HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE HATED SON

Оноре де Бальзак

The Hated Son

де Бальзак О.

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Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
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DEDICATION

To Madame la Baronne James Rothschild

PART I. HOW THE MOTHER LIVED

CHAPTER I. A BEDROOM OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

On a winter's night, about two in the morning, the Comtesse Jeanne d'Herouville felt such violent pains that in spite of her inexperience, she was conscious of an approaching confinement; and the instinct which makes us hope for ease in a change of posture induced her to sit up in her bed, either to study the nature of these new sufferings, or to reflect on her situation. She was a prey to cruel fears, – caused less by the dread of a first lying-in, which terrifies most women, than by certain dangers which awaited her child.

In order not to awaken her husband who was sleeping beside her, the poor woman moved with precautions which her intense terror made as minute as those of a prisoner endeavoring to escape. Though the pains became more and more severe, she ceased to feel them, so completely did she concentrate her own strength on the painful effort of resting her two moist hands on the pillow and so turning her suffering body from a posture in which she could find no ease. At the slightest rustling of the huge green silk coverlet, under which she had slept but little since her marriage, she stopped as though she had rung a bell. Forced to watch the count, she divided her attention between the folds of the rustling stuff and a large swarthy face, the moustache of which was brushing her shoulder. When some noisier breath than usual left her husband's lips, she was filled with a sudden terror that revived the color driven from her cheeks by her double anguish.

The prisoner reached the prison door in the dead of night and trying to noiselessly turn the key in a pitiless lock, was never more timidly bold.

When the countess had succeeded in rising to her seat without awakening her keeper, she made a gesture of childlike joy which revealed the touching naivete of her nature. But the half-formed smile on her burning lips was quickly suppressed; a thought came to darken that pure brow, and her long blue eyes resumed their sad expression. She gave a sigh and again laid her hands, not without precaution, on the fatal conjugal pillow. Then – as if for the first time since her marriage she found herself free in thought and action – she looked at the things around her, stretching out her neck with little darting motions like those of a bird in its cage. Seeing her thus, it was easy to divine that she had once been all gaiety and light-heartedness, but that fate had suddenly mown down her hopes, and changed her ingenuous gaiety to sadness.

The chamber was one of those which, to this day octogenarian porters of old chateaus point out to visitors as "the state bedroom where Louis XIII. once slept." Fine pictures, mostly brown in tone, were framed in walnut, the delicate carvings of which were blackened by time. The rafters of the ceiling formed compartments adorned with arabesques in the style of the preceding century, which preserved the colors of the chestnut wood. These decorations, severe in tone, reflected the light so little that it was difficult to see their designs, even when the sun shone full into that long and wide and lofty chamber. The silver lamp, placed upon the mantel of the vast fireplace, lighted the room so feebly that its quivering gleam could be compared only to the nebulous stars which appear at moments through the dun gray clouds of an autumn night. The fantastic figures crowded on the marble of the fireplace, which was opposite to the bed, were so grotesquely hideous that she dared not fix her eyes upon them, fearing to see them move, or to hear a startling laugh from their gaping and twisted mouths.

At this moment a tempest was growling in the chimney, giving to every puff of wind a lugubrious meaning, – the vast size of the flute putting the hearth into such close communication with the skies above that the embers upon it had a sort of respiration; they sparkled and went out at the will of the wind. The arms of the family of Herouville, carved in white marble with their mantle

and supporters, gave the appearance of a tomb to this species of edifice, which formed a pendant to the bed, another erection raised to the glory of Hymen. Modern architects would have been puzzled to decide whether the room had been built for the bed or the bed for the room. Two cupids playing on the walnut headboard, wreathed with garlands, might have passed for angels; and columns of the same wood, supporting the tester were carved with mythological allegories, the explanation of which could have been found either in the Bible or Ovid's Metamorphoses. Take away the bed, and the same tester would have served in a church for the canopy of the pulpit or the seats of the wardens. The married pair mounted by three steps to this sumptuous couch, which stood upon a platform and was hung with curtains of green silk covered with brilliant designs called "ramages" – possibly because the birds of gay plumage there depicted were supposed to sing. The folds of these immense curtains were so stiff that in the semi-darkness they might have been taken for some metal fabric. On the green velvet hanging, adorned with gold fringes, which covered the foot of this lordly couch the superstition of the Comtes d'Herouville had affixed a large crucifix, on which their chaplain placed a fresh branch of sacred box when he renewed at Easter the holy water in the basin at the foot of the cross.

On one side of the fireplace stood a large box or wardrobe of choice woods magnificently carved, such as brides receive even now in the provinces on their wedding day. These old chests, now so much in request by antiquaries, were the arsenals from which women drew the rich and elegant treasures of their personal adornment, – laces, bodices, high collars and ruffs, gowns of price, alms-purses, masks, gloves, veils, – in fact all the inventions of coquetry in the sixteenth century.

On the other side, by way of symmetry, was another piece of furniture, somewhat similar in shape, where the countess kept her books, papers, and jewels. Antique chairs covered with damask, a large and greenish mirror, made in Venice, and richly framed in a sort of rolling toilet-table, completed the furnishings of the room. The floor was covered with a Persian carpet, the richness of which proved the gallantry of the count; on the upper step of the bed stood a little table, on which the waiting-woman served every night in a gold or silver cup a drink prepared with spices.

After we have gone some way in life we know the secret influence exerted by places on the condition of the soul. Who has not had his darksome moments, when fresh hope has come into his heart from things that surrounded him? The fortunate, or the unfortunate man, attributes an intelligent countenance to the things among which he lives; he listens to them, he consults them – so naturally superstitious is he. At this moment the countess turned her eyes upon all these articles of furniture, as if they were living beings whose help and protection she implored; but the answer of that sombre luxury seemed to her inexorable.

Suddenly the tempest redoubled. The poor young woman could augur nothing favorable as she listened to the threatening heavens, the changes of which were interpreted in those credulous days according to the ideas or the habits of individuals. Suddenly she turned her eyes to the two arched windows at the end of the room; but the smallness of their panes and the multiplicity of the leaden lines did not allow her to see the sky and judge if the world were coming to an end, as certain monks, eager for donations, affirmed. She might easily have believed in such predictions, for the noise of the angry sea, the waves of which beat against the castle wall, combined with the mighty voice of the tempest, so that even the rocks appeared to shake. Though her sufferings were now becoming keener and less endurable, the countess dared not awaken her husband; but she turned and examined his features, as if despair were urging her to find a consolation there against so many sinister forebodings.

If matters were sad around the poor young woman, that face, notwithstanding the tranquillity of sleep, seemed sadder still. The light from the lamp, flickering in the draught, scarcely reached beyond the foot of the bed and illumined the count's head capriciously; so that the fitful movements of its flash upon those features in repose produced the effect of a struggle with angry thought. The countess was scarcely reassured by perceiving the cause of that phenomenon. Each time that a gust of wind projected the light upon the count's large face, casting shadows among its bony outlines, she fancied that her husband was about to fix upon her his two insupportably stern eyes.

Implacable as the war then going on between the Church and Calvinism, the count's forehead was threatening even while he slept. Many furrows, produced by the emotions of a warrior life, gave it a vague resemblance to the vermiculated stone which we see in the buildings of that period; his hair, like the whitish lichen of old oaks, gray before its time, surrounded without grace a cruel brow, where religious intolerance showed its passionate brutality. The shape of the aquiline nose, which resembled the beak of a bird of prey, the black and crinkled lids of the yellow eyes, the prominent bones of a hollow face, the rigidity of the wrinkles, the disdain expressed in the lower lip, were all expressive of ambition, despotism, and power, the more to be feared because the narrowness of the skull betrayed an almost total absence of intelligence, and a mere brute courage devoid of generosity. The face was horribly disfigured by a large transversal scar which had the appearance of a second mouth on the right cheek.

At the age of thirty-three the count, anxious to distinguish himself in that unhappy religious war the signal for which was given on Saint-Bartholomew's day, had been grievously wounded at the siege of Rochelle. The misfortune of this wound increased his hatred against the partisans of what the language of that day called "the Religion," but, by a not unnatural turn of mind, he included in that antipathy all handsome men. Before the catastrophe, however, he was so repulsively ugly that no lady had ever been willing to receive him as a suitor. The only passion of his youth was for a celebrated woman called La Belle Romaine. The distrust resulting from this new misfortune made him suspicious to the point of not believing himself capable of inspiring a true passion; and his character became so savage that when he did have some successes in gallantry he owed them to the terror inspired by his cruelty. The left hand of this terrible Catholic, which lay on the outside of the bed, will complete this sketch of his character. Stretched out as if to guard the countess, as a miser guards his hoard, that enormous hand was covered with hair so thick, it presented such a network of veins and projecting muscles, that it gave the idea of a branch of birch clasped with a growth of yellowing ivy.

Children looking at the count's face would have thought him an ogre, terrible tales of whom they knew by heart. It was enough to see the width and length of the space occupied by the count in the bed, to imagine his gigantic proportions. When awake, his gray eyebrows hid his eyelids in a way to heighten the light of his eye, which glittered with the luminous ferocity of a wolf skulking on the watch in a forest. Under his lion nose, with its flaring nostrils, a large and ill-kept moustache (for he despised all toilet niceties) completely concealed the upper lip. Happily for the countess, her husband's wide mouth was silent at this moment, for the softest sounds of that harsh voice made her tremble. Though the Comte d'Herouville was barely fifty years of age, he appeared at first sight to be sixty, so much had the toils of war, without injuring his robust constitution, dilapidated him physically.

The countess, who was now in her nineteenth year, made a painful contrast to that large, repulsive figure. She was fair and slim. Her chestnut locks, threaded with gold, played upon her neck like russet shadows, and defined a face such as Carlo Dolce has painted for his ivory-toned madonnas, – a face which now seemed ready to expire under the increasing attacks of physical pain. You might have thought her the apparition of an angel sent from heaven to soften the iron will of the terrible count.

"No, he will not kill us!" she cried to herself mentally, after contemplating her husband for a long time. "He is frank, courageous, faithful to his word – faithful to his word!"

Repeating that last sentence in her thoughts, she trembled violently, and remained as if stupefied.

To understand the horror of her present situation, we must add that this nocturnal scene took place in 1591, a period when civil war raged throughout France, and the laws had no vigor. The excesses of the League, opposed to the accession of Henri IV., surpassed the calamities of the religious wars. License was so universal that no one was surprised to see a great lord kill his enemy in open day. When a military expedition, having a private object, was led in the name of the King or of the League, one or other of these parties applauded it. It was thus that Blagny, a soldier, came near

becoming a sovereign prince at the gates of France. Sometime before Henri III.'s death, a court lady murdered a nobleman who made offensive remarks about her. One of the king's minions remarked to him: —

"Hey! vive Dieu! sire, she daggered him finely!"

The Comte d'Herouville, one of the most rabid royalists in Normandy, kept the part of that province which adjoins Brittany under subjection to Henri IV. by the rigor of his executions. The head of one of the richest families in France, he had considerably increased the revenues of his great estates by marrying seven months before the night on which this history begins, Jeanne de Saint-Savin, a young lady who, by a not uncommon chance in days when people were killed off like flies, had suddenly become the representative of both branches of the Saint-Savin family. Necessity and terror were the causes which led to this union. At a banquet given, two months after the marriage, to the Comte and Comtesse d'Herouville, a discussion arose on a topic which in those days of ignorance was thought amusing: namely, the legitimacy of children coming into the world ten months after the death of their fathers, or seven months after the wedding day.

"Madame," said the count brutally, turning to his wife, "if you give me a child ten months after my death, I cannot help it; but be careful that you are not brought to bed in seven months!"

"What would you do then, old bear?" asked the young Marquis de Verneuil, thinking that the count was joking.

"I should wring the necks of mother and child!"

An answer so peremptory closed the discussion, imprudently started by a seigneur from Lower Normandy. The guests were silent, looking with a sort of terror at the pretty Comtesse d'Herouville. All were convinced that if such an event occurred, her savage lord would execute his threat.

The words of the count echoed in the bosom of the young wife, then pregnant; one of those presentiments which furrow a track like lightning through the soul, told her that her child would be born at seven months. An inward heat overflowed her from head to foot, sending the life's blood to her heart with such violence that the surface of her body felt bathed in ice. From that hour not a day had passed that the sense of secret terror did not check every impulse of her innocent gaiety. The memory of the look, of the inflections of voice with which the count accompanied his words, still froze her blood, and silenced her sufferings, as she leaned over that sleeping head, and strove to see some sign of a pity she had vainly sought there when awake.

The child, threatened with death before its life began, made so vigorous a movement that she cried aloud, in a voice that seemed like a sigh, "Poor babe!"

She said no more; there are ideas that a mother cannot bear. Incapable of reasoning at this moment, the countess was almost choked with the intensity of a suffering as yet unknown to her. Two tears, escaping from her eyes, rolled slowly down her cheeks, and traced two shining lines, remaining suspended at the bottom of that white face, like dewdrops on a lily. What learned man would take upon himself to say that the child unborn is on some neutral ground, where the emotions of its mother do not penetrate during those hours when soul clasps body and communicates its impressions, when thought permeates blood with healing balm or poisonous fluids? The terror that shakes the tree, will it not hurt the fruit? Those words, "Poor babe!" were they dictated by a vision of the future? The shuddering of this mother was violent; her look piercing.

The bloody answer given by the count at the banquet was a link mysteriously connecting the past with this premature confinement. That odious suspicion, thus publicly expressed, had cast into the memories of the countess a dread which echoed to the future. Since that fatal gala, she had driven from her mind, with as much fear as another woman would have found pleasure in evoking them, a thousand scattered scenes of her past existence. She refused even to think of the happy days when her heart was free to love. Like as the melodies of their native land make exiles weep, so these memories revived sensations so delightful that her young conscience thought them crimes, and sued them to

enforce still further the savage threat of the count. There lay the secret of the horror which was now oppressing her soul.

Sleeping figures possess a sort of suavity, due to the absolute repose of both body and mind; but though that species of calmness softened but slightly the harsh expression of the count's features, all illusion granted to the unhappy is so persuasive that the poor wife ended by finding hope in that tranquillity. The roar of the tempest, now descending in torrents of rain, seemed to her no more than a melancholy moan; her fears and her pains both yielded her a momentary respite. Contemplating the man to whom her life was bound, the countess allowed herself to float into a reverie, the sweetness of which was so intoxicating that she had no strength to break its charm. For a moment, by one of those visions which in some way share the divine power, there passed before her rapid images of a happiness lost beyond recall.

Jeanne in her vision saw faintly, and as if in a distant gleam of dawn, the modest castle where her careless childhood had glided on; there were the verdant lawns, the rippling brook, the little chamber, the scenes of her happy play. She saw herself gathering flowers and planting them, unknowing why they wilted and would not grow, despite her constancy in watering them. Next, she saw confusedly the vast town and the vast house blackened by age, to which her mother took her when she was seven years old. Her lively memory showed her the old gray heads of the masters who taught and tormented her. She remembered the person of her father; she saw him getting off his mule at the door of the manor-house, and taking her by the hand to lead her up the stairs; she recalled how her prattle drove from his brow the judicial cares he did not always lay aside with his black or his red robes, the white fur of which fell one day by chance under the snipping of her mischievous scissors. She cast but one glance at the confessor of her aunt, the mother-superior of a convent of Poor Clares, a rigid and fanatical old man, whose duty it was to initiate her into the mysteries of religion. Hardened by the severities necessary against heretics, the old priest never ceased to jangle the chains of hell; he told her of nothing but the vengeance of Heaven, and made her tremble with the assurance that God's eye was on her. Rendered timid, she dared not raise her eyes in the priest's presence, and ceased to have any feeling but respect for her mother, whom up to that time she had made a sharer in all her frolics. When she saw that beloved mother turning her blue eyes towards her with an appearance of anger, a religious terror took possession of the girl's heart.

Then suddenly the vision took her to the second period of her childhood, when as yet she understood nothing of the things of life. She thought with an almost mocking regret of the days when all her happiness was to work beside her mother in the tapestried salon, to pray in the church, to sing her ballads to a lute, to read in secret a romance of chivalry, to pluck the petals of a flower, discover what gift her father would make her on the feast of the Blessed Saint-John, and find out the meaning of speeches repressed before her. Passing thus from her childish joys through the sixteen years of her girlhood, the grace of those softly flowing years when she knew no pain was eclipsed by the brightness of a memory precious though ill-fated. The joyous peace of her childhood was far less sweet to her than a single one of the troubles scattered upon the last two years of her childhood, – years that were rich in treasures now buried forever in her heart.

The vision brought her suddenly to that morning, that ravishing morning, when in the grand old parlor panelled and carved in oak, which served the family as a dining-room, she saw her handsome cousin for the first time. Alarmed by the seditions in Paris, her mother's family had sent the young courtier to Rouen, hoping that he could there be trained to the duties of the magistracy by his uncle, whose office might some day devolve upon him. The countess smiled involuntarily as she remembered the haste with which she retired on seeing this relation whom she did not know. But, in spite of the rapidity with which she opened and shut the door, a single glance had put into her soul so vigorous an impression of the scene that even at this moment she seemed to see it still occurring. Her eye again wandered from the violet velvet mantle embroidered with gold and lined with satin to the spurs on the boots, the pretty lozenges slashed into the doublet, the trunk-hose, and the rich collaret which gave

to view a throat as white as the lace around it. She stroked with her hand the handsome face with its tiny pointed moustache, and "royale" as small as the ermine tips upon her father's hood.

In the silence of the night, with her eyes fixed on the green silk curtains which she no longer saw, the countess, forgetting the storm, her husband, and her fears, recalled the days which seemed to her longer than years, so full were they, – days when she loved, and was beloved! – and the moment when, fearing her mother's sternness, she had slipped one morning into her father's study to whisper her girlish confidences on his knee, waiting for his smile at her caresses to say in his ear, "Will you scold me if I tell you something?" Once more she heard her father say, after a few questions in reply to which she spoke for the first time of her love, "Well, well, my child, we will think of it. If he studies well, if he fits himself to succeed me, if he continues to please you, I will be on your side."

After that she had listened no longer; she had kissed her father, and, knocking over his papers as she ran from the room, she flew to the great linden-tree where, daily, before her formidable mother rose, she met that charming cousin, Georges de Chaverny.

Faithfully the youth promised to study law and customs. He laid aside the splendid trappings of the nobility of the sword to wear the sterner costume of the magistracy.

"I like you better in black," she said.

It was a falsehood, but by that falsehood she comforted her lover for having thrown his dagger to the winds. The memory of the little schemes employed to deceive her mother, whose severity seemed great, brought back to her the soulful joys of that innocent and mutual and sanctioned love; sometimes a rendezvous beneath the linden, where speech could be freer than before witnesses; sometimes a furtive clasp, or a stolen kiss, – in short, all the naive instalments of a passion that did not pass the bounds of modesty. Reliving in her vision those delightful days when she seemed to have too much happiness, she fancied that she kissed, in the void, that fine young face with the glowing eyes, that rosy mouth that spoke so well of love. Yes, she had loved Chaverny, poor apparently; but what treasures had she not discovered in that soul as tender as it was strong!

Suddenly her father died. Chaverny did not succeed him. The flames of civil war burst forth. By Chaverny's care she and her mother found refuge in a little town of Lower Normandy. Soon the deaths of other relatives made her one of the richest heiresses in France. Happiness disappeared as wealth came to her. The savage and terrible face of Comte d'Herouville, who asked her hand, rose before her like a thunder-cloud, spreading its gloom over the smiling meadows so lately gilded by the sun. The poor countess strove to cast from her memory the scenes of weeping and despair brought about by her long resistance.

At last came an awful night when her mother, pale and dying, threw herself at her daughter's feet. Jeanne could save Chaverny's life by yielding; she yielded. It was night. The count, arriving bloody from the battlefield was there; all was ready, the priest, the altar, the torches! Jeanne belonged henceforth to misery. Scarcely had she time to say to her young cousin who was set at liberty: —

"Georges, if you love me, never see me again!"

She heard the departing steps of her lover, whom, in truth, she never saw again; but in the depths of her heart she still kept sacred his last look which returned perpetually in her dreams and illumined them. Living like a cat shut into a lion's cage, the young wife dreaded at all hours the claws of the master which ever threatened her. She knew that in order to be happy she must forget the past and think only of the future; but there were days, consecrated to the memory of some vanished joy, when she deliberately made it a crime to put on the gown she had worn on the day she had seen her lover for the first time.

"I am not guilty," she said, "but if I seem guilty to the count it is as if I were so. Perhaps I am! The Holy Virgin conceived without – "

She stopped. During this moment when her thoughts were misty and her soul floated in a region of fantasy her naivete made her attribute to that last look with which her lover transfixed her the occult power of the visitation of the angel to the Mother of her Lord. This supposition, worthy of the days

of innocence to which her reverie had carried her back, vanished before the memory of a conjugal scene more odious than death. The poor countess could have no real doubt as to the legitimacy of the child that stirred in her womb. The night of her marriage reappeared to her in all the horror if its agony, bringing in its train other such nights and sadder days.

"Ah! my poor Chaverny!" she cried, weeping, "you so respectful, so gracious, YOU were always kind to me."

She turned her eyes to her husband as if to persuade herself that that harsh face contained a promise of mercy, dearly brought. The count was awake. His yellow eyes, clear as those of a tiger, glittered beneath their tufted eyebrows and never had his glance been so incisive. The countess, terrified at having encountered it, slid back under the great counterpane and was motionless.

"Why are you weeping?" said the count, pulling away the covering which hid his wife.

That voice, always a terror to her, had a specious softness at this moment which seemed to her of good augury.

"I suffer much," she answered.

"Well, my pretty one, it is no crime to suffer; why did you tremble when I looked at you? Alas! what must I do to be loved?" The wrinkles of his forehead between the eyebrows deepened. "I see plainly you are afraid of me," he added, sighing.

Prompted by the instinct of feeble natures the countess interrupted the count by moans, exclaiming: —

"I fear a miscarriage! I clambered over the rocks last evening and tired myself."

Hearing those words, the count cast so horribly suspicious a look upon his wife, that she reddened and shuddered. He mistook the fear of the innocent creature for remorse.

"Perhaps it is the beginning of a regular childbirth," he said.

"What then?" she said.

"In any case, I must have a proper man here," he said. "I will fetch one."

The gloomy look which accompanied these words overcame the countess, who fell back in the bed with a moan, caused more by a sense of her fate than by the agony of the coming crisis; that moan convinced the count of the justice of the suspicions that were rising in his mind. Affecting a calmness which the tones of his voice, his gestures, and looks contradicted, he rose hastily, wrapped himself in a dressing-gown which lay on a chair, and began by locking a door near the chimney through which the state bedroom was entered from the reception rooms which communicated with the great staircase.

Seeing her husband pocket that key, the countess had a presentiment of danger. She next heard him open the door opposite to that which he had just locked and enter a room where the counts of Herouville slept when they did not honor their wives with their noble company. The countess knew of that room only by hearsay. Jealousy kept her husband always with her. If occasionally some military expedition forced him to leave her, the count left more than one Argus, whose incessant spying proved his shameful distrust.

In spite of the attention the countess now gave to the slightest noise, she heard nothing more. The count had, in fact, entered a long gallery leading from his room which continued down the western wing of the castle. Cardinal d'Herouville, his great-uncle, a passionate lover of the works of printing, had there collected a library as interesting for the number as for the beauty of its volumes, and prudence had caused him to build into the walls one of those curious inventions suggested by solitude or by monastic fears. A silver chain set in motion, by means of invisible wires, a bell placed at the bed's head of a faithful servitor. The count now pulled the chain, and the boots and spurs of the man on duty sounded on the stone steps of a spiral staircase, placed in the tall tower which flanked the western corner of the chateau on the ocean side.

When the count heard the steps of his retainer he pulled back the rusty bolts which protected the door leading from the gallery to the tower, admitting into the sanctuary of learning a man of arms whose stalwart appearance was in keeping with that of his master. This man, scarcely awakened,

seemed to have walked there by instinct; the horn lantern which he held in his hand threw so feeble a gleam down the long library that his master and he appeared in that visible darkness like two phantoms.

"Saddle my war-horse instantly, and come with me yourself."

This order was given in a deep tone which roused the man's intelligence. He raised his eyes to those of his master and encountered so piercing a look that the effect was that of an electric shock.

"Bertrand," added the count laying his right hand on the servant's arm, "take off your cuirass, and wear the uniform of a captain of guerrillas."

"Heavens and earth, monseigneur! What? disguise myself as a Leaguer! Excuse me, I will obey you; but I would rather be hanged."

The count smiled; then to efface that smile, which contrasted with the expression of his face, he answered roughly: —

"Choose the strongest horse there is in the stable and follow me. We shall ride like balls shot from an arquebuse. Be ready when I am ready. I will ring to let you know."

Bertrand bowed in silence and went away; but when he had gone a few steps he said to himself, as he listened to the howling of the storm: —

"All the devils are abroad, jarnidieu! I'd have been surprised to see this one stay quietly in his bed. We took Saint-Lo in just such a tempest as this."

The count kept in his room a disguise which often served him in his campaign stratagems. Putting on the shabby buff-coat that looked as thought it might belong to one of the poor horse-soldiers whose pittance was so seldom paid by Henri IV., he returned to the room where his wife was moaning.

"Try to suffer patiently," he said to her. "I will founder my horse if necessary to bring you speedy relief."

These words were certainly not alarming, and the countess, emboldened by them, was about to make a request when the count asked her suddenly: —

"Tell me where you keep your masks?"

"My masks!" she replied. "Good God! what do you want to do with them?"

"Where are they?" he repeated, with his usual violence.

"In the chest," she said.

She shuddered when she saw her husband select from among her masks a "touret de nez," the wearing of which was as common among the ladies of that time as the wearing of gloves in our day. The count became entirely unrecognizable after he had put on an old gray felt hat with a broken cock's feather on his head. He girded round his loins a broad leathern belt, in which he stuck a dagger, which he did not wear habitually. These miserable garments gave him so terrifying an air and he approached the bed with so strange a motion that the countess thought her last hour had come.

"Ah! don't kill us!" she cried, "leave me my child, and I will love you well."

"You must feel yourself very guilty to offer as the ransom of your faults the love you owe me."

The count's voice was lugubrious and the bitter words were enforced by a look which fell like lead upon the countess.

"My God!" she cried sorrowfully, "can innocence be fatal?"

"Your death is not in question," said her master, coming out of a sort of reverie into which he had fallen. "You are to do exactly, and for love of me, what I shall now tell you."

He flung upon the bed one of the two masks he had taken from the chest, and smiled with derision as he saw the gesture of involuntary fear which the slight shock of the black velvet wrung from his wife.

"You will give me a puny child!" he cried. "Wear that mask on your face when I return. I'll have no barber-surgeon boast that he has seen the Comtesse d'Herouville."

"A man! – why choose a man for the purpose?" she said in a feeble voice.

"Ho! ho! my lady, am I not master here?" replied the count.

"What matters one horror the more!" murmured the countess; but her master had disappeared, and the exclamation did her no injury.

Presently, in a brief lull of the storm, the countess heard the gallop of two horses which seemed to fly across the sandy dunes by which the castle was surrounded. The sound was quickly lost in that of the waves. Soon she felt herself a prisoner in the vast apartment, alone in the midst of a night both silent and threatening, and without succor against an evil she saw approaching her with rapid strides. In vain she sought for some stratagem by which to save that child conceived in tears, already her consolation, the spring of all her thoughts, the future of her affections, her one frail hope.

Sustained by maternal courage, she took the horn with which her husband summoned his men, and, opening a window, blew through the brass tube feeble notes that died away upon the vast expanse of water, like a bubble blown into the air by a child. She felt the uselessness of that moan unheard of men, and turned to hasten through the apartments, hoping that all the issues were not closed upon her. Reaching the library she sought in vain for some secret passage; then, passing between the long rows of books, she reached a window which looked upon the courtyard. Again she sounded the horn, but without success against the voice of the hurricane.

In her helplessness she thought of trusting herself to one of the women, – all creatures of her husband, – when, passing into her oratory, she found that the count had locked the only door that led to their apartments. This was a horrible discovery. Such precautions taken to isolate her showed a desire to proceed without witnesses to some horrible execution. As moment after moment she lost hope, the pangs of childbirth grew stronger and keener. A presentiment of murder, joined to the fatigue of her efforts, overcame her last remaining strength. She was like a shipwrecked man who sinks, borne under by one last wave less furious than others he has vanquished. The bewildering pangs of her condition kept her from knowing the lapse of time. At the moment when she felt that, alone, without help, she was about to give birth to her child, and to all her other terrors was added that of the accidents to which her ignorance exposed her, the count appeared, without a sound that let her know of his arrival. The man was there, like a demon claiming at the close of a compact the soul that was sold to him. He muttered angrily at finding his wife's face uncovered; then after masking her carefully, he took her in his arms and laid her on the bed in her chamber.

CHAPTER II. THE BONESETTER

The terror of that apparition and hasty removal stopped for a moment the physical sufferings of the countess, and so enabled her to cast a furtive glance at the actors in this mysterious scene. She did not recognize Bertrand, who was there disguised and masked as carefully as his master. After lighting in haste some candles, the light of which mingled with the first rays of the sun which were reddening the window panes, the old servitor had gone to the embrasure of a window and stood leaning against a corner of it. There, with his face towards the wall, he seemed to be estimating its thickness, keeping his body in such absolute immobility that he might have been taken for a statue. In the middle of the room the countess beheld a short, stout man, apparently out of breath and stupefied, whose eyes were blindfolded and his features so distorted with terror that it was impossible to guess at their natural expression.

"God's death! you scamp," said the count, giving him back his eyesight by a rough movement which threw upon the man's neck the bandage that had been upon his eyes. "I warn you not to look at anything but the wretched woman on whom you are now to exercise your skill; if you do, I'll fling you into the river that flows beneath those windows, with a collar round your neck weighing a hundred pounds!"

With that, he pulled down upon the breast of his stupefied hearer the cravat with which his eyes had been bandaged.

"Examine first if this can be a miscarriage," he continued; "in which case your life will answer to me for the mother's; but, if the child is living, you are to bring it to me."

So saying, the count seized the poor operator by the body and placed him before the countess, then he went himself to the depths of a bay-window and began to drum with his fingers upon the panes, casting glances alternately on his serving-man, on the bed, and at the ocean, as if he were pledging to the expected child a cradle in the waves.

The man whom, with outrageous violence, the count and Bertrand had snatched from his bed and fastened to the crupper of the latter's horse, was a personage whose individuality may serve to characterize the period, – a man, moreover, whose influence was destined to make itself felt in the house of Herouville.

Never in any age were the nobles so little informed as to natural science, and never was judicial astrology held in greater honor; for at no period in history was there a greater general desire to know the future. This ignorance and this curiosity had led to the utmost confusion in human knowledge; all things were still mere personal experience; the nomenclatures of theory did not exist; printing was done at enormous cost; scientific communication had little or no facility; the Church persecuted science and all research which was based on the analysis of natural phenomena. Persecution begat mystery. So, to the people as well as to the nobles, physician and alchemist, mathematician and astronomer, astrologer and necromancer were six attributes, all meeting in the single person of the physician. In those days a superior physician was supposed to be cultivating magic; while curing his patient he was drawing their horoscopes. Princes protected the men of genius who were willing to reveal the future; they lodged them in their palaces and pensioned them. The famous Cornelius Agrippa, who came to France to become the physician of Henri II., would not consent, as Nostradamus did, to predict the future, and for this reason he was dismissed by Catherine de' Medici, who replaced him with Cosmo Ruggiero. The men of science, who were superior to their times, were therefore seldom appreciated; they simply inspired an ignorant fear of occult sciences and their results.

Without being precisely one of the famous mathematicians, the man whom the count had brought enjoyed in Normandy the equivocal reputation which attached to a physician who was known to do mysterious works. He belonged to the class of sorcerers who are still called in parts of France

"bonesetters." This name belonged to certain untutored geniuses who, without apparent study, but by means of hereditary knowledge and the effect of long practice, the observations of which accumulated in the family, were bonesetters; that is, they mended broken limbs and cured both men and beasts of certain maladies, possessing secrets said to be marvellous for the treatment of serious cases. But not only had Maitre Antoine Beauvouloir (the name of the present bonesetter) a father and grandfather who were famous practitioners, from whom he inherited important traditions, he was also learned in medicine, and was given to the study of natural science. The country people saw his study full of books and other strange things which gave to his successes a coloring of magic. Without passing strictly for a sorcerer, Antoine Beauvouloir impressed the populace through a circumference of a hundred miles with respect akin to terror, and (what was far more really dangerous for himself) he held in his power many secrets of life and death which concerned the noble families of that region. Like his father and grandfather before him, he was celebrated for his skill in confinements and miscarriages. In those days of unbridled disorder, crimes were so frequent and passions so violent that the higher nobility often found itself compelled to initiate Maitre Antoine Beauvouloir into secrets both shameful and terrible. His discretion, so essential to his safety, was absolute; consequently his clients paid him well, and his hereditary practice greatly increased. Always on the road, sometimes roused in the dead of night, as on this occasion by the count, sometimes obliged to spend several days with certain great ladies, he had never married; in fact, his reputation had hindered certain young women from accepting him. Incapable of finding consolation in the practice of his profession, which gave him such power over feminine weakness, the poor bonesetter felt himself born for the joys of family and yet was unable to obtain them.

The good man's excellent heart was concealed by a misleading appearance of joviality in keeping with his puffy cheeks and rotund figure, the vivacity of his fat little body, and the frankness of his speech. He was anxious to marry that he might have a daughter who should transfer his property to some poor noble; he did not like his station as bonesetter and wished to rescue his family name from the position in which the prejudices of the times had placed it. He himself took willingly enough to the feasts and jovialities which usually followed his principal operations. The habit of being on such occasions the most important personage in the company, had added to his natural gaiety a sufficient dose of serious vanity. His impertinences were usually well received in crucial moments when it often pleased him to perform his operations with a certain slow majesty. He was, in other respects, as inquisitive as a nightingale, as greedy as a hound, and as garrulous as all diplomatists who talk incessantly and betray no secrets. In spite of these defects developed in him by the endless adventures into which his profession led him, Antoine Beauvouloir was held to be the least bad man in Normandy. Though he belonged to the small number of minds who are superior to their epoch, the strong good sense of a Norman countryman warned him to conceal the ideas he acquired and the truths he from time to time discovered.

As soon as he found himself placed by the count in presence of a woman in childbirth, the bonesetter recovered his presence of mind. He felt the pulse of the masked lady; not that he gave it a single thought, but under cover of that medical action he could reflect, and he did reflect on his own situation. In none of the shameful and criminal intrigues in which superior force had compelled him to act as a blind instrument, had precautions been taken with such mystery as in this case. Though his death had often been threatened as a means of assuring the secrecy of enterprises in which he had taken part against his will, his life had never been so endangered as at that moment. He resolved, before all things, to find out who it was who now employed him, and to discover the actual extent of his danger, in order to save, if possible, his own little person.

"What is the trouble?" he said to the countess in a low voice, as he placed her in a manner to receive his help.

"Do not give him the child – "

"Speak loud!" cried the count in thundering tones which prevented Beauvouloir from hearing the last word uttered by the countess. "If not," added the count who was careful to disguise his voice, "say your 'In manus.'"

"Complain aloud," said the leech to the lady; "cry! scream! Jarnidieu! that man has a necklace that won't fit you any better than me. Courage, my little lady!"

"Touch her lightly!" cried the count.

"Monsieur is jealous," said the operator in a shrill voice, fortunately drowned by the countess's cries.

For Maitre Beauvouloir's safety Nature was merciful. It was more a miscarriage than a regular birth, and the child was so puny that it caused little suffering to the mother.

"Holy Virgin!" cried the bonesetter, "it isn't a miscarriage, after all!"

The count made the floor shake as he stamped with rage. The countess pinched Beauvouloir.

"Ah! I see!" he said to himself. "It ought to be a premature birth, ought it?" he whispered to the countess, who replied with an affirmative sign, as if that gesture were the only language in which to express her thoughts.

"It is not all clear to me yet," thought the bonesetter.

Like all men in constant practice, he recognized at once a woman in her first trouble as he called it. Though the modest inexperience of certain gestures showed him the virgin ignorance of the countess, the mischievous operator exclaimed: —

"Madame is delivered as if she knew all about it!"

The count then said, with a calmness more terrifying than his anger: —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.