ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

BRIGADIER FREDERICK, THE DEAN'S WATCH

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ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

Fashions change in literature, but certain things abide. There may be disputes from generation to generation, even from decade to decade, as to what is æsthetic, or what is beautiful; there is less as to what is human. The work of the French writers, whose duality is quite lost in the long-time association of their names for the purposes of story making, seems at the least to make this claim to outlast its authors: it is delightfully saturated with humanity.

And this humanity is of the sort that, since it can be understood of all men, is therefore very widely acceptable. It is well to emphasize the point in an attempt to explain the popularity of Erckmann-Chatrian, immediate or remote. There are other reasons, to be sure: but this one is at the door, knocking to be heard. But to speak of the essential humanity of these books is not to deny or ignore their art; that they have in abundance-quite as truly indeed as the work of your most insistent advocate of "art for art"; but it is art for life's sake. In the best sense, the verisimilitude of the Erckmann-Chatrian stories is admirable, impressive. They are, as a rule, exquisitely in key. They produce a cumulative effect by steadily, unobtrusively clinging to a single view-point, that of the speaker who is an eye-witness, and the result is a double charm-that of reality and that of illusion. One sees life, not through the eyes of the authors, but through the eyes of the characters; hence the frequent setting-forth of principles is relieved from didacticism by the careful way in which the writers refrain from expressing their own opinion. So artistic are they that they even indulge in the delicate ruse of opposing the views which are really their own, thereby producing a still stronger effect of fair-mindedness and detachment.

Yet, as the world knows, in the most justly famed of their books, the so-called National Novels, it is their purpose to preach against war; they are early advocates of the principles of the Peace Congress at The Hague, forerunners, in their own fashion, of the ideas expressed in art and literature by later men like Tolstoy and Verestchagin.

The local colour-one still uses the phrase as convenient-is remarkable for its sympathetic fidelity; the style well-nigh a model of prose whose purpose it is to depict in homely yet picturesque terms the passage of great events, seen by humble, it may be Philistine, folk, and hence not seen *couleur de rose*. When a heartfelt sympathy for average human-kind rises to the surface of the author's feeling, some candid, cordial phrase is ever found to express it.

The work of Erckmann-Chatrian, voluminous as it is, can be easily classified: it mainly consists of the idyl and the picture of war; *L'lllustre Docteur Mathéus*, their first success, happily illustrates the former *genre*; any one of the half dozen tales making up the National Novel series may be taken to represent the latter. Both veins turned out to be gold mines, so rich were they in the free-milling ore of popular favour. Such stories as *L'Ami Fritz* and *The Brigadier Frederick* are types of the two kinds of fiction which panned out most richly also for the world. In the idyl dealing with homely provincial life-the life of their home province-these authors are, of a truth, masters. The story is naught, the way of telling it, all that breeds atmosphere and innuendo, is everything. In *L'Ami Fritz* the plot may be told in a sentence: 'tis the wooing and winning of a country lass, daughter of a farmer, by a well-to-do jovial bachelor of middle age in a small town; *voilà tout*; yet the tale makes not only delicious reading, it leaves a permanent impression of pleasure-one is fain to re-read it. It is rich in human nature, in a comfortable sense of the good things of the earth; food and drink, soft beds, one's seat at the tavern, spring sunlight, and the sound of a fiddle playing dance tunes at the fair: and, on a higher plane, of the genial joys of comradeship and the stanch belief in one's native land. When the

subtler passion of love comes in upon this simple pastoral scene, the gradual discovery of Friend Fritz that the sentiment he has always ridiculed has him at last in its clutch, is portrayed with a sly unction, a kindly humour overlying an unmistakable tenderness of heart, which give the tale great charm. Sweetness and soundness are fundamentals of such literature.

This tale is a type of them all, though deservedly the best liked. Love of nature and of human nature, a knowledge of the little, significant things that make up life, an exquisite realism along with a sort of temperamental optimism which assumes good of men and women – these blend in the provincial stories in such a way that one's sense of art is charmed while in no less degree one's sense of life is quickened and comforted. Erckmann-Chatrian introduced to French readers the genuine Alsatian, not the puppet of the vaudeville stage. Their books are, among other things, historical documents. From their sketches and tales better than in any other way one can gain an understanding of the present German provinces of Alsace and Lorraine during a period stretching from the Revolution to and after the Franco-Prussian war. The Alsatian in their hands is seen distinctly as one of the most interesting of Gallic provincial types.

The attitude of Dr. Mathéus, that charming physician savant, who is in love with science, with the great world of scholarship and literary fame, and so is fain to leave his simple countryside in quest of renown – in his final return to his home as, after all, the best spot on earth, typifies the teaching of these authors in all their works. The tale is a sort of allegory, veiling a sermon on the value of the "fireside clime" of home hearths and hearts. Nor must it be forgotten that these writers cultivated the short story or tale with vigour and success; *The Dean's Watch*, printed in the present volume, is an excellent example of the *genre*. Erckmann-Chatrian, especially in the earlier years of their conjoined labour, wrote numerous pieces of short fiction which abounded in gruesome adventure and situations more or less startling – witness the Heidelberg murder story. They possessed a considerable talent for the detective fiction brought to a fine art by Poe and worthily carried on in our day by Conan Doyle. Yet even here the work has a higher value – perhaps the highest – for the thoughtful reader in that it affords a faithful transcript of German life in time gone by; the authors, although so circumscribed in space, are in some sort historians of piquant social conditions. It is commonly said that your true short-story writer is not a novelist, nor the other way about. But *The Dean's Watch*, and a dozen other tales that could be named, are little master-pieces not to be omitted in any just, comprehensive survey of these fecund authors.

The National Novels differ from these simpler tales in more than theme and the fuller body and greater variety they possess; the authors' aim in the series sets the books apart from the other stories. This group is made up of tales that fairly may be called "purpose fiction," in the present cant. Erckmann-Chatrian agree to hate war and to justify their hate by writing a succession of books portraying its horrors, always from the disadvantage-point of actual humble participants and onlookers, so that the plea shall appear to be at once fairly made and yet be overwhelming in effect. Of the result, surely it may be said of the National Novels that if they are not magnificent, they are war – war stript of its glory, reduced to the one grim denominator of human misery.

The successive national struggles of France towards that peaceful Republicanism which has now endured long enough to induce the outside world into a belief that this volatile, fiery people will never revert to any form of monarchy, are sketched so graphically as to give a clear comprehension of their history. Nowhere is the artistry of the authors better exhibited than in the skill with which, by placing their own position in the mouths of others and by means of their remarkable power in characterization, they rob special pleading of that didacticism which is so deadly an enemy of good fiction. To secure an effect of verisimilitude no method of story-telling is perhaps so useful as that in which one of the characters speaks in proper person. What the author loses in omniscience, he more than gains in the impression of reality. This method is admirable in the hands of Erckmann-Chatrian, who consistently use it in their fiction. Do the writers of any other nation, one is tempted to query, offer such frequent examples of good taste in this avoidance of the too didactic as do the

French? In some English hands so strenuous an attempt would have seemed heavily intolerable. Here one forgets all but the naturalness of word and action in the characters; and the lesson sinks the deeper into the mind.

In justice both to our authors and the present-day temper, it may be declared that the Twentieth Century is likely to be more sympathetic to their particular thesis than was their own time. There is a popular treatment of war which bedecks it in a sort of stage tinsel, to the hiding of its gaunt figure and cadaverous face. Some of Scott's romances are of this order. Zola, with his epic sweep in *Le Débâcle*, does not disguise the horrors of the Franco-Prussian struggle. Yet epic it is, and in a sense, romantic; handled by a poet whose imagination is aroused by the magnitude and movement of his theme. Erckmann-Chatrian set themselves squarely against this conception; they reduce the splendid trappings and *elan* of battle to its true hideousness.

In order to depict the inevitable, wretched results of the killing of men for purposes of political ambition, or national aggrandizement, Erckmann-Chatrian, as in their provincial idyls, cling steadily to the position of the average man, who cannot for the life of him see the use of leaving all that is pleasant and dear, of fighting, marching, sickening, and dying for the sake of a cause he does not understand or believe in, as the slave of men whom he perhaps despises. Joseph Berta, the lame conscript, the shrewd, kindly Jew Mathieu, the common-sense miller Christian Weber, protagonists in three well-known stories, each distinct from the other, are all alike in their preference for peace over war, for the joy of home and the quiet prosecution of their respective affairs, instead of the dubious pleasures of siege and campaign.

There is a superbly *bourgeois* flavour to it all. Yet one feels its force, its sound humanity. The republicanism of these writers is of the broadest kind. They hate Bonaparte or Bourbon, because in their belief either house stands for tyranny and corruption; while Napoleon is their special detestation, the later Empire is vigorously assailed because it, too, is opposed to the interests of the people. Napoleon III., whom in high satiric scorn they pillory as "The Honest Man," comes in for savage condemnation, since he again brings woe upon the working folk, in pursuit of his own selfish ends. And underneath all, like a ground-swell can be felt a deep and genuine, if homely, patriotism.

Human nature, as it is witnessed in the pages of Erckmann-Chatrian, is not hard to decipher. It lacks the subtlety of the modern psychologue, miscalled a novelist. Humanity for them is made up of two great contrasted elements – the people and the enemies of the people; the latter made up of kings, politicians, government leaders, and the general world of bureaucracy, who fleece the former, "that vast flock which they were always accustomed to shear, and which they call the people." But the people themselves, how veritable and charming they are! Not a whit are they idealized; the fictional folk of these writers are always recognisable; they give us that pleasure of recognition which Mr. James points out as one of the principal virtues of modern novel-making. The title of one of the well-known books, *The History of a Man of the People*, might almost stand as a description of their complete works. There is no sentimentalizing of average humanity; none of the Auerbach or George Sand prettification of country life. Erckmann-Chatrian are as truthful as a later realist like Thomas Hardy. The family life in *The Brigadier Frederick* is almost lyrically set forth, until it seems, mayhap, too good for human nature's daily food; but similar scenes in other stories have a Dutch-like fidelity in their transcripts of the coarser, less lovely human traits; recall the wife and daughter of Weber, for example, or the well-nigh craven fear of Joseph Berta in *The Plebiscite*, who seems half a poltroon until he is seasoned in a Napoleonic campaign; the psychologic treatment here suggesting Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. The blend of grim realism and heroic patriotism in the figure of the old sergeant in *The Plebiscite* is a fine illustration of that truth to both the shell and kernel of life which Erckmann-Chatrian maintain throughout their work.

On the whole, then, it is a comfortable, enheartening conception of Man they present. Poor theologians they would make; men are by nature good and kind; only warped by cruel misuse and bad masters, as in war. "Ah, it is a great joy to love and to be loved, the only one joy of life," exclaims

the Jew Mathieu in *The Blockade*. This simple yet sufficient creed pervades their thought. Again and again is it declared that whatever the apparent evil, so that the faithful-hearted and devout of the world, like Father Frederick, lose courage for the moment, the fault is with men upon earth, not in heaven. High over all, God reigns. A spirit of kindliness, quiet, unheroic, but deep and tender, enswathes the more serious part of these novels like an atmosphere; and if the mood shifts to indignation, it is the righteous indignation of the good in the face of that which is wrong and evil. And these better human attributes are most commonly found in the provinces; the city, as a rule, spells sin. The touch of mother earth brings purity and strength. "La mauvaise race qui trompe," declares the Brigadier Frederick, "n'existe pas au pays; elle est toujours venue d'ailleurs." One smiles at this, but it offends not nor seems absurd. Its very prejudice is lovable.

Perhaps none of the stories make so moving an appeal against war as *The Brigadier Frederick*. Its sadness is the most heartfelt, its realism the most truthful, and hence effective. Nor in any other book of the War Series does the French character shine more clearly in its typical virtues. Family love and faith, *camaraderie*, humble devoutness in religion, and earnest patriotism are constantly made manifest in this fine tale. Instead of conducting their hero through the spectacular scenes of military campaigns, the authors depict only the stay-at-home aspects of war, which because of their lack of strut and epic colour are, as a rule, overlooked, and which yet illustrate far better than the most Zolaesque details the wretched *milieu* and after effects of a great national struggle. Frederick, the old guard of the Alsatian forest domains, loses in turn his post, his son-in-law, wife, and daughter, and at last his native land; and through all his misery remains proudly a Frenchman, who refuses to declare allegiance to the German invaders; and, in being true to his convictions, furnishes a noble example of a man who, by the moral test, rises superior to any fate, his head being

"bloody but unbowed."

Again, sad as the story is, it differs from too much of the tragedy of current literature; it is sad for the sake of a purpose, not for sadness' sake. Alleviation is offered the reader from the beginning, in that he knows that Frederick himself has survived all his woes, since he is telling his tale to a friend in after years. These qualities make the work wholesome and beautiful, sound both for art and life.

Erckmann-Chatrian draw strength from mother-soil. Their stories are laid in Alsace-Lorraine, or at least it is that debatable land whence the characters go only to return for the peaceful denouement, which these authors, in the good old-fashioned style, like to offer their readers. The popularity of such writers brings us back, happily, to that untechnical valuation of literature which insists, first of all, in regarding it as an exposition of human experience. Their books bear translation especially well because there is something in them besides incommunicable flavours of style, though style is not wanting; namely, vital folk, vivid scenes, significant happenings. Theirs is the misleading simplicity of method and manner which hides technique of a rare and admirable kind. Allowing for all exaggeration for altered ideals in fiction, and for the waning of interest in the historical circumstances which they portray, there remain such elements of permanent appeal as to give their books far more than a transient worth.

For more than forty years, Erckmann-Chatrian wrote as one man; their collaboration was, in effect, a chemical union. No example in literature better illustrates the possibility of the merging of individualities for the purposes of artistic unity. The double work of the English Besant and Rice is by no means so important nor do they stand and fall together in the same sense; much of Besant's typical fiction being produced after his partner's death. In the case of the most famed collaboration of older days, that of the dramatists Beaumont and Fletcher, the union was more intimate. But the early death of Beaumont, the consideration that he wrote less than half the plays conventionally attributed to their joint authorship, and the additional consideration that some of the best and most enjoyable dramas associated with these great names —*The Loyal Subject*, to mention but one – are unquestionably of Fletcher's sole composition, make the Beaumont-Fletcher alliance not so perfect an example of

literary collaboration as is offered by Erckmann-Chatrian. When Chatrian died in 1890, it was as if, for literary purposes, both died. Their work had a unity testifying to a remarkable if not unique congeniality in temperament, view and aim, as well as to a fraternal unity which – alas! the irony of all human friendships – was dispelled when their quarrel, just before the death of Chatrian, put an end to an association so fruitful and famous.

From the very nature of fiction in contrast with drama, it would seem as if collaboration in stage literature were more likely to yield happy results than in the case of the novel. Here, however, is an example setting aside *a priori*reasoning; seemingly "helpless each without the other," the final breach in their personal relations would seem to have written Finis to their literary endeavour. Yet Erckmann survived for nearly a decade and wrote military stories, which in tone and temper carried on the traditions of the two men. But we may easily detect in this last effort the penalty of their literary severance: the loss of the craftsmanship of Chatrian was a loss indeed. Nor is this subjective guess-work of the critic; Erckmann himself described nearly twenty years ago the respective parts played by the two in their literary work. He declared that after a story had been blocked out and thoroughly talked over between them, he did all the actual composition. Then was it Chatrian's business to point out faults, to suggest, here a change in perspective, there less emphasis upon a subsidiary character, or here again, a better handling of proportion – in short, to do all the retouching that looks to artistry. And Erckmann goes on to testify in good set terms how necessary his collaborator was to the final perfected form of the story; how much it must have suffered without his sense of technique. It would appear from this that the senior member of the firm did what is commonly called the creative work of composition, the junior filling the role of critic. From France one hears that Erckmann was very German in taste and sympathy (*mirabile dictu!* in view of so much of what he wrote); Chatrian, French to the core, a man who insisted on residing on the French side of the national line, who reared his sons to be French soldiers; whereas Erckmann in later years hobnobbed with the Germans, members of his family, in fact, inter-marrying with his ancient enemies.

Indeed, this last act of their personal history has its disillusionment. But after all, men shall be judged in their works. Whatever their private quarrellings, their respective parts in literary labour, their attributes or national leanings, the world, justly caring most in the long run for the fiction they wrote, will continue to think of them as provincial patriots, lovers of their country, and Frenchmen of the French, not only in the tongue they used, but in those deep-lying characteristics and qualities which make their production worthily Gallic in the nobler implication of the word.

RICHARD BURTON.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The celebrated friends who collaborated for fifty years under the title of ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN *were natives of the department of the Meurthe, in Alsace-Lorraine*. ÉMILE ERCKMANN *was born at Phalsbourg (now Pfalzburg), on the 20th of May, 1822. His father was a bookseller; his mother he lost early. He was educated at the grammar school of Phalsbourg, and was a boarder there, growing up an intractable and idle boy. At the age of twenty Erckmann went up to Paris to study law, but he was inattentive to his work, and positively took fifteen years to pass the necessary examinations; having done so, he made no further rise of his profession. When he was twenty-five he suffered from a serious illness, and during his convalescence, in Alsace, he turned his attention to literature. At this moment there had arrived in Phalsbourg; as an usher in the grammar school, a young Alsatian*, ALEXANDRE CHATRIAN, *of Italian descent, who was born at Soldatenthal, near Abreschwiller, on the 18th of December, 1826, and who was destined for the trade of glass-worker. He had been sent in 1844, as an apprentice, to the glass-works in Belgium, but had, in opposition to the wish of his parents, determined to return and to be a schoolmaster in France.*

Erckmann and Chatrian now met, and instantly felt irresistibly drawn to one another. From this time until near the end of their careers their names were melted indissolubly into one. In 1848 a local newspaper, "Le Démocrate du Rhin," opened its columns to their contributions, and they began to publish novels. Their first great success was "L'Illustre Docteur Mathéus" in 1859, which appeared originally in the "Revue Nouvelle," and which exactly gauged the taste of the general public. This was followed by "Contes Fantastiques" and "Contes de la Montague," in 1860; by "Maître Daniel Rock," in 1861; by "Contes des Bords du Rhin" and "Le Fou Yégof" in 1862; "Le Joueur de Clarinette" in 1863; and in 1864, which was perhaps the culminating year of the talent of Erckmann-Chatrian, by "Madame Thérèse," "L'Ami Fritz" and "L'Histoire d'un Conscrit de 1813." These, and innumerable stories which followed them, dealt almost entirely with scenes of country life in Alsace and the neighbouring German Palatinate. The authors adopted a strong Chauvinist bias, and at the time of the Franco-German War their sympathies were violently enlisted on the side of France.

In 1872 Erckmann-Chatrian published a political novel which enjoyed an immense success, "Histoire du Plébiscite"; in 1873, "Les Deux Frères", and they concluded in many volumes their long romance "Histoire d'un Paysan." Two of the latest of their really striking romances were "Les Vieux de la Vielle," 1882, and "Les Rantzau," 1884. During this period, however, their great vogue was the theatre, where in 1869 they produced "Le Juif Polonais," and in 1877 "L'Ami Fritz," two of the most successful romantic plays of the nineteenth century, destined to be popular in all parts of the world. After the war of 1870-'71 Erckmann lived at Phalsbourg; which was presently annexed to German Lothringen, and he became a German citizen; Chatrian continued to reside in Paris, and remained a Frenchman. For a long time the friends continued to collaborate on the old terms of intimacy, though at a distance from one another, but a quarrel finally separated them, on a vulgar matter of interest. Erckmann claimed, and Chatrian refused, author's rights on those plays which bore the name of both writers, although Chatrian had composed them unaided. The rupture became complete in 1889, when the old friends parted as bitter enemies. Chatrian died a year later, on the 4th of September, 1890, from a stroke of apoplexy, at Villemomble, near Paris. Erckmann left Phalsbourg, and settled at Lunéville, where he died on the 14th of March, 1899. The temperament of Erckmann was phlegmatic and melancholy; that of Chatrian impetuous and fiery. They were strongly opposed to the theories of the realists, which assailed them in their advancing age, and they stated their own principles of literary composition in "Quelques mots sur l'esprit humain," 1880, and its continuation "L'Art et les Grands Idéalistes," 1885. For a long time their popularity was unequalled by that of any other French novelist, largely because their lively writings were pre-eminently suited to family reading. But they never achieved an equal prominence in purely literary estimation.

E.G.

BRIGADIER FREDERICK

I

When I was brigadier forester at Steinbach, said Father Frederick to me, and when I was the inspector of the most beautiful forest district in all the department of Saverne, I had a pretty cottage, shaded by trees, the garden and orchard behind filled with apple trees, plum trees, and pear trees, covered with fruit in the autumn; with that four acres of meadow land along the bank of the river; when the grandmother, Anne, in spite of her eighty years, still spun behind the stove, and was able to help about the house; when my wife and daughter kept house and superintended the stables and the cultivation of our land, and when weeks, months, and years passed in their tranquility like a single day. If at that time any one had said to me, "See here, Brigadier Frederick, look at this great valley of Alsace, that extends to the banks of the Rhine; its hundreds of villages, surrounded by harvests of all kinds: tobacco, hops, madder, hemp, flax, wheat, barley and oats, over which rushes the wind as over the sea; those high factory chimneys, vomiting clouds of smoke into the air; those wind-mills and sawmills; those hills, covered with vines; those great forests of beech and fir trees, the best in France for ship-building; those old castles, in ruins for centuries past, on the summits of the mountains; those fortresses of Neuf-Brisach, Schlestadt, Phalsbourg, Bitche, that defend the passes of the Vosges. Look, brigadier, as far as a man's eye can reach from the line of Wissembourg to Belfort. Well, in a few years all that will belong to the Prussians; they will be the masters of all; they will have garrisons everywhere; they will levy taxes; they will send preceptors, censors, foresters, and schoolmasters into all the villages, and the inhabitants will bend their backs; they will go through the military drill in the German ranks, commanded by the feldwebel[1] of the Emperor William." If any one had told me that, I would have thought the man was mad, and, even in my indignation, I should have been very likely to have given him a backhander across the face.

He would only have told the truth, however, and he would not even have said enough, for we have seen many other things; and the most terrible thing of all for me, who had never quitted the mountain, is to see myself, at my old age, in this garret, from which I can see only the tiles and chimney-pots; alone, abandoned by Heaven and earth, and thinking day and night of that frightful story.

Yes, George, the most terrible thing is to think! Foxes and wolves that are wounded lick themselves and get well. Kids and hares that are hurt either die at once, or else hide in a thicket and end by recovering. When a dog's puppies are taken away, the poor beast pines for a few days; then she forgets, and all is forgotten. But we men cannot forget, and as time goes on we realize our misery more and more, and we see many sad things that we had not felt at first. Injustice, bad faith, selfishness, all grow up before our eyes like thorns and briers.

However, since you desire to know how I happened to get into this hovel in the heart of La Villette, and the way in which I have passed my life up to the present time, I will not refuse to answer you. You can question many other people beside myself; persons of different occupations – workmen, peasants emigrated from down yonder; all the tumble-down houses of La Villette and La Chapelle are filled with them. I have heard that more than two hundred thousand have left. It is possible. When I quitted the country the roads were already overcrowded.

But you know all about these things as well as I do; so I will tell about what concerns me alone, beginning at the beginning. That will be the simplest way.

---

[1] Sergeant.

When your grandfather, M. Münsch, the President of the Tribunal, obtained promotion, in 1865, and left for Brittany, I was very glad of it, in one way, for he deserved to be promoted; I have never seen a better or more learned man. Saverne was not the place for him. But, on the other hand, I was very sorry for it. My father, the former forester of Dôsenheim, had never spoken to me of President Münsch but with the greatest respect, repeating to me, over and over again, that he was our benefactor, that he had always liked our family. I myself owed to him my good post at Steinbach, and it was also on his recommendation that I got my wife, Catherine Burat, the only daughter of the former brigadier, Martin Burat.

After that, you can readily believe that, in going to make my report at Saverne, it was always with emotion that I gazed upon that good house, where, for twenty years, I had been so kindly received, and I regretted that noble man; it made my heart very sad. And, naturally, we missed very much, no longer having you to spend the vacations with us. We were so used to having you, that, long in advance, we would say: "The month of September is coming round; little George will soon be here."

My wife arranged the bed upstairs; she put lavender in the well-bleached sheets, and she washed the floor and window-panes. I prepared snares for the thrushes and bait of all kinds for the trout; I repaired the tomtits' hut under the rocks; I tried the whistles for the bird-calls, and made new ones with lead and geese bones; I arranged everything in order in our boxes – the hooks, the lines, the flies, made of cock feathers; laughing beforehand at the pleasure of seeing you rummage among them, and of hearing you say: "See here, Father Frederick, you must wake me up to-morrow morning at two o'clock, without fail; we will start long before day!"

I knew very well that you would sleep like a top till I should come to shake you and to scold you for your laziness; but at night, before going to bed, you always wanted to be up at two o'clock, or even at midnight; that amused me greatly.

And then I saw you in the hut, keeping so still while I whistled on the bird-call that you scarcely dared to breathe; I heard you trembling on the moss when the jackdaws and thrushes arrived, wheeling under the trees to see; I heard you whisper, softly: "There they are, there they are!"

You were almost beside yourself when there came a great cloud of tomtits, which usually happened just at daybreak.

Yes, George, all these things rejoiced my heart, and I looked forward to the vacations with as much impatience perhaps as you did. Our little Marie-Rose also rejoiced in the thought of soon seeing you again; she hastened to plait new snares and to repair the meshes of the nets which had got broken the year before. But then all was over; you were never to return, and we knew it well.

Two or three times that poor idiot Calas, who looked after our cows in the field, seeing afar off on the other slope of the valley some persons who were on their way to Dôsenheim, came running in, crying, with his mouth open as far as his ears, "Here he is, here he is! It is he; I recognise him; he has his bundle under his arm!"

And Ragot barked at the heels of that idiot. I should have liked to have knocked them both over, for we had learned of your arrival at Rennes, and the President himself had written that you regretted Steinbach every day. I was in a bad enough humour, without listening to such cries.

Often, too, my wife and Marie-Rose, while arranging the fruit on the garret floor, would say: "What fine melting pears, what good gray rennets! Ah! if George returned, he would roll them round from morning till night. He would do nothing but run up and down stairs." And then they would smile, with tears in their eyes.

And how often I myself, returning from the bird-catching, and throwing on the table my bunches of tomtits, have I not cried: "Look! there are ten or twelve dozen of them. What is the good of them now the boy is no longer here? Might as well give them to the cat; for my part, I despise them."

That was true, George; I never had a taste for tomtits, or even for thrushes. I always liked better a good quarter of beef, with now and then only a little bit of game, by way of change.

Well, it is thus that the time passed just after your departure. That lasted for some months, and finally our ideas took another course, and that the more because, in the month of January, 1867, a great misfortune happened to us.

II

In the depth of the winter, while all the roads and the mountain paths were covered with snow, and we heard every night the branches of the beech trees breaking like glass under their load of ice, to the right and left of the house, one evening my wife, who, since the commencement of the season, had gone to and fro looking very pale and without speaking, said to me, towards six o'clock, after having lighted the fire in the fireplace, "Frederick, I am going to bed. I do not feel well. I am cold."

She had never said anything like that before. She was a woman who never complained and who, during her youth, had looked after her house up to the very day before her confinements. I suspected nothing, and I replied to her:

"Catherine, do not put yourself out. You work too hard. Go and rest. Marie-Rose will do the cooking."

I thought "once in twenty years is not too much; she may well rest herself a little."

Marie-Rose heated a jug of water to put under her feet, and we took our supper of potatoes and clotted milk as tranquilly as usual. We were not at all uneasy, and about nine o'clock, having smoked my pipe near the stove, I was about to go to bed, when, on coming near the bed, I saw my wife, white as a sheet, and with her eyes wide open. I said to her,

"Helloa, Catherine!"

But she did not stir. I repeated "Catherine," and shook her by the arm. She was already cold. The courageous woman had not lain down till the last moment, so to speak; she had lost much blood without complaining. I was a widower. My poor Marie-Rose no longer had a mother.

That crushed me terribly. I thought I should never recover from the blow.

The old grandmother, who for some time had scarcely ever stirred from her arm-chair, and who seemed always in a dream, awoke. Marie-Rose uttered cries and sobs which could be heard out of doors, and even Calas, the poor idiot, stammered:

"Oh, if I had only died instead of her!"

And as we were far away in the woods, I was forced to transport my poor wife to bury her, to the church at Dôsenheim, through the great snows. We went in a line, with the coffin before us in the cart. Marie-Rose wept so much that I was forced to support her at every step. Fortunately the grandmother did not come; she sat at home in her arm-chair, reciting the prayers for the dead. We did not return that evening till it was dark night. And now the mother was yonder under the snow, with the old Burat family, who are all in the cemetery of Dôsenheim behind the church; she was there, and I thought:

"What will become of the house? Frederick, you will never marry again; you have had a good wife and who knows if the second would not be the worst and the most extravagant in the country. You will never take another. You will live like that, all alone. But what will you do? Who will take care of everything? Who will look after your interest day and night? The grandmother is too old and the girl is still a mere child."

I was miserable, thinking that everything would go to ruin and that my savings of so many years would be wasted from day to day.

But my little Marie-Rose was a real treasure, a girl full of courage and good sense, and no sooner was my wife dead than she put herself at the head of our affairs, looking after the fields, the cattle, and the household, and ruling Calas like her mother. The poor fellow obeyed her; he understood in his simplicity that she was now the mistress and that she had the right to speak for everybody.

And so things go on earth. When we have had such trials we think that nothing worse can happen to us, but all that was merely the beginning, and when I think of it, it seems to me that our greatest happiness would have been, all to have died together upon the same day.

III

Thus all our joys, all our satisfactions passed away, one after the other. The old house to which I formerly returned, laughing from afar, only to see its little windows glittering in the sun and its little chimney smoking between the tops of the fir trees, was then sad and desolate. The winter appeared very long to us. The fire which sparkles so joyously on the hearth when the white flowers of the frost cover the panes, and when silence reigns in the valley, that fire which I had so often gazed at for half an hour at a time while smoking my pipe, thinking of a thousand things that passed through my head, now gave me none but melancholy thoughts. The fagots wept; poor Ragot sought in every corner, he wandered up stairs and down and smelt under all the doors; Calas wove baskets in silence, the oziers piled in front of him; grandmother Anne told her beads, and Marie-Rose, very pale and dressed in black, came and went through the house, watching over all and doing everything without noise like her poor mother. As for me, I said nothing; when death has entered anywhere all lamentations that one makes are pure loss. Yes, that winter was long!

And then the spring came as in other years; the firs and beech trees put forth their buds; the windows were opened to renew the air: the great pear tree before the door became covered with white flowers; all the birds of the air began once more to sing, to chase each other, and to build nests as if nothing had happened.

I also returned to my work, accompanying the chief guard, M. Rameau, in his circuits in order to direct the wood felling, overlooking the works from a distance, leaving early in the morning and returning late, at the last song of the thrushes.

My grief pursued me everywhere, and yet I had still the consolation of seeing Marie-Rose grow in strength and beauty in a truly marvellous way.

It is not, George, because I was her father that I tell you this, but you would have had to search for a long time from Saverne to Lutzelstein before finding as fresh-looking a young girl with as trim a figure, as honest an air, with such beautiful blue eyes and such magnificent fair hair. And how well she understood all kinds of work, whether in the house or out of doors! Ah, yes, I may well say it, she was a beautiful creature, gentle and yet strong.

Often coming in at night and seeing her at the head of the stairs, signing to me that she had waited supper a long time for me, then running down the stairs and holding out to me her fresh cheek, I have often thought:

"She is still handsomer than her mother was at the same age; she has the same good sense. Don't lament over your misfortunes, Frederick, for many people would envy your lot in having such a child, who gives you so much satisfaction."

One thing only made the tears come, that is when I thought of my wife, then I cried to myself:

"Ah! if Catherine could come back to see her, she would be very happy!"

About the same time other ideas entered my head; the epoch of my retirement was approaching, and as Marie-Rose had entered her seventeenth year, I thought of finding her a good and nice young fellow from among the foresters, in whose house I could tranquilly end my days, in the midst of my children and grandchildren, and who, taking my place, would respect me as I had respected my father-in-law Burat, when succeeding him twenty years before.

I thought of it; it was my principal idea, and I had even some one in view, a tall and handsome young man from Felsberg, who had left the horse guards three or four years before, and who had just been appointed forest guard at Tömenthal, near our house. His name was Jean Merlin, and he was already experienced in the duties of a forester, having passed his apprenticeship at Eyisheim, in Alsace.

The young fellow pleased me first because he had a good character, afterward because Marie-Rose regarded him with a favourable eye. I had remarked that she always blushed a little when she

saw him enter the house to make his report, and that he never failed to appear in full dress, carefully shaved, his little cap with its hunting horn badge, adorned with an oak leaf or a sprig of heather, which sets off a man; and that his voice, which was a little gruff, became very gentle in saying, "Good day, Mlle. Marie-Rose; I hope you are quite well? What beautiful weather we are having – the sun is shining finely," etc. He appeared embarrassed; and Marie-Rose also answered him timidly. It was very clear that they loved and admired each other, a natural thing when one is old enough to get married. It always has been and always will be so; it is a blessing of Providence.

Therefore I found no evil in it, on the contrary I thought: "When he asks her of me according to custom, we will see about it. I will say neither yes nor no at once; one must not have the air of throwing one's self at people's heads; but I will, and by yielding, for neither must one break young people's hearts."

Those were the ideas that I revolved in my head.

Besides which the young man was of good family; he had his uncle, Daniel Merlin, who was schoolmaster at Felsberg; his father had been sergeant in a regiment of infantry, and his mother, Margredel, though she lived with him in the forester's house at Tömenthal, possessed at Felsberg a cottage, a garden, and four or five acres of good land; one could not desire a match in every way more advantageous.

And seeing that everything seemed to go according to my wishes, almost every evening when I returned from my circuits through the woods, in the path which skirts the valley of Dôsenheim, at the moment when the sun is setting, when the silence spreads itself with the shadow of the forest over the great meadows of La Zinzelle – that silence of the solitude, scarcely broken by the murmur of the little river – almost every evening, walking thoughtfully along, I pictured to myself the peace that my children would have in this corner of the world, their pleasant home, the birth of little beings whom we would carry to Dôsenheim to have them baptized in the old church, and other similar things, which touched my heart and made me say:

"Lord God, it is all sure; these things will happen. And when you grow old, Frederick, very old, your back bent by age, like grandmother Anne, and your head quite white, you will pass away quietly, satisfied with years, and blessing the young brood. And long after you are gone, that brave Jean Merlin, with Marie-Rose, will keep you in remembrance."

In picturing all this to myself, I halted regularly on the path above the forester house of Jean Merlin, looking beneath at the little tiled roof, the garden surrounded with palisades, and the yard whence the mother of Jean drove her ducks and fowls into the poultry-yard towards night, for foxes were not wanting in that outskirt of the forest. I looked down from above, and I cried, raising my cap, "Hilloa! Margredel, good evening."

Then she would raise her eyes, and joyously reply to me, "Good evening, Mr. Brigadier. Are all well at your house?"

"Why, yes, Margredel, very well, Heaven be praised." Then I would come down through the brushwood, and we would shake hands.

She was a good woman, always gay and laughing because of her great confidence in God, which made her always look upon the bright side of things. Without ever having said anything to each other, we knew very well of what we were each thinking; we only needed to talk about the weather to understand all the rest.

And when, after having had a good gossip, I went away, Margredel would still call after me, in her rather cracked voice, for she was nearly sixty years old, "A pleasant walk to you, Brigadier. Don't forget Mlle. Marie-Rose and the grandmother."

"Don't be afraid. I'll forget nothing."

She would make a sign with her head to me that it was all right, and I would go off with lengthening steps.

It sometimes happened to me also, sometimes when my circuit was finished before five o'clock, to find Jean near the house, at the other side of the valley, in the path that skirted our orchard, and Marie-Rose in the garden picking vegetables. They were each on their own side, and were talking across the hedge without appearing to do so; they were telling things to each other.

That reminded me of the happy time when I was courting Catherine, and I came up very softly over the heather till I was within twenty steps behind them, and then I cried, "Ho! ho! Jean Merlin, is it like this that you perform your duties? I catch you saying fine words to the pretty girls."

Then he turned round, and I saw his embarrassed look.

"Excuse me, Brigadier," he said, "I came to see you on business, and I was conversing with Mlle. Marie-Rose while waiting for you."

"Oh, yes, that is all very well; we will see to that. I do not trust foxes myself."

And other jokes without end. You can understand, George, that happiness had returned to us.

I had as much confidence in Jean Merlin as in Marie-Rose and in myself. The evil race that deceives does not exist in our country; it has always come from elsewhere.

IV

Things went on like this throughout the whole year 1868. Jean Merlin took every possible occasion to present himself at the house, either on business connected with his office, or else to consult me on his family affairs. He had but one fear, that was of being refused. Sometimes, when we were walking together in the woods, I saw him musing, with drooping head; he seemed to wish to speak; he raised his voice suddenly, and then was silent.

For my part, I wished that he would be a little more courageous, but I could not open the subject; that would not have been proper for his superior; I awaited his formal proposal, thinking that he would end by writing to me, or by sending me one of his relatives to make a ceremonious declaration: his uncle Daniel, for instance, the schoolmaster of Felsberg, a respectable man, who was able to take charge of so delicate a commission.

It often happened to me also to reflect upon what concerned me particularly. I asked nothing better than to see my daughter happy, but I had to try to arrange all interests in accord as much as possible. When one thinks of nothing, everything appears simple and easy, and yet the best things have their evil side.

I had still nearly two years to serve before retiring, but after that, if my son-in-law was not named brigadier in my place, we would be forced to quit the old house, where I had passed so many years, with the beings who were dear to me – father-in-law Burat, my poor wife, grandmother Anne, everybody, in fact; and we would be obliged to abandon all that to go live in a land which I did not know, and among strange faces.

That idea made me wretched. I knew well that Marie-Rose and Jean Merlin would always respect me as their father; of that I was sure. But the habit of turning round in the same corner and of seeing the same things becomes a second nature, and that is why old hares and old foxes, even when they have received gunshot wounds in the neighbourhood of their lair or their hole, always return there; they need the sight of the brushwood and the tuft of grass, which recall to them their youth, their love, and even the annoyances and the sorrows which, in the long run, make up three-quarters of our existence, and to which we become as strongly attached as to memories of happiness.

Ah! I never should have believed that anything worse could happen to me than to retire with my children into a country of fir trees like ours, and into a little house like my own.

These things made me very uneasy, and, since the departure of President Münsch, I no longer knew of whom I could ask a bit of good advice, when at length all was settled in a very happy way, which touches my heart even now when I think of it.

V

You must know that, during the years 1867, 1868, and 1869, roads were being made in all directions, to facilitate the wood-cutting and to transport the wood to the railway and the canal. M. Laroche, Forest Inspector of the Canton of Lutzelstein, directed these great works. He was a man of fifty-five years of age, robust and serious, who thought of nothing but his business; hunting and fishing were not among his tastes; to be well noticed by him, there was no question of being a good shot or a skilful trapper; it was necessary to serve him well.

He often came himself to the place, explaining clearly the declivity to be followed, the trees which ought to be felled, etc.; unless one was idiotic, he could not but understand. Things went on this way briskly and well. Naturally, such a man would know all his workmen thoroughly, and when he was satisfied, he would address to you some of those kind words that make your heart light.

For my part, I think that he took an interest in me, for often, after hearing my report in his office at Lutzelstein, he would say to me, "That is very good, very good, Father Frederick!" and would even shake hands with me.

Towards the spring of 1869 the order arrived to repair the road which descends from Petite Pierre to the valley of Graufthal, in order to join the new highway from Saverne to Metting; the junction fell near the saw-mill, not far from the forester's house; I had to go, therefore, every working day with my brigade to survey the works.

The first part was almost finished, and they had commenced to blow up the rocks below, near the valley, to level the road, when, one morning, going to make my usual report at Lutzelstein, the inspector received me particularly well.

It was about ten o'clock, his breakfast hour, and he had just reached his house as I rang.

"Ah! it is you, Father Frederick," said he, gaily, as he opened his door; "fine weather this morning. All right down yonder?"

"Yes, sir, all is going well, according to your orders."

"Very good," said he. "Sit down, I have something to say to you. You will breakfast with me. My wife is with her parents in Champagne; you will keep me company."

Often, when I arrived at breakfast time, he would offer me a glass of wine, but the idea had never occurred to him to give me a place at his table.

"Sit down there," said he. "Here, Virginie, bring a plate for the brigadier. You can bring in breakfast."

Imagine my astonishment and my satisfaction. I did not know how to thank him; he did not seem to see my embarrassment. He commenced by taking off his tunic and putting on his coat, asking me: "You have a good appetite, Father Frederick?"

"Yes, sir, that never fails me."

"So much the better! Taste this beefsteak; Virginie is a good cook; you will tell me what you think of it. Here's to your health!"

"Here's to yours, sir."

I felt as if I were dreaming; I said to myself, "Is this really you, Frederick, who are breakfasting here in this handsome room, with your superior, and who are drinking this good wine?" And I felt embarrassed.

M. Laroche, on the contrary, grew more and more familiar, so that, finally, after three or four glasses, I discovered that the thing was quite natural. Because his wife was not at home, I thought that he was glad to have me to talk over the felling of the timber, the new clearings, and our road from Graufthal; so I grew bolder, and answered him laughing, and almost without embarrassment.

Things went on thus for about twenty minutes; Mlle. Virginie had brought in the biscuits, almonds, and Gruyère cheese, when, throwing himself back in his chair, and looking at me good-

humouredly, "It is very agreeable," said he, "to be as well as we are, at our age. Ha! ha! ha! we have not yet lost our teeth, Father Frederick!"

"No, indeed; they are well-rooted, sir." And I laughed, too.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I shall soon be fifty, sir."

"And I am fifty-five. Well, well, it is all the same; the time for retiring is approaching; one of these days they will slit our ears."

He was still laughing. As for me, when I thought of that, I was not so gay as before.

Then he passed me the cheese, saying: "What do you think of doing two years from now? For my part, my wife wants to take me into her country, Champagne. That is a great bore; I do not like the plains; but, you know, 'A wilful woman will have her way.' It is a proverb, and all proverbs have an astounding air of good sense."

"Yes, sir," I answered; "such proverbs as that are really annoying, for I could never leave the mountains; I am too used to them. If I had to go, I should not live two weeks. There would be nothing left to do but throw on me the last handful of earth."

"Without doubt," he said; "but when the young people come, the old people must give up their place."

In spite of the good wine, I had become quite silent, thinking of those unfortunate things, when he said to me: "In your place, Father Frederick, do you know what I would do? Since you love the mountains so, since it is, so to speak, your existence to live in the forest – well, I would look out for a son-in-law among the foresters; a good fellow, who would take my place and with whom I would live tranquilly till the end, in the midst of the green caps and the smell of the firs."

"Ah! that is so, sir; I think of it every day; but – "

"But what?" he said. "What hinders you? You have a pretty daughter, you are a sensible man; what embarrasses you? It is not for want of choice, I hope; in the inspector's guard, big Kern, Donadieu, Nicolas Trompette, would ask nothing better than to become your son-in-law. And that good Jean Merlin. He is what one might call a model forester – frank, active, intelligent, and who would answer your purpose admirably. His record is excellent; he stands first on the list for promotion, and, upon my word, Father Frederick, I think that, on your retreat, he has a good chance of succeeding you."

When I heard that, I got red up to my ears, and I could not help saying, "That is true! No one has anything to say against Jean Merlin; I have never seen a better or more honest fellow; but I cannot offer my daughter to people who please me; Merlin has never spoken to me of marriage with Marie-Rose, neither has his mother Margredel, nor his uncle Daniel; not any of the family. You can understand, sir, that I cannot make the advances; it would not be proper! Beside, everything ought to be done decently and in order; the proposal ought to be made regularly!"

He was going to answer, when Mlle. Virginia came in to pour out the coffee, so he took a box from the mantelpiece, saying, "Let us light our cigars, Father Frederick."

I saw that he was amused, and when the servant went out he cried, laughing, "Come, now, Father Frederick, do you really need some one to tell you that Marie-Rose and Jean Merlin love each other with all their hearts? And must Uncle Daniel come and declare it to you in a black hood and with buckled shoes?"

He laughed loudly, and as I sat in surprise:

"Well," said he, "here is the affair in two words: The other day Jean Merlin was so melancholy that I asked him if he was sick, and the poor fellow confessed to me, with tears in his eyes, what he called his misfortune. You are so serious and respectable-looking that none of the family dared to make the proposal, and the good people thought that I would have some influence. Must I put on my grand uniform, Father Frederick?"

He was so gay that, notwithstanding my trouble, I answered: "Oh, sir, now all is well!"

"Then you consent?"

"Do I consent? I have never wished for anything else. Yes, yes, I consent, and I thank you. You can say, M. Laroche, that to-day you have rendered Frederick the happiest of men."

I had already risen and had put my bag upon my shoulder, when the chief guard, Rameau, entered, on business connected with the service.

"You are going, Frederick?" asked the inspector. "Are you not going to empty your cup?"

"Ah! M. Laroche," I said, "I am too happy to keep quiet. The children are waiting for me, I am sure; I must go carry them the good news."

"Go, then, go," he said, rising and accompanying me to the door; "you are right not to delay the young people's happiness."

He shook hands with me, and I left, after saluting M. Rameau.

VI

I went away so happy that I could not see clearly. It was only at the end of the street, in going down at the left again, towards the valley, that I awoke from this great confusion of joyous ideas.

I had perhaps taken a little drop too much; I must confess, George, that the good wine had dazzled my eyes a little; but my legs were solid, nevertheless, and I went as if I were just twenty years old, laughing and saying to myself:

"Frederick, now everything is according to rule, no one will have anything to say; it is the inspector himself who has made the proposal and that is a thousand times better than if it had been Uncle Daniel. Ha! ha! ha! what luck! Won't they be happy when they learn that I consent; that all is arranged and that there is nothing left to do but to sing the *Gloria in Excelsis*! Ha! ha! ha! And you can laugh, too, for all has gone as you wished it. You will stay in this country to the end of your existence; you will see the woods from your window, and you will smell the sweet odours of the resin and the moss till you are eighty years of age. That is what you needed, to say nothing of the rest; of the children, the grand-children, etc."

I wanted to dance as I descended the Fromuhle road.

It was then about six o'clock, and night was approaching; with the coolness of the evening the frogs were beginning their music in the midst of the reeds, and the high grasses of the pool, and the old fir trees on the other side of the shore showed blue against the darker sky. I stopped from time to time to look at them and I thought:

"You are fine trees, straight and full of good sap, and so you will remain there for a long time to come. The sun will delight your evergreen tops till you are marked for the axe of the woodcutter. Then that will be the end, but the little firs will have grown up in your shadow and the place will never be vacant."

And while thinking of that, I recommenced my march, quite touched, and I cried:

"Yes, Frederick, such will be your lot. You loved father-in-law Burat, you supported him when he could not do anything, in consideration of the confidence he had reposed in you, and because he was a good man, an old servant of the state and a man to be respected. Now it is your turn to be loved and supported by those who are full of youth; you will be in the midst of them like one of these old fir trees, covered with white moss. The poor old things, they deserved to live, for if they had not grown up straight they would have been cut down long ago to be made into logs and fagots."

I blessed Providence which never lets the honest perish, and it is thus that I arrived, towards seven o'clock in the evening, on the Scienie road at the bottom of the valley. I saw the forester house at the left, near the bridge. Ragot was barking, Calas was bringing the cattle back to the stable, shouting and cracking his whip, the flock of ducks on the bank of the river were scratching and picking themselves around their necks and under their wings and tails, while awaiting the hour of going to roost; some chickens were still pecking in the courtyard, and two or three half-plucked old hens were napping in the shadow of the little wall.

Then, seeing Ragot running to meet me, I said to myself:

"Here we are. Now attention. First you are going to speak. Jean Merlin must be there for certain. All must be quite clear beforehand."

VII

I went up the stairs and I saw Marie-Rose in the lower room, with bare arms; she was kneading dough and rolling it out flat, with the rolling-pin, on our large table, to make noodles. She had seen me in the distance and continued her work without raising her eyes.

"You are working hard, Marie-Rose," I remarked to her.

"Ah! it is you, father," said she; "I am making noodles."

"Yes, it is I," I replied, hanging my bag against the wall; "I have come from the inspector's. Has any one been here?"

"Yes, father, Jean Merlin came to make his report, but he went away again."

"Ah! he went away again, did he? Very good! he has not gone far, I guess; we have some very important business to talk over!"

I came and went, looking at the dough, the basket of eggs, the little bowl of flour and Marie-Rose, working away without opening her lips.

Finally I stopped and said to her:

"See here, Marie-Rose, it is right to be industrious, but we have something else to do just now. What is this that I have just heard at the inspector's? Is it true that you love Jean Merlin?"

As I spoke she let fall the rolling pin and flushed scarlet.

"Yes," I said; "that's the point! I don't mean to scold you about it; Jean Merlin is a nice fellow, and a good forester, and I am not angry at him. In my time, I loved your mother dearly, and father Burat, who was my superior, neither chased me away nor swore at me because of it. It is a natural thing when one is young to think of getting married. But when one wishes to marry an honest girl, one must first ask her of her father, so that every one may be agreed. Everything ought to be conducted sensibly."

She was very much embarrassed, for on hearing that she ran to get a pot of mignonette and placed it on the sill of the open window, an action which filled me with surprise, for my wife, Catherine, had done the same thing on the day of my proposal to call me in; and almost at once Merlin came out of the clump of trees under the rocks opposite, where I also had hidden, and ran across the meadow as I myself had run, twenty-three years before!

Then, seeing these things, I did also what old Burat had done. I placed myself in the hall before the door of the room, my daughter behind me; and as Merlin entered, all out of breath, I drew myself up and said to him:

"Merlin, is it true what the inspector tells me; that you love my daughter and ask her in marriage?"

"Yes brigadier," he answered me, placing his hand on his heart, "I love her better than life! At the same time he wished to speak to Marie-Rose, but I cried:

"Stop a minute! You love her and she has found out that she loves you. That is very nice – it is agreeable to love each other! But you must think also of the others, of the old people. When I married Catherine Burat I promised to keep her father and mother till the end of their days, and I have kept my word, like every man of honour; I have loved them, cared for them, and venerated them; they have always had the first place at table, the first glass of wine, the best bed in the house. Grandmother Anne, who still lives, is there to say it. It was only my duty, and if I had not done it I would have been a villain; but they have never had any complaints to make, and on his death-bed father Burat blessed me and said: 'Frederick has always been to us like the best of sons!' I deserve, therefore, to have the same, and I wish to have it because it is just! Well, now that you have heard me, will you promise to be to me what I was to father Burat?"

"Ah! brigadier," said he, "I would be the happiest of men to have you for a father! Yes, yes, I promise to be a good son to you; I promise to love you always and to respect you as you deserve."

Then I was touched, and I said:

"In that case, all right; I give you the hand of Marie-Rose, and you may kiss her."

They kissed each other right before me, like two good children that they were. Marie-Rose wept profusely. I called the grandmother into the little side-room; she came leaning on my arm and blessed us all, saying:

"Now I can die in peace, I have seen my grand-daughter happy, and loved by an honest man."

And all that day till evening she did not stop praying, commending her grand-children to God. Merlin and Marie-Rose did not weary of talking together and looking at each other. I walked to and fro in the large room and told them:

"Now you are affianced. Jean can come whenever he likes, whether I am at home or gone out. The inspector told me that he was first on the list for promotion, and that he would doubtless replace me at my retreat; that cannot be far off now; then we will celebrate the marriage."

This good news augmented their satisfaction.

Night came on, and Jean Merlin, so as not to worry his mother, rose and kissed once more his promised bride. We accompanied him out as far as the great pear tree. The weather was magnificent, the sky glittering with stars; not a bird nor a leaf was stirring, all were sleeping in the valley. And as Merlin pressed my hand I said to him again:

"You will tell your mother, Margredel, to come without fail to-morrow before noon; Marie-Rose will get you up a good dinner, and we will celebrate the betrothal together; it is the greatest festival in one's life; and if Uncle Daniel could also come we should be very glad of it."

"Very well, Father Frederick," he said, and then he walked swiftly away.

We went in again with tears in our eyes. And thinking of my poor Catherine, I said to myself:

"There are still some pleasant days in life; why is my good, my excellent wife no longer with us?"

It was the only bitter moment I had during that day.

VIII

You understand, George, that after this, all went on well. I had nothing more to think of but my service. Jean Merlin and his mother Margredel came to pass every Sunday at our house.

It was autumn, the opening of the season for hunting and fishing; the time for bird catching and snare setting in the woods, and for fishing baskets and nets at the river.

The old watchmaker, Baure, of Phalsbourg, arrived, as usual, with his great fishing rod and his bag for the trout; Lafleche, Vignerol, and others, with their bird calls and limed twigs; the gentlemen from Saverne with their dogs and their guns; they whistled, they yelled; they shot hares and sometimes a deer; then all these people came to take lunch and refresh themselves at the forester's house; the smell of frying and of good omelettes, with ham, reached to the garden, and we turned a penny or two at the house that way.

As you know all these things, I have no need to tell you about them.

But this year we saw also arrive quantities of wood-cutters from the Palatinate, from Bavaria, and further; great strapping fellows, with knapsacks on their backs and gaiters with bone buttons on their legs, who were going to Neiderviller, to Laneville, and to Toul to work at wood felling. They passed in bands, their vests hanging from the handles of their axes over their shoulders.

These people emptied their mugs of wine as they passed; they were jolly fellows, who filled the room with smoke from their big porcelain pipes, asking questions about everything, laughing and joking like people who have no trouble about earning their living.

Naturally I was glad to have them stop at our house; that made business brisk.

I remember at this time a thing which shows the blindness of slow-witted people who are ignorant of what is going on at twenty leagues from home, and who trust to the government without thinking of anything; a thing of which I am ashamed, for we went so far as to laugh at sensible men, who warned us to be on our guard!

One day our whole house was filled with people from the city and the environs; some of these strangers among the rest. They were laughing and drinking, and one of the tall Bavarians, with red whiskers and big mustaches, who was before the window, cried:

"What a lovely country! What magnificent fir trees! What are those old ruins up there – and this little wood yonder – and that path to the right – and that pass to the left, between the rocks? Ah! I have never seen such a country for fruit trees or fine water courses. It is rich; it is green. Is there not a steeple behind that little wood? What is the name of that pretty village?"

I, who was glad to hear this man so enthusiastic over our valley, I told him about everything in detail.

Baure, Dürr, Vignerol were talking together; they were smoking and going occasionally to the kitchen to see if the omelette was nearly ready, without troubling their heads about anything else.

But near the clock sat Captain Rondeau, who had returned home several months before having retired on a pension, a tall, dry-looking man, with hollow cheeks, wearing his black overcoat buttoned up to the chin, suffering from wounds received in Italy, Africa, and the Crimea, listening without saying anything and drinking a cup of milk because Doctor Semperlin had forbidden him to take anything else.

This went on for a whole hour, when the Bavarians, having emptied their mugs, continued their journey. I followed them to the door to show them the road to Biegelberg; the tall, red-haired man laughed, showing his teeth with a joyous air; finally he shook hands with me and cried, "Thanks," as he went to join his band.

While they were taking their leave, Captain Rondeau, leaning on his cane, was standing in the doorway, and he watched them go off with glittering eyes and compressed lips.

"Who are those people, Father Frederick?" he said to me. "Do you know them?"

"Those are Germans, captain," I answered him; "wood-cutters; I do not know any more about them, except that they are going to Toul, to work for some contractors there."

"Why do they not employ Frenchmen, these contractors?"

"Ah! because these wood-cutters are cheaper than ours; they work for half-price."

The captain frowned, and all at once he said:

"Those are spies; people that came to examine the mountain."

"Spies? How is that?" I answered, in astonishment. "What have they to spy out here? Have they any reason to meddle in our affairs?"

"They are Prussian spies," he said, dryly; "they came to take a look at our positions."

Then I believed almost that he was joking with me, and I said to him:

"But, Captain Rondeau, all the strong points are set down, and any one can buy maps of the country at Strasburg, or Nancy, or anywhere."

But, looking at me askance, he exclaimed:

"Maps! maps! And do your maps tell how much hay, and straw, and wheat, and oats, and wine, and oxen, and horses and wagons can be put into requisition in each village for an army on the march? Do they tell you where the mayor lives, or the *curé*, or the postmaster, or the receiver of contributions, so that one can lay one's hand upon them at any minute, or where stables can be found to lodge the horses, and a thousand other things that are useful to know beforehand? Maps, indeed! Do your maps tell the depth of the streams, or the situation of the fords? Do they point out to you the guides that are best to take or the people that must be seized because they might rouse up the populace?"

And as I remained, my arms hanging at my sides, surprised at these things, of which I had never thought, Father Baure cried from the room:

"Well, captain, who is it that would want to attack us? The Germans? Ha! ha! ha! Let them come! let them come! We'll give them a warm reception. Poor devils! I would not like to be in their skins. Ha! ha! ha! We would settle them! Not one should go out alive from these mountains."

All the others laughed and cried out: "Yes! yes! let them come! Let them try it! We'll give them a good reception!"

Then the captain re-entered the room, and, looking at big Fischer, who was shouting the loudest, he asked of him:

"You would receive them? With what? Do you know what you are talking about? Where are our troops, our supplies, our arms; where, where, where, I ask of you? And do you know how many of them there are, these Germans? Do you know that they are a million of men, exercised, disciplined, organized, ready to start at two weeks' notice – artillery, cavalry, infantry? Do you know that? *You* will receive them!"

"Yes," cried Father Baure, "Phalsbourg, with Bitche, Lichtenberg, and Schlestadt, would stop them for twenty years."

Captain Rondeau did not even take the trouble to reply, and, pointing from the window to the wood-cutters that were going away, he said to me: "Look, Father Frederick, look! Are those men wood-cutters? Do our wood-cutters march in ranks? do they keep step? do they keep their shoulders thrown back and their heads straight, and do they obey a chief who keeps them in order? Do not our wood-cutters and those of the mountains all have rounded shoulders and a heavy gait? These men are not even mountaineers; they come from the plains; they are spies. Yes, they are spies, and I mean to have them arrested."

And, without listening to what might be answered, he threw *sous* on the table in payment for his cup of milk, and went out abruptly.

He was scarcely outside the door when all who were present burst out laughing. I signed to them to be quiet, for that the captain could still hear them; then they held their sides and snuffled through their noses, saying:

"What fun! what fun! The Germans coming to attack us!"

Father Baure, while wiping his eyes with his handkerchief, said:

"He is a good fellow; but he got a rap at the Malakoff, and since then his clock has been out of order, and it always strikes noon at fourteen o'clock."

The others recommenced laughing, like real madmen, so that I thought, George, myself, that the captain had not common sense.

All that comes back to me as if it had taken place yesterday, and two or three days later, having learned that the captain had caused the wood-cutters to be arrested in a body at the Lutzelbourg station, and that, their papers being all right, they had obtained authorization to continue their journey into Lorraine, notwithstanding all the representations and the observations of M. Rondeau, I believed decidedly that the worthy man was cracked.

Every time that Baure came to the forester's house he would begin upon the chapter of the German spies, and made me very merry over it. But to-day we have ceased laughing, and I am sure that the jokers of Phalsbourg no longer rub their hands when the *feldwebel* makes his rod whistle while calling to the conscripts on the parade ground, "*Gewehr auf! – Gewehr ab!*" I am sure that this sight has more than once recalled to them the captain's warning.

IX

This took place at the end of the autumn of 1869; the valley was already filled with mist; then came the winter: the snow began to whirl before the panes, the fire to crackle in the furnace, and the spinning-wheel of Marie-Rose to hum from morning till night, to the accompaniment of the monotonous ticking of the old clock.

I paced to and fro, smoking my pipe, and thinking of my retreat. Doubtless Marie-Rose thought of it also, and Merlin spoke to me sometimes about hurrying up the marriage, which annoyed me considerably, for when I have said my say, I am done, and, since we had agreed to celebrate the marriage the day of his nomination, I did not see the use of talking over an affair already decided.

But the young people were in a hurry; the dulness of the season and the impatience of youth were the causes.

For two months past, Baure, Vignerol, Dürr, and the others came no more; the trees bent under their load of icicles; no one passed the house any more, except some rare travellers afar off in the valley. The history of the captain's spies, which had made me laugh so much, had entirely gone out of my head, when an extraordinary thing proved to me clearly that the old soldier had not been wrong in distrusting the Prussians, and that other people thought of dealing foul blows – people high in rank, in whom we had placed all our confidence.

That year several herds of wild boars ravaged the country. These animals scratched up the newly-sown grain; they dug up the ground in the woods to find roots, and came down every night to tear up the fields around the farms and the hamlets.

The peasants were never done lamenting and complaining; when, finally, we heard that Baron Pichard had arrived to organize a general battle. I received at the same time the order to go and join him, at his rendezvous of Rothfelz, with the best marksmen of the brigade, as many of the huntsmen of the neighbourhood as I could get.

It was in December I started with Merlin, big Kern, Donadieu, Trompette, and fifteen or twenty hunters, and in the evening we found up there all the baron's guests, filling the rooms of the little hunting lodge, lying on straw, eating, drinking, and joking as usual.

But you know all about those things, George; you remember also the hunting lodge at Rothfelz, the cries of the hunters, the barking of the dogs, and the danger of the guests, who fired in every direction but the right one, in the lines and out of the lines, always imagining at the end that they had killed the great beast. As for us guards, we had always missed. You remember that; it is always the same thing.

What I want to tell you is, that after the hunt, in which some wild boars and a few young pigs had fallen, they had a grand feast in the hunting lodge. The carriages of the baron had contained an abundance of everything: wine, cherry brandy, wheaten bread, pies, sugar, coffee, cognac; and, naturally, towards midnight, after having run around in the snow, eaten, drunk, howled and sung, the party of pleasure wore a dubious aspect.

We were quartered in the kitchen and well supplied with everything, and, as the door of the dining-room was open, to air the room, we could hear everything that the guests said, particularly as they shouted at the tops of their voices, like blind men.

I had noticed among the number a tall, lean fellow, with a hooked nose, black eyes, a small mustache, a tightly-fitting vest, and muscular legs in his high leather gaiters, who handled his small gun with singular skill; I said to myself, "That man, Frederick, is not in the habit of sitting before a desk and toasting his calves by the fire; he is certainly a soldier, a superior officer!"

He had been stationed near me in the morning, and I had noticed that his two shots had not missed their mark. I looked upon him as a real huntsman, and so he was. He knew also how to drink, for towards midnight three-fourths of the guests were already fast asleep in all the corners, and, except

himself, Baron Pichard, M. Tubingue, one of the largest, richest vine-growers in Alsace; M. Jean Claude Ruppert, the notary, who could drink two days running without changing colour or saying one word quicker than another; and M. Mouchica, the wood-merchant, whose custom it is to intoxicate every one with whom he has any dealings – except these, the other guests, extended on their bundles of straw, had all left the party.

Then a loud conversation took place; the baron said that the Germans were sending spies into Alsace, that they had agents everywhere, disguised as servants or commercial travellers or peddlers; that they were drawing out maps of the roads, the paths, the forests; that they even penetrated into our arsenals and sent notes regularly to Germany; that they had done the same thing in Schleswig-Holstein before commencing the war, and then in Bohemia, before Sadowa; that they were not to be trusted, etc.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.