HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE LILY OF THE VALLEY

Honoré Balzac
The Lily of the Valley

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25020003
The Lily of the Valley:

Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
The Lily of the Valley

DEDICATION

To Monsieur J. B. Nacquart,
Member of the Royal Academy of Medicine.

Dear Doctor – Here is one of the most carefully hewn stones in the second course of the foundation of a literary edifice which I have slowly and laboriously constructed. I wish to inscribe your name upon it, as much to thank the man whose science once saved me as to honor the friend of my daily life.

De Balzac.

THE LILY OF THE VALLEY

ENVOI

Felix de Vandenesse to Madame la Comtesse Natalie de Manerville:

I yield to your wishes. It is the privilege of the women whom we love more than they love us to make the men who love them ignore the ordinary rules of common-sense. To smooth the frown upon their brow, to soften the pout upon their lips, what obstacles we miraculously overcome! We shed our blood, we risk our future!

You exact the history of my past life; here it is. But remember this, Natalie; in obeying you I crush under foot a reluctance hitherto unconquerable. Why are you jealous of the sudden reveries which overtake me in the midst of our happiness? Why show the pretty anger of a petted woman when silence grasps me? Could you not play upon the contradictions of my character without inquiring into the causes of them? Are there secrets in your heart which seek absolution through a knowledge of mine? Ah! Natalie, you have guessed mine; and it is better you should know the whole truth. Yes, my life is shadowed by a phantom; a word evokes it; it hovers vaguely above me and about me; within my soul are solemn memories, buried in its depths like those marine productions seen in calmest weather and which the storms of ocean cast in fragments on the shore.

The mental labor which the expression of ideas

necessitates has revived the old, old feelings which give me so much pain when they come suddenly; and if in this confession of my past they break forth in a way that wounds you, remember that you threatened to punish me if I did not obey your wishes, and do not, therefore, punish my obedience. I would that this, my confidence, might increase your love.

Until we meet,

Felix.

CHAPTER I. TWO CHILDHOODS

To what genius fed on tears shall we some day owe that most touching of all elegies, – the tale of tortures borne silently by souls whose tender roots find stony ground in the domestic soil, whose earliest buds are torn apart by rancorous hands, whose flowers are touched by frost at the moment of their blossoming? What poet will sing the sorrows of the child whose lips must suck a bitter breast, whose smiles are checked by the cruel fire of a stern eye? The tale that tells of such poor hearts, oppressed by beings placed about them to promote the development of their natures, would contain the true history of my childhood.

What vanity could I have wounded, – I a child new-born? What moral or physical infirmity caused by mother's coldness? Was I the child of duty, whose birth is a mere chance, or was I one whose very life was a reproach? Put to nurse in the country and forgotten by my family for over three years, I was treated with such indifference on my return to the parental roof that even the servants pitied me. I do not know to what feeling or happy accident I owed my rescue from this first neglect; as a child I was ignorant of it, as a man I have not discovered it. Far from easing my lot, my brother and my two sisters found amusement in making me suffer. The compact in virtue of which children hide each other's peccadilloes, and which early teaches them the principles of honor, was null and void in my case; more than

that, I was often punished for my brother's faults, without being allowed to prove the injustice. The fawning spirit which seems instinctive in children taught my brother and sisters to join in the persecutions to which I was subjected, and thus keep in the good graces of a mother whom they feared as much as I. Was this partly the effect of a childish love of imitation; was it from a need of testing their powers; or was it simply through lack of pity? Perhaps these causes united to deprive me of the sweets of fraternal intercourse.

Disinherited of all affection, I could love nothing; yet nature had made me loving. Is there an angel who garners the sighs of feeling hearts rebuffed incessantly? If in many such hearts the crushed feelings turn to hatred, in mine they condensed and hollowed a depth from which, in after years, they gushed forth upon my life. In many characters the habit of trembling relaxes the fibres and begets fear, and fear ends in submission; hence, a weakness which emasculates a man, and makes him more or less a slave. But in my case these perpetual tortures led to the development of a certain strength, which increased through exercise and predisposed my spirit to the habit of moral resistance. Always in expectation of some new grief – as the martyrs expected some fresh blow – my whole being expressed, I doubt not, a sullen resignation which smothered the grace and gaiety of childhood, and gave me an appearance of idiocy which seemed to justify my mother's threatening prophecies. The certainty of injustice prematurely roused my pride – that

fruit of reason – and thus, no doubt, checked the evil tendencies which an education like mine encouraged.

Though my mother neglected me I was sometimes the object of her solicitude; she occasionally spoke of my education and seemed desirous of attending to it herself. Cold chills ran through me at such times when I thought of the torture a daily intercourse with her would inflict upon me. I blessed the neglect in which I lived, and rejoiced that I could stay alone in the garden and play with the pebbles and watch the insects and gaze into the blueness of the sky. Though my loneliness naturally led me to reverie, my liking for contemplation was first aroused by an incident which will give you an idea of my early troubles. So little notice was taken of me that the governess occasionally forgot to send me to bed. One evening I was peacefully crouching under a fig-tree, watching a star with that passion of curiosity which takes possession of a child's mind, and to which my precocious melancholy gave a sort of sentimental intuition. My sisters were playing about and laughing; I heard their distant chatter like an accompaniment to my thoughts. After a while the noise ceased and darkness fell. My mother happened to notice my absence. To escape blame, our governess, a terrible Mademoiselle Caroline, worked upon my mother's fears, – told her I had a horror of my home and would long ago have run away if she had not watched me; that I was not stupid but sullen; and that in all her experience of children she had never known one of so bad a disposition as mine. She pretended to search for me. I answered as soon as I

was called, and she came to the fig-tree, where she very well knew I was. "What are you doing there?" she asked. "Watching a star." "You were not watching a star," said my mother, who was listening on her balcony; "children of your age know nothing of astronomy." "Ah, madame," cried Mademoiselle Caroline, "he has opened the faucet of the reservoir; the garden is inundated!" Then there was a general excitement. The fact was that my sisters had amused themselves by turning the cock to see the water flow, but a sudden spurt wet them all over and frightened them so much that they ran away without closing it. Accused and convicted of this piece of mischief and told that I lied when I denied it, I was severely punished. Worse than all, I was jeered at for my pretended love of the stars and forbidden to stay in the garden after dark.

Such tyrannical restrains intensify a passion in the hearts of children even more than in those of men; children think of nothing but the forbidden thing, which then becomes irresistibly attractive to them. I was often whipped for my star. Unable to confide in my kind, I told it all my troubles in that delicious inward prattle with which we stammer our first ideas, just as once we stammered our first words. At twelve years of age, long after I was at school, I still watched that star with indescribable delight, – so deep and lasting are the impressions we receive in the dawn of life.

My brother Charles, five years older than I and as handsome a boy as he now is a man, was the favorite of my father, the

idol of my mother, and consequently the sovereign of the house. He was robust and well-made, and had a tutor. I, puny and even sickly, was sent at five years of age as day pupil to a school in the town; taken in the morning and brought back at night by my father's valet. I was sent with a scanty lunch, while my school-fellows brought plenty of good food. This trifling contrast between my privations and their prosperity made me suffer deeply. The famous potted pork prepared at Tours and called "rillettes" and "rillons" was the chief feature of their mid-day meal, between the early breakfast and the parent's dinner, which was ready when we returned from school. This preparation of meat, much prized by certain gourmands, is seldom seen at Tours on aristocratic tables; if I had ever heard of it before I went to school, I certainly had never had the happiness of seeing that brown mess spread on slices of bread and butter. Nevertheless, my desire for those "rillons" was so great that it grew to be a fixed idea, like the longing of an elegant Parisian duchess for the stews cooked by a porter's wife, – longings which, being a woman, she found means to satisfy. Children guess each other's covetousness, just as you are able to read a man's love, by the look in the eyes; consequently I became an admirable butt for ridicule. My comrades, nearly all belonging to the lower bourgeoisie, would show me their "rillons" and ask if I knew how they were made and where they were sold, and why it was that I never had any. They licked their lips as they talked of them – scraps of pork pressed in their own fat and looking like cooked truffles; they inspected

my lunch-basket, and finding nothing better than Olivet cheese or dried fruits, they plagued me with questions: "Is that all you have? have you really nothing else?" – speeches which made me realize the difference between my brother and myself.

This contrast between my own abandonment and the happiness of others nipped the roses of my childhood and blighted my budding youth. The first time that I, mistaking my comrades' actions for generosity, put forth my hand to take the dainty I had so long coveted and which was now hypocritically held out to me, my tormentor pulled back his slice to the great delight of his comrades who were expecting that result. If noble and distinguished minds are, as we often find them, capable of vanity, can we blame the child who weeps when despised and jeered at? Under such a trial many boys would have turned into gluttons and cringing beggars. I fought to escape my persecutors. The courage of despair made me formidable; but I was hated, and thus had no protection against treachery. One evening as I left school I was struck in the back by a handful of small stones tied in a handkerchief. When the valet, who punished the perpetrator, told this to my mother she exclaimed: "That dreadful child! he will always be a torment to us."

Finding that I inspired in my schoolmates the same repulsion that was felt for me by my family, I sank into a horrible distrust of myself. A second fall of snow checked the seeds that were germinating in my soul. The boys whom I most liked were notorious scamps; this fact roused my pride and I held aloof.

Again I was shut up within myself and had no vent for the feelings with which my heart was full. The master of the school, observing that I was gloomy, disliked by my comrades, and always alone, confirmed the family verdict as to my sulky temper. As soon as I could read and write, my mother transferred me to Pont-le-Voy, a school in charge of Oratorians who took boys of my age into a form called the "class of the Latin steps" where dull lads with torpid brains were apt to linger.

There I remained eight years without seeing my family; living the life of a pariah, – partly for the following reason. I received but three francs a month pocket-money, a sum barely sufficient to buy the pens, ink, paper, knives, and rules which we were forced to supply ourselves. Unable to buy stilts or skipping-ropes, or any of the things that were used in the playground, I was driven out of the games; to gain admission on suffrage I should have had to toady the rich and flatter the strong of my division. My heart rose against either of these meannesses, which, however, most children readily employ. I lived under a tree, lost in dejected thought, or reading the books distributed to us monthly by the librarian. How many griefs were in the shadow of that solitude; what genuine anguish filled my neglected life! Imagine what my sore heart felt when, at the first distribution of prizes, – of which I obtained the two most valued, namely, for theme and for translation, – neither my father nor my mother was present in the theatre when I came forward to receive the awards amid general acclamations, although the building was filled with the

relatives of all my comrades. Instead of kissing the distributor, according to custom, I burst into tears and threw myself on his breast. That night I burned my crowns in the stove. The parents of the other boys were in town for a whole week preceding the distribution of the prizes, and my comrades departed joyfully the next day; while I, whose father and mother were only a few miles distant, remained at the school with the "outremers," – a name given to scholars whose families were in the colonies or in foreign countries.

You will notice throughout how my unhappiness increased in proportion as the social spheres on which I entered widened. God knows what efforts I made to weaken the decree which condemned me to live within myself! What hopes, long cherished with eagerness of soul, were doomed to perish in a day! To persuade my parents to come and see me, I wrote them letters full of feeling, too emphatically worded, it may be; but surely such letters ought not to have drawn upon me my mother's reprimand, coupled with ironical reproaches for my style. Not discouraged even then, I implored the help of my sisters, to whom I always wrote on their birthdays and fete-days with the persistence of a neglected child; but it was all in vain. As the day for the distribution of prizes approached I redoubled my entreaties, and told of my expected triumphs. Misled by my parents' silence, I expected them with a beating heart. I told my schoolfellows they were coming; and then, when the old porter's step sounded in the corridors as he called my happy comrades

one by one to receive their friends, I was sick with expectation. Never did that old man call my name!

One day, when I accused myself to my confessor of having cursed my life, he pointed to the skies, where grew, he said, the promised palm for the "Beati qui lugent" of the Saviour. From the period of my first communion I flung myself into the mysterious depths of prayer, attracted to religious ideas whose moral fairyland so fascinates young spirits. Burning with ardent faith, I prayed to God to renew in my behalf the miracles I had read of in martyrology. At five years of age I fled to my star; at twelve I took refuge in the sanctuary. My ecstasy brought dreams unspeakable, which fed my imagination, fostered my susceptibilities, and strengthened my thinking powers. I have often attributed those sublime visions to the guardian angel charged with moulding my spirit to its divine destiny; they endowed my soul with the faculty of seeing the inner soul of things; they prepared my heart for the magic craft which makes a man a poet when the fatal power is his to compare what he feels within him with reality, – the great things aimed for with the small things gained. Those visions wrote upon my brain a book in which I read that which I must voice; they laid upon my lips the coal of utterance.

My father having conceived some doubts as to the tendency of the Oratorian teachings, took me from Pont-le-Voy, and sent me to Paris to an institution in the Marais. I was then fifteen. When examined as to my capacity, I, who was in the rhetoric

class at Pont-le-Voy, was pronounced worthy of the third class. The sufferings I had endured in my family and in school were continued under another form during my stay at the Lepitre Academy. My father gave me no money; I was to be fed, clothed, and stuffed with Latin and Greek, for a sum agreed on. During my school life I came in contact with over a thousand comrades; but I never met with such an instance of neglect and indifference as mine. Monsieur Lepitre, who was fanatically attached to the Bourbons, had had relations with my father at the time when all devoted royalists were endeavoring to bring about the escape of Marie Antoinette from the Temple. They had lately renewed acquaintance; and Monsieur Lepitre thought himself obliged to repair my father's oversight, and to give me a small sum monthly. But not being authorized to do so, the amount was small indeed.

The Lepitre establishment was in the old Joyeuse mansion where, as in all seignorial houses, there was a porter's lodge. During a recess, which preceded the hour when the man-of-all-work took us to the Charlemagne Lyceum, the well-to-do pupils used to breakfast with the porter, named Doisy. Monsieur Lepitre was either ignorant of the fact or he connived at this arrangement with Doisy, a regular smuggler whom it was the pupils' interest to protect, – he being the secret guardian of their pranks, the safe confidant of their late returns and their intermediary for obtaining forbidden books. Breakfast on a cup of "cafe-au-lait" is an aristocratic habit, explained by the high prices to which colonial products rose under Napoleon. If the use

of sugar and coffee was a luxury to our parents, with us it was the sign of self-conscious superiority. Doisy gave credit, for he reckoned on the sisters and aunts of the pupils, who made it a point of honor to pay their debts. I resisted the blandishments of his place for a long time. If my judges knew the strength of its seduction, the heroic efforts I made after stoicism, the repressed desires of my long resistance, they would pardon my final overthrow. But, child as I was, could I have the grandeur of soul that scorns the scorn of others? Moreover, I may have felt the promptings of several social vices whose power was increased by my longings.

About the end of the second year my father and mother came to Paris. My brother had written me the day of their arrival. He lived in Paris, but had never been to see me. My sisters, he said, were of the party; we were all to see Paris together. The first day we were to dine in the Palais-Royal, so as to be near the Theatre-Francais. In spite of the intoxication such a programme of unhoped-for delights excited, my joy was dampened by the wind of a coming storm, which those who are used to unhappiness apprehend instinctively. I was forced to own a debt of a hundred francs to the Sieur Doisy, who threatened to ask my parents himself for the money. I bethought me of making my brother the emissary of Doisy, the mouth-piece of my repentance and the mediator of pardon. My father inclined to forgiveness, but my mother was pitiless; her dark blue eye froze me; she fulminated cruel prophecies: “What should I be later if at seventeen years

of age I committed such follies? Was I really a son of hers? Did I mean to ruin my family? Did I think myself the only child of the house? My brother Charles's career, already begun, required large outlay, amply deserved by his conduct which did honor to the family, while mine would always disgrace it. Did I know nothing of the value of money, and what I cost them? Of what use were coffee and sugar to my education? Such conduct was the first step into all the vices."

After enduring the shock of this torrent which rasped my soul, I was sent back to school in charge of my brother. I lost the dinner at the Freres Provencaux, and was deprived of seeing Talma in Britannicus. Such was my first interview with my mother after a separation of twelve years.

When I had finished school my father left me under the guardianship of Monsieur Lepitre. I was to study the higher mathematics, follow a course of law for one year, and begin philosophy. Allowed to study in my own room and released from the classes, I expected a truce with trouble. But, in spite of my nineteen years, perhaps because of them, my father persisted in the system which had sent me to school without food, to an academy without pocket-money, and had driven me into debt to Doisy. Very little money was allowed to me, and what can you do in Paris without money? Moreover, my freedom was carefully chained up. Monsieur Lepitre sent me to the law school accompanied by a man-of-all-work who handed me over to the professor and fetched me home again. A young girl would have

been treated with less precaution than my mother's fears insisted on for me. Paris alarmed my parents, and justly. Students are secretly engaged in the same occupation which fills the minds of young ladies in their boarding-schools. Do what you will, nothing can prevent the latter from talking of lovers, or the former of women. But in Paris, and especially at this particular time, such talk among young lads was influenced by the oriental and sultanic atmosphere and customs of the Palais-Royal.

The Palais-Royal was an Eldorado of love where the ingots melted away in coin; there virgin doubts were over; there curiosity was appeased. The Palais-Royal and I were two asymptotes bearing one towards the other, yet unable to meet. Fate miscarried all my attempts. My father had presented me to one of my aunts who lived in the Ile St. Louis. With her I was to dine on Sundays and Thursdays, escorted to the house by either Monsieur or Madame Lepitre, who went out themselves on those days and were to call for me on their way home. Singular amusement for a young lad! My aunt, the Marquise de Listomere, was a great lady, of ceremonious habits, who would never have dreamed of offering me money. Old as a cathedral, painted like a miniature, sumptuous in dress, she lived in her great house as though Louis XV. were not dead, and saw none but old women and men of a past day, – a fossil society which made me think I was in a graveyard. No one spoke to me and I had not the courage to speak first. Cold and alien looks made me ashamed of my youth, which seemed to annoy them. I counted

on this indifference to aid me in certain plans; I was resolved to escape some day directly after dinner and rush to the Palais-Royal. Once seated at whist my aunt would pay no attention to me. Jean, the footman, cared little for Monsieur Lepitre and would have aided me; but on the day I chose for my adventure that luckless dinner was longer than usual, – either because the jaws employed were worn out or the false teeth more imperfect. At last, between eight and nine o'clock, I reached the staircase, my heart beating like that of Bianca Capello on the day of her flight; but when the porter pulled the cord I beheld in the street before me Monsieur Lepitre's hackney-coach, and I heard his pursy voice demanding me!

Three times did fate interpose between the hell of the Palais-Royal and the heaven of my youth. On the day when I, ashamed at twenty years of age of my own ignorance, determined to risk all dangers to put an end to it, at the very moment when I was about to run away from Monsieur Lepitre as he got into the coach, – a difficult process, for he was as fat as Louis XVIII. and club-footed, – well, can you believe it, my mother arrived in a post-chaise! Her glance arrested me; I stood still, like a bird before a snake. What fate had brought her there? The simplest thing in the world. Napoleon was then making his last efforts. My father, who foresaw the return of the Bourbons, had come to Paris with my mother to advise my brother, who was employed in the imperial diplomatic service. My mother was to take me back with her, out of the way of dangers which seemed, to those who followed

the march of events intelligently, to threaten the capital. In a few minutes, as it were, I was taken out of Paris, at the very moment when my life there was about to become fatal to me.

The tortures of imagination excited by repressed desires, the weariness of a life depressed by constant privations had driven me to study, just as men, weary of fate, confine themselves in a cloister. To me, study had become a passion, which might even be fatal to my health by imprisoning me at a period of life when young men ought to yield to the bewitching activities of their springtide youth.

This slight sketch of my boyhood, in which you, Natalie, can readily perceive innumerable songs of woe, was needful to explain to you its influence on my future life. At twenty years of age, and affected by many morbid elements, I was still small and thin and pale. My soul, filled with the will to do, struggled with a body that seemed weakly, but which, in the words of an old physician at Tours, was undergoing its final fusion into a temperament of iron. Child in body and old in mind, I had read and thought so much that I knew life metaphysically at its highest reaches at the moment when I was about to enter the tortuous difficulties of its defiles and the sandy roads of its plains. A strange chance had held me long in that delightful period when the soul awakes to its first tumults, to its desires for joy, and the savor of life is fresh. I stood in the period between puberty and manhood, – the one prolonged by my excessive study, the other tardily developing its living shoots. No young

man was ever more thoroughly prepared to feel and to love. To understand my history, let your mind dwell on that pure time of youth when the mouth is innocent of falsehood; when the glance of the eye is honest, though veiled by lids which droop from timidity contradicting desire; when the soul bends not to worldly Jesuitism, and the heart throbs as violently from trepidation as from the generous impulses of young emotion.

I need say nothing of the journey I made with my mother from Paris to Tours. The coldness of her behavior repressed me. At each relay I tried to speak; but a look, a word from her frightened away the speeches I had been meditating. At Orleans, where we had passed the night, my mother complained of my silence. I threw myself at her feet and clasped her knees; with tears I opened my heart. I tried to touch hers by the eloquence of my hungry love in accents that might have moved a stepmother. She replied that I was playing comedy. I complained that she had abandoned me. She called me an unnatural child. My whole nature was so wrung that at Blois I went upon the bridge to drown myself in the Loire. The height of the parapet prevented my suicide.

When I reached home, my two sisters, who did not know me, showed more surprise than tenderness. Afterwards, however, they seemed, by comparison, to be full of kindness towards me. I was given a room on the third story. You will understand the extent of my hardships when I tell you that my mother left me, a young man of twenty, without other linen than my miserable

school outfit, or any other outside clothes than those I had long worn in Paris. If I ran from one end of the room to the other to pick up her handkerchief, she took it with the cold thanks a lady gives to her footman. Driven to watch her to find if there were any soft spot where I could fasten the rootlets of affection, I came to see her as she was, – a tall, spare woman, given to cards, egotistical and insolent, like all the Listomeres, who count insolence as part of their dowry. She saw nothing in life except duties to be fulfilled. All cold women whom I have known made, as she did, a religion of duty; she received our homage as a priest receives the incense of the mass. My elder brother appeared to absorb the trifling sentiment of maternity which was in her nature. She stabbed us constantly with her sharp irony, – the weapon of those who have no heart, – and which she used against us, who could make her no reply.

Notwithstanding these thorny hindrances, the instinctive sentiments have so many roots, the religious fear inspired by a mother whom it is dangerous to displease holds by so many threads, that the sublime mistake – if I may so call it – of our love for our mother lasted until the day, much later in our lives, when we judged her finally. This terrible despotism drove from my mind all thoughts of the voluptuous enjoyments I had dreamed of finding at Tours. In despair I took refuge in my father's library, where I set myself to read every book I did not know. These long periods of hard study saved me from contact with my mother; but they aggravated the dangers of my moral condition. Sometimes

my eldest sister – she who afterwards married our cousin, the Marquis de Listomere – tried to comfort me, without, however, being able to calm the irritation to which I was a victim. I desired to die.

Great events, of which I knew nothing, were then in preparation. The Duc d'Angouleme, who had left Bordeaux to join Louis XVIII. in Paris, was received in every town through which he passed with ovations inspired by the enthusiasm felt throughout old France at the return of the Bourbons. Touraine was aroused for its legitimate princes; the town itself was in a flutter, every window decorated, the inhabitants in their Sunday clothes, a festival in preparation, and that nameless excitement in the air which intoxicates, and which gave me a strong desire to be present at the ball given by the duke. When I summoned courage to make this request of my mother, who was too ill to go herself, she became extremely angry. "Had I come from Congo?" she inquired. "How could I suppose that our family would not be represented at the ball? In the absence of my father and brother, of course it was my duty to be present. Had I no mother? Was she not always thinking of the welfare of her children?"

In a moment the semi-disinherited son had become a personage! I was more dumfounded by my importance than by the deluge of ironical reasoning with which my mother received my request. I questioned my sisters, and then discovered that my mother, who liked such theatrical plots, was already attending to my clothes. The tailors in Tours were fully occupied by the

sudden demands of their regular customers, and my mother was forced to employ her usual seamstress, who – according to provincial custom – could do all kinds of sewing. A bottle-blue coat had been secretly made for me, after a fashion, and silk stockings and pumps provided; waistcoats were then worn short, so that I could wear one of my father's; and for the first time in my life I had a shirt with a frill, the pleatings of which puffed out my chest and were gathered in to the knot of my cravat. When dressed in this apparel I looked so little like myself that my sister's compliments nerved me to face all Touraine at the ball. But it was a bold enterprise. Thanks to my slimness I slipped into a tent set up in the gardens of the Papion house, and found a place close to the armchair in which the duke was seated. Instantly I was suffocated by the heat, and dazzled by the lights, the scarlet draperies, the gilded ornaments, the dresses, and the diamonds of the first public ball I had ever witnessed. I was pushed hither and thither by a mass of men and women, who hustled each other in a cloud of dust. The brazen clash of military music was drowned in the hurrahs and acclamations of "Long live the Duc d'Angouleme! Long live the King! Long live the Bourbons!" The ball was an outburst of pent-up enthusiasm, where each man endeavored to outdo the rest in his fierce haste to worship the rising sun, – an exhibition of partisan greed which left me unmoved, or rather, it disgusted me and drove me back within myself.

Swept onward like a straw in the whirlwind, I was seized with

a childish desire to be the Duc d'Angouleme himself, to be one of these princes parading before an awed assemblage. This silly fancy of a Tourangean lad roused an ambition to which my nature and the surrounding circumstances lent dignity. Who would not envy such worship? – a magnificent repetition of which I saw a few months later, when all Paris rushed to the feet of the Emperor on his return from Elba. The sense of this dominion exercised over the masses, whose feelings and whose very life are thus merged into one soul, dedicated me then and thenceforth to glory, that priestess who slaughters the Frenchmen of to-day as the Druidess once sacrificed the Gauls.

Suddenly I met the woman who was destined to spur these ambitious desires and to crown them by sending me into the heart of royalty. Too timid to ask any one to dance, – fearing, moreover, to confuse the figures, – I naturally became very awkward, and did not know what to do with my arms and legs. Just as I was suffering severely from the pressure of the crowd an officer stepped on my feet, swollen by the new leather of my shoes as well as by the heat. This disgusted me with the whole affair. It was impossible to get away; but I took refuge in a corner of a room at the end of an empty bench, where I sat with fixed eyes, motionless and sullen. Misled by my puny appearance, a woman – taking me for a sleepy child – slid softly into the place beside me, with the motion of a bird as she drops upon her nest. Instantly I breathed the woman-atmosphere, which irradiated my soul as, in after days, oriental poesy has shone there. I looked

at my neighbor, and was more dazzled by that vision than I had been by the scene of the fete.

If you have understood this history of my early life you will guess the feelings which now welled up within me. My eyes rested suddenly on white, rounded shoulders where I would fain have laid my head, – shoulders faintly rosy, which seemed to blush as if uncovered for the first time; modest shoulders, that possessed a soul, and reflected light from their satin surface as from a silken texture. These shoulders were parted by a line along which my eyes wandered. I raised myself to see the bust and was spell-bound by the beauty of the bosom, chastely covered with gauze, where blue-veined globes of perfect outline were softly hidden in waves of lace. The slightest details of the head were each and all enchantments which awakened infinite delights within me; the brilliancy of the hair laid smoothly above a neck as soft and velvety as a child's, the white lines drawn by the comb where my imagination ran as along a dewy path, – all these things put me, as it were, beside myself. Glancing round to be sure that no one saw me, I threw myself upon those shoulders as a child upon the breast of its mother, kissing them as I laid my head there. The woman uttered a piercing cry, which the noise of the music drowned; she turned, saw me, and exclaimed, "Monsieur!" Ah! had she said, "My little lad, what possesses you?" I might have killed her; but at the word "Monsieur!" hot tears fell from my eyes. I was petrified by a glance of saintly anger, by a noble face crowned with a diadem of golden hair in

harmony with the shoulders I adored. The crimson of offended modesty glowed on her cheeks, though already it was appeased by the pardoning instinct of a woman who comprehends a frenzy which she inspires, and divines the infinite adoration of those repentant tears. She moved away with the step and carriage of a queen.

I then felt the ridicule of my position; for the first time I realized that I was dressed like the monkey of a barrel organ. I was ashamed. There I stood, stupefied, – tasting the fruit that I had stolen, conscious of the warmth upon my lips, repenting not, and following with my eyes the woman who had come down to me from heaven. Sick with the first fever of the heart I wandered through the rooms, unable to find mine Unknown, until at last I went home to bed, another man.

A new soul, a soul with rainbow wings, had burst its chrysalis. Descending from the azure wastes where I had long admired her, my star had come to me a woman, with undiminished lustre and purity. I loved, knowing naught of love. How strange a thing, this first irruption of the keenest human emotion in the heart of a man! I had seen pretty women in other places, but none had made the slightest impression upon me. Can there be an appointed hour, a conjunction of stars, a union of circumstances, a certain woman among all others to awaken an exclusive passion at the period of life when love includes the whole sex?

The thought that my Elect lived in Touraine made the air I breathed delicious; the blue of the sky seemed bluer than I had

ever yet seen it. I raved internally, but externally I was seriously ill, and my mother had fears, not unmingled with remorse. Like animals who know when danger is near, I hid myself away in the garden to think of the kiss that I had stolen. A few days after this memorable ball my mother attributed my neglect of study, my indifference to her tyrannical looks and sarcasms, and my gloomy behavior to the condition of my health. The country, that perpetual remedy for ills that doctors cannot cure, seemed to her the best means of bringing me out of my apathy. She decided that I should spend a few weeks at Frapesle, a chateau on the Indre midway between Montbazon and Azay-le-Rideau, which belonged to a friend of hers, to whom, no doubt, she gave private instructions.

By the day when I thus for the first time gained my liberty I had swum so vigorously in Love's ocean that I had well-nigh crossed it. I knew nothing of mine unknown lady, neither her name, nor where to find her; to whom, indeed, could I speak of her? My sensitive nature so exaggerated the inexplicable fears which beset all youthful hearts at the first approach of love that I began with the melancholy which often ends a hopeless passion. I asked nothing better than to roam about the country, to come and go and live in the fields. With the courage of a child that fears no failure, in which there is something really chivalrous, I determined to search every chateau in Touraine, travelling on foot, and saying to myself as each old tower came in sight, "She is there!"

Accordingly, of a Thursday morning I left Tours by the barrier of Saint-Eloy, crossed the bridges of Saint-Sauveur, reached Poncher whose every house I examined, and took the road to Chinon. For the first time in my life I could sit down under a tree or walk fast or slow as I pleased without being dictated to by any one. To a poor lad crushed under all sorts of despotism (which more or less does weigh upon all youth) the first employment of freedom, even though it be expended upon nothing, lifts the soul with irrepressible buoyancy. Several reasons combined to make that day one of enchantment. During my school years I had never been taken to walk more than two or three miles from a city; yet there remained in my mind among the earliest recollections of my childhood that feeling for the beautiful which the scenery about Tours inspires. Though quite untaught as to the poetry of such a landscape, I was, unknown to myself, critical upon it, like those who imagine the ideal of art without knowing anything of its practice.

To reach the chateau of Frapesle, foot-passengers, or those on horseback, shorten the way by crossing the Charlemagne moors, – uncultivated tracts of land lying on the summit of the plateau which separates the valley of the Cher from that of the Indre, and over which there is a cross-road leading to Champy. These moors are flat and sandy, and for more than three miles are dreary enough until you reach, through a clump of woods, the road to Sache, the name of the township in which Frapesle stands. This road, which joins that of Chinon beyond Ballan,

skirts an undulating plain to the little hamlet of Artanne. Here we come upon a valley, which begins at Montbazon, ends at the Loire, and seems to rise and fall, – to bound, as it were, – beneath the chateaus placed on its double hillsides, – a splendid emerald cup, in the depths of which flow the serpentine lines of the river Indre. I gazed at this scene with ineffable delight, for which the gloomy moor-land and the fatigue of the sandy walk had prepared me.

"If that woman, the flower of her sex, does indeed inhabit this earth, she is here, on this spot."

Thus musing, I leaned against a walnut-tree, beneath which I have rested from that day to this whenever I return to my dear valley. Beneath that tree, the confidant of my thoughts, I ask myself what changes there are in me since last I stood there.

My heart deceived me not – she lived there; the first castle that I saw on the slope of a hill was the dwelling that held her. As I sat beneath my nut-tree, the mid-day sun was sparkling on the slates of her roof and the panes of her windows. Her cambric dress made the white line which I saw among the vines of an arbor. She was, as you know already without as yet knowing anything, the Lily of this valley, where she grew for heaven, filling it with the fragrance of her virtues. Love, infinite love, without other sustenance than the vision, dimly seen, of which my soul was full, was there, expressed to me by that long ribbon of water flowing in the sunshine between the grass-green banks, by the lines of the poplars adorning with their mobile laces that vale of love, by

the oak-woods coming down between the vineyards to the shore, which the river curved and rounded as it chose, and by those dim varying horizons as they fled confusedly away.

If you would see nature beautiful and virgin as a bride, go there of a spring morning. If you would still the bleeding wounds of your heart, return in the last days of autumn. In the spring, Love beats his wings beneath the broad blue sky; in the autumn, we think of those who are no more. The lungs diseased breathe in a blessed purity; the eyes will rest on golden copses which impart to the soul their peaceful stillness. At this moment, when I stood there for the first time, the mills upon the brooksides gave a voice to the quivering valley; the poplars were laughing as they swayed; not a cloud was in the sky; the birds sang, the crickets chirped, – all was melody. Do not ask me again why I love Touraine. I love it, not as we love our cradle, not as we love the oasis in a desert; I love it as an artist loves art; I love it less than I love you; but without Touraine, perhaps I might not now be living.

Without knowing why, my eyes reverted ever to that white spot, to the woman who shone in that garden as the bell of a convolvulus shines amid the underbrush, and wilts if touched. Moved to the soul, I descended the slope and soon saw a village, which the superabounding poetry that filled my heart made me fancy without an equal. Imagine three mills placed among islands of graceful outline crowned with groves of trees and rising from a field of water, – for what other name can I give to that aquatic vegetation, so verdant, so finely colored, which carpeted the

river, rose above its surface and undulated upon it, yielding to its caprices and swaying to the turmoil of the water when the mill-wheels lashed it. Here and there were mounds of gravel, against which the wavelets broke in fringes that shimmered in the sunlight. Amaryllis, water-lilies, reeds, and phloxes decorated the banks with their glorious tapestry. A trembling bridge of rotten planks, the abutments swathed with flowers, and the hand-rails green with perennials and velvet mosses drooping to the river but not falling to it; mouldering boats, fishing-nets; the monotonous sing-song of a shepherd; ducks paddling among the islands or preening on the "jard," – a name given to the coarse sand which the Loire brings down; the millers, with their caps over one ear, busily loading their mules, – all these details made the scene before me one of primitive simplicity. Imagine, also, beyond the bridge two or three farm-houses, a dove-cote, turtle-doves, thirty or more dilapidated cottages, separated by gardens, by hedges of honeysuckle, clematis, and jasmine; a dunghill beside each door, and cocks and hens about the road. Such is the village of Pont-de-Ruan, a picturesque little hamlet leading up to an old church full of character, a church of the days of the Crusades, such a one as painters desire for their pictures. Surround this scene with ancient walnut-trees and slim young poplars with their pale-gold leaves; dot graceful buildings here and there along the grassy slopes where sight is lost beneath the vaporous, warm sky, and you will have some idea of one of the points of view of this most lovely region.

I followed the road to Sache along the left bank of the river, noticing carefully the details of the hills on the opposite shore. At length I reached a park embellished with centennial trees, which I knew to be that of Frapesle. I arrived just as the bell was ringing for breakfast. After the meal, my host, who little suspected that I had walked from Tours, carried me over his estate, from the borders of which I saw the valley on all sides under its many aspects, – here through a vista, there to its broad extent; often my eyes were drawn to the horizon along the golden blade of the Loire, where the sails made fantastic figures among the currents as they flew before the wind. As we mounted a crest I came in sight of the chateau d'Azay, like a diamond of many facets in a setting of the Indre, standing on wooden piles concealed by flowers. Farther on, in a hollow, I saw the romantic masses of the chateau of Sache, a sad retreat though full of harmony; too sad for the superficial, but dear to a poet with a soul in pain. I, too, came to love its silence, its great gnarled trees, and the nameless mysterious influence of its solitary valley. But now, each time that we reached an opening towards the neighboring slope which gave to view the pretty castle I had first noticed in the morning, I stopped to look at it with pleasure.

"Hey!" said my host, reading in my eyes the sparkling desires which youth so ingenuously betrays, "so you scent from afar a pretty woman as a dog scents game!"

I did not like the speech, but I asked the name of the castle and of its owner.

"It is Clochegourde," he replied; "a pretty house belonging to the Comte de Mortsauf, the head of an historic family in Touraine, whose fortune dates from the days of Louis XI., and whose name tells the story to which they owe their arms and their distinction. Monsieur de Mortsauf is descended from a man who survived the gallows. The family bear: Or, a cross potent and counter-potent sable, charged with a fleur-de-lis or; and 'Dieu saulve le Roi notre Sire,' for motto. The count settled here after the return of the emigration. The estate belongs to his wife, a demoiselle de Lenoncourt, of the house of Lenoncourt-Givry which is now dying out. Madame de Mortsauf is an only daughter. The limited fortune of the family contrasts strangely with the distinction of their names; either from pride, or, possibly, from necessity, they never leave Clochegourde and see no company. Until now their attachment to the Bourbons explained this retirement, but the return of the king has not changed their way of living. When I came to reside here last year I paid them a visit of courtesy; they returned it and invited us to dinner; the winter separated us for some months, and political events kept me away from Frapesle until recently. Madame de Mortsauf is a woman who would hold the highest position wherever she might be."

"Does she often come to Tours?"

"She never goes there. However," he added, correcting himself, "she did go there lately to the ball given to the Duc d'Angouleme, who was very gracious to her husband."

"It was she!" I exclaimed.

"She! who?"

"A woman with beautiful shoulders."

"You will meet a great many women with beautiful shoulders in Touraine," he said, laughing. "But if you are not tired we can cross the river and call at Clochegourde and you shall renew acquaintance with those particular shoulders."

I agreed, not without a blush of shame and pleasure. About four o'clock we reached the little chateau on which my eyes had fastened from the first. The building, which is finely effective in the landscape, is in reality very modest. It has five windows on the front; those at each end of the facade, looking south, project about twelve feet, – an architectural device which gives the idea of two towers and adds grace to the structure. The middle window serves as a door from which you descend through a double portico into a terraced garden which joins the narrow strip of grass-land that skirts the Indre along its whole course. Though this meadow is separated from the lower terrace, which is shaded by a double line of acacias and Japanese ailanthus, by the country road, it nevertheless appears from the house to be a part of the garden, for the road is sunken and hemmed in on one side by the terrace, on the other side by a Norman hedge. The terraces being very well managed put enough distance between the house and the river to avoid the inconvenience of too great proximity to water, without losing the charms of it. Below the house are the stables, coach-house, green-houses, and kitchen,

the various openings to which form an arcade. The roof is charmingly rounded at the angles, and bears mansarde windows with carved mullions and leaden finials on their gables. This roof, no doubt much neglected during the Revolution, is stained by a sort of mildew produced by lichens and the reddish moss which grows on houses exposed to the sun. The glass door of the portico is surmounted by a little tower which holds the bell, and on which is carved the escutcheon of the Blamont-Chauvry family, to which Madame de Mortsauf belonged, as follows: Gules, a pale vair, flanked quarterly by two hands clasped or, and two lances in chevron sable. The motto, "Voyez tous, nul ne touche!" struck me greatly. The supporters, a griffin and dragon gules, enchained or, made a pretty effect in the carving. The Revolution has damaged the ducal crown and the crest, which was a palm-tree vert with fruit or. Senart, the secretary of the committee of public safety was bailiff of Sache before 1781, which explains this destruction.

These arrangements give an elegant air to the little castle, dainty as a flower, which seems to scarcely rest upon the earth. Seen from the valley the ground-floor appears to be the first story; but on the other side it is on a level with a broad gravelled path leading to a grass-plot, on which are several flower-beds. To right and left are vineyards, orchards, and a few acres of tilled land planted with chestnut-trees which surround the house, the ground falling rapidly to the Indre, where other groups of trees of variegated shades of green, chosen by Nature herself, are spread

along the shore. I admired these groups, so charmingly disposed, as we mounted the hilly road which borders Clochegourde; I breathed an atmosphere of happiness. Has the moral nature, like the physical nature, its own electrical communications and its rapid changes of temperature? My heart was beating at the approach of events then unrevealed which were to change it forever, just as animals grow livelier when foreseeing fine weather.

This day, so marked in my life, lacked no circumstance that was needed to solemnize it. Nature was adorned like a woman to meet her lover. My soul heard her voice for the first time; my eyes worshipped her, as fruitful, as varied as my imagination had pictured her in those school-dreams the influence of which I have tried in a few unskilful words to explain to you, for they were to me an Apocalypse in which my life was figuratively foretold; each event, fortunate or unfortunate, being mated to some one of these strange visions by ties known only to the soul.

We crossed a court-yard surrounded by buildings necessary for the farm work, – a barn, a wine-press, cow-sheds, and stables. Warned by the barking of the watch-dog, a servant came to meet us, saying that Monsieur le comte had gone to Azay in the morning but would soon return, and that Madame la comtesse was at home. My companion looked at me. I fairly trembled lest he should decline to see Madame de Mortsauf in her husband's absence; but he told the man to announce us. With the eagerness of a child I rushed into the long antechamber which crosses the

whole house.

"Come in, gentlemen," said a golden voice.

Though Madame de Mortsauf had spoken only one word at the ball, I recognized her voice, which entered my soul and filled it as a ray of sunshine fills and gilds a prisoner's dungeon. Thinking, suddenly, that she might remember my face, my first impulse was to fly; but it was too late, – she appeared in the doorway, and our eyes met. I know not which of us blushed deepest. Too much confused for immediate speech she returned to her seat at an embroidery frame while the servant placed two chairs, then she drew out her needle and counted some stitches, as if to explain her silence; after which she raised her head, gently yet proudly, in the direction of Monsieur de Chessel as she asked to what fortunate circumstance she owed his visit. Though curious to know the secret of my unexpected appearance, she looked at neither of us, – her eyes were fixed on the river; and yet you could have told by the way she listened that she was able to recognize, as the blind do, the agitations of a neighboring soul by the imperceptible inflexions of the voice.

Monsieur de Chessel gave my name and biography. I had lately arrived at Tours, where my parents had recalled me when the armies threatened Paris. A son of Touraine to whom Touraine was as yet unknown, she would find me a young man weakened by excessive study and sent to Frapesle to amuse himself; he had already shown me his estate, which I saw for the first time. I had just told him that I had walked from Tours to

Frapesle, and fearing for my health – which was really delicate – he had stopped at Clochegourde to ask her to allow me to rest there. Monsieur de Chessel told the truth; but the accident seemed so forced that Madame de Mortsauf distrusted us. She gave me a cold, severe glance, under which my own eyelids fell, as much from a sense of humiliation as to hide the tears that rose beneath them. She saw the moisture on my forehead, and perhaps she guessed the tears; for she offered me the restoratives I needed, with a few kind and consoling words, which gave me back the power of speech. I blushed like a young girl, and in a voice as tremulous as that of an old man I thanked her and declined.

"All I ask," I said, raising my eyes to hers, which mine now met for the second time in a glance as rapid as lightning, – "is to rest here. I am so crippled with fatigue I really cannot walk farther."

"You must not doubt the hospitality of our beautiful Touraine," she said; then, turning to my companion, she added: "You will give us the pleasure of your dining at Clochegourde?"

I threw such a look of entreaty at Monsieur de Chessel that he began the preliminaries of accepting the invitation, though it was given in a manner that seemed to expect a refusal. As a man of the world, he recognized these shades of meaning; but I, a young man without experience, believed so implicitly in the sincerity between word and thought of this beautiful woman that I was wholly astonished when my host said to me, after we reached

home that evening, “I stayed because I saw you were dying to do so; but if you do not succeed in making it all right, I may find myself on bad terms with my neighbors.” That expression, “if you do not make it all right,” made me ponder the matter deeply. In other words, if I pleased Madame de Mortsauf, she would not be displeased with the man who introduced me to her. He evidently thought I had the power to please her; this in itself gave me that power, and corroborated my inward hope at a moment when it needed some outward succor.

“I am afraid it will be difficult,” he began; “Madame de Chessel expects us.”

“She has you every day,” replied the countess; “besides, we can send her word. Is she alone?”

“No, the Abbe de Quelus is there.”

“Well, then,” she said, rising to ring the bell, “you really must dine with us.”

This time Monsieur de Chessel thought her in earnest, and gave me a congratulatory look. As soon as I was sure of passing a whole evening under that roof I seemed to have eternity before me. For many miserable beings to-morrow is a word without meaning, and I was of the number who had no faith in it; when I was certain of a few hours of happiness I made them contain a whole lifetime of delight.

Madame de Mortsauf talked about local affairs, the harvest, the vintage, and other matters to which I was a total stranger. This usually argues either a want of breeding or great contempt for the

stranger present who is thus shut out from the conversation, but in this case it was embarrassment. Though at first I thought she treated me as a child and I envied the man of thirty to whom she talked of serious matters which I could not comprehend, I came, a few months later, to understand how significant a woman's silence often is, and how many thoughts a voluble conversation masks. At first I attempted to be at my ease and take part in it, then I perceived the advantages of my situation and gave myself up to the charm of listening to Madame de Mortsauf's voice. The breath of her soul rose and fell among the syllables as sound is divided by the notes of a flute; it died away to the ear as it quickened the pulsation of the blood. Her way of uttering the terminations in "i" was like a bird's song; the "ch" as she said it was a kiss, but the "t's" were an echo of her heart's despotism. She thus extended, without herself knowing that she did so, the meaning of her words, leading the soul of the listener into regions above this earth. Many a time I have continued a discussion I could easily have ended, many a time I have allowed myself to be unjustly scolded that I might listen to those harmonies of the human voice, that I might breathe the air of her soul as it left her lips, and strain to my soul that spoken light as I would fain have strained the speaker to my breast. A swallow's song of joy it was when she was gay! – but when she spoke of her griefs, a swan's voice calling to its mates!

Madame de Mortsauf's inattention to my presence enabled me to examine her. My eyes rejoiced as they glided over the

sweet speaker; they kissed her feet, they clasped her waist, they played with the ringlets of her hair. And yet I was a prey to terror, as all who, once in their lives, have experienced the illimitable joys of a true passion will understand. I feared she would detect me if I let my eyes rest upon the shoulder I had kissed, and the fear sharpened the temptation. I yielded, I looked, my eyes tore away the covering; I saw the mole which lay where the pretty line between the shoulders started, and which, ever since the ball, had sparkled in that twilight which seems the region of the sleep of youths whose imagination is ardent and whose life is chaste.

I can sketch for you the leading features which all eyes saw in Madame de Mortsauf; but no drawing, however correct, no color, however warm, can represent her to you. Her face was of those that require the unattainable artist, whose hand can paint the reflection of inward fires and render that luminous vapor which defies science and is not revealable by language – but which a lover sees. Her soft, fair hair often caused her much suffering, no doubt through sudden rushes of blood to the head. Her brow, round and prominent like that of Joconda, teemed with unuttered thoughts, restrained feelings – flowers drowning in bitter waters. The eyes, of a green tinge flecked with brown, were always wan; but if her children were in question, or if some keen condition of joy or suffering (rare in the lives of all resigned women) seized her, those eyes sent forth a subtile gleam as if from fires that were consuming her, – the gleam that wrung the tears from mine when she covered me with her contempt, and which sufficed

to lower the boldest eyelid. A Grecian nose, designed it might be by Phidias, and united by its double arch to lips that were gracefully curved, spiritualized the face, which was oval with a skin of the texture of a white camellia colored with soft rose-tints upon the cheeks. Her plumpness did not detract from the grace of her figure nor from the rounded outlines which made her shape beautiful though well developed. You will understand the character of this perfection when I say that where the dazzling treasures which had so fascinated me joined the arm there was no crease or wrinkle. No hollow disfigured the base of her head, like those which make the necks of some women resemble trunks of trees; her muscles were not harshly defined, and everywhere the lines were rounded into curves as fugitive to the eye as to the pencil. A soft down faintly showed upon her cheeks and on the outline of her throat, catching the light which made it silken. Her little ears, perfect in shape, were, as she said herself, the ears of a mother and a slave. In after days, when our hearts were one, she would say to me, "Here comes Monsieur de Mortsauf"; and she was right, though I, whose hearing is remarkably acute, could hear nothing.

Her arms were beautiful. The curved fingers of the hand were long, and the flesh projected at the side beyond the finger-nails, like those of antique statues. I should displease you, I know, if you were not yourself an exception to my rule, when I say that flat waists should have the preference over round ones. The round waist is a sign of strength; but women thus formed are imperious,

self-willed, and more voluptuous than tender. On the other hand, women with flat waists are devoted in soul, delicately perceptive, inclined to sadness, more truly woman than the other class. The flat waist is supple and yielding; the round waist is inflexible and jealous.

You now know how she was made. She had the foot of a well-bred woman, – the foot that walks little, is quickly tired, and delights the eye when it peeps beneath the dress. Though she was the mother of two children, I have never met any woman so truly a young girl as she. Her whole air was one of simplicity, joined to a certain bashful dreaminess which attracted others, just as a painter arrests our steps before a figure into which his genius has conveyed a world of sentiment. If you recall the pure, wild fragrance of the heath we gathered on our return from the Villa Diodati, the flower whose tints of black and rose you praised so warmly, you can fancy how this woman could be elegant though remote from the social world, natural in expression, fastidious in all things which became part of herself, – in short, like the heath of mingled colors. Her body had the freshness we admire in the unfolding leaf; her spirit the clear conciseness of the aboriginal mind; she was a child by feeling, grave through suffering, the mistress of a household, yet a maiden too. Therefore she charmed artlessly and unconsciously, by her way of sitting down or rising, of throwing in a word or keeping silence. Though habitually collected, watchful as the sentinel on whom the safety of others depends and who looks for danger, there were moments when

smiles would wreathe her lips and betray the happy nature buried beneath the saddened bearing that was the outcome of her life. Her gift of attraction was mysterious. Instead of inspiring the gallant attentions which other women seek, she made men dream, letting them see her virginal nature of pure flame, her celestial visions, as we see the azure heavens through rifts in the clouds. This involuntary revelation of her being made others thoughtful. The rarity of her gestures, above all, the rarity of her glances – for, excepting her children, she seldom looked at any one – gave a strange solemnity to all she said and did when her words or actions seemed to her to compromise her dignity.

On this particular morning Madame de Mortsauf wore a rose-colored gown patterned in tiny stripes, a collar with a wide hem, a black belt, and little boots of the same hue. Her hair was simply twisted round her head, and held in place by a tortoise-shell comb. Such, my dear Natalie, is the imperfect sketch I promised you. But the constant emanation of her soul upon her family, that nurturing essence shed in floods around her as the sun emits its light, her inward nature, her cheerfulness on days serene, her resignation on stormy ones, – all those variations of expression by which character is displayed depend, like the effects in the sky, on unexpected and fugitive circumstances, which have no connection with each other except the background against which they rest, though all are necessarily mingled with the events of this history, – truly a household epic, as great to the eyes of a wise man as a tragedy to the eyes of the crowd, an epic in which

you will feel an interest, not only for the part I took in it, but for the likeness that it bears to the destinies of so vast a number of women.

Everything at Clochegourde bore signs of a truly English cleanliness. The room in which the countess received us was panelled throughout and painted in two shades of gray. The mantelpiece was ornamented with a clock inserted in a block of mahogany and surmounted with a tazza, and two large vases of white porcelain with gold lines, which held bunches of Cape heather. A lamp was on a pier-table, and a backgammon board on legs before the fireplace. Two wide bands of cotton held back the white cambric curtains, which had no fringe. The furniture was covered with gray cotton bound with a green braid, and the tapestry on the countess's frame told why the upholstery was thus covered. Such simplicity rose to grandeur. No apartment, among all that I have seen since, has given me such fertile, such teeming impressions as those that filled my mind in that salon of Clochegourde, calm and composed as the life of its mistress, where the conventual regularity of her occupations made itself felt. The greater part of my ideas in science or politics, even the boldest of them, were born in that room, as perfumes emanate from flowers; there grew the mysterious plant that cast upon my soul its fructifying pollen; there glowed the solar warmth which developed my good and shrivelled my evil qualities. Through the windows the eye took in the valley from the heights of Pont-de-Ruan to the chateau d'Azay, following the windings of the further

shore, picturesquely varied by the towers of Frapesle, the church, the village, and the old manor-house of Sache, whose venerable pile looked down upon the meadows.

In harmony with this reposeful life, and without other excitements to emotion than those arising in the family, this scene conveyed to the soul its own serenity. If I had met her there for the first time, between the count and her two children, instead of seeing her resplendent in a ball dress, I should not have ravished that delirious kiss, which now filled me with remorse and with the fear of having lost the future of my love. No; in the gloom of my unhappy life I should have bent my knee and kissed the hem of her garment, wetting it with tears, and then I might have flung myself into the Indre. But having breathed the jasmine perfume of her skin and drunk the milk of that cup of love, my soul had acquired the knowledge and the hope of human joys; I would live and await the coming of happiness as the savage awaits his hour of vengeance; I longed to climb those trees, to creep among the vines, to float in the river; I wanted the companionship of night and its silence, I needed lassitude of body, I craved the heat of the sun to make the eating of the delicious apple into which I had bitten perfect. Had she asked of me the singing flower, the riches buried by the comrades of Morgan the destroyer, I would have sought them, to obtain those other riches and that mute flower for which I longed.

When my dream, the dream into which this first contemplation of my idol plunged me, came to an end and I

heard her speaking of Monsieur de Mortsauf, the thought came that a woman must belong to her husband, and a raging curiosity possessed me to see the owner of this treasure. Two emotions filled my mind, hatred and fear, – hatred which allowed of no obstacles and measured all without shrinking, and a vague, but real fear of the struggle, of its issue, and above all of *her*.

"Here is Monsieur de Mortsauf," she said.

I sprang to my feet like a startled horse. Though the movement was seen by Monsieur de Chessel and the countess, neither made any observation, for a diversion was effected at this moment by the entrance of a little girl, whom I took to be about six years old, who came in exclaiming, "Here's papa!"

"Madeleine?" said her mother, gently.

The child at once held out her hand to Monsieur de Chessel, and looked attentively at me after making a little bow with an air of astonishment.

"Are you more satisfied about her health?" asked Monsieur de Chessel.

"She is better," replied the countess, caressing the little head which was already nestling in her lap.

The next question of Monsieur de Chessel let me know that Madeleine was nine years old; I showed great surprise, and immediately the clouds gathered on the mother's brow. My companion threw me a significant look, – one of those which form the education of men of the world. I had stumbled no doubt upon some maternal wound the covering of which should have

been respected. The sickly child, whose eyes were pallid and whose skin was white as a porcelain vase with a light within it, would probably not have lived in the atmosphere of a city. Country air and her mother's brooding care had kept the life in that frail body, delicate as a hot-house plant growing in a harsh and foreign climate. Though in nothing did she remind me of her mother, Madeleine seemed to have her soul, and that soul held her up. Her hair was scanty and black, her eyes and cheeks hollow, her arms thin, her chest narrow, showing a battle between life and death, a duel without truce in which the mother had so far been victorious. The child willed to live, – perhaps to spare her mother, for at times, when not observed, she fell into the attitude of a weeping-willow. You might have thought her a little gypsy dying of hunger, begging her way, exhausted but always brave and dressed up to play her part.

"Where have you left Jacques?" asked the countess, kissing the white line which parted the child's hair into two bands that looked like a crow's wings.

"He is coming with papa."

Just then the count entered, holding his son by the hand. Jacques, the image of his sister, showed the same signs of weakness. Seeing these sickly children beside a mother so magnificently healthy it was impossible not to guess at the causes of the grief which clouded her brow and kept her silent on a subject she could take to God only. As he bowed, Monsieur de Mortsauf gave me a glance that was less observing than

awkwardly uneasy, – the glance of a man whose distrust grows out of his inability to analyze. After explaining the circumstances of our visit, and naming me to him, the countess gave him her place and left the room. The children, whose eyes were on those of their mother as if they drew the light of theirs from hers, tried to follow her; but she said, with a finger on her lips, "Stay dears!" and they obeyed, but their eyes filled. Ah! to hear that one word "dears" what tasks they would have undertaken!

Like the children, I felt less warm when she had left us. My name seemed to change the count's feeling toward me. Cold and supercilious in his first glance, he became at once, if not affectionate, at least politely attentive, showing me every consideration and seeming pleased to receive me as a guest. My father had formerly done devoted service to the Bourbons, and had played an important and perilous, though secret part. When their cause was lost by the elevation of Napoleon, he took refuge in the quietude of the country and domestic life, accepting the unmerited accusations that followed him as the inevitable reward of those who risk all to win all, and who succumb after serving as pivot to the political machine. Knowing nothing of the fortunes, nor of the past, nor of the future of my family, I was unaware of this devoted service which the Comte de Mortsauf well remembered. Moreover, the antiquity of our name, the most precious quality of a man in his eyes, added to the warmth of his greeting. I knew nothing of these reasons until later; for the time being the sudden transition to cordiality put me at my ease.

When the two children saw that we were all three fairly engaged in conversation, Madeleine slipped her head from her father's hand, glanced at the open door, and glided away like an eel, Jacques following her. They rejoined their mother, and I heard their voices and their movements, sounding in the distance like the murmur of bees about a hive.

I watched the count, trying to guess his character, but I became so interested in certain leading traits that I got no further than a superficial examination of his personality. Though he was only forty-five years old, he seemed nearer sixty, so much had the great shipwreck at the close of the eighteenth century aged him. The crescent of hair which monastically fringed the back of his head, otherwise completely bald, ended at the ears in little tufts of gray mingled with black. His face bore a vague resemblance to that of a white wolf with blood about its muzzle, for his nose was inflamed and gave signs of a life poisoned at its springs and vitiated by diseases of long standing. His flat forehead, too broad for the face beneath it, which ended in a point, and transversely wrinkled in crooked lines, gave signs of a life in the open air, but not of any mental activity; it also showed the burden of constant misfortunes, but not of any efforts made to surmount them. His cheekbones, which were brown and prominent amid the general pallor of his skin, showed a physical structure which was likely to ensure him a long life. His hard, light-yellow eye fell upon mine like a ray of wintry sun, bright without warmth, anxious without thought, distrustful without conscious cause. His mouth

was violent and domineering, his chin flat and long. Thin and very tall, he had the bearing of a gentleman who relies upon the conventional value of his caste, who knows himself above others by right, and beneath them in fact. The carelessness of country life had made him neglect his external appearance. His dress was that of a country-man whom peasants and neighbors no longer considered except for his territorial worth. His brown and wiry hands showed that he wore no gloves unless he mounted a horse, or went to church, and his shoes were thick and common.

Though ten years of emigration and ten years more of farm-life had changed his physical condition, he still retained certain vestiges of nobility. The bitterest liberal (a term not then in circulation) would readily have admitted his chivalric loyalty and the imperishable convictions of one who puts his faith to the "Quotidienne"; he would have felt respect for the man religiously devoted to a cause, honest in his political antipathies, incapable of serving his party but very capable of injuring it, and without the slightest real knowledge of the affairs of France. The count was in fact one of those upright men who are available for nothing, but stand obstinately in the way of all; ready to die under arms at the post assigned to them, but preferring to give their life rather than to give their money.

During dinner I detected, in the hanging of his flaccid cheeks and the covert glances he cast now and then upon his children, the traces of some wearing thought which showed for a moment upon the surface. Watching him, who could fail to understand

him? Who would not have seen that he had fatally transmitted to his children those weakly bodies in which the principle of life was lacking. But if he blamed himself he denied to others the right to judge him. Harsh as one who knows himself in fault, yet without greatness of soul or charm to compensate for the weight of misery he had thrown into the balance, his private life was no doubt the scene of irascibilities that were plainly revealed in his angular features and by the incessant restlessness of his eye. When his wife returned, followed by the children who seemed fastened to her side, I felt the presence of unhappiness, just as in walking over the roof of a vault the feet become in some way conscious of the depths below. Seeing these four human beings together, holding them all as it were in one glance, letting my eye pass from one to the other, studying their countenances and their respective attitudes, thoughts steeped in sadness fell upon my heart as a fine gray rain dims a charming landscape after the sun has risen clear.

When the immediate subject of conversation was exhausted the count told his wife who I was, and related certain circumstances connected with my family that were wholly unknown to me. He asked me my age. When I told it, the countess echoed my own exclamation of surprise at her daughter's age. Perhaps she had thought me fifteen. Later on, I discovered that this was still another tie which bound her strongly to me. Even then I read her soul. Her motherhood quivered with a tardy ray of hope. Seeing me at over twenty years of age so slight and delicate

and yet so nervously strong, a voice cried to her, “They too will live!” She looked at me searchingly, and in that moment I felt the barriers of ice melting between us. She seemed to have many questions to ask, but uttered none.

“If study has made you ill,” she said, “the air of our valley will soon restore you.”

“Modern education is fatal to children,” remarked the count. “We stuff them with mathematics and ruin their health with sciences, and make them old before their time. You must stay and rest here,” he added, turning to me. “You are crushed by the avalanche of ideas that have rolled down upon you. What sort of future will this universal education bring upon us unless we prevent its evils by replacing public education in the hands of the religious bodies?”

These words were in harmony with a speech he afterwards made at the elections when he refused his support to a man whose gifts would have done good service to the royalist cause. “I shall always distrust men of talent,” he said.

Presently the count proposed that we should make the tour of the gardens.

“Monsieur – ” said his wife.

“Well, what, my dear?” he said, turning to her with an arrogant harshness which showed plainly enough how absolute he chose to be in his own home.

“Monsieur de Vandenesse walked from Tours this morning and Monsieur de Chessel, not aware of it, has already taken him

on foot over Frapesle."

"Very imprudent of you," the count said, turning to me; "but at your age – " and he shook his head in sign of regret.

The conversation was resumed. I soon saw how intractable his royalism was, and how much care was needed to swim safely in his waters. The man-servant, who had now put on his livery, announced dinner. Monsieur de Chessel gave his arm to Madame de Mortsauf, and the count gaily seized mine to lead me into the dining-room, which was on the ground-floor facing the salon.

This room, floored with white tiles made in Touraine, and wainscoted to the height of three feet, was hung with a varnished paper divided into wide panels by wreaths of flowers and fruit; the windows had cambric curtains trimmed with red, the buffets were old pieces by Boulle himself, and the woodwork of the chairs, which were covered by hand-made tapestry, was carved oak. The dinner, plentifully supplied, was not luxurious; family silver without uniformity, Dresden china which was not then in fashion, octagonal decanters, knives with agate handles, and lacquered trays beneath the wine-bottles, were the chief features of the table, but flowers adorned the porcelain vases and overhung the gilding of their fluted edges. I delighted in these quaint old things. I thought the Reveillon paper with its flowery garlands beautiful. The sweet content that filled my sails hindered me from perceiving the obstacles which a life so uniform, so unvarying in solitude of the country placed between her and me. I was near her, sitting at her right hand, serving her

with wine. Yes, unhoped-for joy! I touched her dress, I ate her bread. At the end of three hours my life had mingled with her life! That terrible kiss had bound us to each other in a secret which inspired us with mutual shame. A glorious self-abasement took possession of me. I studied to please the count, I fondled the dogs, I would gladly have gratified every desire of the children, I would have brought them hoops and marbles and played horse with them; I was even provoked that they did not already fasten upon me as a thing of their own. Love has intuitions like those of genius; and I dimly perceived that gloom, discontent, hostility would destroy my footing in that household.

The dinner passed with inward happiness on my part. Feeling that I was there, under her roof, I gave no heed to her obvious coldness, nor to the count's indifference masked by his politeness. Love, like life, has an adolescence during which period it suffices unto itself. I made several stupid replies induced by the tumults of passion, but no one perceived their cause, not even SHE, who knew nothing of love. The rest of my visit was a dream, a dream which did not cease until by moonlight on that warm and balmy night I recrossed the Indre, watching the white visions that embellished meadows, shores, and hills, and listening to the clear song, the matchless note, full of deep melancholy and uttered only in still weather, of a tree-frog whose scientific name is unknown to me. Since that solemn evening I have never heard it without infinite delight. A sense came to me then of the marble wall against which my feelings had hitherto dashed themselves.

Would it be always so? I fancied myself under some fatal spell; the unhappy events of my past life rose up and struggled with the purely personal pleasure I had just enjoyed. Before reaching Frapesle I turned to look at Clochegourde and saw beneath its windows a little boat, called in Touraine a punt, fastened to an ash-tree and swaying on the water. This punt belonged to Monsieur de Mortsauf, who used it for fishing.

"Well," said Monsieur de Chessel, when we were out of ear-shot. "I needn't ask if you found those shoulders; I must, however, congratulate you on the reception Monsieur de Mortsauf gave you. The devil! you stepped into his heart at once."

These words followed by those I have already quoted to you raised my spirits. I had not as yet said a word, and Monsieur de Chessel may have attributed my silence to happiness.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"He never, to my knowledge, received any one so well."

"I will admit that I am rather surprised myself," I said, conscious of a certain bitterness underlying my companion's speech.

Though I was too inexpert in social matters to understand its cause, I was much struck by the feeling Monsieur de Chessel betrayed. His real name was Durand, but he had had the weakness to discard the name of a worthy father, a merchant who had made a large fortune under the Revolution. His wife was sole heiress of the Chessels, an old parliamentary family under Henry IV., belonging to the middle classes, as did most of

the Parisian magistrates. Ambitious of higher flights Monsieur de Chessel endeavored to smother the original Durand. He first called himself Durand de Chessel, then D. de Chessel, and that made him Monsieur de Chessel. Under the Restoration he entailed an estate with the title of count in virtue of letters-patent from Louis XVIII. His children reaped the fruits of his audacity without knowing what it cost him in sarcastic comments. Parvenus are like monkeys, whose cleverness they possess; we watch them climbing, we admire their agility, but once at the summit we see only their absurd and contemptible parts. The reverse side of my host's character was made up of pettiness with the addition of envy. The peerage and he were on diverging lines. To have an ambition and gratify it shows merely the insolence of strength, but to live below one's avowed ambition is a constant source of ridicule to petty minds. Monsieur de Chessel did not advance with the straightforward step of a strong man. Twice elected deputy, twice defeated; yesterday director-general, to-day nothing at all, not even prefect, his successes and his defeats had injured his nature, and given him the sourness of invalided ambition. Though a brave man and a witty one and capable of great things, envy, which is the root of existence in Touraine, the inhabitants of which employ their native genius in jealousy of all things, injured him in upper social circles, where a dissatisfied man, frowning at the success of others, slow at compliments and ready at epigram, seldom succeeds. Had he sought less he might perhaps have obtained more; but unhappily

he had enough genuine superiority to make him wish to advance in his own way.

At this particular time Monsieur de Chessel's ambition had a second dawn. Royalty smiled upon him, and he was now affecting the grand manner. Still he was, I must say, most kind to me, and he pleased me for the very simple reason that with him I had found peace and rest for the first time. The interest, possibly very slight, which he showed in my affairs, seemed to me, lonely and rejected as I was, an image of paternal love. His hospitable care contrasted so strongly with the neglect to which I was accustomed, that I felt a childlike gratitude to the home where no fetters bound me and where I was welcomed and even courted.

The owners of Frapesle are so associated with the dawn of my life's happiness that I mingle them in all those memories I love to revive. Later, and more especially in connection with his letters-patent, I had the pleasure of doing my host some service. Monsieur de Chessel enjoyed his wealth with an ostentation that gave umbrage to certain of his neighbors. He was able to vary and renew his fine horses and elegant equipages; his wife dressed exquisitely; he received on a grand scale; his servants were more numerous than his neighbors approved; for all of which he was said to be aping princes. The Frapesle estate is immense. Before such luxury as this the Comte de Mortsauf, with one family cariole, – which in Touraine is something between a coach without springs and a post-chaise, – forced by limited means to

let or farm Clochegourde, was Tourangean up to the time when royal favor restored the family to a distinction possibly unlooked for. His greeting to me, the younger son of a ruined family whose escutcheon dated back to the Crusades, was intended to show contempt for the large fortune and to belittle the possessions, the woods, the arable lands, the meadows, of a neighbor who was not of noble birth. Monsieur de Chessel fully understood this. They always met politely; but there was none of that daily intercourse or that agreeable intimacy which ought to have existed between Clochegourde and Frapesle, two estates separated only by the Indre, and whose mistresses could have beckoned to each other from their windows.

Jealousy, however, was not the sole reason for the solitude in which the Count de Mortsauf lived. His early education was that of the children of great families, – an incomplete and superficial instruction as to knowledge, but supplemented by the training of society, the habits of a court life, and the exercise of important duties under the crown or in eminent offices. Monsieur de Mortsauf had emigrated at the very moment when the second stage of his education was about to begin, and accordingly that training was lacking to him. He was one of those who believed in the immediate restoration of the monarchy; with that conviction in his mind, his exile was a long and miserable period of idleness. When the army of Conde, which his courage led him to join with the utmost devotion, was disbanded, he expected to find some other post under the white flag, and never sought, like other

emigrants, to take up an industry. Perhaps he had not the sort of courage that could lay aside his name and earn his living in the sweat of a toil he despised. His hopes, daily postponed to the morrow, and possibly a scruple of honor, kept him from offering his services to foreign powers. Trials undermined his courage. Long tramps afoot on insufficient nourishment, and above all, on hopes betrayed, injured his health and discouraged his mind. By degrees he became utterly destitute. If to some men misery is a tonic, on others it acts as a dissolvent; and the count was of the latter.

Reflecting on the life of this poor Touraine gentleman, tramping and sleeping along the highroads of Hungary, sharing the mutton of Prince Esterhazy's shepherds, from whom the foot-worn traveller begged the food he would not, as a gentleman, have accepted at the table of the master, and refusing again and again to do service to the enemies of France, I never found it in my heart to feel bitterness against him, even when I saw him at his worst in after days. The natural gaiety of a Frenchman and a Tourangean soon deserted him; he became morose, fell ill, and was charitably cared for in some German hospital. His disease was an inflammation of the mesenteric membrane, which is often fatal, and is liable, even if cured, to change the constitution and produce hypochondria. His love affairs, carefully buried out of sight and which I alone discovered, were low-lived, and not only destroyed his health but ruined his future.

After twelve years of great misery he made his way to France,

under the decree of the Emperor which permitted the return of the emigrants. As the wretched wayfarer crossed the Rhine and saw the tower of Strasburg against the evening sky, his strength gave way. "'France! France!' I cried. 'I see France!'" (he said to me) "as a child cries 'Mother!' when it is hurt." Born to wealth, he was now poor; made to command a regiment or govern a province, he was now without authority and without a future; constitutionally healthy and robust, he returned infirm and utterly worn out. Without enough education to take part among men and affairs, now broadened and enlarged by the march of events, necessarily without influence of any kind, he lived despoiled of everything, of his moral strength as well as his physical. Want of money made his name a burden. His unalterable opinions, his antecedents with the army of Conde, his trials, his recollections, his wasted health, gave him susceptibilities which are but little spared in France, that land of jest and sarcasm. Half dead he reached Maine, where, by some accident of the civil war, the revolutionary government had forgotten to sell one of his farms of considerable extent, which his farmer had held for him by giving out that he himself was the owner of it.

When the Lenoncourt family, living at Givry, an estate not far from this farm, heard of the arrival of the Comte de Mortsauf, the Duc de Lenoncourt invited him to stay at Givry while a house was being prepared for him. The Lenoncourt family were nobly generous to him, and with them he remained some months, struggling to hide his sufferings during that first period of rest.

The Lenoncourts had themselves lost an immense property. By birth Monsieur de Mortsauf was a suitable husband for their daughter. Mademoiselle de Lenoncourt, instead of rejecting a marriage with a feeble and worn-out man of thirty-five, seemed satisfied to accept it. It gave her the opportunity of living with her aunt, the Duchesse de Verneuil, sister of the Prince de Blamont-Chauvry, who was like a mother to her.

Madame de Verneuil, the intimate friend of the Duchesse de Bourbon, was a member of the devout society of which Monsieur Saint-Martin (born in Touraine and called the Philosopher of Mystery) was the soul. The disciples of this philosopher practised the virtues taught them by the lofty doctrines of mystical illumination. These doctrines hold the key to worlds divine; they explain existence by reincarnations through which the human spirit rises to its sublime destiny; they liberate duty from its legal degradation, enable the soul to meet the trials of life with the unalterable serenity of the Quaker, ordain contempt for the sufferings of this life, and inspire a fostering care of that angel within us who allies us to the divine. It is stoicism with an immortal future. Active prayer and pure love are the elements of this faith, which is born of the Roman Church but returns to the Christianity of the primitive faith. Mademoiselle de Lenoncourt remained, however, in the Catholic communion, to which her aunt was equally bound. Cruelly tried by revolutionary horrors, the Duchesse de Verneuil acquired in the last years of her life a halo of passionate piety, which, to use the phraseology of Saint-

Martin, shed the light of celestial love and the chrism of inward joy upon the soul of her cherished niece.

After the death of her aunt, Madame de Mortsauf received several visits at Clochegourde from Saint-Martin, a man of peace and of virtuous wisdom. It was at Clochegourde that he corrected his last books, printed at Tours by Letourmy. Madame de Verneuil, wise with the wisdom of an old woman who has known the stormy straits of life, gave Clochegourde to the young wife for her married home; and with the grace of old age, so perfect where it exists, the duchess yielded everything to her niece, reserving for herself only one room above the one she had always occupied, and which she now fitted up for the countess. Her sudden death threw a gloom over the early days of the marriage, and connected Clochegourde with ideas of sadness in the sensitive mind of the bride. The first period of her settlement in Touraine was to Madame de Mortsauf, I cannot say the happiest, but the least troubled of her life.

After the many trials of his exile, Monsieur de Mortsauf, taking comfort in the thought of a secure future, had a certain recovery of mind; he breathed anew in this sweet valley the intoxicating essence of revived hope. Compelled to husband his means, he threw himself into agricultural pursuits and began to find some happiness in life. But the birth of his first child, Jacques, was a thunderbolt which ruined both the past and the future. The doctor declared the child had not vitality enough to live. The count concealed this sentence from the mother;

but he sought other advice, and received the same fatal answer, the truth of which was confirmed at the subsequent birth of Madeleine. These events and a certain inward consciousness of the cause of this disaster increased the diseased tendencies of the man himself. His name doomed to extinction, a pure and irreproachable young woman made miserable beside him and doomed to the anguish of maternity without its joys – this uprising of his former into his present life, with its growth of new sufferings, crushed his spirit and completed its destruction.

The countess guessed the past from the present, and read the future. Though nothing is so difficult as to make a man happy when he knows himself to blame, she set herself to that task, which is worthy of an angel. She became stoical. Descending into an abyss, whence she still could see the sky, she devoted herself to the care of one man as the sister of charity devotes herself to many. To reconcile him with himself, she forgave him that for which he had no forgiveness. The count grew miserly; she accepted the privations he imposed. Like all who have known the world only to acquire its suspiciousness, he feared betrayal; she lived in solitude and yielded without a murmur to his mistrust. With a woman's tact she made him will to do that which was right, till he fancied the ideas were his own, and thus enjoyed in his own person the honors of a superiority that was never his. After due experience of married life, she came to the resolution of never leaving Clochegourde; for she saw the hysterical tendencies of the count's nature, and feared the

outbreaks which might be talked of in that gossipping and jealous neighborhood to the injury of her children. Thus, thanks to her, no one suspected Monsieur de Mortsauf's real incapacity, for she wrapped his ruins in a mantle of ivy. The fickle, not merely discontented but embittered nature of the man found rest and ease in his wife; his secret anguish was lessened by the balm she shed upon it.

This brief history is in part a summary of that forced from Monsieur de Chessel by his inward vexation. His knowledge of the world enabled him to penetrate several of the mysteries of Clochegourde. But the prescience of love could not be misled by the sublime attitude with which Madame de Mortsauf deceived the world. When alone in my little bedroom, a sense of the full truth made me spring from my bed; I could not bear to stay at Frapesle when I saw the lighted windows of Clochegourde. I dressed, went softly down, and left the chateau by the door of a tower at the foot of a winding stairway. The coolness of the night calmed me. I crossed the Indre by the bridge at the Red Mill, took the ever-blessed punt, and rowed in front of Clochegourde, where a brilliant light was streaming from a window looking towards Azay.

Again I plunged into my old meditations; but they were now peaceful, intermingled with the love-note of the nightingale and the solitary cry of the sedge-warbler. Ideas glided like fairies through my mind, lifting the black veil which had hidden till then the glorious future. Soul and senses were alike charmed. With

what passion my thoughts rose to her! Again and again I cried, with the repetition of a madman, “Will she be mine?” During the preceding days the universe had enlarged to me, but now in a single night I found its centre. On her my will and my ambition henceforth fastened; I desired to be all in all to her, that I might heal and fill her lacerated heart.

Beautiful was that night beneath her windows, amid the murmur of waters rippling through the sluices, broken only by a voice that told the hours from the clock-tower of Sache. During those hours of darkness bathed in light, when this sidereal flower illumined my existence, I betrothed to her my soul with the faith of the poor Castilian knight whom we laugh at in the pages of Cervantes, – a faith, nevertheless, with which all love begins.

At the first gleam of day, the first note of the waking birds, I fled back among the trees of Frapesle and reached the house; no one had seen me, no one suspected by absence, and I slept soundly until the bell rang for breakfast. When the meal was over I went down, in spite of the heat, to the meadow-lands for another sight of the Indre and its isles, the valley and its slopes, of which I seemed so passionate an admirer. But once there, thanks to a swiftness of foot like that of a loose horse, I returned to my punt, the willows, and Clochegourde. All was silent and palpitating, as a landscape is at midday in summer. The still foliage lay sharply defined on the blue of the sky; the insects that live by light, the dragon-flies, the cantharides, were flying among the reeds and the ash-trees; cattle chewed the cud in the shade, the ruddy

earth of the vineyards glowed, the adders glided up and down the banks. What a change in the sparkling and coquettish landscape while I slept! I sprang suddenly from the boat and ran up the road which went round Clochegourde for I fancied that I saw the count coming out. I was not mistaken; he was walking beside the hedge, evidently making for a gate on the road to Azay which followed the bank of the river.

"How are you this morning, Monsieur le comte?"

He looked at me pleasantly, not being used to hear himself thus addressed.

"Quite well," he answered. "You must love the country, to be rambling about in this heat!"

"I was sent here to live in the open air."

"Then what do you say to coming with me to see them cut my rye?"

"Gladly," I replied. "I'll own to you that my ignorance is past belief; I don't know rye from wheat, nor a poplar from an aspen; I know nothing of farming, nor of the various methods of cultivating the soil."

"Well, come and learn," he cried gaily, returning upon his steps. "Come in by the little gate above."

The count walked back along the hedge, he being within it and I without.

"You will learn nothing from Monsieur de Chessel," he remarked; "he is altogether too fine a gentleman to do more than receive the reports of his bailiff."

The count then showed me his yards and the farm buildings, the pleasure-grounds, orchards, vineyards, and kitchen garden, until we finally came to the long alley of acacias and ailanthus beside the river, at the end of which I saw Madame de Mortsauf sitting on a bench, with her children. A woman is very lovely under the light and quivering shade of such foliage. Surprised, perhaps, at my prompt visit, she did not move, knowing very well that we should go to her. The count made me admire the view of the valley, which at this point is totally different from that seen from the heights above. Here I might have thought myself in a corner of Switzerland. The meadows, furrowed with little brooks which flow into the Indre, can be seen to their full extent till lost in the misty distance. Towards Montbazon the eye ranges over a vast green plain; in all other directions it is stopped by hills, by masses of trees, and rocks. We quickened our steps as we approached Madame de Mortsauf, who suddenly dropped the book in which Madeleine was reading to her and took Jacques upon her knees, in the paroxysms of a violent cough.

"What's the matter?" cried the count, turning livid.

"A sore throat," answered the mother, who seemed not to see me; "but it is nothing serious."

She was holding the child by the head and body, and her eyes seemed to shed two rays of life into the poor frail creature.

"You are so extraordinarily imprudent," said the count, sharply; "you expose him to the river damps and let him sit on a stone bench."

"Why, papa, the stone is burning hot," cried Madeleine.

"They were suffocating higher up," said the countess.

"Women always want to prove they are right," said the count, turning to me.

To avoid agreeing or disagreeing with him by word or look I watched Jacques, who complained of his throat. His mother carried him away, but as she did so she heard her husband say: —

"When they have brought such sickly children into the world they ought to learn how to take care of them."

Words that were cruelly unjust; but his self-love drove him to defend himself at the expense of his wife. The countess hurried up the steps and across the portico, and I saw her disappear through the glass door. Monsieur de Mortsauf seated himself on the bench, his head bowed in gloomy silence. My position became annoying; he neither spoke nor looked at me. Farewell to the walk he had proposed, in the course of which I had hoped to fathom him. I hardly remember a more unpleasant moment. Ought I to go away, or should I not go? How many painful thoughts must have arisen in his mind, to make him forget to follow Jacques and learn how he was! At last however he rose abruptly and came towards me. We both turned and looked at the smiling valley.

"We will put off our walk to another day, Monsieur le comte," I said gently.

"No, let us go," he replied. "Unfortunately, I am accustomed to such scenes – I, who would give my life without the slightest

regret to save that of the child."

"Jacques is better, my dear; he has gone to sleep," said a golden voice. Madame de Mortsauf suddenly appeared at the end of the path. She came forward, without bitterness or ill-will, and bowed to me.

"I am glad to see that you like Clochegourde," she said.

"My dear, should you like me to ride over and fetch Monsieur Deslandes?" said the count, as if wishing her to forgive his injustice.

"Don't be worried," she said. "Jacques did not sleep last night, that's all. The child is very nervous; he had a bad dream, and I told him stories all night to keep him quiet. His cough is purely nervous; I have stilled it with a lozenge, and he has gone to sleep."

"Poor woman!" said her husband, taking her hand in his and giving her a tearful look, "I knew nothing of it."

"Why should you be troubled when there is no occasion?" she replied. "Now go and attend to the rye. You know if you are not there the men will let the gleaners of the other villages get into the field before the sheaves are carried away."

"I am going to take a first lesson in agriculture, madame," I said to her.

"You have a very good master," she replied, motioning towards the count, whose mouth screwed itself into that smile of satisfaction which is vulgarly termed a "bouche en coeur."

Two months later I learned she had passed that night in great anxiety, fearing that her son had the croup; while I was in the

boat, rocked by thoughts of love, imagined that she might see me from her window adoring the gleam of the candle which was then lighting a forehead furrowed by fears! The croup prevailed at Tours, and was often fatal. When we were outside the gate, the count said in a voice of emotion, "Madame de Mortsauf is an angel!" The words staggered me. As yet I knew but little of the family, and the natural conscience of a young soul made me exclaim inwardly: "What right have I to trouble this perfect peace?"

Glad to find a listener in a young man over whom he could lord it so easily, the count talked to me of the future which the return of the Bourbons would secure to France. We had a desultory conversation, in which I listened to much childish nonsense which positively amazed me. He was ignorant of facts susceptible of proof that might be called geometric; he feared persons of education; he rejected superiority, and scoffed, perhaps with some reason, at progress. I discovered in his nature a number of sensitive fibres which it required the utmost caution not to wound; so that a conversation with him of any length was a positive strain upon the mind. When I had, as it were, felt of his defects, I conformed to them with the same suppleness that his wife showed in soothing him. Later in life I should certainly have made him angry, but now, humble as a child, supposing that I knew nothing and believing that men in their prime knew all, I was genuinely amazed at the results obtained at Clochegourde by this patient agriculturist. I listened admiringly to his plans; and

with an involuntary flattery which won his good-will, I envied him the estate and its outlook – a terrestrial paradise, I called it, far superior to Frapesle.

"Frapesle," I said, "is a massive piece of plate, but Clochegourde is a jewel-case of gems," – a speech which he often quoted, giving credit to its author.

"Before we came here," he said, "it was desolation itself."

I was all ears when he told of his seed-fields and nurseries. New to country life, I besieged him with questions about prices, means of preparing and working the soil, etc., and he seemed glad to answer all in detail.

"What in the world do they teach you in your colleges?" he exclaimed at last in astonishment.

On this first day the count said to his wife when he reached home, "Monsieur Felix is a charming young man."

That evening I wrote to my mother and asked her to send my clothes and linen, saying that I should remain at Frapesle. Ignorant of the great revolution which was just taking place, and not perceiving the influence it was to have upon my fate, I expected to return to Paris to resume my legal studies. The Law School did not open till the first week in November; meantime I had two months and a half before me.

The first part of my stay, while I studied to understand the count, was a period of painful impressions to me. I found him a man of extreme irascibility without adequate cause; hasty in action in hazardous cases to a degree that alarmed

me. Sometimes he showed glimpses of the brave gentleman of Conde's army, parabolic flashes of will such as may, in times of emergency, tear through politics like bomb-shells, and may also, by virtue of honesty and courage, make a man condemned to live buried on his property an Elbee, a Bonchamp, or a Charette. In presence of certain ideas his nostril contracted, his forehead cleared, and his eyes shot lightnings, which were soon quenched. Sometimes I feared he might detect the language of my eyes and kill me. I was young then and merely tender. Will, that force that alters men so strangely, had scarcely dawned within me. My passionate desires shook me with an emotion that was like the throes of fear. Death I feared not, but I would not die until I knew the happiness of mutual love – But how tell of what I felt! I was a prey to perplexity; I hoped for some fortunate chance; I watched; I made the children love me; I tried to identify myself with the family.

Little by little the count restrained himself less in my presence. I came to know his sudden outbreaks of temper, his deep and ceaseless melancholy, his flashes of brutality, his bitter, cutting complaints, his cold hatreds, his impulses of latent madness, his childish moans, his cries of a man's despair, his unexpected fury. The moral nature differs from the physical nature inasmuch as nothing is absolute in it. The force of effects is in direct proportion to the characters or the ideas which are grouped around some fact. My position at Clochegourde, my future life, depended on this one eccentric will.

I cannot describe to you the distress that filled my soul (as quick in those days to expand as to contract), whenever I entered Clochegourde, and asked myself, "How will he receive me?" With what anxiety of heart I saw the clouds collecting on that stormy brow. I lived in a perpetual "qui-vive." I fell under the dominion of that man; and the sufferings I endured taught me to understand those of Madame de Mortsauf. We began by exchanging looks of comprehension; tried by the same fire, how many discoveries I made during those first forty days! – of actual bitterness, of tacit joys, of hopes alternately submerged and buoyant. One evening I found her pensively watching a sunset which reddened the summits with so ravishing a glow that it was impossible not to listen to that voice of the eternal Song of Songs by which Nature herself bids all her creatures love. Did the lost illusions of her girlhood return to her? Did the woman suffer from an inward comparison? I fancied I perceived a desolation in her attitude that was favorable to my first appeal, and I said, "Some days are hard to bear."

"You read my soul," she answered; "but how have you done so?"

"We touch at many points," I replied. "Surely we belong to the small number of human beings born to the highest joys and the deepest sorrows; whose feeling qualities vibrate in unison and echo each other inwardly; whose sensitive natures are in harmony with the principle of things. Put such beings among surroundings where all is discord and they suffer horribly, just

as their happiness mounts to exaltation when they meet ideas, or feelings, or other beings who are congenial to them. But there is still a third condition, where sorrows are known only to souls affected by the same distress; in this alone is the highest fraternal comprehension. It may happen that such souls find no outlet either for good or evil. Then the organ within us endowed with expression and motion is exercised in a void, expends its passion without an object, utters sounds without melody, and cries that are lost in solitude, – terrible defeat of a soul which revolts against the inutility of nothingness. These are struggles in which our strength oozes away without restraint, as blood from an inward wound. The sensibilities flow to waste and the result is a horrible weakening of the soul; an indescribable melancholy for which the confessional itself has no ears. Have I not expressed our mutual sufferings?"

She shuddered, and then without removing her eyes from the setting sun, she said, "How is it that, young as you are, you know these things? Were you once a woman?"

"Ah!" I replied, "my childhood was like a long illness – "

"I hear Madeleine coughing," she cried, leaving me abruptly.

The countess showed no displeasure at my constant visits, and for two reasons. In the first place she was pure as a child, and her thoughts wandered into no forbidden regions; in the next I amused the count and made a sop for that lion without claws or mane. I found an excuse for my visits which seemed plausible to every one. Monsieur de Mortsauf proposed to teach

me backgammon, and I accepted; as I did so the countess was betrayed into a look of compassion, which seemed to say, "You are flinging yourself into the jaws of the lion." If I did not understand this at the time, three days had not passed before I knew what I had undertaken. My patience, which nothing exhausts, the fruit of my miserable childhood, ripened under this last trial. The count was delighted when he could jeer at me for not putting in practice the principles or the rules he had explained; if I reflected before I played he complained of my slowness; if I played fast he was angry because I hurried him; if I forgot to mark my points he declared, making his profit out of the mistake, that I was always too rapid. It was like the tyranny of a schoolmaster, the despotism of the rod, of which I can really give you no idea unless I compare myself to Epictetus under the yoke of a malicious child. When we played for money his winnings gave him the meanest and most abject delight.

A word from his wife was enough to console me, and it frequently recalled him to a sense of politeness and good-breeding. But before long I fell into the furnace of an unexpected misery. My money was disappearing under these losses. Though the count was always present during my visits until I left the house, which was sometimes very late, I cherished the hope of finding some moment when I might say a word that would reach my idol's heart; but to obtain that moment, for which I watched and waited with a hunter's painful patience, I was forced to continue these weary games, during which my feelings were

lacerated and my money lost. Still, there were moments when we were silent, she and I, looking at the sunlight on the meadows, the clouds in a gray sky, the misty hills, or the quivering of the moon on the sandbanks of the river; saying only, "Night is beautiful!"

"Night is woman, madame."

"What tranquillity!"

"Yes, no one can be absolutely wretched here."

Then she would return to her embroidery frame. I came at last to hear the inward beatings of an affection which sought its object. But the fact remained – without money, farewell to these evenings. I wrote to my mother to send me some. She scolded me and sent only enough to last a week. Where could I get more? My life depended on it. Thus it happened that in the dawn of my first great happiness I found the same sufferings that assailed me elsewhere; but in Paris, at college, at school I evaded them by abstinence; there my privations were negative, at Frapesle they were active; so active that I was possessed by the impulse to theft, by visions of crime, furious desperations which rend the soul and must be subdued under pain of losing our self-respect. The memory of what I suffered through my mother's parsimony taught me that indulgence for young men which one who has stood upon the brink of the abyss and measured its depths, without falling into them, must inevitably feel. Though my own rectitude was strengthened by those moments when life opened and let me see the rocks and quicksands beneath the surface, I have never known that terrible thing called human

justice draw its blade through the throat of a criminal without saying to myself: “Penal laws are made by men who have never known misery.”

At this crisis I happened to find a treatise on backgammon in Monsieur de Chessel’s library, and I studied it. My host was kind enough to give me a few lessons; less harshly taught by the count I made good progress and applied the rules and calculations I knew by heart. Within a few days I was able to beat Monsieur de Mortsauf; but no sooner had I done so and won his money for the first time than his temper became intolerable; his eyes glittered like those of tigers, his face shrivelled, his brows knit as I never saw brows knit before or since. His complainings were those of a fretful child. Sometimes he flung down the dice, quivered with rage, bit the dice-box, and said insulting things to me. Such violence, however, came to an end. When I had acquired enough mastery of the game I played it to suit me; I so managed that we were nearly equal up to the last moment; I allowed him to win the first half and made matters even during the last half. The end of the world would have surprised him less than the rapid superiority of his pupil; but he never admitted it. The unvarying result of our games was a topic of discourse on which he fastened.

“My poor head,” he would say, “is fatigued; you manage to win the last of the game because by that time I lose my skill.”

The countess, who knew backgammon, understood my manoeuvres from the first, and gave me those mute thanks which swell the heart of a young man; she granted me the same look

she gave to her children. From that ever-blessed evening she always looked at me when she spoke. I cannot explain to you the condition I was in when I left her. My soul had annihilated my body; it weighed nothing; I did not walk, I flew. That look I carried within me; it bathed me with light just as her last words, "Adieu, monsieur," still sounded in my soul with the harmonies of "O filii, o filioe" in the paschal choir. I was born into a new life, I was something to her! I slept on purple and fine linen. Flames darted before my closed eyelids, chasing each other in the darkness like threads of fire in the ashes of burned paper. In my dreams her voice became, though I cannot describe it, palpable, an atmosphere of light and fragrance wrapping me, a melody enfolding my spirit. On the morrow her greeting expressed the fulness of feelings that remained unuttered, and from that moment I was initiated into the secrets of her voice.

That day was to be one of the most decisive of my life. After dinner we walked on the heights across a barren plain where no herbage grew; the ground was stony, arid, and without vegetable soil of any kind; nevertheless a few scrub oaks and thorny bushes straggled there, and in place of grass, a carpet of crimped mosses, illuminated by the setting sun and so dry that our feet slipped upon it. I held Madeleine by the hand to keep her up. Madame de Mortsauf was leading Jacques. The count, who was in front, suddenly turned round and striking the earth with his cane said to me in a dreadful tone: "Such is my life! – but before I knew you," he added with a look of penitence at his wife.

The reparation was tardy, for the countess had turned pale; what woman would not have staggered as she did under the blow?

"But what delightful scenes are wafted here, and what a view of the sunset!" I cried. "For my part I should like to own this barren moor; I fancy there may be treasures if we dig for them. But its greatest wealth is that of being near you. Who would not pay a great cost for such a view? – all harmony to the eye, with that winding river where the soul may bathe among the ash-trees and the alders. See the difference of taste! To you this spot of earth is a barren waste; to me, it is paradise."

She thanked me with a look.

"Bucolics!" exclaimed the count, with a bitter look. "This is no life for a man who bears your name." Then he suddenly changed his tone – "The bells!" he cried, "don't you hear the bells of Azay? I hear them ringing."

Madame de Mortsauf gave me a frightened look. Madeleine clung to my hand.

"Suppose we play a game of backgammon?" I said. "Let us go back; the rattle of the dice will drown the sound of the bells."

We returned to Clochegourde, conversing by fits and starts. Once in the salon an indefinable uncertainty and dread took possession of us. The count flung himself into an armchair, absorbed in reverie, which his wife, who knew the symptoms of his malady and could foresee an outbreak, was careful not to interrupt. I also kept silence. As she gave me no hint to leave, perhaps she thought backgammon might divert the count's mind

and quiet those fatal nervous susceptibilities, the excitements of which were killing him. Nothing was ever harder than to make him play that game, which, however, he had a great desire to play. Like a pretty woman, he always required to be coaxed, entreated, forced, so that he might not seem the obliged person. If by chance, being interested in the conversation, I forgot to propose it, he grew sulky, bitter, insulting, and spoiled the talk by contradicting everything. If, warned by his ill-humor, I suggested a game, he would dally and demur. "In the first place, it is too late," he would say; "besides, I don't care for it." Then followed a series of affectations like those of women, which often leave you in ignorance of their real wishes.

On this occasion I pretended a wild gaiety to induce him to play. He complained of giddiness which hindered him from calculating; his brain, he said, was squeezed into a vice; he heard noises, he was choking; and thereupon he sighed heavily. At last, however, he consented to the game. Madame de Mortsauf left us to put the children to bed and lead the household in family prayers. All went well during her absence; I allowed Monsieur de Mortsauf to win, and his delight seemed to put him beside himself. This sudden change from a gloom that led him to make the darkest predictions to the wild joy of a drunken man, expressed in a crazy laugh and without any adequate motive, distressed and alarmed me. I had never seen him in quite so marked a paroxysm. Our intimacy had borne fruits in the fact that he no longer restrained himself before me. Day by day he had

endeavored to bring me under his tyranny, and obtain fresh food, as it were, for his evil temper; for it really seems as though moral diseases were creatures with appetites and instincts, seeking to enlarge the boundaries of their empire as a landowner seeks to increase his domain.

Presently the countess came down, and sat close to the backgammon table, apparently for better light on her embroidery, though the anxiety which led her to place her frame was ill-concealed. A piece of fatal ill-luck which I could not prevent changed the count's face; from gaiety it fell to gloom, from purple it became yellow, and his eyes rolled. Then followed worse ill-luck, which I could neither avert nor repair. Monsieur de Mortsauf made a fatal throw which decided the game. Instantly he sprang up, flung the table at me and the lamp on the floor, struck the chimney-piece with his fist and jumped, for I cannot say he walked, about the room. The torrent of insults, imprecations, and incoherent words which rushed from his lips would have made an observer think of the old tales of satanic possession in the Middle Ages. Imagine my position!

"Go into the garden," said the countess, pressing my hand.

I left the room before the count could notice my disappearance. On the terrace, where I slowly walked about, I heard his shouts and then his moans from the bedroom which adjoined the dining-room. Also I heard at intervals through that tempest of sound the voice of an angel, which rose like the song of a nightingale as the rain ceases. I walked about under the

acacias in the loveliest night of the month of August, waiting for the countess to join me. I knew she would come; her gesture promised it. For several days an explanation seemed to float between us; a word would suffice to send it gushing from the spring, overfull, in our souls. What timidity had thus far delayed a perfect understanding between us? Perhaps she loved, as I did, these quiverings of the spirit which resembled emotions of fear and numbed the sensibilities while we held our life unuttered within us, hesitating to unveil its secrets with the modesty of the young girl before the husband she loves. An hour passed. I was sitting on the brick balustrade when the sound of her footsteps blending with the undulating ripple of her flowing gown stirred the calm air of the night. These are sensations to which the heart suffices not.

"Monsieur de Mortsauf is sleeping," she said. "When he is thus I give him an infusion of poppies, a cup of water in which a few poppies have been steeped; the attacks are so infrequent that this simple remedy never loses its effect – Monsieur," she continued, changing her tone and using the most persuasive inflexion of her voice, "this most unfortunate accident has revealed to you a secret which has hitherto been sedulously kept; promise me to bury the recollection of that scene. Do this for my sake, I beg of you. I don't ask you to swear it; give me your word of honor and I shall be content."

"Need I give it to you?" I said. "Do we not understand each other?"

"You must not judge unfavorably of Monsieur de Mortsauf; you see the effects of his many sufferings under the emigration," she went on. "To-morrow he will entirely forget all that he has said and done; you will find him kind and excellent as ever."

"Do not seek to excuse him, madame," I replied. "I will do all you wish. I would fling myself into the Indre at this moment if I could restore Monsieur de Mortsauf's health and ensure you a happy life. The only thing I cannot change is my opinion. I can give you my life, but not my convictions; I can pay no heed to what he says, but can I hinder him from saying it? No, in my opinion Monsieur de Mortsauf is – "

"I understand you," she said, hastily interrupting me; "you are right. The count is as nervous as a fashionable woman," she added, as if to conceal the idea of madness by softening the word. "But he is only so at intervals, once a year, when the weather is very hot. Ah, what evils have resulted from the emigration! How many fine lives ruined! He would have been, I am sure of it, a great soldier, an honor to his country – "

"I know," I said, interrupting in my turn to let her see that it was useless to attempt to deceive me.

She stopped, laid one hand lightly on my brow, and looked at me. "Who has sent you here," she said, "into this home? Has God sent me help, a true friendship to support me?" She paused, then added, as she laid her hand firmly upon mine, "For you are good and generous – " She raised her eyes to heaven, as if to invoke some invisible testimony to confirm her thought, and

then let them rest upon me. Electrified by the look, which cast a soul into my soul, I was guilty, judging by social laws, of a want of tact, though in certain natures such indelicacy really means a brave desire to meet danger, to avert a blow, to arrest an evil before it happens; oftener still, an abrupt call upon a heart, a blow given to learn if it resounds in unison with ours. Many thoughts rose like gleams within my mind and bade me wash out the stain that blotted my conscience at this moment when I was seeking a complete understanding.

"Before we say more," I said in a voice shaken by the throbbings of my heart, which could be heard in the deep silence that surrounded us, "suffer me to purify one memory of the past."

"Hush!" she said quickly, touching my lips with a finger which she instantly removed. She looked at me haughtily, with the glance of a woman who knows herself too exalted for insult to reach her. "Be silent; I know of what you are about to speak, – the first, the last, the only outrage ever offered to me. Never speak to me of that ball. If as a Christian I have forgiven you, as a woman I still suffer from your act."

"You are more pitiless than God himself," I said, forcing back the tears that came into my eyes.

"I ought to be so, I am more feeble," she replied.

"But," I continued with the persistence of a child, "listen to me now if only for the first, the last, the only time in your life."

"Speak, then," she said; "speak, or you will think I dare not hear you."

Feeling that this was the turning moment of our lives, I spoke to her in the tone that commands attention; I told her that all women whom I had ever seen were nothing to me; but when I met her, I, whose life was studious, whose nature was not bold, I had been, as it were, possessed by a frenzy that no one who once felt it could condemn; that never heart of man had been so filled with the passion which no being can resist, which conquers all things, even death —

"And contempt?" she asked, stopping me.

"Did you despise me?" I exclaimed.

"Let us say no more on this subject," she replied.

"No, let me say all!" I replied, in the excitement of my intolerable pain. "It concerns my life, my whole being, my inward self; it contains a secret you must know or I must die in despair. It also concerns you, who, unawares, are the lady in whose hand is the crown promised to the victor in the tournament!"

Then I related to her my childhood and youth, not as I have told it to you, judged from a distance, but in the language of a young man whose wounds are still bleeding. My voice was like the axe of a woodsman in the forest. At every word the dead years fell with echoing sound, bristling with their anguish like branches robbed of their foliage. I described to her in feverish language many cruel details which I have here spared you. I spread before her the treasure of my radiant hopes, the virgin gold of my desires, the whole of a burning heart kept alive beneath the snow of these Alps, piled higher and higher by perpetual winter. When,

bowed down by the weight of these remembered sufferings, related as with the live coal of Isaiah, I awaited the reply of the woman who listened with a bowed head, she illumined the darkness with a look, she quickened the worlds terrestrial and divine with a single sentence.

"We have had the same childhood!" she said, turning to me a face on which the halo of the martyrs shone.

After a pause, in which our souls were wedded in the one consoling thought, "I am not alone in suffering," the countess told me, in the voice she kept for her little ones, how unwelcome she was as a girl when sons were wanted. She showed me how her troubles as a daughter bound to her mother's side differed from those of a boy cast out upon the world of school and college life. My desolate neglect seemed to me a paradise compared to that contact with a millstone under which her soul was ground until the day when her good aunt, her true mother, had saved her from this misery, the ever-recurring pain of which she now related to me; misery caused sometimes by incessant faultfinding, always intolerable to high-strung natures which do not shrink before death itself but die beneath the sword of Damocles; sometimes by the crushing of generous impulses beneath an icy hand, by the cold rebuffal of her kisses, by a stern command of silence, first imposed and then as often blamed; by inward tears that dared not flow but stayed within the heart; in short, by all the bitterness and tyranny of convent rule, hidden to the eyes of the world under the appearance of an exalted motherly devotion. She gratified her

mother's vanity before strangers, but she dearly paid in private for this homage. When, believing that by obedience and gentleness she had softened her mother's heart, she opened hers, the tyrant only armed herself with the girl's confidence. No spy was ever more traitorous and base. All the pleasures of girlhood, even her fete days, were dearly purchased, for she was scolded for her gaiety as much as for her faults. No teaching and no training for her position had been given in love, always with sarcastic irony. She was not angry against her mother; in fact she blamed herself for feeling more terror than love for her. "Perhaps," she said, dear angel, "these severities were needful; they had certainly prepared her for her present life." As I listened it seemed to me that the harp of Job, from which I had drawn such savage sounds, now touched by the Christian fingers gave forth the litanies of the Virgin at the foot of the cross.

"We lived in the same sphere before we met in this," I said; "you coming from the east, I from the west."

She shook her head with a gesture of despair.

"To you the east, to me the west," she replied. "You will live happy, I must die of pain. Life is what we make of it, and mine is made forever. No power can break the heavy chain to which a woman is fastened by this ring of gold – the emblem of a wife's purity."

We knew we were twins of one womb; she never dreamed of a half-confidence between brothers of the same blood. After a short sigh, natural to pure hearts when they first open to

each other, she told me of her first married life, her deceptions and disillusions, the rebirth of her childhood's misery. Like me, she had suffered under trifles; mighty to souls whose limpid substance quivers to the least shock, as a lake quivers on the surface and to its utmost depths when a stone is flung into it. When she married she possessed some girlish savings; a little gold, the fruit of happy hours and repressed fancies. These, in a moment when they were needed, she gave to her husband, not telling him they were gifts and savings of her own. He took no account of them, and never regarded himself her debtor. She did not even obtain the glance of thanks that would have paid for all. Ah! how she went from trial to trial! Monsieur de Mortsauf habitually neglected to give her money for the household. When, after a struggle with her timidity, she asked him for it, he seemed surprised and never once spared her the mortification of petitioning for necessities. What terror filled her mind when the real nature of the ruined man's disease was revealed to her, and she quailed under the first outbreak of his mad anger! What bitter reflections she had made before she brought herself to admit that her husband was a wreck! What horrible calamities had come of her bearing children! What anguish she felt at the sight of those infants born almost dead! With what courage had she said in her heart: "I will breathe the breath of life into them; I will bear them anew day by day!" Then conceive the bitterness of finding her greatest obstacle in the heart and hand from which a wife should draw her greatest succor! She saw the untold disaster that

threatened him. As each difficulty was conquered, new deserts opened before her, until the day when she thoroughly understood her husband's condition, the constitution of her children, and the character of the neighborhood in which she lived; a day when (like the child taken by Napoleon from a tender home) she taught her feet to trample through mud and snow, she trained her nerves to bullets and all her being to the passive obedience of a soldier.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.