HONORÉ DE BALZAC

URSULA

Оноре де Бальзак

Ursula

де Бальзак О.

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Содержание

Honoré de Balzac
Ursula

DEDICATION

To Mademoiselle Sophie Surville,

It is a true pleasure, my dear niece, to dedicate to you this book, the subject and details of which have won the approbation, so difficult to win, of a young girl to whom the world is still unknown, and who has compromised with none of the lofty principles of a saintly education. Young girls are indeed a formidable public, for they ought not to be allowed to read books less pure than the purity of their souls; they are forbidden certain reading, just as they are carefully prevented from seeing social life as it is. Must it not therefore be a source of pride to a writer to find that he has pleased you?

God grant that your affection for me has not misled you. Who can tell?

– the future; which you, I hope, will see, though not, perhaps.

Your uncle,

De Balzac.

CHAPTER I. THE FRIGHTENED HEIRS

Entering Nemours by the road to Paris, we cross the canal du Loing, the steep banks of which serve the double purpose of ramparts to the fields and of picturesque promenades for the inhabitants of that pretty little town. Since 1830 several houses had unfortunately been built on the farther side of the bridge. If this sort of suburb increases, the place will lose its present aspect of graceful originality.

In 1829, however, both sides of the road were clear, and the master of the post route, a tall, stout man about sixty years of age, sitting one fine autumn morning at the highest part of the bridge, could take in at a glance the whole of what is called in his business a “ruban de queue.” The month of September was displaying its treasures; the atmosphere glowed above the grass and the pebbles; no cloud dimmed the blue of the sky, the purity of which in all parts, even close to the horizon, showed the extreme rarefaction of the air. So Minoret-Levrault (for that was the post master’s name) was obliged to shade his eyes with one hand to keep them from being dazzled. With the air of a man who was tired of waiting, he looked first to the charming meadows which lay to the right of the road where the aftermath was springing up, then to the hill-slopes covered with copses which extend, on the left, from Nemours to Bouron. He could hear in the valley of the Loing, where the sounds on the road were echoed back from the hills, the trot of his own horses and the crack of his postilion’s whip.

None but a post master could feel impatient within sight of such meadows, filled with cattle worthy of Paul Potter and glowing beneath a Raffaelle sky, and beside a canal shaded with trees after Hobbema. Whoever knows Nemours knows that nature is there as beautiful as art, whose mission is to spiritualize it; there, the landscape has ideas and creates thought. But, on catching sight of Minoret-Levrault an artist would very likely have left the view to sketch the man, so original was he in his native commonness. Unite in a human being all the conditions of the brute and you have a Caliban, who is certainly a great thing. Wherever form rules, sentiment disappears. The post master, a living proof of that axiom, presented a physiognomy in which an observer could with difficulty trace, beneath the vivid carnation of its coarsely developed flesh, the semblance of a soul. His cap of blue cloth, with a small peak, and sides fluted like a melon, outlined a head of vast dimensions, showing that Gall’s science has not yet produced its chapter of exceptions. The gray and rather shiny hair which appeared below the cap showed that other causes than mental toil or grief had whitened it. Large ears stood out from the head, their edges scarred with the eruptions of his over-abundant blood, which seemed ready to gush at the least exertion. His skin was crimson under an outside layer of brown, due to the habit of standing in the sun. The roving gray eyes, deep-sunken, and hidden by bushy black brows, were like those of the Kalmucks who entered France in 1815; if they ever sparkled it was only under the influence of a covetous thought. His broad pug nose was flattened at the base. Thick lips, in keeping with a repulsive double chin, the beard of which, rarely cleaned more than once a week, was encircled with a dirty silk handkerchief twisted to a cord; a short neck, rolling in fat, and heavy cheeks completed the characteristics of brute force which sculptors give to their caryatids. Minoret-Levrault was like those statues, with this difference, that whereas they supported an edifice, he had more than he could well do to support himself. You will meet many such Atlases in the world. The man’s torso was a block; it was like that of a bull standing on his hind-legs. His vigorous arms ended in a pair of thick, hard hands, broad and strong and well able to handle whip, reins, and pitchfork; hands which his postilions never attempted to trifle with. The enormous stomach of this giant rested on thighs which were as large as the body of an ordinary adult, and feet like those of an elephant. Anger was a rare thing with him, but it was terrible, apoplectic, when it did burst forth. Though violent and quite incapable of reflection, the man had never done anything that justified the sinister suggestions of his bodily presence. To all those who felt afraid of him his postilions would reply, “Oh! he’s not bad.”

The master of Nemours, to use the common abbreviation of the country, wore a velveteen shooting-jacket of bottle-green, trousers of green linen with great stripes, and an ample yellow

waistcoat of goat's skin, in the pocket of which might be discerned the round outline of a monstrous snuff-box. A snuff-box to a pug nose is a law without exception.

A son of the Revolution and a spectator of the Empire, Minoret-Levrault did not meddle with politics; as to his religious opinions, he had never set foot in a church except to be married; as to his private principles, he kept them within the civil code; all that the law did not forbid or could not prevent he considered right. He never read anything but the journal of the department of the Seine-et-Oise, and a few printed instructions relating to his business. He was considered a clever agriculturist; but his knowledge was only practical. In him the moral being did not belie the physical. He seldom spoke, and before speaking he always took a pinch of snuff to give himself time, not to find ideas, but words. If he had been a talker you would have felt that he was out of keeping with himself. Reflecting that this elephant minus a trumpet and without a mind was called Minoret-Levrault, we are compelled to agree with Sterne as to the occult power of names, which sometimes ridicule and sometimes foretell characters.

In spite of his visible incapacity he had acquired during the last thirty-six years (the Revolution helping him) an income of thirty thousand francs, derived from farm lands, woods and meadows. If Minoret, being master of the coach-lines of Nemours and those of the Gatinais to Paris, still worked at his business, it was less from habit than for the sake of an only son, to whom he was anxious to give a fine career. This son, who was now (to use an expression of the peasantry) a "monsieur," had just completed his legal studies and was about to take his degree as licentiate, preparatory to being called to the Bar. Monsieur and Madame Minoret-Levrault – for behind our colossus every one will perceive a woman without whom this signal good-fortune would have been impossible – left their son free to choose his own career; he might be a notary in Paris, king's-attorney in some district, collector of customs no matter where, broker, or post master, as he pleased. What fancy of his could they ever refuse him? to what position of life might he not aspire as the son of a man about whom the whole countryside, from Montargis to Essonne, was in the habit of saying, "Pere Minoret doesn't even know how rich he is"?

This saying had obtained fresh force about four years before this history begins, when Minoret, after selling his inn, built stables and a splendid dwelling, and removed the post-house from the Grand'Rue to the wharf. The new establishment cost two hundred thousand francs, which the gossip of thirty miles in circumference more than doubled. The Nemours mail-coach service requires a large number of horses. It goes to Fontainebleau on the road to Paris, and from there diverges to Montargis and also to Montereau. The relays are long, and the sandy soil of the Montargis road calls for the mythical third horse, always paid for but never seen. A man of Minoret's build, and Minoret's wealth, at the head of such an establishment might well be called, without contradiction, the master of Nemours. Though he never thought of God or devil, being a practical materialist, just as he was a practical agriculturist, a practical egoist, and a practical miser, Minoret had enjoyed up to this time a life of unmixed happiness, – if we can call pure materialism happiness. A physiologist, observing the rolls of flesh which covered the last vertebrae and pressed upon the giant's cerebellum, and, above all, hearing the shrill, sharp voice which contrasted so absurdly with his huge body, would have understood why this ponderous, coarse being adored his only son, and why he had so long expected him, – a fact proved by the name, Desire, which was given to the child.

The mother, whom the boy fortunately resembled, rivaled the father in spoiling him. No child could long have resisted the effects of such idolatry. As soon as Desire knew the extent of his power he milked his mother's coffer and dipped into his father's purse, making each author of his being believe that he, or she, alone was petitioned. Desire, who played a part in Nemours far beyond that of a prince royal in his father's capital, chose to gratify his fancies in Paris just as he had gratified them in his native town; he had therefore spent a yearly sum of not less than twelve thousand francs during the time of his legal studies. But for that money he had certainly acquired ideas that would never had come to him in Nemours; he had stripped off the provincial skin, learned the power of money and

seen in the magistracy a means of advancement which he fancied. During the last year he had spent an extra sum of ten thousand francs in the company of artists, journalists, and their mistresses. A confidential and rather disquieting letter from his son, asking for his consent to a marriage, explains the watch which the post master was now keeping on the bridge; for Madame Minoret-Levrault, busy in preparing a sumptuous breakfast to celebrate the triumphal return of the licentiate, had sent her husband to the mail road, advising him to take a horse and ride out if he saw nothing of the diligence. The coach which was conveying the precious son usually arrived at five in the morning and it was now nine! What could be the meaning of such delay? Was the coach overturned? Could Desire be dead? Or was it nothing worse than a broken leg?

Three distinct volleys of cracking whips rent the air like a discharge of musketry; the red waistcoats of the postilions dawned in sight, ten horses neighed. The master pulled off his cap and waved it; he was seen. The best mounted postilion, who was returning with two gray carriage-horses, set spurs to his beast and came on in advance of the five diligence horses and the three other carriage-horses, and soon reached his master.

"Have you seen the 'Ducler'?"

On the great mail routes names, often fantastic, are given to the different coaches; such, for instance, as the "Caillard," the "Ducler" (the coach between Nemours and Paris), the "Grand Bureau." Every new enterprise is called the "Competition." In the days of the Lecompte company their coaches were called the "Countess." – "'Caillard' could not overtake the 'Countess'; but 'Grand Bureau' caught up with her finely," you will hear the men say. If you see a postilion pressing his horses and refusing a glass of wine, question the conductor and he will tell you, snuffing the air while his eye gazes far into space, "The 'Competition' is ahead." – "We can't get in sight of her," cries the postilion; "the vixen! she wouldn't stop to let her passengers dine." – "The question is, has she got any?" responds the conductor. "Give it to Polignac!" All lazy and bad horses are called Polignac. Such are the jokes and the basis of conversation between postilions and conductors on the roofs of the coaches. Each profession, each calling in France has its slang.

"Have you seen the 'Ducler'?" asked Minoret.

"Monsieur Desire?" said the postilion, interrupting his master. "Hey! you must have heard us, didn't our whips tell you? we felt you were somewhere along the road."

Just then a woman dressed in her Sunday clothes, – for the bells were pealing from the clock tower and calling the inhabitants to mass, – a woman about thirty-six years of age came up to the post master.

"Well, cousin," she said, "you wouldn't believe me – Uncle is with Ursula in the Grand'Rue, and they are going to mass."

In spite of the modern poetic canons as to local color, it is quite impossible to push realism so far as to repeat the horrible blasphemy mingled with oaths which this news, apparently so unexciting, brought from the huge mouth of Minoret-Levrault; his shrill voice grew sibilant, and his face took on the appearance of what people oddly enough call a sunstroke.

"Is that true?" he asked, after the first explosion of his wrath was over.

The postilions bowed to their master as they and their horses passed him, but he seemed to neither see nor hear them. Instead of waiting for his son, Minoret-Levrault hurried up to the Grand'Rue with his cousin.

"Didn't I always tell you so?" she resumed. "When Doctor Minoret goes out of his head that demure little hypocrite will drag him into religion; whoever lays hold of the mind gets hold of the purse, and she'll have our inheritance."

"But, Madame Massin – " said the post master, dumbfounded.

"There now!" exclaimed Madame Massin, interrupting her cousin. "You are going to say, just as Massin does, that a little girl of fifteen can't invent such plans and carry them out, or make an old man of eighty-three, who has never set foot in a church except to be married, change his opinions, –

now don't tell me he has such a horror of priests that he wouldn't even go with the girl to the parish church when she made her first communion. I'd like to know why, if Doctor Minoret hates priests, he has spent nearly every evening for the last fifteen years of his life with the Abbe Chaperon. The old hypocrite never fails to give Ursula twenty francs for wax tapers every time she takes the sacrament. Have you forgotten the gift Ursula made to the church in gratitude to the cure for preparing her for her first communion? She spent all her money on it, and her godfather returned it to her doubled. You men! you don't pay attention to things. When I heard that, I said to myself, 'Farewell baskets, the vintage is done!' A rich uncle doesn't behave that way to a little brat picked up in the streets without some good reason."

"Pooh, cousin; I dare say the good man is only taking her to the door of the church," replied the post master. "It is a fine day, and he is out for a walk."

"I tell you he is holding a prayer-book, and looks sanctimonious – you'll see him."

"They hide their game pretty well," said Minoret, "La Bougival told me there was never any talk of religion between the doctor and the abbe. Besides, the abbe is one of the most honest men on the face of the globe; he'd give the shirt off his back to a poor man; he is incapable of a base action, and to cheat a family out of their inheritance is – "

"Theft," said Madame Massin.

"Worse!" cried Minoret-Levrault, exasperated by the tongue of his gossiping neighbour.

"Of course I know," said Madame Massin, "that the Abbe Chaperon is an honest man; but he is capable of anything for the sake of his poor. He must have mined and undermined uncle, and the old man has just tumbled into piety. We did nothing, and here he is perverted! A man who never believed in anything, and had principles of his own! Well! we're done for. My husband is absolutely beside himself."

Madame Massin, whose sentences were so many arrows stinging her fat cousin, made him walk as fast as herself, in spite of his obesity and to the great astonishment of the church-goers, who were on their way to mass. She was determined to overtake this uncle and show him to the post master.

Nemours is commanded on the Gatinais side by a hill, at the foot of which runs the road to Montargis and the Loing. The church, on the stones of which time has cast a rich discolored mantle (it was rebuilt in the fourteenth century by the Guises, for whom Nemours was raised to a peerage-duchy), stands at the end of the little town close to a great arch which frames it. For buildings, as for men, position does everything. Shaded by a few trees, and thrown into relief by a neatly kept square, this solitary church produces a really grandiose effect. As the post master of Nemours entered the open space, he beheld his uncle with the young girl called Ursula on his arm, both carrying prayer-books and just entering the church. The old man took off his hat in the porch, and his head, which was white as a hill-top covered with snow, shone among the shadows of the portal.

"Well, Minoret, what do you say to the conversion of your uncle?" cried the tax-collector of Nemours, named Cremiere.

"What do you expect me to say?" replied the post master, offering him a pinch of snuff.

"Well answered, Pere Levrault. You can't say what you think, if it is true, as an illustrious author says it is, that a man must think his words before he speaks his thoughts," cried a young man, standing near, who played the part of Mephistopheles in the little town.

This ill-conditioned youth, named Goupil, was head clerk to Monsieur Cremiere-Dionis, the Nemours notary. Notwithstanding a past conduct that was almost debauched, Dionis had taken Goupil into his office when a career in Paris – where the clerk had wasted all the money he inherited from his father, a well-to-do farmer, who educated him for a notary – was brought to a close by his absolute pauperism. The mere sight of Goupil told an observer that he had made haste to enjoy life, and had paid dear for his enjoyments. Though very short, his chest and shoulders were developed at twenty-seven years of age like those of a man of forty. Legs small and weak, and a broad face, with a cloudy complexion like the sky before a storm, surmounted by a bald forehead, brought out still further the

oddity of his conformation. His face seemed as though it belonged to a hunchback whose hunch was inside of him. One singularity of that pale and sour visage confirmed the impression of an invisible gobbosity; the nose, crooked and out of shape like those of many deformed persons, turned from right to left of the face instead of dividing it down the middle. The mouth, contracted at the corners, like that of a Sardinian, was always on the qui vive of irony. His hair, thin and reddish, fell straight, and showed the skull in many places. His hands, coarse and ill-joined at the wrists to arms that were far too long, were quick-fingered and seldom clean. Goupil wore boots only fit for the dust-heap, and raw silk stockings now of a russet black; his coat and trousers, all black, and threadbare and greasy with dirt, his pitiful waistcoat with half the button-moulds gone, an old silk handkerchief which served as a cravat – in short, all his clothing revealed the cynical poverty to which his passions had reduced him. This combination of disreputable signs was guarded by a pair of eyes with yellow circles round the pupils, like those of a goat, both lascivious and cowardly. No one in Nemours was more feared nor, in a way, more deferred to than Goupil. Strong in the claims made for him by his very ugliness, he had the odious style of wit peculiar to men who allow themselves all license, and he used it to gratify the bitterness of his life-long envy. He wrote the satirical couplets sung during the carnival, organized charivaris, and was himself a "little journal" of the gossip of the town. Dionis, who was clever and insincere, and for that reason timid, kept Goupil as much through fear as for his keen mind and thorough knowledge of all the interests of the town. But the master so distrusted his clerk that he himself kept the accounts, refused to let him live in his house, held him at arm's length, and never confided any secret or delicate affair to his keeping. In return the clerk fawned upon the notary, hiding his resentment at this conduct, and watching Madame Dionis in the hope that he might get his revenge there. Gifted with a ready mind and quick comprehension he found work easy.

"You!" exclaimed the post master to the clerk, who stood rubbing his hands, "making game of our misfortunes already?"

As Goupil was known to have pandered to Dionis' passions for the last five years, the post master treated him cavalierly, without suspecting the hoard of ill-feeling he was piling up in Goupil's heart with every fresh insult. The clerk, convinced that money was more necessary to him than it was to others, and knowing himself superior in mind to the whole bourgeoisie of Nemours, was now counting on his intimacy with Minoret's son Desire to obtain the means of buying one or the other of three town offices, – that of clerk of the court, or the legal practice of one of the sheriffs, or that of Dionis himself. For this reason he put up with the affronts of the post master and the contempt of Madame Minoret-Levrault, and played a contemptible part towards Desire, consoling the fair victims whom that youth left behind him after each vacation, – devouring the crumbs of the loaves he had kneaded.

"If I were the nephew of a rich old fellow, he never would have given God to ME for a co-heir," retorted Goupil, with a hideous grin which exhibited his teeth – few, black, and menacing.

Just then Massin-Levrault, junior, the clerk of the court, joined his wife, bringing with him Madame Cremiere, the wife of the tax-collector of Nemours. This man, one of the hardest natures of the little town, had the physical characteristics of a Tartar: eyes small and round as sloes beneath a retreating brow, crimped hair, an oily skin, huge ears without any rim, a mouth almost without lips, and a scanty beard. He spoke like a man who was losing his voice. To exhibit him thoroughly it is enough to say that he employed his wife and eldest daughter to serve his legal notices.

Madame Cremiere was a stout woman, with a fair complexion injured by red blotches, always too tightly laced, intimate with Madame Dionis, and supposed to be educated because she read novels. Full of pretensions to wit and elegance, she was awaiting her uncle's money to "take a certain stand," decorate her salon, and receive the bourgeoisie. At present her husband denied her Carcel lamps, lithographs, and all the other trifles the notary's wife possessed. She was excessively afraid of Goupil, who caught up and retailed her "slapsus-linquies" as she called them. One day Madame Dionis chanced to ask what "Eau" she thought best for the teeth.

"Try opium," she replied.

Nearly all the collateral heirs of old Doctor Minoret were now assembled in the square; the importance of the event which brought them was so generally felt that even groups of peasants, armed with their scarlet umbrellas and dressed in those brilliant colors which make them so picturesque on Sundays and fete-days, stood by, with their eyes fixed on the frightened heirs. In all little towns which are midway between large villages and cities those who do not go to mass stand about in the square or market-place. Business is talked over. In Nemours the hour of church service was a weekly exchange, to which the owners of property scattered over a radius of some miles resorted.

"Well, how would you have prevented it?" said the post master to Goupil in reply to his remark.

"I should have made myself as important to him as the air he breathes. But from the very first you failed to get hold of him. The inheritance of a rich uncle should be watched as carefully as a pretty woman – for want of proper care they'll both escape you. If Madame Dionis were here she could tell you how true that comparison is."

"But Monsieur Bongrand has just told me there is nothing to worry about," said Massin.

"Oh! there are plenty of ways of saying that!" cried Goupil, laughing. "I would like to have heard your sly justice of the peace say it. If there is nothing to be done, if he, being intimate with your uncle, knows that all is lost, the proper thing for him to say to you is, 'Don't be worried.'"

As Goupil spoke, a satirical smile overspread his face, and gave such meaning to his words that the other heirs began to feel that Massin had let Bongrand deceive him. The tax-collector, a fat little man, as insignificant as a tax-collector should be, and as much of a cipher as a clever woman could wish, hereupon annihilated his co-heir, Massin, with the words: – "Didn't I tell you so?"

Tricky people always attribute trickiness to others. Massin therefore looked askance at Monsieur Bongrand, the justice of the peace, who was at that moment talking near the door of the church with the Marquis du Rouvre, a former client.

"If I were sure of it!" he said.

"You could neutralize the protection he is now giving to the Marquis du Rouvre, who is threatened with arrest. Don't you see how Bongrand is sprinkling him with advice?" said Goupil, slipping an idea of retaliation into Massin's mind. "But you had better go easy with your chief; he's a clever old fellow; he might use his influence with your uncle and persuade him not to leave everything to the church."

"Pooh! we sha'n't die of it," said Minoret-Levrault, opening his enormous snuff-box.

"You won't live of it, either," said Goupil, making the two women tremble. More quick-witted than their husbands, they saw the privations this loss of inheritance (so long counted on for many comforts) would be to them. "However," added Goupil, "we'll drown this little grief in floods of champagne in honor of Desire! – sha'n't we, old fellow?" he cried, tapping the stomach of the giant, and inviting himself to the feast for fear he should be left out.

CHAPTER II. THE RICH UNCLE

Before proceeding further, persons of an exact turn of mind may like to read a species of family inventory, so as to understand the degrees of relationship which connected the old man thus suddenly converted to religion with these three heads of families or their wives. This cross-breeding of families in the remote provinces might be made the subject of many instructive reflections.

There are but three or four houses of the lesser nobility in Nemours; among them, at the period of which we write, that of the family of Portenduere was the most important. These exclusives visited none but nobles who possessed lands or chateaus in the neighbourhood; of the latter we may mention the d'Aiglemonts, owners of the beautiful estate of Saint-Lange, and the Marquis du Rouvre, whose property, crippled by mortgages, was closely watched by the bourgeoisie. The nobles of the town had no money. Madame de Portenduere's sole possessions were a farm which brought a rental of forty-seven hundred francs, and her town house.

In opposition to this very insignificant Faubourg St. Germain was a group of a dozen rich families, those of retired millers, or former merchants; in short a miniature bourgeoisie; below which, again, lived and moved the retail shopkeepers, the proletaries and the peasantry. The bourgeoisie presented (like that of the Swiss cantons and of other small countries) the curious spectacle of the ramifications of certain autochthonous families, old-fashioned and unpolished perhaps, but who rule a whole region and pervade it, until nearly all its inhabitants are cousins. Under Louis XI., an epoch at which the commons first made real names of their surnames (some of which are united with those of feudalism) the bourgeoisie of Nemours was made up of Minorets, Massins, Levraults and Cremieres. Under Louis XIII. these four families had already produced the Massin-Cremieres, the Levrault-Massins, the Massin-Minorets, the Minoret-Minorets, the Cremiere-Levraults, the Levrault-Minoret-Massins, Massin-Levraults, Minoret-Massins, Massin-Massins, and Cremiere-Massins, – all these varied with juniors and diversified with the names of eldest sons, as for instance, Cremiere-Francois, Levrault-Jacques, Jean-Minoret – enough to drive a Pere Anselme of the People frantic, – if the people should ever want a genealogist.

The variations of this family kaleidoscope of four branches was now so complicated by births and marriages that the genealogical tree of the bourgeoisie of Nemours would have puzzled the Benedictines of the Almanach of Gotha, in spite of the atomic science with which they arrange those zigzags of German alliances. For a long time the Minorets occupied the tanneries, the Cremieres kept the mills, the Massins were in trade, and the Levraults continued farmers. Fortunately for the neighbourhood these four stocks threw out suckers instead of depending only on their tap-roots; they scattered cuttings by the expatriation of sons who sought their fortune elsewhere; for instance, there are Minorets who are cutlers at Melun; Levraults at Montargis; Massins at Orleans; and Cremieres of some importance in Paris. Divers are the destinies of these bees from the parent hive. Rich Massins employ, of course, the poor working Massins – just as Austria and Prussia take the German princes into their service. It may happen that a public office is managed by a Minoret millionaire and guarded by a Minoret sentinel. Full of the same blood and called by the same name (for sole likeness), these four roots had ceaselessly woven a human network of which each thread was delicate or strong, fine or coarse, as the case might be. The same blood was in the head and in the feet and in the heart, in the working hands, in the weakly lungs, in the forehead big with genius.

The chiefs of the clan were faithful to the little town, where the ties of family were relaxed or tightened according to the events which happened under this curious cognomenism. In whatever part of France you may be, you will find the same thing under changed names, but without the poetic charm which feudalism gave to it, and which Walter Scott's genius reproduced so faithfully. Let us look a little higher and examine humanity as it appears in history. All the noble families of the eleventh century, most of them (except the royal race of Capet) extinct to-day, will be found to

have contributed to the birth of the Rohans, Montmorencys, Beauffremonts, and Mortemarts of our time, – in fact they will all be found in the blood of the last gentleman who is indeed a gentleman. In other words, every bourgeois is cousin to a bourgeois, and every noble is cousin to a noble. A splendid page of biblical genealogy shows that in one thousand years three families, Shem, Ham, and Japhet, peopled the globe. One family may become a nation; unfortunately, a nation may become one family. To prove this we need only search back through our ancestors and see their accumulation, which time increases into a retrograde geometric progression, which multiplies of itself; reminding us of the calculation of the wise man who, being told to choose a reward from the king of Persia for inventing chess, asked for one ear of wheat for the first move on the board, the reward to be doubled for each succeeding move; when it was found that the kingdom was not large enough to pay it. The net-work of the nobility, hemmed in by the net-work of the bourgeoisie, – the antagonism of two protected races, one protected by fixed institutions, the other by the active patience of labor and the shrewdness of commerce, – produced the revolution of 1789. The two races almost reunited are to-day face to face with collaterals without a heritage. What are they to do? Our political future is big with the answer.

The family of the man who under Louis XV. was simply called Minoret was so numerous that one of the five children (the Minoret whose entrance into the parish church caused such interest) went to Paris to seek his fortune, and seldom returned to his native town, until he came to receive his share of the inheritance of his grandfather. After suffering many things, like all young men of firm will who struggle for a place in the brilliant world of Paris, this son of the Minorets reached a nobler destiny than he had, perhaps, dreamed of at the start. He devoted himself, in the first instance, to medicine, a profession which demands both talent and a cheerful nature, but the latter qualification even more than talent. Backed by Dupont de Nemours, connected by a lucky chance with the Abbe Morellet (whom Voltaire nicknamed Mords-les), and protected by the Encyclopedists, Doctor Minoret attached himself as liegeman to the famous Doctor Bordeu, the friend of Diderot, D'Alembert, Helvetius, the Baron d'Holbach and Grimm, in whose presence he felt himself a mere boy. These men, influenced by Bordeu's example, became interested in Minoret, who, about the year 1777, found himself with a very good practice among deists, encyclopedists, sensualists, materialists, or whatever you are pleased to call the rich philosophers of that period.

Though Minoret was very little of a humbug, he invented the famous balm of Lelievre, so much extolled by the "Mercure de France," the weekly organ of the Encyclopedists, in whose columns it was permanently advertised. The apothecary Lelievre, a clever man, saw a stroke of business where Minoret had only seen a new preparation for the dispensary, and he loyally shared his profits with the doctor, who was a pupil of Rouelle in chemistry as well as of Bordeu in medicine. Less than that would make a man a materialist.

The doctor married for love in 1778, during the reign of the "Nouvelle Heloise," when persons did occasionally marry for that reason. His wife was a daughter of the famous harpsichordist Valentin Mirouet, a celebrated musician, frail and delicate, whom the Revolution slew. Minoret knew Robespierre intimately, for he had once been instrumental in awarding him a gold medal for a dissertation on the following subject: "What is the origin of the opinion that covers a whole family with the shame attaching to the public punishment of a guilty member of it? Is that opinion more harmful than useful? If yes, in what way can the harm be warded off." The Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences at Metz, to which Minoret belonged, must possess this dissertation in the original. Though, thanks to this friendship, the Doctor's wife need have had no fear, she was so in dread of going to the scaffold that her terror increased a disposition to heart disease caused by the over-sensitiveness of her nature. In spite of all the precautions taken by the man who idolized her, Ursula unfortunately met the tumbril of victims among whom was Madame Roland, and the shock caused her death. Minoret, who in tenderness to his wife had refused her nothing, and had given her a life of luxury, found himself after her death almost a poor man. Robespierre gave him an appointment as surgeon-in-charge of a hospital.

Though the name of Minoret obtained during the lively debates to which mesmerism gave rise a certain celebrity which occasionally recalled him to the minds of his relatives, still the Revolution was so great a destroyer of family relations that in 1813 Nemours knew little of Doctor Minoret, who was induced to think of returning there to die, like the hare to its form, by a circumstance that was wholly accidental.

Who has not felt in traveling through France, where the eye is often wearied by the monotony of plains, the charming sensation of coming suddenly, when the eye is prepared for a barren landscape, upon a fresh cool valley, watered by a river, with a little town sheltering beneath a cliff like a swarm of bees in the hollow of an old willow? Wakened by the "hu! hu!" of the postilion as he walks beside his horses, we shake off sleep and admire, like a dream within a dream, the beautiful scene which is to the traveler what a noble passage in a book is to a reader, – a brilliant thought of Nature. Such is the sensation caused by a first sight of Nemours as we approach it from Burgundy. We see it encircled with bare rocks, gray, black, white, fantastic in shape like those we find in the forest of Fontainebleau; from them spring scattered trees, clearly defined against the sky, which give to this particular rock formation the dilapidated look of a crumbling wall. Here ends the long wooded hill which creeps from Nemours to Bouron, skirting the road. At the bottom of this irregular amphitheater lie meadow-lands through which flows the Loing, forming sheets of water with many falls. This delightful landscape, which continues the whole way to Montargis, is like an opera scene, for its effects really seem to have been studied.

One morning Doctor Minoret, who had been summoned into Burgundy by a rich patient, was returning in all haste to Paris. Not having mentioned at the last relay the route he intended to take, he was brought without his knowledge through Nemours, and beheld once more, on waking from a nap, the scenery in which his childhood had been passed. He had lately lost many of his old friends. The votary of the Encyclopedists had witnessed the conversion of La Harpe; he had buried Lebrun-Pindare and Marie-Joseph de Chenier, and Morellet, and Madame Helvetius. He assisted at the quasi-fall of Voltaire when assailed by Geoffroy, the continuator of Freton. For some time past he had thought of retiring, and so, when his post chaise stopped at the head of the Grand'Rue of Nemours, his heart prompted him to inquire for his family. Minoret-Levrault, the post master, came forward himself to see the doctor, who discovered him to be the son of his eldest brother. The nephew presented the doctor to his wife, the only daughter of the late Levrault-Cremiere, who had died twelve years earlier, leaving him the post business and the finest inn in Nemours.

"Well, nephew," said the doctor, "have I any other relatives?"

"My aunt Minoret, your sister, married a Massin-Massin – "

"Yes, I know, the bailiff of Saint-Lange."

"She died a widow leaving an only daughter, who has lately married a Cremiere-Cremiere, a fine young fellow, still without a place."

"Ah! she is my own niece. Now, as my brother, the sailor, died a bachelor, and Captain Minoret was killed at Monte-Legino, and here I am, that ends the paternal line. Have I any relations on the maternal side? My mother was a Jean-Massin-Levrault."

"Of the Jean-Massin-Levrault's there's only one left," answered Minoret-Levrault, "namely, Jean-Massin, who married Monsieur Cremiere-Levrault-Dionis, a purveyor of forage, who perished on the scaffold. His wife died of despair and without a penny, leaving one daughter, married to a Levrault-Minoret, a farmer at Montereau, who is doing well; their daughter has just married a Massin-Levrault, notary's clerk at Montargis, where his father is a locksmith."

"So I've plenty of heirs," said the doctor gayly, immediately proposing to take a walk through Nemours accompanied by his nephew.

The Loing runs through the town in a waving line, banked by terraced gardens and neat houses, the aspect of which makes one fancy that happiness must abide there sooner than elsewhere. When

the doctor turned into the Rue des Bourgeois, Minoret-Levrault pointed out the property of Levrault-Levrault, a rich iron merchant in Paris who, he said, had just died.

"The place is for sale, uncle, and a very pretty house it is; there's a charming garden running down to the river."

"Let us go in," said the doctor, seeing, at the farther end of a small paved courtyard, a house standing between the walls of the two neighbouring houses which were masked by clumps of trees and climbing-plants.

"It is built over a cellar," said the doctor, going up the steps of a high portico adorned with vases of blue and white pottery in which geraniums were growing.

Cut in two, like the majority of provincial houses, by a long passage which led from the courtyard to the garden, the house had only one room to the right, a salon lighted by four windows, two on the courtyard and two on the garden; but Levrault-Levrault had used one of these windows to make an entrance to a long greenhouse built of brick which extended from the salon towards the river, ending in a horrible Chinese pagoda.

"Good! by building a roof to that greenhouse and laying a floor," said old Minoret, "I could put my book there and make a very comfortable study of that extraordinary bit of architecture at the end."

On the other side of the passage, toward the garden, was the dining-room, decorated in imitation of black lacquer with green and gold flowers; this was separated from the kitchen by the well of the staircase. Communication with the kitchen was had through a little pantry built behind the staircase, the kitchen itself looking into the courtyard through windows with iron railings. There were two chambers on the next floor, and above them, attic rooms sheathed in wood, which were fairly habitable. After examining the house rapidly, and observing that it was covered with trellises from top to bottom, on the side of the courtyard as well as on that to the garden, – which ended in a terrace overlooking the river and adorned with pottery vases, – the doctor remarked: —

"Levrault-Levrault must have spend a good deal of money here."

"Ho! I should think so," answered Minoret-Levrault. "He liked flowers – nonsense! 'What do they bring in?' says my wife. You saw inside there how an artist came from Paris to paint flowers in fresco in the corridor. He put those enormous mirrors everywhere. The ceilings were all re-made with cornices which cost six francs a foot. The dining-room floor is in marquetry – perfect folly! The house won't sell for a penny the more."

"Well, nephew, buy it for me: let me know what you do about it; here's my address. The rest I leave to my notary. Who lives opposite?" he asked, as they left the house.

"Emigres," answered the post master, "named Portenduere."

The house once bought, the illustrious doctor, instead of living there, wrote to his nephew to let it. The Folie-Levraught was therefore occupied by the notary of Nemours, who about that time sold his practice to Dionis, his head-clerk, and died two years later, leaving the house on the doctor's hands, just at the time when the fate of Napoleon was being decided in the neighbourhood. The doctor's heirs, at first misled, had by this time decided that his thought of returning to his native place was merely a rich man's fancy, and that probably he had some tie in Paris which would keep him there and cheat them of their hoped-for inheritance. However, Minoret-Levrault's wife seized the occasion to write him a letter. The old man replied that as soon as peace was signed, the roads cleared of soldiers, and safe communications established, he meant to go and live at Nemours. He did, in fact, put in an appearance with two of his clients, the architect of his hospital and an upholsterer, who took charge of the repairs, the indoor arrangements, and the transportation of the furniture. Madame Minoret-Levrault proposed the cook of the late notary as caretaker, and the woman was accepted.

When the heirs heard that their uncle and great-uncle Minoret was really coming to live in Nemours, they were seized (in spite of the political events which were just then weighing so heavily on Brie and on the Gatinais) with a devouring curiosity, which was not surprising. Was he rich? Economical or spendthrift? Would he leave a fine fortune or nothing? Was his property in annuities?

In the end they found out what follows, but only by taking infinite pains and employing much subterraneous spying.

After the death of his wife, Ursula Mirouet, and between the years 1789 and 1813, the doctor (who had been appointed consulting physician to the Emperor in 1805) must have made a good deal of money; but no one knew how much. He lived simply, without other extravagancies than a carriage by the year and a sumptuous apartment. He received no guests, and dined out almost every day. His housekeeper, furious at not being allowed to go with him to Nemours, told Zelie Levrault, the post master's wife, that she knew the doctor had fourteen thousand francs a year on the "grand-livre." Now, after twenty years' exercise of a profession which his position as head of a hospital, physician to the Emperor, and member of the Institute, rendered lucrative, these fourteen thousand francs a year showed only one hundred and sixty thousand francs laid by. To have saved only eight thousand francs a year the doctor must have had either many vices or many virtues to gratify. But neither his housekeeper nor Zelie nor any one else could discover the reason for such moderate means. Minoret, who when he left it was much regretted in the quarter of Paris where he had lived, was one of the most benevolent of men, and, like Larrey, kept his kind deeds a profound secret.

The heirs watched the arrival of their uncle's fine furniture and large library with complacency, and looked forward to his own coming, he being now an officer of the Legion of honor, and lately appointed by the king a chevalier of the order of Saint-Michel – perhaps on account of his retirement, which left a vacancy for some favorite. But when the architect and painter and upholsterer had arranged everything in the most comfortable manner, the doctor did not come. Madame Minoret-Levrault, who kept an eye on the upholsterer and architect as if her own property was concerned, found out, through the indiscretion of a young man sent to arrange the books, that the doctor was taking care of a little orphan named Ursula. The news flew like wild-fire through the town. At last, however, towards the middle of the month of January, 1815, the old man actually arrived, installing himself quietly, almost slyly, with a little girl about ten months old, and a nurse.

"The child can't be his daughter," said the terrified heirs; "he is seventy-one years old."

"Whoever she is," remarked Madame Massin, "she'll give us plenty of tintouin" (a word peculiar to Nemours, meaning uneasiness, anxiety, or more literally, tingling in the ears).

The doctor received his great-niece on the mother's side somewhat coldly; her husband had just bought the place of clerk of the court, and the pair began at once to tell him of their difficulties. Neither Massin nor his wife were rich. Massin's father, a locksmith at Montargis, had been obliged to compromise with his creditors, and was now, at sixty-seven years of age, working like a young man, and had nothing to leave behind him. Madame Massin's father, Levrault-Minoret, had just died at Montereau after the battle, in despair at seeing his farm burned, his fields ruined, his cattle slaughtered.

"We'll get nothing out of your great-uncle," said Massin to his wife, now pregnant with her second child, after the interview.

The doctor, however, gave them privately ten thousand francs, with which Massin, who was a great friend of the notary and of the sheriff, began the business of money-lending, and carried matters so briskly with the peasantry that by the time of which we are now writing Goupil knew him to hold at least eighty thousand francs on their property.

As to his other niece, the doctor obtained for her husband, through his influence in Paris, the collectorship of Nemours, and became his bondsman. Though Minoret-Levrault needed no assistance, Zelie, his wife, being jealous of the uncle's liberality to his two nieces, took her ten-year old son to see him, and talked of the expense he would be to them at a school in Paris, where, she said, education costs so much. The doctor obtained a half-scholarship for his great-nephew at the school of Louis-le-Grand, where Desire was put into the fourth class.

Cremiere, Massin, and Minoret-Levrault, extremely common persons, were "rated without appeal" by the doctor within two months of his arrival in Nemours, during which time they courted,

less their uncle than his property. Persons who are led by instinct have one great disadvantage against others with ideas. They are quickly found out; the suggestions of instinct are too natural, too open to the eye not to be seen at a glance; whereas, the conceptions of the mind require an equal amount of intellect to discover them. After buying the gratitude of his heirs, and thus, as it were, shutting their mouths, the wily doctor made a pretext of his occupations, his habits, and the care of the little Ursula to avoid receiving his relatives without exactly closing his doors to them. He liked to dine alone; he went to bed late and he got up late; he had returned to his native place for the very purpose of finding rest in solitude. These whims of an old man seemed to be natural, and his relatives contented themselves with paying him weekly visits on Sundays from one to four o'clock, to which, however, he tried to put a stop by saying: "Don't come and see me unless you want something."

The doctor, while not refusing to be called in consultation over serious cases, especially if the patients were indigent, would not serve as a physician in the little hospital of Nemours, and declared that he no longer practiced his profession.

"I've killed enough people," he said, laughing, to the Abbe Chaperon, who, knowing his benevolence, would often get him to attend the poor.

"He's an original!" These words, said of Doctor Minoret, were the harmless revenge of various wounded vanities; for a doctor collects about him a society of persons who have many of the characteristics of a set of heirs. Those of the bourgeoisie who thought themselves entitled to visit this distinguished physician kept up a ferment of jealousy against the few privileged friends whom he did admit to his intimacy, which had in the long run some unfortunate results.

CHAPTER III. THE DOCTOR'S FRIENDS

Curiously enough, though it explains the old proverb that "extremes meet," the materialistic doctor and the cure of Nemours were soon friends. The old man loved backgammon, a favorite game of the priesthood, and the Abbe Chaperon played it with about as much skill as he himself. The game was the first tie between them. Then Minoret was charitable, and the abbe was the Fenelon of the Gatinais. Both had had a wide and varied education; the man of God was the only person in all Nemours who was fully capable of understanding the atheist. To be able to argue, men must first understand each other. What pleasure is there in saying sharp words to one who can't feel them? The doctor and the priest had far too much taste and had seen too much of good society not to practice its precepts; they were thus well-fitted for the little warfare so essential to conversation. They hated each other's opinions, but they valued each other's character. If such conflicts and such sympathies are not true elements of intimacy we must surely despair of society, which, especially in France, requires some form of antagonism. It is from the shock of characters, and not from the struggle of opinions, that antipathies are generated.

The Abbe Chaperon became, therefore, the doctor's chief friend. This excellent ecclesiastic, then sixty years of age, had been curate of Nemours ever since the re-establishment of Catholic worship. Out of attachment to his flock he had refused the vicariat of the diocese. If those who were indifferent to religion thought well of him for so doing, the faithful loved him the more for it. So, revered by his sheep, respected by the inhabitants at large, the abbe did good without inquiring into the religious opinions of those he benefited. His parsonage, with scarcely furniture enough for the common needs of life, was cold and shabby, like the lodging of a miser. Charity and avarice manifest themselves in the same way; charity lays up a treasure in heaven which avarice lays up on earth. The Abbe Chaperon argued with his servant over expenses even more sharply than Gobseck with his – if indeed that famous Jew kept a servant at all. The good priest often sold the buckles off his shoes and his breeches to give their value to some poor person who appealed to him at a moment when he had not a penny. When he was seen coming out of church with the straps of his breeches tied into the button-holes, devout women would redeem the buckles from the clock-maker and jeweler of the town and return them to their pastor with a lecture. He never bought himself any clothes or linen, and wore his garments till they scarcely held together. His linen, thick with darns, rubbed his skin like a hair shirt. Madame de Portenduere, and other good souls, had an agreement with his housekeeper to replace the old clothes with new ones after he went to sleep, and the abbe did not always find out the difference. He ate his food off pewter with iron forks and spoons. When he received his assistants and sub-curates on days of high solemnity (an expense obligatory on the heads of parishes) he borrowed linen and silver from his friend the atheist.

"My silver is his salvation," the doctor would say.

These noble deeds, always accompanied by spiritual encouragement, were done with a beautiful naivete. Such a life was all the more meritorious because the abbe was possessed of an erudition that was vast and varied, and of great and precious faculties. Delicacy and grace, the inseparable accompaniments of simplicity, lent charm to an elocution that was worthy of a prelate. His manners, his character, and his habits gave to his intercourse with others the most exquisite savor of all that is most spiritual, most sincere in the human mind. A lover of gayety, he was never priest in a salon. Until Doctor Minoret's arrival, the good man kept his light under a bushel without regret. Owning a rather fine library and an income of two thousand francs when he came to Nemours, he now possessed, in 1829, nothing at all, except his stipend as parish priest, nearly the whole of which he gave away during the year. The giver of excellent counsel in delicate matters or in great misfortunes, many persons who never went to church to obtain consolation went to the parsonage to get advice. One little anecdote will suffice to complete his portrait. Sometimes the peasants, – rarely, it is true, but

occasionally, – unprincipled men, would tell him they were sued for debt, or would get themselves threatened fictitiously to stimulate the abbe's benevolence. They would even deceive their wives, who, believing their chattels were threatened with an execution and their cows seized, deceived in their turn the poor priest with their innocent tears. He would then manage with great difficulty to provide the seven or eight hundred francs demanded of him – with which the peasant bought himself a morsel of land. When pious persons and vestrymen denounced the fraud, begging the abbe to consult them in future before lending himself to such cupidity, he would say: —

"But suppose they had done something wrong to obtain their bit of land? Isn't it doing good when we prevent evil?"

Some persons may wish for a sketch of this figure, remarkable for the fact that science and literature had filled the heart and passed through the strong head without corrupting either. At sixty years of age the abbe's hair was white as snow, so keenly did he feel the sorrows of others, and so heavily had the events of the Revolution weighed upon him. Twice incarcerated for refusing to take the oath he had twice, as he used to say, uttered in "In manus." He was of medium height, neither stout nor thin. His face, much wrinkled and hollowed and quite colorless, attracted immediate attention by the absolute tranquillity expressed in its shape, and by the purity of its outline, which seemed to be edged with light. The face of a chaste man has an unspeakable radiance. Brown eyes with lively pupils brightened the irregular features, which were surmounted by a broad forehead. His glance wielded a power which came of a gentleness that was not devoid of strength. The arches of his brow formed caverns shaded by huge gray eyebrows which alarmed no one. As most of his teeth were gone his mouth had lost its shape and his cheeks had fallen in; but this physical destruction was not without charm; even the wrinkles, full of pleasantness, seemed to smile on others. Without being gouty his feet were tender; and he walked with so much difficulty that he wore shoes made of calf's skin all the year round. He thought the fashion of trousers unsuitable for priests, and he always appeared in stockings of coarse black yarn, knit by his housekeeper, and cloth breeches. He never went out in his cassock, but wore a brown overcoat, and still retained the three-cornered hat he had worn so courageously in times of danger. This noble and beautiful old man, whose face was glorified by the serenity of a soul above reproach, will be found to have so great an influence upon the men and things of this history, that it was proper to show the sources of his authority and power.

Minoret took three newspapers, – one liberal, one ministerial, one ultra, – a few periodicals, and certain scientific journals, the accumulation of which swelled his library. The newspapers, encyclopaedias, and books were an attraction to a retired captain of the Royal-Swedish regiment, named Monsieur de Jordy, a Voltairean nobleman and an old bachelor, who lived on sixteen hundred francs of pension and annuity combined. Having read the gazettes for several days, by favor of the abbe, Monsieur de Jordy thought it proper to call and thank the doctor in person. At this first visit the old captain, formerly a professor at the Military Academy, won the doctor's heart, who returned the call with alacrity. Monsieur de Jordy, a spare little man much troubled by his blood, though his face was very pale, attracted attention by the resemblance of his handsome brow to that of Charles XII.; above it he kept his hair cropped short, like that of the soldier-king. His blue eyes seemed to say that "Love had passed that way," so mournful were they; revealing memories about which he kept such utter silence that his old friends never detected even an allusion to his past life, nor a single exclamation drawn forth by similarity of circumstances. He hid the painful mystery of his past beneath a philosophic gayety, but when he thought himself alone his motions, stiffened by a slowness which was more a matter of choice than the result of old age, betrayed the constant presence of distressful thoughts. The Abbe Chaperon called him a Christian ignorant of his Christianity. Dressed always in blue cloth, his rather rigid demeanor and his clothes bespoke the old habits of military discipline. His sweet and harmonious voice stirred the soul. His beautiful hands and the general cut of his figure, recalling that of the Comte d'Artois, showed how charming he must have been in his youth, and made the mystery of his life still more mysterious. An observer asked involuntarily what misfortune

had blighted such beauty, courage, grace, accomplishment, and all the precious qualities of the heart once united in his person. Monsieur de Jordy shuddered if Robespierre's name were uttered before him. He took much snuff, but, strange to say, he gave up the habit to please little Ursula, who at first showed a dislike to him on that account. As soon as he saw the little girl the captain fastened his eyes upon her with a look that was almost passionate. He loved her play so extravagantly and took such interest in all she did that the tie between himself and the doctor grew closer every day, though the latter never dared to say to him, "You, too, have you lost children?" There are beings, kind and patient as old Jordy, who pass through life with a bitter thought in their heart and a tender but sorrowful smile on their lips, carrying with them to the grave the secret of their lives; letting no one guess it, – through pride, through disdain, possibly through revenge; confiding in none but God, without other consolation than his.

Monsieur de Jordy, like the doctor, had come to die in Nemours, but he knew no one except the abbe, who was always at the beck and call of his parishioners, and Madame de Portenduere, who went to bed at nine o'clock. So, much against his will, he too had taken to going to bed early, in spite of the thorns that beset his pillow. It was therefore a great piece of good fortune for him (as well as for the doctor) when he encountered a man who had known the same world and spoken the same language as himself; with whom he could exchange ideas, and who went to bed late. After Monsieur de Jordy, the Abbe Chaperon, and Minoret had passed one evening together they found so much pleasure in it that the priest and soldier returned every night regularly at nine o'clock, the hour at which, little Ursula having gone to bed, the doctor was free. All three would then sit up till midnight or one o'clock.

After a time this trio became a quartette. Another man to whom life was known, and who owed to his practical training as a lawyer, the indulgence, knowledge, observation, shrewdness, and talent for conversation which the soldier, doctor, and priest owed to their practical dealings with the souls, diseases, and education of men, was added to the number. Monsieur Bongrand, the justice of peace, heard of the pleasure of these evenings and sought admittance to the doctor's society. Before becoming justice of peace at Nemours he had been for ten years a solicitor at Melun, where he conducted his own cases, according to the custom of small towns, where there are no barristers. He became a widower at forty-five years of age, but felt himself still too active to lead an idle life; he therefore sought and obtained the position of justice of peace at Nemours, which became vacant a few months before the arrival of Doctor Minoret. Monsieur Bongrand lived modestly on his salary of fifteen hundred francs, in order that he might devote his private income to his son, who was studying law in Paris under the famous Derville. He bore some resemblance to a retired chief of a civil service office; he had the peculiar face of a bureaucrat, less sallow than pallid, on which public business, vexations, and disgust leave their imprint, – a face lined by thought, and also by the continual restraints familiar to those who are trained not to speak their minds freely. It was often illumined by smiles characteristic of men who alternately believe all and believe nothing, who are accustomed to see and hear all without being startled, and to fathom the abysses which self-interest hollows in the depths of the human heart.

Below the hair, which was less white than discolored, and worn flattened to the head, was a fine, sagacious forehead, the yellow tones of which harmonized well with the scanty tufts of thin hair. His face, with the features set close together, bore some likeness to that of a fox, all the more because his nose was short and pointed. In speaking, he spluttered at the mouth, which was broad like that of most great talkers, – a habit which led Goupil to say, ill-naturedly, "An umbrella would be useful when listening to him," or, "The justice rains verdicts." His eyes looked keen behind his spectacles, but if he took the glasses off his dulled glance seemed almost vacant. Though he was naturally gay, even jovial, he was apt to give himself too important and pompous an air. He usually kept his hands in the pockets of his trousers, and only took them out to settle his eye-glasses on his nose, with a movement that was half comic, and which announced the coming of a keen observation or some victorious argument. His gestures, his loquacity, his innocent self-assertion, proclaimed the

provincial lawyer. These slight defects were, however, superficial; he redeemed them by an exquisite kind-heartedness which a rigid moralist might call the indulgence natural to superiority. He looked a little like a fox, and he was thought to be very wily, but never false or dishonest. His wiliness was perspicacity; and consisted in foreseeing results and protecting himself and others from the traps set for them. He loved whist, a game known to the captain and the doctor, and which the abbe learned to play in a very short time.

This little circle of friends made for itself an oasis in Mironet's salon. The doctor of Nemours, who was not without education and knowledge of the world, and who greatly respected Minoret as an honor to the profession, came there sometimes; but his duties and also his fatigue (which obliged him to go to bed early and to be up early) prevented his being as assiduously present as the three other friends. This intercourse of five superior men, the only ones in Nemours who had sufficiently wide knowledge to understand each other, explains old Minoret's aversion to his relatives; if he were compelled to leave them his money, at least he need not admit them to his society. Whether the post master, the sheriff, and the collector understood this distinction, or whether they were reassured by the evident loyalty and benefactions of their uncle, certain it is that they ceased, to his great satisfaction, to see much of him. So, about eight months after the arrival of the doctor these four players of whist and backgammon made a solid and exclusive little world which was to each a fraternal aftermath, an unlooked for fine season, the gentle pleasures of which were the more enjoyed. This little circle of choice spirits closed round Ursula, a child whom each adopted according to his individual tendencies; the abbe thought of her soul, the judge imagined himself her guardian, the soldier intended to be her teacher, and as for Minoret, he was father, mother, and physician, all in one.

After he became acclimated old Minoret settled into certain habits of life, under fixed rules, after the manner of the provinces. On Ursula's account he received no visitors in the morning, and never gave dinners, but his friends were at liberty to come to his house at six o'clock and stay till midnight. The first-comers found the newspapers on the table and read them while awaiting the rest; or they sometimes sallied forth to meet the doctor if he were out for a walk. This tranquil life was not a mere necessity of old age, it was the wise and careful scheme of a man of the world to keep his happiness untroubled by the curiosity of his heirs and the gossip of a little town. He yielded nothing to that capricious goddess, public opinion, whose tyranny (one of the present great evils of France) was just beginning to establish its power and to make the whole nation a mere province. So, as soon as the child was weaned and could walk alone, the doctor sent away the housekeeper whom his niece, Madame Minoret-Levrault had chosen for him, having discovered that she told her patroness everything that happened in his household.

Ursula's nurse, the widow of a poor workman (who possessed no name but a baptismal one, and who came from Bougival) had lost her last child, aged six months, just as the doctor, who knew her to be a good and honest creature, engaged her as wetnurse for Ursula. Antoinette Patris (her maiden name), widow of Pierre, called Le Bougival, attached herself naturally to Ursula, as wetmaids do to their nurslings. This blind maternal affection was accompanied in this instance by household devotion. Told of the doctor's intention to send away his housekeeper, La Bougival secretly learned to cook, became neat and handy, and discovered the old man's ways. She took the utmost care of the house and furniture; in short she was indefatigable. Not only did the doctor wish to keep his private life within four walls, as the saying is, but he also had certain reasons for hiding a knowledge of his business affairs from his relatives. At the end of the second year after his arrival La Bougival was the only servant in the house; on her discretion he knew he could count, and he disguised his real purposes by the all-powerful open reason of a necessary economy. To the great satisfaction of his heirs he became a miser. Without fawning or wheedling, solely by the influence of her devotion and solicitude, La Bougival, who was forty-three years old at the time this tale begins, was the housekeeper of the doctor and his protegee, the pivot on which the whole house turned, in short, the confidential

servant. She was called La Bougival from the admitted impossibility of applying to her person the name that actually belonged to her, Antoinette – for names and forms do obey the laws of harmony.

The doctor's miserliness was not mere talk; it was real, and it had an object. From the year 1817 he cut off two of his newspapers and ceased subscribing to periodicals. His annual expenses, which all Nemours could estimate, did not exceed eighteen hundred francs a year. Like most old men his wants in linen, boots, and clothing, were very few. Every six months he went to Paris, no doubt to draw and reinvest his income. In fifteen years he never said a single word to any one in relation to his affairs. His confidence in Bongrand was of slow growth; it was not until after the revolution of 1830 that he told him of his projects. Nothing further was known of the doctor's life either by the bourgeoisie at large or by his heirs. As for his political opinions, he did not meddle in public matters seeing that he paid less than a hundred francs a year in taxes, and refused, impartially, to subscribe to either royalist or liberal demands. His known horror for the priesthood, and his deism were so little obtrusive that he turned out of his house a commercial runner sent by his great-nephew Desire to ask a subscription to the "Cure Meslier" and the "Discours du General Foy." Such tolerance seemed inexplicable to the liberals of Nemours.

The doctor's three collateral heirs, Minoret-Levrault and his wife, Monsieur and Madame Massin-Levrault, junior, Monsieur and Madame Cremiere-Cremiere – whom we shall in future call simply Cremiere, Massin, and Minoret, because these distinctions among homonyms is quite unnecessary out of the Gatinais – met together as people do in little towns. The post master gave a grand dinner on his son's birthday, a ball during the carnival, another on the anniversary of his marriage, to all of which he invited the whole bourgeoisie of Nemours. The collector received his relations and friends twice a year. The clerk of the court, too poor, he said, to fling himself into such extravagance, lived in a small way in a house standing half-way down the Grand'Rue, the ground-floor of which was let to his sister, the letter-postmistress of Nemours, a situation she owed to the doctor's kind offices. Nevertheless, in the course of the year these three families did meet together frequently, in the houses of friends, in the public promenades, at the market, on their doorsteps, or, of a Sunday in the square, as on this occasion; so that one way and another they met nearly every day. For the last three years the doctor's age, his economies, and his probable wealth had led to allusions, or frank remarks, among the townspeople as to the disposition of his property, a topic which made the doctor and his heirs of deep interest to the little town. For the last six months not a day passed that friends and neighbours did not speak to the heirs, with secret envy, of the day the good man's eyes would shut and the coffers open.

"Doctor Minoret may be an able physician, on good terms with death, but none but God is eternal," said one.

"Pooh, he'll bury us all; his health is better than ours," replied an heir, hypocritically.

"Well, if you don't get the money yourselves, your children will, unless that little Ursula – "

"He won't leave it all to her."

Ursula, as Madame Massin had predicted, was the bete noire of the relations, their sword of Damocles; and Madame Cremiere's favorite saying, "Well, whoever lives will know," shows that they wished at any rate more harm to her than good.

The collector and the clerk of the court, poor in comparison with the post master, had often estimated, by way of conversation, the doctor's property. If they met their uncle walking on the banks of the canal or along the road they would look at each other piteously.

"He must have got hold of some elixir of life," said one.

"He has made a bargain with the devil," replied the other.

"He ought to give us the bulk of it; that fat Minoret doesn't need anything," said Massin.

"Ah! but Minoret has a son who'll waste his substance," answered Cremiere.

"How much do you really think the doctor has?"

"At the end of twelve years, say twelve thousand francs saved each year, that would give one hundred and forty-four thousand francs, and the interest brings in at least one hundred thousand more. But as he must, if he consults a notary in Paris, have made some good strokes of business, and we know that up to 1822 he could get seven or eight per cent from the State, he must now have at least four hundred thousand francs, without counting the capital of his fourteen thousand a year from the five per cents. If he were to die to-morrow without leaving anything to Ursula we should get at least seven or eight hundred thousand francs, besides the house and furniture."

"Well, a hundred thousand to Minoret, and three hundred thousand apiece to you and me, that would be fair."

"Ha, that would make us comfortable!"

"If he did that," said Massin, "I should sell my situation in court and buy an estate; I'd try to be judge at Fontainebleau, and get myself elected deputy."

"As for me I should buy a brokerage business," said the collector.

"Unluckily, that girl he has on his arm and the abbe have got round him. I don't believe we can do anything with him."

"Still, we know very well he will never leave anything to the Church."

CHAPTER IV. ZELIE

The fright of the heirs at beholding their uncle on his way to mass will now be understood. The dullest persons have mind enough to foresee a danger to self-interests. Self-interest constitutes the mind of the peasant as well as that of the diplomatist, and on that ground the stupidest of men is sometimes the most powerful. So the fatal reasoning, "If that little Ursula has influence enough to drag her godfather into the pale of the Church she will certainly have enough to make him leave her his property," was now stamped in letters of fire on the brains of the most obtuse heir. The post master had forgotten about his son in his hurry to reach the square; for if the doctor were really in the church hearing mass it was a question of losing two hundred and fifty thousand francs. It must be admitted that the fears of these relations came from the strongest and most legitimate of social feelings, family interests.

"Well, Monsieur Minoret," said the mayor (formerly a miller who had now become royalist, named Levrault-Cremiere), "when the devil gets old the devil a monk would be. Your uncle, they say, is one of us."

"Better late than never, cousin," responded the post master, trying to conceal his annoyance.

"How that fellow will grin if we are defrauded! He is capable of marrying his son to that damned girl – may the devil get her!" cried Cremiere, shaking his fists at the mayor as he entered the porch.

"What's Cremiere grumbling about?" said the butcher of the town, a Levrault-Levrault the elder. "Isn't he pleased to see his uncle on the road to paradise?"

"Who would ever have believed it!" ejaculated Massin.

"Ha! one should never say, 'Fountain, I'll not drink of your water,'" remarked the notary, who, seeing the group from afar, had left his wife to go to church without him.

"Come, Monsieur Dionis," said Cremiere, taking the notary by the arm, "what do you advise me to do under the circumstances?"

"I advise you," said the notary, addressing the heirs collectively, "to go to bed and get up at your usual hour; to eat your soup before it gets cold; to put your feet in your shoes and your hats on your heads; in short, to continue your ways of life precisely as if nothing had happened."

"You are not consoling," said Massin.

In spite of his squat, dumpy figure and heavy face, Cremiere-Dionis was really as keen as a blade. In pursuit of usurious fortune he did business secretly with Massin, to whom he no doubt pointed out such peasants as were hampered in means, and such pieces of land as could be bought for a song. The two men were in a position to choose their opportunities; none that were good escaped them, and they shared the profits of mortgage-usury, which retards, though it does not prevent, the acquirement of the soil by the peasantry. So Dionis took a lively interest in the doctor's inheritance, not so much for the post master and the collector as for his friend the clerk of the court; sooner or later Massin's share in the doctor's money would swell the capital with which these secret associates worked the canton.

"We must try to find out through Monsieur Bongrand where the influence comes from," said the notary in a low voice, with a sign to Massin to keep quiet.

"What are you about, Minoret?" cried a little woman, suddenly descending upon the group in the middle of which stood the post master, as tall and round as a tower. "You don't know where Desire is and there you are, planted on your two legs, gossiping about nothing, when I thought you on horseback! – Oh, good morning, Messieurs and Mesdames."

This little woman, thin, pale, and fair, dressed in a gown of white cotton with pattern of large, chocolate-colored flowers, a cap trimmed with ribbon and frilled with lace, and wearing a small green shawl on her flat shoulders, was Minoret's wife, the terror of postilions, servants, and carters; who kept the accounts and managed the establishment "with finger and eye" as they say in those parts. Like the

true housekeeper that she was, she wore no ornaments. She did not give in (to use her own expression) to gew-gaws and trumpery; she held to the solid and the substantial, and wore, even on Sundays, a black apron, in the pocket of which she jingled her household keys. Her screeching voice was agony to the drums of all ears. Her rigid glance, conflicting with the soft blue of her eyes, was in visible harmony with the thin lips of a pinched mouth and a high, projecting, and very imperious forehead. Sharp was the glance, sharper still both gesture and speech. "Zelie being obliged to have a will for two, had it for three," said Goupil, who pointed out the successive reigns of three young postilions, of neat appearance, who had been set up in life by Zelie, each after seven years' service. The malicious clerk named them Postilion I., Postilion II., Postilion III. But the little influence these young men had in the establishment, and their perfect obedience proved that Zelie was merely interested in worthy helpers.

This attempt at scandal was against probabilities. Since the birth of her son (nursed by her without any evidence of how it was possible for her to do so) Madame Minoret had thought only of increasing the family fortune and was wholly given up to the management of their immense establishment. To steal a bale of hay or a bushel of oats or get the better of Zelie in even the most complicated accounts was a thing impossible, though she scribbled hardly better than a cat, and knew nothing of arithmetic but addition and subtraction. She never took a walk except to look at the hay, the oats, or the second crops. She sent "her man" to the mowing, and the postilions to tie the bales, telling them the quantity, within a hundred pounds, each field should bear. Though she was the soul of that great body called Minoret-Levrault and led him about by his pug nose, she was made to feel the fears which occasionally (we are told) assail all tamers of wild beasts. She therefore made it a rule to get into a rage before he did; the postilions knew very well when his wife had been quarreling with him, for his anger ricocheted on them. Madame Minoret was as clever as she was grasping; and it was a favorite remark in the whole town, "Where would Minoret-Levrault be without his wife?"

"When you know what has happened," replied the post master, "you'll be over the traces yourself."

"What is it?"

"Ursula has taken the doctor to mass."

Zelie's pupils dilated; she stood for a moment yellow with anger, then, crying out, "I'll see it before I believe it!" she rushed into the church. The service had reached the Elevation. The stillness of the worshippers enabled her to look along each row of chairs and benches as she went up the aisle beside the chapels to Ursula's place, where she saw old Minoret standing with bared head.

If you recall the heads of Barbe-Marbois, Boissy d'Anglas, Morellet, Helvetius, or Frederick the Great, you will see the exact image of Doctor Minoret, whose green old age resembled that of those celebrated personages. Their heads coined in the same mint (for each had the characteristics of a medal) showed a stern and quasi-puritan profile, cold tones, a mathematical brain, a certain narrowness about the features, shrewd eyes, grave lips, and a something that was surely aristocratic – less perhaps in sentiment than in habit, more in the ideas than in the character. All men of this stamp have high brows retreating at the summit, the sign of a tendency to materialism. You will find these leading characteristics of the head and these points of the face in all the Encyclopedists, in the orators of the Gironde, in the men of a period when religious ideas were almost dead, men who called themselves deists and were atheists. The deist is an atheist lucky in classification.

Minoret had a forehead of this description, furrowed with wrinkles, which recovered in his old age a sort of artless candor from the manner in which the silvery hair, brushed back like that of a woman when making her toilet, curled in light flakes upon the blackness of his coat. He persisted in dressing, as in his youth, in black silk stockings, shoes with gold buckles, breeches of black poult-de-soie, and a black coat, adorned with the red rosette. This head, so firmly characterized, the cold whiteness of which was softened by the yellowing tones of old age, happened to be, just then, in the full light of a window. As Madame Minoret came in sight of him the doctor's blue eyes with their reddened lids were raised to heaven; a new conviction had given them a new expression. His

spectacles lay in his prayer-book and marked the place where he had ceased to pray. The tall and spare old man, his arms crossed on his breast, stood erect in an attitude which bespoke the full strength of his faculties and the unshakable assurance of his faith. He gazed at the altar humbly with a look of renewed hope, and took no notice of his nephew's wife, who planted herself almost in front of him as if to reproach him for coming back to God.

Zelie, seeing all eyes turned upon her, made haste to leave the church and returned to the square less hurriedly than she had left it. She had reckoned on the doctor's money, and possession was becoming problematical. She found the clerk of the court, the collector, and their wives in greater consternation than ever. Goupil was taking pleasure in tormenting them.

"It is not in the public square and before the whole town that we ought to talk of our affairs," said Zelie; "come home with me. You too, Monsieur Dionis," she added to the notary; "you'll not be in the way."

Thus the probable disinheritance of Massin, Cremiere, and the post master was the news of the day.

Just as the heirs and the notary were crossing the square to go to the post house the noise of the diligence rattling up to the office, which was only a few steps from the church, at the top of the Grand'Rue, made its usual racket.

"Goodness! I'm like you, Minoret; I forgot all about Desire," said Zelie. "Let us go and see him get down. He is almost a lawyer; and his interests are mixed up in this matter."

The arrival of the diligence is always an amusement, but when it comes in late some unusual event is expected. The crowd now moved towards the "Ducler."

"Here's Desire!" was the general cry.

The tyrant, and yet the life and soul of Nemours, Desire always put the town in a ferment when he came. Loved by the young men, with whom he was invariably generous, he stimulated them by his very presence. But his methods of amusement were so dreaded by older persons that more than one family was very thankful to have him complete his studies and study law in Paris. Desire Minoret, a slight youth, slender and fair like his mother, from whom he obtained his blue eyes and pale skin, smiled from the window on the crowd, and jumped lightly down to kiss his mother. A short sketch of the young fellow will show how proud Zelie felt when she saw him.

He wore very elegant boots, trousers of white English drilling held under his feet by straps of varnished leather, a rich cravat, admirably put on and still more admirably fastened, a pretty fancy waistcoat, in the pocket of said waistcoat a flat watch, the chain of which hung down; and, finally, a short frock-coat of blue cloth, and a gray hat, – but his lack of the manner-born was shown in the gilt buttons of the waistcoat and the ring worn outside of his purple kid glove. He carried a cane with a chased gold head.

"You are losing your watch," said his mother, kissing him.

"No, it is worn that way," he replied, letting his father hug him.

"Well, cousin, so we shall soon see you a lawyer?" said Massin.

"I shall take the oaths at the beginning of next term," said Desire, returning the friendly nods he was receiving on all sides.

"Now we shall have some fun," said Goupil, shaking him by the hand.

"Ha! my old wag, so here you are!" replied Desire.

"You take your law license for all license," said Goupil, affronted by being treated so cavalierly in presence of others.

"You know my luggage," cried Desire to the red-faced old conductor of the diligence; "have it taken to the house."

"The sweat is rolling off your horses," said Zelie sharply to the conductor; "you haven't common-sense to drive them in that way. You are stupider than your own beasts."

"But Monsieur Desire was in a hurry to get here to save you from anxiety," explained Cabirolle.

"But if there was no accident why risk killing the horses?" she retorted.

The greetings of friends and acquaintances, the crowding of the young men around Desire, and the relating of the incidents of the journey took enough time for the mass to be concluded and the worshippers to issue from the church. By mere chance (which manages many things) Desire saw Ursula on the porch as he passed along, and he stopped short amazed at her beauty. His action also stopped the advance of the relations who accompanied him.

In giving her arm to her godfather, Ursula was obliged to hold her prayer-book in one hand and her parasol in the other; and this she did with the innate grace which graceful women put into the awkward or difficult things of their charming craft of womanhood. If mind does truly reveal itself in all things, we may be permitted to say that Ursula's attitude and bearing suggested divine simplicity. She was dressed in a white cambric gown made like a wrapper, trimmed here and there with knots of blue ribbon. The pelerine, edged with the same ribbon run through a broad hem and tied with bows like those on the dress, showed the great beauty of her shape. Her throat, of a pure white, was charming in tone against the blue, – the right color for a fair skin. A long blue sash with floating ends defined a slender waist which seemed flexible, – a most seductive charm in women. She wore a rice-straw bonnet, modestly trimmed with ribbons like those of the gown, the strings of which were tied under her chin, setting off the whiteness of the straw and doing no despite to that of her beautiful complexion. Ursula dressed her own hair naturally (a la Berthe, as it was then called) in heavy braids of fine, fair hair, laid flat on either side of the head, each little strand reflecting the light as she walked. Her gray eyes, soft and proud at the same time, were in harmony with a finely modeled brow. A rosy tinge, suffusing her cheeks like a cloud, brightened a face which was regular without being insipid; for nature had given her, by some rare privilege, extreme purity of form combined with strength of countenance. The nobility of her life was manifest in the general expression of her person, which might have served as a model for a type of trustfulness, or of modesty. Her health, though brilliant, was not coarsely apparent; in fact, her whole air was distinguished. Beneath the little gloves of a light color it was easy to imagine her pretty hands. The arched and slender feet were delicately shod in bronzed kid boots trimmed with a brown silk fringe. Her blue sash holding at the waist a small flat watch and a blue purse with gilt tassels attracted the eyes of every woman she met.

"He has given her a new watch!" said Madame Cremiere, pinching her husband's arm.

"Heavens! is that Ursula?" cried Desire; "I didn't recognize her."

"Well, my dear uncle," said the post master, addressing the doctor and pointing to the whole population drawn up in parallel hedges to let the doctor pass, "everybody wants to see you."

"Was it the Abbe Chaperon or Mademoiselle Ursula who converted you, uncle," said Massin, bowing to the doctor and his protegee, with Jesuitical humility.

"Ursula," replied the doctor, laconically, continuing to walk on as if annoyed.

The night before, as the old man finished his game of whist with Ursula, the Nemours doctor, and Bongrand, he remarked, "I intend to go to church to-morrow."

"Then," said Bongrand, "your heirs won't get another night's rest."

The speech was superfluous, however, for a single glance sufficed the sagacious and clear-sighted doctor to read the minds of his heirs by the expression of their faces. Zelie's irruption into the church, her glance, which the doctor intercepted, this meeting of all the expectant ones in the public square, and the expression in their eyes as they turned them on Ursula, all proved to him their hatred, now freshly awakened, and their sordid fears.

"It is a feather in your cap, Mademoiselle," said Madame Cremiere, putting in her word with a humble bow, – "a miracle which will not cost you much."

"It is God's doing, madame," replied Ursula.

"God!" exclaimed Minoret-Levrault; "my father-in-law used to say he served to blanket many horses."

"Your father-in-law had the mind of a jockey," said the doctor severely.

"Come," said Minoret to his wife and son, "why don't you bow to my uncle?"

"I shouldn't be mistress of myself before that little hypocrite," cried Zelie, carrying off her son.

"I advise you, uncle, not to go to mass without a velvet cap," said Madame Massin; "the church is very damp."

"Pooh, niece," said the doctor, looking round on the assembly, "the sooner I'm put to bed the sooner you'll flourish."

He walked on quickly, drawing Ursula with him, and seemed in such a hurry that the others dropped behind.

"Why do you say such harsh things to them? it isn't right," said Ursula, shaking his arm in a coaxing way.

"I shall always hate hypocrites, as much after as before I became religious. I have done good to them all, and I asked no gratitude; but not one of my relatives sent you a flower on your birthday, which they know is the only day I celebrate."

At some distance behind the doctor and Ursula came Madame de Portenduere, dragging herself along as if overcome with trouble. She belonged to the class of old women whose dress recalls the style of the last century. They wear puce-colored gowns with flat sleeves, the cut of which can be seen in the portraits of Madame Lebrun; they all have black lace mantles and bonnets of a shape gone by, in keeping with their slow and dignified deportment; one might almost fancy that they still wore paniers under their petticoats or felt them there, as persons who have lost a leg are said to fancy that the foot is moving. They swathe their heads in old lace which declines to drape gracefully about their cheeks. Their wan and elongated faces, their haggard eyes and faded brows, are not without a certain melancholy grace, in spite of the false fronts with flattened curls to which they cling, – and yet these ruins are all subordinate to an unspeakable dignity of look and manner.

The red and wrinkled eyes of this old lady showed plainly that she had been crying during the service. She walked like a person in trouble, seemed to be expecting some one, and looked behind her from time to time. Now, the fact of Madame de Portenduere looking behind her was really as remarkable in its way as the conversion of Doctor Minoret.

"Who can Madame de Portenduere be looking for?" said Madame Massin, rejoining the other heirs, who were for the moment struck dumb by the doctor's answer.

"For the cure," said Dionis, the notary, suddenly striking his forehead as if some forgotten thought or memory had occurred to him. "I have an idea! I'll save your inheritance! Let us go and breakfast gayly with Madame Minoret."

We can well imagine the alacrity with which the heirs followed the notary to the post house. Goupil, who accompanied his friend Desire, locked arm in arm with him, whispered something in the youth's ear with an odious smile.

"What do I care?" answered the son of the house, shrugging his shoulders. "I am madly in love with Florine, the most celestial creature in the world."

"Florine! and who may she be?" demanded Goupil. "I'm too fond of you to let you make a goose of yourself wish such creatures."

"Florine is the idol of the famous Nathan; my passion is wasted, I know that. She has positively refused to marry me."

"Sometimes those girls who are fools with their bodies are wise with their heads," responded Goupil.

"If you could but see her – only once," said Desire, lackadaisically, "you wouldn't say such things."

"If I saw you throwing away your whole future for nothing better than a fancy," said Goupil, with a warmth which might even have deceived his master, "I would break your doll as Varney served Amy Robsart in 'Kenilworth.' Your wife must be a d'Aiglement or a Mademoiselle du Rouvre, and get you made a deputy. My future depends on yours, and I sha'n't let you commit any follies."

“I am rich enough to care only for happiness,” replied Desire.

“What are you two plotting together?” cried Zelie, beckoning to the two friends, who were standing in the middle of the courtyard, to come into the house.

The doctor disappeared into the Rue des Bourgeois with the activity of a young man, and soon reached his own house, where strange events had lately taken place, the visible results of which now filled the minds of the whole community of Nemours. A few explanations are needed to make this history and the notary’s remark to the heirs perfectly intelligible to the reader.

CHAPTER V. URSULA

The father-in-law of Doctor Minoret, the famous harpsichordist and maker of instruments, Valentin Mirouet, also one of our most celebrated organists, died in 1785 leaving a natural son, the child of his old age, whom he acknowledged and called by his own name, but who turned out a worthless fellow. He was deprived on his death bed of the comfort of seeing this petted son. Joseph Mirouet, a singer and composer, having made his debut at the Italian opera under a feigned name, ran away with a young lady in Germany. The dying father commended the young man, who was really full of talent, to his son-in-law, proving to him, at the same time, that he had refused to marry the mother that he might not injure Madame Minoret. The doctor promised to give the unfortunate Joseph half of whatever his wife inherited from her father, whose business was purchased by the Erards. He made due search for his illegitimate brother-in-law; but Grimm informed him one day that after enlisting in a Prussian regiment Joseph had deserted and taken a false name and that all efforts to find him would be frustrated.

Joseph Mirouet, gifted by nature with a delightful voice, a fine figure, a handsome face, and being moreover a composer of great taste and much brilliancy, led for over fifteen years the Bohemian life which Hoffman has so well described. So, by the time he was forty, he was reduced to such depths of poverty that he took advantage of the events of 1806 to make himself once more a Frenchman. He settled in Hamburg, where he married the daughter of a bourgeois, a girl devoted to music, who fell in love with the singer (whose fame was ever prospective) and chose to devote her life to him. But after fifteen years of Bohemia, Joseph Mirouet was unable to bear prosperity; he was naturally a spendthrift, and though kind to his wife, he wasted her fortune in a very few years. The household must have dragged on a wretched existence before Joseph Mirouet reached the point of enlisting as a musician in a French regiment. In 1813 the surgeon-major of the regiment, by the merest chance, heard the name of Mirouet, was struck by it, and wrote to Doctor Minoret, to whom he was under obligations.

The answer was not long in coming. As a result, in 1814, before the allied occupation, Joseph Mirouet had a home in Paris, where his wife died giving birth to a little girl, whom the doctor desired should be called Ursula after his wife. The father did not long survive the mother, worn out, as she was, by hardship and poverty. When dying the unfortunate musician bequeathed his daughter to the doctor, who was already her godfather, in spite of his repugnance for what he called the mummeries of the Church. Having seen his own children die in succession either in dangerous confinements or during the first year of their lives, the doctor had awaited with anxiety the result of a last hope. When a nervous, delicate, and sickly woman begins with a miscarriage it is not unusual to see her go through a series of such pregnancies as Ursula Minoret did, in spite of the care and watchfulness and science of her husband. The poor man often blamed himself for their mutual persistence in desiring children. The last child, born after a rest of nearly two years, died in 1792, a victim of its mother's nervous condition – if we listen to physiologists, who tell us that in the inexplicable phenomenon of generation the child derives from the father by blood and from the mother in its nervous system.

Compelled to renounce the joys of a feeling all powerful within him, the doctor turned to benevolence as a substitute for his denied paternity. During his married life, thus cruelly disappointed, he had longed more especially for a fair little daughter, a flower to bring joy to the house; he therefore gladly accepted Joseph Mirouet's legacy, and gave to the orphan all the hopes of his vanished dreams. For two years he took part, as Cato for Pompey, in the most minute particulars of Ursula's life; he would not allow the nurse to suckle her or to take her up or put her to bed without him. His medical science and his experience were all put to use in her service. After going through many trials, alternations of hope and fear, and the joys and labors of a mother, he had the happiness of seeing this

child of the fair German woman and the French singer a creature of vigorous health and profound sensibility.

With all the eager feelings of a mother the happy old man watched the growth of the pretty hair, first down, then silk, at last hair, fine and soft and clinging to the fingers that caressed it. He often kissed the little naked feet the toes of which, covered with a pellicle through which the blood was seen, were like rosebuds. He was passionately fond of the child. When she tried to speak, or when she fixed her beautiful blue eyes upon some object with that serious, reflective look which seems the dawn of thought, and which she ended with a laugh, he would stay by her side for hours, seeking, with Jordy's help, to understand the reasons (which most people call caprices) underlying the phenomena of this delicious phase of life, when childhood is both flower and fruit, a confused intelligence, a perpetual movement, a powerful desire.

Ursula's beauty and gentleness made her so dear to the doctor that he would have liked to change the laws of nature in her behalf. He declared to old Jordy that his teeth ached when Ursula was cutting hers. When old men love children there is no limit to their passion – they worship them. For these little beings they silence their own manias or recall a whole past in their service. Experience, patience, sympathy, the acquisitions of life, treasures laboriously amassed, all are spent upon that young life in which they live again; their intelligence does actually take the place of motherhood. Their wisdom, ever on the alert, is equal to the intuition of a mother; they remember the delicate perceptions which in their own mother were divinations, and import them into the exercise of a compassion which is carried to an extreme in their minds by a sense of the child's unutterable weakness. The slowness of their movements takes the place of maternal gentleness. In them, as in children, life is reduced to its simplest expression; if maternal sentiment makes the mother a slave, the abandonment of self allows an old man to devote himself utterly. For these reasons it is not unusual to see children in close intimacy with old persons. The old soldier, the old abbe, the old doctor, happy in the kisses and cajoleries of little Ursula, were never weary of answering her talk and playing with her. Far from making them impatient her petulances charmed them; and they gratified all her wishes, making each the ground of some little training.

The child grew up surrounded by old men, who smiled at her and made themselves mothers for her sake, all three equally attentive and provident. Thanks to this wise education, Ursula's soul developed in a sphere that suited it. This rare plant found its special soil; it breathed the elements of its true life and assimilated the sun rays that belonged to it.

"In what faith do you intend to bring up the little one?" asked the abbe of the doctor, when Ursula was six years old.

"In yours," answered Minoret.

An atheist after the manner of Monsieur Wolmar in the "Nouvelle Heloise" he did not claim the right to deprive Ursula of the benefits offered by the Catholic religion. The doctor, sitting at the moment on a bench outside the Chinese pagoda, felt the pressure of the abbe's hand on his.

"Yes, abbe, every time she talks to me of God I shall send her to her friend 'Shapron,'" he said, imitating Ursula's infant speech, "I wish to see whether religious sentiment is inborn or not. Therefore I shall do nothing either for or against the tendencies of that young soul; but in my heart I have appointed you her spiritual guardian."

"God will reward you, I hope," replied the abbe, gently joining his hands and raising them towards heaven as if he were making a brief mental prayer.

So, from the time she was six years old the little orphan lived under the religious influence of the abbe, just as she had already come under the educational training of her friend Jordy.

The captain, formerly a professor in a military academy, having a taste for grammar and for the differences among European languages, had studied the problem of a universal tongue. This learned man, patient as most old scholars are, delighted in teaching Ursula to read and write. He taught her

also the French language and all she needed to know of arithmetic. The doctor's library afforded a choice of books which could be read by a child for amusement as well as instruction.

The abbe and the soldier allowed the young mind to enrich itself with the freedom and comfort which the doctor gave to the body. Ursula learned as she played. Religion was given with due reflection. Left to follow the divine training of a nature that was led into regions of purity by these judicious educators, Ursula inclined more to sentiment than to duty; she took as her rule of conduct the voice of her own conscience rather than the demands of social law. In her, nobility of feeling and action would ever be spontaneous; her judgment would confirm the impulse of her heart. She was destined to do right as a pleasure before doing it as an obligation. This distinction is the peculiar sign of Christian education. These principles, altogether different from those that are taught to men, were suitable for a woman, – the spirit and the conscience of the home, the beautifier of domestic life, the queen of her household. All three of these old preceptors followed the same method with Ursula. Instead of recoiling before the bold questions of innocence, they explained to her the reasons of things and the best means of action, taking care to give her none but correct ideas. When, apropos of a flower, a star, a blade of grass, her thoughts went straight to God, the doctor and the professor told her that the priest alone could answer her. None of them intruded on the territory of the others; the doctor took charge of her material well-being and the things of life; Jordy's department was instruction; moral and spiritual questions and the ideas appertaining to the higher life belonged to the abbe. This noble education was not, as it often is, counteracted by injudicious servants. La Bougival, having been lectured on the subject, and being, moreover, too simple in mind and character to interfere, did nothing to injure the work of these great minds. Ursula, a privileged being, grew up with good geniuses round her; and her naturally fine disposition made the task of each a sweet and easy one. Such manly tenderness, such gravity lighted by smiles, such liberty without danger, such perpetual care of soul and body made little Ursula, when nine years of age, a well-trained child and delightful to behold.

Unhappily, this paternal trinity was broken up. The old captain died the following year, leaving the abbe and the doctor to finish his work, of which, however, he had accomplished the most difficult part. Flowers will bloom of themselves if grown in a soil thus prepared. The old gentleman had laid by for ten years past one thousand francs a year, that he might leave ten thousand to his little Ursula, and keep a place in her memory during her whole life. In his will, the wording of which was very touching, he begged his legatee to spend the four or five hundred francs that came of her little capital exclusively on her dress. When the justice of the peace applied the seals to the effects of his old friend, they found in a small room, which the captain had allowed no one to enter, a quantity of toys, many of them broken, while all had been used, – toys of a past generation, reverently preserved, which Monsieur Bongrand was, according to the captain's last wishes, to burn with his own hands.

About this time it was that Ursula made her first communion. The abbe employed one whole year in duly instructing the young girl, whose mind and heart, each well developed, yet judiciously balancing one another, needed a special spiritual nourishment. The initiation into a knowledge of divine things which he gave her was such that Ursula grew into the pious and mystical young girl whose character rose above all vicissitudes, and whose heart was enabled to conquer adversity. Then began a secret struggle between the old man wedded to unbelief and the young girl full of faith, – long unsuspected by her who incited it, – the result of which had now stirred the whole town, and was destined to have great influence on Ursula's future by rousing against her the antagonism of the doctor's heirs.

During the first six months of the year 1824 Ursula spent all her mornings at the parsonage. The old doctor guessed the abbe's secret hope. He meant to make Ursula an unanswerable argument against him. The old unbeliever, loved by his godchild as though she were his own daughter, would surely believe in such artless candor; he could not fail to be persuaded by the beautiful effects of religion on the soul of a child, where love was like those trees of Eastern climes, bearing both flowers

and fruit, always fragrant, always fertile. A beautiful life is more powerful than the strongest argument. It is impossible to resist the charms of certain sights. The doctor's eyes were wet, he knew not how or why, when he saw the child of his heart starting for the church, wearing a frock of white crape, and shoes of white satin; her hair bound with a fillet fastened at the side with a knot of white ribbon, and rippling upon her shoulders; her eyes lighted by the star of a first hope; hurrying, tall and beautiful, to a first union, and loving her godfather better since her soul had risen towards God. When the doctor perceived that the thought of immortality was nourishing that spirit (until then within the confines of childhood) as the sun gives life to the earth without knowing why, he felt sorry that he remained at home alone.

Sitting on the steps of his portico he kept his eyes fixed on the iron railing of the gate through which the child had disappeared, saying as she left him: "Why won't you come, godfather? how can I be happy without you?" Though shaken to his very center, the pride of the Encyclopedist did not as yet give way. He walked slowly in a direction from which he could see the procession of communicants, and distinguish his little Ursula brilliant with exaltation beneath her veil. She gave him an inspired look, which knocked, in the stony regions of his heart, on the corner closed to God. But still the old deist held firm. He said to himself: "Mummeries! if there be a maker of worlds, imagine the organizer of infinitude concerning himself with such trifles!" He laughed as he continued his walk along the heights which look down upon the road to the Gatinais, where the bells were ringing a joyous peal that told of the joy of families.

The noise of backgammon is intolerable to persons who do not know the game, which is really one of the most difficult that was ever invented. Not to annoy his godchild, the extreme delicacy of whose organs and nerves could not bear, he thought, without injury the noise and the exclamations she did not know the meaning of, the abbe, old Jordy while living, and the doctor always waited till their child was in bed before they began their favorite game. Sometimes the visitors came early when she was out for a walk, and the game would be going on when she returned; then she resigned herself with infinite grace and took her seat at the window with her work. She had a repugnance to the game, which is really in the beginning very hard and unconquerable to some minds, so that unless it be learned in youth it is almost impossible to take it up in after life.

The night of her first communion, when Ursula came into the salon where her godfather was sitting alone, she put the backgammon-board before him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.