

ЭЖЕН СЮ

AVARICE - ANGER: TWO
OF THE SEVEN
CARDINAL SINS

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the Seven Cardinal Sins

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Eugène Sue

Avarice--Anger: Two of the Seven Cardinal Sins

THE MILLIONAIRES AVARICE

CHAPTER I. AN UNFORTUNATE CHOICE

The narrow street known for many long years as the Charnier des Innocents (the Charnel-house of the Innocents), near the market, has always been noted for the large number of scribes who have established their booths in this densely populated part of Paris.

One fine morning in the month of May, 18 — , a young girl about eighteen years of age, who was clad in working dress, and whose charming though melancholy face wore that peculiar pallor which seems to be a sort of sinister reflection of poverty, was walking thoughtfully down the Charnier des Innocents. Several times she paused as if in doubt in front of

as many scriveners' booths, but either because the proprietors seemed too young or too unprepossessing in appearance or too busy, she went slowly on again.

Seeing, in the doorway of the last booth, an old man with a face as good and kind as it was venerable, the young girl did not hesitate to enter the modest little establishment.

The scrivener, struck in his turn by the young girl's remarkable beauty and modest bearing, as well as her timid and melancholy air, greeted her with almost paternal affability as she entered his shop, after which he closed the door; then drawing the curtain of the little window, the good man motioned his client to a seat, while he took possession of his old leather armchair.

Mariette — for that was the young girl's name — lowered her big blue eyes, blushed deeply, and maintained an embarrassed, almost painful, silence for several seconds. Her bosom rose and fell tumultuously under the small gray shawl that she wore over her faded calico gown, while the hands she had clasped in her lap trembled violently.

The old scrivener, anxious to reassure the poor girl, said to her, almost affectionately, "Come, come, my child, compose yourself. Why should you feel this embarrassment? You came to ask me to write some request or petition for you, or, perhaps, a letter, did you not?"

"Yes, monsieur, it was — it was to ask you to write a letter for me that I came."

"Then you do not know how to write?"

"No, monsieur," replied Mariette, blushing still more deeply, as if ashamed of her ignorance, whereupon the scrivener, regretting that he had thus humiliated his client, said, kindly:

"You certainly cannot suppose me capable of blaming you for your ignorance. On the contrary, it is a sincere compassion I feel for persons who, for want of an education, are compelled to come to me, to apply to a third party, who may betray their confidence, and, perhaps, even ridicule them! And yet they are compelled to confide their dearest and most secret thoughts to these strangers. It is very hard, is it not?"

"It is, indeed, monsieur," replied Mariette, touched by these words. "To be obliged to apply to a stranger to — "

The young girl did not finish the sentence, but blushed deeply, and her eyes filled with tears.

Gazing at his youthful client with even greater interest, the scrivener said:

"Do not be so troubled, my child. You have neither garrulousness nor ridicule to fear from me. I have always regarded as something indescribably touching and sacred the confidence which persons who have been deprived of the advantages of an education are obliged to repose in me."

Then, with a kindly smile, he added: "But pray do not suppose for one moment, mademoiselle, that I say this to glorify myself at the expense of my *confreres*, and to get their clients away from them. No, I am saying exactly what I think and feel; and at my age, one certainly may be allowed to do that."

Mariette, more and more surprised at the old man's words, said, gratefully:

"I thank you, monsieur; you relieve me very much by thus understanding and excusing my embarrassment. It is very hard not to know how to read and write," she added, sighing, "but, alas! very often one cannot help it."

"I am sure, my poor child, that in your case, as in the case of many other young girls who apply to me, it is not the goodwill but the opportunity that is lacking. Many of these young girls, from being obliged to take care of their young brothers and sisters while their parents are busy away from home, have had no chance to attend school. Others were apprenticed at an early age — "

"Like myself, monsieur," said Mariette, smiling. "I was apprenticed when I was only nine years old, and up to that time I had been obliged to remain at home and take care of a little brother, who died a short time before my father and mother."

"Poor child! your history is very similar to that of most young girls of your station in life. But, since your term of apprenticeship expired, have you made no effort to acquire a little education?"

"Since that time I have had to work all day and far into the night to earn enough to keep my godmother and myself alive, monsieur," said Mariette, sadly.

"Alas! yes, time is bread to the labourer, and only too often he has to choose whether he shall die of hunger or live in ignorance."

Then, becoming more and more interested, he added: "You

spoke of your godmother just now; so your father and mother are both dead, I suppose?"

"Yes, as I told you a little while ago," replied Mariette, sadly. "But pardon me, monsieur, for taking up so much of your time instead of telling you at once what I want you to write for me."

"I am sure my time could not have been better spent, for I am an old man, and I have had a good deal of experience, and I feel sure that you are a good and worthy girl. But now about the letter. Do you prefer to give me a rough idea of what you wish to write and let me put it in my own words, or do you prefer to dictate the letter?"

"I would rather dictate it, monsieur."

"Then I am ready," said the old man, putting on his spectacles, and seating himself at his desk with his eyes fixed upon the paper so as not to increase his client's embarrassment by looking at her.

So, after a moment's hesitation, Mariette, with downcast eyes, proceeded to dictate, as follows:

"Monsieur Louis."

On hearing this name, the old scrivener made a slight movement of surprise, — a fact that was not noticed by Mariette, who repeated, in a less trembling voice this time, "Monsieur Louis."

"I have written that," said the scrivener, still without looking at Mariette, whereupon the latter continued, hesitating every now and then, for, in spite of her confidence in the old man, it was no easy matter to reveal her secret thoughts to him:

"I am greatly troubled, for I have heard nothing from you, though you promised to write me while you were away."

"While you were away," repeated the scrivener, whose face had suddenly become thoughtful, and who was saying to himself, with a vague anxiety: "This is a singular coincidence. His name is Louis, and he is away."

"I hope you are well, M. Louis," Mariette continued, "and that it is not on account of any illness that you have not written to me, for then I should have two causes of anxiety instead of one."

"To-day is the sixth of May, M. Louis, the sixth of May, so I could not let the day pass without writing to you. Perhaps the same thought will occur to you, and that day after to-morrow I shall receive a letter from you, as you will receive one from me. Then I shall know that it was not on account of forgetfulness or sickness that you have delayed writing to me so long. In that case, how happy I shall be! So I shall wait for day after to-morrow with great impatience. Heaven grant that I may not be disappointed, M. Louis."

Mariette stifled a sigh as she uttered these last words, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

A long pause followed. The features of the scrivener who was bending over his desk could not be seen by the young girl, but they were assuming a more and more anxious expression; and two or three times he tried to steal a furtive glance at his client, as if the interest he had felt in her had given place to a sort of distrust caused by grave apprehensions on his part.

The young woman, keeping her eyes still fixed upon her lap, continued:

"I have no news to tell you, M. Louis. My godmother is still very ill. Her sufferings seem to increase, and that renders her much more irritable. In order that I may be with her as much as possible, I sew at home now most of the time, instead of going to Madame Jourdan's, so the days seem long and gloomy; for the work done in the shop with my companions was almost a pleasure, and seemed to progress much more rapidly. So I am obliged to work far into the night now, and do not get much sleep, as my godmother suffers much more at night than in the daytime, and requires a great deal of attention from me. Sometimes I do not even wake when she calls me because I am so dead with sleep, and then she scolds, which is very natural when she suffers so.

"You can understand, of course, that my life at home is not very happy, and that a friendly word from you would be a great comfort, and console me for many things that are very unpleasant.

"Good-bye, M. Louis. I expected to have written to you through Augustine, but she has gone back to her home now, and I have been obliged to apply to another person, to whom I have dictated this letter. Ah, M. Louis, never have I realised the misfortune of not knowing how to read or write as much as I do at this present time.

"Farewell, M. Louis, think of me, I beg of you, for I am always thinking of you.

"With sincere affection I once more bid you adieu."

As the young girl remained silent for a minute or two after these words, the old man turned to her and asked:

"Is that all, my child?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And what name is to be signed to this letter?"

"The name of Mariette, monsieur."

"Mariette only?"

"Mariette Moreau, if you think best, monsieur. That is my family name."

"Signed, Mariette Moreau," said the old man, writing the name as he spoke.

Then, having folded the letter, he asked, concealing the secret anxiety with which he awaited the girl's reply:

"To whom is this letter to be addressed, my child?"

"To M. Louis Richard. General delivery, Dreux."

"I thought as much," secretly groaned the old man, as he prepared to write the address Mariette had just given him.

If the young girl had not been so deeply preoccupied she could hardly have failed to notice the change in the expression of the scrivener's face, — a change which became still more noticeable when he discovered for a certainty for whom this missive was intended. It was with a look of positive anger now that he furtively watched Mariette, and he seemed unable to make up his mind to write the address she had just given him, for after having written upon the envelope the words, "To Monsieur," he

dropped his pen, and said to his client, forcing a smile in order to conceal alike his resentment and his apprehensions:

"Now, my child, though this is the first time we ever saw each other, it seems to me you feel you can trust me a little already."

"That is true, monsieur. Before I came here, I feared I should not have the courage to dictate my letter to an entire stranger, but your manner was so kind that I soon got over my embarrassment."

"I certainly see no reason why you should feel the slightest embarrassment. If I were your own father, I could not find a word of fault with the letter you have just written to — to M. Louis, and if I were not afraid of abusing the confidence you say that you have in me, I should ask — but no, that would be too inquisitive."

"You would ask me what, monsieur?"

"Who this M. Louis Richard is?"

"That is no secret, monsieur. M. Louis is the clerk of a notary whose office is in the same building as the shop in which I work. It was in this way that we became acquainted on the sixth of May, just one year ago to-day."

"Ah! I understand now why you laid such stress upon that date in your letter."

"Yes, monsieur."

"And you love each other, I suppose, — don't blush so, child, — and expect to marry some day, probably?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And M. Louis's family consents to the marriage?"

"M. Louis has no one but his father to consult, and we hope he will not refuse his consent."

"And the young man's father, what kind of a person is he?"

"The best of fathers, M. Louis says, and bears his present poverty with great courage and cheerfulness, though he used to be very well off. M. Louis and his father are as poor now, though, as my godmother and I are. That makes us hope that he will not oppose our marriage."

"And your godmother, my child, — it seems to me she must be a great trial to you."

"When one suffers all the time, and has never had anything but misfortunes all one's life, it is very natural that one should not be very sweet tempered."

"Your godmother is an invalid, then?"

"She has lost one of her hands, monsieur, and she has a lung trouble that has confined her to the bed for more than a year."

"Lost her hand, — how?"

"She used to work in a mattress factory, monsieur, and one day she ran a long, crooked needle into her hand. The wound became inflamed from want of care, for my godmother had not time to give it the attention it should have had, and the doctors were obliged to cut her arm off. The wound reopens now and then, and causes her a great deal of pain."

"Poor woman!" murmured the scrivener, absently.

"As for the lung trouble she has," continued Mariette, "many women who follow that trade contract the disease, the

doctors say, from breathing the unwholesome dust from the old mattresses they make over. My godmother is bent almost double, and nearly every night she has such terrible fits of coughing that I have to hold her for hours, sometimes."

"And your godmother has nothing but your earnings to depend on?"

"She cannot work now, monsieur, of course."

"Such devotion on your part is very generous, I must say."

"I am only doing my duty, monsieur. My godmother took care of me after my parents died, and paid for a three years' apprenticeship for me. But for her, I should not be in a position to earn my living, so it is only right that she should profit now by the assistance she gave me years ago."

"But you must have to work very hard to support her and yourself?"

"Yes; I have to work from fifteen to eighteen hours a day, monsieur."

"And at night you have to nurse her instead of taking the rest you so much need?"

"Who else would nurse her, monsieur?"

"But why doesn't she try to get into some hospital?"

"They will not take her into a hospital because the lung trouble she has is incurable. Besides, I could not desert her like that."

"Ah, well, my child, I see that I was not mistaken. You are a good, noble-hearted girl, there is no doubt of it," added the old man, holding out his hand to Mariette.

As he did, either through awkwardness, or intentionally, the scrivener overturned the inkstand that stood on his desk in such a way that a good part of the contents ran over the letter, which lacked only the address to complete it.

"Good heavens! How unfortunate, the letter is covered with ink, monsieur!" exclaimed Mariette.

"How awkward in me!" responded the old man, with a disgusted air. "Still, it doesn't matter very much, after all. It was a short letter. I write very rapidly, and it will not take me more than ten minutes to copy it for you, my child. At the same time, I will read it aloud so you can see if there is any change you would like to make in it."

"I am truly sorry to give you so much trouble, monsieur."

"It serves me right, as it was all my fault," responded the old man, cheerfully.

And he began to read the letter aloud as he wrote, exactly as if he were recopying it, as he proceeded with the reading. Nevertheless, from the scrivener's manner it seemed evident that a violent struggle was going on in his breast, for sometimes he sighed and knit his brows, sometimes he seemed confused and kept his eyes sedulously averted from the ingenuous face of Mariette, who sat with one elbow resting upon the table, and her head supported on her hand, watching with envious eyes the rapid movements of the old man's pen, as it traced characters which were undecipherable to her, but which would, as she fondly supposed, convey her thoughts to the man she loved.

The young girl expressing no desire to make the slightest change in her artless missive, the scrivener handed it to her after having carefully sealed it.

"And now, monsieur, how much do I owe you?" timidly inquired the girl, drawing a little purse containing two small silver corns and a few sous from her pocket.

"Fifty centimes," replied the old man after a moment's hesitation, remembering, perhaps, that it was at the cost of a day's bread that the poor girl was writing to her lover; "fifty centimes," repeated the scrivener, "for you understand, of course, my child, that I expect you to pay for only one of the letters I have written. I alone am responsible for my awkwardness."

"You are certainly very honest, monsieur," said Mariette, touched by what she considered a proof of generosity on the part of the scrivener. Then, after having paid for her letter, she added:

"You have been so kind to me, monsieur, that I shall venture to ask a favour of you."

"Speak, my child."

"If I have any other letters to write, it would be almost impossible for me to apply to any one but you, monsieur."

"I shall be at your service."

"But this is not all, monsieur. My godmother is as I am. She can neither read nor write. I had a friend I could depend upon, but she is out of town. In case I should receive a letter from M. Louis, would you be kind enough to read it to me?"

"Certainly, my child. I will read your letters to you with

pleasure. Bring them all to me," replied the old man, with much inward gratification. "It is I who should thank you for the confidence you manifest in me. I hope I shall soon see you again, and that you leave here much more easy in mind than when you came."

"I certainly could not expect such kindness as you have shown me from any one else."

"Farewell, then, my child, and be sure that you consider me your reader and secretary henceforth. It really seems as if we must have known each other a dozen years."

"That is true, monsieur. *Au revoir*."

"*Au revoir*, my child."

Mariette had hardly left the booth when a postman appeared in the doorway, and holding out a letter to the old scrivener, said, cordially:

"Here, Father Richard, is a letter from Dreux."

"A letter from Dreux!" exclaimed the old man, seizing it eagerly. "Thank you, my friend." Then, examining the handwriting, he said to himself: "It is from Ramon! What is he going to tell me? What does he think of my son? Ah! what is going to become of all the fine plans Ramon and I formed so long ago?"

"There are six sous to pay on it, Father Richard," said the postman, arousing the old scrivener from his reverie.

"Six sous! the devil! isn't it prepaid?"

"Look at the stamp, Father Richard."

"True," said the scrivener, sighing heavily, as he reluctantly drew the ten sous piece he had just received from his pocket and handed it to the postman.

While this was going on, Mariette was hastening homeward.

CHAPTER II.

A TOUCHING EXAMPLE OF UNSELFISH DEVOTION

Mariette soon reached the gloomy and sombre thoroughfare known as the Rue des Prêtres St. Germain-l'Auxerrois, and entered one of the houses opposite the grim walls of the church. After traversing a dark alley, the girl began to climb a rickety stairway as dark as the alley itself, for the only light came through a courtyard so narrow that it reminded one of a well.

The porter's room was on the first landing only a few steps from the stairway, and Mariette, pausing there, said to the woman who occupied it:

"Madame Justin, did you have the goodness to go up and see if my godmother wanted anything?"

"Yes, Mlle. Mariette, I took her milk up to her, but she was in such a bad humour that she treated me like a dog. Had it not been for obliging you, I would have let the old crosspatch alone, I can tell you."

"You must not be too hard on her, Madame Justin; she suffers so much."

"Oh, you are always making excuses for her, I know. It shows how good-hearted you are, but it doesn't prevent your godmother from being a hateful old thing. Poor child, you certainly are

having your purgatory in advance. If there is no paradise for you hereafter you will certainly be cheated out of your rightful dues. But wait a minute, I have a letter for you."

"A letter?" exclaimed Mariette, her heart throbbing with relief and hope, "a letter from some one out of the city?"

"Yes, mademoiselle, it is postmarked Dreux, and there are six sous to pay on it. Here it is, and see, on the corner of the envelope the writer has put the words, 'Very urgent.'"

Mariette seized the letter and slipped it into her bosom; then, drawing out her little purse again, she took from it her last ten sous piece and paid the woman, after which she hastened up to her room, pleased and at the same time anxious and sad; pleased at having received a letter from Louis, anxious concerning the significance of those words, "Very urgent," written in a corner of the envelope, and sad because several hours must elapse before she would know the contents of the letter, for she dared not absent herself again after having left her godmother alone so long.

It was with a sort of dread that she finally opened the door of the room on the fifth floor that she occupied with her godmother. The poor woman was lying on the only bed the two women possessed. A thin mattress now rolled up out of the way in a corner, but laid on the floor at night, served as a bed for Mariette. A table, an old bureau, two chairs, a few cooking utensils hanging on the wall near the fireplace, were the only articles of furniture in the dimly lighted room, but everything was scrupulously clean.

Madame Lacombe — for that was the invalid's name — was a tall, frightfully pale, and emaciated woman, about fifty years of age, with a peevish, disagreeable face. Bent nearly double in the bed, one could see of her only her mutilated arm swathed in bandages, and her irascible face, surrounded by an old cap from which a wisp of gray hair crept out here and there, while her bluish lips were continually distorted by a bitter and sardonic smile.

Madame Lacombe seemed to be suffering greatly. At all events she was in an execrable temper, and her hollow eyes gleamed ominously. Making an effort to turn herself in bed, so as to get a look at her godchild, she exclaimed, wrathfully:

"Where on earth have you been all this time, you gadabout?"

"I have been gone barely an hour, godmother."

"And you hoped to find me dead when you got back, didn't you, now? Oh, you needn't deny it. You've had enough of me, yes, too much. The day my coffin lid is screwed down will be a happy day for you, and for me, too, for it is too bad, too bad for any one to have to suffer as I do," added the poor woman, pressing her hand upon her bosom, and groaning heavily.

Mariette dried the tears her godmother's sarcastic words had excited, and approaching the sufferer, said, gently:

"You had such a bad night last night that I hoped you would be more comfortable to-day and get a little sleep while I was out."

"If I suffer or if I starve to death it makes no difference to you, evidently, provided you can run the streets."

"I went out this morning because I was absolutely obliged to, godmother, but before I left I asked Madame Justin — "

"I'd as lief see a death's-head as that creature, so when you want to get rid of me you have only to send her to wait on me."

"Shall I dress your arm, godmother?"

"No, it is too late for that now. You stayed away on purpose. I know you did."

"I am sorry I was late, but won't you let me dress it now?"

"I wish to heaven you would leave me in peace."

"But your arm will get worse if you don't have it dressed."

"And that is exactly what you want."

"Oh, godmother, don't say that, I beg of you."

"Don't come near me! I won't have it dressed, I say."

"Very well, godmother," replied the girl, sighing. Then she added, "I asked Madame Justin to bring up your milk. Here it is. Would you like me to warm it a little?"

"Milk? milk? I'm tired of milk! The very thought of it makes me sick at my stomach. The doctor said I was to have good strong bouillon, with a chop and a bit of chicken now and then. I had some Monday and Wednesday — but this is Sunday."

"It is not my fault, godmother. I know the doctor ordered it, but one must have money to follow his directions, and it is almost impossible for me to earn twenty sous a day now."

"You don't mind spending money on clothes, I'm sure. When my comfort is concerned it is a very different thing."

"But I have had nothing but this calico dress all winter,

godmother," answered Mariette, with touching resignation. "I economise all I can, and we owe two months' rent for all that."

"That means I am a burden to you, I suppose. And yet I took you in out of the street, and had you taught a trade, you ungrateful, hard-hearted minx!"

"No, godmother, I am not ungrateful. When you are not feeling as badly as you are now you are more just to me," replied Mariette, restraining her tears; "but don't insist upon going without eating any longer. It will make you feel so badly."

"I know it. I've got dreadful cramps in my stomach now."

"Then take your milk, I beg of you, godmother."

"I won't do anything of the kind! I hate milk, I tell you."

"Shall I go out and get you a couple of fresh eggs?"

"No, I want some chicken."

"But, godmother, I can't — "

"Can't what?"

"Buy chicken on credit."

"I only want a half or a quarter of one. You had twenty-four sous in your purse this morning."

"That is true, godmother."

"Then go to the *rôtisseur* and buy me a quarter of a chicken."

"But, godmother, I — "

"Well?"

"I haven't that much money any longer, I have only a few sous left."

"And those two ten sous pieces; what became of them?"

"Godmother — "

"Where are those two ten sous pieces, tell me?"

"I — I don't know," repeated the poor girl, blushing. "They must have slipped out of my purse. I — I — "

"You lie. You are blushing as red as a beet."

"I assure you — "

"Yes, yes, I see," sneered the sick woman, "while I am lying here on my death-bed you have been stuffing yourself with dainties."

"But, godmother — "

"Get out of my sight, get out of my sight, I tell you! Let me lie here and starve if you will, but don't let me ever lay eyes on you again! You were very anxious for me to drink that milk! There was poison in it, I expect, I am such a burden to you."

At this accusation, which was as absurd as it was atrocious, Mariette stood for a moment silent and motionless, not understanding at first the full meaning of those horrible words; but when she did, she recoiled, clasping her hands in positive terror; then, unable to restrain her tears, and yielding to an irresistible impulse, she threw herself on the sick woman's neck, twined her arms around her, and covering her face with tears and kisses, exclaimed, wildly:

"Oh, godmother, godmother, how can you?"

This despairing protest against a charge which could have originated only in a disordered brain restored the invalid to her senses, and, realising the injustice of which she had been guilty,

she, too, burst into tears; then taking one of Mariette's hands in one of hers, and trying to press the young girl to her breast with the other, she said, soothingly:

"Come, come, child, don't cry so. What a silly creature you are! Can't you see that I was only joking?"

"True, godmother, I was very stupid to think you could be in earnest," replied Mariette, passing the back of her hand over her eyes to dry her tears, "but really I couldn't help it."

"You ought to have more patience with your poor godmother, Mariette," replied the sick woman, sadly. "When I suffer so it seems as if I can hardly contain myself."

"I know it, I know it, godmother! It is easy enough to be just and amiable when one is happy, while you, poor dear, have never known what happiness is."

"That is true," said the sick woman, feeling a sort of cruel satisfaction in justifying her irritability by an enumeration of her grievances, "that is true. Many persons may have had a lot like mine, but no one ever had a worse one. Beaten as an apprentice, beaten by my husband until he drank himself to death, I have dragged my ball and chain along for fifty years, without ever having known a single happy day."

"Poor godmother, I understand only too well how much you must have suffered."

"No, child, no, you cannot understand, though you have known plenty of trouble in your short life; but you are pretty, and when you have on a fresh white cap, with a little bow of pink

ribbon on your hair, and you look at yourself in the glass, you have a few contented moments, I know."

"But listen, godmother, I — "

"It is some comfort, I tell you. Come, child, be honest now, and admit that you are pleased, and a little proud too, when people turn to look at you, in spite of your cheap frock and your clumsy laced shoes."

"Oh, so far as that is concerned, godmother, I always feel ashamed, somehow, when I see people looking at me. When I used to go to the workroom there was a man who came to see Madame Jourdan, and who was always looking at me, but I just hated it."

"Oh, yes, but for all that it pleases you way down in your secret heart; and when you get old you will have something pleasant to think of, while I have not. I can't even remember that I was ever young, and, so far as looks are concerned, I was always so ugly that I never could bear to look in the glass, and I could get no husband except an old drunkard who used to beat me within an inch of my life. I didn't even have a chance to enjoy myself after his death, either, for I had a big bill at the wine-shop to pay for him. Then, as if I had not trouble enough, I must needs lose my health and become unable to work, so I should have died of starvation, but for you."

"Come, come, godmother, you're not quite just," said Mariette, anxious to dispel Madame Lacombe's ill-humour. "To my certain knowledge, you have had at least one happy day in

your life."

"Which day, pray?"

"The day when, at my mother's death, you took me into your home out of charity."

"Well?"

"Well, did not the knowledge that you had done such a noble deed please you? Wasn't that a happy day for you, godmother?"

"You call that a happy day, do you? On the contrary it was one of the very worst days I ever experienced."

"Why, godmother?" exclaimed the girl, reproachfully.

"It was, for my good-for-nothing husband having died, as soon as his debts were paid I should have had nobody to think of but myself; but after I took you, it was exactly the same as if I were a widow with a child to support, and that is no very pleasant situation for a woman who finds it all she can do to support herself. But you were so cute and pretty with your curly head and big blue eyes, and you looked so pitiful kneeling beside your mother's coffin, that I hadn't the heart to let you go to the Foundling Asylum. What a night I spent asking myself what I should do about you, and what would become of you if I should get out of work. If I had been your own mother, Mariette, I couldn't have been more worried, and here you are talking about that having been a happy day for me. No; if I had been well off, it would have been very different! I should have said to myself: 'There is no danger, the child will be provided for.' But to take a child without any hope of bettering its condition is a very serious

thing."

"Poor godmother!" said the young girl, deeply affected. Then smiling through her tears in the hope of cheering the sick woman, she added:

"Ah, well, we won't talk of days, then, but of moments, for I'm going to convince you that you have at least been happy for that brief space of time, as at this present moment, for instance."

"This present moment?"

"Yes, I'm sure you must be pleased to see that I have stopped crying, thanks to the kind things you have been saying to me."

But the sick woman shook her head sadly.

"When I get over a fit of ill-temper like that I had just now, do you know what I say to myself?" she asked.

"What is it, godmother?"

"I say to myself: 'Marianne is a good girl, I know, but I am always so disagreeable and unjust to her that way down in the depths of her heart she must hate me, and I deserve it.'"

"Come, come, godmother, why will you persist in dwelling upon that unpleasant subject, godmother?" said the girl, reproachfully.

"You must admit that I am right, and I do not say this in any faultfinding way, I assure you. It would be perfectly natural. You are obliged almost to kill yourself working for me, you nurse me and wait on me, and I repay you with abuse and hard words. My death will, indeed, be a happy release for you, poor child. The sooner the undertaker comes for me, the better."

"You said, just now, that when you were talking of such terrible things it was only in jest, and I take it so now," responded Mariette, again trying to smile, though it made her heart bleed to see the invalid relapsing into this gloomy mood again; but the latter, touched by the grieved expression of the girl's features, said:

"Well, as I am only jesting, don't put on such a solemn look. Come, get out the chafing-dish and make me some milk soup. While the milk is warming, you can dress my arm."

Mariette seemed as pleased with these concessions on the part of her godmother as if the latter had conferred some great favour upon her. Hastening to the cupboard she took from a shelf the last bit of bread left in the house, crumbled it in a saucepan of milk, lighted the lamp under the chafing-dish, and then returned to the invalid, who now yielded the mutilated arm to her ministrations, and in spite of the repugnance which such a wound could not fail to inspire, Mariette dressed it with as much dexterity as patience.

The amiability and devotion of the young girl, as well as her tender solicitude, touched the heart of Madame Lacombe, and when the unpleasant task was concluded, she remarked:

"Talk about Sisters of Charity, there is not one who deserves half as much praise as you do, child."

"Do not say that, godmother. Do not the good sisters devote their lives to caring for strangers, while you are like a mother to me? I am only doing my duty. I don't deserve half as much credit as they do."

"Yes, my poor Mariette, I would talk about my affection for you. It is a delightful thing. I positively made you weep awhile ago, and I shall be sure to do the same thing again to-morrow."

Mariette, to spare herself the pain of replying to her godmother's bitter words, went for the soup, which the invalid seemed to eat with considerable enjoyment after all, for it was not until she came to the last spoonful that she exclaimed:

"But now I think of it, child, what are you going to eat?"

"Oh, I have already breakfasted, godmother," replied the poor little deceiver. "I bought a roll this morning, and ate it as I walked along. But let me arrange your pillow for you. You may drop off to sleep, perhaps, you had such a bad night."

"But you were awake even more than I was."

"Nonsense! I am no sleepyhead, and being kept awake a little doesn't hurt me. There, don't you feel more comfortable now?"

"Yes, very much. Thank you, my child."

"Then I will take my work and sit over there by the window. It is so dark to-day, and my work is particular."

"What are you making?"

"Such an exquisite chemise of the finest linen lawn, godmother. Madame Jourdan told me I must be very careful with it. The lace alone I am to put on it is worth two hundred francs, which will make the cost of each garment at least three hundred francs, and there are two dozen of them to be made. They are for some kept woman, I believe," added Mariette, naïvely.

The sick woman gave a sarcastic laugh.

"What are you laughing at, godmother?" inquired the girl, in surprise.

"A droll idea that just occurred to me."

"And what was it, godmother?" inquired Mariette, rather apprehensively, for she knew the usual character of Madame Lacombe's pleasantries.

"I was thinking how encouraging it was to virtue that an honest girl like yourself, who has only two or three patched chemises to her back, should be earning twenty sous a day by making three hundred franc chemises for — Oh, well, work away, child, I'll try to dream of a rest from my sufferings."

And the sick woman turned her face to the wall and said no more.

Fortunately, Mariette was too pure-hearted, and too preoccupied as well, to feel the bitterness of her godmother's remark, and when the sick woman turned her back upon her the girl drew the very urgent letter the portress had given her from her bosom, and laid it in her lap where she could gaze at it now and then as she went on with her sewing.

CHAPTER III.

A SHAMEFUL DECEPTION

Discovering, a little while afterward, that her godmother was asleep, Mariette, who up to that time had kept the letter from Louis Richard — the scrivener's only son — carefully concealed in her lap, broke the seal and opened the missive. An act of vain curiosity on her part, for, as we have said, the poor girl could not read. But it was a touching sight to see her eagerly gaze at these, to her, incomprehensible characters.

She perceived with a strange mingling of anxiety and hope that the letter was very short. But did this communication, which was marked "Very urgent" on a corner of the envelope, contain good or bad news?

Mariette, with her eyes riveted upon these hieroglyphics, lost herself in all sorts of conjectures, rightly thinking that so short a letter after so long a separation must contain something of importance, — either an announcement of a speedy return, or bad news which the writer had not time to explain in full.

Under these circumstances, poor Mariette experienced one of the worst of those trials to which persons who have been deprived of the advantages of even a rudimentary education are exposed. To hold in one's hand lines that may bring you either joy or sorrow, and yet be unable to learn the secret! To be obliged to wait until you can ask a stranger to read these lines and until

you can hear from other lips the news upon which your very life depends, — is this not hard?

At last this state of suspense became so intolerable that, seeing her godmother continued to sleep, she resolved, even at the risk of being cruelly blamed on her return, — for Madame Lacombe's good-natured fits were rare, — to hasten back to the scrivener; so she cautiously rose from her chair so as not to wake the sick woman, and tiptoed to the door, but just as she reached it a bitter thought suddenly checked her.

She could not have the scrivener read her letter without asking him to reply to it. At least it was more than probable that the contents of the letter would necessitate an immediate reply, consequently she would be obliged to pay the old man, and Mariette no longer possessed even sufficient money to buy bread for the day, and the baker, to whom she already owed twenty francs, would positively refuse, she knew, to trust her further. Her week's earnings which had only amounted to five francs, as her godmother had taken up so much of her time, had been nearly all spent in paying a part of the rent and the washerwoman, leaving her, in fact, only twenty-five sous, most of which had been used in defraying the expenses of her correspondence with Louis, an extravagance for which the poor child now reproached herself in view of her godmother's pressing needs.

One may perhaps smile at the harsh recriminations to which she had been subjected on account of this trifling expenditure, but, alas! twenty sous does not seem a trifling sum to the poor, an

increase or decrease of that amount in their daily or even weekly earnings often meaning life or death, sickness or health, to the humble toiler for daily bread.

To save further expense, Mariette thought for a moment of asking the portress to read the letter for her, but the poor girl was so shy and sensitive, and feared the rather coarse, though good-natured woman's raillery so much, that she finally decided she would rather make almost any sacrifice than apply to her. She had one quite pretty dress which she had bought at a second-hand clothes store and refitted for herself, a dress which she kept for great occasions and which she had worn the few times she had gone on little excursions with Louis. With a heavy sigh, she placed the dress, together with a small silk fichu, in a basket to take it to the pawnbroker; and with the basket in her hand, and walking very cautiously so as not to wake her godmother, the girl approached the door, but just as she again reached it Madame Lacombe made a slight movement, and murmured, drowsily:

"She's going out again, I do believe, and —"

But she fell asleep again without finishing the sentence.

Mariette stood for a moment silent and motionless, then opening the door with great care she stole out, locking it behind her and removing the key, which she left in the porter's room as she passed. She then hastened to the Mont de Piété, where they loaned her fifty sous on her dress and fichu, and, armed with this money, Mariette flew back to the Charnier des Innocents to find the scrivener.

Since Mariette's departure, and particularly since he had read the letter received from Dreux that morning, the old man had been reflecting with increasing anxiety on the effect this secret which he had discovered by the merest chance would have upon certain projects of his own. He was thus engaged when he saw the same young girl suddenly reappear at the door of his shop, whereupon, without concealing his surprise, though he did not betray the profound uneasiness his client's speedy return caused him, the scrivener said:

"What is it, my child? I did not expect you back so soon."

"Here is a letter from M. Louis, sir," said the young girl, drawing the precious missive from her bosom, "and I have come to ask you to read it to me."

Trembling with anxiety and curiosity, the girl waited as the scrivener glanced over the brief letter, concealing with only a moderate degree of success the genuine consternation its contents excited; then, uttering an exclamation of sorrowful indignation, he, to Mariette's intense bewilderment and dismay, tore the precious letter in several pieces.

"Poor child! poor child!" he exclaimed, throwing the fragments under his desk, after having crumpled them in his hands.

"What are you doing, monsieur?" cried Mariette, pale as death.

"Ah, my poor child!" repeated the old man, with an air of deep compassion.

"Good heavens! Has any misfortune befallen M. Louis?" murmured the girl, clasping her hands imploringly.

"No, my child, no; but you must forget him."

"Forget him?"

"Yes; believe me, it would be much better for you to renounce all hope, so far as he is concerned."

"My God! What has happened to him?"

"There are some things that are much harder to bear than ignorance, and yet I was pitying you a little while ago because you could not read."

"But what did he say in the letter, monsieur?"

"Your marriage is no longer to be thought of."

"Did M. Louis say that?"

"Yes, at the same time appealing to your generosity of heart."

"M. Louis bids me renounce him, and says he renounces me?"

"Alas! yes, my poor child. Come, come, summon up all your courage and resignation."

Mariette, who had turned as pale as death, was silent for a moment, while big tears rolled down her cheeks; then, stooping suddenly, she gathered up the crumpled fragments of the letter and handed them to the scrivener, saying, in a husky voice:

"I at least have the courage to hear all. Put the pieces together and read the letter to me, if you please, monsieur."

"Do not insist, my child, I beg of you."

"Read it, monsieur, in pity read it!"

"But — "

"I must know the contents of this letter, however much the knowledge may pain me."

"I have already told you the substance of it. Spare yourself further pain."

"Have pity on me, monsieur. If you do really feel the slightest interest in me, read the letter to me, — in heaven's name, read it! Let me at least know the extent of my misfortune; besides, there may be a line, or at least a word, of consolation."

"Well, my poor child, as you insist," said the old man, adjusting the fragments of the letter, while Mariette watched him with despairing eyes, "listen to the letter."

And he read as follows:

"My dear Mariette: — I write you a few lines in great haste. My soul is full of despair, for we shall be obliged to renounce our hopes. My father's comfort and peace of mind, in his declining years, must be assured at any cost. You know how devotedly I love my father. I have given my word, and you and I must never meet again.

"One last request. I appeal both to your delicacy and generosity of heart. Make no attempt to induce me to change this resolution. I have been obliged to choose between my father and you; perhaps if I should see you again, I might not have the courage to do my duty as a son. My father's future is, consequently, in your hands. I rely upon your generosity. Farewell! Grief overpowers me so completely that I can no longer hold my pen.

"Once more, and for ever, farewell.

"Louis."

While this note was being read, Mariette might have served as a model for a statue of grief. Standing motionless beside the scrivener's desk, with inertly hanging arms, and clasped hands, her downcast eyes swimming with tears, and her lips agitated by a convulsive trembling, the poor creature still seemed to be listening, long after the old man had concluded his reading.

He was the first to break the long silence that ensued.

"I felt certain that this letter would pain you terribly, my dear child," he said, compassionately.

But Mariette made no reply.

"Do not tremble so, my child," continued the scrivener. "Sit down; and here, take a sip of water."

But Mariette did not even hear him. With her tear-dimmed eyes still fixed upon vacancy, she murmured, with a heart-broken expression on her face:

"So it is all over! There is nothing left for me in the world. It was too blissful a dream. I am like my godmother, happiness is not for such as me."

"My child," pleaded the old man, touched, in spite of himself, by her despair, "my child, don't give way so, I beg of you."

The words seemed to recall the girl to herself. She wiped her eyes, then, gathering up the pieces of the torn letter, she said, in a voice she did her best to steady:

"Thank you, monsieur."

"What are you doing?" asked Father Richard, anxiously. "What is the use of preserving these fragments of a letter which will awaken such sad memories?"

"The grave of a person one has loved also awakens sad memories," replied Mariette, with a bitter smile, "and yet one does not desert that grave."

After she had collected all the scraps of paper in the envelope, Mariette replaced it in her bosom, and, crossing her little shawl upon her breast, turned to go, saying, sadly: "I thank you for your kindness, monsieur;" then, as if bethinking herself, she added, timidly:

"Though this letter requires no reply, monsieur, after all the trouble I have given you, I feel that I ought to offer — "

"My charge is ten sous, exactly the same as for a letter," replied the old man, promptly, accepting and pocketing the remuneration with unmistakable eagerness, in spite of the conflicting emotions which had agitated him ever since the young girl's return. "And now *au revoir*, my child," he said, in a tone of evident relief; "our next meeting, I hope, will be under happier circumstances."

"Heaven grant it, monsieur," replied Mariette, as she walked slowly away, while Father Richard, evidently anxious to return home, closed the shutters of his stall, thus concluding his day's work much earlier than usual.

Mariette, a prey to the most despairing thoughts, walked on and on mechanically, wholly unconscious of the route she was

following, until she reached the Pont au Change. At the sight of the river she started suddenly like one awaking from a dream, and murmured, "It was my evil genius that brought me here."

In another moment she was leaning over the parapet gazing down eagerly into the swift flowing waters below. Gradually, as her eyes followed the course of the current, a sort of vertigo seized her. Unconsciously, too, she was slowly yielding to the fascination such a scene often exerts, and, with her head supported on her hands, she leaned farther and farther over the stream.

"I could find forgetfulness there," the poor child said to herself. "The river is a sure refuge from misery, from hunger, from sickness, or from a miserable old age, an old age like that of my poor godmother. My godmother? Why, without me, what would become of her?"

Just then Mariette felt some one seize her by the arm, at the same time exclaiming, in a frightened tone:

"Take care, my child, take care, or you will fall in the river."

The girl turned her haggard eyes upon the speaker, and saw a stout woman with a kind and honest face, who continued, almost affectionately:

"You are very imprudent to lean so far over the parapet, my child. I expected to see you fall over every minute."

"I was not noticing, madame —"

"But you ought to notice, child. Good Heavens! how pale you are! Do you feel sick?"

"No, only a little weak, madame. It is nothing. I shall soon be all right again."

"Lean on me. You are just recovering from a fit of illness, I judge."

"Yes, madame," replied Mariette, passing her hand across her forehead. "Will you tell me where I am, please?"

"Between the Pont Neuf and the Pont au Change, my dear. You are a stranger in Paris, perhaps."

"No, madame, but I had an attack of dizziness just now. It is passing off, and I see where I am now."

"Wouldn't you like me to accompany you to your home, child?" asked the stout woman, kindly. "You are trembling like a leaf. Here, take my arm."

"I thank you, madame, but it is not necessary. I live only a short distance from here."

"Just as you say, child, but I'll do it with pleasure if you wish. No? Very well, good luck to you, then."

And the obliging woman continued on her way.

Mariette, thus restored to consciousness, as it were, realised the terrible misfortune that had befallen her all the more keenly, and to this consciousness was now added the fear of being cruelly reproached by her godmother just at a time when she was so sorely in need of consolation, or at least of the quiet and solitude that one craves after such a terrible shock.

Desiring to evade the bitter reproaches this long absence was almost sure to bring down upon her devoted head, and

remembering the desire her godmother had expressed that morning, Mariette hoped to gain forgiveness by gratifying the invalid's whim, so, with the forty sous left of the amount she had obtained at the Mont de Piété still in her pocket, she hastened to a *rôtisseur's*, and purchased a quarter of a chicken there, thence to a bakery, where she bought a couple of crisp white rolls, after which she turned her steps homeward.

A handsome coupé was standing at the door of the house in which Mariette lived, though she did not even notice this fact, but when she stopped at the porter's room as usual, to ask for her key, Madame Justin exclaimed:

"Your key, Mlle. Mariette? Why, that gentleman called for it a moment ago."

"What gentleman?"

"A decorated gentleman. Yes, I should say he was decorated. Why, the ribbon in his buttonhole was at least two inches wide. I never saw a person with such a big decoration."

"But I am not acquainted with any decorated gentleman," replied the young girl, much surprised. "He must have made a mistake."

"Oh, no, child. He asked me if the Widow Lacombe didn't live here with her goddaughter, a seamstress, so you see there could be no mistake."

"But didn't you tell the gentleman that my godmother was an invalid and could not see any one?"

"Yes, child, but he said he must have a talk with her on a very

important matter, all the same, so I gave him the key, and let him go up."

"I will go and see who it is, Madame Justin," responded Mariette.

Imagine her astonishment, when, on reaching the fifth floor, she saw the stranger through the half-open door, and heard him address these words to Madame Lacombe:

"As your goddaughter has gone out, my good woman, I can state my business with you very plainly."

When these words reached her ears, Mariette, yielding to a very natural feeling of curiosity, concluded to remain on the landing and listen to the conversation, instead of entering the room.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VOICE OF THE TEMPTER

The speaker was a man about forty-five years of age, with regular though rather haggard features and a long moustache, made as black and lustrous by some cosmetic as his artistically curled locks, which evidently owed their raven hue to artificial means. The stranger's physiognomy impressed one as being a peculiar combination of deceitfulness, cunning, and impertinence. He had large feet and remarkably large hands; in short, despite his very evident pretensions, it was easy to see that he was one of those vulgar persons who cannot imitate, but only parody real elegance. Dressed in execrable taste, with a broad red ribbon in the buttonhole of his frock coat, he affected a military bearing. With his hat still on his head, he had seated himself a short distance from the bed, and as he talked with the invalid he gnawed the jewelled handle of a small cane that he carried.

Madame Lacombe was gazing at the stranger with mingled surprise and distrust. She was conscious, too, of a strong aversion, caused, doubtless, by his both insolent and patronising air.

"As your goddaughter is out, my good woman, I can state my business with you very plainly."

These were the words that Mariette overheard on reaching the landing. The conversation that ensued was, in substance, as

follows:

"You asked, monsieur, if I were the Widow Lacombe, Mariette Moreau's godmother," said the sick woman tartly. "I told you that I was. Now, what do you want with me? Explain, if you please."

"In the first place, my good woman — "

"My name is Lacombe, Madame Lacombe."

"Oh, very well, Madame Lacombe," said the stranger, with an air of mock deference, "I will tell you first who I am; afterwards I will tell you what I want. I am Commandant de la Miraudière." Then, touching his red ribbon, he added, "An old soldier as you see — ten campaigns — five wounds."

"That is nothing to me."

"I have many influential acquaintances in Paris, dukes, counts, and marquises."

"What do I care about that?"

"I keep a carriage, and spend at least twenty thousand francs a year."

"While my goddaughter and I starve on twenty sous a day, when she can earn them," said the sick woman, bitterly. "That is the way of the world, however."

"But it is not fair, my good Mother Lacombe," responded Commandant de la Miraudière, "it is not fair, and I have come here to put an end to such injustice."

"If you've come here to mock me, I wish you'd take yourself off," retorted the sick woman, sullenly.

"Mock you, Mother Lacombe, mock you! Just hear what I have come to offer you. A comfortable room in a nice apartment, a servant to wait on you, two good meals a day, coffee every morning, and fifty francs a month for your snuff, if you take it, or for anything else you choose to fancy, if you don't, — well, what do you say to all this, Mother Lacombe?"

"I say — I say you're only making sport of me, that is, unless there is something behind all this. When one offers such things to a poor old cripple like me, it is not for the love of God, that is certain."

"No, Mother Lacombe, but for the love of two beautiful eyes, perhaps."

"Whose beautiful eyes?"

"Your goddaughter's, Mother Lacombe," replied Commandant de la Miraudière, cynically. "There is no use beating about the bush."

The invalid made a movement indicative of surprise, then, casting a searching look at the stranger, inquired:

"You know Mariette, then?"

"I have been to Madame Jourdan's several times to order linen, for I am very particular about my linen," added the stranger, glancing down complacently at his embroidered shirt-front. "I have consequently often seen your goddaughter there; I think her charming, adorable, and — "

"And you have come to buy her of me?"

"Bravo, Mother Lacombe! You are a clever and sensible

woman, I see. You understand things in the twinkling of an eye. This is the proposition I have come to make to you: A nice suite of rooms, newly furnished for Mariette, with whom you are to live, five hundred francs a month to run the establishment, a maid and a cook who will also wait on you, a suitable outfit for Mariette, and a purse of fifty louis to start with, to say nothing of the other presents she will get if she behaves properly. So much for the substantials. As for the agreeable part, there will be drives in the park, boxes at the theatre, — I know any number of actors, and I am also on the best of terms with some very high-toned ladies who give many balls and card-parties, — in short, your goddaughter will have a delightful, an enchanted life, Mother Lacombe, the life of a duchess. Well, how does all this strike you?"

"Very favourably, of course," responded the sick woman, with a sardonic smile. "Such cattle as we are, are only fit to be sold when we are young, or to sell others when we are old."

"Ah, well, Mother Lacombe, to quiet your scruples, if you have any, you shall have sixty francs a month for your snuff, and I shall also make you a present of a handsome shawl, so you can go around respectably with Mariette, whom you are never to leave for a moment, understand, for I am as jealous as a tiger, and have no intention of being made a fool of."

"All this tallies exactly with what I said to Mariette only this morning. 'You are an honest girl,' I said to her, 'and yet you can scarcely earn twenty sous a day making three hundred franc

chemises for a kept woman."

"Three hundred franc chemises ordered from Madame Jourdan's? Oh, yes, Mother Lacombe, I know. They are for Amandine, who is kept by the Marquis de Saint-Herem, an intimate friend of mine. It was I who induced her to patronise Madame Jourdan, — a regular bonanza for her, though the marquis is very poor pay, but he makes all his furnishers as well as all his mistresses the fashion. This little Amandine was a clerk in a little perfumery shop on the Rue Colbert six months ago, and Saint-Herem has made her the rage. There is no woman in Paris half as much talked about as Amandine. The same thing may happen to Mariette some day, Mother Lacombe. She may be wearing three hundred franc chemises instead of making them. Don't it make you proud to think of it?"

"Unless Mariette has the same fate as another poor girl I knew."

"What happened to her, Mother Lacombe?"

"She was robbed."

"Robbed?"

"She, too, was promised mountains of gold. The man who promised it placed her in furnished apartments, and at the end of three months left her without a penny. Then she killed herself in despair."

"Really, Mother Lacombe, what kind of a man do you take me for?" demanded the stranger, indignantly. "Do I look like a scoundrel, like a Robert Macaire?"

"I don't know, I am sure."

"I, an old soldier who have fought in twenty campaigns, and have ten wounds! I, who am hand and glove with all the lions of Paris! I, who keep my carriage and spend twenty thousand francs a year! Speak out, what security do you want? If you say so, the apartment shall be furnished within a week, the lease made out in your name, and the rent paid one year in advance; besides, you shall have the twenty-five or thirty louis I have about me to bind the bargain, if you like."

And as he spoke, he drew a handful of gold from his pocket and threw it on the little table by the sick woman's bed, adding: "You see I am not like you. I am not afraid of being robbed, Mother Lacombe."

On hearing the chink of coin, the invalid leaned forward, and cast a greedy, covetous look upon the glittering pile. Never in her life had she had a gold coin in her possession, and now she could not resist the temptation to touch the gleaming metal, and let it slip slowly through her fingers.

"I can at least say that I have handled gold once in my life," the sick woman murmured, hoarsely.

"It is nothing to handle it, Mother Lacombe. Think of the pleasure of spending it."

"There is enough here to keep one in comfort five or six months," said the old woman, carefully arranging the gold in little piles.

"And remember that you and Mariette can have as much every

month if you like, Mother Lacombe, in good, shining gold, if you wish it."

After a long silence, the sick woman raised her hollow eyes to the stranger's face, and said:

"You think Mariette pretty, monsieur. You are right, and there is not a better-hearted, more deserving girl in the world. Well, be generous to her. This money is a mere trifle to a man as rich as you are. Make us a present of it."

"Eh?" exclaimed the stranger, in profound astonishment.

"Monsieur," said the consumptive, clasping her hands imploringly, "be generous, be charitable. This sum of money is a mere trifle to you, as I said before, but it would support us for months. We should be able to pay all we owe. Mariette would not be obliged to work night and day. She would have time to look around a little, and find employment that paid her better. We should owe five or six months of peace and happiness to your bounty. It costs us so little to live! Do this, kind sir, and we will for ever bless you, and for once in my life I shall have known what happiness is."

The sick woman's tone was so sincere, her request so artless, that the stranger, who could not conceive of any human creature being stupid enough really to expect such a thing of a man of his stamp, felt even more hurt than surprised, and said to himself:

"Really, this is not very flattering to me. The old hag must take me for a country greenhorn to make such a proposition as that."

So bursting into a hearty laugh, he said, aloud:

"You must take me for a philanthropist, or the winner of the Montyon prize, Mother Lacombe. I am to make you a present of six hundred francs, and accept your benediction and eternal gratitude in return, eh?"

The sick woman had yielded to one of those wild and sudden hopes that sometimes seize the most despondent persons; but irritated by the contempt with which her proposal had been received, she now retorted, with a sneer:

"I hope you will forgive me for having so grossly insulted you, I am sure, monsieur."

"Oh, you needn't apologise, Mother Lacombe. I have taken no offence, as you see. But we may as well settle this little matter without any further delay. Am I to pocket those shining coins you seem to take so much pleasure in handling, yes or no?"

And he stretched out his hand as if to gather up the gold pieces.

With an almost unconscious movement, the sick woman pushed his hand away, exclaiming, sullenly:

"Wait a minute, can't you? You needn't be afraid that anybody is going to eat your gold."

"On the contrary, that is exactly what I would like you to do, on condition, of course — "

"But I know Mariette, and she would never consent," replied the sick woman, with her eyes still fixed longingly upon the shining coins.

"Nonsense!"

"But she is an honest girl, I tell you. She might listen to a man she loved, as so many girls do, but to you, never. She would absolutely refuse. She has her ideas — oh, you needn't laugh."

"Oh, I know Mariette is a virtuous girl. Madame Jourdan, for whom your goddaughter has worked for years, has assured me of that fact; but I know, too, that you have a great deal of influence over her. She is dreadfully afraid of you, Madame Jourdan says, so I am sure that you can, if you choose, persuade or, if need be, compel Mariette to accept — what? Simply an unlooked-for piece of good fortune, for you are housed like beggars and almost starving, that is evident. Suppose you refuse, what will be the result? The girl, with all her fine disinterestedness, will be fooled sooner or later by some scamp in her own station in life, and —"

"That is possible, but she will not have sold herself."

"That is all bosh, as you'll discover some day when her lover deserts her, and she has to do what so many other girls do to save herself from starving."

"That is very possible," groaned the sick woman. "Hunger is an evil counsellor, I know, when one has one's child as well as one's self to think of. And with this gold, how many of these poor girls might be saved! Ah! if Mariette is to end her days like them, after all, what is the use of struggling?"

For a minute or two the poor woman's contracted features showed that a terrible conflict was raging in her breast. The gold seemed to exercise an almost irresistible fascination over her; she seemed unable to remove her eyes from it; but at last with a

desperate effort she closed them, as if to shut out the sight of the money, and throwing herself back on her pillow, cried, angrily:

"Go away, go away, and let me alone."

"What! you refuse my offer, Mother Lacombe?"

"Yes."

"Positively?"

"Yes."

"Then I've got to pocket all this gold again, I suppose," said the stranger, gathering up the coins, and making them jingle loudly as he did so. "All these shining yellow boys must go back into my pocket."

"May the devil take you and your gold!" exclaimed the now thoroughly exasperated woman. "Keep your money, but clear out. I didn't take Mariette in to ruin her, or advise her to ruin herself. Rather than eat bread earned in such way, I would light a brazier of charcoal and end both the girl's life and my own."

Madame Lacombe had scarcely uttered these words before Mariette burst into the room, pale and indignant, and throwing herself upon the sick woman's neck, exclaimed:

"Ah, godmother. I knew very well that you loved me as if I were your own child!"

Then turning to Commandant de la Miraudière, whom she recognised as the man who had stared at her so persistently at Madame Jourdan's, she said contemptuously:

"I beg that you will leave at once."

"But, my dear little dove — "

"I was there at the door, monsieur, and I heard all."

"So much the better. You know what I am willing to do, and I assure you — "

"Once more, I must request you to leave at once."

"Very well, very well, my little Lucrece, I will go, but I shall allow you one week for reflection," said the stranger, preparing to leave the room.

But on the threshold he paused and added:

"You will not forget my name, Commandant de la Miraudière, my dear. Madame Jourdan knows my address."

After which he disappeared.

"Ah, godmother," exclaimed the girl, returning to the invalid, and embracing her effusively, "how nobly you defended me!"

"Yes," responded the sick woman, curtly, freeing herself almost roughly from her goddaughter's embrace, "and yet with all these virtues, one perishes of hunger."

"But, godmother — "

"Don't talk any more about it, for heaven's sake!" cried the invalid, angrily. "It is all settled. What is the use of discussing it any further? I have done my duty; you have done yours. I am an honest woman; you are an honest girl. Great good it will do you, and me, too; you may rest assured of that."

"But, godmother, listen to me — "

"We shall be found here some fine morning stiff and cold, you and I, with a pan of charcoal between us. Ah, ha, ha!"

And with a shrill, mirthless laugh, the poor creature,

embittered by years of misfortune, and chafing against the scruples that had kept her honest in spite of herself, put an end to the conversation by abruptly turning her back upon her goddaughter.

It was nearly night now.

Mariette went out into the hall where she had left the basket containing the sick woman's supper. She placed the food on a small table near the bed, and then went and seated herself silently by the narrow window, where, drawing the fragments of her lover's letter from her pocket, she gazed at them with despair in her soul.

On leaving Mariette, the commandant said to himself:

"I'm pretty sure that last shot told in spite of what they said. The girl will change her mind and so will the old woman. The sight of my gold seemed to dazzle the eyes of that old hag as much as if she had been trying to gaze at the noonday sun. Their poverty will prove a much more eloquent advocate for me than any words of mine. I do not despair, by any means. Two months of good living will make Mariette one of the prettiest girls in Paris, and she will do me great credit at very little expense. But now I must turn my attention to business. A fine little discovery it is that I have just made, and I think I shall be able to turn it to very good account."

Stepping into his carriage, he was driven to the Rue Grenelle St. Honoré. Alighting in front of No. 17, a very unpretentious dwelling, he said to the porter:

"Does M. Richard live here?"

"A father and son of that name both live here, monsieur."

"I wish to see the son. Is M. Louis Richard in?"

"Yes, monsieur. He has only just returned from a journey. He is with his father now."

"Ah, he is with his father? Well, I would like to see him alone."

"As they both occupy the same room, there will be some difficulty about that."

The commandant reflected a moment, then, taking a visiting card bearing his address from his pocket, he added these words in pencil: "requests the honour of a visit from M. Louis Richard to-morrow morning between nine and ten, as he has a very important communication which will brook no delay, to make to him."

"Here are forty sous for you, my friend," said M. de la Miraudière to the porter, "and I want you to give this card to M. Louis Richard."

"That is a very easy way to earn forty sous."

"But you are not to give the card to him until to-morrow morning as he goes out, and his father is not to know anything about it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, monsieur, and there will be no difficulty about it as M. Louis goes out every morning at seven o'clock, while his father never leaves before nine."

"I can rely upon you, then?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur, you can regard the errand as done."

Commandant de la Miraudière reëntered his carriage and drove away.

Soon after his departure a postman brought a letter for Louis Richard. It was the letter written that same morning in Mariette's presence by the scrivener, who had addressed it to No. 17 Rue de Grenelle, Paris, instead of to Dreux as the young girl had requested.

We will now usher the reader into the room occupied by the scrivener, Richard, and his son, who had just returned from Dreux.

CHAPTER V.

FATHER AND SON

The father and son occupied on the fifth floor of this old house a room that was almost identical in every respect with the abode of Mariette and her godmother. Both were characterised by the same bareness and lack of comfort. A small bed for the father, a mattress for the son, a rickety table, three or four chairs, a chest for their clothing — these were the only articles of furniture in the room.

Father Richard, on his way home, had purchased their evening repast, an appetising slice of ham and a loaf of fresh bread. These he had placed upon the table with a bottle of water, and a single candle, whose faint light barely served to render darkness visible.

Louis Richard, who was twenty-five years of age, had a frank, honest, kindly, intelligent face, while his shabby, threadbare clothing, worn white at the seams, only rendered his physical grace and vigour more noticeable.

The scrivener's features wore a joyful expression, slightly tempered, however, by the anxiety he now felt in relation to certain long cherished projects of his own.

The young man, after having deposited his shabby valise on the floor, tenderly embraced his father, to whom he was devoted; and the happiness of being with him again and the certainty of seeing Mariette on the morrow made his face radiant, and

increased his accustomed good humour.

"So you had a pleasant journey, my son," remarked the old man, seating himself at the table.

"Very."

"Won't you have some supper? We can talk while we eat."

"Won't I have some supper, father? I should think I would. I did not dine at the inn like the other travellers, and for the best of reasons," added Louis, gaily, slapping his empty pocket.

"You have little cause to regret the fact, probably," replied the old man, dividing the slice of ham into two very unequal portions, and giving the larger to his son. "The dinners one gets at wayside inns are generally very expensive and very poor."

As he spoke, he handed Louis a thick slice of bread, and the father and son began to eat with great apparent zest, washing down their food with big draughts of cold water.

"Tell me about your journey, my son," remarked the old man.

"There is very little to tell, father. My employer gave me a number of documents to be submitted to M. Ramon. He read and studied them very carefully, I must say. At least he took plenty of time to do it, — five whole days, after which he returned the documents with numberless comments, annotations, and corrections."

"Then you did not enjoy yourself particularly at Dreux, I judge."

"I was bored to death, father."

"What kind of a man is this M. Ramon, that a stay at his house

should be so wearisome?"

"The worst kind of a person conceivable, my dear father. In other words, an execrable old miser."

"Hum! hum!" coughed the old man, as if he had swallowed the wrong way. "So he is a miser, is he? He must be very rich, then."

"I don't know about that. One may be stingy with a small fortune as well as with a big one, I suppose; but if this M. Ramon's wealth is to be measured by his parsimony, he must be a multi-millionaire. He is a regular old Harpagon."

"If you had been reared in luxury and abundance, I could understand the abuse you heap upon this old Harpagon, as you call him; but we have always lived in such poverty that, however parsimonious M. Ramon may be, you certainly cannot be able to see much difference between his life and ours."

"Ah, father, you don't know what you're talking about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, M. Ramon keeps two servants; we have none. He occupies an entire house; we both eat and sleep in this garret room. He has three or four courses at dinner, we take a bite of anything that comes handy, but for all that we live a hundred times better than that skinflint does."

"But I don't understand, my son," said Father Richard, who for some reason or other seemed to be greatly annoyed at the derogatory opinion his son expressed. "There can be no comparison between that gentleman's circumstances and ours."

"My dear father, we make no attempt to conceal our poverty

at all events. We endure our privations cheerfully, and if I sometimes, in my ambitious moments, dream of a rather more comfortable existence, you know it is not on my own account, for I am very well satisfied with my lot."

"My dear boy, I know what a kind heart you have, I know, too, how much you love me, and the only thing that consoles me for our poverty is the knowledge that you do not repine at your lot."

"Repine at my lot when you share it? Besides, what we lack is really only the superfluous. We do not eat capons stuffed with truffles, it is true, but we eat with a good appetite, — witness the rapid disappearance of this big loaf of bread; our clothes are threadbare, but warm; we earn, both together, from seventeen to eighteen hundred francs a year. Not a colossal amount, by any means, but we owe no man a penny. Ah, my dear father, if Heaven never sends me any worse trouble than this, I shall never complain."

"You have no idea how much pleasure it gives me to see you accept your lot in life so cheerfully. But tell me, are you really happy?"

"Very happy."

"Really and truly?"

"Why should I wish to deceive you? Do I ever look glum and sour like a man who is discontented with his lot?"

"That is only because you have such an uncommonly good disposition, perhaps."

"That depends. If I were obliged to live with that abominable

old skinflint Ramon, I should soon become intolerable."

"Why are you so hard upon that poor man?"

"The recollection of the torture I endured under his roof, I suppose."

"Torture?"

"What else do you call it, father, to live in a big, cold, dilapidated, cheerless house, — a house so dreary, in fact, that the grave seems a cheerful abode in comparison? And then to see those two thin, solemn-faced, famished-looking servants wandering about in that grim sepulchre! And the meals, — meals at which the master of the house seems to count each morsel that you eat! And his daughter, — for the man has a daughter who will perpetuate the breed, I suppose, — and his daughter, who doles out scanty portions for the domestics, and then carefully locks up the remains of the meagre meal!"

"Louis, Louis, how is it that you, who are usually so charitably inclined, should be so strangely hostile to this poor man and his daughter?"

"His daughter! Can you call such a thing as that a daughter, a big, raw-boned creature, with feet and hands like a man's, a face like a nutcracker, and a nose, — great Heavens! what a nose, — a nose as long as that, and of a brick-red colour? But justice compels me to say that this incomparable creature has yellow hair and black teeth to make up for her red nose."

"The portrait is not flattered, evidently, but all women cannot be pretty, and a kind heart is much better than a pretty face."

"True, father, but how strange it is that there should be such remarkable contrasts in some families."

"What do you mean?"

"Judge of my surprise on seeing in one of the apartments of that gloomy house the portrait of a woman with such a charming, refined, distinguished face that it seemed as if the picture must have been placed there expressly to spite hateful Miss Red Nose. You shake your head, father, but I am sure you ought not to censure me very severely. At first I felt very sorry for the young lady when I saw her so excessively ugly, and, above all, condemned to live with such an old skinflint of a father; but afterwards, when I saw her nearly badger the life out of those two poor servants, scolding them continually for the merest trifle, and doling out the very smallest amount of food that would suffice to keep them alive, my compassion changed to aversion and positive loathing. But to return to the subject of the picture. The portrait bore such a striking resemblance to one of my old schoolmates that I asked old Harpagon who the lady was, and greatly to my surprise he told me that it was a portrait of his sister, the late Madame de Saint-Herem. 'Then this lady is, doubtless, the mother of the young Marquis de Saint-Herem?' I asked, and if you could only have seen old Ramon's face! One would have supposed I had just evoked the very devil himself. Miss Red Nose, too, made a gesture of pious horror (I forgot to tell you, to complete the picture, that she is one of the worst of bigots), whereupon her worthy parent answered that he had the

misfortune to be the uncle of an infernal scoundrel named Saint-Herem."

"This M. de Saint-Herem must bear a very bad reputation, I judge."

"What! Florestan? the bravest and most delightful fellow in the world."

"But his uncle — "

"Listen, father, and you shall judge for yourself. Saint-Herem and I were very intimate at college, but I had lost sight of him for a long time, when about six months ago, as I was walking along the boulevard, I saw everybody turning to look at a beautiful mail phaeton drawn by two magnificent horses, and with two tiny footmen perched up behind. And who do you suppose was driving this exquisite turnout? My old college friend, Saint-Herem, who looked handsomer than ever; in fact, it would be impossible to conceive of a more distinguished-looking young man."

"I should judge that he must be a terrible spendthrift, though."

"Wait until you hear the end of my story, my dear father. The vehicle stopped suddenly, the little grooms jumped down and ran to the horses' heads. Saint-Herem sprang out of the phaeton, rushed up to me, and positively embraced me in his delight at meeting me again after such a long separation. I was dressed like the poor devil of a notary's clerk that I am, and you must admit, my dear father, that most men of fashion would have shrunk from even recognising such a plebeian-looking creature,

but Florestan did not even seem to notice my plain apparel. As for me, I was both pleased and embarrassed by this manifestation of friendly feeling on his part, for we seemed to attract a great deal of attention. Saint-Herem, too, must have noticed the fact, for he exclaimed:

"Did you ever see such a set of gaping idiots? Where are you going?"

"To the office."

"Then get in with me. We can talk as we drive along."

"What! get into that stylish carriage with my clumsy shoes and big umbrella? What will people think?" I replied. But Florestan only shrugged his shoulders, and, seizing me by the arm, half led, half dragged me to the carriage. On our way to the office he made me promise that I would come and see him, and finally he set me down at the notary's door with the warmest protestations of friendship and good-will. Now what do you think of a man who would act like that, father?"

"Pooh!" responded the scrivener, with a by no means enthusiastic air, "he yielded to a kindly impulse, that is all. I always distrust people who are so inclined to make a display of their friendship; besides, you are in no position to keep up such an acquaintance."

"I know that; still, under the circumstances, I felt obliged to keep my promise to take breakfast with Florestan on the following Sunday. The kind-hearted fellow treated me as if I were a prince, and begged me to come again, but I left for Dreux

soon afterward, so I have not seen him since."

"It is very strange that you never said anything to me about your visit to him."

"Shall I tell you why I did not? I said to myself: 'My poor father loves me so much he may fear that the sight of Florestan's splendour will excite my envy, and make me dissatisfied with my own humble condition in life, so I will conceal the fact that I once breakfasted with a Sardanapalus or a Lucullus.'"

"My dear, brave boy!" exclaimed the old man, with deep emotion, "I understand; and the delicacy of your conduct touches me deeply. It is only one more proof of your kindness and generosity of heart, but I beg that you will now listen to me attentively for a moment, for it is to this very generosity of feeling, as well as to your affection for me, that I am about to appeal. There is an extremely grave and important matter about which I must speak to you."

The scrivener's expression had become so serious and even solemn that the young man gazed at him with surprise; but just then the porter knocked at the door and said:

"Here is a letter for you, M. Louis."

"Very well," replied the young man, abstractedly, too much engaged in wondering what the important matter to which his father had alluded could be to pay much attention to the letter, which Father Richard instantly recognised as the one which he had written to his son that morning, and which he had addressed to the Rue de Grenelle instead of to Dreux, as poor Mariette had

requested.

Knowing the contents of the missive, the old scrivener was on the point of advising his son to read the letter immediately, but, after a moment's reflection, he adopted the opposite course, and said:

"My dear boy, you will have plenty of time to read your letter by and by. Listen to me now, for I repeat there is a matter of great importance both to you and to me, that I must consult you about."

"I am at your service, my dear father," replied Louis, laying the letter which he had been about to open on the table.

CHAPTER VI.

A FATHER'S AMBITION

Father Richard remained silent for a moment, then, turning to his son, said:

"I have warned you that I am about to appeal to your generosity as well as to your affection for me."

"Then you have only to speak, father."

"You told me just now that, if you sometimes dreamed of a less humble existence than ours, it was not on your own account, but mine."

"And that is perfectly true."

"Ah, well, my son, it only depends upon yourself to see this desire realised."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen to me. Reverses of fortune which closely followed your mother's death, while you were but an infant, left me barely property enough to defray the expenses of your education."

"Yes, my dear father, and the courage and resignation with which you have endured this misfortune have only increased my love and respect for you."

"Our pecuniary condition seems likely to speedily become worse instead of better, I regret to say. With old age fast coming on, and my failing vision, I realise that the day is near at hand when it will be impossible for me to earn even the pittance

needed for my support."

"But, father, you may be sure — "

"Of your willing aid, I know that; but your own future is precarious in the extreme. The most you can hope for is to become chief clerk in a notary's office, for it takes money to study a profession, and I am poor."

"Do not worry, father. I shall always be able to earn money enough for us two."

"But what if sickness should come, or some accident should befall either of us, or you should be thrown out of employment for several months, what would become of us then?"

"My dear father, if we poor people stopped to think of the misfortunes that might befall us, we should lose courage. Let us close our eyes to the future, and think only of the present. That, thank Heaven! is not alarming."

"Yes, I admit that it is better not to think of the future when it is alarming, but when it may be happy and prosperous, if we choose to make it so, is it not well to open our eyes instead of closing them?"

"Certainly."

"So I repeat, that it depends entirely upon yourself to make our future both happy and prosperous."

"You may consider it done, then. Only tell me how I am to do it."

"I shall surprise you very much, I am sure, when I tell you that this M. Ramon with whom you have just spent several days, and

whom you so cruelly misjudge, is an old friend of mine, and that the visit you just paid him was planned by him and me."

"But the papers my employer —"

"Your employer kindly consented to assist us by charging you with a pretended mission to Ramon."

"But why was it considered necessary to resort to this trick?"

"Ramon wished to see you and study you; in other words, to become thoroughly acquainted with you without your suspecting it, and I feel it my duty to tell you that he is delighted with you. I received a long letter from him this very morning, in which he speaks of you in the highest terms."

"I regret that I am unable to return the compliment; but how can M. Ramon's good or bad opinion affect me?"

"It does affect you very seriously, though, my dear boy, for the prosperous future of which I spoke is entirely dependent upon the opinion Ramon has of you."

"You speak in enigmas, father."

"Ramon, without being what is called rich, possesses a comfortable fortune, which, by reason of his wise economy, is increasing every day."

"I can readily believe that, only what you call economy is contemptible stinginess, father."

"Don't let us haggle about terms, my son. Call it parsimony or economy, or what you will, in consequence of it Ramon is sure to leave his daughter a handsome fortune, though he will give her nothing during his lifetime."

"That does not surprise me in the least; but I really cannot imagine what you are driving at, father?"

"I rather hesitate to tell you, because, however erroneous first impressions may be, they are very tenacious, and you have expressed yourself so harshly in relation to Mlle. Ramon — "

"Miss Red Nose? On the contrary, I assure you that I have been extremely lenient."

"Oh, you will get over your prejudice, I am sure. Believe me, Mlle. Ramon is one of those persons who have to be known to be appreciated. She is a young woman of remarkable strength of character as well as of the most exemplary piety. What more can one ask in the mother of a family?"

"The mother of a family?" repeated Louis, who, though he was far from suspecting the danger that menaced him, began to be conscious of a vague uneasiness. "And what difference does it make to me whether Mlle. Ramon proves an admirable mother of a family or not?"

"It is a matter of vital importance to you."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"And why?" demanded Louis, anxiously.

"Because it is the one desire of my life to see you Mlle. Ramon's husband," answered the old man, firmly.

"Mlle. Ramon's husband!" cried Louis, springing up with a movement of positive horror; "I marry that woman?"

"Yes, my son. Marry Mlle. Ramon, and our future is assured.

We will go to Dreux to live. The house is large enough for us all. Ramon will give his daughter no dowry, but we are to live with him, that is decided, and he will procure you a lucrative situation. When your father-in-law dies, you will come into a handsome fortune. Louis, my son, my beloved son," added the old man, imploringly, seizing his son's hands, "consent to this marriage, I beg of you. Consent to it, and you will make me the happiest of men."

"Ah, father, you do not know what you are asking," replied Louis.

"You are going to say that you do not love Mlle. Ramon, perhaps; but mutual respect and esteem are sufficient, and you can give both to Mlle. Ramon, for she deserves them. As for her father, the parsimony that shocked you so much at first, will seem less objectionable when you recollect that, after all, you are the person who will profit by it, eventually. Ramon is really a most estimable man. The one ambition of his life is to leave his daughter and the husband of her choice a handsome fortune; to attain this end, he keeps his expenses down as much as possible. Is this any crime, I should like to know? Come, Louis, my dear boy, answer me, give me a word of hope."

"Father, much as it costs me to thwart your plans, what you ask is impossible," replied the young man, sadly.

"Louis, can it be you that answers me in this way when I appeal to your love for me?"

"In the first place, you would derive no personal advantage

from this marriage. You are thinking only of my interest when you urge it upon me."

"What! is it nothing to be able to live with Ramon without being obliged to spend a sou? For it is understood that we are to live there for nothing, I tell you, as he gives his daughter no dowry."

"So long as I have a drop of blood in my veins, I will accept charity from no man, father. More than once already I have begged you to abandon your profession of scrivener, and let me supply our modest wants without any assistance from you. I can easily do it by working a little harder."

"But if your health should fail, and old age should prevent me from earning a livelihood, there would be nothing left for me but to go to the almshouse."

"I have faith in my courage. I shall not lose my health, and you will want for nothing; but, if I had to marry Mlle. Ramon, I should certainly die of grief and despair."

"You are not in earnest, Louis?"

"I certainly am, father. I feel, and I always shall feel, an unconquerable aversion to Mlle. Ramon; besides, I love a young girl, and she, and she alone, shall be my wife."

"I fancied I had your confidence, and yet you have come to such an important decision as this without my even suspecting it."

"I have been silent on the subject, because I wished to give convincing proofs of the permanent nature of this attachment before I confided my intentions to you. I, and the young girl I

love, accordingly agreed to wait one year in order to see if our natures were really congenial, and if what we considered real love were only an ephemeral fancy. Our love has withstood every test, thank God! The year expires to-day, and I shall see the girl I love to-morrow, in order to decide upon the day that she will broach the subject to her godmother who reared her. Forgive me, father," added Louis, interrupting the old man as he was about to speak; "I wish to say one word more. The girl I love is poor, and works for her daily bread as I do, but she is the best and noblest creature I know. Never will you find a more devoted daughter. Her earnings and mine will suffice for our needs; she is accustomed to even greater privations than we are. I will toil with redoubled ardour and diligence, and, believe me, you shall have the rest you so much need. Any disagreement between you and me is intensely painful to me. This is the first time, I believe, that we have ever differed in opinion, so spare me the sorrow of again refusing to comply with your request, I beseech you. Do not insist further upon the subject of this marriage. I can never resign myself to it, never! Nor will I ever have any other woman for my wife than Mariette Moreau!"

Louis uttered these last words in such a firm, though respectful tone that the old man, not considering it advisable to insist further, replied, with a disappointed air:

"I cannot believe, Louis, that all the reasons I have urged in favour of this marriage will remain valueless in your eyes. I have more faith in your heart than you have in mine, and I feel sure

that a little reflection on your part will lead you to reconsider your decision."

"You must not hope that, father."

"I will so far comply with your wishes as to insist no further at this time; I trust to reflection to bring you to a different frame of mind. I give you twenty-four hours to come to a final decision. I will promise not to say another word to you on the subject until that time expires; and I must request you, in turn, to make no further allusion to your wishes. Day after to-morrow we will talk the matter over again."

"So be it, father, but I assure you that at the expiration of — "

"We have agreed not to discuss the matter further at this time," interrupted the old man, beginning to walk the room in silence, with an occasional furtive glance at Louis, who, with his head supported on his hands, still remained seated at the table on which he had placed the letter a short time before.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FORGED LETTER

His eyes having at last chanced to fall upon this letter addressed to him in a handwriting he did not recognise, Louis broke the seal mechanically.

A moment afterward, the old man, who was still silently pacing the floor, saw his son suddenly turn pale and pass his hand across his forehead as if to satisfy himself that he was not the victim of an optical delusion, then re-read with increasing agitation a missive which he seemed unable to credit.

This letter, which Father Richard had written in a disguised hand that morning, ostensibly from Mariette's dictation, far from expressing that young girl's real sentiments, read as follows:

"M. Louis: — I take advantage of your absence to write you what I should not dare to tell you, — what, in fact, I have put off confessing for more than two months for fear of causing you pain. All idea of a marriage between us must be abandoned, M. Louis, as well as all idea of ever seeing each other again.

"It is impossible for me to tell you the cause of this change in my feelings, but I assure you that my mind is fully made up. The reason I did not inform you yesterday, the sixth of May, M. Louis, the sixth of May, is that I wished to think the matter over once more, and in your absence,

before telling you my decision.

"Farewell, M. Louis. Do not try to see me again. It would be useless and would only cause me great pain. If, on the contrary, you make no attempt to see me, or to induce me to reconsider my determination, my happiness as well as that of my poor godmother is assured.

"It is consequently for the sake of the happiness and peace of mind of both of us, M. Louis, that I implore you not to insist upon another meeting.

"You are so kind-hearted that I am sure you would not like to cause me unnecessary pain, for I solemnly swear that all is over between us. You will not insist further, I hope, when I tell you that I no longer love you except as a friend.

Mariette Moreau.

"P.S. Instead of addressing this letter to Dreux, as you requested, I send it to your Paris address, in order that you may find it there on your return. Augustine, who has written for me heretofore, having gone home on a visit, I have had recourse to another person.

"I forgot to say that my godmother's health remains about the same."

The perusal of this letter plunged Louis into a profound stupor. The ingenuous style of composition, the numerous petty details, the allusion, twice repeated, to the sixth of May, all proved that the missive must have been dictated by Mariette, so, after vainly asking himself what could be the cause of this sudden rupture, anger, grief, and wounded pride, all struggled for the

mastery in the young man's heart, and he murmured:

"She need not insist so strongly upon my making no attempt to see her again! Why should I desire to do so?"

But grief soon overcame anger in the young man's heart. He endeavoured to recall all the particulars of his last interview with Mariette, but no indication of the slightest alienation of affection presented itself to his mind. On the contrary, never had she seemed more loving and devoted, — never had she seemed so eager to unite her lot with his. And yet, unless appearances were deceiving him, Mariette, whom he had always believed so pure and honest, was a monster of dissimulation.

Louis could not believe that; so, impatient to solve the mystery, and unable to endure this suspense any longer, he resolved to go to Mariette's home at once, even at the risk of offending her godmother, who, like Father Richard, had had no suspicion of the young people's mutual love up to the present time.

Not one of the different emotions which had in turn agitated the young man had escaped the scrivener's watchful eye, as, thinking it quite time to interfere, he said:

"Louis, we must leave for Dreux early to-morrow morning, for, if we do not, Ramon is sure to be here day after to-morrow, as has been agreed upon."

"Father!"

"Such a proceeding on our part does not compromise us in the least, and if you are determined to oppose the dearest wish

of my heart, I only ask that you will spend a few more days with Ramon and his daughter, as a favour to me. After that, you will be perfectly free to act as you see fit."

Then seeing Louis pick up his hat, as if he intended to go out, Father Richard exclaimed:

"What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"I have a slight headache, father, and I am going out for awhile."

"Don't, I beg of you," exclaimed the old man, with growing alarm. "You have looked and acted very strangely ever since you read that letter. You frighten me."

"You are mistaken, father. There is nothing the matter with me. I have a slight headache, that is all. I shall be back soon."

And Louis left the room abruptly.

As he passed the porter's lodge, that functionary stopped him, and said, with a mysterious air:

"M. Louis, I want to see you alone for a moment. Step inside, if you please."

"What is it?" asked Louis, as he complied with the request.

"Here is a card that a gentleman left for you. He came in a magnificent carriage, and said that his business was very important."

Louis took the card, and, approaching the lamp, read:

"Commandant de la Miraudière, 17 Rue du Mont-Blanc."

"Requests the honour of a visit from M. Louis Richard to-morrow morning between nine and ten, as he has a very

important communication, which will brook no delay, to make to him."

"Commandant de la Miraudière? I never heard the name before," Louis said to himself, as he examined the card, then, turning it over mechanically, he saw, written in pencil on the other side:

"Mariette Moreau, with Madame Lacombe, Rue des Prêtres St. Germain l'Auxerrois."

For M. de la Miraudière, having jotted down Mariette's address on one of his visiting cards, had, without thinking, written upon the same card the request for an interview which he had left for Louis.

That young man, more and more perplexed, endeavoured in vain to discover what possible connection there could be between Mariette and the stranger who had left the card. After a moment's silence, he said to the porter:

"Did the gentleman leave any other message?"

"He told me to give you the card when your father was not present."

"That is strange," thought the young man.

"What kind of a looking man was he — young or old?" he asked, aloud.

"A very handsome man, M. Louis, a decorated gentleman, with a moustache as black as ink, and very elegantly dressed."

Louis went out with his brain in a whirl. This new revelation increased his anxiety. The most absurd suspicions and fears

immediately assailed him, and he forthwith began to ask himself if this stranger were not a rival.

In her letter Mariette had implored Louis to make no attempt to see her again. Such a step on his part, would, she said, endanger not only her own happiness, but that of her godmother as well. Louis knew the trying position in which the two women were placed, and a terrible suspicion occurred to him. Perhaps Mariette, impelled as much by poverty as by her godmother's persistent entreaties, had listened to the proposals of the man whose card he, Louis, had just received. In that case, what could be the man's object in requesting an interview? Louis racked his brain in the hope of solving this mystery, but in vain.

These suspicions once aroused, the supposition that he had been betrayed for the sake of a rich rival seemed the only possible explanation of Mariette's strange conduct. Under these circumstances he abandoned his intention of going to Mariette's house for the present, or at least until after his interview with the commandant, from whom he was resolved to extort an explanation.

He returned home about midnight, and his father, convinced by the gloomy expression of his son's countenance that he could not have seen the girl and discovered the deception that had been practised upon both of them, again proposed that they should leave for Dreux the next morning, but Louis replied that he desired more time for reflection before taking this important step, and threw himself despairingly on his pallet.

Sleep was an impossibility, and at daybreak he stole out of the room to escape his father's questions, and after having waited in mortal anxiety on the boulevard for the hour appointed for his interview with Commandant de la Miraudière, he hastened to that gentleman's house.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

When Louis presented himself at the house of Commandant de la Miraudière, that gentleman was sitting at his desk, enveloped in a superb dressing-gown, smoking his cigar, and examining a big pile of notes and bills.

While he was thus engaged, his servant entered, and announced:

"M. Richard."

"Ask M. Richard to wait in the drawing-room a moment. When I ring, show him in."

As soon as the servant left the room, M. de la Miraudière opened a secret drawer in his desk, and took out twenty-five one thousand franc notes, and placed them beside a sheet of the stamped paper used for legal documents of divers kinds, then rang the bell.

Louis entered, with a gloomy and perturbed air. His heart throbbed violently at the thought that he was, perhaps, in the presence of a favoured rival, for this poor fellow, like sincere lovers in general, greatly exaggerated the advantages which his competitor possessed, so M. de la Miraudière, wrapped in a handsome dressing-gown, and occupying an elegant suite of apartments, seemed a very formidable rival indeed.

"Is it to M. Louis Richard that I have the honour of speaking?"

inquired M. de la Miraudière, with his most ingratiating smile.

"Yes, monsieur."

"The only son of M. Richard, the scrivener?"

These last words were uttered with a rather sarcastic air. Louis noted the fact, and responded, dryly:

"Yes, monsieur, my father is a scrivener."

"Excuse me, my dear sir, for having given you so much trouble, but it was absolutely necessary that I should talk with you alone, and as that seemed well-nigh impossible at your own home, I was obliged to ask you to take the trouble to call here."

"May I ask why you wished to see me, monsieur?"

"Merely to offer you my services, my dear M. Richard," replied M. de la Miraudière in an insinuating tone. "For it would give me great pleasure to be able to call you my client."

"Your client? Why, who are you, monsieur?"

"An old soldier, now on the retired list, — twenty campaigns, ten wounds, — now a man of affairs, merely to pass away the time. I have a number of large capitalists as backers, and I often act as an intermediary between them and young men of prospective wealth."

"Then I do not know of any service you can render me."

"You say that, when you are leading a life of drudgery as a notary's clerk, when you are vegetating — positively vegetating — living in a miserable attic with your father, and dressed, Heaven knows how!"

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Louis, fairly purple with indignation.

"Excuse me, my young friend, but these are, I regret to say, the real facts of the case, shameful as they appear. Why, a young man like you ought to be spending twenty-five or thirty thousand francs a year, ought to have his horses and mistresses and enjoy life generally."

"Monsieur, if this is intended as a joke, I warn you that I am in no mood for it," said Louis, angrily.

"As I have already told you, I am an old soldier who has proved his valour on many a well-fought field, my young friend, so I can afford not to take offence at your manner, for which there is plenty of excuse, I must admit, as what I am saying must seem rather extraordinary to you."

"Very extraordinary, monsieur."

"Here is something that may serve to convince you that I am speaking seriously," added the man of affairs, spreading out the thousand franc notes on his desk. "Here are twenty-five thousand francs that I should be delighted to place at your disposal, together with twenty-five hundred francs a month for the next five years."

Louis, unable to believe his own ears, gazed at M. de la Miraudière in speechless astonishment, but at last, partially recovering from his stupor, he said:

"You make this offer to me, monsieur?"

"Yes, and with very great pleasure."

"To me, Louis Richard?"

"To you, Louis Richard."

"Richard is a very common name, monsieur. You probably mistake me for some other person."

"No, no, my young friend, I know what I am talking about, and I also know who I am talking to. It is to Louis Désiré Richard, only son of M. Alexandre Timoléon Bénédicte Pamphile Richard, aged sixty-seven, born in Brie Comte Robert, but now residing at No. 17, Rue de Grenelle St. Honoré, a scrivener by profession. There is no mistake, you see, my young friend."

"Then as you know my family so well, you must also know that my poverty prevents me from contracting any such a loan."

"Your poverty!"

"Yes, monsieur."

"It is shameful, it is outrageous, to rear a young man under such a misapprehension of the real state of affairs," exclaimed the commandant, indignantly, "to compel him to spend the best years of his life in the stock, as it were, and to compel him to wear shabby clothes and woollen stockings and brogans. Fortunately, there is such a thing as Providence, and you now behold a humble instrument of Providence in the shape of Commandant de la Miraudière."

"I assure you that all this is extremely tiresome, monsieur. If you cannot explain more clearly, we had better bring this interview to an immediate conclusion."

"Very well, then. You believe your father to be a very poor man, do you not?"

"I am not ashamed of the fact."

"Oh, credulous youth that you are! Listen and bless me ever afterward."

As he spoke, M. de la Miraudière drew a large leather-bound book resembling a ledger toward him, and, after a moment's search, read aloud as follows:

"Inventory of Personal Property of M. Alexandre Timoléon Bénédict Pamphile Richard, from information secured by the Committee on Loans of the Bank of France, May 1, 18 — .

"1st.	Three thousand nine hundred and twenty shares of the Bank of France, market value,	924,300	fr.
"2d.	Notes of the Mont de Piété,	875,250	
"3d.	On Deposit in the Bank of France,	259,130	
	"Total,	2,058,680	fr.

"You see from these figures, my ingenuous young friend, that the known personal property of your honoured parent amounted, on the first of this month, to considerably over two million francs; but it is more than likely that, after the fashion of most misers who take a vast amount of pleasure in seeing and handling a part of their wealth, he has a large amount of money hoarded away in some convenient hiding-place. Even if this should not be the case, you see that the author of your being possesses more than two million francs, and as he spends barely twelve hundred francs out of an income of nearly one hundred thousand, you can form some idea of the amount of wealth you will enjoy some day, and you can no longer wonder at the offer I have just made you."

Louis was petrified with astonishment by this revelation. He could not utter a word, but merely gazed at the speaker with inexpressible amazement.

"You seem to be knocked all in a heap, my young friend. You act as if you were dazed."

"I really do not know what to think of all this," stammered Louis.

"Do as St. Thomas did, then. Touch these bank-notes and perhaps that will convince you. The capitalists who are backing me are not inclined to run any risk with their lucre, and they are willing to advance you this money at seven per cent., with a like commission for my services in addition. Interest and loan together will scarcely amount to one-half of your father's yearly income, so you will still be piling up money, even if you should live as a gentleman ought to live, and spend fifty thousand francs a year. It will be impossible for you to get along on less than that, but you can at least wait with patience for the hour of your honoured parent's demise, you understand. And, by the way, I have provided for every contingency, as you will see when I tell you about the little scheme I have invented, for of course your good father will be astonished at the change in your mode of living, so you are to invest in a lottery ticket — the prize, a magnificent five hundred louis diamond; price of tickets, ten francs each. The drawing takes place day after to-morrow; you will win the prize and sell it again for eight or nine thousand francs. This money you must allow a friend to invest for you in a

wonderfully successful enterprise, which will yield three hundred per cent a year. Thanks to this stratagem, you can spend twenty-five or thirty thousand francs a year under your father's very nose. Tell me, now, young man, haven't you good cause to regard me in the light of a guardian angel, or a beneficent Providence? But what on earth is the matter with you? What is the meaning of this clouded brow, this solemn air, this gloomy silence, when I expected to see you half-delirious with joy, and fairly turning somersaults in your delight at being transformed from a clerk into a millionaire, in less than a quarter of an hour. Speak, young man, speak! Can it be that joy and astonishment have bereft him of reason?"

It is a fact that a revelation which would undoubtedly have filled any one else with the wildest joy had only aroused a feeling of painful resentment in Louis Richard's breast. The deception his father had practised upon him wounded him deeply, but bitterer still was the thought that, but for Mariette's cruel desertion, he might have shared this wealth with her some day, and changed the laborious, squalid life the young girl had always led into one of ease and luxury.

This reflection, reviving as it did such poignant regrets, dominated him so completely that, forgetting everything else, he drew out the visiting card the commandant had left for him, and demanded, abruptly:

"Will you tell me how it happens that Mlle. Moreau's name and address are written in pencil on the back of this card?"

"What!" exclaimed the commandant, amazed at the question, especially at such a moment. "You wish to know — "

"How it happens that Mlle. Moreau's address is on this card. When I ask a question, I expect to have it answered."

"The devil! My young friend, you are trying to carry things with a high hand, it strikes me."

"You are at perfect liberty to take offence at my manner, if you choose."

"Really, monsieur!" exclaimed the usurer, straightening himself up and twirling his black moustache quite ferociously. Then, with a sudden change of manner, he added: "Oh, nonsense! I have proved my valour beyond all question. An old soldier, with any number of wounds, I can afford to let many things pass; so I will merely say, my dear client, that that young girl's name and address happen to be on the card because I wrote them there so I would not forget them."

"You know Mlle. Mariette, then?"

"I do."

"You are paying court to her, perhaps?"

"Rather."

"With hopes of success?"

"Decidedly."

"Very well, I forbid you ever to set foot in her house again."

"Ah, ha! so I have a rival," the usurer said to himself. "How funny! I understand the girl's refusal now. I must get ahead of my client, though. He is young and unsophisticated, — that means

he is jealous. He will be sure to fall into the trap, then I can oust him, for I've set my heart on the girl, and if I can't get her this young fellow sha'n't. I'm resolved upon that!"

After which, he added aloud:

"My dear friend, when I am forbidden to do anything, I consider it my bounden duty to do precisely what I am forbidden to do."

"We will see about that, monsieur."

"Listen, young man. I have fought fifty-seven duels, so I can easily dispense with fighting the fifty-eighth with you. I prefer, consequently, to try to induce you to listen to the voice of reason, if possible. Permit me, therefore, to ask you one question: You have just returned from a journey, I believe?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You were absent several days, I think. May I ask if you have seen Mariette since your return?"

"No, monsieur, but — "

"Ah, well, my young friend, the same thing has happened to you that has happened to many other lovers. Mariette was not aware that you were the son of a millionaire; I presented myself in your absence, and offered her what has never yet failed to turn the head of a half-starved grisette. Her godmother, who was also dying of hunger, craved the fleshpots of Egypt, naturally, — and, well, '*les absents ont toujours tort*,' you know. Ha, ha, you understand!"

"My God!" groaned Louis, his anger giving place to profound

despair. "My God! it is true, then."

"If I had known that I was interfering with a prospective client, I would have abstained, I assure you. Now it is too late. Besides, there are as good fish in the sea — You know the proverb. Come, my young friend, don't take it so much to heart. The girl was entirely too young for you. She needs training. You will find plenty of charming women already trained and thoroughly trained. I can particularly recommend a certain Madame — "

"Wretch!" exclaimed Louis, seizing the man of affairs by the collar, "wretch! — "

"Monsieur, you shall answer for this!" exclaimed the commandant, trying to wrench himself from his rival's iron grasp.

Just then the door opened suddenly, and, at the sound of a loud laugh, both men turned simultaneously.

"Saint-Herem!" exclaimed Louis, recognising his old schoolmate.

"You here!" exclaimed Florestan de Saint-Herem, while the usurer, adjusting the collar of his dressing-gown, muttered savagely under his breath:

"What the devil brought Saint-Herem here just at this most inopportune moment, I should like to know!"

CHAPTER IX.

COMMANDANT DE LA MIRAUDIÈRE'S ANTECEDENTS

M. de Saint-Herem was a handsome man, not over thirty years of age, with a remarkably distinguished manner and bearing. His refined and rather spirituelle face sometimes wore an expression of extreme superciliousness, as when he addressed any remark to Commandant de la Miraudière, for instance; but at the sight of his old schoolmate he seemed to experience the liveliest joy. He even embraced him affectionately, and Louis returned the embrace heartily, spite of the conflicting emotions that agitated him.

But this manifestation of surprise and pleasure over, the chief actors in the scene relapsed into the same mood they had been in when Saint-Herem so unexpectedly burst in upon them, and Louis, pale with anger, continued to cast such wrathful glances at the usurer that M. de Saint-Herem said to that gentleman, with a mocking air:

"You must admit that I arrived very opportunely. But for my timely appearance upon the scene of action, it seems to me my friend Louis would soon have taken all the starch out of you."

"To dare to lay his hand on me, an old soldier!" exclaimed the commandant, advancing a step toward Louis. "This matter shall

not be allowed to end here, M. Richard."

"That is for you to say, M. de la Miraudière."

"M. de la Miraudière? Ha, ha, ha!" roared Florestan. "What! my dear Louis, you really take that fellow seriously? You believe in his title, in his cross, in his campaigns, his wounds, his duels, and his high-sounding name?"

"Enough of this jesting," said the pretended commandant, colouring with vexation. "Even friendly raillery has its limits, my dear fellow."

"M. Jerome Porquin," began Florestan, then, turning to Louis, he added, pointing to the usurer, "his real name is Porquin, and a very appropriate name it is, it seems to me."

Then once more addressing the pretended commandant, Florestan added, in a tone that admitted of no reply:

"This is the second time I have been obliged to forbid your calling me your dear friend, M. Porquin. It is different with me, I have bought and paid for the right to call you my dear, my enormously, entirely too dear M. Porquin, for you have swindled me most outrageously — "

"Really, monsieur, I will not allow — "

"What is that? Since when has M. Porquin become so terribly sensitive?" cried Saint-Herem, with an affectation of intense astonishment. "What has happened? Oh, yes, I understand. It is your presence, my friend Louis, that makes this much too dear M. Porquin squirm so when I expose his falsehoods and his absurd pretensions. To settle this vexed question once for all,

I must tell you — and let us see if he will have the effrontery to contradict me — who M. le Commandant de la Miraudière really is. He has never served his country except in the sutler's department. He went to Madrid in that capacity during the late war, and as he proved to be too great an expense to the government, he was asked to take himself off. He did so, and transformed himself into what he calls a man of affairs, or, in other words, into a usurer, and an intermediary in all sorts of shady transactions. The decoration he wears is that of the Golden Spur, a papal order, which one holy man procured from another holy man as a reward for his assistance in a most atrocious swindle. He has never fought a duel in his life, in the first place because he is one of the biggest cowards that ever lived, and in the second place because he bears such a bad reputation that he knows perfectly well that no respectable man would condescend to fight with him, and that if he becomes insolent the only thing to do is to give him a sound thrashing."

"When you want to make use of me you do not treat me in this fashion, monsieur," said the usurer, sullenly.

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