DUMAS ALEXANDRE

TAKING THE BASTILE

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Taking the Bastile

Дюма А.

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Alexandre Dumas
Taking the Bastile Or, Pitou the Peasant; a Historical Story of the Great French Revolution

CHAPTER I.
THE SON OF GILBERT

It was a winter night, and the ground around Paris was covered with snow, although the flakes had ceased to fall since some hours.

Spite of the cold and the darkness, a young man, wrapped in a mantle so voluminous as to hide a babe in his arms, strode over the white fields out of the town of Villers Cotterets, in the woods, eighteen leagues from the capital, which he had reached by the stage-coach, towards a hamlet called Haramont. His assured step seemed to indicate that he had previously gone this road.

Soon above him streaked the leafless boughs upon the grey sky. The sharp air, the odor of the oaks, the icicles and beads on the tips of branches, all appealed to the poetry in the wanderer.

Through the clumps he looked for the village spire and the blue smoke of the chimneys, filtering from the cottages through the natural trellis of the limbs.

It was dawn when he crossed a brook, bordered with yellow cress and frozen vines, and at the first hovel asked for the laborer's boy to take him to Madeline Pitou's home.

Mute and attentive, not so dull as most of their kind, the children sprang up and staring at the stranger, led him by the hand to a rather large and good-looking cottage, on the bank of the rivulet running by most of the dwellings.

A plank served as a bridge.

"There," said one of the guides nodding his head towards it.

Gilbert gave them a coin, which made their eyes open still more widely, and crossed the board to the door which he pushed open, while the children, taking one another's hand, started with all their might at the handsome gentleman in a brown cloth coat, buckled shoes and large cloak, who wanted to find Madeline Pitou.

Apart from them, Gilbert, for such was the young man's name, simply so for he had no other, saw no living things: Haramont was the deserted village he was seeking.

As soon as the door was open, his sight was struck by a scene full of charm, for almost anybody, and particularly for a young philosopher like our roamer.

A robust peasant woman was suckling a baby, while another child, a sturdy boy of four or five, was saying a prayer in a loud voice.

In the chimney corner, near a window or rather a hole in the wall in which was stuck a pane of glass, another woman, going on for thirty-five or six, was spinning, with a stool under her feet, and a fat poodle on an end of this stool.

Catching sight of the visitor the dog barked in a civil and hospitable manner just to show that he had not been caught napping. The praying boy turned, cutting the devotional phrase in two, and both females uttered an exclamation between joy and surprise.

"I greet you, good mother Madeline," said Gilbert with a smile.

"The gentleman has my name," she cried out with a start.

"As you notice; but please do not interrupt me. Instead of one babe at the breast, you are to have the pair."

In the rude country-made crib he laid his burden, a little boy.

What a pretty darling!" ejaculated the spinner.

"Quite a dear, yes, Aunt Angelique," said Madeline.

"Your sister?" inquired the visitor, pointing to the spinner who was also a spinster.

"No my man's sister."

"Yes, my auntie, my aunt 'Gelique," mumbled the boy, striking into the talk without being asked.

"Be quiet, Ange," rebuked his mother: "you are interrupting the gentleman."

"My business is very plain, good woman. The child you see is son of one of my master's farmers, the farmer being ruined. My master, his godfather, wants him brought up in the country to become a good workman, hale, and with good manners. Will you undertake this rearing?"

"But, master? – "

"Born yesterday and never nursed," went on Gilbert. Besides, this is the nursling which Master Niquet, the lawyer at Villers Cotterets, spoke to you about."

Madeline instantly seized the babe and supplied it with the nourishment it craved with a generous impetuosity deeply affecting the young man.

"I have not been misled," said he: "you are a good woman. In my master's name, I confide the child to you. I see that he will fare well here, and I trust he will bring into this cabin a dream of happiness together with his own. How much does Master Niquet pay you for his children?"

"Twelve livres a-month, sir: but he is rich, and he adds a few pieces for sugar and toys."

"Mother Madeline," replied Gilbert proudly, "this child will bring you twenty livres a-month, or two hundred and forty a-year."

"Lord bless us! I thank you kindly, master," said the peasant.

"And here is the first year's money down on the nail," went on Gilbert, placing ten fine gold coins on the table, which made the two women open their eyes and little Ange Pitou stretch out his devastating hand.

"But if the little thing should not live?" queried the nurse timidly.

"It would be a great blow – such a misfortune as seldom happens," responded the gentleman; "Here is the hire settled – are you satisfied?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Let us now pass to the future payments."

"Then we are to keep the child?"

"Probably, and be parents to it," said Gilbert, in a stifled voice and losing color.

"Dear, dear, is he an outcast?"

Gilbert had not expected such feeling and questions: but he recovered from the emotion.

"I did not tell you the whole truth," he said; "the poor father died on the shock of hearing that his wife gave up her life in bearing him the child."

The women wrung their hands with sympathy.

"So that the child can reckon on no love from his parents," continued Gilbert, breathing painfully.

At this point in tramped Daddy Pitou with a calm and jolly manner. His was one of those round and honest characters, overflowing with health and good will, such as Greuze paints in his natural domestic pictures. A few words showed him how matters stood. Out of good nature he understood things – even those beyond his comprehension.

Gilbert made it clear that the keep-money would be paid until the boy was a man and able to live alone with his mind and arm.

"All right," said Pitou, "I rather think we shall take to the kid, though he is a tiny creature."

"Look at that," said the women together, "he thinks it a little dear just like us."

"I should like you to come over to Master Niquet's where I will leave the money required so that you may be content and the child happy."

Gilbert took leave of the women and bent over the cradle in which the new-comer had ousted the rightful heir. He wore a sombre air.

"You look little like me," he muttered, "for you have the aspect of your proud mother, the aristocratic Andrea, daughter of Baron Taverney."

The trait broke his heart: he pressed his nails into his flesh to keep down the tears flowing from his aching breast. He left a kiss timid and tremulous on the babe's fresh cheek and tottered out. He gave half a louis to little Ange, who was stumbling between his legs, and shook hands with the women who thought it an honor. So many emotions oppressed the father of eighteen years that little more would have prostrated him. Pale and nervous, his brain was spinning.

"Let us be off," he said to Pitou, waiting on the sill.

"Master!" called out Madeline from the threshold: "his name – what did you say his name is?"

"Call him Gilbert," replied the young man with manly pride.

The business at the notary's was quickly done. Money was banked for the child's keep and bringing up as became a farmhand's offspring. For fifteen years education and training was to be given him, and the balance was to be devoted to fitting him in a trade or buying a plot of land. At his eighteenth year some two thousand livres were to be paid the nurse and her husband, who would have the other sum yearly from the intermediary.

As a reward Niquet was to have the interest of the funds.

Ten years passed and the Pitou woman, who had lost her husband while Ange was hardly able to remember him, felt herself dying. Three years before she had seen Gilbert, returned a man of twenty-seven, stiff, dogmatic of speech, cold at the outset. But his mask of ice thawed when he saw his son again, hearty, smiling and strong, brought up as he had planned. He shook the good widow's hand and said:

"Rely on me if ever in need."

He took the child away, went to see the tomb of Rousseau the philosopher, musician and poet, and returned to Villers Cotterets. Seduced by the good air and the praise of the Abbe Fortier's school for youth, he left Gilbert at that institution. He had thought highly of the tutor's philosophical mien; for philosophy was a great power at this revolutionary period and had glided into the bosom of the Church. He left him his address and departed for Paris.

Ange Pitou's mother knew these particulars.

At her dying hour she remembered the pledge of Gilbert to be the friend at need. It was a bright light. No doubt Providence had brought him to Haramont to provide poor Pitou with more than he lost in losing life and family.

Not able to write, she sent for the parish priest, who wrote a letter for her, and this was given to Abbe Fortier to be sent off by the post.

It was time, for she died next day.

CHAPTER II.
ANGE PITOU

Ange was too young to feel the whole extent of his loss: but he divined that the angel of the hearth had vanished: and when the body was taken to the churchyard and interred, he sat down by the grave and replied to all pleadings for him to come away by saying that Mamma Madeline was there, that he never had left her and he would stay beside her now.

It was there that Dr. Gilbert, for Ange Pitou's future guardian was a physician, found him when he hastened to Haramont on receiving the dying mother's appeal.

Ange was very young when thus he saw the doctor for the first time. But, we know, youth can feel deep impressions, leaving everlasting memories. The previous passing of the young man of mystery through the cottage had impressed its trace. He had left welfare with the boy: every time Ange heard his mother pronounce the benefactor's name, it had been almost with worship. Finally, when he appeared, grown up, adorned with the title of Physician, joining to the past boons the future promises, Pitou had judged by his mother's gratitude that he ought himself be grateful. The poor lad, without clearly knowing what he was saying, faltered words of eternal remembrance, and profound thanks such as he had heard his mother use.

Therefore, as soon as he perceived the doctor coming among the grassy graves and broken crosses, he understood that he came at his mother's appeal and he could not say no to him as to the others. He made him no resistance except to turn his head to look backwards as Dr. Gilbert grasped his hand and led him from the cemetery.

A stylish cab was at the gates, into which the doctor made the poor boy step, and he was taken to the town tailor's, where he was fitted with clothes: they were made too large so that he would grow up to them. At the rate our hero grew this would not take long.

Thus equipped, Ange was walked in a quarter of the town called Pleux, where Pitou's pace slacked. He recalled this as being the abode of his Aunt Angelique, of whom he had preserved an appalling memory.

Indeed the old maid had no attractions for a boy who cherished true motherly affections: she was nearly sixty by this period. The minute practice of religion had brutalized her, and mistaken piety had twisted all sweet, merciful and humane feelings, so that she cultivated in their stead a natural dose of greedy intelligence, augmented daily by her association with all the prudes. She did not precisely live on public charity but besides the sale of linen thread hand-spun, and letting out chairs in the church, she received from kindly souls ensnared by her devout posturings, petty coin which she converted into silver and that into gold. Nobody suspected she accumulated them and she stuffed the gold in the cushion and frame of an old armchair in which she sat at work.

It was to this venerable relative's dwelling that Gilbert led little Pitou. We might say Big Pitou, for he was too large for his age.

Miss Rose Angelique Pitou, as they came up, was in a merry humor as she had just sent another gold piece to go and keep company with the rest of her hoard. She was going around her seat of revenue when the doctor and his ward appeared at the door, and she had to welcome the relic of her family.

The interview would have been affecting if it had not been so grotesque. The doctor, a man of keen observation, and physiognomist, read the character of the hypocritical old maid at a glance. With her long nose, thin lips and small bright eyes, she collected in one person cupidity, selfishness and hypocrisy.

As soon as the stranger stated his little text on the duty of aunts to take care of their nieces and nephews, she turned sour and replied that, whatever her love for her poor sister, and her interest in

her dear little nephew, the slenderness of her means did not permit her, though she was godmother as well as aunt, to add to her expenses.

"It is this way, Master Gilbert; this would run me into six cents a day extra, for that lubberly boy would eat a pound of bread."

Ange screwed up his face, for he could tuck away a pound and a half at breakfast alone.

"This is saying nothing for his washing, for he is a dirty little chap."

Considering that Ange was a regular gipsy for burrowing after moles and climbing trees, this was true enough; but it is fair to say that he tore his clothes worse than he soiled them.

"Fie!" said Doctor Gilbert; "do you who understand the Christian virtues so well, make such close calculations about a nephew and an orphan?"

"Then the keeping of his clothes in repair," went on the miser, recalling the quantity of patches she had seen sewn by her sister on the knees, and seat of Master Ange's pants.

"In short," said the doctor, "you refuse to shelter your nephew in your house – the orphan boy who will have to beg for alms at the doors of others."

Mean as she was, she felt the disgrace befalling her as if she drove her next of kin to this step.

"No, I will take charge of him," she said.

"Good," said the doctor, delighted to find a moist spot in this desert.

"I will recommend him to the Augustin Monastery and have them take him as a boy of all work."

The doctor was a philosopher, we have mentioned; which means that he was the opponent of all the churchmen. He resolved to tear this recruit from the enemy with all the warmth that the Augustines would have shown to deprive him of a disciple.

"Well," he rejoined, sticking his hand in his deepest pocket, "since you are in so hard a position, dear Miss Angelique, that you are forced to send your nephew into beggary, I will find somebody else to take him and the sum I am going to set aside for his maintenance. I am obliged to return to America. Meanwhile I must apprentice the boy to some craft, which he can choose for himself. In my absence he will grow up and then we will see what to make of him. Kiss your good aunt good-bye, and let us try our luck elsewhere," concluded the doctor.

He had barely finished before Pitou rushed into his aunt's long, bony arms to exchange the hug which he wanted to be in token of eternal separation. But the mention of a sum of money and Gilbert's movements of putting his hand in his pocket for cash, with the chink of silver, set the warmth of greed up from her old heart.

"Lord, doctor, do not you know that nobody in all the wide world can love this poor lone, lorn thing like his own dear fond auntie?"

Entwining him with her long arms, she imprinted on his cheeks a couple of kisses so sour that they made his hair stand on end and then curl with a shriveling up.

"Just what I thought; but still you are too poor to do the proper thing."

"Nay, good Master Gilbert," said the pious dame, "forget not that we have the Father of the fatherless above and that He has promised that a swallow shall not be sold for a penny without its being spent for the orphan's share."

"The text may be so, but it nowhere says that the orphan is to be bound out as a servant. I am afraid to do with Ange as I suggested; it would be too dear for your slight resources."

"But with the sum you spoke of, in your pocket," said the old devotee, with her eyes rivetted on the place whence the chink had sounded.

"I would give it, assuredly, but only on condition that the boy should be brought up to some livelihood."

"I promise that," cried Aunt Angelique; "I vow it, as true as the sheep are tempered for the storm-wind." And she raised her skeleton hand to heaven.

"Well," replied Gilbert, drawing out a bag rounded with coin; "I am ready to deposit the funds, but you must sign a contract at Lawyer Niquet's."

Niquet was her own business man and she raised no objections.

A bargain was made for five years: Ange Pitou was to be brought up to some trade and boarded, etc., for two hundred livres to his aunt, a-year. The doctor paid down the money.

Next day he quitted Villers, after arranging matters with a farmer on some property of his, named Billet, whose acquaintance we shall make in good time.

Miss Pitou, pouncing on the first payment in advance of the maintenance fund, buried eight bright gold pieces in her armchair bottom.

With eight livres over, she put the small change waiting to make up the amount of a gold piece to be placed, when converted, in the peculiar savings-bank.

We noticed the scant sympathy Ange felt for his aunt; he had foreseen the sorrow, disappointment and tribulations awaiting him under her roof.

In the first place, as soon as the doctor had turned his back, there was no longer a question about his learning any trade. When the good notary made a remark on this agreement, the tender aunt rejoined that her nephew was too delicate to be put out to work. The lawyer had admired his client's sensitive heart and deferred the apprenticeship question for another year. He was only twelve so that it would not waste much valuable time.

While his aunt was ruminating how to evade the contract, Ange resumed his truant life in the woods, as led at Haramont: it was the same woods and hence the same life.

As soon as he had the best spots located for bird-catching, he made some birdlime and having a four-pound loaf under his arm, he went off into the forest for the whole day.

He had foreseen a storm when he came back at nightfall, but he expected to parry it with the proceeds of his skill.

He had not presaged how the tempest would fall. In fact, Aunt Angelique had ambushed herself behind the door to deal him a cuff, as he crept in which he recognized as inflicted by her hard hand. Happily he had a hard head, too, and though the blow staggered him, he had the sense left to hold out as a peace-offering and buckler the talisman he had prepared. It was a bunch of two dozen small birds.

"What is this?" challenged his aunt, continuing to grumble for form's sake but opening her eyes more widely than her mouth.

"Birds, you see, good Aunt Angelique," replied Pitou as she grabbed the lot.

"Good to eat?" questioned the old maid who was greedy in all her senses of the word.

"Redbreasts and larks – I should bet they are good to eat – but they are better to sell. They command a good price in the market."

Where did you steal them, you little rogue?"

"Steal? they ain't stolen – I took 'em at the pool in the woods. A fellow has only to set up limed twigs anywhere round the water and the silly birds get tangled; then you run up, wring their necks, and there you have them."

"Lime? do you catch birds with lime?" queried Angelique.

"Not mortar lime, bless your innocence, but birdlime; it is made by boiling down holly sap."

"I understand, but where did you get the money to buy holly sap?"

"I should be a saphead to buy that: one makes it."

"Ah, then these birds are to be had for the picking up?"

"Yes: any day; but not everyday, for, of course, you cannot catch on Tuesday those you caught on Monday."

"Very true," returned the aunt, amazed at the brightness her nephew was for once displaying: "you are right."

This unheard of approval delighted the boy.

"But, on the days when you ought not to go to the pools, you go elsewhere. When you are not catching birds, you snare hares. You can eat them, too, and sell the skins for two cents."

Angelique stared at her nephew who was coming out as a financier.

"Oh, I can do the selling!"

"Of course, just as Mother Madeline did," for Pitou had never supposed he was to enjoy the fruit of his hunting.

"When will you go snaring hares?" she asked eagerly.

"I will go snaring hares and rabbits when I have wire for snares."

"All right, make it."

"Oh, I cannot do that," Pitou said, scratching his head. "I must buy that at the store but I can weave the springes."

"What does it cost?"

"I can make a couple of dozen with four cents' worth, and it ought to catch half a dozen bunnies – and the snares are used over and over again – unless the gamekeepers seize them."

"Here are four cents," said Aunt Angelique, "go and buy wire and get the rabbits to-morrow."

Wire was cheaper in the town than at the village so that Ange got material for twenty-four snares for three cents; he brought the odd copper to his aunt who was touched by this honesty. For an instant she felt like giving him the cent but unfortunately for Ange, it had been flattened by a hammer and might be passed in the dusk for a twosous piece. She thought it wicked to squander a piece that might bring a hundred per cent, and she popped it into her pouch.

Pitou made the snares and in the morning asked mysteriously for a bag. In it she put the bread and cheese for his meals, and away he went to his hunting ground.

Meanwhile she plucked the robins intended for their dinner; she took a brace of larks to Abbe Fortier, and two brace to the Golden Ball innkeeper, who paid her three cents for them and ordered as many as she could supply at that rate.

She went home beaming: the blessing of heaven had entered the house with Ange Pitou.

"They are quite right who say a good action is never thrown away," she observed as she munched the robins, as fat as ortolans and delicate as beccaficoes.

At dark in walked Ange, with the rounded out bag on his shoulders; Aunt Angelique received him on the threshold but not with a slap.

"Here I am, with my bag," said he with the calmness of having well spent his day.

"And what have you in the bag?" cried the aunt, stretching out her hand in sharp curiosity.

"Beech-mast," replied Pitou. "It is this way. If Daddy Lajeunesse, the gamekeeper, saw me rambling without the bag he would want to know what I was lurking for and he would feel suspicion. But when he challenged me with the bag, I just answered him: 'I am gathering beechmast, father – it is not forbidden to gather mast, is it?' and not being forbidden, he could not do anything. So he said nothing except: 'You have a good aunt, Pitou; give her my compliments.'"

"So you have been collecting mast instead of catching rabbits," cried Aunt Angelique, angrily.

"No, no, I laid my snares under cover of mast-gathering: the old donkey saw me doing that and thought it right."

"But the game?" said the woman, bent on the first principle.

"The moon will be up at twelve and I will go and see how many I have snared."

"You will go into the woods at midnight?"

"Why, not? what is there to be afraid of?"

The woman was as amazed at Ange's courage as at the breadth of his speculations. But brought up in the woods, Ange was not to be scared at what terrifies the town boy.

So at midnight he set out, skirting the cemetery wall, for the innocent lad, never in his ideas offending anybody, had no more fear of the dead than of the living.

The only person he dreaded was Lajeunesse. So he made a turn round his house and stopped to imitate the barking of a dog so naturally that the gamekeeper's basset "Snorer," deceived by the provocation, replied with a full throat and came to the door to sniff the air.

Pitou ran on, chuckling, for if Snorer were home his master was surely asleep there, as the man and the dog were inseparable.

In the snares two rabbits had been strangled, Pitou stuffed them into the pockets of a coat made too long for him and now too small.

Greed kept the aunt awake, though she had lain down. She had reckoned on two brace of game.

"Only a pair," said Pitou. "It is not my fault that I have not done better but these are the cunningest rabbits for miles round."

Next day Pitou renewed his enterprises and had the luck to catch three rabbits. Two went to the tavern and one to Abbe Fortier, who recommended Aunt Angelique to the benevolent of the town.

Thus things went on for three or four months, the woman enchanted and Ange thinking life endurable. Except for his mother's loss, matters were such as at Haramont: he passed his time in rural pleasures.

But an unexpected circumstance broke the jar of illusion of the prude and stopped the nephew's trapping.

A letter from Dr. Gilbert arrived from New York. He had not forgotten his little ward on landing, but asked Master Niquet if his instructions had been followed and if young Pitou were learning the means to make his own living.

It was a pinch, for there was no denying that Ange was in first-rate health. He was tall and lank but so are hickory saplings, and nobody doubts their strength and elasticity.

The aunt asked a week to put in her reply; it was miserable for both. Pitou asked no better career than he was leading, but it was quiet at the time; not only did the cold weather drive the birds away but the snow fell and as it would retain footprints, he dared not go into the woods to lay traps and snares.

During the week the old maid's claws grew; she made the stripling so wretched that he was ready to take up any trade rather than be her butt any longer.

Suddenly a sublime idea sprouted in her cruelly tormented brain, where peace reigned again.

Father Fortier had two purses for poor students attached to his school, out of the bounty of the Duke of Orleans.

Angelique resolved to beg him to enter Ange for one of them. This would cost the teacher nothing, and to say nothing of the game on which the woman had been nourishing the doctor for half a year, he owed something to the church-seat letter.

Indeed, Ange was received without fee by the schoolmaster.

The old girl was delighted for it was the school of the district where Dr. Gilbert's son was educated. He paid fifty livres and Ange got in for nothing, but nobody was to let Sebastian Gilbert or any others know that.

Whether they guessed this or not, Ange was received by his school fellows with that sweet spirit of brotherhood born among children and perpetuated among "the grown ups," in other words with hooting and teasing. But when three or four of the budding tyrants made the acquaintance of Pitou's enormous fist and were trodden under his even more enormous foot, respect began to be diffused. He would have had a life a shade less worried than when under Angelique's wing; but Father Fortier in soliciting little children to come unto him, forgot to warn them that the hands he held out were armed with the Latin Rudiments and birch rods.

Little did the aunt care whether the information was flogged or insinuated mentally into her nephew. She basked in the golden ray from dreamland that in three years Ange would pass the examination and be sent to college with the Orleans Purse.

Then would he become a priest, when he would, of course, make his aunt his housekeeper.

One day a rough awakening came to this delusion. Ange crawled into the house as if shod in lead.

"What is the matter?" cried Aunt 'Gelique, who had never seen a more piteous mien. "Are you hungry?"

"No," replied Pitou dolefully.

The hearer was uneasy, for illness is a cause of alarm to good mothers and bad godmothers, as it forces expenses.

"It is a great misfortune," Pitou blubbered: "Father Fortier sends me home from school – so no more studies, no examination, no purse, no college – "

His sobs changed into howls while the woman stared at him to try to read in his soul the reason for this expulsion.

"I suppose you have been playing truant again," she said. "I hear that you are always roaming round Farmer Billet's place to catch a sight of his daughter Catherine. Fie, fie! very pretty conduct in a future priest!"

Ange shook his head.

"You lie," shrieked the old maid, with her anger rising with the growing certainty that it was a serious scrape. "Last Sunday you were again seen rambling in Lovers-Walk with Kate Billet."

It was she who fibbed but she was one who believed the end justified the means, and a whale-truth might be caught by throwing out a tub-lie.

"Oh, no, they could not have seen me there," cried Ange; "for we were out by the Orange-gardens."

"There, you wretch, you see you were with her."

"But this is not a matter that Miss Billet is concerned in," ventured Ange, blushing like the overgrown boy of sixteen that he was.

"Yes, call her 'Miss' to pretend you have any respect for her, the flirt, the jilt, the mincing minx! I will tell her father confessor how she is carrying on."

"But I take my Bible oath that she is not a flirt."

"You defend her, when you need all the excuses you can rake up for yourself. This is going on fine. What is the world coming to, when children of sixteen are walking arm in arm under the shade trees."

"But, aunt, you are away out – Catherine will not let me 'arm' her – she keeps me off at arms-length."

"You see how you break down your own denials. You are calling her Catherine, plain, now. Oh, why not Kate, or Kitty, or some such silly nickname which you use in your iniquitous familiarity? She drives you away to have you come nearer, they all do."

"Do they? there, I never thought of that," exclaimed the swain, suddenly enlightened.

"Ah, you will have something else to think of! And she," said the old prude, "I will manage all this. I will ask Father Fortier to lock you up on bread and water for a fortnight and have her put in a nunnery if she cannot moderate her fancy for you."

She spoke so emphatically that Pitou was frightened.

"You are altogether wrong, my good aunt," pleaded he, clasping his hands: "Miss Catherine has nothing to do with my misfortune."

"Impurity is the mother of all the vices," returned Angelique sententiously.

"But Impurity has nothing to do with my being turned out of school," objected the youth: "the teacher put me out because I made too many barbarisms and solecisms which prevent me of having any chance to win that purse."

"What will become of you, then?"

"Blest if I know," wailed Pitou, who had never looked upon priesthood, with Aunt 'Gelique as housekeeper as Paradise on earth. "Let come what Providence pleases," he sighed, lamentably raising his eyes.

"Providence, do you call it? I see you have got hold of these newfangled ideas about philosophy."

"That cannot be, aunt, for I cannot go into Philosophy till I have passed Rhetoric, and I am only in the third course."

"Joke away," sneered the old maid to whom the school-jargon was Greek. "I speak of the philosophy of these philosophers, not what a pious man like the priest would allow in his holy house. You are a serpent and you have been gnawing a file of the newspapers in which these dreadful writers insult King and Queen and the Church! He is lost!"

When Aunt Angelique said her ward was lost, she meant that she was ruined. The danger was imminent. She took the sublime resolution to run to Father Fortier's for explanation and above all to try to patch up the breach.

CHAPTER III.
A REVOLUTIONARY FARMER

The departure of his aunt gave Pitou a quarter of an hour in tranquillity.

He wanted to utilize it. He gathered the crumbs of his aunt's meal to feed his lizards (he was a naturalist who was never without pets,) caught some flies for his ants and frogs, and opened the cupboard and bread-box to get a supply of food for himself. Appetite had come to him with the lonesomeness.

His preparations made for a feast, he went back to the doorway so as not to be surprised by the woman's return.

While he was watching, a pretty maid passed the end of the street, riding on the crupper of a horse laden with two panniers. One was filled with pigeons, the other with pullets. This was Catherine Billet, who smiled on Pitou, and stopped on seeing him.

According to his habit he turned red as a beet: with gaping mouth, he glared – we mean – admired Kate Billet, the last expression of feminine beauty to him. She looked up and down the street, nodded to her worshipper, and kept on in her way, Pitou trembling with delight as he nodded back.

Absorbed in his contemplation, he did not perceive his relative on the return from Fortier's. Suddenly she grabbed his hand, while turning pale with anger.

Abruptly roused from his bright dream by the electric shock always caused by Aunt Angelique's grasp, the youth wheeled and saw with horror that she was holding up his hand, which was in turn holding half a loaf with two most liberal smears of butter and another of white cheese applied to it.

The woman yelled with fury and Pitou groaned with fright. She raised her other claw-like hand and he lowered his head; she darted for the broom and the other dropped the food and took to his heels without any farewell speech.

Those two hearts knew one another and understood that they could not get on together any more.

Angelique bounced indoors and locked with a double turn of the key. The grating sound seemed a renewal of the tempest to the fugitive who put on the pace.

The result was an event the aunt was as far from expecting as the young man himself.

Running as though all the fiends from below were at his heels, Pitou was soon beyond the town bounds. On turning the burial-ground wall he bunked up against a horse.

"Good gracious," cried a sweet voice well-known to the flyer, "wherever are you racing so, Master Ange? You nearly made Younker take the bit in his teeth with the scare you gave us."

"Oh, Miss Catherine, what a misfortune is on me," replied Pitou, wide of the question.

"You alarm me," said the girl, pulling up in the mid-way; "What is wrong?"

"I cannot be a priest," returned the young fellow, as if revealing a world of iniquities.

"You won't," said the maid, roaring with laughter instead of throwing up her hands as Pitou expected. "Become a soldier, then. You must not make a fuss over such a trifle. Really, I thought your aunt had kicked the bucket."

"It is much the same thing, for she has kicked me out."

"Lor', no, for you have not the pleasure of mourning for her," observed Catherine Billet, laughing more heartily than before, which scandalized the nephew.

"You are a lucky one to be able to laugh like that, and it proves you have a merry heart, and the sorrows of others make no impression on you."

"Who tells you that I should not feel for you if you met a real grief?"

"Real? when I have not a feather to fly with!"

"All for the best," returned the peasant girl.

"But how about eating?" retorted Pitou; "a fellow must eat, and I am always sharp set."

"Don't you like to work?"

"What am I to work at?" whined he. "My aunt and Father Fortier have repeated a hundred times that I am good for nothing. Ah! if I had been bound prentice to a wheelwright or a carpenter, instead of their trying to make a priest of me. Upon my faith, Miss Catherine, a curse is on me!" said he with a wave of the hand in desperation.

"Alack!" sighed the girl who knew like everybody the orphan's melancholy tale: "there is truth in what you say, my poor Pitou. But there is one thing you might do."

"Do tell me what that is?" cried the youth, jumping towards the coming suggestion as a drowning man leaps for a twig of willow.

"You have a guardian in Dr. Gilbert, whose son is your schoolfellow."

"I should rather think he was, and by the same token I have taken many floggings for him."

"Why not apply to his father, who, certainly, will not shake you off?"

"That would be all right if I knew where to address him; but your father may know as he farms some of his land."

"I know that he sends some of the rent to America and banks the other part here at a notary's."

"America is a far cry," moaned Pitou.

"What, would you start for America?" exclaimed the maid, almost frightened at his courage.

"Me? Sakes! No, never! France is good enough for me if I could get enough to eat and drink."

"Very well," said she, falling into silence which lasted some time.

The lad was plunged into a thoughtful mood which would have much puzzled Teacher Fortier the logical man. Starting from Obscurity, the reverie brightened and then grew confused again, like lightning.

Younker had started in again for the walk home, and Pitou, with a hand on one basket, trudged on beside it. As dreamy as her neighbor, Catherine let the bridle drop with no fear about being run away with. There were no monsters on the highway and Younker bore no resemblance to the fabulous hippogriffs.

The walker stopped mechanically when the animal did, which was at the farm.

"Hello, is this you, Pitou?" challenged a strong-shouldered man, proudly stationed before a drinking pool where his horse was swilling.

"It is me, Master Billet."

"He's had another mishap," said the maid, jumping off the horse without any heed as to showing her ankles. "His aunt has sent him packing."

"What has he done to worry the old bigot this time?" queried the farmer.

"It appears that I am not good enough in Greek," said the scholar, who was lying, for it was Latin he was a bungler at.

"What do you want to be good at Greek for?" asked the broad-shouldered man.

"To explain Theocritus and read the Iliad. These are useful when you want to be a priest."

"Trash!" said Billet. "Do you need Greek and Latin? do I know my own language – can I read or write? but this does not prevent me plowing, sowing and reaping."

"But you, Master Billet, are a cultivator and not a priest: 'Agricole,' says Virgil – "

"Do not you think a farmer is on a level with a larned clerk – you cussed choir-boy? Particularly when the *Agricoaler* has a hundred acres of tilled land in the sun and a thousand louis in the shade?"

"I have always been told that a priest leads the happiest life: though I grant," added Pitou, smiling most amiably, "I do not believe all I hear."

"You are *right*, my boy, by a blamed *sight*– you see I can make rhymes, if I like to try. It strikes me that you have the makings in you of something better than a scholard, and that it is a deused lucky thing that you try something else – mainly at the present time. As a farmer I know which way

the wind blows, and it is rough for priests. So then, as you are an honest lad and larned," here Pitou bowed at being so styled for the first time – "you can get along without the black gown."

Catherine, who was setting the chickens and pigeons on the ground, was listening with interest to the dialogue.

"It looks hard to win a livelihood," said the lad.

"What do you know how to do?"

"I can make birdlime and snare game. I can mock the birds' songs, eh, Miss Kate?"

"He can whistle like a blackbird."

"But whistling is not a trade," commented Billet.

"Just what I say to myself, by Jingo!"

"Oh, you can swear – that is a manly accomplishment, any how."

"Oh, did I? I beg your pardon, farmer."

"Don't mention it," said the rustic. "I rip out myself sometimes. Thunder and blazes!" he roared to his horse, "can't you be quiet? these devilish Percherons must always be grazing and jerking. Are you lazy," he continued to the lad.

"I don't know. I have never worked at anything but learning Greek and Latin, and they do not tempt me much."

"A good job – that shows that you are not such a fool, as I took you for," said Billet.

His hearer opened his eyes immeasurably; this was the first time he had heard this order of ideas, subversive of all the theories set up for him previously.

"I mean, are you easily tired out?"

"Bless you, I can go ten leagues and never feel it."

"Good, we are getting on; we might train you a trifle lower and make some money on you as a runner."

"Train me lower," said Pitou, looking at his slender figure, bony arms and stilt-like legs; "I fancy I am thin now as it is."

"In fact, you are a treasure, my friend," replied the yeoman, bursting into laughter.

Pitou was stepping from one surprise to another; never had he been esteemed so highly.

"In short, how are you at work?"

"Don't know; for I never have worked."

The girl laughed, but her father took the matter seriously.

"These rogues of larned folk," he broke forth, shaking his fist at the town, "look at them training up the youth in the way they should not go, in laziness and idleness. What good is such a sluggard to his brothers, I want to know?"

"Not much," said Pitou; "luckily I have no brothers."

"By brothers I mean all mankind," continued the farmer; "are not all men brothers, hey?"

"The Scripture says so."

"And equals," proceeded the other.

"That is another matter," said the younger man; "if I had been the equal of Father Fortier I guess he would not have given me the whip so often; if I were the equal of my aunt, she would not have driven me from home."

"I tell you that all men are brothers and we shall soon prove this to the tyrants," said Billet. "I will take you into my house to prove it."

"You will? but, just think, I eat three pounds of bread a day, with butter and cheese to boot."

"Pooh, I see you will not be dear to feed," said the farmer, "we will keep you."

"Have you nothing else to ask father, Pitou?" inquired Catherine.

"Nothing, miss."

"What did you come along for?"

"Just to keep you company."

"Well, you are gallant, and I accept the compliment for what it is worth," said the girl, "but you came to ask news about your guardian, Pitou."

"So I did. That is funny – I forgot it."

"You want to speak about our worthy Dr. Gilbert?" said the farmer, with a tone indicating the degree of deep consideration in which he held his landlord.

"Just so," answered Pitou; "but I am not in need now; since you house me, I can tranquilly wait till he returns from America."

"You will not have to wait long, for he has returned."

"You don't say so; when?"

"I cannot exactly say: but he was at Havre a week ago; for I have a parcel in my saddlebags that comes from him and was handed me at Villers Cotterets, and here it is."

"How do you know it is from him?"

"Because there is a letter in it."

"Excuse me, daddy," interrupted Catherine, "but you boast that you cannot read."

"So I do! I want folks to say: 'There is old Farmer Billet, who owes nothing to nobody – not even the schoolmaster: for he has made himself all alone.' I did not read the letter but the rural constabulary quarter-master whom I met there."

"What does he say – that he still is content with you?"

"Judge for yourself."

Out of a leather wallet he took a letter which he held to his daughter, who read:

> "My Dear Friend Billet: I arrive from America where I found a people richer, greater and happier than ours. This arises from their being free, while we are not. But we are marching towards this new era, and all must labor for the light to come. I know your principles, Friend Billet, and your influence on the farmers, your neighbors; and all the honest population of toilers and hands whom you lead, not like a king but a father.
>
> "Teach them the principles of devotion and brotherhood I know you cherish. Philosophy is universal, all men ought to read their rights and duties by its light. I send you a little book in which these rights and duties are set forth. It is my work, though my name is not on the title-page. Propagate these principles, those of universal equality. Get them read in the winter evenings. Reading is the food of the mind as bread is that for the body.
>
> "One of these days I shall see you, and tell you about a new kind of farming practiced in the United States. It consists, in the landlord and the tenant working on shares of the crop. It appears to me more according to the laws of primitive society and to the love of God.
>
> *"Greeting and brotherly feeling,*
> *"Honore Gilbert, Citizen of Philadelphia."*

"This letter is nicely written," observed Pitou.

"I warrant it is," said Billet.

"Yes, father dear; but I doubt the quarter-master will be of your opinion. Because, this not only will get Dr. Gilbert into trouble, but you, too."

"Pooh, you are always scarey," sneered the farmer. "This does not hinder me having the book, and – we have got something for you to do, Pitou – you shall read me this in the evenings."

"But in the daytime?"

"Tend the sheep and cows. Let us have a squint at the book."

He took out one of those sewn pamphlets in a red cover, issued in great quantity in those days, with or without permission of the authorities. In the latter case the author ran great risk of being sent to prison.

"Read us the title, Pitou, till we have a peep at the book inside. The rest afterwards."

The boy read on the first page these words, which usage has made vague and meaningless lately but at that epoch they had a deep effect on all hearts:

"On the Independence of Man and the Freedom of Nations."

"What do you say to that, my lad?" cried the farmer.

"Why, it seems to me that Independence and Freedom are much of a muchness? my guardian would be whipped out of the class by Father Fortier for being guilty of a pleonasm.

"Fleanism or not, this book is the work of a real man," rejoined the other.

"Never mind, father," said Catherine, with the admirable instinct of womankind: "I beg you to hide the book. It will get you into some bad scrape. I tremble merely to look at it."

"Why should it do me any harm, when it has not brought it on the writer?"

"How do you know that, father? This letter was written a week ago, and took all that time to arrive from Havre. But I had a letter this morning from Sebastian Gilbert, at Paris, who sends his love to his foster-brother – I forgot that – and he has been three days without his father meeting him there."

"She is right," said Pitou: "this delay is alarming."

"Hold your tongue, you timid creature; and let us read the doctor's treatise?" said the farmer: "It will not only make you larned, but manly."

Pitou stuck the book under his arm with so solemn a movement that it completed the winning of his protector's heart.

"Have you had your dinner?" asked he.

"No, sir," replied the youth.

"He was eating when he was driven from home," said the girl.

"Well, you go in and ask Mother Billet for the usual rations and to-morrow we will set you regularly to work."

With an eloquent look the orphan thanked him, and, conducted by Catherine, he entered the kitchen, governed by the absolute rule of Mother Billet.

CHAPTER IV.
LONG LEGS ARE GOOD FOR RUNNING IF NOT FOR DANCING

Mistress Billet was a fat woman who honored her husband, delighted in her daughter and fed her field hands as no other housewife did for miles around. So there was a rush to be employed at Billet's.

Pitou appreciated his luck at the full value when he saw the golden loaf placed at his elbow, the pot of cider set on his right, and the chunk of mild-cured bacon before him. Since he lost his mother, five years before, the orphan had never enjoyed such cheer, even on a feast day.

He remembered, too, that his new duties of neatherd and shepherd had been fulfilled by gods and demigods.

Besides Mrs. Billet had the management of the kine and orders were not harsh from Catherine's mouth.

"You shall stay here," said she; "I have made father understand that you are good for a heap of things; for instance, you can keep the accounts – "

"Well, I know the four rules of arithmetic," said Pitou, proudly.

"You are one ahead of me. Here you stay."

"I am glad, for I could not live afar from you. Oh, I beg pardon, but that came from my heart."

"I do not bear you ill will for that," said Catherine; "it is not your fault if you like us here."

Poor young lambs, they say so much in so few words!

So Pitou did much of Catherine's work and she had more time to make pretty caps and "titivate herself up," to use her mother's words.

"I think you prettier without a cap on," he remarked.

"You may; but your taste is not the rule. I cannot go over to the town and dance without a cap on. That is all very well for fine ladies, who have the right to go bareheaded and wear powder on the hair."

"You beat them all without powder."

"Compliments again, did you learn to make them at Fortier's."

"No, he taught nothing like that."

"Dancing?"

"Lord help us – dancing at Fortier's! he made us cut capers at the end of the birch."

"So you do not know how to dance? Still you shall come along with me on Sunday, and see Master Isidor Charny dance: he is the best dancer of all the gentlemen round here."

"Who is he?"

"Owner of Boursiennes Manor. He will dance with me next Sunday."

Pitou's heart shrank without his knowing why.

"So you make yourself lovely to dance with him?" he inquired.

"With him and all the rest. You, too, if you like to learn."

Next day he applied himself to the new accomplishment and had to acknowledge that tuition is agreeable according to the tutor. In two hours he had a very good idea of the art.

"Ah, if you had taught me Latin, I don't believe I should have made so many mistakes," he sighed.

"But then you would be a priest and be shut up in an ugly old monastery where no women are allowed."

"That's so; well, I am not sorry I am not to be a priest."

At breakfast Billet reminded his new man that the reading of the Gilbert pamphlet was to take place in the barn at ten a. m. next day. That was the hour for mass, Pitou objected.

"Just why I pitch on it, to test my lads," replied the farmer.

Billet detested religious leaders as the apostles of tyranny, and seized the opportunity of setting up one altar against another.

His wife and daughter raising some remonstrance, he said that church was good enough for womanfolks, no doubt, and they might go and sleep away their time there; but it suited men to hear stronger stuff, or else the men should not work on his land.

Billet was a despot in his house; only Catherine ever coped with him and she was hushed when he frowned.

But she thought to gain something for Pitou on the occasion. She pointed out that the doctrines might suffer by the mouthpiece; that the reader was too shabby for the phrases to make a mark. So Pitou was agreeably surprised when Sunday morning came round to see the tailor enter while he was ruminating how he could "clean up," and lay on a chair a coat and breeches of sky blue cloth and a long waistcoat of white and pink stripes. At the same time a housemaid came in to put on another chair opposite the first, a shirt and a neckcloth; if the former fitted, she was to make half-a-dozen.

It was the day for surprises: behind the two came the hatter who brought a three-cocked hat of the latest fashion so full of style and elegance that nothing better was worn in Villers Cotterets.

The only trouble was that the shoes were too small for Ange: the man had made them on the last of his son who was four years the senior of Pitou. This superiority of our friend made him proud for a space, but it was spoilt by his fear that he would have to go to the ball in his old shoes – which would mar the new suit. This uneasiness was of short duration. A pair of shoes sent for Father Billet were brought at the same time and they fitted Pitou – a fact kept hidden from Billet, who might not like his new man literally stepping into his own shoes.

When Pitou, dressed, hatted, shod and his hair dressed, looked at himself in the mirror, he did not know himself. He grinned approvingly and said, as he drew himself up to his full height:

"Fetch along your Master Charnys now!"

"My eyes," cried the farmer, admiring him as much as the women when he strutted into the main room: "you have turned out a strapper, my lad. I should like Aunt Angelique to see you thus togged out. She would want you home again."

"But, papa, she could not take him back, could she?"

"As long as he is a minor – unless she forfeited her right by driving him out."

"But the five years are over," said Pitou quickly, "for which Dr. Gilbert paid a thousand francs."

"There is a man for you!" exclaimed Billet: "just think that I am always hearing such good deeds of his. D'ye see, it is life and death for him!" and he raised his hand to heaven.

"He wanted me to learn a trade," went on the youth.

"Quite right of him. See how the best intentions are given a twist. A thousand francs are left to fit a lad for the battle of life, and they put him in a priest's school to make a psalm-singer of him. How much did your aunt give old Fortier?"

"Nothing."

"Then she pocketed Master Gilbert's money?"

"It is likely enough."

"Mark ye, Pitou, I have a bit of a hint to give you. When the old humbug of a saint cracks her whistle, look into the boxes, demijohns and old crocks, for she has been hiding her savings. But to business. Have you the Gilbert book?"

"Here, in my pocket."

"Have you thought the matter over, father?" said Catherine.

"Good actions do not want any thought," replied the farmer. "The doctor bade me have the book read and the good principles sown. The book shall be read and the principles scattered."

"But we can go to church?" ventured the maid timidly.

"Mother and you can go to the pew, yes: but we men have better to do. Come alone, Pitou, my man."

Pitou bowed to the ladies as well as the tight coat allowed and followed the farmer, proud to be called a man.

The gathering in the barn was numerous. Billet was highly esteemed by his hired men and they did not mind his roaring at them as long as he boarded and lodged them bounteously. So they had all hastened to come at his invitation.

Besides, at this period, the strange fever ran through France felt when a nation is going to go to work. New and strange words were current in mouths never pronouncing them. Freedom, Independence, emancipation, were heard not only among the lower classes but from the nobility in the first place, so that the popular voice was but their echo.

From the West came the light which illumined before it burnt. The sun rose in the Great Republic of America which was to be in its round a vast conflagration for France by the beams of which frightened nations were to see "Freedom" inscribed in letters of blood.

So political meetings were less rare than might be supposed. Apostles of an unknown deity sprang up from heaven knows where, and went from town to town, disseminating words of hope. Those at the head of the government found certain wheels clogged without understanding where the hindrance lay. Opposition was in all minds before it appeared in hands and limbs, but it was present, sensible, and the more menacing as it was intangible like a spectre and could be premised before it was grappled with.

Twenty and more farmers, field hands, and neighbors of Billet were in the barn.

When their friend walked in with Pitou, all heads were uncovered and all hats waved at arms-length. It was plain that these men were willing to die at the master's call.

The farmer explained that the book was by Dr. Gilbert which the young man was about to read out. The doctor was well-known in the district where he owned much land, while Billet was his principal tenant.

A cask was ready for the reader, who scrambled upon it, and began his task.

Common folks, I may almost say, people in general, listen with the most attention to words they do not clearly understand. The full sense of the pamphlet escaped the keenest wits here, and Billet's as well. But in the midst of the cloudy phrases shone the words Freedom, Independence and Equality like lightnings in the dark, and that was enough for the applause to break forth:

"Hurrah for Dr. Gilbert!" was shouted.

When the book was read a third through, it was resolved to have the rest in two more sessions, next time on the Sunday coming, when all hands promised to attend.

Pitou had read very well: nothing succeeds like success. He took his share in the cheers for the language, and Billet himself felt some respect arise for the dismissed pupil of Father Fortier.

One thing was lacking to Ange, that Catherine had not witnessed his oratorical triumph.

But Billet hastened to impart his pleasure to his wife and daughter. Mother Billet said nothing, being a woman of narrow mind.

"I am afraid you will get into trouble," sighed Catherine, smiling sadly.

"Pshaw, playing the bird of ill-omen again. Let me tell you that I like larks better than owls."

"Father, I had warning that you were looked upon suspiciously."

"Who said so?"

"A friend."

"Advice ought to be thanked. Tell me the friend's name?"

"He ought to be well informed, as it is Viscount Isidor Charny."

"What makes that scented dandy meddle with such matters? Does he give me advice on the way I should think? Do I suggest how he should cut his coat? It seems to me that it would be only tarring him with the same brush."

"I am not telling you this to vex you, father: but the advice is given with good intention."

"I will give him a piece, and you can transmit it with my compliments. Let him and his upper class look to themselves. The National Assembly is going to give them a shaking up; and the question will be roughly handled of the royal pets and favorites. Warning to his brother George, the Count of Charny, who is one of the gang, and on very close terms with the Austrian leech."

"Father, you have more experience than we, and you can act as you please," returned the girl.

"Indeed," said Pitou in a low voice, "why does this Charny fop shove in his oar anyhow?" for he was filled with arrogance from his success.

Catherine did not hear, or pretended not, and the subject dropped.

Pitou thought the dinner lasted a long time as he was in a hurry to go off with Catherine and show his finery at the rustic ball. Catherine looked charming. She was a pretty, black-eyed but fair girl, slender and flexible as the willows shading the farm spring. She had tricked herself out with the natural daintiness setting off all her advantages, and the little cap she had made for herself suited her wonderfully.

Almost the first of the stray gentlemen who condescended to patronize the popular amusement was a young man whom Pitou guessed to be Isidor Charny.

He was a handsome young blade of twenty-three or so, graceful in every movement like those brought up in aristocratic education from the cradle. Besides, he was one of those who wear dress to the best harmony.

On seeing his hands and feet, Pitou began to be less proud over Nature's prodigality towards him in these respects. He looked down at his legs with the eye of the stag in the fable. He sighed when Catherine wished to know why he was so glum.

But honest Pitou, after being forced to own the superiority of Charny as a beauty, had to do so as a dancer.

Dancing was part of the training, then: Lauzum owed his fortune at court to his skill in a curranto in the royal quadrille. More than one other nobleman had won his way by the manner of treading a measure and arching the instep.

The viscount was a model of grace and perfection.

"Lord 'a' mercy," sighed Pitou when Catherine returned to him; "I shall never dare to dance with you after seeing Lord Charny at it."

Catherine did not answer as she was too good to tell a lie; she stared at the speaker for he was suddenly becoming a man: he could feel jealousy.

She danced three or four times yet, and after another round with Isidor Charny, she asked to be taken home; that was all she had come for, one might guess.

"What ails you?" she asked as her companion kept quiet; "why do you not speak to me?"

"Because I cannot talk like Viscount Charny," was the other's reply. "What can I say after all the fine things he spoke during the dances?"

"You are unfair, Ange; for we were talking about you. If your guardian does not turn up, we must find you a patron."

"Am I not good enough to keep the farm books?" sighed Pitou.

"On the contrary, with the education you have received you are fitted for something better."

"I do not know what I am coming to, but I do not want to owe it to Viscount Charny."

"Why refuse his protection? His brother the Count, is, they say, particularly in favor at the court, and he married a bosom friend of the Queen Marie Antoinette. Lord Isidor tells me that he will get you a place in the custom-house, if you like."

"Much obliged, but as I have already told you, I am content to stay as I am, if your father does not send me away."

"Why the devil should I," broke in a rough voice which Catherine started to recognize as her father's.

"Not a word about Lord Isidor," whispered she to Pitou.

"I – I hardly know – I kind o' feared I was not smart enough, stammered Ange.

"When you can count like one o'clock, and read to beat the schoolmaster, who still believes himself a wise clerk. No, Pitou, the good God brings people to me, and once they are under my rooftree, they stick as long as He pleases."

With this assurance Pitou returned to his new home. He had experienced a great change. He had lost trust in himself. And so he slept badly. He recalled Gilbert's book; it was principally against the privileged classes and their abuses, and the cowardice of those who submitted to them. Pitou fancied he began to understand these matters better and he made up his mind to read more of the work on the morrow.

Rising early, he went down with it into the yard where he could have the light fall on the book through an open window with the additional advantage that he might see Catherine through it. She might be expected down at any moment.

But when he glanced up from his reading at the intervention of an opaque body between him and the light, he was amazed at the disagreeable person who caused the eclipse.

This was a man of middle age, longer and thinner than Pitou, clad in a coat as patched and thread-bare as his own – for Pitou had resumed his old clothes for the working day – while thrusting his head forward on a lank neck, he read the book with as much curiosity as the other felt relish – though it was upside down to him.

Ange was greatly astonished. A kind smile adorned the stranger's mouth in which a few snags stuck up, a pair crossing another like boar's fangs.

"The American edition," said the man snuffling up his nose, "In octavo, 'On the Freedom of Man and the Independence of Nations. Boston, 1788.'"

Pitou opened his eyes in proportion to the progress of the unknown reader, so that when he had reached the end his eyes were at the utmost extent.

"Just so, sir," said Pitou.

"This is the treatise of Dr. Gilbert's?" said the man in black.

"Yes, sir," rejoined the young man politely.

He rose as he had been taught that he must not sit in a superior's presence and to simple Ange everybody was a superior. In rising something fair and rosy attracted his attention at the window: it was Catherine come down at last, who was making cautionary signs to him.

"I do not want to be inquisitive, sir, but I should like to know whose book this is?" remarked the stranger pointing at the book without touching it as it was between Pitou's hands.

Pitou was going to say it belonged to Billet, but the girl motioned that he ought to lay claim to it himself. So he majestically responded:

"This book is mine."

The man in black had seen nothing but the book and its reader and heard but these words. But he suspiciously glanced behind: swift as a bird, Catherine had vanished.

"Your book?"

"Yes; do you want to read it – 'Avidus legendi libri' or 'legendie historiae?'"

"Hello! you appear much above the condition your clothes beseem," said the stranger: "'Non dives vestitu sed ingenio' – and it follows that I take you into custody."

"Me, in custody?" gasped Pitou at the summit of stupefaction.

At the order of the man in black, two sergeants of the Paris Police seemed to rise up out of the ground.

"Let us draw up a report," said the man, while one of the constables bound Pitou's hands by a rope and took the book into his own possession, and the other secured the prisoner to a ring happening to be by the window.

Pitou was going to bellow, but the same person who had already so influenced him seemed to hint he should submit.

He submitted with a docility enchanting the policemen, and the man in a black suit in particular. Hence, without any distrust, they walked into the farmhouse where the two policemen took seats at a table while the other – we shall know what he was after presently.

Scarcely had the trio gone in than Pitou heard the voice:

"Hold up your hands."

He raised them and his head as well, and saw Catherine's pale and frightened face: in her hand she held a knife.

Pitou rose on tiptoe and she cut the rope round his wrists.

"Take the knife," she said, "and cut yourself free from the ringbolt."

Pitou did not wait for twice telling but found himself wholly free.

"Here is a double-louis," went on the girl; "you have good legs. Make away. Go to Paris and warn the doctor."

She could not conclude for the constables appeared again as the coin fell at Pitou's feet. He picked it up quickly. Indeed the armed constables stood on the sill for an instant, astounded to see the man free whom they had left bound. But as at the dog's least stir the hare bolts, at the first move of the police, Pitou made a prodigious leap and was on the other side of the hedge.

They uttered a yell which brought out the corporal, who held a little casket under the arm. He lost no time in speech-making but darted after the escaped one. His men followed his example. But they were not able to jump the hedge and ditch, like Pitou, and were forced to go roundabout.

But when they got over, they beheld the youth five hundred paces off on the meadow, tearing away directly to the woods, a quarter of a league distant, which he would gain in a short time.

He turned at this nick, and perceiving the enemy take up the chase, though more for the name of the thing than any hope of overtaking him, he doubled his speed and soon dashed out of sight in the thicket.

He had the wind as well as the swiftness of the buck, and he ran for ten minutes as he might for an hour. But judging that he was out of danger, by his instinct, he stopped to breathe, listen and make sure that he was quite alone.

"It is incredible what a quantity of incidents have been crammed into three days," he mused.

He looked alternately at his coin and the knife.

"I must find time to change the gold and give Miss Catherine a penny for the knife, for fear it will cut our friendship. Never mind, since she bade me go to Paris, I shall go."

On making out where he was, he struck a straight line over the heath to come out on the Paris highroad.

CHAPTER V.
WHY THE POLICE AGENT CAME WITH THE CONSTABLES

About six that morning a police-agent from the capital, accompanied by two inferior policemen, had arrived at Villers Cotterets where they presented themselves to the police justice, and asked him to tell them where Farmer Billet dwelt.

Five hundred paces from the farmhouse the corporal, as the exempt's rank was in the semi-military organization of the police of the era, perceived a peasant working in the field, of whom he inquired about his master.

The man pointed to a horseman a quarter of a league off.

"He won't be back till nine," he said; "there he is inspecting the work. He comes in for breakfast, then."

"If you want to please your master, run and tell him a gentleman from town is waiting to see him."

"Do you mean Dr. Gilbert?"

"Run and tell him, all the same."

No sooner was he notified than Billet galloped home but when he entered the room where he expected to see his landlord under the canopy of the large fireplace, none were there but his wife, sitting in the middle, plucking ducks with all the care such a task demands. Catherine was up in her room, preparing finery for Sunday, from the pleasure girls feel in getting ready for fun.

"Who asked for me?" demanded Billet, stopping on the threshold and looking round.

"Me," replied a flute-like voice behind him.

"Turning, the yeoman beheld the police-agent and his two myrmidons.

"How now? what do you want?" he snarled, making three steps backwards.

"Next to nothing, dear Master Billet," replied the unctuous speaker: "we have to make a search in your premises, that is all."

"A search, hey?" repeated Billet, glancing at his gun, on hooks over the mantelpiece. "Since we had a National Assembly," he said, "I thought citizens were no longer exposed to proceedings which smack of another age and style of things. What do you want with a peaceable and loyal man?"

Policemen are alike all the world over in their never answering questions of their victims; some bewail them while clapping on the iron cuffs, searching them or pinioning; they are the most dangerous as they appear to be the best. The fellow who descended on Farmer Billet was of the hypocritical school, those who have a tear for those they overhaul, but they never let their hands be idle to dash away the tear.

Uttering a sigh, this man waved his hand to his acolytes, who went up to Billet. He jumped back and reached out for his musket.

But his hand was turned aside from the doubly dangerous weapon to him who made use of it and her whose pair of slight hands was strong with terror and mighty with entreaty.

It was Catherine who had rushed to the spot in time to save her father from the crime of rebellion to justice.

After this first outburst, Billet made no further resistance.

The police agent ordered him to be locked up in one of the ground floor rooms which he had noticed to be barred, though Billet, who had the grating done, had forgotten the precaution. Catherine was placed in a first-floor room and Mrs. Billet was shoved into the kitchen as inoffensive. Master of the fort, the Exempt set to searching all the furniture.

"What are you doing?" roared Billet who saw through the keyhole that his house was turned out of windows.

"Looking, as you see, for something we cannot find," replied the police officer.

"But you may be robbers, burglars, scoundrels!"

"Oh, you wrong us, master," rejoined the fellow through the door; "we are honest folk like yourself – only we are in the wages of the King and we have to obey his orders."

"His Majesty's orders," repeated the farmer: "King Louis XVI. gives you orders to rummage my desk and turn my things upside down? When the famine was so dreadful last year that we thought of eating our horses; when the hail on the thirteenth of July two years back cut our wheat to chaff – his Majesty never bothered about us. What has happened at my farm at present for him to concern himself – never having seen or known me?"

"You will please excuse me," said the man, opening the door a little and warily showing a search-warrant issued by the Chief of Police but as usual commencing with "In the King's Name" – "His Majesty has heard about you, old fellow; though he may not personally know you, do not kick at the honor he does you, and try to receive properly those whom he sends in his royal name."

With a polite bow and a friendly wink, the chief policeman slammed the door, and recommenced the ferreting.

Billet held his tongue and with folded arms, trod the room: he felt he was in the men's power. The searching went on silently. These men seemed fallen from the skies. No one had seen them but the farm-hand who had pointed out the way to the farmhouse. In the yard the watch-dogs had not barked; the leader of the expedition must be a celebrated man in his line and not making his first arrest.

Billet heard his daughter wailing in the room overhead. He recalled her prophetic words, for he had no doubt that the investigation was caused by the doctor's book.

Nine o'clock struck, and Billet could count his hired men returning for their morning meal from the fields. This made him comprehend that, in case of conflict, he could have numbers of not law on his side. This made the blood boil in his veins. He had not the temper to bear inaction any longer and grasping the door he gave it such a shaking by the handle that with such another he would send the lock flying.

The police opened it at once and confronted the farmer, threatening and upright before the house turned inside out.

"But, to make it short, what are you looking for?" roared the caged lion: "Tell me, or by the Lord Harry of Navarre, I swear I'll thump it out of you."

The flocking in of the farm lads had not escaped the corporal's alert eye; he reckoned them and was convinced that, in case of a tussel, he could not crow on the battlefield.

With more honeyed politeness than before, he sneaked up to the speaker and said as he bowed to the ground:

"I am going to tell you, Master Billet, though it goes dead against the rules and regulations. We are looking for a subversive publication, and incendiary pamphlet put on the back list by the Royal Censors."

"A book in the house of a farmer who cannot read?"

"What is there amazing in that, when you are friend of the author and he sent you a copy?"

"I am not the friend of Dr. Gilbert but his humble servant," replied the other. "To be his friend would be too great an honor for a poor farmer like me."

This unreflected reply, in which Billet betrayed himself by confessing that he not only knew the author, which was natural being his landlord, but the book – assured victory to the officer of the law. This man drew himself up to his full height, with his most benignant air, and smiling as he tapped Billet on the shoulder, so that he seemed to cleave his head in twain, he said:

"You have let the cat out of the bag. You have been the first to name Gilbert, whose name we kept back out of discretion."

"That's so," muttered the farmer. "Look here, I will not merely own up but – will you stop pulling things about if I tell you where the book is?"

"Why, certainly," said the chief making a sign to his associates; "for the book is the object of the search. Only," he added with a sly grin, "don't allow you have one copy when you have a dozen."

"I swear, I have only the one."

"We are obliged to get that down to a certainty by the most minute search, Master Billet. Have five minute's farther patience. We are only poor servants of justice, under orders from those above us, and you will not oppose honorable men doing their duty – for there are such in all walks of life."

He had found the flaw in the armor: he knew how to talk Billet over.

"Go on, but be done quickly," he said, turning his back on them.

The man closed the door softly and still more quietly turned the key: which made Billet snap his fingers: sure that he could burst the door off its hinges if he had to do it.

On his part the policeman waved his fellows to the work. All three in a trice went through the papers, books and linen. Suddenly, at the bottom of an open clothespress, they perceived a small oak casket clamped with iron. The corporal pounced on it as a vulture on its prey. By the mere view, by his scent, by the place where it was stored, he had divined what he sought, for he quickly hid the box under his tattered mantle and beckoned to his bravoes that he had accomplished the errand.

At that very moment Billet had come to the end of his patience.

"I tell you that you cannot find what you are looking for unless I tell you," he called out. "There is no need to 'make hay' with my things. I am not a conspirator, confound you! Come, get this into your noddles. Answer, or, by all the blue moons, I will go to Paris and complain to the King, to the Assembly and to the people."

At this time the King was still spoken of before the people.

"Yes, dear Master Billet, we hear you, and we are ready to bow to your excellent reasons. Come, let us know where the book is, and, as we are now convinced that you have only the single copy, we will seize that and get away. There it is in a nutshell."

"Well, the book is in the hands of a lad to whom I entrusted it this morning to carry it to a friend's," said Billet.

"What is the name of this honest lad?" queried the man in black coaxingly.

"Ange Pitou; he is a poor orphan whom I housed from charity, and who does not know the nature of the book."

"I thank you, dear Master Billet," said the corporal, throwing the linen into the hole in the wall and closing the lid. "And where may this nice boy be, prithee?"

"I fancy I saw him as I came in, under the arbor by the Spanish climbing beans. Go and take the book away but do not hurt him."

"Hurt? oh, Master, you do not know us to think we would hurt a fly."

They advanced in the indicated direction, where they had the adventure with Pitou already described. Catherine had heard enough in the words about the doctor, the book, and the search-warrant, to save the innocent holder of the treasonable pamphlet.

Since the double errand of the police was fulfilled, the commander of the expedition was only too glad of the excuse to get far away. So he bounded on his men by his voice and example till they ran him into the woods. Then they came to a halt in the bushes. In the chase they were joined by two more policeman who had hidden on the farm with orders not to run up unless called.

"Faith, it is a good job the lad did not have the box instead of the book," said the organizer of the attack, "we would be obliged to take post-horses to catch up with him. Hang me if he is a man at all so much as a deer."

"But you have the prize, eh, Master Wolfstep?" said one of the subordinates.

"Certainly, comrade, for here it is," answered the police agent, to whom the nickname had been given for his sidelong "lope" or wolfish tread and its lightness.

"Then we are entitled to the promised reward, eh?"

"Ay, and here you are," said the captain of the squad, distributing gold pieces among them with no preference for those who had actively prosecuted the search and the others.

"Long live the Chief!" called out the men.

"There is no harm in your cheering the Chief," said Wolfstep: "but it is not he who cashes up this trip. It is some friend of his, lady or gentleman, who wants to keep in the background."

"I wager that he or she wants that little box bad," suggested one of the hirelings.

"Rigoulet, my friend," said the leader, "I have always certified that you are a chap full of keenness; but while we wait for the gift to win its reward, we had better be on the move. That confounded countryman does not look easily cooled down, and when he perceives the casket is missing, he may set his farm boys on our track; and they are poachers capable of keeling us over with a shot as surely as the best Swiss marksmen in his Majesty's forces."

This advice was that of the majority, for the five men kept on along the forest skirts out of sight till they reached the highroad.

This was no useless precaution for Catherine had no sooner seen the party disappear in pursuit of Pitou than, full of confidence in the last one's agility, who would lead them a pretty chase, she called on the farm-men to open the door.

They knew something unusual was going on but not exactly what.

They ran in to set her free and she liberated her father.

Billet seemed in a dream. Instead of rushing out of the room, he walked forth warily, and acted as if not liking to stay in any one place and yet hated to look on the furniture and cupboards disturbed by the posse.

"They have got the book, anyway?" he questioned.

"I believe they took that, dad, but not Pitou, who cut away? If they are sticking to him, they will all be over at Cayelles or Vauciennes by this time."

"Capital! Poor lad, he owes all this harrying to me."

"Oh, father, do not bother about him but look to ourselves. Be easy about Pitou getting out of his scrape. But what a state of disorder! look at this, mother!"

"They are low blackguards," said Mother Billet: "they have not even respected my linen press."

"What, tumbled over the linen?" said Billet, springing towards the cavity which the corporal had carefully closed but into which, opening it, he plunged both arms deeply. "It is not possible!"

"What are you looking for, father?" asked the girl as her father looked about him bewildered.

"Look, look if you can see it anywhere: the casket! that is what the villains were raking for."

"Dr. Gilbert's casket?" inquired Mrs. Billet, who commonly let others do the talking and work in critical times.

"Yes, that most precious casket," responded the farmer thrusting his hands into his mop of hair.

"You frighten me, father," said Catherine.

"Wretch that I am," cried the man, in rage, "and fool never to suspect that. I never thought about the casket. Oh, what will the doctor say? What will he think? That I am a betrayer, a coward, a worthless fellow!"

"Oh, heavens, what was in it, dad?"

"I don't know; but I answered for it to the doctor on my life and I ought to have been killed defending it."

He made so threatening a gesture against himself that the women recoiled in terror.

"My horse, bring me my horse," roared the madman. "I must let the doctor know – he must be apprised."

"I told Pitou to do that."

"Good! no, what's the use? – a man afoot. I must ride to Paris. Did you not read in his letter that he was going there? My horse!"

"And will you leave us in the midst of anguish?"

"I must, my girl, I must," he said, kissing Catherine convulsively: "the doctor said: 'If ever you lose that box, or rather if it is stolen from you, come to warn me the instant you perceive the loss, Billet, wherever I am. Let nothing stop you, not even the life of man.'"

"Lord, what can be in it?"

"I don't know a bit. But I do know that it was placed in my keeping, and that I have let it be snatched away. But here is my nag. I shall learn where the father is by his son at the college."

Kissing his wife and his daughter for the last time, the farmer bestrode his steed and set off towards the city at full gallop.

CHAPTER VI.
ON THE ROAD

Pitou was spurred by the two most powerful emotions in the world, love and fear. Panic bade him take care of himself as he would be arrested and perhaps flogged; love in Catherine's voice had said: "Be off to Paris."

These two stimulants led him to fly rather than run.

Heaven is infallible as well as mighty: how useful were the long legs of Pitou, so ungraceful at a ball, in streaking it over the country, as well as the knotty knees, although his heart, expanded by terror, beat three to a second. My Lord Charny, with his pretty feet and little knees, and symmetrically placed calves, could not have dashed along at this gait.

He had gone four leagues and a half in an hour, as much as is required of a good horse at the trot. He looked behind: nothing on the road; he looked forward; only a couple of women.

Encouraged, he threw himself on the turf by the roadside and reposed. The sweet smell of the lucerne and marjoram did not make him forget Mistress Billet's mild-cured bacon and the pound-and-a-half of bread which Catherine sliced off for him at every meal. All France lacked bread half as good as that, so dear that it originated the oft repeated saying of Duchess Polignac that "the poor hungry people ought to eat cake."

Pitou said that Catherine was the most generous creature in creation and the Billet Farm the most luxurious palace.

He turned a dying eye like the Israelites crossing the Jordan towards the east, where the Billet fleshpots smoked.

Sighing, but starting off anew, he went at a job-pace for a couple of hours which brought him towards Dammartin.

Suddenly his expert ear, reliable as a Sioux Indian's, caught the ring of a horseshoe on the road.

He had hardly concluded that the animal was coming at the gallop than he saw it appear on a hilltop four hundred paces off.

Fear which had for a space abandoned Pitou, seized him afresh, and restored him the use of those long if unshapely legs with which he had made such marvellous good time a couple of hours previously.

Without reflecting, looking behind or trying to hide his fright, Ange cleared the ditch on one side and darted through the woods to Ermenonville. He did not know the place but he spied some tall trees and reasoned that, if they were on the skirts of a forest, he was saved.

This time he had to beat a horse; Pitou's feet had become wings.

He went all the faster as on glancing over his shoulder, he saw the horseman jump the hedge and ditch from the highway.

He had no more doubts that the rider was after him so that he not only doubled his pace but he dreaded to lose anything by looking behind.

But the animal, superior to the biped in running, gained on him, and Pitou heard the rider plainly calling him by name.

Nearly overtaken, still he struggled till the cut of a whip crossed his legs, and a well-known voice thundered:

"Blame you, you idiot – have you made a vow to founder Younker?"

The horse's name put an end to the fugitive's irresolution.

"Oh, I hear Master Billet," he groaned, as he rolled over on his back, exhaustion and the lash having thrown him on the grass.

Assured of the identity he sat up, while the farmer reined in Younker, streaming with white froth.

"Oh, dear master," said Pitou, "how kind of you to ride after me. I swear to you that I should come back to the farm late. I got to the end of the double-louis Miss Catherine gave me. But since you have overtaken me, here is the gold, for it is your'n, and let us get back."

"A thousand devils," swore the yeoman, "we have a lot to do at the farm, I don't think. Where are the sleuth-hounds?"

"Sleuth hounds?" repeated Pitou, not understanding the nickname for what we call detective police officer's, though it had already entered into the language.

"Those sneaks in black," continued Billet, "if you can understand that better."

"Oh, you bet that I did not amuse myself by waiting till they came up."

"Bravo, dropped them, eh?"

"Flatter myself I did."

"Then, if certain what did you keep on running for?"

"I thought you were their captain who had taken to horse to have me."

"Come, come you are not such a dunderhead as I thought. As the road is clear, make an effort, get up behind me on the crupper and let us hurry into Dammartin. I will change horses at Neighbor Lefranc's, for Younker is done up, so we can push ahead for Paris."

"But I do not see what use I shall be there," remonstrated Pitou.

"But I think the other way. You can serve me there, for you have big fists, and I hold it for a fact that they are going to fall to hitting out at one another in the city."

Far from charmed by this prospect, the lad was wavering when Billet caught hold of him as of a sack of flour and slung him across the horse.

Regaining the road, by dint of spur, cudgel and heel, Younker was sent along at so fair a gait that they were in Dammartin in less than half an hour.

Billet rode in by a lane, not the main road, to Father Lefranc's farm, where he left his man and horse in the yard, to run direct into the kitchen where the master, going out, was buttoning up his leggings.

"Quick, quick, old mate, your best horse," he hailed him before he recovered from his astonishment.

"That's Maggie – the good beast is just harnessed. I was going out on her."

"She'll do; only I give fair warning that I shall break her down most likely."

"What for, I should like to know?"

"Because I must be in Paris this evening," said the farmer, making the masonic sign of "Pressing danger."

"Ride her to death, then," answered Lefranc; "but give me Younker."

"A bargain."

"Have a glass of wine?"

"Two. I have an honest lad with me who is tired with traveling this far. Give him some refreshment."

In ten minutes the gossips had put away a bottle and Pitou had swallowed a two-pound loaf and a hunk of bacon, nearly all fat. While he was eating, the stableman, a good sort of a soul, rubbed him down with a wisp of hay as if he were a favorite horse. Thus feasted and massaged, Pitou swallowed a glass of wine from a third bottle, emptied with so much velocity that the lad was lucky to get his share.

Billet got upon Maggie, and Pitou "forked" himself on, though stiff as a pair of compasses.

The good beast, tickled by the spur, trotted bravely under the double load towards town, without ceasing to flick off the flies with her robust tail, the strong hairs lashing the dust off Pitou's back and stinging his thin calves, from which his stockings had run down.

CHAPTER VII.
THE FIRST BLOOD

Night was thickening as the two travelers reached La Villette, a suburb of Paris. A great flame rose before them. Billet pointed out the ruddy glare.

"They are troops camping out," said Pitou; "Can't you see that, and they have lighted campfires. Here are some, so that there may naturally be more over yonder."

Indeed, on attentively looking on the right, Father Billet saw black detachments marching noiselessly in the shadow of St. Denis Plain, horse and foot. Their weapons glimmered in the pale starry light.

Accustomed to see in the dark from his night roaming in the woods, Pitou pointed out to his master cannon mired to the hubs in the swampy fields.

"Ho, ho," muttered Billet: "something new is going on here. Look at the sparks yonder. Make haste, my lad."

"Yes, it is a house a-fire. See the sparks fly," added the younger man.

Maggie stopped; the rider jumped off upon the pavement and going up to a group of soldiers in blue and yellow uniforms, bivouacking under the roadside trees, asked:

"Comrades, can you tell me what is the matter in Paris?"

The soldiers merely replied with some German oaths.

"What the deuce do they say?" queried Billet of his brother peasant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.