norman cattle breeder, who lived on his land, saving up his cash, and making his only child an allowance of three thousand francs a year, so that he might complete, in Paris, the study of law which he

had commenced at Caen. The other, a dark young man with curly moustaches and a bold expression of face, was the son of a petty nobleman of Périgord, who had left him a heavily mortgaged estate with a somewhat high-sounding name. He was called Adhémar de Puymirol, and lived upon a small allowance made him by an aunt who wished him to become a doctor.

He and George Caumont had met shortly after their arrival in Paris, and their acquaintance had speedily become intimacy, for they had the same ambition and much the same tastes. They both regarded their present situation as a probationary one, hoping sooner or later to contract a brilliant marriage; and they governed themselves accordingly, merely attending the courts and the clinical lectures when they had nothing better to do, and just occasionally passing an examination in order not to discourage Papa Caumont and Aunt Bessèges. But everything comes to an end, and with their relatives grumbling and their creditors barking loudly, there were days when the thought of the future filled them with dismay. Still, on this beautiful spring morning, everything seemed tinged with a roseate hue, and they even laughed at the enforced departure for the provinces apparently so near at hand. "Leave Paris!" said Adhémar, gazing at the scene around him. "Never, George; I would rather give lessons in anatomy to freshmen than go and bury myself in Périgord to doctor my aunt's farmers."

"And I," sighed George, "would rather act as a college tutor than devote the rest of my life to cattle breeding. We are at the

end of our tether, unfortunately, and if we don't meet two rich girls before the close of the term, we shall be obliged to decamp, for Paris will be too hot for us."

"Ah, well, we will go to one of the watering-places where heiresses are met."

"You are always so confident!"

"That is the only way to succeed. If our friend Pierre Dargental had become discouraged, we shouldn't now be going to celebrate the close of his bachelor life at lunch. Dargental is no better than we are, and yet he has found a widow of title worth more than a million francs."

"And all he brings her on his side will be his debts – some three hundred thousand francs."

"Oh! in this part of the world, a man shrewd enough to obtain credit to that amount can aspire to anything – "

"Except to the hand of an honest woman," replied George. "There are some pretty hard stories about this Countess de Lescombat's behaviour after her first husband's death."

"Well, they say she accepted Dargental's offer of marriage before her period of mourning expired. She consoled herself a little too soon, perhaps, but that is a matter of no consequence, after all."

"All the same, I should much prefer a less wealthy and more innocent girl to a rich lady of rank, with a very doubtful reputation."

"But one can't always have one's choice in such matters."

Dargental is about to enter a very wealthy set. He will introduce us to it, and we ought to succeed in finding what we want there. So it does not become us to find fault with him."

"Will any of his old flames be at lunch to-day?" inquired George.

"I believe that Blanche Pornic, the actress, is the only favoured one."

"She is very amusing."

"Yes; and thoroughly good-hearted."

The vehicle had crossed over the Place du Carrousel, and was now behind five or six others, which had formed into a line to pass through the narrow passage conducting into the Rue de Rivoli. "Five minutes to twelve!" exclaimed Puymirol, glancing at his watch. "They will be at table by the time we reach the Lion d'Or. Why doesn't this idiot of a cabman drive faster?"

"It isn't his fault. The block prevents him from doing so. There are at least half a dozen traps ahead of us."

As George spoke, he put his head out of the window, and saw that the passage would not be free for several minutes. Three or four pedestrians, tired of waiting, had turned to retrace their steps; and among them Caumont noticed a man wearing a broad-brimmed hat, pulled down over his eyes, and a full black beard concealing the lower part of his face. At a distance of ten paces behind him came two unprepossessing individuals, who seemed anxious not to lose sight of this bearded individual. Caumont rather lightly concluded that they were detectives watching the

fellow, but as he had no personal interest in the matter he again ensconced himself in his corner and said to his friend: "Have a little patience. We shall soon move on." As he spoke, he turned, and failed to see that the bearded man rested his hand for an instant on the door of the vehicle, and then without glancing at the occupants, dropped something that fell upon Puymirol's boot.

"What is that?" cried Adhémar, "what scoundrel ventures to bombard us in this style?"

"I have no idea," replied George, and on hastily turning again, he caught a fresh glimpse of the bearded man, whose back only was now visible, for he had passed them, and was slowing proceeding across the Place du Carrousel. Just then the cab moved on, and in an instant the pedestrians were left far behind. "Whatever the article is it must have been thrown in by a man who just passed us," resumed George; "and he must have done so with extraordinary swiftness and dexterity, for his movement escaped my notice entirely."

Meanwhile Puymirol had picked up from the bottom of the cab a handsome pocket-book, which, with his friend's assent, he now began to open. "The man who threw that in here," said George, "must be a thief, who in his anxiety to escape arrest, and to get rid of the stolen article, dropped it into our cab. When pickpockets find themselves in danger of capture, they very often resort to that device."

"Well," rejoined Puymirol, "at least there isn't the slightest vestige of a bank-note inside, as you can see for yourself. Nor

are there any visiting-cards, nothing but papers, and not many of them. In this compartment there are some lottery tickets, just look: The Tunisian Lottery, the Amiens Lottery, and the Lottery of the Decorative Art Society. And here on the other side there are some letters."

"Letters!" repeated George. "So much the better. We shall perhaps find in them some clue that will enable us to discover the person from whom the pocket-book was stolen."

"You don't know whether it was stolen," remarked Adh mar. "Besides, who would think of stealing lottery tickets?"

"True, but it perhaps contained money, which the thief extracted before throwing away; besides, a letter is sometimes of great value to its writer."

"Hum, these ones were written by women. There are three of them – each in a different handwriting, and, strange to say, not one of them signed, not even with a Christian name. The owner of the pocket-book must have had uncommonly prudent sweethearts. I wonder why he kept these notes in this case?"

"Because he intended to make use of them at some future time."

"You think he was a blackmailer, eh? That's quite possible."

"That theory would at least explain the robbery. If the women in question knew that these specimens of their handwriting had fallen into our hands, they would be more easy in mind, for we don't know them, and it is not likely that we ever shall."

"We are not sure of that. Stranger things than that happen in

Paris. But do you think it advisable for us to take the pocket-book to the lost property office at the Prefecture of Police?"

"No, I think it would be better to burn it with its contents."

"Why? I feel strongly inclined to preserve it. One never knows what may happen, and it would afford me infinite satisfaction to discover one of these unknown correspondents."

"Do so if you like, but I don't want to mix myself up in any such affair. I shall forget the matter, and I beg that you will never remind me of it."

"Agreed, on conditions that you say nothing about it to any one at lunch. There will be a parcel of chatterers present."

"You need have no fears of that. I will be as silent as a fish."

"All right, then. Here we are! I must put these letters out of sight," said Puymirol, and he stowed the Russian leather-case away in his coat pocket.

The cab had drawn up in front of the Lion d'Or restaurant in the Rue du Helder, and the two friends alighted, and asked for the room reserved for M. Dargental's party. The head-waiter replied that the gentleman referred to had not yet arrived, though he had ordered lunch to be served at twelve o'clock precisely; and he then led the friends to an apartment where they found two people waiting. One of them was a pale young man, about twenty-eight years of age, as phlegmatic as a Scandinavian, and as dissipated as a Russian. Although always ready to drink, to play cards, and to spend his nights in bad company, he never laughed and rarely smiled. A good-hearted fellow, however, and popular in the set

he mingled with. His name was Charles Balmer, and he was afflicted with the belief that he was dying from consumption. Beside him in the private room sat Blanche Pornic, the actress, Dargental's old flame. Tall, and lithe of form to a degree that had won her the surname of the Reed, she was very charming, with her pale golden hair, her brown eyes, sparkling with mischief, her regular features, her graceful movements, and her silvery voice – a voice that went straight to one's heart. When Puymirol and Caumont arrived she and Balmer were complaining of Dargental's non-arrival, and after some comments had been exchanged concerning his delay, Blanche exclaimed: "We have given him quite enough grace. Come, Balmer, ring, and tell them to serve us."

"Nothing would please me better," exclaimed Balmer. "I am as hungry as a dog."

"That is a good sign for a sick man," remarked Puymirol.

"By no means. What, can it be that you, a medical man, are ignorant of the fact that consumptives eat like ogres?"

"That is all bosh; besides, you are no more a consumptive than I am."

"I haven't more than two years to live, as I know perfectly well. If you wish to satisfy yourself on the point, you only have to examine my lungs."

"No, no," cried Blanche. "This is no hospital, and you disgust me with your medical talk. To table, gentlemen! I will sit opposite Dargental. He isn't here, but I will imagine that he is. Caumont

may take a seat on my right, and Puymirol on my left. And now let us partake of the funereal repast."

"Funereal is the very word," said Adhémar. "The invitations we received had mourning borders."

"And the bill of fare also," chimed in George.

"Pierre made a great mistake," remarked Blanche; "such jokes always bring bad luck."

"The fact that he hasn't come is sufficient proof of that. I wonder if he has broken a leg."

"No, indeed! Dargental is too lucky to meet with any such accident. His noble betrothed must have got wind of this breakfast, and have forbidden him to attend it."

"In that case, he would, at least, have warned you."

"Do you regret his absence?" asked Blanche, with a glance at Puymirol.

"How can I when I am near you?"

"Nonsense! you always will be a provincial. Confine your attention to these oysters. They are delicious, and this Sauterne is of the best quality."

This preliminary chat was soon interrupted by the lively clatter of knives and forks, and the tinkling of glasses. All the gentlemen of the party ate and drank heartily, but Blanche, despite her commendatory words, did not seem inclined to finish her oysters, and only just moistened her lips in the Château Yquem. "What is the matter with you, Blanche?" cried Balmer, between two mouthfuls. "I have seen you eat with a much better appetite. Is

Pierre's marriage the cause of this falling off? You must have been expecting it for several months, however."

"I was so well prepared for it that I myself urged him to take the step. And as for being angry, that can hardly be, as I came expressly to lunch with him. He no longer cares for me; well, no matter, I can only rely on his wife to avenge me. She has already given conclusive proofs of her ability in that direction."

"Indeed?" inquired Balmer, with an air of pretended innocence.

"If you don't know her story, I will tell it you," rejoined Blanche abruptly.

"I know only what Dargental has seen fit to tell us," said Balmer.

"Well then, once upon a time, as they say in fairy tales, there lived in Lyons a silk-worker, who had an illegitimate daughter. She was very beautiful, but she was no better than her mother. Her father vainly tried to repress her evil tendency, but at the age of fifteen, tired of being whipped and scolded, she eloped with a mountebank, under whose tuition she learned a host of things – circus-riding, trapeze-performing, and so forth."

"All the elegant accomplishments!" sneered Balmer.

"Two years afterwards, Octavia Crochard, as she was called, appeared in a new character. A respectable old gentleman who had fallen in love with her sent her to a boarding school at Saint Mandé, where she passed as his niece, every one being ignorant of her antecedents. She was so clever naturally that she soon

made up for lost time, and speedily became a very accomplished young woman. She even learned how to conceal her proclivities, but she was none the better for that. Not long afterwards the old gentleman died, leaving her, in his will, an income of twelve thousand francs, on conditions that she took his name."

"A nice condition! What an idiot he must have been!"

"Octavia was shrewd enough to behave herself after she left the boarding-school. She engaged a companion or chaperon, and, thanks to the recommendation of the lady-principal of the school which she had just left, she succeeded in securing an acquaintance with people of position, and before many months had elapsed, she made a conquest of another old simpleton, a *blasé* millionaire, who married her shortly afterwards."

"This is a very interesting story," said Balmer, as he emptied his fifth glass of champagne; "but what has it to do with the countess?"

"What! haven't you guessed that this same Crochard girl is now known as the Countess de Lescombat, and will soon take the name of Madame d'Argental? – Dargental with an apostrophe, be it understood, for she has insisted that Pierre should make this change in his name. In fact, to please her, he has purchased the title of marquis somewhere in Italy. Octavia does not wish to marry beneath her station."

"Have you communicated all this information to your friend Dargental?"

"No, I have taken good care not to do that. He would imagine

I had invented the story, and slandered the countess, from jealousy. But he will hear it from plenty of others, by and by. He already knows that Lescombat bequeathed his entire fortune to his wife only about a month before his death, and he will learn, sooner or later on, that the pretended attack of apoplexy that killed the count was a plain case of suicide. The old nobleman felt so much regret at having despoiled his natural heirs that he poisoned himself with prussic acid."

"But why didn't he alter his will?" inquired George Caumont.

"He couldn't; Octavia watched him too closely. Besides, she is a perfect Circe, in her power to bewitch men. She has poor Dargental completely under her control, for it is evident she has confiscated him this morning."

Adhémar and George could not repress a smile. They plainly realised that Blanche would never forgive Dargental for deserting her. As for the story about Madame de Lescombat, they thought it advisable to believe merely half of it; but even that was quite enough to make them pity the imprudent man who was about to place himself at the mercy of this wily widow. However, after all, why should she want to marry him, as he was not worth a copper?

"Are you sure that he is at her house now?" inquired Balmer. "Remember, he may be ill."

"He lives but a short distance from here, on the Boulevard Haussmann. We might send a messenger there to inquire after him," suggested George.

"I object to that proposal," said Blanche. "He would imagine

that I could not get on without him. Balmer, fill my glass. Gentlemen, I drink to your sweethearts."

The toast met with no response, for, at that moment, a waiter entered, bearing a salver upon which a blue envelope was lying. "Here is a telegram which has just arrived for Monsieur Dargental," said the attendant. "Shall I lay it beside his plate?"

"Hand it here!" cried Balmer, seizing hold of the missive. "A telegram is not a letter, and it will certainly do no harm for me to open this one. It will perhaps explain why Pierre has left us in the lurch, after inviting us here." He tore open the envelope as he spoke, and he had scarcely glanced at the contents, than he exclaimed triumphantly: "It is from the countess! You see that he is not at her house."

"Let me see it," said Blanche, holding out her hand; and, glancing at the missive, she added: "It is from her. Listen, gentlemen: 'My dear Pierre – I should be very sorry to curtail your farewells to your friends of both sexes, but I should be greatly obliged to you if you would come to my house immediately after the lunch.' Both sexes! that is a dig at me. This countess has a very easy style, and she is as prudent as a serpent, for she has merely signed her christian name, Octavia, for fear of compromising herself, I suppose."

As the actress spoke, she passed the telegram to her left-hand neighbour. Puymirol, on examining it, at once perceived that it was not a genuine telegram, but one of those communications, the sender of which pens as many words as he pleases upon a

slip of paper; he then seals the latter up, and it is despatched by the pneumatic tube service to any part of Paris. The handwriting of this particular "telegraphic-note" was therefore the countess's, not a clerk's, and Adhémar noted that it was peculiarly firm and decided in character.

"Well," said Blanche, "as the countess hasn't kept Pierre a prisoner, I begin to think that he must be playing a trick on us."

"Unless some misfortune has befallen him," suggested Puymirol.

"A misfortune will befall him when he marries, there is no doubt of that; but Dargental has no business to treat us like nobodies. If you take my advice, we will each pay a share of the bill and decamp."

"Speak for yourself, I am still thirsty," growled Balmer. "You can go if you like, but I intend to have my coffee and season it with a few glasses of cognac."

"Then you can settle the bill, and I will send you my share of it as soon as I learn the amount. I am going. Who loves me, follows me!" said Blanche, rising from table.

Adhémar and George followed her example. "I shall pass Dargental's door on leaving here, and I will hand his doorkeeper that pneumatic telegram," remarked Adhémar, placing the missive in his pocket beside the pocket-book thrown into the cab.

Balmer declining to move, the three others now went downstairs together. Blanche then sprang into a cab which stood outside the restaurant and drove off, saying, "Come and see me

one of these days. I should like to hear the end of this affair."

"What do you think of it all?" said Caumont to Adhémar, as soon as the actress had gone.

"I think," replied Puymirol, "that the countess is an adventuress, Blanche a viper, and Dargental a fool."

"Why, not long ago, you proclaimed him to be shrewdness personified!"

"I must confess that that opinion seems erroneous. But let us go to Dargental's place; we shall, perhaps, find the solution of the enigma there. It isn't far off."

The house in which Dargental lived stood on the Boulevard Haussmann. They soon reached the door, and the house-porter, on being questioned by Adhémar, replied that he believed that M. Dargental was at home. At all events, he had not seen him pass out. Dargental's rooms were situated on the second floor, to which the two friends duly climbed. Puymirol rang, but no one answered the summons, and the bell was pulled three times more, but without any better success. The two friends were, indeed, about to go off disappointed, when a servant in livery, carrying a package under his arm, appeared upon the landing. This servant was Dargental's valet, and he knew Puymirol and Caumont by sight. "I fear that the marquis has gone out," he remarked. On hearing this title, which Dargental had never borne before, the two friends exchanged a smile. "He was to lunch out to-day," continued the valet, "and he was already dressed when he sent me off on an errand at about eleven o'clock."

"It was with us that he meant to lunch, and we haven't seen anything of him," said Caumont.

"If you gentlemen would like to come in, I have the key," now suggested the servant.

"Very well, open the door, then."

The valet thereupon ushered them into an ante-chamber which they had traversed more than once. "Is there a fire in the house?" inquired Puymirol. "There is a strong smell of smoke here."

"Of powder, rather," muttered Caumont.

The valet, apparently quite as surprised by the smell as they were, opened the dining-room door, crossed the threshold, looked in, and then suddenly recoiled, exclaiming, in evident terror: "My God! my master is dead! Monsieur le marquis has killed himself!"

Puymirol pushed the valet aside, and rushed into the room. It was but dimly lighted by stained glass windows, and Puymirol did not at first perceive Dargental, upon whom the valet's eyes had chanced to fall just as he crossed the threshold. Madame de Lescombat's unfortunate lover was sitting, or rather reclining, in a large arm-chair. Seen from a distance, he seemed to be asleep. Puymirol hastened forward, took hold of his hand, found that it was icy cold, and then perceived that his face was livid, his eyes half closed, and his mouth distorted. "Open the window, quick, quick!" he cried, and Caumont, forestalling the valet, instantly obeyed the order.

In the full light it was seen that stains of blood tinged

Dargental's shirt front, which was torn and scorched by a bullet in the vicinity of the heart; his waistcoat was unbuttoned, the lapels of his coat were pushed back and creased, while on the floor at his feet gleamed the shining barrel of a revolver. "My master! my poor master!" groaned the valet.

"You can not restore him to life, my lad," said Puymirol, who never lost his presence of mind. "This is no time for weeping. The commissary of police must be warned. Fetch him immediately, and, on your way out, tell the doorkeeper what has happened, and ask him to come up. We don't care to remain alone with the body. Upon the whole, it will be best for us to go down with you, I think. Our unfortunate friend is beyond all human aid, and the suicide must be established at once."

Neither Caumont nor the valet made any objections, and the trio hastened downstairs. "My master has shot himself," cried the valet to the doorkeeper. "These gentlemen can testify that I was not present when the accident occurred! On returning home, a few moments ago, I found them ringing at the door, so I opened it for them with my key."

"It is really impossible," said the doorkeeper in alarm. "I saw him this morning, and he seemed to be in the best of spirits. He even warned me that he meant to give up his apartments on account of his approaching marriage."

"We didn't come here to talk," interrupted Puymirol. "This fellow is going for the commissary of police; you had better come upstairs with us, and remain until he brings some official back

with him."

The doorkeeper assented; the valet hastened off; and the two friends, having again ascended the stairs, this time with the cerberus of the house, re-entered the apartments where nothing had been disturbed during their absence. Not caring to approach the body, they all three of them remained in the ante-chamber. "Are you well acquainted with this valet?" Puymirol inquired of the doorkeeper.

"Yes, sir. He has been in Monsieur Dargental's employ for three years. I assure you that he is quite incapable of a crime, and fully deserves all the confidence my unfortunate tenant placed in him. This very morning, Monsieur Dargental gave him a letter for the Countess de Lescombat, his intended wife. I was standing at my door as he passed out, and Jean stopped for a moment to chat with me. While we were talking, he said: 'Ah! Monsieur Pinchon, I am so attached to my master that –'"

The sound of footsteps upon the stairs cut M. Pinchon short. The valet was returning, bringing with him in lieu of the commissary, who was absent from his office, that functionary's secretary, an intelligent, wide-awake-looking young man. Having been enlightened on the way by the servant, the secretary walked straight to the body, examined it carefully but without touching it, and said curtly: "This chair is not in its accustomed place."

The other chairs were, in fact, arranged in lines along the walls, but this one stood in the middle of the room, and almost directly opposite the door. "This is the first time I ever heard of

a man sitting down to shoot himself," continued the official.

"Do you suspect a crime, then?" inquired Puymirol.

"I have formed no opinion as yet. A doctor will come with the commissary, and make a report. In the meantime, gentlemen, will you have the kindness to give me your names and addresses, for it does not seem necessary that you should be present at the investigation. You will be questioned later on, if needful."

"I am named Adhémar de Puymirol; my friend's name is George Caumont, and we live together, at No. 14, in the Rue de Medicis."

"Very well," said the secretary, as he entered the names in his note-book. "You were very intimate, I believe, with this Monsieur –"

"Monsieur Pierre Dargental," concluded Puymirol. "We certainly knew him very well; I especially. He had invited us to lunch with him this morning in company with Monsieur Charles Balmer, who resides, I believe, in the Rue Auber, and an actress named Blanche Pornic, who lives in the Avenue de Messine."

"Was the lunch ordered by Monsieur Dargental?"

"Yes, and we ate it without him. Afterwards we called here, my friend and myself, to ascertain what had become of him, and we were ringing at his door when the valet, who happened to come upstairs, opened it for us."

"I am aware of that. You must have been greatly surprised on entering. To what cause do you attribute this suicide?"

"I know no cause for it. Dargental was about to be married;

besides, it seems to me very strange that he should have killed himself just as we were expecting him to celebrate the close of his bachelor life."

"Yes, and all the stranger as he was quite ready to go out. See, his hat has rolled behind the chair, and his cane has fallen upon the floor. All this does not seem to harmonize with the care he appears to have taken in seating himself."

"That is true. The whole affair is incomprehensible. Dargental must have momentarily lost his mind."

"In that case he must have had a revolver in his pocket at the time; but that weapon there is not one of the sort a man usually carries upon his person. It is too large and too heavy for that."

"All I can say is that the weapon belonged to him. I have often seen it hanging, with others, against the wall of his bedroom. I am certain that it must bear the name of the dealer who sold it to him – Galland."

"That point will be verified by the commissary, and the doctor will tell us if the blood could have spouted a distance of two yards from the arm-chair. See, here is a pool of it upon the floor, almost at my very feet." Puymirol hastily recoiled, for he perceived, for the first time, that he was almost stepping in it. "One more question, sir," said the 'secretary.' "Had Monsieur Dargental any enemies?"

"Not to my knowledge. On the contrary, he had many friends. Besides, no one could have anything to gain by his death, for he had no fortune."

"Oh, no," sighed the doorkeeper. "An execution was put in only the other day by one of his creditors."

"Nevertheless, he lived in handsome style," replied the secretary, "and it is very probable that he had more or less money in the house or about his person; in fact, judging from the apparent disorder of his clothing, it seems more than likely that his pockets were searched after his death. But I will detain you no longer, gentlemen. You will hold yourselves, of course, at the disposal of the authorities – I have your address."

"Certainly, sir," said Puymirol, who had had quite enough of this covert examination. George Caumont was also anxious to get away, for this talk in the presence of his friend's lifeless body made him sick at heart. The valet was about to beat a retreat with them, but the dismissal was not for him, for the secretary remarked drily: "Remain. The commissary will want to talk with you."

"I hope you have no further need of me," now said the doorkeeper.

"Yes, I have, but I shall not keep you long."

M. Pinchon's dismay was pitiful to behold, and the two friends hastily availed themselves of the permission to depart. "What do you think of this catastrophe?" inquired Puymirol, as soon as they reached the street.

"I really don't know what to think of it, and I must admit that I shall make no attempt to solve the mystery. The authorities will take charge of that."

"Well, Dargental did me many good turns, and I should like to avenge his death, for I really believe he was murdered."

"Indeed! But whom do you suspect? And what do you suppose was the object of the crime? Robbery?"

"No, he had nothing but debts. The porter, you recollect, told us that his furniture had been attached. Some woman committed the murder. A woman who was or who had been in love with him."

"Then she killed him from jealousy, you think?"

"Jealousy or revenge, which amounts to about the same thing. It must have been one of his recent flames, probably the last one."

"What, Blanche Pornic? But she lunched with us."

"It is just because she lunched with us that I suspect her. She came to the restaurant merely to prove an *alibi*. She may very well have killed Dargental at eleven o'clock and yet have reached the Lion d'Or before noon. Balmer can tell us at what hour she arrived. Besides, she may have hired some other person to commit the crime in her stead. By the way, have you forgotten what she said during lunch? Despite her sweet words one could guess that she hated Dargental."

"Indeed! why should she hate him?"

"Because he was going to marry Madame de Lescombat. She could not forgive him for preferring the countess to herself. And by the way, if the inquiry proves that Dargental has really been murdered, Blanche would be delighted should her rival be accused of the crime."

"Well, she certainly didn't act in the right way to divert suspicion from herself. It is strange that she should have treated us to that narrative of the countess's career quite unsolicited; and if she is as shrewd as you pretend – "

"Did you notice her strange manner during the repast, and her abrupt departure afterwards? She heard us say that we were going to Dargental's to find out what had become of him, and she did not care to await the result. She knew the cause of his absence only too well."

"You may call these indications, if you like," replied George, "still they hardly prove that Mademoiselle Pornic instigated the murder, and I don't think her capable of such baseness. Dargental must have committed suicide."

"Oh, a man doesn't kill himself like that with his hat on his head and a cane in his hand. It occurs to me now that his shirt was not scorched as much as it would have been if the pistol had been placed against it. The shot must have been fired from a distance of a few yards, and Dargental probably fell just where we saw the pool of blood. The murderer afterwards raised him up and seated him in the arm-chair."

"That's possible," muttered George, somewhat shaken in his convictions.

"Ah, you are coming round to my way of thinking, at last. Well, I return to my first injunction. Look for the woman. Where is the woman?"

"Well, if you feel so positive that a woman is mixed up in the

affair," said Caumont, after a long pause, "I am surprised that you don't think of that countess whose first husband ended so badly."

"That's absurd!" exclaimed Puymirol. "The first husband committed suicide, and his widow certainly had no reason to make away with the man she meant to take as his successor."

"You know nothing about that."

"Mademoiselle Pornic's inuendoes will rankle in your mind, I see. You certainly place a deal of confidence in that venomous creature."

"I might retort that you seem to feel a great deal of confidence in the countess. Do you think of offering yourself as a substitute for Dargental?"

"No, but the countess is no worse than many other women, and your suspicions are too ridiculous to be entertained for a moment. Don't you recollect that telegram in which Madame de Lescombat said: 'I don't wish to interfere with your farewell entertainment to your friends of both sexes, but come and see me immediately afterwards.' So she must have known that Dargental was breakfasting with one or more of his old flames, and feeling no jealousy on that account, she had no grievance against him."

"Did she really say 'your friends of both sexes?'"

"Those were the very words, my dear fellow, as you shall see for yourself. I put the telegram in my pocket, you recollect, with the intention of giving it to Dargental. Here it is." And Adhémar, after rummaging in his pocket, drew from it not only the telegram, but also the mysterious pocket-book. Then, turning

suddenly, he dragged George behind one of the newspaper kiosks on the boulevard, along which they were now walking. "Didn't Blanche say that Dargental had just been invested with the title of marquis?" he asked.

"Yes, and she must have told the truth, for the valet said, 'Monsieur le Marquis,' in speaking of his master."

"Blanche also said, did she not, that Dargental had altered his name to D'Argental?"

"To please the Countess de Lescombat. The news did not surprise me. For ennobling one's self by means of an apostrophe is a very common thing in these days."

"Well, look at this pocket-book. Here is a marquis's cornet, and a capital A; that is to say, Marquis d'Argental."

"What! you think that this case belonged – "

"To our friend Pierre. And now I understand his death. He was killed by some one who wished to regain possession of the letters he kept in this case. So the crime was committed, or at least instigated, by a woman."

"I admire your bold reasoning, though I think it decidedly paradoxical. The scoundrel who stole this pocket-book would not have thrown it into our cab."

"You told me yourself that he was closely followed by two persons who seemed to be watching him. He perhaps feared that he would be arrested and searched; and he did not know that we were intimate with Dargental. He thought that we should keep the pocket-book, and burn the letters which could be of no possible

interest to us, and which he was anxious to get rid of at any cost."

"Then, according to you, that man intended to return these letters to the various women they compromised. You must admit that this supposition is absurd in the extreme."

"Oh! he was only acting on behalf of *one* of the women."

"Which one? There are three letters, but each of them is written in a different hand. You said so yourself."

"I may have been mistaken. I think I will examine them more closely. Let us take a seat in front of that café. I see a table in a corner where we shall be comparatively alone."

George Caumont assented to the proposal, and as soon as the friends were seated in a little niche in front of the Café Américain, Puymirol opened the pocket-book. "Let us proceed systematically," he remarked. "Here is the first letter. It is not long, but it is expressive. 'My adored one,' it says, 'I am ready to leave everything to follow you, and to sacrifice, for your sake, all that I prize most in this world, my children and my good name. When shall we start? Say the word, and I will join you. Take me to the end of the world, and make me your slave. I shall be only too happy, for I cannot live apart from you.' I have skipped the kisses. There are too many of them," concluded Adhémar, sneering.

"My children!" repeated George, ironically. "Then Blanche certainly did not write that letter. She has no children."

"Nor has Madame de Lescombat any. But let us examine the next missive: 'My friend, I have loved you, I love you still; but if

you go on in this way, I shall no longer love you. I shall even hate you, and I do not conceal from you that there lurks in my heart a feeling that you would do well not to arouse. Have you ever seen Sardou's "Hatred" played? Well, I am a Florentine Parisienne, and I should know how to avenge my wrongs, as Italian women revenged theirs in the middle ages. These are no meaningless threats, my dear. To extricate you from a terrible predicament I once committed an act that might have sent me straight to the Assizes, and I mean to be rewarded by your devotion. You must choose between her and me. You understand me, do you not? I await in reply, not words, but acts. I shall expect you to-morrow, you bad fellow, whom I love so much. Bring me what you swore to return to me, or there will be bitter war."

"The deuce!" exclaimed George, "that woman doesn't bandy words. I should think her quite capable of conniving at Dargental's murder to regain possession of a letter in which she owns that she had committed a crime. She does not state what crime, but she may have committed forgery; and if Dargental profited by the deed, as she says clearly enough, he certainly had good reason to fear her vengeance."

"Then, if this letter came from Blanche Pornic, you would be inclined to think that the murder was committed by her orders, and for her benefit?"

"I would not swear that such was the case; but it would seem very probable."

"Well, I know her; and I am sure that she was the writer of

this threatening missive. 'You must choose between her and me.' 'Her' is Madame de Lescombat, her rival; and I would wager almost any amount that the letter is not a week old. A day or two after it was written, Dargental's intended marriage was announced. He had refused to fulfil his promise, and Blanche avenged herself accordingly."

"But if they had quarrelled to that point, he would not have invited her to lunch with us this morning."

"There is nothing to prove that she did not invite herself, in order to throw us off the track. But let us pass on to the third letter." So saying, Puymirol drew it from the pocket-book, unfolded it, and uttered an exclamation of astonishment. "What is the matter?" asked George.

Puymirol, instead of replying, proceeded to unfold the telegram, which he had drawn from his pocket, with the Russian leather case, and spread it out upon the table beside the third letter, which he had not yet read. "This last missive certainly comes from Madame de Lescombat," he grunted. "The handwriting is precisely the same as that of the telegraphic note."

"Then Madame de Lescombat was probably as deeply interested as her rivals in regaining possession of her correspondence. You must admit that."

"Yes; but as Dargental was about to marry her, he would have returned her the letter, had she desired it."

"Who knows? Read it, and let me know your opinion afterwards."

Puymirol complied, though somewhat reluctantly, for he was afraid he would be obliged to change his first opinion. He read as follows: "My king, my love, my life, I am intoxicated with happiness. What blissful hours I have spent with you! When will they return? Why did I allow you to depart? I feel a mad desire to hasten after you, and throw myself in the arms that clasped me so fondly. Before I met you I never knew what it was to love. Now, however, my happiness is perfect, and I have proved to you how ardent is my affection. I have placed myself in your power by confiding my great secret to you. In a word, you might ruin me. And if I write this, it is in order that you may have in your possession a proof, a confession. If I deceived you, if I ceased to love you – But I am blaspheming! I shall love you until my latest breath. But if I ever give you any cause of complaint, show me no mercy, crush me, deliver me up; I shall have deserved my fate. Oh, when will the day come when I shall be able to acknowledge you as my lord and master before all the world? When shall I bear your name? It seems to me that day will never come. Eight months longer to wait! Eight months during which we must conceal our love, and pretend to mourn a being I loathed. And what if you learned to love another in the meantime? What if your infatuation should return for the woman I hate the most because it was she whom you most loved. Ah! I should die. It would kill me; but I should not die without being avenged upon that creature."

"Well, what do you think of that?" asked George.

"I think that the lady was desperately in love with Dargental, and that she was out of her mind when she wrote that letter."

"It was evidently written just two months after her husband's death, for she deploras the fact that her happiness must be deferred eight months longer, and the law does not allow a woman to marry again until ten months of widowhood have expired."

"But it is at the least two years since Lescombat died of apoplexy."

"Or of something else. Well, the marriage was deferred for some reason or other, which is conclusive proof that the courtship was stormy. The countess has had plenty of time to change her mind."

"She did not change it, as she meant to marry Dargental next week."

"I admit that; but perhaps she was not so much in earnest as formerly. Dargental, in spite of his promises, had not severed his connection with Blanche Pornic, and Madame de Lescombat may have regretted saying, and above all, writing, so much; she herself could not break the engagement, as he had her completely in his power."

"And you fancy that she could devise no other means but murder to escape him. That is absurd, my dear fellow."

"Less absurd than your suspicions respecting Blanche, for this letter is certainly from the countess; and we are by no means sure that the other comes from the actress." Puymirol hung his

head. He was obliged to confess that George was right, though it cost him a struggle to admit it. "However, I don't see," added Caumont, "why we should devote our attention to this mystery. The authorities will take charge of that. You have only to hand the letters to the commissary of police, and state how you came into possession of them."

"I shall not do that," said Adhémar quickly. "I don't want to inform on any one."

"But you talk about avenging Dargental's death."

"Quite so, and when I learn who the guilty party is, I will decide on my course. I shall begin my search after the truth to-morrow. Before doing so, however, I want to know the result of the inquiry now in progress."

"How will you learn that result?"

"We shall be summoned as witnesses; and the questions put to us will indicate how the magistrate views the affair. But we can not stay here forever. Shall we go to the club? Balmer will be there by about four o'clock; and there are some questions that I should like to ask him. He was very intimate with Dargental, so he may be able to enlighten me respecting certain circumstances."

The two friends thereupon rose up and repaired to their club, a second-rate establishment in the Avenue de l'Opéra hard by. They had been elected members, thanks to Dargental. On arriving, they found that Balmer had not yet put in an appearance, so they sat down in a corner to wait for him. Their thoughts

followed very different channels. Puymirol, while regretting Dargental, to whom he was indebted for many little services, hoped to profit by his death, without knowing exactly how. He had, however, more ambition than scruples, and though he would not have stooped to blackmailing, he did not hesitate about fishing in muddy waters. He said to himself that Madame de Lescombat, whether innocent or guilty of the murder, would give almost anything to regain possession of her letter, and that she would be disposed to assist any man who might restore it to her; now, why should he not be the man? These intentions were certainly not very laudable; but when a fellow wishes to succeed at any cost, he must not be over fastidious. Caumont, on his side, did not feel the slightest interest in the countess, and had only undertaken Blanche Pornic's defence from a sense of justice. He had never liked Dargental, though he had seen a good deal of him, having been dragged into his society by Puymirol. He regretted his untimely death, but felt no desire to avenge it; indeed, he was sorry that he had become mixed up in the affair of the pocket-book and the letters. In point of fact, he had other thoughts in his mind. He had recently met a young lady whom he greatly admired, and whom he wished to marry.

While the two friends thus sat side by side on a sofa, smoking in silence, Charles Balmer suddenly appeared looking considerably excited. "Do you know what has happened?" he asked, in a husky voice. "I have just come from Dargental's."

"We went there in advance of you. He is dead," said Adhémar.

"He was murdered, my dear fellow. I fell into a nest of detectives, magistrates, and physicians, and I thought for a while that they were going to arrest me. They confined themselves to questioning me, however."

"Have they discovered the culprit?" asked Adhémar.

"Well, they have arrested the valet, who stoutly denies any knowledge of the crime. I know him, and I would stake my life upon his innocence. Besides, Dargental's pocket-book was stolen, and it certainly was not Jean who took it, for he was searched, and only thirty-seven sous were found upon him. They are going to keep him in jail, all the same, but I am convinced that his innocence will be established sooner or later on."

"But how do they know that the pocket-book was stolen?"

"Dargental always carried it in his breast-pocket. Jean himself told the commissary so, and the pocket was empty. Poor Pierre! when I think how we blamed him for keeping us waiting! He was just starting off to lunch with us when he was killed – by whom, no one can tell." With these words Balmer left the two friends to approach the card tables and inform the other members present of the violent death which had befallen one of the boldest players of the club.

"Well," said George to Puymirol, "after what you have just heard, do you still persist in your determination to usurp the functions of the police?"

"I not only persist in my determination, but I shall begin work this very evening," replied Adhémar, taking up his hat. "You can

return home if you like; I mean to call on the countess."

II

Every April the horse-show, held annually at the Palais de l'Industrie in the Champs Elysées, is one of the favourite resorts of Parisian society; and on the day when the chargers parade, ridden by lieutenants and sub-lieutenants, quite prepared to break their necks in order to attract the attention of the ladies, a large crowd is invariably present. The attractive gathering took place that year a fortnight after Dargental's tragical demise. Both George Caumont and Adhémar de Puymirol were there, having met each other by appointment at the door. Since their friend's death they had not seen nearly so much of each other as usual. They still lived in the same house, and upon the same floor, but in the morning, instead of going out together as formerly, each of them went his own way, for George had refused to help Adhémar in discovering the murderer, and spent his time in a manner more congenial to his tastes. The fact that Dargental had not committed suicide was now established, but, otherwise, no progress had been made with the investigation. The valet was still in prison, but stoutly protested his innocence, and there was really no evidence against him. Puymirol, who might have furnished a clue as to the truth, remained obstinately silent. Upon being questioned by the magistrate, on the day following the crime, he had contented himself with relating the incidents of the lunch. George Caumont had been equally reticent, and so had

Balmer and Blanche Pornic, who were also questioned; and as the valet persisted in his denials, it would be necessary to set him at liberty sooner or later.

Puymirol's attempts to obtain an interview with the countess had proved utterly fruitless. Madame de Lescombat received no one, and this was only natural, after the tragical event which had bereft her of her betrothed. A letter which Puymirol had written to her, requesting a private interview, had remained unanswered, and our amateur detective, greatly vexed, was, therefore, reduced to waiting for an opportunity which might never present itself. On trying to console himself by card-playing, he met with a terrible run of ill luck; and finding himself most embarrassed, it is no wonder if he felt dreadfully out of sorts as he strolled that day on Caumont's arm through the crowd inside the Palais de l'Industrie. George, on his side, seemed to be eyeing the occupants of the benches as if in search of some acquaintance. Indeed, he suddenly let go of his friend's arm, and Puymirol exclaimed: "Ah! there's your sweetheart – Well, go and see her. We will meet here during the intermission that follows the hurdle race."

"I can not promise to be punctual," replied Caumont, evidently anxious to start off.

In another moment he could be seen cautiously making his way towards a remarkably charming girl, who sat with her friends in one of the tribunes: but he seemed to be in no hurry to reach her, for he often paused as he approached the staircase, which

he would have to ascend. He was not far from it when the young lady recognised him and smiled. He thereupon eagerly bowed, blushing a little as he did so, and then, quickening his pace, he began to elbow his way through the crowd – no easy task. Just then, however, he found himself, to his surprise, face to face with Blanche Pornic. The meeting was very disagreeable to George, who knew that the eyes of the girl he admired were upon him, so he endeavoured to turn a little aside and thus avoid Blanche, but she resolutely barred his way. "I see that you are not particularly glad to meet me," she remarked, laughing, "but I shall inflict my society upon you to punish you for failing to call on me as you promised."

"I did very wrong, I admit," replied George, "and I will atone for my fault to-morrow; but you will excuse me for leaving you now, as I must join a friend who is waiting for me."

"He will have to wait then, for you can't go any further as another trial is about to take place. Don't you hear the bell?" Blanche spoke the truth. The promenaders, warned by the signal, had paused, and any further progress was impossible. "I have you," she continued, "and I sha'n't let you go, for I want to have a long talk with you about Dargental's death."

George resolved to make the best of the situation, so he replied: "Well, as you insist upon broaching that sad subject, it is said that Dargental did not commit suicide as was at first supposed."

"No doubt," replied Blanche. "Suicide was far from his

thoughts. He was murdered, my dear fellow, and I believe I know the culprit."

George had not expected to hear the person whom Puymirol suspected of the crime make such a statement as this. "You know the culprit and yet you have not denounced him," said he.

"Oh! I make it a principle never to meddle with matters that don't concern me."

"But this does concern you. You knew Dargental so well."

"No doubt; and he has died for having deserted me."

"I don't understand you."

"Oh! that doesn't matter. Had I cared to tell what I know, I should have done so to the magistrate who questioned me; and I deserve some credit for holding my tongue, for he insinuated that suspicion might fall upon me. But I have nothing to fear, and I am going to stand my ground. Have you seen the Countess de Lescombat?" added Blanche, abruptly, "I suppose you know she is here."

"Here, a fortnight after Dargental's death? It's impossible!"

"She is enthroned up there in the stewards' stand, and Dargental's death has not affected her in the least."

"It is certainly scandalous," replied George.

"Oh! she imagines that by showing herself here, she will make people believe that Dargental was indifferent to her."

"But all Paris knew of the connection, and she was about to legalise it by marriage."

"We knew it, but the bans had not been published, and

Madame de Lescombat will now declare that Pierre was a friend, and nothing more. And people will end by believing that such was really the case, unless some of her letters should be found among the poor fellow's papers. But she is too shrewd to write. It is all very well for me who have nothing to lose to be prodigal with my signature. If Dargental has not burned my letters, an interesting collection will be found."

"Dargental probably destroyed them; still, it isn't likely that they contained anything that would compromise you," said George, scrutinizing Blanche's countenance.

"Well," replied Blanche, quite composed, "I never concealed my fondness for Pierre, and I did for him what I would never have done for any other living being. But when I learned to know him well, I deeply regretted writing him a certain note, which might cause me a deal of trouble, should it fall into the hands of the authorities. Dargental was quite capable of keeping this note. I begged of him to return it to me before his marriage, and if I accepted his invitation at the Lion d'Or, it was because I hoped he would return it to me at dessert."

"But in what way could this note compromise you?" inquired George, trying to smile. "I presume that it didn't contain a confession of any crime on your part."

"You know nothing about women," replied Blanche. "The very best of them are fools when their affections are involved, and I was madly in love with Dargental. To save him from any danger, I would have stolen or committed murder, but I did not

go to such lengths as that; still I did him a service that might have cost me dear. I tell you this, because I know I can trust you; but, pray, say nothing to your friend Puymirol about the matter, for I have no confidence in him. He sides with the countess, and I am almost certain that he just left you to go and pay his respects to her. But what do you think of the show this year?"

"It is about the same as usual, I fancy."

"You wonder why I came, probably. Well, I came here to see the officers. Like all the rest of my sex, I am fond of uniforms. There is one officer here whom I have taken a special fancy to. Shall I point him out to you?"

"Certainly," replied George, although he was not at all interested in the matter.

"Step here a moment, then," said Blanche. A hurdle trial was now taking place, and as the different competitors passed by, she indulged in lively criticism. "There he is, at last," she continued, pointing to a young sub-lieutenant and then clapping her hands like a child, she added: "Isn't he handsome?"

George looked at the rider, who had excited her admiration, and beheld a tall, well-built young man, with a handsome and genial face, mounted upon a half-bred horse, which he managed with wonderful skill and ease. "Do you know who he is?" Caumont asked of Blanche.

"No; but I should very much like to know. If he does not receive the first prize, the judges will be guilty of the grossest injustice. Did you notice him bow to these ladies over there, that

young girl in a lace bonnet, with an older lady, who must have been very handsome, and who still has some good looks left her?" George glanced in the direction indicated, and, on recognising the ladies, blushed so deeply that Blanche resumed: "So they are friends of yours? You need not blush like a schoolboy, for they are both charming, the girl especially, and I am delighted that you know them; for now you can introduce the lieutenant to me."

"You had better not count upon that," retorted George, drily.

"Oh! you need not take offence, I meant no harm. You seem to be deeply interested in one of the two ladies; and I should never forgive myself if I prevented you from following the dictates of your heart any longer. So go, and good luck to you!"

George now thought of reaching the tribune to join the ladies who interested him far more than Blanche Pornic's revelations. The trial was over, the judges had retired for deliberation, and Caumont was about to climb the stairs when he perceived the people he wished to join coming down towards him. The daughter was in front, and she smiled as he stood, with uncovered head, eagerly awaiting her approach. He had been introduced to herself and her mother by an old schoolmate of his, now a civil engineer, who had informed him that Madame Verdon was the widow of an iron manufacturer who had left a fortune of twelve hundred thousand francs, which would revert, partly to his son and partly to his daughter, Gabrielle, the young girl who was now descending the stairs. George had often met her and her mother in the Luxembourg gardens and had visited them

at their residence on the Boulevard St. Michel, very near his own abode. He had gradually fallen in love with Mademoiselle Verdon, but being well aware of the objections that might be made to him as a suitor for the hand of a young lady blessed with an income of twenty thousand francs, he had carefully abstained from playing the part of a lover. Still, he had eyes, and he saw very plainly that the daughter liked him, and that the mother did not seem to discourage his pretensions. He even fancied that Madame Verdon had been unusually cordial of late, and he wondered if the time had not come for him to make some advances. He wished, however, first to have an explanation with the young girl, and then if he met with any encouragement from her, to ask her hand of her mother. But a favourable opportunity had not yet presented itself. Indeed, Dargental's death, and the judicial proceedings following upon that tragical event, had, for some days, engrossed George's attention to such an extent that he had scarcely seen the Verdons. "Good-morning," exclaimed the mother, as she now approached. "We haven't seen you for a long time past. What have you been doing with yourself? Gabrielle has lost all fondness for the Luxembourg garden since you have ceased visiting it."

"Yes, monsieur," chimed in the young girl, "it is very unkind of you to desert us, and your conduct is inexcusable, for it cannot be your law studies that engross you, as you spend your time here."

"It is the first time I have been here this year, mademoiselle."

"Oh! I am not scolding you. It is much more amusing here than in our quiet neighbourhood, especially for you who are probably acquainted with all these people. I, myself, have eyes only for my brother."

"Your brother, mademoiselle?"

"Yes," replied Madame Verdon, "my son, Albert, has just taken part in one of the trials, and as I am confident that he will receive the first prize, I came here expressly to enjoy his triumph. You must allow me to introduce him to you when the awards have been made. He has a three months' leave, which he will spend with us."

"I thought your son was still at Saint Cyr," stammered George.

"He has been promoted to sub-lieutenancy in the Seventh Cuirassiers. This promotion makes me feel very old, I assure you; and I must confess that I am rather averse to admitting that I have a son who is twenty-six years of age."

"You will see how handsome my big brother is," interrupted Gabrielle. "All the ladies applauded him enthusiastically when he jumped the last hurdle. The one who was talking with you must have split her gloves in her fervour."

George said nothing, but he blushed to his very ears. He had flattered himself that Gabrielle Verdon had not noticed his long conversation with Blanche Pornic, but he could no longer delude himself on the point. "Doesn't your father ever come to Paris, now?" inquired Madame Verdon. "He must be very fond of horses?"

"My father is getting too old to travel about much," replied George, somewhat astonished by this remark.

"I understand. When a person has charge of a large estate, it is difficult for him to absent himself. An estate is like an iron foundry: it needs constant attention. I know something about that, for I spent ten years in the valley of the Vosges. My husband only took me to Paris once a year. You scarcely remember that time, child. Monsieur Jacques has not forgotten it, however." These concluding words were evidently addressed to a gentleman whom George had not before noticed, but whom Madame Verdon now disclosed to view by stepping a little aside. This person was tall, broad shouldered, and stoutly built. His rather coarse features gave him a stern air, and he was wanting in elegance of manner, although he was very neatly dressed. "Let me introduce Monsieur Jacques Rochas, my husband's former partner, and his successor," resumed Madame Verdon. "He has just sold the iron works he purchased from us, and has come to reside in Paris. You will meet him frequently at our house."

George bowed coldly, and the stranger returned the salute in a somewhat bearish fashion. Both gentlemen seemed ill at ease, and Madame Verdon herself appeared rather uncomfortable. "Here are the victors now," cried Gabrielle. "Albert leads the procession. Let us get a little nearer to see the party form. Use your elbows, Monsieur George, and make room for us through the crowd." And without troubling herself as to whether her mother was following her or not, she turned to the left, followed

by George, who asked no better than to have a private interview with the young girl.

"Madame Verdon will think I am running away with you," he said, jestingly.

"We shall be able to find her again presently, without any trouble," replied Gabrielle. "She doesn't worry herself much about me just now. Here is a good place for a quiet talk, and I wish to speak to you upon a serious subject."

"I am entirely at your service, mademoiselle," replied George, who was greatly astonished.

The musicians now struck up a triumphal march, and, amid the din, Gabrielle resumed: "I warn you that I am going to ask you a very strange and improper question. You have been paying me considerable attention of late. Do you love me?"

This question was indeed unexpected – the more so as well-bred young ladies habitually wait for it to be put to them. Mademoiselle Verdon was certainly reversing the usual order of things; but George promptly answered: "Love you, mademoiselle! yes, with my whole heart. I have not yet dared to tell you so, but –"

"No protestations. I believe you, and I am going to enable you to prove the truth of your words. Do you wish to marry me?"

"Such is my most ardent desire. If I could hope that your mother would grant me your hand –"

"She will, if you ask her for it now; that is to say, within a few days. Later on, she will, perhaps, refuse you." George could

not understand the meaning of all this, as his bewildered mien showed plainly enough. "The situation is simply this," continued Gabrielle: "My mother wishes to marry again. This news may surprise you, but it is true, nevertheless. She wishes to marry again, to enter society. Her children are in her way, and she does not at all care to keep them with her. My brother does not so much preoccupy her. An officer goes about from garrison to garrison when he is not in the field, so she will seldom see Albert; but as I cannot leave her as long as I remain single, she is in a hurry to get me married off. She is looking for a husband for me, and if you do not speak out she will content herself with the first comer."

"Oh! she will easily secure a much more eligible suitor than myself, for I have neither money nor prospects."

"I have money enough for two, and your future depends upon your intelligence and industry. My mother knows this perfectly well; she also knows that I like you. Moreover, she has made inquiries respecting you. She has received information that your family is highly respectable, and that your father will leave you his estate and some capital. She is in a hurry to settle the matter, for you see it would not do for both the mother and the daughter to marry within a few days of each other. She dreads ridicule, and she is quite right, for all our acquaintances would laugh at her. But if I now became your wife, she would trouble herself no further about me. She would leave Paris, and, after travelling awhile, she would be married in Switzerland or Italy. She told me yesterday

that she wished to leave next month, and that she did not want to take me with her. The only refuge left for me would be a convent, for I cannot follow Albert's regiment about, and he is my only relative." George was so overwhelmed by these disclosures, that he did not know what to reply, and Gabrielle concluded that he did not care for her. "I see that you are shocked to hear me talk in this way," she said, sadly. "I know I do wrong in censuring my mother's conduct in your presence, and throwing myself in your arms, as it were. But I never could disguise my feelings, and I always speak straight to the point. I thought you loved me well enough to do me justice. If I am mistaken I must bear the penalty of my imprudence; but you at least cannot accuse me of dissimulation."

"On the contrary, I sincerely thank you, mademoiselle, for divining the feelings which I dared not express, and I entreat you not to take my silence as a sign of coldness or hesitation. My delight overcame me. I was so little prepared for the happiness you have announced to me."

"It is not my fault if I did not explain the situation sooner. I have not seen you for several days. But, now, will you authorise me to inform my mother that you intend to ask for my hand in marriage – at an early date?"

"To-morrow, if I have your consent, mademoiselle."

"Thank you," replied the girl, earnestly. "I can never do enough to prove to you my love and gratitude. My brother will be as pleased as I am when I introduce you to him by-and-by."

They are very slow in forming the procession, it seems to me," continued Gabrielle. "They have no right to keep a sister waiting so long for her brother's triumphal entry."

"Nor a mother who is longing to applaud her son," added George, in a somewhat questioning tone.

"Mamma? Oh, yes, she is fond of Albert, but she will wait quite contentedly, as her intended husband is with her."

"Her intended husband?"

"Ah! I forgot to tell you that she expects to marry the person she just introduced to you, Monsieur Jacques Rochas."

"Your father's former partner?"

"That is the title my mother gives him. The truth is, he was formerly a foreman at the iron works. He subsequently became superintendent, and, after my father's death, he leased the works. He made a good deal of money, and finally purchased the place from us. It seems that he has just disposed of it very advantageously, and is now much richer than we are."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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