HONORÉ DE BALZAC

SONS OF THE SOIL

Оноре де Бальзак

Sons of the Soil

де Бальзак О.

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Содержание

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DEDICATION

To Monsieur P. S. B. Gavault

Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote these words at the beginning of his Nouvelle Heloise: “I have seen the morals of my time and I publish these letters.” May I not say to you, in imitation of that great writer, “I have studied the march of my epoch and I publish this work”?

The object of this particular study – startling in its truth so long as society makes philanthropy a principle instead of regarding it as an accident – is to bring to sight the leading characters of a class too long unheeded by the pens of writers who seek novelty as their chief object. Perhaps this forgetfulness is only prudence in these days when the people are heirs of all the sycophants of royalty. We make criminals poetic, we commiserate the hangman, we have all but deified the proletary. Sects have risen, and cried by every pen, “Arise, working-men!” just as formerly they cried, “Arise!” to the “tiers etat.” None of these Erostrates, however, have dared to face the country solitudes and study the unceasing conspiracy of those whom we term weak against those others who fancy themselves strong, – that of the peasant against the proprietor. It is necessary to enlighten not only the legislator of to-day but him of to-morrow. In the midst of the present democratic ferment, into which so many of our writers blindly rush, it becomes an urgent duty to exhibit the peasant who renders Law inapplicable, and who has made the ownership of land to be a thing that is, and that is not.

You are now to behold that indefatigable mole, that rodent which undermines and disintegrates the soil, parcels it out and divides an acre into a hundred fragments, – ever spurred on to his banquet by the lower middle classes who make him at once their auxiliary and their prey. This essentially unsocial element, created by the Revolution, will some day absorb the middle classes, just as the middle classes have destroyed the nobility. Lifted above the law by its own insignificance, this Robespierre, with one head and twenty million arms, is at work perpetually; crouching in country districts, intrenched in municipal councils, under arms in the national guard of every canton in France, – one result of the year 1830, which failed to remember that Napoleon preferred the chances of defeat to the danger of arming the masses.

If during the last eight years I have again and again given up the writing of this book (the most important of those I have undertaken to write), and as often returned to it, it was, as you and other friends can well imagine, because my courage shrank from the many difficulties, the many essential details of a drama so doubly dreadful and so cruelly bloody. Among the reasons which render me now almost, it may be thought, foolhardy, I count the desire to finish a work long designed to be to you a proof of my deep and lasting gratitude for a friendship that has ever been among my greatest consolations in misfortune.

De Balzac.

PART I

Whoso land hath, contention hath.

CHAPTER I. THE CHATEAU

Les Aigues, August 6, 1823.

To Monsieur Nathan,

My dear Nathan, – You, who provide the public with such delightful dreams through the magic of your imagination, are now to follow me while I make you dream a dream of truth. You shall then tell me whether the present century is likely to bequeath such dreams to the Nathans and the Blondets of the year 1923; you shall estimate the distance at which we now are from the days when the Florines of the eighteenth century found, on awaking, a chateau like Les Aigues in the terms of their bargain.

My dear fellow, if you receive this letter in the morning, let your mind travel, as you lie in bed, fifty leagues or thereabouts from Paris, along the great mail road which leads to the confines of Burgundy, and behold two small lodges built of red brick, joined, or separated, by a rail painted green. It was there that the diligence deposited your friend and correspondent.

On either side of this double pavilion grows a quick-set hedge, from which the brambles straggle like stray locks of hair. Here and there a tree shoots boldly up; flowers bloom on the slopes of the wayside ditch, bathing their feet in its green and sluggish water. The hedge at both ends meets and joins two strips of woodland, and the double meadow thus inclosed is doubtless the result of a clearing.

These dusty and deserted lodges give entrance to a magnificent avenue of centennial elms, whose umbrageous heads lean toward each other and form a long and most majestic arbor. The grass grows in this avenue, and only a few wheel-tracks can be seen along its double width of way. The great age of the trees, the breadth of the avenue, the venerable construction of the lodges, the brown tints of their stone courses, all bespeak an approach to some half-regal residence.

Before reaching this enclosure from the height of an eminence such as we Frenchmen rather conceitedly call a mountain, at the foot of which lies the village of Conches (the last post-house), I had seen the long valley of Aigues, at the farther end of which the mail road turns to follow a straight line into the little sub-prefecture of La Ville-aux-Fayes, over which, as you know, the nephew of our friend des Lupeaulx lords it. Tall forests lying on the horizon, along vast slopes which skirt a river, command this rich valley, which is framed in the far distance by the mountains of a lesser Switzerland, called the Morvan. These forests belong to Les Aigues, and to the Marquis de Ronquerolles and the Comte de Soulanges, whose castles and parks and villages, seen in the distance from these heights, give the scene a strong resemblance to the imaginary landscapes of Velvet Breughel.

If these details do not remind you of all the castles in the air you have desired to possess in France you are not worthy to receive the present narrative of an astounded Parisian. At last I have seen a landscape where art is blended with nature in such a way that neither of them spoils the other; the art is natural, and the nature artistic. I have found the oasis that you and I have dreamed of when reading novels, – nature luxuriant and adorned, rolling lines that are not confused, something wild withal, unkempt, mysterious, not common. Jump that green railing and come on!

When I tried to look up the avenue, which the sun never penetrates except when it rises or when it sets, striping the road like a zebra with its oblique rays, my view was obstructed by an outline of rising ground; after that is passed, the long avenue is obstructed by a copse, within which the roads meet at a cross-ways, in the centre of which stands a stone obelisk, for all the world like an eternal exclamation mark. From the crevices between the foundation stones of this erection, which is topped by a spiked ball (what an idea!), hang flowering plants, blue or yellow according to the season. Les Aigues must certainly have been built by a woman, or for a woman; no man would have had such dainty ideas; the architect no doubt had his cue.

Passing through the little wood placed there as sentinel, I came upon a charming declivity, at the foot of which foamed and gurgled a little brook, which I crossed on a culvert of mossy stones, superb in color, the prettiest of all the mosaics which time manufactures. The avenue continues by

the brookside up a gentle rise. In the distance, the first tableau is now seen, – a mill and its dam, a causeway and trees, linen laid out to dry, the thatched cottage of the miller, his fishing-nets, and the tank where the fish are kept, – not to speak of the miller's boy, who was already watching me. No matter where you are in the country, however solitary you may think yourself, you are certain to be the focus of the two eyes of a country bumpkin; a laborer rests on his hoe, a vine-dresser straightens his bent back, a little goat-girl, or shepherdess, or milkmaid climbs a willow to stare at you.

Presently the avenue merges into an alley of acacias, which leads to an iron railing made in the days when iron-workers fashioned those slender filagrees which are not unlike the copies set us by a writing-master. On either side of the railing is a ha-ha, the edges of which bristle with angry spikes, – regular porcupines in metal. The railing is closed at both ends by two porter's-lodges, like those of the palace at Versailles, and the gateway is surmounted by colossal vases. The gold of the arabesques is ruddy, for rust has added its tints, but this entrance, called "the gate of the Avenue," which plainly shows the hand of the Great Dauphin (to whom, indeed, Les Aigues owes it), seems to me none the less beautiful for that. At the end of each ha-ha the walls of the park, built of rough-hewn stone, begin. These stones, set in a mortar made of reddish earth, display their variegated colors, the warm yellows of the silex, the white of the lime carbonates, the russet browns of the sandstone, in many a fantastic shape. As you first enter it, the park is gloomy, the walls are hidden by creeping plants and by trees that for fifty years have heard no sound of axe. One might think it a virgin forest, made primeval again through some phenomenon granted exclusively to forests. The trunks of the trees are swathed with lichen which hangs from one to another. Mistletoe, with its viscid leaves, droops from every fork of the branches where moisture settles. I have found gigantic ivies, wild arabesques which flourish only at fifty leagues from Paris, here where land does not cost enough to make one sparing of it. The landscape on such free lines covers a great deal of ground. Nothing is smoothed off; rakes are unknown, ruts and ditches are full of water, frogs are tranquilly delivered of their tadpoles, the woodland flowers bloom, and the heather is as beautiful as that I have seen on your mantle-shelf in January in the elegant beau-pot sent by Florine. This mystery is intoxicating, it inspires vague desires. The forest odors, beloved of souls that are epicures of poesy, who delight in the tiny mosses, the noxious fungi, the moist mould, the willows, the balsams, the wild thyme, the green waters of a pond, the golden star of the yellow water-lily, – the breath of all such vigorous propagations came to my nostrils and filled me with a single thought; was it their soul? I seemed to see a rose-tinted gown floating along the winding alley.

The path ended abruptly in another copse, where birches and poplars and all the quivering trees palpitated, – an intelligent family with graceful branches and elegant bearing, the trees of a love as free! It was from this point, my dear fellow, that I saw a pond covered with the white water-lily and other plants with broad flat leaves and narrow slender ones, on which lay a boat painted white and black, as light as a nut-shell and dainty as the wherry of a Seine boatman. Beyond rose the chateau, built in 1560, of fine red brick, with stone courses and copings, and window-frames in which the sashes were of small leaded panes (O Versailles!). The stone is hewn in diamond points, but hollowed, as in the Ducal Palace at Venice on the facade toward the Bridge of Sighs. There are no regular lines about the castle except in the centre building, from which projects a stately portico with double flights of curving steps, and round balusters slender at their base and broadening at the middle. The main building is surrounded by clock-towers and sundry modern turrets, with galleries and vases more or less Greek. No harmony there, my dear Nathan! These heterogeneous erections are wrapped, so to speak, by various evergreen trees whose branches shed their brown needles upon the roofs, nourishing the lichen and giving tone to the cracks and crevices where the eye delights to wander. Here you see the Italian pine, the stone pine, with its red bark and its majestic parasol; here a cedar two hundred years old, weeping willows, a Norway spruce, and a beech which overtops them all; and there, in front of the main tower, some very singular shrubs, – a yew trimmed in a way that recalls some long-

decayed garden of old France, and magnolias with hortensias at their feet. In short, the place is the Invalides of the heroes of horticulture, once the fashion and now forgotten, like all other heroes.

A chimney, with curious copings, which was sending forth great volumes of smoke, assured me that this delightful scene was not an opera setting. A kitchen reveals human beings. Now imagine *me*, Blondet, who shiver as if in the polar regions at Saint-Cloud, in the midst of this glowing Burgundian climate. The sun sends down its warmest rays, the king-fisher watches on the shores of the pond, the cricket chirps, the grain-pods burst, the poppy drops its morphia in glutinous tears, and all are clearly defined on the dark-blue ether. Above the ruddy soil of the terraces flames that joyous natural punch which intoxicates the insects and the flowers and dazzles our eyes and browns our faces. The grape is beading, its tendrils fall in a veil of threads whose delicacy puts to shame the lace-makers. Beside the house blue larkspur, nasturtium, and sweet-peas are blooming. From a distance orange-trees and tuberoses scent the air. After the poetic exhalations of the woods (a gradual preparation) came the delectable pastilles of this botanic seraglio.

Standing on the portico, like the queen of flowers, behold a woman robed in white, with hair unpowdered, holding a parasol lined with white silk, but herself whiter than the silk, whiter than the lilies at her feet, whiter than the starry jasmine that climbed the balustrade, – a woman, a Frenchwoman born in Russia, who said as I approached her, “I had almost given you up.” She had seen me as I left the copse. With what perfection do all women, even the most guileless, understand the arrangement of a scenic effect? The movements of the servants, who were preparing to serve breakfast, showed me that the meal had been delayed until after the arrival of the diligence. She had not ventured to come to meet me.

Is this not our dream, – the dream of all lovers of the beautiful, under whatsoever form it comes; the seraphic beauty that Luini put into his Marriage of the Virgin, that noble fresco at Sarono; the beauty that Rubens grasped in the tumult of his “Battle of the Thermodon”; the beauty that five centuries have elaborated in the cathedrals of Seville and Milan; the beauty of the Saracens at Granada, the beauty of Louis XIV. at Versailles, the beauty of the Alps, and that of this Limagne in which I stand?

Belonging to the estate, about which there is nothing too princely, nor yet too financial, where prince and farmer-general have both lived (which fact serves to explain it), are four thousand acres of woodland, a park of some nine hundred acres, the mill, three leased farms, another immense farm at Conches, and vineyards, – the whole producing a revenue of about seventy thousand francs a year. Now you know Les Aigues, my dear fellow; where I have been expected for the last two weeks, and where I am at this moment, in the chintz-lined chamber assigned to dearest friends.

Above the park, towards Conches, a dozen little brooks, clear, limpid streams coming from the Morvan, fall into the pond, after adorning with their silvery ribbons the valleys of the park and the magnificent gardens around the chateau. The name of the place, Les Aigues, comes from these charming streams of water; the estate was originally called in the old title-deeds “Les Aigues-Vives” to distinguish it from “Aigues-Mortes”; but the word “Vives” has now been dropped. The pond empties into the stream, which follows the course of the avenue, through a wide and straight canal bordered on both sides and along its whole length by weeping willows. This canal, thus arched, produces a delightful effect. Gliding through it, seated on a thwart of the little boat, one could fancy one’s self in the nave of some great cathedral, the choir being formed of the main building of the house seen at the end of it. When the setting sun casts its orange tones mingled with amber upon the casements of the chateau, the effect is that of painted windows. At the other end of the canal we see Blangy, the county-town, containing about sixty houses, and the village church, which is nothing more than a tumble-down building with a wooden clock-tower which appears to hold up a roof of broken tiles. One comfortable house and the parsonage are distinguishable; but the township is a large one, – about two hundred scattered houses in all, those of the village forming as it were the capital. The roads are lined with fruit-trees, and numerous little gardens are strewn here and there, – true country

gardens with everything in them; flowers, onions, cabbages and grapevines, currants, and a great deal of manure. The village has a primitive air; it is rustic, and has that decorative simplicity which we artists are forever seeking. In the far distance is the little town of Soulanges overhanging a vast sheet of water, like the buildings on the lake of Thune.

When you stroll in the park, which has four gates, each superb in style, you feel that our mythological Arcadias are flat and stale. Arcadia is in Burgundy, not in Greece; Arcadia is at Les Aigues and nowhere else. A river, made by scores of brooklets, crosses the park at its lower level with a serpentine movement; giving a dewy freshness and tranquillity to the scene, – an air of solitude, which reminds one of a convent of Carthusians, and all the more because, on an artificial island in the river, is a hermitage in ruins, the interior elegance of which is worthy of the luxurious financier who constructed it. Les Aigues, my dear Nathan, once belonged to that Bouret who spent two millions to receive Louis XV. on a single occasion under his roof. How many ardent passions, how many distinguished minds, how many fortunate circumstances have contributed to make this beautiful place what it is! A mistress of Henri IV. rebuilt the chateau where it now stands. The favorite of the Great Dauphin, Mademoiselle Choin (to whom Les Aigues was given), added a number of farms to it. Bouret furnished the house with all the elegancies of Parisian homes for an Opera celebrity; and to him Les Aigues owes the restoration of its ground floor in the style Louis XV.

I have often stood rapt in admiration at the beauty of the dining-room. The eye is first attracted to the ceiling, painted in fresco in the Italian manner, where lightsome arabesques are frolicking. Female forms, in stucco ending in foliage, support at regular distances corbeils of fruit, from which spring the garlands of the ceiling. Charming paintings, the work of unknown artists, fill the panels between the female figures, representing the luxuries of the table, – boar's-heads, salmon, rare shell-fish, and all edible things, – which fantastically suggest men and women and children, and rival the whimsical imagination of the Chinese, – the people who best understand, to my thinking at least, the art of decoration. The mistress of the house finds a bell-wire beneath her feet to summon servants, who enter only when required, disturbing no interviews and overhearing no secrets. The panels above the doorways represent gay scenes; all the embrasures, both of doors and windows, are in marble mosaics. The room is heated from below. Every window looks forth on some delightful view.

This room communicates with a bath-room on one side and on the other with a boudoir which opens into the salon. The bath-room is lined with Sevres tiles, painted in monochrome, the floor is mosaic, and the bath marble. An alcove, hidden by a picture painted on copper, which turns on a pivot, contains a couch in gilt wood of the truest Pompadour. The ceiling is lapis-lazuli starred with gold. The tiles are painted from designs by Boucher. Bath, table and love are therefore closely united.

After the salon, which, I should tell you, my dear fellow, exhibits the magnificence of the Louis XIV. manner, you enter a fine billiard-room unrivalled so far as I know in Paris itself. The entrance to this suite of ground-floor apartments is through a semi-circular antechamber, at the lower end of which is a fairy-like staircase, lighted from above, which leads to other parts of the house, all built at various epochs – and to think that they chopped off the heads of the wealthy in 1793! Good heavens! why can't people understand that the marvels of art are impossible in a land where there are no great fortunes, no secure, luxurious lives? If the Left insists on killing kings why not leave us a few little princelings with money in their pockets?

At the present moment these accumulated treasures belong to a charming woman with an artistic soul, who is not content with merely restoring them magnificently, but who keeps the place up with loving care. Sham philosophers, studying themselves while they profess to be studying humanity, call these glorious things extravagance. They grovel before cotton prints and the tasteless designs of modern industry, as if we were greater and happier in these days than in those of Henri IV., Louis XIV., and Louis XVI., monarchs who have all left the stamp of their reigns upon Les Aigues. What palace, what royal castle, what mansions, what noble works of art, what gold brocaded stuffs are sacred now? The petticoats of our grandmothers go to cover the chairs in these degenerate days.

Selfish and thieving interlopers that we are, we pull down everything and plant cabbages where marvels once were rife. Only yesterday the plough levelled Persan, that magnificent domain which gave a title to one of the most opulent families of the old parliament; hammers have demolished Montmorency, which cost an Italian follower of Napoleon untold sums; Val, the creation of Regnault de Saint-Jean d'Angely, Cassan, built by a mistress of the Prince de Conti; in all, four royal houses have disappeared in the valley of the Oise alone. We are getting a Roman campagna around Paris in advance of the days when a tempest shall blow from the north and overturn our plaster palaces and our pasteboard decorations.

Now see, my dear fellow, to what the habit of bombasticising in newspapers brings you to. Here am I writing a downright article. Does the mind have its ruts, like a road? I stop; for I rob the mail, and I rob myself, and you may be yawning – to be continued in our next; I hear the second bell, which summons me to one of those abundant breakfasts the fashion of which has long passed away, in the dining-rooms of Paris, be it understood.

Here's the history of my Arcadia. In 1815, there died at Les Aigues one of the famous wantons of the last century, – a singer, forgotten of the guillotine and the nobility, after preying upon exchequers, upon literature, upon aristocracy, and all but reaching the scaffold; forgotten, like so many fascinating old women who expiate their golden youth in country solitudes, and replace their lost loves by another, – man by Nature. Such women live with the flowers, with the woodland scents, with the sky, with the sunshine, with all that sings and skips and shines and sprouts, – the birds, the squirrels, the flowers, the grass; they know nothing about these things, they cannot explain them, but they love them; they love them so well that they forget dukes, marshals, rivalries, financiers, follies, luxuries, their paste jewels and their real diamonds, their heeled slippers and their rouge, – all, for the sweetness of country life.

I have gathered, my dear fellow, much precious information about the old age of Mademoiselle Laguerre; for, to tell you the truth, the after life of such women as Florine, Mariette, Suzanne de Val Noble, and Tullia has made me, every now and then, extremely inquisitive, as though I were a child inquiring what had become of the old moons.

In 1790 Mademoiselle Laguerre, alarmed at the turn of public affairs, came to settle at Les Aigues, bought and given to her by Bouret, who passed several summers with her at the chateau. Terrified at the fate of Madame du Barry, she buried her diamonds. At that time she was only fifty-three years of age, and according to her lady's-maid, afterwards married to a gendarme named Soudry, "Madame was more beautiful than ever." My dear Nathan, Nature has no doubt her private reasons for treating women of this sort like spoiled children; excesses, instead of killing them, fatten them, preserve them, renew their youth. Under a lymphatic appearance they have nerves which maintain their marvellous physique; they actually preserve their beauty for reasons which would make a virtuous woman haggard. No, upon my word, Nature is not moral!

Mademoiselle Laguerre lived an irreproachable life at Les Aigues, one might even call it a saintly one, after her famous adventure, – you remember it? One evening in a paroxysm of despairing love, she fled from the opera-house in her stage dress, rushed into the country, and passed the night weeping by the wayside. (Ah! how they have calumniated the love of Louis XV.'s time!) She was so unused to see the sunrise, that she hailed it with one of her finest songs. Her attitude, quite as much as her tinsel, drew the peasants about her; amazed at her gestures, her voice, her beauty, they took her for an angel, and dropped on their knees around her. If Voltaire had not existed we might have thought it a new miracle. I don't know if God gave her much credit for her tardy virtue, for love after all must be a sickening thing to a woman as weary of it as a wanton of the old Opera. Mademoiselle Laguerre was born in 1740, and her hey-day was in 1760, when Monsieur (I forget his name) was called the "ministre de la guerre," on account of his liaison with her. She abandoned that name, which was quite unknown down here, and called herself Madame des Aigues, as if to merge her identity in the estate, which she delighted to improve with a taste that was profoundly artistic. When Bonaparte

became First Consul, she increased her property by the purchase of church lands, for which she used the proceeds of her diamonds. As an Opera divinity never knows how to take care of her money, she intrusted the management of the estate to a steward, occupying herself with her flowers and fruits and with the beautifying of the park.

After Mademoiselle was dead and buried at Blangy, the notary of Soulanges – that little town which lies between Ville-aux-Fayes and Blangy, the capital of the township – made an elaborate inventory, and sought out the heirs of the singer, who never knew she had any. Eleven families of poor laborers living near Amiens, and sleeping in cotton sheets, awoke one fine morning in golden ones. The property was sold at auction. Les Aigues was bought by Montcornet, who had laid by enough during his campaigns in Spain and Pomerania to make the purchase, which cost about eleven hundred thousand francs, including the furniture. The general, no doubt, felt the influence of these luxurious apartments; and I was arguing with the countess only yesterday that her marriage was a direct result of the purchase of Les Aigues.

To rightly understand the countess, my dear Nathan, you must know that the general is a violent man, red as fire, five feet nine inches tall, round as a tower, with a thick neck and the shoulders of a blacksmith, which must have amply filled his cuirass. Montcornet commanded the cuirassiers at the battle of Essling (called by the Austrians Gross-Aspern), and came near perishing when that noble corps was driven back on the Danube. He managed to cross the river astride a log of wood. The cuirassiers, finding the bridge down, took the glorious resolution, at Montcornet's command, to turn and resist the entire Austrian army, which carried off on the morrow over thirty wagon-loads of cuirasses. The Germans invented a name for their enemies on this occasion which means "men of iron."[1] Montcornet has the outer man of a hero of antiquity. His arms are stout and vigorous, his chest deep and broad; his head has a leonine aspect, his voice is of those that can order a charge in the thick of battle; but he has nothing more than the courage of a daring man; he lacks mind and breadth of view. Like other generals to whom military common-sense, the natural boldness of those who spend their lives in danger, and the habit of command gives an appearance of superiority, Montcornet has an imposing effect when you first meet him; he seems a Titan, but he contains a dwarf, like the pasteboard giant who saluted Queen Elizabeth at the gates of Kenilworth. Choleric though kind, and full of imperial hauteur, he has the caustic tongue of a soldier, and is quick at repartee, but quicker still with a blow. He may have been superb on a battle-field; in a household he is simply intolerable.

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[1] I do not, on principle, like foot-notes, and this is the first I have ever allowed myself. Its historical interest must be my excuse; it will prove, moreover, that descriptions of battles should be something more than the dry particulars of technical writers, who for the last three thousand years have told us about left and right wings and centres being broken or driven in, but never a word about the soldier himself, his sufferings, and his heroism. The conscientious care with which I prepared myself to write the "Scenes from Military Life," led me to many a battle-field once wet with the blood of France and her enemies. Among them I went to Wagram. When I reached the shores of the Danube, opposite Lobau, I noticed on the bank, which is covered with turf, certain undulations that reminded me of the furrows in a field of lucern. I asked the reason of it, thinking I should hear of some new method of agriculture: "There sleep the cavalry of the imperial guard," said the peasant who served us as a guide; "those are their graves you see there." The words made me shudder. Prince Frederic Schwartzenburg, who translated them, added that the man had himself driven one of the wagons laden with cuirasses. By one of the strange chances of war our guide had served a breakfast to Napoleon on the morning of the battle of Wagram. Though poor, he had kept the double napoleon which the Emperor gave him for his milk and his eggs. The curate of Gross-Aspern took us to the famous cemetery where French and Austrians struggled together knee-deep in blood, with a courage and obstinacy glorious to each. There, while explaining that a marble tablet (to which our attention had been attracted, and on which were inscribed the names of the owner of Gross-Aspern, who had been killed on the third day) was the sole compensation ever given to the family, he said, in a tone of deep sadness: "It was a time of great misery, and of great hopes; but now are the days of forgetfulness." The saying seemed to me sublime in its simplicity; but when I came to reflect upon the matter, I felt there was some justification for the apparent ingratitude of the House of Austria. Neither nations nor kings are wealthy enough to reward all the devotions to which these tragic struggles give rise. Let those who serve a cause with a secret expectation of recompense, set a price upon their blood and become mercenaries. Those who wield either sword or pen for their country's good ought to think of nothing but of *doing their best*, as our fathers used to say, and expect nothing, not even glory, except as a happy accident.It was in rushing to retake this famous cemetery for the third time that Massena, wounded and carried in the box of a cabriolet, made this splendid harangue to his soldiers: "What! you rascally curs, who have only five sous a day while I have forty thousand, do you let me go ahead of you?" All the world knows the order which the Emperor sent to his lieutenant by M. de Sainte-Croix, who swam the Danube three times: "Die or retake the village; it is a question of saving the army; the bridges are destroyed."The Author.

He knows no love but barrack love, – the love which those clever myth-makers, the ancients, placed under the patronage of Eros, son of Mars and Venus. Those delightful chroniclers of the old religions provided themselves with a dozen different Loves. Study the fathers and the attributes of these Loves, and you will discover a complete social nomenclature, – and yet we fancy that we originate things! When the world turns upside down like an hour-glass, when the seas become continents, Frenchmen will find canons, steamboats, newspapers, and maps wrapped up in seaweed at the bottom of what is now our ocean.

Now, I must tell you that the Comtesse de Montcornet is a fragile, timid, delicate little woman. What do you think of such a marriage as that? To those who know society such things are common enough; a well-assorted marriage is the exception. Nevertheless, I have come to see how it is that this slender little creature handles her bobbins in a way to lead this heavy, solid, stolid general precisely as he himself used to lead his cuirassiers.

If Montcornet begins to bluster before his Virginie, Madame lays a finger on her lips and he is silent. He smokes his pipes and his cigars in a kiosk fifty feet from the chateau, and airs himself before he returns to the house. Proud of his subjection, he turns to her, like a bear drunk on grapes, and says, when anything is proposed, “If Madame approves.” When he comes to his wife’s room, with that heavy step which makes the tiles creak as though they were boards, and she, not wanting him, calls out: “Don’t come in!” he performs a military volte-face and says humbly: “You will let me know when I can see you?” – in the very tones with which he shouted to his cuirassiers on the banks of the Danube: “Men, we must die, and die well, since there’s nothing else we can do!” I have heard him say, speaking of his wife, “Not only do I love her, but I venerate her.” When he flies into a passion which defies all restraint and bursts all bonds, the little woman retires into her own room and leaves him to shout. But four or five hours later she will say: “Don’t get into a passion, my dear, you might break a blood-vessel; and besides, you hurt me.” Then the lion of Essling retreats out of sight to wipe his eyes. Sometimes he comes into the salon when she and I are talking, and if she says: “Don’t disturb us, he is reading to me,” he leaves us without a word.

It is only strong men, choleric and powerful, thunder-bolts of war, diplomats with olympian heads, or men of genius, who can show this utter confidence, this generous devotion to weakness, this constant protection, this love without jealousy, this easy good humor with a woman. Good heavens! I place the science of the countess’s management of her husband as far above the peevish, arid virtues as the satin of a causeuse is superior to the Utrecht velvet of a dirty bourgeois sofa.

My dear fellow, I have spent six days in this delightful country-house, and I never tire of admiring the beauties of the park, surrounded by forests where pretty wood-paths lead beside the brooks. Nature and its silence, these tranquil pleasures, this placid life to which she woos me, – all attract. Ah! here is true literature; no fault of style among the meadows. Happiness forgets all things here, – even the Debats! It has rained all the morning; while the countess slept and Montcornet tramped over his domain, I have compelled myself to keep my rash, imprudent promise to write to you.

Until now, though I was born at Alencon, of an old judge and a prefect, so they say, and though I know something of agriculture, I supposed the tale of estates bringing in four or five thousand francs a month to be a fable. Money, to me, meant a couple of dreadful things, – work and a publisher, journalism and politics. When shall we poor fellows come upon a land where gold springs up with the grass? That is what I desire for you and for me and the rest of us in the name of the theatre, and of the press, and of book-making! Amen!

Will Florine be jealous of the late Mademoiselle Laguerre? Our modern Bourets have no French nobles now to show them how to live; they hire one opera-box among three of them; they subscribe for their pleasures; they no longer cut down magnificently bound quartos to match the octavos in their library; in fact, they scarcely buy even stitched paper books. What is to become of us?

Adieu; continue to care for
Your Blondet.

If this letter, dashed off by the idlest pen of the century, had not by some lucky chance been preserved, it would have been almost impossible to describe Les Aigues; and without this description the history of the horrible events that occurred there would certainly be less interesting.

After that remark some persons will expect to see the flashing of the cuirass of the former colonel of the guard, and the raging of his anger as he falls like a waterspout upon his little wife; so that the end of this present history may be like the end of all modern dramas, – a tragedy of the bed-chamber. Perhaps the fatal scene will take place in that charming room with the blue monochromes, where beautiful ideal birds are painted on the ceilings and the shutters, where Chinese monsters laugh with open jaws on the mantle-shelf, and dragons, green and gold, twist their tails in curious convolutions around rich vases, and Japanese fantasy embroiders its designs of many colors; where sofas and reclining-chairs and consoles and what-nots invite to that contemplative idleness which forbids all action.

No; the drama here to be developed is not one of private life; it concerns things higher, or lower. Expect no scenes of passion; the truth of this history is only too dramatic. And remember, the historian should never forget that his mission is to do justice to all; the poor and the prosperous are equals before his pen; to him the peasant appears in the grandeur of his misery, and the rich in the pettiness of his folly. Moreover, the rich man has passions, the peasant only wants. The peasant is therefore doubly poor; and if, politically, his aggressions must be pitilessly repressed, to the eyes of humanity and religion he is sacred.

CHAPTER II. A BUCOLIC OVERLOOKED BY VIRGIL

When a Parisian drops into the country he is cut off from all his usual habits, and soon feels the dragging hours, no matter how attentive his friends may be to him. Therefore, because it is so impossible to prolong in a tete-a-tete conversations that are soon exhausted, the master and mistress of a country-house are apt to say, calmly, "You will be terribly bored here." It is true that to understand the delights of country life one must have something to do, some interests in it; one must know the nature of the work to be done, and the alternating harmony of toil and pleasure, – eternal symbol of human life.

When a Parisian has recovered his powers of sleeping, shaken off the fatigues of his journey, and accustomed himself to country habits, the hardest period of the day (if he wears thin boots and is neither a sportsman nor an agriculturalist) is the early morning. Between the hours of waking and breakfasting, the women of the family are sleeping or dressing, and therefore unapproachable; the master of the house is out and about on his own affairs; a Parisian is therefore compelled to be alone from eight to eleven o'clock, the hour chosen in all country-houses for breakfast. Now, having got what amusement he can out of carefully dressing himself, he has soon exhausted that resource. Then, perhaps, he has brought with him some work, which he finds it impossible to do, and which goes back untouched, after he sees the difficulties of doing it, into his valise; a writer is then obliged to wander about the park and gape at nothing or count the big trees. The easier the life, the more irksome such occupations are, – unless, indeed, one belongs to the sect of shaking quakers or to the honorable guild of carpenters or taxidermists. If one really had, like the owners of estates, to live in the country, it would be well to supply one's self with a geological, mineralogical, entomological, or botanical hobby; but a sensible man doesn't give himself a vice merely to kill time for a fortnight. The noblest estate, and the finest chateaux soon pall on those who possess nothing but the sight of them. The beauties of nature seem rather squalid compared to the representation of them at the opera. Paris, by retrospection, shines from all its facets. Unless some particular interest attaches us, as it did in Blondet's case, to scenes honored by the steps and lighted by the eyes of a certain person, one would envy the birds their wings and long to get back to the endless, exciting scenes of Paris and its harrowing strifes.

The long letter of the young journalist must make most intelligent minds suppose that he had reached, morally and physically, that particular phase of satisfied passions and comfortable happiness which certain winged creatures fed in Strasbourg so perfectly represent when, with their heads sunk behind their protruding gizzards, they neither see nor wish to see the most appetizing food. So, when the formidable letter was finished, the writer felt the need of getting away from the gardens of Armida and doing something to enliven the deadly void of the morning hours; for the hours between breakfast and dinner belonged to the mistress of the house, who knew very well how to make them pass quickly. To keep, as Madame de Montcornet did, a man of talent in the country without ever seeing on his face the false smile of satiety, or detecting the yawn of a weariness that cannot be concealed, is a great triumph for a woman. The affection which is equal to such a test certainly ought to be eternal. It is to be wondered at that women do not oftener employ it to judge of their lovers; a fool, an egoist, or a petty nature could never stand it. Philip the Second himself, the Alexander of dissimulation, would have told his secrets if condemned to a month's tete-a-tete in the country. Perhaps this is why kings seek to live in perpetual motion, and allow no one to see them more than fifteen minutes at a time.

Notwithstanding that he had received the delicate attentions of one of the most charming women in Paris, Emile Blondet was able to feel once more the long forgotten delights of a truant schoolboy; and on the morning of the day after his letter was written he had himself called by Francois, the head valet, who was specially appointed to wait on him, for the purpose of exploring the valley of the Avonne.

The Avonne is a little river which, being swollen above Conches by numerous rivulets, some of which rise in Les Aigues, falls at Ville-aux-Fayes into one of the large affluents of the Seine. The geographical position of the Avonne, navigable for over twelve miles, had, ever since Jean Bouvet invented rafts, given full money value to the forests of Les Aigues, Soulanges, and Ronquerolles, standing on the crest of the hills between which this charming river flows. The park of Les Aigues covers the greater part of the valley, between the river (bordered on both sides by the forest called des Aigues) and the royal mail road, defined by a line of old elms in the distance along the slopes of the Avonne mountains, which are in fact the foot-hills of that magnificent amphitheater called the Morvan.

However vulgar the comparison may be, the park, lying thus at the bottom of the valley, is like an enormous fish with its head at Conches and its tail in the village of Blangy; for it widens in the middle to nearly three hundred acres, while towards Conches it counts less than fifty, and sixty at Blangy. The position of this estate, between three villages, and only three miles from the little town of Soulanges, from which the descent is rapid, may perhaps have led to the strife and caused the excesses which are the chief interest attaching to the place. If, when seen from the mail road or from the uplands beyond Ville-aux-Fayes, the paradise of Les Aigues induces mere passing travellers to commit the mortal sin of envy, why should the rich burghers of Soulanges and Ville-aux-Fayes who had it before their eyes and admired it every day of their lives, have been more virtuous?

This last topographical detail was needed to explain the site, also the use of the four gates by which alone the park of Les Aigues was entered; for it was completely surrounded by walls, except where nature had provided a fine view, and at such points sunk fences or ha-has had been placed. The four gates, called the gate of Conches, the gate of Avonne, the gate of Blangy, and the gate of the Avenue, showed the styles of the different periods at which they were constructed so admirably that a brief description, in the interest of archaeologists, will presently be given, as brief as the one Blondet has already written about the gate of the Avenue.

After eight days of strolling about with the countess, the illustrious editor of the “Journal des Debats” knew by heart the Chinese kiosk, the bridges, the isles, the hermitage, the dairy, the ruined temple, the Babylonian ice-house, and all the other delusions invented by landscape architects which some nine hundred acres of land can be made to serve. He now wished to find the sources of the Avonne, which the general and the countess daily extolled in the evening, making plans to visit them which were daily forgotten the next morning. Above Les Aigues the Avonne really had the appearance of an alpine torrent. Sometimes it hollowed a bed among the rocks, sometimes it went underground; on this side the brooks came down in cascades, there they flowed like the Loire on sandy shallows where rafts could not pass on account of the shifting channels. Blondet took a short cut through the labyrinths of the park to reach the gate of Conches. This gate demands a few words, which give, moreover, certain historical details about the property.

The original founder of Les Aigues was a younger son of the Soulanges family, enriched by marriage, whose chief ambition was to make his elder brother jealous, – a sentiment, by the bye, to which we owe the fairy-land of Isola Bella in the Lago Maggiore. In the middle ages the castle of Les Aigues stood on the banks of the Avonne. Of this old building nothing remains but the gateway, which has a porch like the entrance to a fortified town, flanked by two round towers with conical roofs. Above the arch of the porch are heavy stone courses, now draped with vegetation, showing three large windows with cross-bar sashes. A winding stairway in one of the towers leads to two chambers, and a kitchen occupies the other tower. The roof of the porch, of pointed shape like all old timber-work, is noticeable for two weathercocks perched at each end of a ridge-pole ornamented with fantastic iron-work. Many an important place cannot boast of so fine a town hall. On the outside of this gateway, the keystone of the arch still bears the arms of Soulanges, preserved by the hardness of the stone on which the chisel of the artist carved them, as follows: Azure, on a pale, argent, three pilgrim’s staff’s sable; a fess bronchant, gules, charged with four grosses patee, fitched, or; with the heraldic form of

a shield awarded to younger sons. Blondet deciphered the motto, “Je soule agir,” – one of those puns that crusaders delighted to make upon their names, and which brings to mind a fine political maxim, which, as we shall see later, was unfortunately forgotten by Montcornet. The gate, which was opened for Blondet by a very pretty girl, was of time-worn wood clamped with iron. The keeper, wakened by the creaking of the hinges, put his nose out of the window and showed himself in his night-shirt.

“So our keepers sleep till this time of day!” thought the Parisian, who thought himself very knowing in rural customs.

After a walk of about quarter of an hour, he reached the sources of the river above Conches, where his ravished eyes beheld one of those landscapes that ought to be described, like the history of France, in a thousand volumes or in only one. We must here content ourselves with two paragraphs.

A projecting rock, covered with dwarf trees and abraded at its base by the Avonne, to which circumstance it owes a slight resemblance to an enormous turtle lying across the river, forms an arch through which the eye takes in a little sheet of water, clear as a mirror, where the stream seems to sleep until it reaches in the distance a series of cascades falling among huge rocks, where little weeping willows with elastic motion sway back and forth to the flow of waters.

Beyond these cascades is the hillside, rising sheer, like a Rhine rock clothed with moss and heather, gullied like it, again, by sharp ridges of schist and mica sending down, here and there, white foaming rivulets to which a little meadow, always watered and always green, serves as a cup; farther on, beyond the picturesque chaos and in contrast to this wild, solitary nature, the gardens of Conches are seen, with the village roofs and the clock-tower and the outlying fields.

There are the two paragraphs, but the rising sun, the purity of the air, the dewy sheen, the melody of woods and waters – imagine them!

“Almost as charming as at the Opera,” thought Blondet, making his way along the banks of the unnavigable portion of the Avonne, whose caprices contrast with the straight and deep and silent stream of the lower river, flowing between the tall trees of the forest of Les Aigues.

Blondet did not proceed far on his morning walk, for he was presently brought to a stand-still by the sight of a peasant, – one of those who, in this drama, are supernumeraries so essential to its action that it may be doubted whether they are not in fact its leading actors.

When the clever journalist reached a group of rocks where the main stream is imprisoned, as it were, between two portals, he saw a man standing so motionless as to excite his curiosity, while the clothes and general air of this living statue greatly puzzled him.

The humble personage before him was a living presentment of the old men dear to Charlet’s pencil; resembling the troopers of that Homer of soldiery in a strong frame able to endure hardship, and his immortal skirmishers in a fiery, crimson, knotted face, showing small capacity for submission. A coarse felt hat, the brim of which was held to the crown by stitches, protected a nearly bald head from the weather; below it fell a quantity of white hair which a painter would gladly have paid four francs an hour to copy, – a dazzling mass of snow, worn like that in all the classical representations of Deity. It was easy to guess from the way in which the cheeks sank in, continuing the lines of the mouth, that the toothless old fellow was more given to the bottle than the trencher. His thin white beard gave a threatening expression to his profile by the stiffness of its short bristles. The eyes, too small for his enormous face, and sloping like those of a pig, betrayed cunning and also laziness; but at this particular moment they were gleaming with the intent look he cast upon the river. The sole garments of this curious figure were an old blouse, formerly blue, and trousers of the coarse burlap used in Paris to wrap bales. All city people would have shuddered at the sight of his broken sabots, without even a wisp of straw to stop the cracks; and it is very certain that the blouse and the trousers had no money value at all except to a paper-maker.

As Blondet examined this rural Diogenes, he admitted the possibility of a type of peasantry he had seen in old tapestries, old pictures, old sculptures, and which, up to this time, had seemed to him imaginary. He resolved for the future not to utterly condemn the school of ugliness, perceiving

a possibility that in man beauty may be but the flattering exception, a chimera in which the race struggles to believe.

"What can be the ideas, the morals, the habits, of such a being? What is he thinking of?" thought Blondet, seized with curiosity. "Is he my fellow-creature? We have nothing in common but shape, and even that! – "

He noticed in the old man's limbs the peculiar rigidity of the tissues of persons who live in the open air, accustomed to the inclemencies of the weather and to the endurance of heat and cold, – hardened to everything, in short, – which makes their leathern skin almost a hide, and their nerves an apparatus against physical pain almost as powerful as that of the Russians or the Arabs.

"Here's one of Cooper's Red-skins," thought Blondet; "one needn't go to America to study savages."

Though the Parisian was less than ten paces off, the old man did not turn his head, but kept looking at the opposite bank with a fixity which the fakirs of India give to their vitrified eyes and their stiffened joints. Compelled by the power of a species of magnetism, more contagious than people have any idea of, Blondet ended by gazing at the water himself.

"Well, my good man, what do you see there?" he asked, after the lapse of a quarter of an hour, during which time he saw nothing to justify this intent contemplation.

"Hush!" whispered the old man, with a sign to Blondet not to ruffle the air with his voice; "You will frighten it – "

"What?"

"An otter, my good gentleman. If it hears us it'll go quick under water. I'm certain it jumped there; see! see! there, where the water bubbles! Ha! it sees a fish, it is after that! But my boy will grab it as it comes back. The otter, don't you know, is very rare; it is scientific game, and good eating, too. I get ten francs for every one I carry to Les Aigues, for the lady fasts Fridays, and to-morrow is Friday. Years agone the deceased madame used to pay me twenty francs, and gave me the skin to boot! Mouche," he called, in a low voice, "watch it!"

Blondet now perceived on the other side of the river two bright eyes, like those of a cat, beneath a tuft of alders; then he saw the tanned forehead and tangled hair of a boy about ten years of age, who was lying on his stomach and making signs towards the otter to let his master know he kept it well in sight. Blondet, completely mastered by the eagerness of the old man and boy, allowed the demon of the chase to get the better of him, – that demon with the double claws of hope and curiosity, who carries you whithersoever he will.

"The hat-makers buy the skin," continued the old man; "it's so soft, so handsome! They cover caps with it."

"Do you really think so, my old man?" said Blondet, smiling.

"Well truly, my good gentleman, you ought to know more than I, though I am seventy years old," replied the old fellow, very humbly and respectfully, falling into the attitude of a giver of holy water; "perhaps you can tell me why conductors and wine-merchants are so fond of it?"

Blondet, a master of irony, already on his guard from the word "scientific," recollected the Marechal de Richelieu and began to suspect some jest on the part of the old man; but he was reassured by his artless attitude and the perfectly stupid expression of his face.

"In my young days we had lots of otters," whispered the old fellow; "but they've hunted 'em so that if we see the tail of one in seven years it is as much as ever we do. And the sub-prefect at Ville-aux-Fayes, – doesn't monsieur know him? though he be a Parisian, he's a fine young man like you, and he loves curiosities, – so, as I was saying, hearing of my talent for catching otters, for I know 'em as you know your alphabet, he says to me like this: 'Pere Fourchon,' says he, 'when you find an otter bring it to me, and I'll pay you well; and if it's spotted white on the back,' says he, 'I'll give you thirty francs.' That's just what he did say to me as true as I believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And there's a learned man at Soulanges, Monsieur Gourdon, our doctor, who is making,

so they tell me, a collection of natural history which hasn't its mate at Dijon even; indeed he is first among the learned men in these parts, and he'll pay me a fine price, too; he stuffs men and beasts. Now my boy there stands me out that that otter has got the white spots. 'If that's so,' says I to him, 'then the good God wishes well to us this morning!' Ha! didn't you see the water bubble? yes, there it is! there it is! Though it lives in a kind of a burrow, it sometimes stays whole days under water. Ha, there! it heard you, my good gentleman; it's on its guard now; for there's not a more suspicious animal on earth; it's worse than a woman."

"So you call women suspicious, do you?" said Blondet.

"Faith, monsieur, if you come from Paris you ought to know about that better than I. But you'd have done better for me if you had stayed in your bed and slept all the morning; don't you see that wake there? that's where she's gone under. Get up, Mouche! the otter heard monsieur talking, and now she's scary enough to keep us at her heels till midnight. Come, let's be off! and good-bye to our thirty francs!"

Mouche got up reluctantly; he looked at the spot where the water bubbled, pointed to it with his finger and seemed unable to give up all hope. The child, with curly hair and a brown face, like the angels in a fifteenth-century picture, seemed to be in breeches, for his trousers ended at the knee in a ragged fringe of brambles and dead leaves. This necessary garment was fastened upon him by cords of tarred oakum in guise of braces. A shirt of the same burlap which made the old man's trousers, thickened, however, by many darns, open in front showed a sun-burnt little breast. In short, the attire of the being called Mouche was even more startlingly simple than that of Pere Fourchon.

"What a good-natured set of people they are here," thought Blondet; "if a man frightened away the game of the people of the suburbs of Paris, how their tongues would maul him!"

As he had never seen an otter, even in a museum, he was delighted with this episode of his early walk. "Come," said he, quite touched when the old man walked away without asking him for a compensation, "you say you are a famous otter catcher. If you are sure there is an otter down there – "

From the other side of the water Mouche pointed his finger to certain air-bubbles coming up from the bottom of the Avonne and bursting on its surface.

"It has come back!" said Pere Fourchon; "don't you see it breathe, the beggar? How do you suppose they manage to breathe at the bottom of the water? Ah, the creature's so clever it laughs at science."

"Well," said Blondet, who supposed the last word was a jest of the peasantry in general rather than of this peasant in particular, "wait and catch the otter."

"And what are we to do about our day's work, Mouche and I?"

"What is your day worth?"

"For the pair of us, my apprentice and me? – Five francs," said the old man, looking Blondet in the eye with a hesitation which betrayed an enormous overcharge.

The journalist took ten francs from his pocket, saying, "There's ten, and I'll give you ten more for the otter."

"And it won't cost you dear if there's white on its back; for the sub-prefect told me there wasn't one o' them museums that had the like; but he knows everything, our sub-prefect, – no fool he! If I hunt the otter, he, M'sieur des Lupeaulx, hunts Mademoiselle Gaubertin, who has a fine white 'dot' on her back. Come now, my good gentleman, if I may make so bold, plunge into the middle of the Avonne and get to that stone down there. If we head the otter off, it will come down stream; for just see their slyness, the beggars! they always go above their burrow to feed, for, once full of fish, they know they can easily drift down, the sly things! Ha! if I'd been trained in their school I should be living now on an income; but I was a long time finding out that you must go up stream very early in the morning if you want to bag the game before others. Well, somebody threw a spell over me when I was born. However, we three together ought to be slyer than the otter."

"How so, my old necromancer?"

"Why, bless you! we are as stupid as the beasts, and so we come to understand the beasts. Now, see, this is what we'll do. When the otter wants to get home Mouche and I'll frighten it here, and you'll frighten it over there; frightened by us and frightened by you it will jump on the bank, and when it takes to earth, it is lost! It can't run; it has web feet for swimming. Ho, ho! it will make you laugh, such floundering! you don't know whether you are fishing or hunting! The general up at Les Aigues, I have known him to stay here three days running, he was so bent on getting an otter."

Blondet, armed with a branch cut for him by the old man, who requested him to whip the water with it when he called to him, planted himself in the middle of the river by jumping from stone to stone.

"There, that will do, my good gentleman."

Blondet stood where he was told without remarking the lapse of time, for every now and then the old fellow made him a sign as much as to say that all was going well; and besides, nothing makes time go so fast as the expectation that quick action is to succeed the perfect stillness of watching.

"Pere Fourchon," whispered the boy, finding himself alone with the old man, "there's *really* an otter!"

"Do you see it?"

"There, see there!"

The old fellow was dumb-founded at beholding under water the reddish-brown fur of an actual otter.

"It's coming my way!" said the child.

"Hit him a sharp blow on the head and jump into the water and hold him fast down, but don't let him go!"

Mouche dove into the water like a frightened frog.

"Come, come, my good gentleman," cried Pere Fourchon to Blondet, jumping into the water and leaving his sabots on the bank, "frighten him! frighten him! Don't you see him? he is swimming fast your way!"

The old man dashed toward Blondet through the water, calling out with the gravity that country people retain in the midst of their greatest excitements: —

"Don't you see him, there, along the rocks?"

Blondet, placed by direction of the old fellow in such a way that the sun was in his eyes, thrashed the water with much satisfaction to himself.

"Go on, go on!" cried Pere Fourchon; "on the rock side; the burrow is there, to your left!"

Carried away by excitement and by his long waiting, Blondet slipped from the stones into the water.

"Ha! brave you are, my good gentleman! Twenty good Gods! I see him between your legs! you'll have him! – Ah! there! he's gone – he's gone!" cried the old man, in despair.

Then, in the fury of the chase, the old fellow plunged into the deepest part of the stream in front of Blondet.

"It's your fault we've lost him!" he cried, as Blondet gave him a hand to pull him out, dripping like a triton, and a vanquished triton. "The rascal, I see him, under those rocks! He has let go his fish," continued Fourchon, pointing to something that floated on the surface. "We'll have that at any rate; it's a tench, a real tench."

Just then a groom in livery on horseback and leading another horse by the bridle galloped up the road toward Conches.

"See! there's the chateau people sending after you," said the old man. "If you want to cross back again I'll give you a hand. I don't mind about getting wet; it saves washing!"

"How about rheumatism?"

"Rheumatism! don't you see the sun has browned our legs, Mouche and me, like tobacco-pipes. Here, lean on me, my good gentleman – you're from Paris; you don't know, though you *do* know so

much, how to walk on our rocks. If you stay here long enough, you'll learn a deal that's written in the book o' nature, – you who write, so they tell me, in the newspapers."

Blondet had reached the bank before Charles, the groom, perceived him.

"Ah, monsieur!" he cried; "you don't know how anxious Madame has been since she heard you had gone through the gate of Conches; she was afraid you were drowned. They have rung the great bell three times, and Monsieur le cure is hunting for you in the park."

"What time is it, Charles?"

"A quarter to twelve."

"Help me to mount."

"Ha!" exclaimed the groom, noticing the water that dripped from Blondet's boots and trousers, "has monsieur been taken in by Pere Fourchon's otter?"

The words enlightened the journalist.

"Don't say a word about it, Charles," he cried, "and I'll make it all right with you."

"Oh, as for that!" answered the man, "Monsieur le comte himself has been taken in by that otter. Whenever a visitor comes to Les Aigues, Pere Fourchon sets himself on the watch, and if the gentleman goes to see the sources of the Avonne he sells him the otter; he plays the trick so well that Monsieur le comte has been here three times and paid him for six days' work, just to stare at the water!"

"Heavens!" thought Blondet. "And I imagined I had seen the greatest comedians of the present day! – Potier, the younger Baptiste, Michot, and Monrose. What are they compared to that old beggar?"

"He is very knowing at the business, Pere Fourchon is," continued Charles; "and he has another string to his bow, besides. He calls himself a rope-maker, and has a walk under the park wall by the gate of Blangy. If you merely touch his rope he'll entangle you so cleverly that you will want to turn the wheel and make a bit of it yourself; and for that you would have to pay a fee for apprenticeship. Madame herself was taken in, and gave him twenty francs. Ah! he is the king of tricks, that old fellow!"

The groom's gossip set Blondet thinking of the extreme craftiness and wiliness of the French peasant, of which he had heard a great deal from his father, a judge at Alencon. Then the satirical meaning hidden beneath Pere Fourchon's apparent guilelessness came back to him, and he owned himself "gulled" by the Burgundian beggar.

"You would never believe, monsieur," said Charles, as they reached the portico at Les Aigues, "how much one is forced to distrust everybody and everything in the country, – especially here, where the general is not much liked – "

"Why not?"

"That's more than I know," said Charles, with the stupid air servants assume to shield themselves when they wish not to answer their superiors, which nevertheless gave Blondet a good deal to think of.

"Here you are, truant!" cried the general, coming out on the terrace when he heard the horses. "Here he is; don't be uneasy!" he called back to his wife, whose little footfalls were heard behind him. "Now the Abbe Brossette is missing. Go and find him, Charles," he said to the groom.

CHAPTER III. THE TAVERN

The gate of Blangy, built by Bouret, was formed of two wide pilasters of projecting rough-hewn stone; each surmounted by a dog sitting on his haunches and holding an escutcheon between his fore paws. The proximity of a small house where the steward lived dispensed with the necessity for a lodge. Between the two pilasters, a sumptuous iron gate, like those made in Buffon's time for the Jardin des Plantes, opened on a short paved way which led to the country road (formerly kept in order by Les Aigues and the Soulanges family) which unites Conches, Cerneux, Blangy, and Soulanges to Ville-aux-Fayes, like a wreath, for the whole road is lined with flowering hedges and little houses covered with roses and honey-suckle and other climbing plants.

There, along a pretty wall which extends as far as a terrace from which the land of Les Aigues falls rapidly to the valley till it meets that of Soulanges, are the rotten posts, the old wheel, and the forked stakes which constituted the manufactory of the village rope-maker.

Soon after midday, while Blondet was seating himself at table opposite the Abbe Brossette and receiving the tender expostulations of the countess, Pere Fourchon and Mouche arrived at this establishment. From that vantage-ground Pere Fourchon, under pretence of rope-making, could watch Les Aigues and see every one who went in and out. Nothing escaped him, the opening of the blinds, tete-a-tete loiterings, or the least little incidents of country life, were spied upon by the old fellow, who had set up this business within the last three years, – a trifling circumstance which neither the masters, nor the servants, nor the keepers of Les Aigues had as yet remarked upon.

"Go round to the house by the gate of the Avonne while I put away the tackle," said Pere Fourchon to his attendant, "and when you have blabbed about the thing, they'll no doubt send after me to the Grand-I-Vert, where I am going for a drop of drink, – for it makes one thirsty enough to wade in the water that way. If you do just as I tell you, you'll hook a good breakfast out of them; try to meet the countess, and give a slap at me, and that will put it into her head to come and preach morality or something! There's lots of good wine to get out of it."

After these last instructions, which the sly look in Mouche's face rendered quite superfluous, the old peasant, hugging the otter under his arm, disappeared along the country road.

Half-way between the gate and the village there stood, at the time when Emile Blondet stayed at Les Aigues, one of those houses which are never seen but in parts of France where stone is scarce. Bits of bricks picked up anywhere, cobblestones set like diamonds in the clay mud, formed very solid walls, though worn in places; the roof was supported by stout branches and covered with rushes and straw, while the clumsy shutters and the broken door – in short, everything about the cottage was the product of lucky finds, or of gifts obtained by begging.

The peasant has an instinct for his habitation like that of an animal for its nest or its burrow, and this instinct was very marked in all the arrangements of this cottage. In the first place, the door and the window looked to the north. The house, placed on a little rise in the stoniest angle of a vineyard, was certainly healthful. It was reached by three steps, carefully made with stakes and planks filled in with broken stone and gravel, so that the water ran off rapidly; and as the rain seldom comes from the northward in Burgundy, no dampness could rot the foundations, slight as they were. Below the steps and along the path ran a rustic paling, hidden beneath a hedge of hawthorn and sweet-brier. An arbor, with a few clumsy tables and wooden benches, filled the space between the cottage and the road, and invited the passers-by to rest themselves. At the upper end of the bank by the house roses grew, and wall-flowers, violets, and other flowers that cost nothing. Jessamine and honey-suckle had fastened their tendrils on the roof, mossy already, though the building was far from old.

To the right of the house, the owner had built a stable for two cows. In front of this erection of old boards, a sunken piece of ground served as a yard where, in a corner, was a huge manure-heap. On the other side of the house and the arbor stood a thatched shed, supported on trunks of

trees, under which the various outdoor properties of the peasantry were put away, – the utensils of the vine-dressers, their empty casks, logs of wood piled about a mound which contained the oven, the mouth of which opened, as was usual in the houses of the peasantry, under the mantle-piece of the chimney in the kitchen.

About an acre of land adjoined the house, inclosed by an evergreen hedge and planted with grape-vines; tended as peasants tend them, – that is to say, well-manured, and dug round, and layered so that they usually set their fruit before the vines of the large proprietors in a circuit of ten miles round. A few trees, almond, plum, and apricot, showed their slim heads here and there in this enclosure. Between the rows of vines potatoes and beans were planted. In addition to all this, on the side towards the village and beyond the yard was a bit of damp low ground, favorable for the growth of cabbages and onions (favorite vegetables of the working-classes), which was closed by a wooden gate, through which the cows were driven, trampling the path into mud and covering it with dung.

The house, which had two rooms on the ground-floor, opened upon the vineyard. On this side an outer stairway, roofed with thatch and resting against the wall of the house, led up to the garret, which was lighted by one round window. Under this rustic stairway opened a cellar built of Burgundy brick, containing several casks of wine.

Though the kitchen utensils of the peasantry are usually only two, namely, a frying-pan and an iron pot, with which they manage to do all their cooking, exceptions to this rule, in the shape of two enormous saucepans hanging beneath the mantle-shelf and above a small portable stove, were to be seen in this cottage. In spite, however, of this indication of luxury, the furniture was in keeping with the external appearance of the place. A jar held water, the spoons were of wood or pewter, the dishes, of red clay without and white within, were scaling off and had been mended with pewter rivets; the heavy table and chairs were of pine wood, and for flooring there was nothing better than the hardened earth. Every fifth year the walls received a coat of white-wash and so did the narrow beams of the ceiling, from which hung bacon, strings of onions, bundles of tallow candles, and the bags in which a peasant keeps his seeds; near the bread-box stood an old-fashioned wardrobe in walnut, where the scanty household linen, and the one change of garments together with the holiday attire of the entire family were kept.

Above the mantel of the chimney gleamed a poacher's old gun, not worth five francs, – the wood scorched, the barrel to all appearances never cleaned. An observer might reflect that the protection of a hovel with only a latch, and an outer gate that was only a paling and never closed, needed no better weapon; but still the wonder was to what use it was put. In the first place, though the wood was of the commonest kind, the barrel was carefully selected, and came from a valuable gun, given in all probability to a game-keeper. Moreover, the owner of this weapon never missed his aim; there was between him and his gun the same intimate acquaintance that there is between a workman and his tool. If the muzzle must be raised or lowered the merest fraction in its aim, because it carries just an atom above or below the range, the poacher knows it; he obeys the rule and never misses. An officer of artillery would have found the essential parts of this weapon in good condition notwithstanding its uncleanly appearance. In all that the peasant appropriates to his use, in all that serves him, he displays just the amount of force that is needed, neither more nor less; he attends to the essential and to nothing beyond. External perfection he has no conception of. An unerring judge of the necessary in all things, he thoroughly understands degrees of strength, and knows very well when working for an employer how to give the least possible for the most he can get. This contemptible-looking gun will be found to play a serious part in the life of the family inhabiting this cottage, and you will presently learn how and why.

Have you now taken in all the many details of this hovel, planted about five hundred feet away from the pretty gate of Les Aigues? Do you see it crouching there, like a beggar beside a palace? Well, its roof covered with velvet mosses, its clacking hens, its grunting pig, its straying heifer, all its rural graces have a horrible meaning.

Fastened to a pole, which was stuck in the ground beside the entrance through the fence, was a withered bunch of three pine branches and some old oak-leaves tied together with a rag. Above the door of the house a roving artist had painted, probably in return for his breakfast, a huge capital "I" in green on a white ground two feet square; and for the benefit of those who could read, this witty joke in twelve letters: "Au Grand-I-Vert" (hiver). On the left of the door was a vulgar sign bearing, in colored letters, "Good March beer," and the picture of a foaming pot of the same, with a woman, in a dress excessively low-necked, on one side, and an hussar on the other, – both coarsely colored. Consequently, in spite of the blooming flowers and the fresh country air, this cottage exhaled the same strong and nauseous odor of wine and food which assails you in Paris as you pass the door of the cheap cook-shops of the faubourg.

Now you know the surroundings. Behold the inhabitants and hear their history, which contains more than one lesson for philanthropists.

The proprietor of the Grand-I-Vert, named Francois Tonsard, commends himself to the attention of philosophers by the manner in which he had solved the problem of an idle life and a busy life, so as to make the idleness profitable, and occupation nil.

A jack-of-all-trades, he knew how to cultivate the ground, but for himself only. For others, he dug ditches, gathered fagots, barked the trees, or cut them down. In all such work the employer is at the mercy of the workman. Tonsard owned his plot of ground to the generosity of Mademoiselle Laguerre. In his early youth he had worked by the day for the gardener at Les Aigues; and he really had not his equal in trimming the shrubbery-trees, the hedges, the horn-beams, and the horse-chestnuts. His very name shows hereditary talent. In remote country-places privileges exist which are obtained and preserved with as much care as the merchants of a city display in getting theirs. Mademoiselle Laguerre was one day walking in the garden, when she overheard Tonsard, then a strapping fellow, say, "All I need to live on, and live happily, is an acre of land." The kind creature, accustomed to make others happy, gave him the acre of vineyard near the gate of Blangy, in return for one hundred days' work (a delicate regard for his feelings which was little understood), and allowed him to stay at Les Aigues, where he lived with her servants, who thought him one of the best fellows in Burgundy.

Poor Tonsard (that is what everybody called him) worked about thirty days out of the hundred that he owed; the rest of the time he idled about, talking and laughing with Mademoiselle's women, particularly with Mademoiselle Cochet, the lady's maid, though she was ugly, like all confidential maids of handsome actresses. Laughing with Mademoiselle Cochet signified so many things that Soudry, the fortunate gendarme mentioned in Blondet's letter, still looked askance at Tonsard after the lapse of nearly twenty-five years. The walnut wardrobe, the bedstead with the tester and curtains, and the ornaments about the bedroom were doubtless the result of the said laughter.

Once in possession of his care, Tonsard replied to the first person who happened to mention that Mademoiselle Laguerre had given it to him, "I've bought it deuced hard, and paid well for it. Do rich folks ever give us anything? Are one hundred days' work nothing? It has cost me three hundred francs, and the land is all stones." But that speech never got beyond the regions of his own class.

Tonsard built his house himself, picking up the materials here and there as he could, – getting a day's work out of this one and that one, gleaning in the rubbish that was thrown away, often asking for things and always obtaining them. A discarded door cut in two for convenience in carrying away became the door of the stable; the window was the sash of a green-house. In short, the rubbish of the chateau, served to build the fatal cottage.

Saved from the draft by Gaubertin, the steward of Les Aigues, whose father was prosecuting-attorney of the department, and who, moreover, could refuse nothing to Mademoiselle Cochet, Tonsard married as soon as his house was finished and his vines had begun to bear. A well-grown fellow of twenty-three, in everybody's good graces at Les Aigues, on whom Mademoiselle had bestowed an acre of her land, and who appeared to be a good worker, he had the art to ring the praises

of his negative merits, and so obtained the daughter of a farmer on the Ronquerolles estate, which lies beyond the forest of Les Aigues.

This farmer held the lease of half a farm, which was going to ruin in his hands for want of a helpmate. A widower, and inconsolable for the loss of his wife, he tried to drown his troubles, like the English, in wine, and then, when he had put the poor deceased out of his mind, he found himself married, so the village maliciously declared, to a woman named Boisson. From being a farmer he became once more a laborer, but an idle and drunken laborer, quarrelsome and vindictive, capable of any ill-deed, like most of his class when they fall from a well-to-do state of life into poverty. This man, whose practical information and knowledge of reading and writing placed him far above his fellow-workmen, while his vices kept him at the level of pauperism, you have already seen on the banks of the Avonne, measuring his cleverness with that of one of the cleverest men in Paris, in a bucolic overlooked by Virgil.

Pere Fourchon, formerly a schoolmaster at Blangy, lost that place through misconduct and his singular ideas as to public education. He helped the children to make paper boats with their alphabets much oftener than he taught them how to spell; he scolded them in so remarkable a manner for pilfering fruit that his lectures might really have passed for lessons on the best way of scaling the walls. From teacher he became a postman. In this capacity, which serves as a refuge to many an old soldier, Pere Fourchon was daily reprimanded. Sometimes he forgot the letters in a tavern, at other times he kept them in his pocket. When he was drunk he left those for one village in another village; when he was sober he read them. Consequently, he was soon dismissed. No longer able to serve the State, Pere Fourchon ended by becoming a manufacturer. In the country a poor man can always get something to do, and make at least a pretence of gaining an honest livelihood. At sixty-eight years of age the old man started his rope-walk, a manufactory which requires the very smallest capital. The workshop is, as we have seen, any convenient wall; the machinery costs about ten francs. The apprentice slept, like his master, in a hay-loft, and lived on whatever he could pick up. The rapacity of the law in the matter of doors and windows expires “sub dio.” The tow to make the first rope can be borrowed. But the principal revenue of Pere Fourchon and his satellite Mouche, the natural son of one of his natural daughters, came from the otters; and then there were breakfasts and dinners given them by peasants who could neither read nor write, and were glad to use the old fellow’s talents when they had a bill to make out, or a letter to dispatch. Besides all this, he knew how to play the clarionet, and he went about with his friend Vermichel, the miller of Soulanges, to village weddings and the grand balls given at the Tivoli of Soulanges.

Vermichel’s name was Michel Vert, but the transposition was so generally used that Brunet, the clerk of the municipal court of Soulanges, was in the habit of writing Michel-Jean-Jerome Vert, called Vermichel, practitioner. Vermichel, a famous violin in the Burgundian regiment of former days, had procured for Pere Fourchon, in recognition of certain services, a situation as practitioner, which in remote country-places usually devolves on those who are able to sign their name. Pere Fourchon therefore added to his other avocations that of witness, or practitioner of legal papers, whenever the Sieur Brunet came to draw them in the districts of Cerneux, Conches, and Blangy. Vermichel and Fourchon, allied by a friendship of twenty years’ tippling, might really be considered a business firm.

Mouche and Fourchon, bound together by vice as Mentor and Telemachus by virtue, travelled like the latter, in search of their father, “panis angelorum,” – the only Latin words which the old fellow’s memory had retained. They went about scraping up the pickings of the Grand-I-Vert, and those of the adjacent chateaux; for between them, in their busiest and most prosperous years, they had never contrived to make as much as three hundred and sixty fathoms of rope. In the first place, no dealer within a radius of fifty miles would have trusted his tow to either Mouche or Fourchon. The old man, surpassing the miracles of modern chemistry, knew too well how to resolve the tow into the all-benignant juice of the grape. Moreover, his triple functions of public writer for three townships,

legal practitioner for one, and clarionet-player at large, hindered, so he said, the development of his business.

Thus it happened that Tonsard was disappointed from the start in the hope he had indulged of increasing his comfort by an increase of property in marriage. The idle son-in-law had chanced, by a very common accident, on an idler father-in-law. Matters went all the worse because Tonsard's wife, gifted with a sort of rustic beauty, being tall and well-made, was not fond of work in the open air. Tonsard blamed his wife for her father's short-comings, and ill-treated her, with the customary revenge of the common people, whose minds take in only an effect and rarely look back to causes.

Finding her fetters heavy, the woman lightened them. She used Tonsard's vices to get the better of him. Loving comfort and good eating herself, she encouraged his idleness and gluttony. In the first place, she managed to procure the good-will of the servants of the chateau, and Tonsard, in view of the results, made no complaint as to the means. He cared very little what his wife did, so long as she did all he wanted of her. That is the secret agreement of many a household. Madame Tonsard established the wine-shop of the Grand-I-Vert, her first customers being the servants of Les Aigues and the keepers and huntsmen.

Gaubertin, formerly steward to Mademoiselle Laguerre, one of La Tonsard's chief patrons, gave her several puncheons of excellent wine to attract custom. The effect of these gifts (continued as long as Gaubertin remained a bachelor) and the fame of her rather lawless beauty commended this beauty to the Don Juans of the valley, and filled the wine-shop of the Grand-I-Vert. Being a lover of good eating, La Tonsard was naturally an excellent cook; and though her talents were only exercised on the common dishes of the country, jugged hare, game sauce, stewed fish and omelets, she was considered in all the country round to be an admirable cook of the sort of food which is eaten at a counter and spiced in a way to excite a desire for drink. By the end of two years, she had managed to rule Tonsard, and turn him to evil courses, which, indeed, he asked no better than to indulge in.

The rascal was continually poaching, and with nothing to fear from it. The intimacies of his wife with Gaubertin and the keepers and the rural authorities, together with the laxity of the times, secured him impunity. As soon as his children were large enough he made them serviceable to his comfort, caring no more for their morality than for that of his wife. He had two sons and two daughters. Tonsard, who lived, as did his wife, from hand to mouth, might have come to an end of this easy life if he had not maintained a sort of martial law over his family, which compelled them to work for the preservation of it. When he had brought up his children, at the cost of those from whom his wife was able to extort gifts, the following charter and budget were the law at the Grand-I-Vert.

Tonsard's old mother and his two daughters, Catherine and Marie, went into the woods at certain seasons twice a-day, and came back laden with fagots which overhung the crutch of their poles at least two feet beyond their heads. Though dried sticks were placed on the outside of the heap, the inside was made of live wood cut from young trees. In plain words, Tonsard helped himself to his winter's fuel in the woods of Les Aigues. Besides this, father and sons were constantly poaching. From September to March, hares, rabbits, partridges, deer, in short, all the game that was not eaten at the chateau, was sold at Blangy and at Soulanges, where Tonsard's two daughters peddled milk in the early mornings, – coming back with the news of the day, in return for the gossip they carried about Les Aigues, and Cerneux, and Conches. In the months when the three Tonsards were unable to hunt with a gun, they set traps. If the traps caught more game than they could eat, La Tonsard made pies of it and sent them to Ville-aux-Fayes. In harvest-time seven Tonsards – the old mother, the two sons (until they were seventeen years of age), the two daughters, together with old Fourchon and Mouche – gleaned, and generally brought in about sixteen bushels a day of all grains, rye, barley, wheat, all good to grind.

The two cows, led to the roadside by the youngest girl, always managed to stray into the meadows of Les Aigues; but as, if it ever chanced that some too flagrant trespass compelled the keepers to take notice of it, the children were either whipped or deprived of a coveted dainty, they

had acquired such extraordinary aptitude in hearing the enemy's footfall that the bailiff or the park-keeper of Les Aigues was very seldom able to detect them. Besides, the relations of those estimable functionaries with Tonsard and his wife tied a bandage over their eyes. The cows, held by long ropes, obeyed a mere twitch or a special low call back to the roadside, knowing very well that, the danger once past, they could finish their browsing in the next field. Old mother Tonsard, who was getting more and more infirm, succeeded Mouche in his duties, after Fourchon, under pretence of caring for his natural grandson's education, kept him to himself; while Marie and Catherine made hay in the woods. These girls knew the exact spots where the fine forest-grass abounded, and there they cut and spread and cocked and garnered it, supplying two thirds, at least, of the winter fodder, and leading the cows on all fine days to sheltered nooks where they could still find pasture. In certain parts of the valley of Les Aigues, as in all places protected by a chain of mountains, in Piedmont and in Lombardy for instance, there are spots where the grass keeps green all the year. Such fields, called in Italy "marciti," are of great value; though in France they are often in danger of being injured by snow and ice. This phenomenon is due, no doubt, to some favorable exposure, and to the infiltration of water which keeps the ground at a warmer temperature.

The calves were sold for about eighty francs. The milk, deducting the time when the cows calved or went dry, brought in about one hundred and sixty francs a year besides supplying the wants of the family. Tonsard himself managed to earn another hundred and sixty by doing odd jobs of one kind or another.

The sale of food and wine in the tavern, after all costs were paid, returned a profit of about three hundred francs, for the great drinking-bouts happened only at certain times and in certain seasons; and as the topers who indulged in them gave Tonsard and his wife due notice, the latter bought in the neighboring town the exact quantity of provisions needed and no more. The wine produced by Tonsard's vineyard was sold in ordinary years for twenty francs a cask to a wine-dealer at Soulanges with whom Tonsard was intimate. In very prolific years he got as much as twelve casks from his vines; but eight was the average; and Tonsard kept half for his own traffic. In all wine-growing districts the gleaning of the large vineyards gives a good perquisite, and out of it the Tonsard family usually managed to obtain three casks more. But being, as we have seen, sheltered and protected by the keepers, they showed no conscience in their proceedings, – entering vineyards before the harvesters were out of them, just as they swarmed into the wheat-fields before the sheaves were made. So, the seven or eight casks of wine, as much gleaned as harvested, were sold for a good price. However, out of these various proceeds the Grand-I-Vert was mulcted in a good sum for the personal consumption of Tonsard and his wife, who wanted the best of everything to eat, and better wine than they sold, – which they obtained from their friend at Soulanges in payment for their own. In short, the money scraped together by this family amounted to about nine hundred francs, for they fattened two pigs a year, one for themselves and the other to sell.

The idlers and scapegraces and also the laborers took a fancy to the tavern of the Grand-I-Vert, partly because of La Tonsard's merits, and partly on account of the hail-fellow-well-met relation existing between this family and the lower classes of the valley. The two daughters, both remarkably handsome, followed the example of their mother as to morals. Moreover, the long established fame of the Grand-I-Vert, dating from 1795, made it a venerable spot in the eyes of the common people. From Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes, workmen came there to meet and make their bargains and hear the news collected by the Tonsard women and by Mouche and old Fourchon, or supplied by Vermichel and Brunet, that renowned official, when he came to the tavern in search of his practitioner. There the price of hay and of wine was settled; also that of a day's work and of piece-work. Tonsard, a sovereign judge in such matters, gave his advice and opinion while drinking with his guests. Soulanges, according to a saying in these parts, was a town for society and amusement only, while Blangy was a business borough; crushed, however, by the great commercial centre of Ville-aux-Fayes, which had become in the last twenty-five years the capital of this flourishing valley. The cattle and grain market

was held at Blangy, in the public square, and the prices there obtained served as a tariff for the whole arrondissement.

By staying in the house and doing no out-door work, La Tonsard continued fresh and fair and dimpled, in comparison with the women who worked in the fields and faded as rapidly as the flowers, becoming old and haggard before they were thirty. She liked to be well-dressed. In point of fact, she was only clean, but in a village cleanliness is a luxury. The daughters, better dressed than their means warranted, followed their mother's example. Beneath their outer garment, which was relatively handsome, they wore linen much finer than that of the richest peasant women. On fete-days they appeared in dresses that were really pretty, obtained, Heaven knows how! For one thing, the men-servants at Les Aigues sold to them, at prices that were easily paid, the cast-off clothing of the lady's-maids, which, after sweeping the streets of Paris and being made over to fit Marie and Catherine, appeared triumphantly in the precincts of the Grand-I-Vert. These girls, bohemians of the valley, received not one penny in money from their parents, who gave them food only, and the wretched pallets on which they slept with their grandmother in the barn, where their brothers also slept, curled up in the hay like animals. Neither father nor mother paid any heed to this propinquity.

The iron age and the age of gold are more alike than we think for. In the one nothing aroused vigilance; in the other, everything rouses it; the result to society is, perhaps, very much the same. The presence of old Mother Tonsard, which was more a necessity than a precaution, was simply one immorality the more. And thus it was that the Abbe Brossette, after studying the morals of his parishioners, made this pregnant remark to his bishop: —

"Monseigneur, when I observe the stress that the peasantry lay on their poverty, I realize how they fear to lose that excuse for their immorality."

Though everybody knew that the family had no principles and no scruples, nothing was ever said against the morals of the Grand-I-Vert. At the beginning of this book it is necessary to explain, once for all, to persons accustomed to the decencies of middle-class life, that the peasants have no decency in their domestic habits and customs. They make no appeal to morality when their daughters are seduced, unless the seducer is rich and timid. Children, until the State takes possession of them, are used either as capital or as instruments of convenience. Self-interest has become, specially since 1789, the sole motive of the masses; they never ask if an action is legal or immoral, but only if it is profitable. Morality, which is not to be confounded with religion, begins only at a certain competence, – just as one sees, in a higher sphere, how delicacy blossoms in the soul when fortune decorates the furniture. A positively moral and upright man is rare among the peasantry. Do you ask why? Among the many reasons that may be given for this state of things, the principal one is this: Through the nature of their social functions, the peasants live a purely material life which approximates to that of savages, and their constant union with nature tends to foster it. When toil exhausts the body it takes from the mind its purifying action, especially among the ignorant. The Abbe Brossette was right in saying that the state policy of the peasant is his poverty.

Meddling in everybody's interests, Tonsard heard everybody's complaints, and often instigated frauds to benefit the needy. His wife, a kindly appearing woman, had a good word for evil-doers, and never withheld either approval or personal help from her customers in anything they undertook against the rich. This inn, a nest of vipers, brisk and venomous, seething and active, was a hot-bed for the hatred of the peasants and the workingmen against the masters and the wealthy.

The prosperous life of the Tonsards was, therefore, an evil example. Others asked themselves why they should not take their wood, as the Tonsards did, from the forest; why not pasture their cows and have game to eat and to sell as well as they; why not harvest without sowing the grapes and the grain. Accordingly, the pilfering thefts which thin the woods and tithe the ploughed lands and meadows and vineyards became habitual in this valley, and soon existed as a right throughout the districts of Blangy, Conches, and Cerneux, all adjacent to the domain of Les Aigues. This sore, for certain reasons which will be given in due time, did far greater injury to Les Aigues than to the estates

of Ronquerolles or Soulanges. You must not, however, fancy that Tonsard, his wife and children, and his old mother ever deliberately said to themselves, “We will live by theft, and commit it as cleverly as we can.” Such habits grow slowly. To the dried sticks they added, in the first instance, a single bit of good wood; then, emboldened by habit and a carefully prepared immunity (necessary to plans which this history will unfold), they ended at last in cutting “their wood,” and stealing almost their entire livelihood. Pasturage for the cows and the abuses of gleaning were established as customs little by little. When the Tonsards and the do-nothings of the valley had tasted the sweets of these four rights (thus captured by rural paupers, and amounting to actual robbery) we can easily imagine they would never give them up unless compelled by a power greater than their own audacity.

At the time when this history begins Tonsard, then about fifty years of age, tall and strong, rather stout than thin, with curly black hair, skin highly colored and marbled like a brick with purple blotches, yellow whites to the eyes, large ears with broad flaps, a muscular frame, encased, however, in flabby flesh, a retreating forehead, and a hanging lip, – Tonsard, such as you see him, hid his real character under an external stupidity, lightened at times by a show of experience, which seemed all the more intelligent because he had acquired in the company of his father-in-law a sort of bantering talk, much affected by old Fourchon and Vermichel. His nose, flattened at the end as if the finger of God intended to mark him, gave him a voice which came from his palate, like that of all persons disfigured by a disease which thickens the nasal passages, through which the air then passes with difficulty. His upper teeth overlapped each other, and this defect (which Lavater calls terrible) was all the more apparent because they were as white as those of a dog. But for a certain lawless and slothful good humor, and the free-and-easy ways of a rustic tippler, the man would have alarmed the least observing of spectators.

If the portraits of Tonsard, his inn, and his father-in-law take a prominent place in this history, it is because that place belongs to him and to the inn and to the family. In the first place, their existence, so minutely described, is the type of a hundred other households in the valley of Les Aigues. Secondly, Tonsard, without being other than the instrument of deep and active hatreds, had an immense influence on the struggle that was about to take place, being the friend and counsellor of all the complainants of the lower classes. His inn, as we shall presently see, was the rendezvous for the aggressors; in fact, he became their chief, partly on account of the fear he inspired throughout the valley – less, however, by his actual deeds than by those that were constantly expected of him. The threat of this man was as much dreaded as the thing threatened, so that he never had occasion to execute it.

Every revolt, open or concealed, has its banner. The banner of the marauders, the drunkards, the idlers, the sluggards of the valley des Aigues was the terrible tavern of the Grand-I-Vert. Its frequenters found amusement there, – as rare and much-desired a thing in the country as in a city. Moreover, there was no other inn along the country-road for over twelve miles, a distance which conveyances (even when laden) could easily do in three hours; so that those who went from Conches to Ville-aux-Fayes always stopped at the Grand-I-Vert, if only to refresh themselves. The miller of Les Aigues, who was also assistant-mayor, and his men came there. The grooms and valets of the general were not averse to Tonsard’s wine, rendered attractive by Tonsard’s daughters; so the Grand-I-Vert held subterraneous communication with the chateau through the servants, and knew immediately everything that they knew. It is impossible either by benefits or through their own self-interests, to break up the perpetual understanding that exists between the servants of a household and the people from whom they come. Domestic service is of the masses, and to the masses it will ever remain attached. This fatal comradeship explains the reticence of the last words of Charles the groom, as he and Blondet reached the portico of the chateau.

CHAPTER IV. ANOTHER IDYLL

"Ha! by my pipe, papa!" exclaimed Tonsard, seeing his father-in-law as the old man entered and supposing him in quest of food, "your stomach is lively this morning! We haven't anything to give you. How about that rope, – the rope, you know, you were to make for us? It is amazing how much you make over night and how little there is made in the morning! You ought long ago to have twisted the one that is to twist you out of existence; you are getting too costly for us."

The wit of a peasant or laborer is very Attic; it consists in speaking out his mind and giving it a grotesque expression. We find the same thing in a drawing-room. Delicacy of wit takes the place of picturesque vulgarity, and that is really all the difference there is.

"That's enough for the father-in-law!" said the old man. "Talk business; I want a bottle of the best."

So saying, Fourchon rapped a five-franc piece that gleamed in his hand on the old table at which he was seated, – which, with its coating of grease, its scorched black marks, its wine stains, and its gashes, was singular to behold. At the sound of coin Marie Tonsard, as trig as a sloop about to start on a cruise, glanced at her grandfather with a covetous look that shot from her eyes like a spark. La Tonsard came out of her bedroom, attracted by the music of metal.

"You are always rough to my poor father," she said to her husband, "and yet he has earned a deal of money this year; God grant he came by it honestly. Let me see that," she added, springing at the coin and snatching it from Fourchon's fingers.

"Marie," said Tonsard, gravely, "above the board you'll find some bottled wine. Go and get a bottle."

Wine is of only one quality in the country, but it is sold as of two kinds, – cask wine and bottled wine.

"Where did you get this, papa" demanded La Tonsard, slipping the coin into her pocket.

"Philippine! you'll come to a bad end," said the old man, shaking his head but not attempting to recover his money. Doubtless he had long realized the futility of a struggle between his daughter, his terrible son-in-law, and himself.

"Another bottle of wine for which you get five francs out of me," he added, in a peevish tone. "But it shall be the last. I shall give my custom to the Cafe de la Paix."

"Hold your tongue, papa!" remarked his fair and fat daughter, who bore some resemblance to a Roman matron. "You need a shirt, and a pair of clean trousers, and a hat; and I want to see you with a waistcoat. That's what I take the money for."

"I have told you again and again that such things would ruin me," said the old man. "People would think me rich and stop giving me anything."

The bottle brought by Marie put an end to the loquacity of the old man, who was not without that trait, characteristic of those whose tongues are ready to tell out everything, and who shrink from no expression of their thought, no matter how atrocious it may be.

"Then you don't want to tell where you filched that money?" said Tonsard. "We might go and get more where that came from, – the rest of us."

He was making a snare, and as he finished it the ferocious innkeeper happened to glance at his father-in-law's trousers, and there he spied a raised round spot which clearly defined a second five-franc piece.

"Having become a capitalist I drink your health," said Pere Fourchon.

"If you choose to be a capitalist you can be," said Tonsard; "you have the means, you have! But the devil has bored a hole in the back of your head through which everything runs out."

"Hey! I only played the otter trick on that young fellow they have got at Les Aigues. He's from Paris. That's all there is to it."

"If crowds of people would come to see the sources of the Avonne, you'd be rich, Grandpa Fourchon," said Marie.

"Yes," he said, drinking the last glassful the bottle contained, "and I've played the sham otter so long, the live otters have got angry, and one of them came right between my legs to-day; Mouche caught it, and I am to get twenty francs for it."

"I'll bet your otter is made of tow," said Tonsard, looking slyly at his father-in-law.

"If you will give me a pair of trousers, a waistcoat, and some list braces, so as not to disgrace Vermichel on the music stand at Tivoli (for old Socquard is always scolding about my clothes), I'll let you keep that money, my daughter; your idea is a good one. I can squeeze that rich young fellow at Les Aigues; may be he'll take to otters."

"Go and get another bottle," said Tonsard to his daughter. "If your father really had an otter, he would show it to us," he added, speaking to his wife and trying to touch up Fourchon.

"I'm too afraid it would get into your frying-pan," said the old man, winking one of his little green eyes at his daughter. "Philippine has already hooked my five-franc piece; and how many more haven't you bagged under pretence of clothing me and feeding me? and now you say that my stomach is too lively, and that I go half-naked."

"You sold your last clothes to drink boiled wine at the Cafe de la Paix, papa," said his daughter, "though Vermichel tried to prevent it."

"Vermichel! the man I treated! Vermichel is incapable of betraying my friendship. It must have been that lump of old lard on two legs that he is not ashamed to call his wife!"

"He or she," replied Tonsard, "or Bonnebault."

"If it was Bonnebault," cried Fourchon, "he who is one of the pillars of the place, I'll – I'll – Enough!"

"You old sot, what has all that got to do with having sold your clothes? You sold them because you did sell them; you're of age!" said Tonsard, slapping the old man's knee. "Come, do honor to my drink and redden up your throat! The father of Mam Tonsard has a right to do so; and isn't that better than spending your silver at Socquard's?"

"What a shame it is that you have been fifteen years playing for people to dance at Tivoli and you have never yet found out how Socquard cooks his wine, – you who are so shrewd!" said his daughter; "and yet you know very well that if we had the secret we should soon get as rich as Rigou."

Throughout the Morvan, and in that region of Burgundy which lies at its feet on the side toward Paris, this boiled wine with which Mam Tonsard reproached her father is a rather costly beverage which plays a great part in the life of the peasantry, and is made by all grocers and wine-dealers, and wherever a drinking-shop exists. This precious liquor, made of choice wine, sugar, and cinnamon and other spices, is preferable to all those disguises or mixtures of brandy called ratafia, one-hundred-and-seven, brave man's cordial, black currant wine, vespetro, spirit-of-sun, etc. Boiled wine is found throughout France and Switzerland. Among the Jura, and in the wild districts trodden only by a few special tourists, the innkeepers call it, on the word of commercial travellers, the wine of Syracuse. Excellent it is, however, and their guests, hungry as hounds after ascending the surrounding peaks, very gladly pay three and four francs a bottle for it. In the homes of the Morvan and in Burgundy the least illness or the slightest agitation of the nerves is an excuse for boiled wine. Before and after childbirth the women take it with the addition of burnt sugar. Boiled wine has soaked up the property of many a peasant, and more than once the seductive liquid has been the cause of marital chastisement.

"Ha! there's no chance of grabbing that secret," replied Fourchon, "Socquard always locks himself in when he boils his wine; he never told how he does it to his late wife. He sends to Paris for his materials."

"Don't plague your father," cried Tonsard; "doesn't he know? well, then, he doesn't know! People can't know everything!"

Fourchon grew very uneasy on seeing how his son-in-law's countenance softened as well as his words.

"What do you want to rob me of now?" he asked, candidly.

"I?" said Tonsard, "I take none but my legitimate dues; if I get anything from you it is in payment of your daughter's portion, which you promised me and never paid."

Fourchon, reassured by the harshness of this remark, dropped his head on his breast as though vanquished and convinced.

"Look at that pretty snare," resumed Tonsard, coming up to his father-in-law and laying the trap upon his knee. "Some of these days they'll want game at Les Aigues, and we shall sell them their own, or there will be no good God for the poor folks."

"A fine piece of work," said the old man, examining the mischievous machine.

"It is very well to pick up the sous now, papa," said Mam Tonsard, "but you know we are to have our share in the cake of Les Aigues."

"Oh, what chatterers women are!" cried Tonsard. "If I am hanged it won't be for a shot from my gun, but for the gabble of your tongue."

"And do you really suppose that Les Aigues will be cut up and sold in lots for your pitiful benefit?" asked Fourchon. "Pshaw! haven't you discovered in the last thirty years that old Rigou has been sucking the marrow out of your bones that the middle-class folks are worse than the lords? Mark my words, when that affair happens, my children, the Soudrys, the Gaubertins, the Rigous, will make you kick your heels in the air. 'I've the good tobacco, it never shall be thine,' that's the national air of the rich man, hey? The peasant will always be the peasant. Don't you see (but you never did understand anything of politics!) that government puts such heavy taxes on wine only to hinder our profits and keep us poor? The middle classes and the government, they are all one. What would become of them if everybody was rich? Could they till their fields? Would they gather the harvest? No, they *want* the poor! I was rich for ten years and I know what I thought of paupers."

"Must hunt with them, though," replied Tonsard, "because they mean to cut up the great estates; after that's done, we can turn against them. If I'd been Courtecuisse, whom that scoundrel Rigou is ruining, I'd have long ago paid his bill with other balls than the poor fellow gives him."

"Right enough, too," replied Fourchon. "As Pere Niseron says (and he stayed republican long after everybody else), 'The people are tough; they don't die; they have time before them.'"

Fourchon fell into a sort of reverie; Tonsard profited by his inattention to take back the trap, and as he took it up he cut a slip below the coin in his father-in-law's pocket at the moment when the old man raised his glass to his lips; then he set his foot on the five-franc piece as it dropped on the earthen floor just where it was always kept damp by the heel-taps which the customers flung from their glasses. Though quickly and lightly done, the old man might, perhaps, have felt the theft, if Vermichel had not happened to appear at that moment.

"Tonsard, do you know where you father is?" called that functionary from the foot of the steps.

Vermichel's shout, the theft of the money, and the emptying of old Fourchon's glass, were simultaneous.

"Present, captain!" cried Fourchon, holding out a hand to Vermichel to help him up the steps.

Of all Burgundian figures, Vermichel would have seemed to you the most Burgundian. The practitioner was not red, he was scarlet. His face, like certain tropical portions of the globe, was fissured, here and there, with small extinct volcanoes, defined by flat and greenish patches which Fourchon called, not unpoetically, the "flowers of wine." This fiery face, the features of which were swelled out of shape by continual drunkenness, looked cyclopic; for it was lighted on the right side by a gleaming eye, and darkened on the other by a yellow patch over the left orb. Red hair, always tousled, and a beard like that of Judas, made Vermichel as formidable in appearance as he was meek in reality. His prominent nose looked like an interrogation-mark, to which the wide-slit mouth seemed to be always answering, even when it did not open. Vermichel, a short man, wore hob-nail shoes,

bottle-green velveteen trousers, an old waistcoat patched with diverse stuffs which seemed to have been originally made of a counterpane, a jacket of coarse blue cloth and a gray hat with a broad brim. All this luxury, required by the town of Soulanges where Vermichel fulfilled the combined functions of porter at the town-hall, drummer, jailer, musician, and practitioner, was taken care of by Madame Vermichel, an alarming antagonist of Rabelaisian philosophy. This virago with moustachios, about one yard in width and one hundred and twenty kilograms in weight (but very active), ruled Vermichel with a rod of iron. Thrashed by her when drunk, he allowed her to thrash him still when sober; which caused Pere Fourchon to say, with a sniff at Vermichel's clothes, "It is the livery of a slave."

"Talk of the sun and you'll see its beams," cried Fourchon, repeating a well-worn allusion to the rutilant face of Vermichel, which really did resemble those copper suns painted on tavern signs in the provinces. "Has Mam Vermichel spied too much dust on your back, that you're running away from your four-fifths, – for I can't call her your better half, that woman! What brings you here at this hour, drum-major?"

"Politics, always politics," replied Vermichel, who seemed accustomed to such pleasantries.

"Ah! business is bad in Blangy, and there'll be notes to protest, and writs to issue," remarked Pere Fourchon, filling a glass for his friend.

"That APE of ours is right behind me," replied Vermichel, with a backward gesture.

In workmen's slang "ape" meant master. The word belonged to the dictionary of the worthy pair.

"What's Monsieur Brunet coming bothering about here?" asked Tonsard.

"Hey, by the powers, you folks!" said Vermichel, "you've brought him in for the last three years more than you are worth. Ha! that master at Les Aigues, he has his eye upon you; he'll punch you in the ribs; he's after you, the Shopman! Brunet says, if there were three such landlords in the valley his fortune would be made."

"What new harm are they going to do to the poor?" asked Marie.

"A pretty wise thing for themselves," replied Vermichel. "Faith! you'll have to give in, in the end. How can you help it? They've got the power. For the last two years haven't they had three foresters and a horse-patrol, all as active as ants, and a field-keeper who is a terror? Besides, the gendarmerie is ready to do their dirty work at any time. They'll crush you – "

"Bah!" said Tonsard, "we are too flat. That which can't be crushed isn't the trees, it's ground."

"Don't you trust to that," said Fourchon to his son-in-law; "you own property."

"Those rich folks must love you," continued Vermichel, "for they think of nothing else from morning till night! They are saying to themselves now like this: 'Their cattle eat up our pastures; we'll seize their cattle; they can't eat grass themselves.' You've all been condemned, the warrants are out, and they have told our ape to take your cows. We are to begin this morning at Conches by seizing old mother Bonnebault's cow and Godin's cow and Mitant's cow."

The moment the name of Bonnebault was mentioned, Marie, who was in love with the old woman's grandson, sprang into the vineyard with a nod to her father and mother. She slipped like an eel through a break in the hedge, and was off on the way to Conches with the speed of a hunted hare.

"They'll do so much," remarked Tonsard, tranquilly, "that they'll get their bones broken; and that will be a pity, for their mothers can't make them any new ones."

"Well, perhaps so," said old Fourchon, "but see here, Vermichel, I can't go with you for an hour or more, for I have important business at the chateau."

"More important than serving three warrants at five sous each? 'You shouldn't spit into the vintage,' as Father Noah says."

"I tell you, Vermichel, that my business requires me to go to the chateau des Aigues," repeated the old man, with an air of laughable self-importance.

"And anyhow," said Mam Tonsard, "my father had better keep out of the way. Do you really mean to find the cows?"

"Monsieur Brunet, who is a very good fellow, would much rather find nothing but their dung," answered Vermichel. "A man who is obliged to be out and about day and night had better be careful."

"If he is, he has good reason to be," said Tonsard, sententiously.

"So," continued Vermichel, "he said to Monsieur Michaud, 'I'll go as soon as the court is up.' If he had wanted to find the cows he'd have gone at seven o'clock in the morning. But that didn't suit Michaud, and Brunet has had to be off. You can't take in Michaud, he's a trained hound! Ha, the brigand!"

"Ought to have stayed in the army, a swaggerer like that," said Tonsard; "he is only fit to deal with enemies. I wish he would come and ask me my name. He may call himself a veteran of the young guard, but I know very well that if I measured spurs with him, I'd keep my feathers up longest."

"Look here!" said Mam Tonsard to Vermichel, "when are the notices for the ball at Soulanges coming out? Here it is the eighth of August."

"I took them yesterday to Monsieur Bournier at Ville-aux-Fayes, to be printed," replied Vermichel; "they do talk of fireworks on the lake."

"What crowds of people we shall have!" cried Fourchon.

"Profits for Socquard!" said Tonsard, spitefully.

"If it doesn't rain," said his wife, by way of comfort.

At this moment the trot of a horse coming from the direction of Soulanges was heard, and five minutes later the sheriff's officer fastened his horse to a post placed for the purpose near the wicket gate through which the cows were driven. Then he showed his head at the door of the Grand-I-Vert.

"Come, my boys, let's lose no time," he said, pretending to be in a hurry.

"Hey!" said Vermichel. "Here's a refractory, Monsieur Brunet; Pere Fourchon wants to drop off."

"He has had too many drops already," said the sheriff; "but the law in this case does not require that he shall be sober."

"Please excuse me, Monsieur Brunet," said Fourchon, "I am expected at Les Aigues on business; they are in treaty for an otter."

Brunet, a withered little man dressed from head to foot in black cloth, with a bilious skin, a furtive eye, curly hair, lips tight-drawn, pinched nose, anxious expression, and gruff in speech, exhibited the phenomenon of a character and bearing in perfect harmony with his profession. He was so well-informed as to the law, or, to speak more correctly, the quibbles of the law, that he had come to be both the terror and the counsellor of the whole canton. He was not without a certain popularity among the peasantry, from whom he usually took his pay in kind. The compound of his active and negative qualities and his knowledge of how to manage matters got him the custom of the canton, to the exclusion of his coadjutor Plissoud, about whom we shall have something to say later. This chance combination of a sheriff's officer who does everything and a sheriff's officer who does nothing is not at all uncommon in the country justice courts.

"So matters are getting warm, are they?" said Tonsard to little Brunet.

"What can you expect? you pilfer the man too much, and he's going to protect himself," replied the officer. "It will be a bad business for you in the end; government will interfere."

"Then we, poor unfortunates, must give up the ghost!" said Mam Tonsard, offering him a glass of brandy on a saucer.

"The unfortunate may all die, yet they'll never be lacking in the land," said Fourchon, sententiously.

"You do great damage to the woods," retorted the sheriff.

"Now don't believe that, Monsieur Brunet," said Mam Tonsard; "they make such a fuss about a few miserable fagots!"

"We didn't crush the rich low enough during the Revolution, that's what's the trouble," said Tonsard.

Just then a horrible, and quite incomprehensible noise was heard. It seemed to be a rush of hurried feet, accompanied with a rattle of arms, half-drowned by the rustling of leaves, the dragging of branches, and the sound of still more hasty feet. Two voices, as different as the two footsteps, were venting noisy exclamations. Everybody inside the inn guessed at once that a man was pursuing a woman; but why? The uncertainty did not last long.

"It is mother!" said Tonsard, jumping up; "I know her shriek."

Then suddenly, rushing up the broken steps of the Grand-I-Vert by a last effort that can be made only by the sinews of smugglers, old Mother Tonsard fell flat on the floor in the middle of the room. The immense mass of wood she carried on her head made a terrible noise as it crashed against the top of the door and then upon the ground. Every one had jumped out of the way. The table, the bottles, the chairs were knocked over and scattered. The noise was as great as if the cottage itself had come tumbling down.

"I'm dead! The scoundrel has killed me!"

The words and the flight of the old woman were explained by the apparition on the threshold of a keeper, dressed in green livery, wearing a hat edged with silver cord, a sabre at his side, a leathern shoulder-belt bearing the arms of Montcornet charged with those of the Troisvilles, the regulation red waistcoat, and buckskin gaiters which came above the knee.

After a moment's hesitation the keeper said, looking at Brunet and Vermichel, "Here are witnesses."

"Witnesses of what?" said Tonsard.

"That woman has a ten-year-old oak, cut into logs, inside those fagots; it is a regular crime!"

The moment the word "witness" was uttered Vermichel thought best to breathe the fresh air of the vineyard.

"Of what? witnesses of what?" cried Tonsard, standing in front of the keeper while his wife helped up the old woman. "Do you mean to show your claws, Vatel? Accuse persons and arrest them on the highway, brigand, – that's your domain; but get out of here! A man's house is his castle."

"I caught her in the act, and your mother must come with me."

"Arrest my mother in my house? You have no right to do it. My house is inviolable, – all the world knows that, at least. Have you got a warrant from Monsieur Guerbet, the magistrate? Ha! you must have the law behind you before you come in here. You are not the law, though you have sworn an oath to starve us to death, you miserable forest-gauger, you!"

The fury of the keeper waxed so hot that he was on the point of seizing hold of the wood, when the old woman, a frightful bit of black parchment endowed with motion, the like of which can be seen only in David's picture of "The Sabines," screamed at him, "Don't touch it, or I'll fly at your eyes!"

"Well, then, undo that pile in presence of Monsieur Brunet," said the keeper.

Though the sheriff's officer had assumed the indifference that the routine of business does really give to officials of his class, he threw a glance at Tonsard and his wife which said plainly, "A bad business!" Old Fourchon looked at his daughter, and slyly pointed at a pile of ashes in the chimney. Mam Tonsard, who understood in a moment from that significant gesture both the danger of her mother-in-law and the advice of her father, seized a handful of ashes and flung them in the keeper's eyes. Vatel roared with pain; Tonsard pushed him roughly upon the broken door-steps where the blinded man stumbled and fell, and then rolled nearly down to the gate, dropping his gun on the way. In an instant the load of sticks was unfastened, and the oak logs pulled out and hidden with a rapidity no words can describe. Brunet, anxious not to witness this manoeuvre, which he readily foresaw, rushed after the keeper to help him up; then he placed him on the bank and wet his handkerchief in water to wash the eyes of the poor fellow, who, in spite of his agony, was trying to reach the brook.

"You are in the wrong, Vatel," said Brunet; "you have no right to enter houses, don't you see?"

The old woman, a little hump-backed creature, stood on the sill of the door, with her hands on her hips, darting flashes from her eyes and curses from her foaming lips shrill enough to be heard at Blangy.

"Ha! the villain, 'twas well done! May hell get you! To suspect me of cutting trees! —*me*, the most honest woman in the village. To hunt me like vermin! I'd like to see you lose your cursed eyes, for then we'd have peace. You are birds of ill-omen, the whole of you; you invent shameful stories to stir up strife between your master and us."

The keeper allowed the sheriff to bathe his eyes and all the while the latter kept telling him that he was legally wrong.

"The old thief! she has tired us out," said Vatel at last. "She has been at work in the woods all night."

As the whole family had taken an active hand in hiding the live wood and putting things straight in the cottage, Tonsard presently appeared at the door with an insolent air. "Vatel, my man, if you ever again dare to force your way into my domain, my gun shall answer you," he said. "To-day you have had the ashes; the next time you shall have the fire. You don't know your own business. That's enough. Now if you feel hot after this affair take some wine, I offer it to you; and you may come in and see that my old mother's bundle of fagots hadn't a scrap of live wood in it; it is every bit brushwood."

"Scoundrel!" said the keeper to the sheriff, in a low voice, more enraged by this speech than by the smart of his eyes.

Just then Charles, the groom, appeared at the gate of the Grand-I-Vert.

"What is the matter, Vatel?" he said.

"Ah!" said the keeper, wiping his eyes, which he had plunged wide open into the rivulet to give them a final cleansing. "I have some debtors in there that I'll cause to rue the day they saw the light."

"If you take it that way, Monsieur Vatel," said Tonsard, coldly, "you will find we don't want for courage in Burgundy."

Vatel departed. Not feeling much curiosity to know what the trouble was, Charles went up the steps and looked into the house.

"Come to the chateau, you and your otter, – if you really have one," he said to Pere Fourchon.

The old man rose hurriedly and followed him.

"Well, where is it, – that otter of yours?" said Charles, smiling doubtfully.

"This way," said the old fellow, going toward the Thune.

The name is that of a brook formed by the overflow of the mill-race and of certain springs in the park of Les Aigues. It runs by the side of the county road as far as the lakelet of Soulanges, which it crosses, and then falls into the Avonne, after feeding the mills and ponds on the Soulanges estate.

"Here it is; I hid it in the brook, with a stone around its neck."

As he stooped and rose again the old man missed the coin out of his pocket, where metal was so uncommon that he was likely to notice its presence or its absence immediately.

"Ah, the sharks!" he cried. "If I hunt otters they hunt fathers-in-law! They get out of me all I earn, and tell me it is for my good! If it were not for my poor Mouche, who is the comfort of my old age, I'd drown myself. Children! they are the ruin of their fathers. You haven't married, have you, Monsieur Charles? Then don't; never get married, and then you can't reproach yourself for spreading bad blood. I, who expected to buy my tow with that money, and there it is filched, stolen! That monsieur up at Les Aigues, a fine young fellow, gave me ten francs; ha! well! it'll put up the price of my otter now."

Charles distrusted the old man so profoundly that he took his grievances (this time very sincere) for the preliminary of what he called, in servant's slang, "varnish," and he made the great mistake of letting his opinion appear in a satirical grin, which the spiteful old fellow detected.

"Come, come! Pere Fourchon, now behave yourself; you are going to see Madame," said Charles, noticing how the rubies flashed on the nose and cheeks of the old drunkard.

"I know how to attend to business, Charles; and the proof is that if you will get me out of the kitchen the remains of the breakfast and a bottle or two of Spanish wine, I'll tell you something which will save you from a 'foul.'"

"Tell me, and Francois shall get Monsieur's own order to give you a glass of wine," said the groom.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Well then, I know you meet my granddaughter Catherine under the bridge of the Avonne. Godain is in love with her; he saw you, and he is fool enough to be jealous, – I say fool, for a peasant oughtn't to have feelings which belong only to rich folks. If you go to the ball of Soulanges at Tivoli and dance with her, you'll dance higher than you'll like. Godain is rich and dangerous; he is capable of breaking your arm without your getting a chance to arrest him."

"That would be too dear; Catherine is a fine girl, but she is not worth all that," replied Charles. "Why should Godain be so angry? others are not."

"He loves her enough to marry her."

"If he does, he'll beat her," said Charles.

"I don't know about that," said the old man. "She takes after her mother, against whom Tonsard never raised a finger, – he's too afraid she'll be off, hot foot. A woman who knows how to hold her own is mighty useful. Besides, if it came to fisticuffs with Catherine, Godain, though he's pretty strong, wouldn't give the last blow."

"Well, thank you, Pere Fourchon; here's forty sous to drink my health in case I can't get you the sherry."

Pere Fourchon turned his head aside as he pocketed the money lest Charles should see the expression of amusement and sarcasm which he was unable to repress.

"Catherine," he resumed, "is a proud minx; she likes sherry. You had better tell her to go and get it at Les Aigues."

Charles looked at Pere Fourchon with naive admiration, not suspecting the eager interest the general's enemies took in slipping one more spy into the chateau.

"The general ought to feel happy now," continued Fourchon; "the peasants are all quiet. What does he say? Is he satisfied with Sibilet?"

"It is only Monsieur Michaud who finds fault with Sibilet. They say he'll get him sent away."

"Professional jealousy!" exclaimed Fourchon. "I'll bet you would like to get rid of Francois and take his place."

"Hang it! he has twelve hundred francs wages," said Charles; "but they can't send him off, – he knows the general's secrets."

"Just as Madame Michaud knows the countess's," remarked Fourchon, watching the other carefully. "Look here, my boy, do you know whether Monsieur and Madame have separate rooms?"

"Of course; if they didn't, Monsieur wouldn't be so fond of Madame."

"Is that all you know?" said Fourchon.

As they were now before the kitchen windows nothing more was said.

CHAPTER V. ENEMIES FACE TO FACE

While breakfast was in progress at the chateau, Francois, the head footman, whispered to Blondet, but loud enough for the general to overhear him, —

"Monsieur, Pere Fourchon's boy is here; he says they have caught the otter, and wants to know if you would like it, or whether they shall take it to the sub-prefect at Ville-aux-Fayes."

Emile Blondet, though himself a past-master of hoaxing, could not keep his cheeks from blushing like those of a virgin who hears an indecorous story of which she knows the meaning.

"Ha! ha! so you have hunted the otter this morning with Pere Fourchon?" cried the general, with a roar of laughter.

"What is it?" asked the countess, uneasy at her husband's laugh.

"When a man of wit and intelligence is taken in by old Fourchon," continued the general, "a retired cuirassier need not blush for having hunted that otter; which bears an enormous resemblance to the third posthorse we are made to pay for and never see." With that he went off into further explosions of laughter, in the midst of which he contrived to say: "I am not surprised you had to change your boots – and your trousers; I have no doubt you have been wading! The joke didn't go as far as that with me, – I stayed on the bank; but then, you know, you are so much more intelligent than I – "

"But you forget," interrupted Madame de Montcornet, "that I do not know what you are talking of."

At these words, said with some pique, the general grew serious, and Blondet told the story of his fishing for the otter.

"But if they really have an otter," said the countess, "those poor people are not to blame."

"Oh, but it is ten years since an otter has been seen about here," said the pitiless general.

"Monsieur le comte," said Francois, "the boy swears by all that's sacred that he has got one."

"If they have one I'll buy it," said the general.

"I don't suppose," remarked the Abbe Brossette, "that God has condemned Les Aigues to never have otters."

"Ah, Monsieur le cure!" cried Blondet, "if you bring the Almighty against me – "

"But what is all this? Who is here?" said the countess, hastily.

"Mouche, madame, – the boy who goes about with old Fourchon," said the footman.

"Bring him in – that is, if Madame will allow it?" said the general; "he may amuse you."

Mouche presently appeared, in his usual state of comparative nudity. Beholding this personification of poverty in the middle of this luxurious dining-room, the cost of one panel of which would have been a fortune to the bare-legged, bare-breasted, and bare-headed child, it was impossible not to be moved by an impulse of charity. The boy's eyes, like blazing coals, gazed first at the luxuries of the room, and then at those on the table.

"Have you no mother?" asked Madame de Montcornet, unable otherwise to explain the child's nakedness.

"No, ma'am; m'ma died of grief for losing p'pa, who went to the army in 1812 without marrying her with papers, and got frozen, saving your presence. But I've my Grandpa Fourchon, who is a good man, – though he does beat me bad sometimes."

"How is it, my dear, that such wretched people can be found on your estate?" said the countess, looking at the general.

"Madame la comtesse," said the abbe, "in this district we have none but voluntary paupers. Monsieur le comte does all he can; but we have to do with a class of persons who are without religion and who have but one idea, that of living at your expense."

"But, my dear abbe," said Blondet, "you are here to improve their morals."

"Monsieur," replied the abbe, "my bishop sent me here as if on a mission to savages; but, as I had the honor of telling him, the savages of France cannot be reached. They make it a law unto themselves not to listen to us; whereas the church does get some hold on the savages of America."

"M'sieur le cure, they do help me a bit now," remarked Mouche; "but if I went to your church they *wouldn't*, and the other folks would make game of my breeches."

"Religion ought to begin by giving him trousers, my dear abbe," said Blondet. "In your foreign missions don't you begin by coaxing the savages?"

"He would soon sell them," answered the abbe, in a low tone; "besides, my salary does not enable me to begin on that line."

"Monsieur le cure is right," said the general, looking at Mouche.

The policy of the little scamp was to appear not to hear what they were saying when it was against himself.

"The boy is intelligent enough to know good from evil," continued the count, "and he is old enough to work; yet he thinks of nothing but how to commit evil without being found out. All the keepers know him. He is very well aware that the master of an estate may witness a trespass on his property and yet have no right to arrest the trespasser. I have known him keep his cows boldly in my meadows, though he knew I saw him; but now, ever since I have been mayor, he runs away fast enough."

"Oh, that is very wrong," said the countess; "you should not take other people's things, my little man."

"Madame, we must eat. My grandpa gives me more slaps than food, and they don't fill my stomach, slaps don't. When the cows come in I milk 'em just a little and I live on that. Monseigneur isn't so poor but what he'll let me drink a drop o' milk the cows get from his grass?"

"Perhaps he hasn't eaten anything to-day," said the countess, touched by his misery. "Give him some bread and the rest of that chicken; let him have his breakfast," she added, looking at the footman. "Where do you sleep, my child?"

"Anywhere, madame; under the stars in summer, and wherever they'll let us in winter."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"There is still time to bring him up to better ways," said the countess to her husband.

"He will make a good soldier," said the general, gruffly; "he is well toughened. I went through that kind of thing myself, and here I am."

"Excuse me, general, I don't belong to nobody," said the boy. "I can't be drafted. My poor mother wasn't married, and I was born in a field. I'm a son of the 'airth,' as grandpa says. M'ma saved me from the army, that she did! My name ain't no more Mouche than nothing at all. Grandpa keeps telling me all my advantages. I'm not on the register, and when I'm old enough to be drafted I can go all over France and they can't take me."

"Are you fond of your grandfather?" said the countess, trying to look into the child's heart.

"My! doesn't he box my ears when he feels like it! but then, after all, he's such fun; he's such good company! He says he pays himself that way for having taught me to read and write."

"Can you read?" asked the count.

"Yah, I should think so, Monsieur le comte, and fine writing too – just as true as we've got that otter."

"Read that," said the count, giving him a newspaper.

"The Qu-o-ti-dienne," read Mouche, hesitating only three times.

Every one, even the abbe, laughed.

"Why do you make me read that newspaper?" cried Mouche, angrily. "My grandpa says it is made up to please the rich, and everybody knows later just what's in it."

"The child is right, general," said Blondet; "and he makes me long to see my hoaxing friend again."

Mouche understood perfectly that he was posing for the amusement of the company; the pupil of Pere Fourchon was worthy of his master, and he forthwith began to cry.

"How can you tease a child with bare feet?" said the countess.

"And who thinks it quite natural that his grandfather should recoup himself for his education by boxing his ears," said Blondet.

"Tell me, my poor little fellow, have you really caught an otter?"

"Yes, madame; as true as that you are the prettiest lady I have seen, or ever shall see," said the child, wiping his eyes.

"Then show me the otter," said the general.

"Oh M'sieur le comte, my grandpa has hidden it; but it was kicking still when we were at work at the rope-walk. Send for my grandpa, please; he wants to sell it to you himself."

"Take him into the kitchen," said the countess to Francois, "and give him his breakfast, and send Charles to fetch Pere Fourchon. Find some shoes, and a pair of trousers and a waistcoat for the poor child; those who come here naked must go away clothed."

"May God bless you, my beautiful lady," said Mouche, departing. "M'sieur le cure may feel quite sure that I'll keep the things and wear 'em fete-days, because you give 'em to me."

Emile and Madame Montcornet looked at each other with some surprise, and seemed to say to the abbe, "The boy is not a fool!"

"It is quite true, madame," said the abbe after the child had gone, "that we cannot reckon with Poverty. I believe it has hidden excuses of which God alone can judge, – physical excuses, often congenital; moral excuses, born in the character, produced by an order of things that are often the result of qualities which, unhappily for society, have no vent. Deeds of heroism performed upon the battle-field ought to teach us that the worst scoundrels may become heroes. But here in this place you are living under exceptional circumstances; and if your benevolence is not controlled by reflection and judgment you run the risk of supporting your enemies."

"Our enemies?" exclaimed the countess.

"Cruel enemies," said the general, gravely.

"Pere Fourchon and his son-in-law Tonsard," said the abbe, "are the strength and the intelligence of the lower classes of this valley, who consult them on all occasions. The Machiavelism of these people is beyond belief. Ten peasants meeting in a tavern are the small change of great political questions."

Just then Francois announced Monsieur Sibilet.

"He is my minister of finance," said the general, smiling; "ask him in. He will explain to you the gravity of the situation," he added, looking at his wife and Blondet.

"Because he has reasons of his own for not concealing it," said the cure, in a low tone.

Blondet then beheld a personage of whom he had heard much ever since his arrival, and whom he desired to know, the land-steward of Les Aigues. He saw a man of medium height, about thirty years of age, with a sulky look and a discontented face, on which a smile sat ill. Beneath an anxious brow a pair of greenish eyes evaded the eyes of others, and so disguised their thought. Sibilet was dressed in a brown surtout coat, black trousers and waistcoat, and wore his hair long and flat to the head, which gave him a clerical look. His trousers barely concealed that he was knock-kneed. Though his pallid complexion and flabby flesh gave the impression of an unhealthy constitution, Sibilet was really robust. The tones of his voice, which were a little thick, harmonized with this unflattering exterior.

Blondet gave a hasty look at the abbe, and the glance with which the young priest answered it showed the journalist that his own suspicions about the steward were certainties to the curate.

"Did you not tell me, my dear Sibilet," said the general, "that you estimate the value of what the peasants steal from us at a quarter of the whole revenue?"

"Much more than that, Monsieur le comte," replied the steward. "The poor about here get more from your property than the State exacts in taxes. A little scamp like Mouche can glean his two bushels a day. Old women, whom you would really think at their last gasp, become at the harvest and vintage times as active and healthy as girls. You can witness that phenomenon very soon," said Sibilet, addressing Blondet, "for the harvest, which was put back by the rains in July will begin next week, when they cut the rye. The gleaners must have a certificate of pauperism from the mayor of the district, and no district should allow any one to glean except the paupers; but the districts of one canton do glean in those of another without certificate. If we have sixty real paupers in our district, there are at least forty others who could support themselves if they were not so idle. Even persons who have a business leave it to glean in the fields and in the vineyards. All these people, taken together, gather in this neighborhood something like three hundred bushels a day; the harvest lasts two weeks, and that makes four thousand five hundred bushels in this district alone. The gleaning takes more from an estate than the taxes. As to the abuse of pasturage, it robs us of fully one-sixth the produce of the meadows; and as to that of the woods, it is incalculable, – they have actually come to cutting down six-year-old trees. The loss to you, Monsieur le comte, amounts to fully twenty-odd thousand francs a year."

"Do you hear that, madame?" said the general to his wife.

"Is it not exaggerated?" asked Madame de Montcornet.

"No, madame, unfortunately not," said the abbe. "Poor Niseron, that old fellow with the white head, who combines the functions of bell-ringer, beadle, grave-digger, sexton, and clerk, in defiance of his republican opinions, – I mean the grandfather of the little Genevieve whom you placed with Madame Michaud – "

"La Pechina," said Sibilet, interrupting the abbe.

"Pechina!" said the countess, "whom do you mean?"

"Madame la comtesse, when you met little Genevieve on the road in a miserable condition, you cried out in Italian, 'Piccina!' The word became a nickname, and is now corrupted all through the district into Pechina," said the abbe. "The poor girl comes to church with Madame Michaud and Madame Sibilet."

"And she is none the better for it," said Sibilet, "for the others ill-treat her on account of her religion."

"Well, that poor old man of seventy gleans, honestly, about a bushel and a half a day," continued the priest; "but his natural uprightness prevents him from selling his gleanings as others do, – he keeps them for his own consumption. Monsieur Langlume, your miller, grinds his flour gratis at my request, and my servant bakes his bread with mine."

"I had quite forgotten my little protegee," said the countess, troubled at Sibilet's remark. "Your arrival," she added to Blondet, "has quite turned my head. But after breakfast I will take you to the gate of the Avonne and show you the living image of those women whom the painters of the fifteenth century delighted to perpetuate."

The sound of Pere Fourchon's broken sabots was now heard; after depositing them in the antechamber, he was brought to the door of the dining-room by Francois. At a sign from the countess, Francois allowed him to pass in, followed by Mouche with his mouth full and carrying the otter, hanging by a string tied to its yellow paws, webbed like those of a palmiped. He cast upon his four superiors sitting at table, and also upon Sibilet, that look of mingled distrust and servility which serves as a veil to the thoughts of the peasantry; then he brandished his amphibian with a triumphant air.

"Here it is!" he cried, addressing Blondet.

"My otter!" returned the Parisian, "and well paid for."

"Oh, my dear gentleman," replied Pere Fourchon, "yours got away; she is now in her burrow, and she won't come out, for she's a female, – this is a male; Mouche saw him coming just as you went away. As true as you live, as true as that Monsieur le comte covered himself and his cuirassiers with glory at Waterloo, the otter is mine, just as much as Les Aigues belongs to Monseigneur the general. But the otter is *yours* for twenty francs; if not I'll take it to the sub-prefect. If Monsieur Gourdon thinks it too dear, then I'll give you the preference; that's only fair, as we hunted together this morning!"

"Twenty francs!" said Blondet. "In good French you can't call that *giving* the preference."

"Hey, my dear gentleman," cried the old fellow. "Perhaps I don't know French, and I'll ask it in good Burgundian; as long as I get the money, I don't care, I'll talk Latin: 'latinus, latina, latinum'! Besides, twenty francs is what you promised me this morning. My children have already stolen the silver you gave me; I wept about it, coming along, – ask Charles if I didn't. Not that I'd arrest 'em for the value of ten francs and have 'em up before the judge, no! But just as soon as I earn a few pennies, they make me drink and get 'em out of me. Ah! it is hard, hard to be reduced to go and get my wine elsewhere. But just see what children are these days! That's what we got by the Revolution; it is all for the children now-a-days, and parents are suppressed. I'm bringing up Mouche on another tack; he loves me, the little scamp," – giving his grandson a poke.

"It seems to me you are making him a little thief, like all the rest," said Sibilet; "he never lies down at night without some sin on his conscience."

"Ha! Monsieur Sibilet, his conscience is as clean as yours any day! Poor child! what can he steal? A little grass! that's better than throttling a man! He don't know mathematics like you, nor subtraction, nor addition, nor multiplication, – you are very unjust to us, that you are! You call us a nest of brigands, but you are the cause of the misunderstandings between our good landlord here, who is a worthy man, and the rest of us, who are all worthy men, – there ain't an honester part of the country than this. Come, what do you mean? do I own property? don't I go half-naked, and Mouche too? Fine sheets we slept in, washed by the dew every morning! and unless you want the air we breathe and the sunshine we drink, I should like to know what we have that you can take away from us! The rich folks rob as they sit in their chimney-corners, – and more profitably, too, than by picking up a few sticks in the woods. I don't see no game-keepers or patrols after Monsieur Gaubertin, who came here as naked as a worm and is now worth his millions. It's easy said, 'Robbers!' Here's fifteen years that old Guerbet, the tax-gatherer at Soulanges, carries his money along the roads by the dead of night, and nobody ever took a farthing from him; is that like a land of robbers? has robbery made us rich? Show me which of us two, your class or mine, live the idlest lives and have the most to live on without earning it."

"If you were to work," said the abbe, "you would have property. God blesses labor."

"I don't want to contradict you, M'sieur l'abbe, for you are wiser than I, and perhaps you'll know how to explain something that puzzles me. Now see, here I am, ain't I? – that drunken, lazy, idle, good-for-nothing old Fourchon, who had an education and was a farmer, and got down in the mud and never got up again, – well, what difference is there between me and that honest and worthy old Niseron, seventy years old (and that's my age) who has dug the soil for sixty years and got up every day before it was light to go to his work, and has made himself an iron body and a fine soul? Well, isn't he as bad off as I am? His little granddaughter, Pechina, is at service with Madame Michaud, whereas my little Mouche is as free as air. So that poor good man gets rewarded for his virtues in exactly the same way that I get punished for my vices. He don't know what a glass of good wine is, he's as sober as an apostle, he buries the dead, and I – I play for the living to dance. He is always in a peck o' troubles, while I slip along in a devil-may-care way. We have come along about even in life; we've got the same snow on our heads, the same funds in our pockets, and I supply him with rope to ring his bell. He's a republican and I'm not even a publican, – that's all the difference as far as I can see. A peasant may do good or do evil (according to your ideas) and he'll go out of the world just as he came into it, in rags; while you wear the fine clothes."

No one interrupted Pere Fourchon, who seemed to owe his eloquence to his potations. At first Sibilet tried to cut him short, but desisted at a sign from Blondet. The abbe, the general, and the countess, all understood from the expression of the writer's eye that he wanted to study the question of pauperism from life, and perhaps take his revenge on Pere Fourchon.

"What sort of education are you giving Mouche?" asked Blondet. "Do you expect to make him any better than your daughters?"

"Does he ever speak to him of God?" said the priest.

"Oh, no, no! Monsieur le cure, I don't tell him to fear God, but men. God is good; he has promised us poor folks, so you say, the kingdom of heaven, because the rich people keep the earth to themselves. I tell him: 'Mouche! fear the prison, and keep out of it, – for that's the way to the scaffold. Don't steal anything, make people give it to you. Theft leads to murder, and murder brings down the justice of men. The razor of justice, —*that's* what you've got to fear; it lets the rich sleep easy and keeps the poor awake. Learn to read. Education will teach you ways to grab money under cover of the law, like that fine Monsieur Gaubertin; why, you can even be a land-steward like Monsieur Sibilet here, who gets his rations out of Monsieur le comte. The thing to do is to keep well with the rich, and pick up the crumbs that fall from their tables.' That's what I call giving him a good, solid education; and you'll always find the little rascal on the side of the law, – he'll be a good citizen and take care of me."

"What do you mean to make of him?" asked Blondet.

"A servant, to begin with," returned Fourchon, "because then he'll see his masters close by, and learn something; he'll complete his education, I'll warrant you. Good example will be a fortune to him, with the law on his side like the rest of you. If M'sieur le comte would only take him in his stables and let him learn to groom the horses, the boy will be mighty pleased, for though I've taught him to fear men, he don't fear animals."

"You are a clever fellow, Pere Fourchon," said Blondet; "you know what you are talking about, and there's sense in what you say."

"Oh, sense? no; I left my sense at the Grand-I-Vert when I lost those silver pieces."

"How is it that a man of your capacity should have dropped so low? As things are now, a peasant can only blame himself for his poverty; he is a free man, and he can become a rich one. It is not as it used to be. If a peasant lays by his money, he can always buy a bit of land and become his own master."

"I've seen the olden time and I've seen the new, my dear wise gentleman," said Fourchon; "the sign over the door has changed, that's true, but the wine is the same, – to-day is the younger brother of yesterday, that's all. Put that in your newspaper! Are we poor folks free? We still belong to the same parish, and its lord is always there, – I call him Toil. The hoe, our sole property, has never left our hands. Let it be the old lords or the present taxes which take the best of our earnings, the fact remains that we sweat our lives out in toil."

"But you could undertake a business, and try to make your fortune," said Blondet.

"Try to make my fortune! And where shall I try? If I wish to leave my own province, I must get a passport, and that costs forty sous. Here's forty years that I've never had a slut of a forty-sous piece jingling against another in my pocket. If you want to travel you need as many crowns as there are villages, and there are mighty few Fourchons who have enough to get to six of 'em. It is only the draft that gives us a chance to get away. And what good does the army do us? The colonels live by the solider, just as the rich folks live by the peasant; and out of every hundred of 'em you won't find more than one of our breed. It is just as it is the world over, one rolling in riches, for a hundred down in the mud. Why are we in the mud? Ask God and the usurers. The best we can do is to stay in our own parts, where we are penned like sheep by the force of circumstances, as our fathers were by the rule of the lords. As for me, what do I care what shackles they are that keep me here? let it be the law of public necessity or the tyranny of the old lords, it is all the same; we are condemned to dig the soil forever. There, where we are born, there we dig it, that earth! and spade it, and manure it, and

delve in it, for you who are born rich just as we are born poor. The masses will always be what they are, and stay what they are. The number of us who manage to rise is nothing like the number of you who topple down! We know that well enough, if we have no education! You mustn't be after us with your sheriff all the time, – not if you're wise. We let you alone, and you must let us alone. If not, and things get worse, you'll have to feed us in your prisons, where we'd be much better off than in our homes. You want to remain our masters, and we shall always be enemies, just as we were thirty years ago. You have everything, we have nothing; you can't expect we should ever be friends."

"That's what I call a declaration of war," said the general.

"Monseigneur," retorted Fourchon, "when Les Aigues belonged to that poor Madame (God keep her soul and forgive her the sins of her youth!) we were happy. *She* let us get our food from the fields and our fuel from the forest; and was she any the poorer for it? And you, who are at least as rich as she, you hunt us like wild beasts, neither more nor less, and drag the poor before the courts. Well, evil will come of it! you'll be the cause of some great calamity. Haven't I just seen your keeper, that shuffling Vatel, half kill a poor old woman for a stick of wood? It is such fellows as that who make you an enemy to the poor; and the talk is very bitter against you. They curse you every bit as hard as they used to bless the late Madame. The curse of the poor, monseigneur, is a seed that grows, – grows taller than your tall oaks, and oak-wood builds the scaffold. Nobody here tells you the truth; and here it is, yes, the truth! I expect to die before long, and I risk very little in telling it to you, the *truth*! I, who play for the peasants to dance at the great fetes at Soulanges, I heed what the people say. Well, they're all against you; and they'll make it impossible for you to stay here. If that damned Michaud of yours doesn't change, they'll force you to change him. There! that information *and* the otter are worth twenty francs, and more too."

As the old fellow uttered the last words a man's step was heard, and the individual just threatened by Fourchon entered unannounced. It was easy to see from the glance he threw at the old man that the threat had reached his ears, and all Fourchon's insolence sank in a moment. The look produced precisely the same effect upon him that the eye of a policeman produces on a thief. Fourchon knew he was wrong, and that Michaud might very well accuse him of saying these things merely to terrify the inhabitants of Les Aigues.

"This is the minister of war," said the general to Blondet, nodding at Michaud.

"Pardon me, madame, for having entered without asking if you were willing to receive me," said the newcomer to the countess; "but I have urgent reasons for speaking to the general at once."

Michaud, as he said this, took notice of Sibilet, whose expression of keen delight in Fourchon's daring words was not seen by the four persons seated at the table, because they were so preoccupied by the old man; whereas Michaud, who for secret reasons watched Sibilet constantly, was struck with his air and manner.

"He has earned his twenty francs, Monsieur le comte," said Sibilet; "the otter is fully worth it."

"Give him twenty francs," said the general to the footman.

"Do you mean to take my otter away from me?" said Blondet to the general.

"I shall have it stuffed," replied the latter.

"Ah! but that good gentleman said I might keep the skin," cried Fourchon.

"Well, then," exclaimed the countess, hastily, "you shall have five francs more for the skin; but go away now."

The powerful odor emitted by the pair made the dining-room so horribly offensive that Madame de Montcornet, whose senses were very delicate, would have been forced to leave the room if Fourchon and Mouche had remained. To this circumstance the old man was indebted for his twenty-five francs. He left the room with a timid glance at Michaud, making him an interminable series of bows.

"What I was saying to monseigneur, Monsieur Michaud," he added, "was really for your good."

"Or for that of those who pay you," replied Michaud, with a searching look.

"When you have served the coffee, leave the room," said the general to the servants, "and see that the doors are shut."

Blondet, who had not yet seen the bailiff of Les Aigues, was conscious, as he now saw him, of a totally different impression from that conveyed by Sibilet. Just as the steward inspired distrust and repulsion, so Michaud commanded respect and confidence. The first attraction of his presence was a happy face, of a fine oval, pure in outline, in which the nose bore part, – a regularity which is lacking in the majority of French faces. Though the features were correct in drawing, they were not without expression, due, perhaps, to the harmonious coloring of the warm brown and ochre tints, indicative of physical health and strength. The clear brown eyes, which were bright and piercing, kept no reserves in the expression of his thought; they looked straight into the eyes of others. The broad white forehead was thrown still further into relief by his abundant black hair. Honesty, decision, and a saintly serenity were the animating points of this noble face, where a few deep lines upon the brow were the result of the man's military career. Doubt and suspicion could there be read the moment they had entered his mind. His figure, like that of all men selected for the elite of the cavalry service, though shapely and elegant, was vigorously built. Michaud, who wore moustachios, whiskers, and a chin beard, recalled that martial type of face which a deluge of patriotic paintings and engravings came very near to making ridiculous. This type had the defect of being common in the French army; perhaps the continuance of the same emotions, the same camp sufferings from which none were exempt, neither high nor low, and more especially the same efforts of officers and men upon the battle-fields, may have contributed to produce this uniformity of countenance. Michaud, who was dressed in dark blue cloth, still wore the black satin stock and high boots of a soldier, which increased the slight stiffness and rigidity of his bearing. The shoulders sloped, the chest expanded, as though the man were still under arms. The red ribbon of the Legion of honor was in his buttonhole. In short, to give a last touch in one word about the moral qualities beneath this purely physical presentment, it may be said that while the steward, from the time he first entered upon his functions, never failed to call his master "Monsieur le comte," Michaud never addressed him otherwise than as "General."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.