

ЭЖЕН СЮ

PRIDE: ONE OF
THE SEVEN
CARDINAL SINS

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Eugène Sue

Pride: One of the Seven Cardinal Sins

Vol. I

CHAPTER I

THE OLD COMMANDER

Elle avait un vice, l'orgueil, qui lui tenait lieu de toutes les qualités.¹

Commander Bernard, a resident of Paris, after having served under the Empire in the Marine Corps, and under the Restoration as a lieutenant in the navy, was retired about the year 1830, with the brevet rank of captain.

Honourably mentioned again and again for his daring exploits in the maritime engagements of the East Indian war, and subsequently recognised as one of the bravest soldiers in the Russian campaign, M. Bernard, the most unassuming and upright of men, with the kindest heart in the world, lived quietly and frugally upon his modest pension, in a little apartment on one of the least frequented streets of the Batignolles.

An elderly woman, named Madame Barbançon, had kept house for him ten years or more, and, though really very fond of him, led him a rather hard life at times, for the worthy female, who had an extremely high temper and a very despotic disposition, was very fond of reminding her employer that she had sacrificed an enviable social position to serve him.

The real truth was, Madame Barbançon had long acted as assistant in the establishment of a well-known midwife, – an experience which furnished her with material for an inexhaustible stock of marvellous stories, her great favourite being her adventure with a masked lady who, with her assistance, had brought a lovely girl baby into the world, a child Madame Barbançon had taken care of for two years, but which had been claimed by a stranger at the expiration of that time.

Four or five years after this memorable event, Madame Barbançon decided to resign her practice and assume the twofold functions of nurse and housekeeper.

About this time Commander Bernard, who was suffering greatly from the reopening of several old wounds, needed a nurse, and was so well pleased with Madame Barbançon's skill that he asked her to enter his service.

"You will have a pretty easy time of it, Mother Barbançon," the veteran said to her. "I am not hard to live with, and we shall get along comfortably together."

Madame Barbançon promptly accepted the offer, elevated herself forthwith to the position of Commander Bernard's *dame de confiance*, and slowly but surely became a veritable servant-mistress. Indeed, seeing the angelic patience with which the commander endured this domestic tyranny, one would have taken the old naval officer for some meek-spirited *rentier*, instead of one of the bravest soldiers of the Empire.

Commander Bernard was passionately fond of gardening, and lavished any amount of care and attention upon a little arbour, constructed by his own hands and covered with clematis, hop-vines, and honeysuckle, where he loved to sit after his frugal dinner and smoke his pipe and think of his campaigns and his former companions in arms. This arbour marked the limits of the commander's landed possessions, for though very small, the garden was divided into two parts. The portion claimed

¹ She had one fault, pride, which, in her, answered in place of all the virtues.

by Madame Barbançon aspired only to be useful; the other, of which the veteran took entire charge, was intended to please the eye only.

The precise boundaries of these two plats of ground had been, and were still, the cause of a quiet but determined struggle between the commander and his housekeeper.

Never did two nations, anxious to extend their frontiers, each at the expense of the other, resort to more trickery or display greater cleverness and perseverance in concealing and maintaining their mutual attempts at invasion.

We must do the commander the justice to say that he fought only for his rights, having no desire to extend, but merely to preserve his territory intact, – territory upon which the bold and insatiable housekeeper was ever trying to encroach by establishing her thyme, savory, parsley, and camomile beds among her employer's roses, tulips, and peonies.

Another cause of heated controversy between the commander and Madame Barbançon was the implacable hatred the latter felt for Napoleon, whom she had never forgiven for the death of a young soldier, – the only lover she had ever been able to boast of, probably. She carried this rancour so far, in fact, as to style the Emperor that "Corsican ogre," and even to deny him the possession of any military genius, an asseveration that amused the veteran immensely.

Nevertheless, in spite of these diverse political sentiments, and the ever recurring and annoying question of the boundaries of the two gardens, Madame Barbançon was, at heart, sincerely devoted to her employer, and attended assiduously to his every want, while the veteran, for his part, would have sorely missed his irascible housekeeper's care and attentions.

The spring of 1844 was fast drawing to a close. The May verdure was shining in all its freshness; three o'clock in the afternoon had just sounded; and though the day was warm, and the sun's rays ardent, the pleasant scent of freshly watered earth, combined with the fragrant odour of several small clumps of lilacs and syringas, testified to the faithful care the commander bestowed upon his garden, for from a frequently and laboriously filled wash-tub sunk in the earth, and dignified with the name of reservoir, the veteran had just treated his little domain to a refreshing shower; nor had he, in his generous impartiality, excluded his housekeeper's vegetable beds and kitchen herbs from the benefits of his ministrations.

The veteran, in his gardening costume of gray linen jacket and big straw hat, was now resting from his labours in the arbour, already nearly covered with a vigorous growth of clematis and honeysuckle. His sunburned features were characterised by an expression of unusual frankness and kindness, though a heavy moustache, as white as his bristling white hair, imparted a decidedly martial air to his physiognomy.

After wiping the sweat from his forehead with a blue checked handkerchief and returning it to his pocket, the veteran picked up his pipe from a table in the arbour, filled and lighted it, then, establishing himself in an old cane-bottomed armchair, began to smoke and enjoy the beauty of the day, the stillness of which was broken only by the occasional twitter of a few birds and the humming of Madame Barbançon, who was engaged in gathering some lettuce and parsley for the supper salad. If the veteran had not been blessed with nerves of steel, his *dolce far niente* would have been sadly disturbed by the monotonous refrain of the old-fashioned love song entitled "Poor Jacques," which the worthy woman was murdering in the most atrocious manner.

"Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre,"²

she sang in a voice as false as it was nasal, and the lugubrious, heart-broken expression she gave to the words, shaking her head sadly the while, made the whole thing extremely ludicrous.

² Instead of "Je manque de tout sur la terre."

For ten years Commander Bernard had endured this travesty without a murmur, and without taking the slightest notice of the ridiculous meaning Madame Barbançon gave to the last line of the chorus.

It is quite possible that to-day the meaning of the words struck him more forcibly, and that a desire to devour everything upon the surface of the earth did not seem to him to be the natural consequence of separation from one's beloved, for, after having lent an impartial and attentive ear a second time to his housekeeper's doleful ditty, he exclaimed, laying his pipe on the table:

"What the devil is that nonsense you are singing, Madame Barbançon?"

"It is a very pretty love song called 'Poor Jacques,'" snapped Madame Barbançon, straightening herself up. "Every one to his taste, you know, monsieur, and you have a perfect right to make fun of it, if you choose, of course. This isn't the first time you have heard me sing it, though."

"No, no, you're quite right about that!" responded the commander, satirically.

"I learned the song," resumed the housekeeper, sighing heavily, "in days – in days – but enough!" she exclaimed, burying her regrets in her capacious bosom. "I sang it, I remember, to that masked lady who came – "

"I'd rather hear the song," hastily exclaimed the veteran, seeing himself threatened with the same tiresome story. "Yes, I much prefer the song to the story. It isn't so long, but the deuce take me if I understand you when you say:

"Mais à présent que je suis loin de toi,
Je mange de tout sur la terre."

"What, monsieur, you don't understand?"

"No, I don't."

"It is very plain it seems to me, but soldiers are so unfeeling."

"But think a moment, Mother Barbançon; here is a girl who, in her despair at poor Jacques's absence, sets about eating everything on the face of the earth."

"Of course, monsieur, any child could understand that."

"But I do not, I must confess."

"What! you can't understand that this unfortunate young girl is so heart-broken, after her lover's departure, that she is ready to eat anything and everything – even poison, poor thing! Her life is of so little value to her, – she is so wretched that she doesn't even know what she is doing, and so eats everything that happens to be within reach – and yet, her misery doesn't move you in the least."

The veteran listened attentively to this explanation, which did not seem to him so entirely devoid of reason, now, after all.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he responded, nodding his head; "but it is like all love songs – extremely far-fetched."

"Poor Jacques' far-fetched? The idea!" cried Madame Barbançon, indignantly.

"'Every one to his taste,' as you remarked a moment ago," answered the veteran. "I like our old sea songs very much better. A man knows what he is singing about when he sings them."

And in a voice as powerful as it was discordant, the old captain began to sing:

"Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des sardines,
Pour aller à Lorient pêcher des harengs – "

"Monsieur!" exclaimed Madame Barbançon, interrupting her employer, with a highly incensed and prudish air, for she knew the end of the ditty, "you forget there are ladies present."

"Is that so?" demanded the veteran, straining his neck to see outside of the harbour.

"There is no need to make such an effort as that, it seems to me," remarked the housekeeper, with great dignity. "You can see me easy enough, I should think."

"That is true, Mother Barbançon. I always forget that you belong to the other sex, but for all that I like my song much better than I do yours. It was a great favourite on the *Armide*, the frigate on which I shipped when I was only fourteen, and afterwards we sang it many a time on dry land when I was in the Marine Corps. Oh, those were happy days! I was young then."

"Yes, and then Bû-û-onaparte" – it is absolutely necessary to spell and accent the word in this way, to give the reader any idea of the disdainful and sneering manner in which Mother Barbançon uttered the name of the great man who had been the cause of her brave soldier boy's death – "Bû-û-onaparte was your leader."

"Yes, the Emperor, that 'Corsican ogre,' the Emperor you revile so, wasn't far off, I admit."

"Yes, monsieur, your Emperor was an ogre, and worse than an ogre."

"What! worse than an ogre?"

"Yes, yes, laugh as much as you like, but he was. Do you know, monsieur, that when that Corsican ogre had the Pope in his power at Fontainebleau, do you know how grossly he insulted our Holy Father, your beast of a Bû-û-onaparte?"

"No, Mother Barbançon, I never heard of it, upon my word of honour."

"It is of no use for you to deny it; I heard it from a young man in the guards – "

"Who must be a pretty old customer by this time, but let us hear the story."

"Ah, well, monsieur, your Bû-û-onaparte was mean enough, in his longing to humiliate the Pope, to harness him to the little King of Rome's carriage, then get into it and make the poor Holy Father drag him across the park at Fontainebleau, in order that he might go in this fashion to announce his divorce to the Empress Josephine – that poor, dear, good woman!"

"What, Mother Barbançon," exclaimed the old sailor, almost choking with laughter, "that scoundrel of an Emperor made the Pope drag him across the park in the King of Rome's carriage to tell the Empress Josephine of his divorce?"

"Yes, monsieur, in order to torment her on account of her religion, just as he forced her to eat a big ham every Good Friday in the presence of Roustan, that dreadful mameluke of his, who used to boast of being a Mussulman and talk about his harem before the priests, just to insult the clergy, until they blushed with shame. There is nothing to laugh at in all this, monsieur. At one time, everybody knew and talked about it, even – "

But, unfortunately, the housekeeper was unable to continue her tirade. Her recriminations were just then interrupted by a vigorous peal of the bell, and she hurried off to open the door.

A few words of explanation are necessary before the introduction of a new character, Olivier Raymond, Commander Bernard's nephew.

The veteran's sister had married a copyist in the Interior Department, and after several years of wedded life the clerk died, leaving a widow and one son, then about eight years of age; after which several friends of the deceased interested themselves in the fatherless boy's behalf, and secured him a scholarship in a fairly good school.

The widow, left entirely without means, and having no right to a pension, endeavoured to support herself by her needle, but after a few years of pinched and laborious existence she left her son an orphan. His uncle Bernard, his sole relative, was then a lieutenant in command of a schooner attached to one of our naval stations in the Southern Pacific. Upon his return to France, the captain found that his nephew's last year in college was nearing an end. Olivier, though his college course had been marked by no particularly brilliant triumphs, had at least thoroughly profited by his gratuitous education, but unfortunately, this education being, as is often the case, far from practical, his future on leaving college was by no means assured.

After having reflected long and seriously upon his nephew's precarious position, and being unable to give him any pecuniary assistance by reason of the smallness of his own pay, Commander Bernard said to Olivier:

"My poor boy, there is but one thing for you to do. You are strong, brave, and intelligent. You have received an education which renders you superior to most of the poor young men who enlist in the army. The conscription is almost sure to catch you next year. Get ahead of it. Enlist. In that case, you will at least be able to select the branch of the service you will enter. There is fighting in Africa, and in five or six years you are likely to be made an officer. This will give you some chance of a career. Still, if the idea of a military life is distasteful to you, my dear boy, we will try to think of something else. We can get along on my pay, as a retired officer, until something else offers. Now think the matter over."

Olivier was not long in making up his mind. Three months afterward he enlisted, on condition that he should be assigned to the African Chasseurs. A year later he was a quartermaster's sergeant; one year afterward a quartermaster. Attacked with one of those stubborn fevers, which a return to a European climate alone can cure, Olivier, unfortunately, was obliged to leave Africa just as he had every reason to expect an officer's epaulettes. After his recovery he was assigned to a regiment of hussars, and, after eighteen months' service in that, he had recently come to spend a six months' furlough in Paris, with his uncle.

The old sailor's flat consisted of a tiny kitchen, into which Madame Barbançon's room opened, of a sort of hall-way, which served as a dining-room, and another considerably larger room, in which the commander and his nephew slept. Olivier, knowing how little his uncle had to live on, would not consent to remain idle. He wrote a remarkably good hand, and this, together with the knowledge of accounts acquired while acting as quartermaster, enabled him to secure several sets of books to keep among the petty merchants in the neighbourhood; so, instead of being a burden upon the veteran, the young officer, with Madame Barbançon's connivance, secretly added his mite to the forty-eight francs' pay the commander received each month, besides treating his uncle now and then to agreeable surprises, which both delighted and annoyed the worthy man, knowing, as he did, the assiduous labour Olivier imposed upon himself to earn this money.

Accustomed from childhood to privations of every kind, first by his experience as a charity pupil, and subsequently by the vicissitudes of army life in Africa, kind-hearted, genial, enthusiastic, and brave, Olivier had but one fault, that is, if an excessive delicacy in all money matters, great and small, can be called a fault. As a common soldier, he even carried his scruples so far that he would refuse the slightest invitation from his comrades, if he was not allowed to pay his own score. This extreme sensitiveness having been at first ridiculed and considered mere affectation, two duels, in which Olivier quite covered himself with glory, caused this peculiarity in the character of the young soldier to be both accepted and respected.

Olivier, cheerful, obliging, quick-witted, and delighted with everything, enlivened his uncle's modest home immensely by his gay spirits. In his rare moments of leisure the young man cultivated his taste by reading the great poets, or else he spaded and watered and gardened with his uncle, after which they smoked their pipes, and talked of foreign lands and of war. At other times, calling into play the culinary knowledge acquired in African camps, Olivier initiated Madame Barbançon into the mysteries of *brochettes de mouton* and other viands, the cooking lessons being enlivened with jokes and all sorts of teasing remarks about *Bû-û-onaparte*, though the housekeeper scolded and snubbed Olivier none the less because she loved him with her whole heart. In short, the young man's presence had cheered the monotonous existence of the veteran and his housekeeper so much that their hearts quite failed them when they recollected that two months of Olivier's leave had already expired.

CHAPTER II

THE BRAVE DUKE

Olivier Raymond was not more than twenty-four years of age, and possessed a singularly expressive and attractive face. His short, white hussar jacket, trimmed with red and decorated with yellow frogs, his well-cut, light blue trousers, that fitted his well-formed supple limbs perfectly, and his blue kepi, perched upon one side of a head covered with hair of the same bright chestnut hue as his moustache, imparted an extremely dashing and martial air to his appearance, only, instead of a sabre, Olivier carried that day under his left arm a big roll of papers, and in his right hand a formidable bundle of pens.

As the young man deposited these eminently peaceful implements upon a table, he turned, and exclaimed gaily, "How are you, Mamma Barbançon?"

In fact, he even had the audacity to put his long arms about the housekeeper's bony waist, and give her a slight squeeze as he spoke.

"Will you never have done with your nonsense, you rascal?" snapped the delighted housekeeper.

"Oh, this is only the beginning. I've got to make a complete conquest of you, Mamma Barbançon."

"Of me?"

"Unquestionably. It is absolutely necessary. I'm compelled to do it."

"And why?"

"In order to induce you to grant me a favour."

"We'll see about that. What is it?"

"Tell me first where my uncle is."

"Smoking his pipe out under the arbour."

"All right! Wait for me here, Mamma Barbançon, and prepare your mind for something startling."

"Something startling, M. Olivier?"

"Yes, something monstrous – unheard-of – impossible!"

"Monstrous – unheard-of – " repeated Madame Barbançon, wonderingly, as she watched the young soldier dash off in pursuit of his uncle.

"How are you, my lad? I didn't expect you so early," said the old captain, holding out his hand to his nephew in pleased surprise. "Home so soon! But so much the better!"

"So much the better!" retorted Olivier, gaily. "On the contrary, you little know what is in store for you. Courage, uncle, courage!"

"Stop your nonsense, you young scoundrel!"

"Close your eyes, and now, 'forward march!'"

"Forward march? Against whom?"

"Against Mother Barbançon, my brave uncle."

"But why?"

"To break the news that – that – that I have invited – some one to dinner."

"The devil!" exclaimed the veteran, recoiling a step or two in evident dismay.

"To dinner – to-day," continued the young lieutenant.

"The devil!" reiterated the veteran, recoiling three steps this time.

"Moreover, my guest – is a duke," continued Olivier.

"A duke! We are lost!" faltered the veteran.

And this time he entirely vanished from sight in his verdant refuge, where he seemed as resolved to maintain his stand as if in some impregnable fortress. "May the devil and all his imps seize me if I undertake to announce any such fact as this to Mother Barbançon!"

"What, uncle, – an officer of marines – afraid?"

"But you've no idea what a scrape you've got yourself into, young man! It's a desperate case, I tell you. You don't know Madame Barbançon. But, good heavens, here she comes now!"

"Our retreat is cut off, uncle," laughed the young man, as Madame Barbançon, whose curiosity had been excited to such a degree that she could wait no longer, appeared in the entrance to the harbour. "My guest will be here in an hour at the very latest, and we needs must conquer or perish of hunger, – you and I and my guest, whose name, I ought to tell you, is the Duc de Senneterre."

"It's no affair of mine, unhappy boy," responded the commander. "Tell her yourself; here she is."

But Olivier only laughed, and, turning to the dreaded housekeeper, exclaimed:

"My uncle has something to tell you, Madame Barbançon."

"There's not a word of truth in what he says," protested the veteran, wiping the sweat from his brow with his checked handkerchief. "It is Olivier who has something to tell you."

"Come, come, uncle, Mother Barbançon is not as dangerous as she looks. Make a clean breast of it."

"It is your affair, my boy. Get out of the scrape as best you can."

The housekeeper, after having glanced first at the uncle and then at the nephew with mingled curiosity and anxiety, at last asked, turning to her employer:

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Ask Olivier, my dear woman. As for me, I've nothing whatever to do with it; I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Ah, well, Mamma Barbançon," said the young soldier, bravely, "you are to lay three covers instead of two at dinner, that is all."

"Three covers, M. Olivier, and why?"

"Because I have invited a former comrade to dine with us."

"*Bon Dieu!*" exclaimed the housekeeper, evidently more terrified than angry, "a guest, and this is not even *pot au feu* day. We have only an onion soup, a vinaigrette made out of yesterday's beef, and a salad."

"And what more could you possibly want, Mamma Barbançon?" cried Olivier, joyously, for he had not expected to find the larder nearly so well supplied. "An onion soup concocted by you, a vinaigrette and a salad seasoned by you, make a banquet for the gods, and my comrade, Gerald, will dine like a king. Take notice that I do not say like an emperor, Mamma Barbançon."

But this delicate allusion to madame's anti-Bonapartist opinions passed unnoticed. For the moment the worshipper of the departed guardsman was lost in the anxious housewife.

"To think that you couldn't have selected a *pot au feu* day when it would have been such an easy matter, M. Olivier," she exclaimed, reproachfully.

"It was not I but my comrade who chose the day, Mamma Barbançon."

"But in polite society, M. Olivier, it is a very common thing to say plainly: 'Don't come to-day; come to-morrow. We shall have the *pot au feu* then.' But, after all, I don't suppose we've got dukes and peers to deal with."

Olivier was strongly tempted to excite the worthy housewife's perturbation to the highest pitch by telling her that it was indeed a duke that was coming to eat her vinaigrette, but scarcely daring to subject Madame Barbançon's culinary self-love to this severe test, he contented himself with saying:

"The mischief is done, Mamma Barbançon, so all I ask is that you will not put me to shame in the presence of an old African comrade."

"Great heavens! Is it possible you fear that, M. Olivier? Put you to shame – I? Quite the contrary, for I would like –"

"It is getting late," said Olivier, "and my friend will soon be here, as hungry as a wolf, so, Mamma Barbançon, take pity on us!"

"True, I haven't a minute to lose."

And the worthy woman bustled away, repeating dolefully, "To think he couldn't have chosen *pot au feu* day."

"Well, she took it much better than I expected," remarked the veteran. "It is evident that she is very fond of you. But now, between ourselves, my dear nephew, you ought to have warned me of your intentions, so your friend might have found, at least, a passable dinner, but you just ask him to come and take pot-luck; and he is a duke into the bargain. But, tell me, how the deuce did you happen to have a duke for a comrade in the African Chasseurs?"

"I'll explain, my dear uncle, for I'm sure you'll take a great fancy to my friend Gerald. There are not many of his stamp to be found nowadays, I assure you. We were classmates at the college of Louis le Grand. I left for Africa. Six months afterward my friend Gerald was in the ranks beside me."

"A private?"

"Yes."

"But why didn't he enter the army by way of St. Cyr? It was merely a whim or caprice on his part, I suppose, this enlisting?"

"No, uncle; on the contrary, Gerald's conduct in the matter has been the result of profound reflection. He is a grand seigneur by birth, being, as I told you just now, the Duc de Senneterre."

"That is a name that has figured prominently in the history of France," remarked the old sailor.

"Yes, the house of Senneterre is as ancient as it is illustrious, uncle, but Gerald's family has lost the greater part of the immense fortune it once possessed. There remains now, I think, an income of barely forty thousand francs a year. That is a good deal of money for the generality of people, but not for persons of noble birth; besides, Gerald has two sisters who must be provided with dowries."

"But tell me how and why your young duke happened to join the army as a private?"

"In the first place, my friend Gerald is very original in his ideas, and has all kinds of odd notions about life. When he found himself within the conscription age, on leaving college, his father – he had a father then – remarked one day, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that arrangements must be made to secure a substitute if any such contingency should arise, and do you know what this peculiar friend of mine replied?"

"Tell me."

"Father," said Gerald, "this is a duty that every right-minded man owes to his country. It is an obligation of race, particularly when a war is actually going on, and I consider it an ignoble act to endeavour to escape the dangers of war by hiring some poor devil to leave his farm or work-bench and go and run the risk of being killed in your stead. To do this is to confess oneself a coward, and, as I am not desirous of such a reputation, I shall serve, if my name is drawn."

"Zounds! I'm in love with your young duke, already!" exclaimed the veteran.

"He stated the case pretty correctly, didn't he?" replied Olivier, with friendly complacency. "Though this resolution seemed very strange to his father, that gentleman had too keen a sense of honour to oppose it. Gerald's name was drawn, and that is the way he happened to be a private in the African Chasseurs, currying his horse, doing his share of the stable and kitchen work like the rest of us, and even going to the guard-house without a word of complaint if he absented himself without permission. In short, there wasn't a better soldier in the regiment."

"Nor a braver, too, I'll be bound," said the veteran, more and more interested.

"Brave as a lion, and so gay and enthusiastic when he charged upon the enemy that he would have fired the hearts of a whole battalion!"

"But with his name and connections, I should think he would soon have been made an officer."

"And so he would, doubtless, though he cared nothing about it, for when his term of service expired, and he had paid his debt to his country, as he expressed it, he said he wanted to return and again enjoy the pleasures of Paris life of which he was passionately fond. After three years of service Gerald had become a quartermaster like myself. About this time he was severely wounded in the

shoulder during a bold charge upon quite a large body of Arabs. Fortunately, I was able to extricate him and carry him off the field, – lifeless to all appearance, – on my horse. The result was he was furloughed, and on leaving the service he went back to Paris. We had become quite intimate, and after his return to France we kept up quite a brisk correspondence. I hoped to meet him again upon my arrival here, but I learned that he was travelling in England. This morning, as I was walking along the boulevard, I heard some one call me at the top of his voice, and, turning, I saw Gerald jump out of a handsome cabriolet, and a second later we were embracing each other as two friends embrace each other on the battlefield after a warm engagement."

"'We must dine and spend the evening together,' he said.' Where are you staying?"

"'With my uncle,' I replied.' I have told him about you a hundred times, and he loves you almost as much as I do.'

"'Very well, then I will come and take dinner with you,' said Gerald. 'I want to see your uncle. I have a thousand things to say to him.'

"And knowing what a kind-hearted, unassuming fellow Gerald is, I assented to his proposal, warning him, however, that I should be obliged to leave him at seven o'clock, exactly as if I were clerk of the court, or was obliged to return to quarters," concluded Olivier, gaily.

"Good lad that you are!" said the commander, affectionately.

"It will give me great pleasure to introduce Gerald to you, uncle, for I know that you will feel at ease with him at once; besides," continued the young soldier, colouring a little, "Gerald is rich, I am poor. He knows my scruples, and as he is aware that I could not afford to pay my share of the bill at any fashionable restaurant, he preferred to invite himself here."

"I understand," said the veteran, "and your young duke shows both delicacy of feeling and kindness of heart in acting thus. Let us at least hope that Madame Barbançon's vinaigrette won't disagree with him," added the commander, laughing.

He had scarcely given utterance to this philanthropical wish when the door-bell gave another loud peal, and a moment afterwards the uncle and nephew saw the young Duc de Senneterre coming down the garden walk preceded by Madame Barbançon, who was in such a state of mental perturbation that she had entirely forgotten to remove her big kitchen apron.

CHAPTER III

THE DINNER IN THE ARBOUR

The Duc de Senneterre, who was about Olivier Raymond's age, had a distinguished bearing, and an exceedingly handsome and attractive face, with black hair and moustache, and eyes of a deep rich blue. His attire was marked with an elegant simplicity.

"Uncle, this is Gerald, my best friend, of whom I have so often spoken," said Olivier.

"I am delighted to see you, monsieur," said the veteran, cordially offering his hand to his nephew's friend.

"And I, commander," rejoined Gerald, with that deference to age which is imbibed from prolonged military service, "am sincerely glad to have the honour of pressing your hand. I know all your goodness to Olivier, and as I regard him almost as a brother, you must understand how thoroughly I have always appreciated your devotion to him."

"Gentlemen, will you have your soup in the house or under the arbour, as you usually do when the weather is fine?" inquired Madame Barbançon.

"We will dine in the arbour – if the commander approves, my dear Madame Barbançon," responded Gerald; "it will be charming; the afternoon is perfect."

"Monsieur knows me?" exclaimed the housekeeper, looking first at Olivier, and then at the duke, in great astonishment.

"Know you, Madame Barbançon?" exclaimed Gerald, gaily. "Why, hasn't Olivier spoken of you a hundred times while we were in camp, and haven't we had more than one quarrel all on your account?"

"On my account?"

"Most assuredly. That rascal of an Olivier is a great Bonapartist, you know. He cannot forgive any one for detesting that odious tyrant, and I took your part, for I, too, abhor the tyrant – that vile Corsican ogre!"

"Corsican ogre! You are a man after my own heart, monsieur. Let us shake hands – we understand each other," cried the housekeeper, triumphantly.

And she extended her bony hand to Gerald, who shook it heartily, at the same time remarking to the commander:

"Upon my word, sir, you had better take care, and you, too, Olivier, will have to look out now. Madame Barbançon had no one to help her before, now she will have a sturdy auxiliary in me."

"Look here, Madame Barbançon," exclaimed Olivier, coming to the rescue of his friend whom the housekeeper seemed inclined to monopolise, "Gerald must be nearly famished, you forget that. Come, I'll help you bring the table out here."

"True, I had forgotten all about dinner," cried the housekeeper, hastening towards the house.

Seeing Olivier start after her, as if to aid her, Gerald said:

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow, do you suppose I'm going to leave all the work to you?"

Then turning to the commander:

"You don't object, I trust, commander. I am making very free, I know, but when we were in the army together Olivier and I set the mess-table more than once, so you will find that I'm not as awkward as you might suppose."

It was a pleasure to see how cleverly and adroitly and gaily Gerald assisted his former comrade in setting the table under the arbour. The task was accomplished so quickly and neatly that one would have supposed that the young duke, like his friend, must have been used to poverty all his life.

To please his friend, Gerald, in half an hour, made a complete conquest of the veteran and his housekeeper, who was delighted beyond expression to see her anti-Bonapartist ally partake with

great apparent enjoyment of her onion soup, salad, and vinaigrette, to which Gerald even asked to be helped twice.

It is needless to say that, during this cheerful repast, the veteran, delicately led on by Gerald, was induced to talk of his campaigns; then, this tribute of respect paid to their companion's superior years, the two young men related all sorts of episodes of their college and army life.

The veteran had lighted his pipe, and Gerald and Olivier their cigars, when the latter happened to inquire of his friend:

"By the way, what has become of that scoundrel, Macreuse, who used to play the spy on us at college? You remember him? – a big, light-haired fellow, who used to cuff us soundly as he passed, just because he dared to, being twice as big as we were."

At the name of Macreuse, Gerald's face took on an expression of mingled contempt and aversion, and he replied:

"You speak rather slightly, – M. Célestin de Macreuse, it seems to me."

"*De Macreuse!*" cried Olivier. "He must have treated himself to the *de* since we knew him, then. In those days his origin was shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew anything about his parents. He was so poor that he once ate half a dozen wood-lice to earn a sou."

"And then he was so horribly cruel," added Gerald; "do you remember his putting those little birds' eyes out with a pin to see if they would fly afterwards?"

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed the indignant commander. "Such a man as that ought to be flayed alive."

"It would rejoice my heart to see your prediction fulfilled, commander," said Gerald, laughing. Then, turning to Olivier, he continued: "It will surprise you very much, I think, when I tell you what I know of M. Célestin de Macreuse. I have told you, I believe, how very exclusive the society is in which my mother has always moved, so you can judge of my astonishment when one evening, shortly after my return to Paris, I heard the name of M. de Macreuse announced in my mother's drawing-room. It was the very man. I had retained such an unpleasant recollection of the fellow, that I went to my mother and said:

"'Why do you receive that man who just spoke to you, – that big, light-haired, sallow man?'

"'Why, that is M. de Macreuse,' my mother replied, in tones indicative of the profoundest respect.

"'And who is M. de Macreuse, my dear mother? I never saw him in your house before.'

"'No, for he has just returned from his travels,' she answered. 'He is a very distinguished and highly exemplary young man, – the founder of the St. Polycarpe Mission.'

"'The deuce! And what is the St. Polycarpe Mission, my dear mother?'

"'It is a society that strives to make the poor resigned to their misery by teaching them that the more they suffer here, the happier they will be hereafter.'

"'*Se non è vero, è ben trovato,*' I laughingly remarked. 'But it seems to me that this fellow has a very plump face to be advocating the good effects of starvation.'

"'My son, I meant every word that I just said to you,' replied my mother, gravely. 'Many highly esteemed persons have connected themselves with M. de Macreuse's work, – a work to which he devotes himself with truly evangelical zeal. But here he comes. I would like to introduce you to him.'

"'Pray do nothing of the kind, mother,' I retorted, quickly. 'I am sure to be impolite; I do not like the gentleman's looks; besides, what I already know of him makes my antipathy to his acquaintance insurmountable. We were at college together, and –'

"But I was unable to say any more; Macreuse was now close to my mother, and I was standing beside her. 'My dear M. de Macreuse,' she said to her protégé, in the most amiable manner, after casting a withering look at me, 'I wish to introduce my son, one of your former classmates, who will be charmed to renew his acquaintance with you.'

"Macreuse bowed profoundly, then said, in a rather condescending way, 'I have been absent from Paris some time, monsieur, and was consequently ignorant of your return to France, so I did not expect to have the honour of meeting you at your mother's house this evening. We were at college together, and –'

"That is true,' I interrupted, 'and I recollect perfectly well how you played the spy on us to ingratiate yourself with the teachers; how you would stoop to any dirty trick to make a penny; and how you put out the eyes of little birds with pins. Possibly this last was in the charitable hope that their sufferings here would profit them hereafter.'"

"A clever thrust that!" exclaimed the commander, with a hearty laugh.

"And what did Macreuse say?" asked Olivier.

"The scoundrel's big moon face turned scarlet. He tried to smile and stammer out a few words, but suddenly my mother, looking at me with a reproachful air, rose, and to rescue our friend from his embarrassment, I suppose, said, 'M. de Macreuse, may I ask you to take me to get a cup of tea?'"

"But how did this man gain an entrance into such an exclusive circle as that of the Faubourg St Germain?" inquired Olivier.

"Nobody knows exactly," replied Gerald. "This much is true, however. If one door in our circle opens, all the others soon do the same. But this first door is hard to open, and who opened it for Macreuse nobody knows, though some persons seem to think that it was Abbé Ledoux, a favourite spiritual director in our set. This seems quite probable, and I have taken almost as strong a dislike to the abbé as to Macreuse. If this dislike needed any justification, it would have it, so far as I am concerned, in the estimate of Macreuse's character formed by a singular man who is rarely deceived in his judgment of persons."

"And who is this infallible man, pray?" inquired Olivier, smiling.

"A hunchback no taller than that," replied Gerald, indicating with his hand a height of about four and a half feet.

"A hunchback?" repeated Olivier, greatly surprised.

"Yes, a hunchback, as quick-witted and determined as his satanic majesty himself, – stiff as an iron bar to those whom he dislikes and despises, but full of affection and devotion to those whom he honours – though such persons, I am forced to admit, are rare – and never making the slightest attempt to conceal from any individual the liking or aversion he or she inspires."

"It is fortunate for him that his infirmity gives him this privilege of plain speaking," remarked the commander. "But for that, your hunchback would be likely to have a hard time of it."

"His infirmity?" said Gerald, laughing. "Though a hunchback, the Marquis de Maillefort is, I assure you –"

"He is a marquis?" interrupted Olivier.

"Yes, a marquis, and an aristocrat of the old school. He is a scion of the ducal house of Hautmartel, the head of which has resided in Germany since 1830. But though he is a hunchback, M. de Maillefort, as I was about to remark before, is as alert and vigorous as any young man, in spite of his forty-five years. And, by the way, you and I consider ourselves pretty good swordsmen, do we not?"

"Well, yes."

"Very well; the marquis could touch us eight times out of twelve. He rivals the incomparable Bertrand. His movements are as light as a bird's, and as swift as lightning itself."

"This brave little hunchback interests me very much," said the veteran. "If he has fought any duels his adversaries must have cut strange figures."

"The marquis has fought several duels, in all of which he evinced the greatest coolness and courage, at least so my father, who was a personal friend of the marquis, once told me."

"And he goes into society in spite of his infirmity?" inquired Olivier.

"Sometimes he frequents it assiduously; then absents himself for months at a time. His is a very peculiar nature. My father told me that for many years the marquis seemed to be in a state of profound melancholy, but I have never seen him other than gay and amusing."

"But with his courage, his skill in the use of weapons, and his quick wit, he is certainly a man to be feared."

"Yes, and you can easily imagine how greatly his presence disquiets certain persons whom society continues to receive on account of their birth, in spite of their notorious villainies. Macreuse, for instance, as soon as he sees the marquis enter by one door, makes his escape by another."

The conversation was here interrupted by an incident which would have been unworthy even of comment in some parts of the town, but rare enough in the Batignolles.

The arbour in which the little party had dined skirted the garden wall, and at the farther end of it was a latticed gate, which afforded the occupants a view of the street beyond. A handsome carriage, drawn by two superb horses stopped exactly in front of this gate.

This carriage was empty.

The footman on the box beside the driver, and, like him, dressed in rich livery, descended from his seat, and drawing from his pocket a letter that evidently bore an address, looked from side to side as if in search of a number, then disappeared, after motioning the coachman to follow him.

"This is the first vehicle of that kind I've seen in the Batignolles in ten years," remarked the old sailor. "It is very flattering to the neighbourhood."

"I never saw finer horses," said Olivier, with the air of a connoisseur. "Do they belong to you, Gerald?"

"Do you take me for a millionaire?" responded the young duke, gaily. "I keep a saddle-horse, and I put one of my mother's horses in my cabriolet, when she is not using them. That is my stable. This does not prevent me from loving horses, or from being something of a sporting man. But, speaking of horses, do you remember that dunce, Mornand, another of our college mates?"

"And still another of our mutual antipathies, – of course I do. What has become of him?"

"He is quite a distinguished personage now."

"He! Nonsense!"

"But I tell you he is. He is a member of the Chamber of Peers. He discourses at length, there. People even listen to him. In short, he is a minister in embryo."

"De Mornand?"

"Yes, my worthy friend. He is as dull as ever, and twice as arrogant and self-complacent. He doubts everything except his own merit. He possesses an insatiable ambition, and he belongs to a coterie of jealous and spiteful individuals, – spiteful because they are mediocre, or, rather, mediocre because they are spiteful. Such men rise in the world with, marvellous rapidity, though Mornand has a broad back and supple loins, – he will succeed, one aiding the other."

Just then the footman who had disappeared with the carriage returned, and, seeing through the latticed gate the little party in the arbour, approached, and, raising his hand to his hat, said:

"Gentlemen, will you be so kind as to tell me if this garden belongs to No. 7?"

"Yes," replied the commander.

"And to the apartment on the ground floor of that house?"

"Yes."

"I rang that bell three times, but no one answered it."

"I occupy that apartment," said the commander, greatly surprised. "What do you want?"

"Here is a very important letter for a Madame Barbançon, who, I am told, lives here."

"Yes, she does live here," replied the veteran, more and more surprised.

Then, seeing the housekeeper at the other end of the garden, he called out to her:

"Mother Barbançon, the door-bell has rung three times, unanswered, while you've been trespassing upon my preserves. Come quick! Here is a letter for you."

CHAPTER IV THE DUCHESS

Madame Barbançon promptly responded to this peremptory summons, and, after a hasty apology to her employer, said to the waiting servant:

"You have a letter for me? From whom?"

"From the Comtesse de Beaumesnil, madame," replied the man, handing Madame Barbançon the letter through the lattice.

"Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil?" exclaimed the astonished housekeeper; "I do not know her. I not only don't know her, but I haven't the slightest idea who she is – not the slightest," the worthy woman repeated, as she opened the letter.

"The Comtesse de Beaumesnil?" inquired Gerald, evidently much interested.

"Do you know her?" asked Olivier.

"I met her two or three years ago," replied Gerald. "She was wonderfully beautiful, then, but the poor woman has not left her bed for a year. I understand that hers is a hopeless case. Worse still, M. de Beaumesnil, who had gone to Italy with their only child, a daughter, who was ordered south by the physicians, – M. de Beaumesnil died quite recently in Naples, in consequence of having been thrown from his horse, so if Madame de Beaumesnil dies, as they apprehend, her daughter will be left an orphan at the age of fifteen or sixteen years."

"Poor child! This is really very sad," said the commander, sympathisingly.

"Nevertheless, Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a brilliant future before her," continued Gerald, "for she will be the richest heiress in France. The Beaumesnil property yields an income of over three million francs!"

"Three million francs!" exclaimed Olivier, laughing. "Can it be that there are people who really have an income of three million francs? Do such people come and go, and move about and talk, just like other people? I should certainly like to be brought face to face with one of these wonderful creatures, Gerald."

"I'll do my best to gratify you, but I warn you that as a general thing they are not pleasant to contemplate. I am not referring to Mlle. de Beaumesnil, however; she may be as beautiful as her mother."

"I should like very much to know how one can spend such an income as that," said the commander, in all sincerity, emptying the ashes from his pipe.

"Great Heavens! is it possible?" exclaimed Madame Barbançon, who, in the meantime, had read the letter handed to her. "I am to go in a carriage – in a carriage like that?"

"What is the matter, Mother Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"I must ask you to let me go away for a little while."

"Certainly, but where are you going, may I ask?"

"To the house of Madame de Beaumesnil," replied the good woman, in a very important tone. "She desires some information which I alone can give, it seems. May I turn Bonapartist if I know what to make of all this!"

But the next instant the former midwife uttered an exclamation, as if a new and startling idea had just occurred to her, and, turning to her employer, she said:

"Monsieur, will you step out into the garden a moment with me? I want to say a word to you in private."

"Oh," replied the veteran, following the lady out of the arbour, "it is an important matter, it seems. Go on; I am listening, Madame Barbançon."

The housekeeper, having led her employer a short distance from the arbour, turned to him and said, with a mysterious air:

"Monsieur, do you know Madame Herbaut, who lives on the second floor and has two daughters? The lady to whom I introduced M. Olivier about a fortnight ago, you recollect."

"I don't know her, but you have often spoken to me about her. Well, what of it?"

"I recollect now that one of her particular friends, Madame Laîné, is now in Italy, acting as governess to the daughter of a countess whose name sounds something like Beaumesnil. In fact, it may be this very same countess."

"It may be, I admit, Mother Barbançon. Well, go on."

"And she may have heard about me through Madame Laîné, whom I have met at Madame Herbaut's."

"That, too, is very possible, Madame Barbançon. You will soon know for a certainty, however, as you are going to Madame Beaumesnil's."

"*Mon Dieu!* monsieur, another idea has just occurred to me."

"Let us hear it," said the veteran, with infinite patience.

"I have told you about that masked lady who –"

"You're not going to tell that story again, surely!" cried the commander, with the evident intention of beating a retreat.

"No, monsieur, but what if all this should have some connection with that young lady?"

"The quickest way to ascertain, Mother Barbançon, is to get off as soon as possible. We shall both be the gainers by it."

"You are right, monsieur. I will go at once."

And following her employer, who had returned to his guests in the arbour, the housekeeper said to the footman, who was still standing a few feet from the gate:

"Young man, as soon as I can get my bonnet and shawl on I shall be at your service."

And a few minutes afterwards Madame Barbançon, triumphantly passing the gate in her carriage, felt that the deference due her employer made it incumbent upon her to rise to her feet in the vehicle, and bow low to the commander and his guests.

Just then the clock in a neighbouring church struck seven.

"Seven o'clock!" exclaimed Olivier, evidently much annoyed. "I am very sorry, my dear Gerald, but I shall have to leave you."

"Already! And why?"

"I promised a worthy mason in the neighbourhood that I would go over his accounts with him this evening, and you have no idea what a task it is to straighten out books like his!"

"True, you did warn me that you would only be at liberty until seven o'clock," replied Gerald. "I had forgotten the fact, I was enjoying my visit so much."

"Olivier," remarked the veteran, whose spirits seemed to have undergone a sudden decline since his nephew's allusion to the work to which he intended to devote his evening, "Olivier, as Madame Barbançon is absent, will you do me the favour to bring from the cellar the last bottle of that Cyprian wine I brought from the Levant? M. Gerald must take a glass of it with us before we separate. The mason's accounts won't suffer if they do have to wait half an hour."

"An excellent idea, uncle, for I do not have to be as punctual now as if it were the week before pay-day. I'll get the wine at once. Gerald shall taste your nectar, uncle."

And Olivier hastened away.

"M. Gerald," began the commander, with no little embarrassment, "it was not merely to give you a taste of my Cyprian wine that I sent Olivier away. It was in order that I might be able to speak to you, his best friend, very plainly in regard to him, and to tell you how kind and thoughtful and generous he is."

"I know all that, commander. I know it well, but I like to hear it from your lips, – the lips of one who knows and loves Olivier."

"No, M. Gerald, no, you do not know all. You have no idea of the arduous, distasteful labour the poor boy imposes upon himself, not only that he may be no expense to me during his furlough, but that he may be able to make me little presents now and then, which I dare not refuse for fear of paining him. This handsome pipe, it was he who gave it to me. I am very fond of roses. He has just presented me with two superb new varieties. I had long wanted a big easy chair, for when my wounds reopen, which happens only too often, I am sometimes obliged to sit up several nights in succession. But a large armchair cost too much. Still, about a week ago, what should I see some men bringing in but that much desired article of furniture! I might have known it, for Olivier had spent I don't know how many nights in copying documents. Excuse these confidential disclosures on the part of poor but honest people, M. Gerald," said the old sailor, in a voice that trembled with emotion, while a tear stole down his cheek, "but my heart is full. I must open it to some one, and it is a twofold pleasure to be able to tell all this to you."

Gerald seemed about to speak, but the commander interrupted him.

"Pardon me, M. Gerald, you will think me too garrulous, I fear, but Olivier will be here in a minute, and I have a favour to ask of you. By reason of your exalted position, you must have many grand acquaintances, M. Gerald. My poor Olivier has no influence, and yet his services, his education, and his conduct alike entitle him to promotion. But he has never been willing, or he has never dared to approach any of his superiors on this subject. I can understand it, for if I had been a 'hustler' – as you call it – I should hold a much higher rank to-day. It seems to be a family failing. Olivier is like me. We both do our best, but when it is a question of asking favours our tongues cleave to the roof of our mouths, and we're ashamed to look anybody in the face. But take care! Here comes Olivier," hastily exclaimed the old sailor, picking up his pipe and beginning to puff at it with all his might; "try to look unconcerned, M. Gerald, for heaven's sake try to look unconcerned, or Olivier will suspect something."

"Olivier must be a lieutenant before his leave expires, commander, and I believe he will be," said Gerald, deeply touched by these revelations on the part of the veteran. "I have very little influence myself, but I will speak to the Marquis de Maillefort. His word carries great weight everywhere, and strongly urged by him, Olivier's promotion – which is only just and right – is assured. I will attend to the matter. You need give yourself no further anxiety on the subject."

"Ah, M. Gerald, I was not mistaken in you, I see," said the commander, hurriedly. "You are kind as a brother to my poor boy – but here he is – don't let him suspect anything."

And the good man began to smoke his pipe with the most unconcerned air imaginable, though he was obliged furtively to dash a tear from out the corner of his eye, while Gerald to divert his former comrade's suspicions still more effectually, cried:

"So you've got here at last, slow-coach! I'm strongly inclined to think you must have fallen in with some pretty barmaid like that handsome Jewess at Oran. Do you remember her, you gay Lothario?"

"She was a beauty, that's a fact," replied the young soldier, smiling at the recollection thus evoked, "but she couldn't hold a candle to the young girl I just met in the courtyard," replied Olivier, setting the dusty bottle of Cyprian wine carefully on the table.

"Ah, your prolonged stay is easily explained now!" retorted Gerald.

"Just hear the coxcomb," chimed in the veteran. "And who is this beauty?"

"Yes, yes, do give us the particulars of your conquest."

"She would suit you wonderfully well, M. le duc," laughed Olivier, "wonderfully well, for she is a duchess."

"A duchess?" queried Gerald.

"A duchess here!" exclaimed the commander. "The locality is indeed honoured, to-day. This is something new."

"I was only trying to gratify your vanity a little, – the vanity of a Batignollais, you know. My conquest, as that harebrained Gerald is pleased to call it, is no conquest at all; besides, the lady in question is not really a duchess, though people call her so."

"And why, pray?" inquired Gerald.

"Because they say she is as proud and beautiful as any duchess."

"But who is she? In my character of duke, my curiosity on this point should be gratified," insisted Gerald.

"She is a music teacher," replied Olivier. "She is degrading herself terribly, you see."

"Say rather the piano is becoming ennobled by the touch of her taper fingers, – for she must have the hands of a duchess, of course. Come now, tell us all about it. If you're in love, whom should you take into your confidence if not your uncle and your former comrade?"

"I sincerely wish I had the right to take you into my confidence," said Olivier, laughing; "but to tell the truth, this is the first time I ever saw the young girl."

"But tell us all you know about her."

"There is a Madame Herbaut who has rooms on the second floor of the house," replied Olivier, "and every Sunday this excellent woman invites a number of young girls, friends of her daughters, to spend the evening with her. Some are bookkeepers or shop girls, others are drawing teachers, or music teachers, like the duchess. There are several very charming girls among them, I assure you, though they work hard all day to earn an honest living. And how intensely they enjoy their Sunday with kind Madame Herbaut! They play games, and dance to the music of the piano. It is very amusing to watch them, and twice when Madame Barbançon took me up to Madame Herbaut's rooms – "

"I demand an introduction to Madame Herbaut, – an immediate introduction, do you hear?" cried the young duke.

"You demand – you demand. So you think you have only to ask, I suppose," retorted Olivier, gaily. "Understand, once for all, that the Batignolles are quite as exclusive as the Faubourg St. Germain."

"Ah, you are jealous! You make a great mistake, though, for real or supposed duchesses have very little charm for me. One doesn't come to the Batignolles to fall in love with a duchess, so you need have no fears on that score; besides, if you refuse my request, I'm on the best possible terms with Mother Barbançon, and I'll ask her to introduce me to Madame Herbaut."

"Try it, and see if you succeed in securing admittance," responded Olivier, with a laughable air of importance. "But to return to the subject of the duchess," he continued, "Madame Herbaut, who is evidently devoted to her, remarked to me the other day, when I was going into ecstasies over this company of charming young girls: 'Ah, what would you say if you could see the duchess? Unfortunately, she has failed us these last two Sundays, and we miss her terribly, for all the other girls simply worship her; but some time ago she was summoned to the bedside of a very wealthy lady who is extremely ill, and whose sufferings are so intense, as well as so peculiar in character, that her physician, at his wit's end, conceived the idea that soft and gentle music might assuage her agony at least to some extent.'"

"How singular!" exclaimed Gerald. "This invalid, whose sufferings they are endeavouring to mitigate in every conceivable way, and to whom your duchess must have been summoned, is Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"The same lady who just sent for Madame Barbançon?" inquired the veteran.

"Yes, monsieur, for I had heard before of this musical remedy resorted to in the hope of assuaging that lady's terrible sufferings."

"A strange idea," said Olivier, "but one that has not proved entirely futile, I should judge, as the duchess, who is a fine musician, goes to the house of Madame de Beaumesnil every evening. That is the reason I did not see her at either of Madame Herbaut's soirées. She had just been calling on that

lady, probably, when I met her just now. Struck by her regal bearing and her extraordinary beauty, I asked the porter if he knew who she was. 'It was the duchess I'm sure, M. Olivier,' he answered."

"This is all very interesting and charming, but it is rather too melancholy to suit my taste," said Gerald. "I prefer those pretty and lively girls who grace Madame Herbaut's entertainments. If you don't take me to one, you're an ingrate. Remember that pretty shop-girl in Algiers, who had an equally pretty sister!"

"What!" exclaimed the veteran, "I thought you were talking a moment ago of a pretty Jewess at Oran!"

"But, uncle, when one is at Oran one's sweetheart is at Oran. When one is at Algiers, one's sweetheart is there."

"So you're trying to outdo Don Juan, you naughty boy!" cried the veteran, evidently much flattered by his nephew's popularity with the fair sex.

"But what else could you expect, commander?" asked Gerald. "It is not a matter of inconstancy, you see, but simply of following one's regiment, that is all. That is the reason Olivier and I were obliged to desert the beauties of Oran for the pretty shop-girls of Algiers."

"Just as a change of station compelled us to desert the bronze-cheeked maidens of Martinique for the fisher maids of St. Pierre Miquelon," remarked the old sailor, who was becoming rather lively under the influence of the Cyprian wine which had been circulating freely during the conversation.

"A very sudden change of zone, commander," remarked Gerald, nudging the veteran with his elbow. "It must have been leaving fire for ice."

"No, no, you're very much mistaken there," protested the veteran, vehemently. "I don't know what to make of it, but those fisher maidens, fair as albinos, had the very deuce in them. There was one little roly-poly with white lashes, particularly, whom they called the Whaler – "

"About the temperature of Senegambia, eh, uncle?"

"I should say so," ejaculated the veteran. And as he replaced his glass upon the table, he made a clucking sound with his tongue, but it was hard to say whether this significant sound had reference to his recollection of the fair Whaler or to the pleasant flavour of the Cyprian wine. Then suddenly recollecting himself, the worthy man exclaimed:

"Well, well, what am I thinking of? It ill becomes an old fellow like me to be talking on such subjects to youths like you! Go on, talk of your Jewesses and your duchesses as much as you please, boys. It suits your years."

"Very well, then, I insist that Olivier shall take me to Madame Herbaut's," said the persistent Gerald.

"See the result of satiety. You go in the most fashionable and aristocratic society, and yet envy us our poor little Batignollais entertainments."

"Fashionable society is not at all amusing," said Gerald. "I frequent it merely to please my mother. To-morrow, for example, will be a particularly trying day to me, for my mother gives an afternoon dance. By the way, why can't you come, Olivier?"

"Come where?"

"Why, to this dance my mother gives."

"I?"

"Yes, you! Why not?"

"I, Olivier Raymond, a private in the hussars, attend a dance given in the Faubourg St. Germain!"

"It would be very strange if I could not take my dearest friend to my mother's house merely because he has the honour to be one of the bravest soldiers in the French army. Olivier, you must come. I insist upon it."

"In jacket and kepi, I suppose," said Olivier, smilingly, referring to his poverty, which did not permit him to indulge in citizen's clothing.

Knowing how this worthy fellow spent the proceeds of his arduous toil, and knowing, too, his extreme sensitiveness in money matters, Gerald could only say in reply:

"True, I did not think of that. It is a pity, for we might have had a very pleasant time together. I could have shown you some of our fashionable beauties, though I feel sure that, so far as young and pretty faces are concerned, Madame Herbaut's entertainments have the advantage."

"Do you see, uncle, how cleverly he returns to the charge?"

The clock in the neighbouring steeple struck eight.

"Eight o'clock!" cried Olivier. "The deuce! My master mason has been waiting for me for an hour. I've got to go, Gerald. I promised to be punctual, – an hour late is a good deal. Good night, uncle."

"You're going to work half the night, again," remarked the veteran, casting a meaning look at Gerald. "I shall wait up for you, though."

"No, no, uncle, go to bed. Tell Madame Barbançon to leave the key with the porter, and some matches in the kitchen. I won't wake you, I'll come in quietly."

"Good-bye, M. Gerald," said the veteran, taking the young duke's hand, and pressing it in a very significant manner, as if to remind him of his promise in regard to Olivier's promotion.

"Good-bye, commander," said Gerald, returning the pressure, and indicating by a gesture that he read the veteran's thought. "You will permit me to come and see you again, will you not?"

"It would give me great pleasure, you may be sure of that, M. Gerald."

"Yes, commander, for I judge you by myself. Good-bye. Come, Olivier, I will accompany you to the door of your master mason."

"I shall have the pleasure of your company a quarter of an hour longer, then. Good night, uncle."

"Good night, my dear boy."

And Olivier, taking up his bundle of papers and pens, left the house arm in arm with Gerald. At the master mason's door they separated, promising to see each other again at an early day.

About an hour after Olivier left his uncle, Madame Barbançon was brought back to the Batignolles in Madame de Beaumesnil's carriage.

The veteran, amazed at the silence of his housekeeper, and at the gloomy expression of her face, addressed her several times in vain, and finally begged her to help herself to the small portion of Cyprian wine that remained. Madame Barbançon took the bottle and started towards the door, then stopped short and crossed her arms with a meditative air, a movement that caused the wine-bottle to fall with a crash upon the floor.

"The deuce take you!" cried the veteran. "Look at the Cyprian wine you've wasted."

"True, I've broken the bottle," replied the housekeeper, with the air of a person just waking from a dream. "It is not surprising. Since I saw and heard Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil, – for I have just seen her, and in such a pitiable state, poor woman! – I have been racking my brain to remember something I can not remember, and I know very well that I shall be absolutely good for nothing for a long time."

"It is a good thing to know this in advance," replied the veteran, with his usual placidity of manner on seeing Madame Barbançon again relapse into a deeply preoccupied frame of mind.

CHAPTER V

THE LION OF THE BALL

On the day following Olivier Raymond's chance meeting with Gerald, the mother of the latter gave a dancing party.

The Duchesse de Senneterre, both by birth and by marriage, was connected with the oldest and most illustrious families of France, and though her fortune was insignificant and her house small, she gave every year four or five small but extremely elegant and exclusive dancing receptions, of which she and her two young daughters did the honours with perfect grace. The Duc de Senneterre, dead for two years, had held a high office under the Restoration.

The three windows of the salon where the guests danced opened into a very pretty garden, and the day being superb, many ladies and gentlemen stepped out for a chat or a stroll through the paths bordered with flowering shrubs during the intervals between the dances.

Four or five men, chancing to meet near a big clump of lilacs, had paused to exchange the airy nothings that generally compose the conversation at such a gathering.

Among this group were two men that merit attention. One, a man about thirty-five years of age, but already obese, with an extremely pompous, indolent, and supercilious manner and a lack-lustre eye, was the Comte de Mornand, the same man who had been mentioned at Commander Bernard's the evening before, when Olivier and Gerald were comparing their reminiscences of college life.

M. de Mornand occupied a hereditary seat in the Chamber of Peers.

The other, an intimate friend of the count, was a man of about the same age, – tall, slim, angular, a trifle round-shouldered, and also a little bald, – whose flat head, prominent and rather bloodshot eyes imparted an essentially reptilian character to his visage. This was the Baron de Ravil. Though his means of support were problematical in the extreme when compared with his luxurious style of living, the baron was still received in the aristocratic society in which his birth entitled him to a place, but never did any intriguer – we use the word in its lowest, most audacious sense – display more brazen effrontry or daring impudence.

"Have you seen the lion of the ball?" inquired one of the men of the party, addressing M. de Mornand.

"I have but just arrived, and have no idea to whom you refer," replied the count.

"Why, the Marquis de Maillefort."

"That cursed hunchback!" exclaimed M. de Ravil; "it is all his fault that this affair seems so unconscionably dull. His hideous presence is enough to cast a damper over any festivity."

"How strange it is that the marquis appears in society for a few weeks, now and then, and then suddenly disappears again," remarked another member of the group.

"I believe he is a manufacturer of counterfeit money and emerges from his seclusion, now and then, to put his spurious coin in circulation," remarked M. de Ravil. "This much is certain – incomprehensible as it appears – he actually loaned me a thousand franc note, which I shall never return, the other night, at the card-table. And what do you suppose the impertinent creature said as he handed it to me? 'It will afford me so much amusement to dun you for it, baron.' He need have no fears. He will amuse himself in that way a long time."

"But all jesting aside, this marquis is a very peculiar man," remarked another member of the party. "His mother, the old Marquise de Maillefort, left him a very handsome fortune, but no one can imagine what he does with his money, for he lives very modestly."

"I used to meet him quite frequently at poor Madame de Beaumesnil's."

"By the way, do you know they say she is said to be lying at the point of death?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil?"

"Yes; she is about to receive the last sacrament. At least that is what they told Madame de Mirecourt, who stopped to inquire for her on her way here."

"Her case must, indeed, have been incurable, then, for her physician is that famous Doctor Gasterini, who is as great a savant as he is a gourmand, which is certainly saying a good deal."

"Poor woman! she is young to die."

"And what an immense fortune her daughter will have," exclaimed M. de Mornand. "She will be the richest heiress in France, and an orphan besides. What a rare titbit for a fortune-hunter!"

As he uttered these words, M. de Mornand's eyes encountered those of his friend Ravil.

Both started slightly, as if the same idea had suddenly occurred to both of them. With a single look they must have read each other's thoughts.

"The richest heiress in France!"

"And an orphan!"

"And an immense landed property besides!" exclaimed the three other men in accents of undisguised covetousness.

After which, one of them, without noticing the interchange of glances between M. de Mornand and his friend, continued:

"And how old is this Mlle. de Beaumesnil?"

"Not over fifteen," replied M. de Ravil, "and exceedingly unprepossessing in appearance, sickly and positively insignificant looking, in fact."

"Sickly, – that is not objectionable, by any means, quite the contrary," said one of the party, reflectively.

"And homely?" remarked another, turning to Ravil. "You have seen her, then?"

"Not I, but one of my aunts saw the girl at the Convent of the Sacred Heart before Beaumesnil took her to Italy by the physician's order."

"Poor Beaumesnil, to die in Naples from a fall from his horse!"

"And you say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil is very homely?" he continued, while M. de Mornand seemed to grow more and more thoughtful.

"Hideous! I think it more than likely that she's going into a decline, too, from what I hear," responded Ravil, disparagingly; "for, after Beaumesnil's death, the physician who had accompanied them to Naples declared that he would not be responsible for the result if Mlle. de Beaumesnil returned to France. She is a consumptive, I tell you, a hopeless consumptive."

"A consumptive heiress!" exclaimed another man ecstatically. "Can any one conceive of a more delightful combination!"

"Ah, yes, I understand," laughed Ravil, "but it is absolutely necessary that the girl should live long enough for a man to marry her, which Mlle. de Beaumesnil is not likely to do. She is doomed. I heard this through M. de la Rochaigne, her nearest relative. And he ought to know, as the property comes to him at her death, if she doesn't marry. Perhaps that accounts for his being so sanguine."

"What a lucky thing it would be for Madame de la Rochaigne, who is so fond of luxury and society!"

"Yes, in other people's houses."

"It is very strange, but it seems to me I have heard that Mlle. de Beaumesnil strongly resembles her mother, who used to be one of the prettiest women in Paris," remarked another gentleman.

"This girl is atrociously ugly, I tell you," said M. de Ravil. "In fact, I'm not sure that she isn't deformed as well."

"Yes," remarked M. de Mornand, awakening from his reverie, "several other persons have said the very same thing about the girl that Ravil does."

"But why didn't her mother accompany her to Italy?"

"Because the poor woman had already been attacked by the strange malady to which she is about to succumb, it seems. People say that it was a terrible disappointment to her because she could

not follow her daughter to Naples, and that this disappointment has contributed not a little to her present hopeless state."

"It would seem, then, that Doctor Dupont's musical cure has proved a failure."

"What musical cure?"

"Knowing Madame de Beaumesnil's passionate love of music, the doctor, to mitigate his patient's sufferings and arouse her from her langour, ordered that soft and soothing music should be played or sung to her."

"Not a bad idea, though revived from the times of Saul and David," commented Ravil.

"Well, what was the result?"

"Madame de Beaumesnil seemed benefited at first, they say, but her malady soon regained the ascendancy."

"I have heard that poor Beaumesnil's sudden death was a terrible shock to her."

"Bah!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, "she never cared a straw for Beaumesnil. She only married him for his millions of millions. Besides, as a young girl she had any number of lovers. In short," continued M. de Mornand, puffing out his cheeks with an air of supercilious dignity, "Madame de Beaumesnil is really a woman of no reputation whatever, and, in spite of the enormous fortune she will leave, no honourable man would ever be willing to marry the daughter of such a mother."

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed a voice which seemed to respond indignantly to M. de Mornand's last words from behind the clump of lilacs.

There was a moment of amazed silence; then M. de Mornand, purple with anger, made a hasty circuit of the clump of shrubbery. He found no one there, however. The path at this place making an abrupt turn, the person who uttered the opprobrious epithet could make his escape with comparative ease.

"There are no more infamous scoundrels than the persons who insult others without daring to show themselves," cried M. de Mornand, in a loud voice.

This strange incident had scarcely taken place before the sound of the orchestra drew the promenaders back to the salon.

M. de Mornand being left alone with Ravil, the latter said to him:

"Somebody who dared not show himself called you a scoundrel. We had better say no more about it. But did you understand me?"

"Perfectly. The same idea suddenly, I might almost say simultaneously, occurred to me, and for an instant I was dazzled – even dazed by it."

"An income of over three millions! What an incorruptible minister you will be, eh?"

"Hush! It is enough to turn one's brain."

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a third party, who, addressing M. de Mornand, said, with the most scrupulous politeness:

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis?"

M. de Mornand's surprise was so great that he started back without uttering a word on hearing this request, for the person who had just made it was no other than the Marquis de Maillefort, the singular hunchback, of whom frequent mention has already been made in these pages.

There was also another feeling that prevented M. de Mornand from immediately replying to this strange proposition, for, in the full, vibrating voice of the speaker, M. de Mornand fancied, for an instant, that he recognised the voice of the unseen person who had called him a scoundrel when he spoke in such disparaging terms of Madame de Beaumesnil.

The Marquis de Maillefort, pretending not to notice the air of displeased surprise with which M. de Mornand had greeted the proposal, repeated in the same tone of scrupulous politeness:

"Monsieur, will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis in the next quadrille?"

On hearing this request on the part of the deformed man thus reiterated, M. de Mornand, without concealing his desire to laugh, exclaimed:

"Act as your vis-à-vis, – yours, monsieur?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied the marquis, with the most innocent air imaginable.

"But, – but what you ask is – is – permit me to say – very remarkable."

"And very dangerous, my dear marquis," added the Baron de Ravil, with his usual sneer.

"As for you, baron, I might put a no less offensive and, perhaps, even more dangerous question to you," retorted the marquis, smiling. "When will you return the thousand francs I had the pleasure of loaning to you the other evening?"

"You are too inquisitive, marquis."

"Come, come, baron, don't treat M. de Talleyrand's *bon mots* as you treat thousand franc notes."

"What do you mean by that, marquis?"

"I mean that it costs you no more to put one in circulation than the other."

M. de Ravil bit his lip.

"This explanation is not altogether satisfactory, M. le marquis," he said, coldly.

"You have an unquestionable right to be very exacting in the matter of explanations, baron," retorted the marquis, in the same tone of contemptuous persiflage; "but you have no right to be indiscreet, as you certainly are at this moment. I had the honour to address M. de Mornand, and you intrude yourself into our conversation, which is exceedingly annoying to me."

Then, turning to M. de Mornand, the hunchback continued:

"You did me the honour, just now, to say that my request that you would act as my vis-à-vis was very remarkable, I believe."

"Yes, monsieur," replied M. de Mornand, quite gravely this time, for he began to suspect that this singular proposal was only a pretext, and the longer he listened to the voice, the more certain he became that it was the same which had styled him a scoundrel. "Yes, monsieur," he continued, with mingled hauteur and assurance, "I did say, and I repeat it, that this request to act as your vis-à-vis was very remarkable on your part."

"And why, may I ask, if you do not think me too inquisitive?"

"Because – why – because it is – it is, I think, very singular that – "

Then as M. de Mornand did not finish the sentence:

"I have a rather peculiar habit, monsieur," the marquis said, lightly.

"What is it, monsieur?"

"Having the misfortune to be a hunchback and consequently an object of ridicule, I have reserved for myself the exclusive right to ridicule my deformity, and as I flatter myself I do that to the satisfaction of people in general – excuse my conceit, monsieur, I beg – I do not permit any one to do badly what I do so well myself."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand, vehemently.

"Permit me to give you an example," continued the marquis in the same airy tone, "I just asked you to do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis. Ah, well, instead of answering, 'Yes, monsieur,' or 'No, monsieur,' in a polite manner, you respond in a voice choked with laughter, 'Your request for me to act as your vis-à-vis is very remarkable.' And when I ask you to finish the sentence, you hesitate and stammer and say nothing."

"But, monsieur – "

"But, monsieur," hastily exclaimed the hunchback, interrupting his companion afresh; "if, instead of being polite, you are disposed to enjoy yourself at my expense, you ought to say something decidedly impertinent, as, for example: 'M. de Maillefort, I have a horror of deformities and really cannot bear the idea of seeing you dance;' or 'Really, M. de Maillefort, I have too much pride to show myself in the back to back figure with you.' So you see, my dear M. de Mornand," continued the

hunchback, with increasing jovialness, "that, as I can ridicule myself better than any one else can, I am perfectly right not to allow any one else to do clumsily what I can do so admirably myself."

"You say that you will not allow," began M. de Mornand, impatiently —

"Come, come, Mornand, this is all nonsense," exclaimed Ravil. "And, you, marquis, are much too sensible a man — "

"That is not the question," replied Mornand, hotly. "This gentleman says he will not allow — "

"Any person to ridicule me," interrupted the marquis. "No, I will not tolerate it for a single instant; I repeat it."

"But Mornand certainly never thought for a single instant of ridiculing you, I am sure, marquis," cried Ravil.

"Is that true, baron?"

"Yes, certainly, certainly."

"Then the gentleman will do me the favour to explain what he meant by his reply."

"That is very simple. I will volunteer — "

"My dear Ravil," interposed M. de Mornand, firmly, "you are going entirely too far. As M. de Maillefort descends to sarcasm and threats, I deem it proper to refuse him any explanation whatever, and M. de Maillefort is at perfect liberty to impute any meaning he pleases to my words."

"Impute any meaning to your words?" exclaimed the hunchback, laughing. "Really, I could not take any such task as that upon myself. That is the business of your honourable colleagues in the Chamber of Peers when you treat them to one of those superb speeches — which you alone have the ability to understand — "

"Let us put an end to this," exclaimed M. de Mornand, exasperated beyond endurance. "Consider my words as insulting as any words could possibly be, monsieur."

"You are mad," cried Ravil. "All this is, or will be, supremely ridiculous if taken seriously."

"You are right, my poor baron," said the marquis, with a contrite air; "it will become supremely ridiculous as you say, but, monsieur, see what a good fellow I am, I will be content with the following apology made verbally by M. de Mornand in the presence of three or four witnesses of my own choosing: 'M. le Marquis de Maillefort, I very humbly and contritely ask your pardon for having dared — '"

"Enough, monsieur!" exclaimed M. de Mornand. "You must believe me either a coward or an egregious fool."

"So you refuse the reparation I demand?" asked the marquis; "you refuse it, absolutely?"

"Absolutely, monsieur, absolutely."

"Then I feel obliged to terminate this interview as I began it, by again having the honour to say to you: 'Will you do me the favour to act as my vis-à-vis?'"

"What, monsieur, as your vis-à-vis?" repeated M. de Mornand, in profound astonishment.

"My vis-à-vis in a *danse à deux*," added the hunchback, with a meaning gesture. "Do you understand me?"

"A duel — with you?" cried M. de Mornand, who, in his first transport of anger, had forgotten the high social position of the hunchback, and the ridicule which would be heaped upon him if he engaged in a personal encounter with such an adversary. "A duel with you, monsieur? Really — "

"Are you going to plead as an excuse that such a position would be too — too remarkable or too dangerous, as your friend Ravil would say?"

"No, monsieur, I do not consider it too dangerous — but too ridiculous."

"Yes, frightfully ridiculous to you, as I remarked to your honest friend here a moment ago."

"Really, gentlemen," exclaimed Ravil, "I will never permit — "

Then seeing Gerald de Senneterre passing through the garden, he added:

"Here comes the Duc de Senneterre, the son of the house. I shall ask him to assist me in putting a stop to this foolish quarrel."

"Yes, gentlemen, the duke's coming is most opportune," replied the hunchback. And turning towards the young man, he called out:

"Gerald, my friend, we need your assistance."

"What is the matter, marquis?" asked Gerald, in a manner that was both deferential and affectionate.

"Have you any cigars?"

"Plenty of them, marquis."

"Well, my dear Gerald, these gentlemen and I are dying to smoke. Won't you take us up to your rooms?"

"Certainly," replied Gerald, gaily. "I have no engagement for this dance, so I have a quarter of an hour at my disposal."

"That is all the time we shall need," said the hunchback, with a meaning look at Mornand and Ravil. "Come, gentlemen," he added, taking Gerald's arm and walking on ahead of the future minister and his friend.

A minute or two afterwards the four gentlemen reached Gerald's apartments, which consisted of three rooms, – one, extremely large, on the third floor of the house.

The young duke having politely begged Messieurs de Mornand and de Ravil to pass in first, M. de Maillefort, locking the door and slipping the key in his pocket, remarked to Gerald:

"Allow me, my friend."

"But why do you lock the door, M. le marquis," asked Gerald, greatly surprised.

"So we shall not be disturbed," answered the hunchback, "but be able to smoke in peace."

"You are certainly a very cautious man, M. le marquis," said Gerald, laughing, as he ushered the party into the furthest room, which, being much larger than the others, served both as a sitting-room and study for the young duke.

Upon one of the panels in this room hung a large shield covered with crimson velvet, on which quite a number of weapons were displayed.

CHAPTER VI THE DUEL

On seeing the Marquis de Maillefort lock the door of the apartment, M. de Mornand partially divined the hunchback's intentions, and any lingering doubts he may have felt were promptly dispelled when the marquis untied his cravat and hastily divested himself of both coat and waistcoat, to the great astonishment of Gerald, who had just turned to approach him with an open box of cigars in his hand.

Almost at the same instant, the marquis, pointing to two swords hanging with the other weapons on the shield, said to the young man:

"My dear Gerald, have the goodness to measure those swords with M. de Ravil, and give the longest to my adversary if there is any difference in them. You know the proverb, 'Hunchbacks have long arms.'"

"What!" exclaimed Gerald, in profound astonishment, "those swords?"

"Certainly, my friend. This is the situation in two words. That gentleman (pointing to Mornand) has just been extremely impertinent to me. He refused to apologise, and the time has now passed when I would accept any apology, even if he would consent to make it. There is consequently nothing for us to do but fight. You will act as my second; M. de Ravil will act in the same capacity for M. de Mornand, and we will settle our differences here and now."

Then, turning to his antagonist, the marquis added:

"Come, monsieur, off with your coat. Gerald has only a quarter of an hour to spare, and we must make the most of it."

"What a pity Olivier could not witness this scene!" thought Gerald, who had recovered from his astonishment, and who now began to regard the adventure as extremely piquant, the more so as he had very little sympathy for Messieurs Mornand and Ravil, and a very warm affection for the marquis.

But though the hunchback had made this open declaration of war, M. de Ravil turned to Gerald, and said, in a tone of profound conviction:

"You must feel that such a duel as this is entirely out of the question, M. le duc?"

"And why, monsieur?" inquired Gerald, dryly.

"Thanks, Gerald," exclaimed the marquis. "The swords, my friend, quick, the swords!"

"But think of permitting such an encounter in your mother's house! It must not be, M. le duc. Think of it, a duel, in a room in your house, and for the most trivial cause," insisted Ravil, as he saw Gerald walk to the panel and take down the swords.

"I consider myself the sole judge of the propriety of what occurs in my apartments," retorted Gerald. "There are numerous instances of similar duels, are there not, M. de Mornand?"

"Any place is suitable for avenging an affront, M. le duc," was the prompt and angry reply.

"Bravo! the Cid never made a better retort!" exclaimed the hunchback. "Come, my dear M. de Mornand, off with your coat! It is hardly fair that I, who am not exactly modelled after the Apollo Belvedere, should be the first to strip."

M. de Mornand, at his wit's end, pulled off his coat.

"I absolutely refuse to act as second in such a duel," shouted M. de Ravil.

"You can do as you please about that," responded the hunchback. "I have the key of the door in my pocket, but you can look out of the window, or beat a tattoo upon the pane, if you prefer. That little act of bravado might have a good effect on M. de Mornand, perhaps."

"De Ravil, measure the swords, I beg of you," cried the other principal in the affair.

"You insist?"

"I do."

"So be it, – but you are mad."

Then, turning to Gerald, he added, "You are taking a great responsibility upon yourself, monsieur."

"That will do, monsieur," replied Gerald, coldly.

The proverb the marquis had quoted seemed a true one, for, when that gentleman rolled his shirt-sleeve up above his elbow, there was disclosed to view a long, thin, but sinewy arm, upon which the muscles stood out like whipcords, while his opponent's arm was plump and soft.

The outcome of the encounter was apparent from the manner in which the antagonists fell into position, and in which they crossed blades, when Gerald, after having exchanged glances with Ravil, gave the signal for the combat to begin.

Not that M. de Mornand evinced any signs of cowardice! On the contrary, he manifested the courage which any well-bred man is almost sure to display, but he was unmistakably nervous, and, though he showed a fair knowledge of fencing, his play was characterised by excessive prudence. He held himself out of reach as much as possible, and always upon the defensive, parrying his antagonist's thrusts skilfully enough, but never attacking.

For a single instant Ravil, and even Gerald, were terrified at the expression of ferocious hatred that overspread the features of the marquis when he confronted his adversary, but, suddenly recovering himself, he became the same gay, mocking cynic as at the beginning of this strange scene, and, as the look of sullen rage he had concentrated upon M. de Mornand softened, his thrusts became less violent and murderous, and, at last, wishing doubtless to end the affair, he made a feint. M. de Mornand responded ingenuously, whereupon his opponent, with a quick, upward thrust, ran his blade through his antagonist's right arm.

At the sight of blood, Gerald and Ravil both sprang forward, exclaiming:

"Enough, gentlemen, enough!"

Both men lowered their swords on hearing this exclamation, and the marquis said, in a clear voice:

"I declare myself satisfied; I will even humbly beg your pardon – for being a hunchback, M. de Mornand. It is the only excuse I can reasonably offer you."

"It is sufficient, monsieur," said M. de Mornand, with a bitter smile, while Gerald and De Ravil bound up the wounded arm with the aid of a handkerchief.

This done, the two men re-dressed themselves, after which M. de Maillefort said to M. de Mornand:

"Will you grant me the favour of a moment's conversation in another room?"

"I am at your service."

"Will you permit it, Gerald?"

"Certainly," replied the young duke.

The two gentlemen having stepped into Gerald's bedroom, the hunchback said, in his usual mocking way:

"Though it may be in very poor taste to speak of one's generosity, my dear sir, I am obliged to admit that for a minute or two I felt strongly inclined to kill you, and that it would have been a very easy matter for me to do it."

"You should have availed yourself of the opportunity, monsieur."

"But I reflected – "

"And with what object?"

"You will excuse me, I am sure, for not opening my whole heart to you, but permit me to beg that you will consider the slight wound you have just received merely an aid to memory."

"I do not understand you in the least, monsieur."

"You know, of course, that one often places a bit of paper in one's snuff-box, or ties a knot in the corner of one's handkerchief, to remind one of a rendezvous or a promise."

"Yes, monsieur; and what of it, may I ask?"

"I am strongly in hopes that the slight wound which I have just given you in the arm will serve as such an effectual reminder that the date of this little episode will never be effaced from your memory."

"And why are you so desirous that this date should be indelibly engraved upon my memory?"

"The explanation is very simple. I wish to fix the date in your memory in an ineffaceable manner, – because it is quite possible that I shall some time have occasion to remind you of *all you have said* this afternoon."

"Remind me of all I have said this afternoon?"

"Yes, monsieur, and in the presence of irrefutable witnesses that I shall summon in case of need."

"I understand you less and less, monsieur."

"I see no particular advantage in your understanding me any better just at this time, my dear sir, so you must permit me to take leave of you, and go and bid my friend Gerald good-bye."

It is easy to comprehend that the real cause of M. de Maillefort's challenge to M. de Mornand was the insulting manner in which that gentleman had spoken of Madame de Beaumesnil, for the latter's suspicions were correct, and it was the hunchback who, unseen, had cried, "Scoundrel!" on hearing M. de Mornand's coarse words.

But why had M. de Maillefort, who was usually so frank and outspoken, taken this roundabout way to secure a pretext for avenging the insult offered to Madame de Beaumesnil? And what could be his object in wishing to remind M. de Mornand of this special day, and in perhaps calling him to account for all he had just said in the presence of reliable witnesses?

These questions will be satisfactorily answered as the story proceeds.

The Marquis de Maillefort had just bidden Gerald good-bye, when one of the servants brought the young duke the following letter, written by Olivier that same morning.

"My good Gerald: – 'Man proposes and God disposes,' and last night, Providence, in the shape of my worthy master mason, decided that I must absent myself from Paris for a fortnight or three weeks, and I am truly sorry, for there can be no repetition of our pleasant dinner-party of yesterday for a long time to come.

"The fact is, my master mason is a very poor arithmetician, and he has become so mixed up in his specifications for some work he is to do in a château near Luzarches that it is impossible for me to make head or tail of his figures. For me to be able to cast any light on this portentous gloom, I shall be obliged to go through a host of measurements which I shall have to take myself, if I would avoid more puzzles, and this will necessitate a prolonged absence, I fear. I never told you, did I? that my master mason was formerly a sergeant in the engineer corps, a brave, honest, plain, kind-hearted man, and you know that life with people of that sort is easy and pleasant. One of my chief reasons, too, for going to his assistance is that, so far as I am able to judge, he is cheating himself badly, – such a rare thing in these days that I shall not be sorry to verify the fact.

"I leave my uncle – what a heart of gold he has, hasn't he? – with no little anxiety. Ever since Madame Barbançon was brought back to us in Madame de Beaumesnil's superb equipage she has been in a truly alarming frame of mind, and I tremble for my uncle's digestion. She has not so much as mentioned Bonaparte's name, and seems to be in a brown study all the time, – pauses thoughtfully in the garden, and every now and then stands stock-still in her kitchen with eyes fixed upon vacancy. She gave us sour milk this morning, and the eggs were like leather. So take heed, my dear Gerald, if you should happen to drop in at meal-time. It is evident, too, that Madame Barbançon is burning with a desire to be questioned concerning the particulars of her recent visit, but very naturally my uncle and I avoid the subject, as there is really something strange and even incomprehensible about the affair.

"If you have time, drop in and see my uncle. It would please him very much, for he will miss me sadly, I fear, and he has taken a great fancy to you. What ineffable kindness of heart and unswerving uprightness of soul are concealed beneath his plain exterior! Ah, my dear Gerald, I have never craved wealth for myself, but I tremble to think that, at his age and with his infirmities, my uncle will have

more and more difficulty in living on his modest pay, in spite of all the little privations he endures so courageously. And if he should become really ill, – for two of his wounds reopen frequently, – sickness is so hard upon the poor? Ah, Gerald, the thought is a cruel one to me.

"Forgive me, my friend and brother. I began this letter cheerfully, and it has become really funereal in tone. Good-bye, Gerald, good-bye. Write me at Luzarches.

*"Yours devotedly,
"Olivier Raymond."*

CHAPTER VII

THE PRETTY MUSICIAN

About seven o'clock on the evening of the same day on which M. de Maillefort's duel took place, and just as the sun was beginning to vanish from sight in a bank of dark clouds that indicated a stormy night, – for occasional big drops of rain were already falling, – a young girl was crossing the Place de la Concorde, in the direction of the Faubourg Ste. Honoré.

This girl carried under her left arm two large music books whose shabby bindings attested to long and faithful service; in her right hand she held a small umbrella. Her attire, which was modest in the extreme, consisted of a plain black silk dress with a small mantle of the same material, and, though the spring was already far advanced, she wore on her head a gray felt hat tied under the chin with broad ribbons of the same quiet hue. A few soft, curling tresses of golden hair, which the wind had loosened from their confinement, caressed her low, broad forehead, and made a lovely frame for her sweet, youthful face, which wore an expression of profound sadness, but which was also instinct with refinement, modesty, and quiet dignity. This same natural dignity manifested itself in the thoughtful and rather proud expression of the girl's large blue eyes. Her bearing was graceful and distinguished, and though her mantle concealed her figure, one instinctively felt that it was not only lithe, but perfect in contour, for her garments were worn with such an air of distinction that one forgot their shabbiness.

As she lifted her dress slightly in crossing a gutter, a pretty foot, clad in a neat, well-fitting, though rather thick-soled shoe, was disclosed to view, and one also caught a glimpse of a petticoat of dazzling whiteness, edged with a narrow lace-trimmed ruffle.

At the corner of the Rue des Champs Élysées, a beggar woman, with a child in her arms, addressed a few words to her in an imploring voice, whereupon the girl paused, and after a moment's embarrassment, – for having both hands occupied, one with her music books and the other with her umbrella, she could not get at her pocket, – she solved the difficulty by confiding the music books temporarily to the poor woman's care, and transferring her umbrella to her other hand. This done, the girl drew out her purse, which contained barely four francs in small change, and, taking from it a two sous piece, said hurriedly, but in tones of entrancing sweetness:

"Forgive me, good mother, forgive me for being unable to offer you more."

Then, with a compassionate glance at the pale face of the infant which the woman was pressing to her breast, she added:

"Poor little thing! May God preserve it to you!" Then resuming possession of her music books, and casting another glance of tender commiseration on the poor creatures, she continued on her way down the Champs Élysées.

We have dwelt upon the apparently trivial details of this act of charity, merely because they seem to us so significant. The gift, though trifling in value, had not been given haughtily or thoughtlessly; nor was the young girl content with dropping a bit of money into the outstretched hand. There was also another circumstance which, though trivial, was highly significant: the young girl had removed her glove before proffering her alms – as she would have done before touching the hand of a friend and equal.

It so happened that M. de Ravil, who had just escorted his wounded friend to his home on the Rue de Madeleine, met the young girl on the pavement of the Rue des Champs Élysées, and, struck by her beauty and by the distinguished bearing which contrasted so strongly with the excessive plainness of her attire, he paused a moment directly in front of her and eyed her cynically, then, as she walked quickly on, he turned and followed her.

As she turned into the Rue de l'Arcade, a street little frequented at that hour of the day, he quickened his pace, and, overtaking the fair unknown, said, insolently:

"Mademoiselle gives music lessons, I judge? Will she be kind enough to come and give me one – at my house?"

As he spoke he laid his hand upon the arm of the girl, who turned quickly with a faint cry; then, though her cheeks were crimson with terror and emotion, she cast such a look of withering scorn on Ravil that, in spite of his natural impudence, his eyes fell, and bowing low before the unknown with an air of ironical deference, he said:

"Pardon me, madame la princesse, I was mistaken in the person."

The girl continued on her way, forcing herself to walk quietly in spite of her painful anxiety, for the house to which she going was only a short distance off now.

"All the same, I intend to follow her and see who this shabbily dressed girl who gives herself the airs of a duchess is," Ravil said to himself.

The comparison was an eminently just one, though he did not know it, for Herminie – that was the girl's name; in fact, being a foundling, she had no other – for Herminie was indeed a duchess, if one means by that word a charming combination of beauty, grace, and natural refinement, accompanied by that indomitable pride which is inherent in every fastidious and sensitive nature.

It has been truly said that many duchesses, both as regards appearance and instincts, were born *lorettes*; while, on the other hand, many poor creatures of the most obscure origin were born duchesses.

Herminie herself was certainly a living example of the truth of this assertion, for the friends she had made in her humble rôle of singing and piano teacher always called her the duchess, – a few from jealousy, for even the most generous and unassuming of people have their detractors, others, on the contrary, because the term best expressed the impression Herminie's manner and appearance made upon them. It is hardly necessary to say that the young lady in question was no other than the duchess of whom Olivier had made frequent mention during the dinner at Commander Bernard's house.

Herminie, still closely followed by Ravil, soon left the Rue de l'Arcade for the Rue d'Anjou, where she entered an imposing mansion, thus escaping the annoying pursuit of that cynical personage.

"How strange!" he exclaimed, pausing a few yards off. "Why the devil is that girl going into the Hôtel de Beaumesnil with her music books under her arm. She certainly cannot live there."

Then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "But now I think of it, this must be the female David who is trying to assuage Madame de Beaumesnil's sufferings by the charm of her music. That lady might well be likened to good King Saul by reason of her great wealth, which will all go to that young girl in whom my friend Mornand already feels such an interest. As for me, that pretty musician who has just entered the home of the countess suits my fancy. I mean to wait until she comes out, for I must find out where she lives."

The expression of melancholy on Herminie's charming face deepened as she crossed the threshold, and, passing the porter without speaking, as any member of the household might have done, entered the magnificent hall of this sumptuous abode.

It was still daylight, but the entire lower floor was brilliantly lighted. As she noted this fact, her surprise changed to anguish, which increased when she saw none of the footmen who were usually in attendance.

A profound stillness pervaded the mansion as the young girl, with her heart throbbing almost to bursting, mounted the handsome stairway to a broad landing, which commanded a view of a long line of large and magnificently furnished apartments.

These rooms, too, were brilliantly lighted but also deserted, and the pale light of the candles, contending with the glowing rays of the setting sun, produced a very strange and most unnatural effect.

Herminie, unable to account for the poignant anxiety to which she was a prey, hurried breathlessly on through several rooms, then paused suddenly.

It seemed to her that she could hear stifled sobs in the distance.

At last she reached a door leading into a long picture-gallery, and at the farther end of this gallery Herminie saw all the inmates of the mansion kneeling just outside the threshold of an open door.

A terrible presentiment seized the young girl. When she left Madame de Beaumesnil the evening before, that lady was alarmingly, though not hopelessly ill; but now, these lights, this lugubrious silence, broken only by smothered sobs, indicated beyond a doubt that Madame de Beaumesnil was receiving the last sacrament.

The young girl, overcome with grief and terror, felt that her strength was deserting her, and instinctively clutched at one of the consoles for support; then, endeavouring to conceal her emotion and her tears, again hastened on with tottering steps towards the group of servants in the open doorway of Madame de Beaumesnil's chamber, and knelt there in the midst of them.

CHAPTER VIII

THE UNHAPPY SECRET

Through the open doorway before which Herminie had just knelt, she could see by the wan light of an alabaster lamp Madame de Beaumesnil, a woman only about thirty-eight years of age, but frightfully pale and emaciated. The countess, who was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, had her hands clasped devoutly. Her features, once of rare beauty, were drawn and haggard, her large eyes, formerly of a clear, bright blue, had lost their lustre, though they were riveted with mingled anxiety and anguish upon the face of Abbé Ledoux, her parish priest, who had just administered the last sacrament.

A minute before Herminie's arrival, Madame de Beaumesnil, lowering her voice still more, though weakness and suffering had already reduced it to little more than a faint whisper, had said to the priest:

"Ah, my father, forgive me, but even at this solemn hour I cannot help thinking with even more bitterness of heart of that poor child, – my other daughter, – the unhappy fruit of a sin which has burdened my life with the most poignant remorse."

"Hush, madame," replied the priest, who, as he cast a furtive glance at the kneeling servants, had just seen Herminie take her place in their midst; "hush, madame, she is here."

"She is?"

"Yes, she came in a moment ago, and is now kneeling with your people."

As he spoke, the priest turned and walked towards the door to close it, after having first intimated by a gesture that the sad ceremony was over.

"I remember now – that yesterday – when Herminie left me – I begged her to return to-day at this very hour. The physician was right, – the angelic voice of the dear child, her tender melodies, have often assuaged my sufferings."

"Take care, madame. Be more prudent, I beg of you," pleaded the priest, alone now with the invalid.

"Oh, I am. My daughter suspects nothing," answered Madame de Beaumesnil, with a bitter smile.

"That is quite probable," said the priest, "for it was only chance, or, rather, the inscrutable will of Providence, that brought this young woman to your notice a short time ago. Doubtless it is the Saviour's will that you should be subjected to a still harder test."

"Hard, indeed, my father, since I shall be obliged to depart from this life without ever having said 'my daughter' to this unfortunate girl. Alas! I shall carry my wretched secret with me to the grave."

"Your vow imposes this sacrifice upon you, madame. It is a sacred obligation," said the priest, severely. "To break your vow, to thus perjure yourself, would be sacrilege."

"I have never thought of perjuring myself, my father," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, despondently; "but God is punishing me cruelly. I am dying, and yet I am forced to treat as a stranger my own child, – who is there – only a few feet from me, kneeling among my people, and who must never know that I am her mother."

"Your sin was great, madame. The expiation must be correspondingly great."

"But how long it has lasted for me, my father. Faithful to my vow, I never even tried to discover what had become of my unfortunate child. Alas! but for the chance which brought her to my notice a few days ago, I should have died without having seen her for seventeen years."

"These thoughts are very sinful, my daughter," said the priest, sternly. "They caused you to take a most imprudent step yesterday."

"Have no fears, my father. It is impossible that the woman I sent for yesterday, openly, in order to avert any suspicion, should suspect my motive in asking for information which she alone could give."

"And this information?"

"Confirmed – as I anticipated – in the most irrefutable manner – what I already knew – that Herminie is my daughter."

"But why do you feel so sure of this woman's discretion?"

"Because she lost all trace of my daughter after their separation sixteen years ago."

"But are you sure this woman did not recognise you?"

"I confessed to you, my father, that I had a mask on my face when I brought Herminie into the world with this woman's aid, and yesterday, in my interview with her, I found it easy to convince her that the mother of the child I was inquiring about had been dead for several years."

"It is necessary that I should grant you absolution for this act of deception," answered Abbé Ledoux, with great severity. "You can see now the fatal consequences of your criminal solicitude for a person who, after your vow, should always have remained a stranger to you."

"Ah, that oath which remorse and gratitude for the most generous forgiveness extorted from me! I have often cursed it, – but I have always kept it, my father."

"And yet, my sister, even at such an hour as this, your every thought is given to that young girl."

"No, not my every thought, my father, for I have another child. But alas! I cannot prevent my heart from throbbing faster at the approach of Herminie, who is also my daughter. Can I prevent my heart from going out to her? I may have courage to control my lips, to guard my eyes, and to conceal my feelings when Herminie is with me, but I cannot prevent myself from feeling a mother's tenderness for her."

"Then you must forbid the girl the house," said the priest, sternly. "You can easily invent a plausible pretext for that, I am sure. Thank her for her services, and –"

"No, no, I should never have the courage to do that," said the countess, quickly. "Is it not hard enough for me that my other daughter, whose affection would have been so consoling in this trying hour, is in a foreign land, mourning the loss of the father of whom she was so suddenly bereft? And who knows, perhaps Ernestine, too, is dying as I am. Poor child! She was so weak and frail when she went away! Oh, was there ever a mother as much to be pitied as I am?"

And two burning tears fell from Madame de Beaumesnil's eyes.

"Calm yourself, my sister," said the abbé, soothingly; "do not grieve so. Put your trust in Heaven. Our Saviour's mercy is great. He has sustained you through this solemn ceremony, which was, as I told you, merely a precaution, for, God be praised! your condition, though alarming, is by no means hopeless."

Madame de Beaumesnil shook her head sadly, as she replied:

"I am growing weaker fast, my father, but now that my last duties are performed I feel much calmer. Ah, if I did not have my children to think of, I could die in peace."

"I understand you, my sister," said the priest, soothingly. Then watching Madame de Beaumesnil's face closely all the while, he continued:

"I understand you, my sister. The future of your child, your legitimate child, – I cannot and must not speak of the other, – her future excites your liveliest apprehensions – and you are right – an orphan – and so young, poor child!"

"Alas! yes, a mother's place can never be filled."

"Then why do you hesitate, my sister?" said the abbé, slowly and impressively, "why do you hesitate to assure this beloved daughter's future happiness? Why have you never permitted me – though I have long desired the favour – to introduce to you that good and devout young man, that model of wisdom and virtue, of whom I have so often spoken. Your mother's heart would long since have appreciated this paragon of Christian virtues; and sure, in advance, of your daughter's obedience

to your last wishes, you could have recommended him to her by a few lines, which I myself would have delivered to the poor child. You could easily have advised her to take for her husband M. Célestin de Macreuse. Your daughter would then be sure of a most estimable and devout husband, for – "

"My father," interrupted Madame de Beaumesnil, without making any effort to conceal the painful feelings that this conversation was awakening. "I have told you that I do not doubt the great worth of this gentleman you have so often mentioned to me, but my daughter Ernestine is not sixteen yet, and I am not willing to insist upon her marrying a man she does not even know, for the dear child has so much affection for me that she would be quite capable of sacrificing herself to please me."

"We will say no more about it, then, my dear sister," said the abbé, with a contrite air. "In calling your attention to M. Célestin de Macreuse, I had but one object in view. That was to save you from the slightest anxiety concerning your dear Ernestine's future. You speak of sacrifices, my sister, but permit me to say that the great danger is that your poor child will be sacrificed some day to some man who is unworthy of her, – to some irreligious, dissipated spendthrift. You are unwilling to influence your daughter in her choice of a husband, you say. But alas! who will guide her in her choice if she has the misfortune to lose you? Will it be her selfish, worldly relatives, or will your too artless and credulous child blindly yield to the promptings of her heart. Ah, my sister, think of the dangers and the deception to which she will inevitably be exposed! Think of the crowd of suitors which her immense fortune is sure to attract! Ah, believe me, my sister, it would be wiser to save her from these perils in advance by a prudent and sensible choice."

"Forgive me, my father," said Madame de Beaumesnil, greatly agitated, and evidently desirous of putting an end to this painful conversation; "but I am feeling very weak and tired. I appreciate and am truly grateful for the interest you take in my daughter. I shall do my duty faithfully by her so long as I am spared. Your words will not be forgotten, I assure you, my father, and may Heaven give me the strength and the time to act."

Too shrewd and crafty to press the claims of his protégé further, Abbé Ledoux said, benignly:

"May Heaven inspire you, my sister. I doubt not that our gracious Lord will make your duty as a mother clear to you. Courage, my sister, courage. And now farewell until to-morrow."

"The morrow belongs to God."

"I can at least implore him to prolong your days, my sister," answered the priest, bowing low. He left the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind him before the countess rang for one of her attendants.

"Is Mlle. Herminie here?" she asked.

"Yes, madame la comtesse."

"Ask her to come in. I wish to see her."

"Yes, madame la comtesse," replied the maid, hastening off to fulfil her employer's instructions.

A few minutes afterwards, Herminie, pale and sad, though apparently calm, entered Madame de Beaumesnil's chamber, with her music books in her hand.

"I was told that madame la comtesse wished to see me," she said, with marked deference.

"Yes, mademoiselle. I have – I have a favour to ask of you," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, who was racking her brain to devise some way of bringing her daughter closer to her.

"I am entirely at madame's service," Herminie answered, promptly but quietly.

"I have a letter to write, mademoiselle, – only a few lines, but I am not sure that I shall have the strength to write it. There is no one here that I can ask to do it in my stead. Should it be necessary, would you be willing to act as my secretary?"

"With the greatest pleasure, madame," was the ready response.

"I thank you for your willingness to oblige me."

"Does madame la comtesse wish me to get the necessary writing materials for her?"

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle," replied the poor mother, though she longed to accept her daughter's offer so she might keep her with her as long as possible. "I will ring for some one. I am loath to give you so much trouble."

"It is no trouble to me, madame. I will gladly get the necessary materials if you will tell me where to find them."

"Over there, on that table near the piano, mademoiselle. I must also ask you to have the goodness to light a candle, – the light from the lamp is not enough. But really I am trespassing entirely too much upon your good nature," added Madame de Beaumesnil, as her daughter lighted a candle and brought the necessary writing materials to the bedside.

The countess having taken a sheet of paper and laid it upon a blotting-case placed upon her knees, accepted a pen from the hand of Herminie, who was holding the candle in the other.

Madame de Beaumesnil tried to write a few words, but her extreme weakness, together with her failing sight, compelled her to desist from her efforts; the pen dropped from her trembling fingers, and, sinking back upon her pillows, the countess said to Herminie, with a forced smile:

"I am not as strong as I thought, so I shall be obliged to accept your kind offer, mademoiselle."

"Madame la comtesse has been in bed so long that she should not be surprised to find herself a little weak," responded Herminie, anxious to reassure Madame de Beaumesnil and herself as well.

"You are right, mademoiselle. It was very foolish in me to try to write. I will dictate to you, if you have no objections."

Herminie had not felt at liberty to remove her hat, and the countess, from whom the brim concealed a part of her child's face, said, with some embarrassment:

"If you would take off your hat, mademoiselle, you would find it more convenient to write, I think."

Herminie removed her hat, and the countess, who was fairly devouring the girl with her eyes, had an opportunity to admire at her ease, with true maternal pride, the charming face and golden tresses of her child.

"I am at your service now, madame la comtesse," said Herminie, seating herself at a table.

"Then will you kindly write this." And the countess proceeded to dictate as follows:

"Madame de Beaumesnil would be greatly obliged to M. le Marquis de Maillefort if he would come to her house as soon as possible, even should that be at a late hour of the night.

"Madame de Beaumesnil, being very weak, is obliged to have recourse to the hand of another person in order to write to M. de Maillefort, to whom she reiterates the assurance of her very highest regard."

As Madame de Beaumesnil dictated this note she was assailed by one of those puerile, but no less poignant, fears that only a mother can understand.

Delighted by the refinement of manner and language she noticed in her daughter, and aware that she was a musical artiste of a high order, the countess asked herself, with a mother's jealous solicitude, if Herminie's education was all it should be, and if her child's great musical talent might not have been cultivated at the expense of other and less showy accomplishments.

And strange as it may seem, – so important are the merest trifles to a mother's pride, – at that moment, and in spite of all her grave anxieties, Madame de Beaumesnil was saying to herself:

"What if my daughter did not spell well? What if her handwriting should prove execrable?"

This fear was so keen that for a minute or two the countess dared not ask Herminie to show her the letter she had written, but, finally, unable to endure the suspense any longer, she asked:

"Have you finished, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, madame la comtesse."

"Then will you have the goodness to hand me the letter so – so I can see if M. de Maillefort's name is spelled correctly. I neglected to tell you how it was spelled," added the countess, unable to invent any better excuse for her curiosity.

Herminie placed the letter in Madame de Beaumesnil's hand. And how proud and delighted that lady was when she saw that the spelling was not only absolutely perfect, but that the chirography was both graceful and distinguished.

"Wonderful! I never saw more beautiful writing!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily.

Then, fearing her companion would notice her emotion, she added, more calmly:

"Will you kindly address the letter now, mademoiselle, to —

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort,

"No. 45 Rue des Martyrs."

Madame de Beaumesnil then summoned a trusty maid who waited upon her exclusively, and as soon as she came in, said to her:

"Madame Dupont, you will take a carriage and deliver this letter yourself to the person to whom it is addressed. In case M. de Maillefort is not at home, you are to wait for him."

"But what if madame la comtesse should need anything during my absence?" said the maid, evidently much surprised at this order.

"Attend to my commission," replied Madame de Beaumesnil. "Mademoiselle here will, I am sure, be kind enough to perform any service I may require."

Herminie bowed her assent.

The countess proceeded to repeat her instructions to her attendant, and while she was thus engaged, Herminie feeling comparatively safe from observation, gazed at Madame de Beaumesnil with a world of love and anxiety in her eyes, saying to herself the while, with touching resignation:

"I dare not gaze at her except by stealth, and yet she is my mother. Ah, may she never suspect that I know the unhappy secret of my birth."

CHAPTER IX

THE PRIVATE INTERVIEW

It was with an expression of almost triumphant satisfaction that Mme. de Beaumesnil watched her maid depart.

The poor mother felt sure now of at least an hour alone with her daughter.

Thanks to this happiness, a faint flush overspread her pallid cheeks, her dim eyes began to sparkle with a feverish light, and the intense prostration gave place to an unnatural excitement, for the countess was making an almost superhuman effort to profit by this opportunity to talk with her daughter alone.

The door had scarcely closed upon the attendant when Madame de Beaumesnil said:

"Mademoiselle, will you have the goodness to pour into a cup five or six spoonfuls of that cordial there on the mantel?"

"But, madame, you forget that the physician ordered you to take this medicine only in small doses," protested Herminie, anxiously. "At least, it seems to me I heard him give those directions yesterday."

"Yes, but I am feeling much better now, and this potion will do me a wonderful amount of good, I think – will give me new strength, in fact."

"Madame la comtesse is really feeling better?" asked Herminie, divided between a desire to believe Madame de Beaumesnil and a fear of seeing her deceived as to the gravity of her situation.

"You can scarcely credit the improvement I speak of, perhaps. The sad rites you witnessed a few minutes ago frightened you, I suppose, and very naturally. But it was only a precaution on my part, for the consciousness of having fulfilled my religious duties, and of being ready to appear before God, gives me a serenity of soul to which the improved condition of which I speak is doubtless due, at least in some measure. I feel sure, too, that the cordial I asked you for just now, but which you refuse to give me," added Madame de Beaumesnil, smiling, "would do me a great deal of good, and enable me to listen once again to one of the songs which have so often assuaged my sufferings."

"As madame insists, I will give her the cordial," said Herminie.

And the young girl, reflecting that a larger or smaller dose of the cordial would probably make very little difference, after all, poured four spoonfuls into a cup and handed it to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The countess, as she took the cup from Herminie, managed to touch her hand, then, rejoiced to have her daughter so near her, sipped the cordial very slowly and then gave such a sigh of weariness as to almost compel Herminie to ask:

"Is madame la comtesse fatigued?"

"Rather. It seems to me that if I could sit bolt upright for a little while I should be more comfortable, but I am hardly strong enough to do that."

"If madame la comtesse would – would lean upon me," said the young girl, hesitatingly, "it might rest her a little."

"I would accept your offer if I did not feel that I was imposing upon your kindness," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, delighted at the success of her little ruse.

Herminie's heart swelled almost to bursting as she seated herself upon the side of the bed and pillowed the invalid's head upon her daughter's bosom.

As they found themselves for the first time in each others' arms, so to speak, the mother and daughter both trembled with emotion. Their position prevented them from seeing each others' faces; but for that Mme. de Beaumesnil, in spite of her vow, might not have been able to guard her secret any longer.

"No, no, there must be no guilty weakness on my part," thought Madame de Beaumesnil. "My poor child shall never know this sad secret, I have sworn it. Is it not a piece of unlooked-for good fortune for me to be the recipient of her affectionate care, which I owe to her kindness of heart rather than to filial instinct, of course?"

"Oh, I would rather die than allow my mother to suspect that I know I am her daughter," thought Herminie, in her turn. "Possibly she is ignorant of the fact herself. Perhaps it was chance, and chance alone, that brought about my present relations with Madame de Beaumesnil; perhaps I am really only a stranger in her eyes."

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, after a while, but without venturing a glance at Herminie. "I feel more comfortable, now."

"Will madame la comtesse allow me to arrange her pillows for her before she lies down again?"

"If you will be so good," replied Madame de Beaumesnil, for would not this little service keep her daughter beside her a few seconds longer?

Mademoiselle and madame la comtesse! If one could but have heard the tone in which the mother and daughter interchanged these cold and ceremonious appellations which had never before seemed so icy in character!

"I have to thank you once again, mademoiselle," said the countess, after she had lain down. "I find myself more and more comfortable, thanks to your kind attentions. The cordial, too, seems to have done me good, and I feel sure that I shall have a very comfortable night."

Herminie glanced dubiously at her hat and mantle. She feared that she would be dismissed on the maid's return, for it was quite likely that Madame de Beaumesnil would not care to hear any music that evening.

Unwilling to renounce her last hope, the young girl said, timidly:

"Madame la comtesse asked me to bring some selections from 'Oberon' this evening, but perhaps she does not care to listen to them."

"Quite the contrary, mademoiselle," said Madame de Beaumesnil, quickly. "You know how often your singing has mitigated my sufferings, and this evening I am feeling so well that music will prove, not an anodyne, but a genuine pleasure."

Herminie cast a quick glance at Madame de Beaumesnil, and was struck by the change in that lady's usually drawn and pallid countenance. A slight colour tinged her cheeks now, and her expression was calm, even smiling.

On beholding this metamorphosis, the girl's gloomy presentiments vanished. Hope revived in her heart, and she almost believed that her mother had been saved by one of those sudden changes so common in nervous maladies.

So inexpressibly pleased and relieved, Herminie took her music and walked to the piano.

Directly over the instrument hung a portrait of a little girl five or six years of age, playing with a magnificent greyhound. She was not pretty, but the childish face had a remarkably sweet and ingenuous expression. This portrait, painted about ten years before, was that of Ernestine de Beaumesnil, the Comtesse de Beaumesnil's legitimate child.

Herminie had not needed to ask who the original of this portrait was, and more than once she had cast a timid, loving glance at this little sister whom she did not know, and whom she would never know, perhaps.

On seeing this portrait now, Herminie, still under the influence of her late emotion, felt even more deeply moved than usual, and for a minute or two she could not take her eyes off the picture. Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil was tenderly watching the girl's every movement, and noted her contemplation of Ernestine's portrait with keen delight.

"Poor Herminie!" thought the countess. "She has a mother and a sister, and yet she will never know the sweetness of those words: my sister – my mother."

And furtively wiping away a tear, Madame de Beaumesnil said aloud to Herminie, whose eyes were still riveted upon the portrait:

"That is my daughter. She has a sweet face, has she not?"

Herminie started as if she had been detected in some grievous crime, and blushed deeply as she timidly replied:

"Pardon me, madame; I – I – "

"Oh, look at it, look at it all you please," exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, hastily. "Though she is nearly grown now, and has changed very much in some respects, she still retains that same sweet, ingenuous expression. She is not nearly as handsome as you are," said the poor mother, with secret pride, and well pleased to be able to thus unite her two daughters in the same comparison, "but Ernestine's face, like yours, possesses a wonderful charm."

Then, fearing she had gone too far, Madame de Beaumesnil added, sadly:

"Poor child! Heaven grant she may be better now!"

"Are you really very anxious about her health, madame la comtesse?"

"She has not been at all well for some months past. She grew so rapidly that we were very anxious about her. The physicians advised us to take her to Italy, but my own health would not permit me to accompany her. Fortunately, the latest reports from her are very encouraging. Poor, dear child! She writes every day a sort of journal for me. You can not imagine anything more touching than her artless confessions. I will let you read some extracts from these letters. You will love Ernestine, then; you could not help loving her."

"I am sure of that, madame, and I thank you a thousand times for your promise," said Herminie. "As the last news received from your daughter is so reassuring, pray do not worry any more about her. Youth has so many chances in its favour anywhere, and under the beautiful skies of Italy she is sure to recover her health."

A bitter thought flitted through Madame de Beaumesnil's mind.

Remembering the expensive journey, the constant care, and the heavy outlay Ernestine's feeble health had necessitated, the countess asked herself with something closely akin to terror what Herminie would have done – poor, deserted creature that she was! – if she had found herself in Ernestine's position, and if her life could have been saved only by the assiduous care and expensive travel which the wealthy alone can command.

This thought excited in Madame de Beaumesnil's breast a still keener desire to know how Herminie had overcome the many difficulties of her precarious position, for the countess had known absolutely nothing in regard to the girl's life up to the time when a mere chance had brought the mother and daughter together.

But how could she solicit these revelations without betraying herself? To what agony she might subject herself by asking her daughter for the story of her life!

This reflection had always prevented Madame de Beaumesnil from questioning Herminie, heretofore, but that evening, either because the countess felt that the apparent improvement in her condition was a precursor of the end, or because a feeling of tenderness, increased by the events of the evening, proved too strong for her powers of resistance, Madame de Beaumesnil resolved to question Herminie.

CHAPTER X REVELATIONS

While Madame de Beaumesnil was silently revolving in her mind the surest means of inducing Herminie to tell the story of her past life, the girl stood turning the pages of her music book, waiting for the countess to ask her to begin.

"You will think me very changeable, I fear, mademoiselle," said the countess, at last; "but if it is all the same to you, I would prefer to postpone the music until about ten o'clock. That is usually my worst time, though perhaps I shall escape it to-night. If I do not, I should regret having exhausted a resource which has so often relieved me. Nor is this all; after having admitted that I am whimsical, I fear that you will now accuse me of having entirely too much curiosity."

"And why, madame?"

"Come and seat yourself here beside me," said the countess, affectionately, "and tell me how it is that you who can not be more than seventeen or eighteen years of age –"

"Eighteen years and six months, madame la comtesse."

"Well, then, how it is that you are such an accomplished musician at your age?"

"Madame la comtesse judges me too flatteringly. I have always had a great love for music, and I had very little trouble in learning it."

"But who was your instructor? Where did you learn music?"

"I was taught in the school I attended, madame la comtesse."

"In Paris, then, I suppose?"

"No; I have attended school in other places besides Paris."

"Where?"

"In Beauvais. I lived there until I was ten years old."

"And after that?"

"I was placed in a Parisian school."

"And how long did you remain there?"

"Until I was sixteen and a half."

"And after that?"

"I left school and began to give lessons in singing and on the piano."

"And ever since that time you have – ?"

Madame de Beaumesnil hastily checked herself, then added, with no little embarrassment:

"I am really ashamed of my inquisitiveness – nothing but the deep interest I take in you could excuse it, mademoiselle."

"The questions madame la comtesse deigns to address to me are evidently so kindly meant that I am only too glad to answer them in all sincerity."

"Well, then, with whom did you make your home after leaving school?"

"With whom did I make my home, madame?"

"Yes; I mean with what persons?"

"I had no one to go to, madame."

"No one?" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, with truly heroic courage. "You had no relatives? No family?"

"I have no relatives, madame la comtesse," replied Herminie, with a courage equal to that of her mother. "I have no relatives."

"I am sure now that she does not know that I am her daughter," Herminie said to herself. "If she did, she certainly would not have had the courage to ask me such a question."

"Then with whom have you lived since that time?" asked the countess.

"I have lived alone."

"Entirely alone?"

"Yes, madame."

"Forgive me this one more question, for at your age – such a position is so unusual – and so very interesting – have you always had scholars enough to support you?"

"Oh, yes, madame la comtesse," replied poor Herminie, bravely.

"And you live entirely alone, though you are so young?"

"What else could I do, madame? One can not choose one's lot; one can only accept it, and by the aid of industry and courage try to make one's existence, if not brilliant, at least happy."

"Happy!" exclaimed Madame de Beaumesnil, in accents of irrepressible delight; "you are really happy?"

As she uttered these words her countenance, as well as her voice, betrayed such intense joy and relief that Herminie's doubts returned, and she said to herself:

"Perhaps she does know that I am her daughter. If she does not, why should she be so pleased to learn that I am happy. It matters little, however. If she does know that I am her daughter, I must reassure her so as to save her from vain regrets, and perhaps remorse. If I am a stranger to her, it is no less necessary for me to reassure her, else she may think I wish to excite her commiseration, and my pride revolts at the idea of that."

Meanwhile, Madame de Beaumesnil, longing to hear Herminie repeat an assurance so precious to a mother's heart, exclaimed:

"And you say you are happy – really and truly happy?"

"Yes, madame," answered Herminie, almost gaily, "very happy."

Seeing her daughter's charming face thus radiant with innocent joy and youthful beauty, the countess was obliged to make a violent effort to keep from betraying herself, and it was with a fair imitation of Herminie's gaiety that she replied:

"Don't laugh at my question, mademoiselle, but to us, who are unfortunately accustomed to all the luxuries and superfluities of wealth, there are many things that seem incomprehensible. When you left school, however modest your wants may have been, how did you manage to supply them?"

"Oh, I was rich, then, madame la comtesse," said Herminie, smiling.

"How was that?"

"Two years after I was placed at a Parisian school, the remittances which had, up to that time, been received for my schooling ceased. I was then twelve years old, and the principal of the school was very fond of me. 'My child,' she said to me one day, 'your friends have ceased to pay for you, but that makes no difference; you shall stay on just the same.'"

"Noble woman!"

"She was the best woman that ever lived, madame la comtesse, but, unfortunately, she is dead now," said Herminie, sadly.

Then, unwilling to leave the countess under a painful impression, she added, smilingly:

"But the kind-hearted woman had not taken my greatest fault into consideration in making these plans. For, as you ask me to be perfectly frank with you, madame, I am forced to admit that I have one great and deplorable fault."

"And what is it, may I ask?"

"Alas! madame, it is *pride*."

"Pride?"

"Yes; so when our kind-hearted principal offered to keep me out of charity, my pride revolted, and I told her I would accept her offer only upon condition that I was allowed to pay by my work for what she offered me gratuitously."

"You said that at the age of twelve. What a little braggart she must have thought you. And how did you propose to pay her, pray?"

"By superintending the practising of the younger music pupils, for I was very far advanced for my age, having always had a passion for music."

"And did she accept your proposal?"

"Gladly, madame la comtesse. My determination to be independent seemed to touch her deeply."

"I can readily understand that."

"Thanks to her, I soon had a large number of pupils, several of them much older than myself, – my pride is continually cropping out, you see, madame. In this way, what was at first child's play became a vocation, and, later on, a valuable resource. At the age of fourteen, I was the second piano teacher, with a salary of twelve hundred francs, so you can form some estimate of the wealth I must have amassed at the age of sixteen and a half."

"Poor child! So young, and yet so full of indomitable energy and noble pride!" exclaimed the countess, unable to restrain her tears.

"Then why did you leave the school?" she continued, after she had conquered her emotion.

"Our noble-hearted principal died, and another lady – who unfortunately did not resemble my benefactress in the least – took her place. The newcomer, however, proposed that I should remain in the institution upon the same terms. I accepted her offer, but, at the end of two months, my great fault – and my hot head – caused me to sever my connection with the school."

"And why?"

"My new employer was as hard and tyrannical as the other had been kind and affectionate, and one day – "

Herminie's beautiful face turned a vivid scarlet at the recollection, and she hesitated a moment.

"One day," she continued, at last, "this lady made a remark to me that cut me to the quick."

"What did the wicked creature say to you?" demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, for Herminie had paused again, unwilling to wound the countess by repeating the insulting and heartless words:

"You are very proud for a bastard that was reared by charity in this very house."

"What did that wicked woman say to you?" insisted Madame de Beaumesnil.

"I beg that you will not insist upon my repeating her heartless words," replied Herminie. "Though I have not forgotten, I have at least forgiven them. But the very next day I left the house with my little savings. With these I fitted up my modest *ménage*, for since that time I have lived alone, in a home of my own."

Herminie uttered the words, "in a home of my own," with such a proud and satisfied air, that Madame de Beaumesnil, with tears in her eyes, despite the smile upon her lips, pressed the young girl's hand affectionately, and said:

"I am sure this home of yours must be charming."

"Oh, yes, madame, there is nothing too elegant for me."

"Come, tell me all about it. How many rooms are there in your apartment?"

"Only one, besides a tiny hall; but it is on the ground floor, and looks out upon a garden. The room is small, so I could afford a pretty carpet and curtains. I have only one armchair, but that is velvet. I have but little furniture, it is true, but that little is in very good taste, I think. There is one thing more that I aspire to, however, and that ambition will soon be realised."

"And what is that?"

"It is to have a little maid, – a child thirteen or fourteen years of age, whom I shall rescue from misery and want, and who will be as happy as the day is long with me. I have heard of an orphan girl, about twelve years old, a dear, obedient, affectionate child, they say, so you can judge how pleased I shall be when I am able to take her into my service. It will not be a useless expense, either, madame la comtesse, for then I shall not be obliged to go out alone to give my lessons, – and that is so unpleasant, for, as you must know, madame, a young girl who is obliged to go out alone – "

Herminie's voice faltered, and tears of shame filled her eyes as she thought of the insult she had just received from M. de Ravil, as well as other annoyances of a like nature to which she had often been subjected in spite of her modest and dignified bearing.

"I understand, my child, and I approve your plan," said Madame de Beaumesnil, more and more deeply touched. "But your pupils – who procures them for you? And do you always have as many as you need?"

"Generally, madame la comtesse. In summer, when several of my pupils go to the country, I follow other pursuits. I can embroider very well; sometimes I copy music – I have even composed several pieces. I have maintained friendly relations, too, with several of my former schoolmates, and it was through one of them that I was recommended to the wife of your physician, who was looking for a young person, a good musician, to play and sing for you."

Herminie, who had begun her story seated in an armchair near the bedside, now found herself half reclining on the bed, clasped in her mother's arms.

Both had unconsciously yielded to the promptings of filial and maternal love, for Madame de Beaumesnil, after placing Herminie near her, had ventured to retain one of her daughter's hands during the narration of this simple yet touching story, and as Herminie recounted the principal incidents of her past life to her mother, she felt Madame de Beaumesnil's hand draw her closer and closer, until she found herself leaning over the bed with her mother's arms around her neck.

Then seized with a sort of maternal frenzy, Madame de Beaumesnil, instead of continuing the conversation and answering her daughter, seized Herminie's lovely face in her two hands, and, without uttering a word, covered it with tears and impassioned kisses, after which the mother and daughter remained for several minutes clasped in a convulsive embrace. It is well-nigh certain that the secret which it had been so difficult to guard, and which had more than once been upon their lips, would have escaped them this time if they had not been suddenly recalled to consciousness by a knock at the door.

Madame de Beaumesnil, terrified at the thought of the act of perjury she had been on the verge of committing, but unable to explain this wild transport of tenderness on her part, exclaimed incoherently, as she gently released Herminie from her embrace:

"Forgive me, forgive me, my child! I am a mother, – my own child is far away – and her absence causes me the deepest regret. My poor brain is so weak – now – and for a moment – I laboured under the delusion – the strange delusion that it was – that it was my absent daughter I was pressing to my heart. Pardon the strange hallucination – you cannot but pity a poor mother who realises that she is dying without being able to embrace her child for the last time."

"Dying!" exclaimed the girl, raising her tear-stained face and gazing wildly at her mother.

But hearing the knock repeated, Herminie hastily dried her tears, and, forcing herself to appear calm, said to her mother:

"This is the second time some one has knocked, madame la comtesse."

"Admit the person," murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, faintly, quite overcome by the painful scene. It proved to be the confidential maid of the countess. She entered, and said:

"I went to M. le Marquis de Maillefort as madame directed."

"Well?" demanded Madame de Beaumesnil, eagerly.

"And M. le marquis is waiting below until madame la comtesse is ready to see him."

"Heaven be praised!" murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, fervently. "God is rewarding me for having had the strength to keep my vow!"

Then, turning to the maid, she added:

"Bring M. de Maillefort here at once."

Herminie, quite overcome by so many conflicting emotions, and feeling that her presence was no longer desired, took her hat and mantle with the intention of departing at once.

The countess never took her eyes from the young girl's face. She was gazing at her daughter for the last time, perhaps, for the poor mother felt her life was nearly over now. Nevertheless she had the courage to say to Herminie in an almost unconcerned voice in order to deceive the girl as to her real condition:

"We will have our selections from 'Oberon' to-morrow, mademoiselle. You will have the goodness to come early, will you not?"

"Yes, madame la comtesse," replied Herminie.

"Show mademoiselle out, Madame Dupont, and then bring M. de Maillefort," the countess said to her maid. But as she watched her daughter move towards the door she could not help saying to her for the last time:

"Farewell, mademoiselle."

"Farewell, madame la comtesse," answered Herminie.

And it was in these formal words that these two poor, heart-broken creatures gave vent to their grief and despair at this final hour of parting.

Madame Dupont showed Herminie to the street door without taking her past the drawing-room in which M. de Maillefort was waiting. Just as the young girl was leaving, Madame Dupont said, kindly:

"You have forgotten your umbrella, mademoiselle, and you will need it, for it is a dreadful night. The rain is falling in torrents."

"Thank you, madame," said Herminie, recollecting now that she had left her umbrella just outside the door of the reception-room, and hastening back for it.

It was indeed, raining in torrents, but Herminie, absorbed in grief, did not even notice that the night was dark and stormy as she left the Hôtel de Beaumesnil, and wended her solitary way homeward.

CHAPTER XI

THE PURSE OF MONEY

M. de Maillefort was waiting alone in one of the drawing-rooms when Madame Dupont came to conduct him into Madame de Beaumesnil's presence.

The hunchback's countenance had lost its usual expression of cynical raillery. Profound sadness, mingled with an intense anxiety and surprise, could be easily discerned upon his features.

Standing with one elbow resting on the mantel, and his head supported on his hand, the marquis seemed lost in thought. One might almost have fancied that he was seeking the solution of some difficult enigma; but now and then he would wake from his reverie and gaze around him with eyes glittering with tears, then hurriedly passing his hand across his forehead, as if to drive away painful thoughts, he began to pace the room with hasty strides.

Only a few minutes had elapsed, however, when Madame Dupont came to say:

"If M. le marquis will be kind enough to follow me, madame la comtesse will see him now."

Stepping in front of the marquis, Madame Dupont opened the door leading into Madame de Beaumesnil's apartment and announced:

"M. le Marquis de Maillefort!"

The countess had made an invalid's toilet. Her blonde hair, somewhat dishevelled by the passionate embraces bestowed upon her daughter, had been smoothed afresh, a dainty cap of Valenciennes lace surmounted the pale face, from which every tinge of colour had now fled. Her eyes, so brilliant with maternal tenderness a few moments before, had lost their lustre, and the hands that burned so feverishly when they pressed Herminie's were fast growing cold.

Noting the appalling change in the features of the countess, whom he had seen but a comparatively short time before radiant with youth and beauty, M. de Maillefort started violently, then paused a moment in spite of himself.

"You find me greatly changed, do you not, M. de Maillefort?" asked Madame de Beaumesnil, with a sad smile.

The hunchback made no reply. His head drooped, and when he raised it again, after a minute or two, he was as pale as death.

Madame de Beaumesnil motioned the marquis to seat himself in an armchair near the bedside, saying as she did so, in a grave but affectionate voice:

"I fear my moments even are numbered, M. de Maillefort, and I shall therefore endeavour to make this interview as brief as possible."

The marquis silently took the seat designated by the countess, who added:

"My note must have surprised you."

"Yes, madame."

"But kind and generous as ever, you hastened to comply with my request."

The marquis bowed, and, in a voice full of emotion, the countess went on:

"M. de Maillefort, you have loved me devotedly," she said.

The hunchback started visibly, and gazed at the countess with mingled dismay and astonishment.

"Do not be surprised that I should have discovered a secret that no one else has even suspected," continued the countess, "for love, true love, always betrays itself to the person loved."

"So you knew," stammered the hunchback.

"I knew all," replied the countess, extending her ice-cold hand to M. de Maillefort, who pressed it reverently, while tears which he could no longer repress streamed down his cheeks.

"Yes, I knew all," continued the countess, "your noble, though carefully concealed, devotion, and the suffering so heroically endured."

"You knew all?" repeated M. de Maillefort, hesitatingly; "you knew all, and yet your greeting was always kind and gracious when we chanced to meet. You knew all, and yet I never detected a mocking smile upon your lips or a gleam of disdainful pity in your eye."

"M. de Maillefort," the countess answered, with touching dignity, "it is in the name of the love you have borne me, it is in the name of the affectionate esteem with which your character has always inspired me, that I now, at the hour of death, beg that you will allow me to entrust to your keeping the interests I hold most dear."

"Forgive me, madame, forgive me," said the marquis, with even greater emotion, "for having even for an instant fancied that a heart like yours could scorn or ridicule an unconquerable but carefully concealed love. Speak on, madame, I believe I am worthy of the confidence you show in me."

"M. de Maillefort, this night will be my last."

"Madame!"

"I am not deceiving myself. It is only by a strong effort of will and a powerful stimulant that I have managed to hold death at bay for several hours past. Listen, then, for, as I just told you, my moments are numbered."

The hunchback dried his tears and listened with breathless attention.

"You have heard of the frightful accident of which M. de Beaumesnil was the victim. By reason of his death – and mine – my daughter Ernestine will soon be an orphan in a strange land, with no one to care for her but a governess. Nor is this all. Ernestine is an angel of goodness and ingenuousness, but she is exceedingly timid. Tenderly guarded both by her father and myself, she is as ignorant of the world as only a sixteen-year-old girl who has been jealously watched over by her parents, and who naturally prefers quiet and simplicity, can be. On some accounts one might suppose that I need feel no anxiety in regard to her future, for she will be the richest heiress in France, but I cannot overcome my uneasiness when I think of the persons who will probably have charge of my daughter when I am gone, for it is M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë who, as her nearest relatives, will doubtless be selected as her guardians. This being the case, you can easily understand my apprehensions, I think."

"It would, indeed, be desirable that your daughter should have more judicious guardians, but Mlle. de Beaumesnil is sixteen. Her minority will not last long; besides, the persons to whom you allude are erratic and ridiculous rather than dangerous."

"I know that, still, Ernestine's hand will be so strongly coveted – I have already had convincing proofs of that" – added Madame de Beaumesnil, remembering her confessor's persistent efforts in M. de Macreuse's behalf, "the poor child will be the victim of such persecution that I shall not feel entirely reassured unless she has a faithful and devoted friend of superior character, willing and capable of guiding her in her choice. Will you be this faithful friend to my child, M. de Maillefort? Consent, I beseech you, and I shall leave the world satisfied that my daughter's lot in life will be as happy as it will be brilliant."

"I will endeavour to be such a friend to your daughter, madame. Everything that I can do for her, I will do."

"Ah, I can breath freely now, I no longer feel any anxiety in regard to Ernestine. I know what such a promise means from you, M. de Maillefort," exclaimed the countess, her face beaming with hope and serenity.

But almost immediately a consciousness of increasing weakness, together with other unfavourable symptoms, convinced Madame de Beaumesnil that her end was fast approaching. Her countenance, which had beamed for a moment with the hope and serenity M. de Maillefort's promise had inspired, became troubled again, and in a hurried, almost entreating voice, she continued:

"But this is not all, M. de Maillefort, I have a still greater favour to ask of you. Aided by your counsels, my daughter Ernestine will be as happy as she is rich. Her future is as bright and as well assured as any person's can be, but it is very different concerning the future of a poor but noble-hearted creature, whom – I – I wish that you – "

Madame de Beaumesnil paused. Say more she dared not – could not.

Though she had resolved to tell M. de Maillefort the secret of Herminie's birth, in the hope of ensuring her child the protection of this generous man, she shrank from the shame of such a confession, – a confession which would also have been a violation of the solemn oath she had taken years before, and faithfully kept.

The marquis, seeing her hesitate, said, gently:

"What is it, madame? Will you not be kind enough to tell me what other service I can render you? Do you not know that you can depend upon me as one of the most devoted of your friends?"

"I know that! I know that!" gasped Madame de Beaumesnil, "but I dare not – I am afraid –"

The marquis, deeply touched by her distress, endeavoured to make it easier for her to prefer her request by saying:

"When you checked yourself just now, madame, you were speaking, I think, of the uncertain future of a poor but noble-hearted creature. Who is she? And in what way can I be of service to her?"

Overcome with grief and increasing weakness, Madame de Beaumesnil buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears; then, after a brief silence, riveting her weeping eyes on the marquis, and endeavouring to appear more calm, she said, brokenly:

"Yes, you might be of the greatest possible service to a poor girl – worthy in every respect – of your interest, for she, too, is an orphan – a most unfortunate orphan, – for she is both friendless and penniless, but, oh, so brave, and so proud! In short, she is an angel," cried the countess, with a vehemence at which M. de Maillefort marvelled greatly. "Yes," continued Madame de Beaumesnil, sobbing violently, "Yes, she is an angel of courage and of virtue, and it is for this angel that I ask the same fatherly interest I asked for my daughter Ernestine. Oh, M. de Maillefort, do not refuse my request, I beseech you!"

The excitement and embarrassment Madame de Beaumesnil manifested in speaking of this orphan, together with the almost frenzied appeal in her behalf, excited the Marquis de Maillefort's profound astonishment.

For a moment he was too amazed to speak; then, all of a sudden, he started violently, for a terrible suspicion darted through his mind. He recollected some of the scandalous (up to this time he had always styled them infamous) reports, which had been rife in former years, concerning Madame de Beaumesnil, and which he had avenged by challenging M. de Mornand that very day.

Could it be that there had really been a foundation for these rumours? Was this orphan, in whom Madame de Beaumesnil seemed to take such a profound interest, bound to the countess by a secret tie? Was she, indeed, the child of her shame?

But almost immediately the marquis, full of confidence in Madame de Beaumesnil's virtue, drove away these odious suspicions, and bitterly reproached himself for having entertained them even for a moment.

The countess, terrified by the hunchback's silence, said to him, in trembling tones:

"Forgive me, M. de Maillefort. I see that I have presumed too much upon your generous kindness. Not content with having secured your fatherly protection for my daughter, Ernestine, I must needs seek to interest you in an unfortunate stranger. Pardon me, I beseech you."

The tone in which Madame de Beaumesnil uttered these words was so heart-broken and full of despair that M. de Maillefort's suspicions revived. One of his dearest illusions was being ruthlessly destroyed. Madame de Beaumesnil was no longer the ideal woman he had so long adored.

But taking pity on this unhappy mother, and understanding how terribly she must suffer, M. de Maillefort felt his eyes fill with tears, and it was in an agitated voice that he replied:

"You need have no fears, madame, I shall keep my promise, and the orphan girl you commend to my care will be as dear to me as Mlle. de Beaumesnil. I shall have two daughters instead of one."

And he pressed the hand of Madame de Beaumesnil affectionately, as if to seal his promise.

"Now I can die in peace!" exclaimed the countess. And before the marquis could prevent it, she had pressed her cold lips upon the hand he had offered her; and, from this manifestation of ineffable gratitude, M. de Maillefort was convinced that the person in question was indeed Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

All at once, either because so much violent emotion had exhausted the invalid's strength, or because her malady – concealed for a time by an apparent improvement in the sufferer's condition – had attained its height, Madame de Beaumesnil made a sudden movement, at the same time uttering a cry of agony.

"Good God, madame, what is it?" cried the marquis, terrified at the sudden alteration in Madame de Beaumesnil's features.

"It is nothing," she answered, heroically, "a slight pain, that is all. But here, take this key, – quick, I beg of you," she added, drawing out a key from under her pillow and handing it to him.

"Open – that – secretary," she gasped.

The marquis obeyed.

"There is a purse in the middle drawer. Do you see it?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Keep it, I beg of you. It contains a sum of money which I have a perfect right to dispose of. It will at least save the young girl I commended to your care from want. Only promise me," continued the poor mother, her voice becoming more and more feeble each moment, – "promise me that you will never mention my name to – to this orphan – nor tell her who it was that asked you to place this money in her hands. But tell her, oh, tell this unfortunate child that she was tenderly loved until the last, and that – that it was absolutely necessary – "

The countess was so weak now that the conclusion of the sentence was inaudible.

"But this purse – to whom am I to give it, madame? Where shall I find this young girl, and what is her name?" exclaimed M. de Maillefort, alarmed by the sudden change in Madame de Beaumesnil's condition, and by her laboured breathing.

But instead of answering M. de Maillefort's question Madame de Beaumesnil sank back on her pillows with a despairing moan, and clasped her hands upon her breast.

"Speak to me, madame," cried the marquis, bending over the countess in the utmost terror and alarm. "This young girl, tell me where I can find her, and who she is."

"I am dying – dying – " murmured Madame de Beaumesnil, lifting her eyes heavenward.

Then with a last supreme effort, she faltered:

"Don't forget – your promise – my child – the orphan!"

In another moment the countess was no more; and M. de Maillefort, overcome with grief and chagrin, could no longer doubt that this orphan, whose name and place of abode were alike unknown to him, was Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

The funeral rites of Madame de Beaumesnil were conducted with great splendour.

The Baron de la Rochaigne acted as chief mourner. M. de Maillefort, invited by letter to take part in the ceremonial, joined the funeral cortège.

In an obscure corner of the church, kneeling as if crushed by the weight of her despair, a young girl prayed and sobbed, unheeded by any one.

It was Herminie.

CHAPTER XII

A VAIN INTERVIEW

Several days after Madame de Beaumesnil's funeral, M. de Maillefort, arousing himself from the gloomy lethargy into which the death of the countess had plunged him, resolved to carry out that unfortunate lady's last wishes in regard to the unknown orphan, though he fully realised all the difficulties of the mission intrusted to him.

How should he go to work to find the young girl whom Madame de Beaumesnil had so urgently commended to his care?

To whom could he apply for information that would give him the necessary clue to her identity?

Above all, how could he secure this information without compromising Madame de Beaumesnil's good name and the secrecy with which she had wished him to carry out her intentions with regard to this mysterious daughter, – her illegitimate child, as M. de Maillefort could no longer doubt.

The hunchback recollected that on the evening of her death the countess had sent a confidential servant to beg him to come to the Hôtel de Beaumesnil without delay.

"This woman has been in Madame de Beaumesnil's service a long time," thought the marquis. "She may be able to give me some information."

So M. de Maillefort's valet, a trustworthy and devoted man, was sent to bring Madame Dupont to the house of the marquis.

"I know how devotedly you were attached to your mistress, my dear Madame Dupont," the marquis began.

"Ah, monsieur, madame la comtesse was so good and kind!" exclaimed Madame Dupont, bursting into tears. "How could one help being devoted to her in life and in death?"

"It is because I am so sure of this devotion, as well as of your respect for the memory of your deceased mistress, that I requested you to come to my house, my dear Madame Dupont. I wish to speak to you on a very delicate subject."

"I am listening, M. le marquis."

"The proof of confidence which Madame de Beaumesnil gave by sending for me just before her death must convince you that any questions I may put to you are of an almost sacred nature, so I can safely count upon your frankness and discretion."

"You can, indeed, M. le marquis."

"I am sure of it. Now the state of affairs is just this: Madame de Beaumesnil has for a long time, as nearly as I can learn, – at the request of a friend, – taken charge of a young orphan girl who, by the death of her protectress, is now deprived of the means of support. I am ignorant of this young girl's name, as well as of her place of residence, and I am anxious to ascertain both as soon as possible. Can you give me any information on the subject?"

"A young orphan girl?" repeated Madame Dupont, thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"During the ten years I have been in the service of madame la comtesse, I have never known any young girl who came regularly to the house or who seemed to be a protégée of hers."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure, M. le marquis."

"And Madame de Beaumesnil never entrusted you with any commission in connection with the young girl of whom I speak?"

"Never, M. le marquis. Many persons applied to madame for aid, for she was very liberal, but I never noticed that she gave any particular person the preference or interested herself any more

in one person than in another, and I feel sure that if madame had wished any confidential mission performed, she would certainly have entrusted it to me."

"That is exactly what I thought, and it was for that very reason I felt confident of securing some information from you. Come now, try and think if you can not remember some young girl in whom Madame de Beaumesnil has seemed to take a special interest for some time past."

"I can remember no one, absolutely no one," answered Madame Dupont after several minutes of profound reflection.

The thought of Herminie did occur to her, but was instantly dismissed, for there had been nothing in Madame de Beaumesnil's manner towards the young musician that indicated any special interest; besides, she and the countess had met for the first time less than a fortnight before the latter's death, while the marquis declared that the young girl of whom he was in search had been under Madame de Beaumesnil's protection for a long time.

"Then I must endeavour to secure my information elsewhere," said the marquis, with a sigh.

"Wait a moment, M. le marquis," exclaimed Madame Dupont. "What I am going to tell you may have no connection with the young girl of whom you speak, but it will do no harm to mention it."

"Let me hear what it is."

"The day before her death, madame la comtesse sent for me, and said: 'Take a cab and carry this letter to a woman who lives in the Batignolles. Do not tell her who sent you, but bring her back with you, and show her up to my room immediately upon her arrival.'"

"And this woman's name?"

"Was a very peculiar one, M. le marquis, and I have not forgotten it. She is called Madame Barbançon."

"Was she a frequent visitor at Madame de Beaumesnil's house?"

"She was never there except that once."

"And did you bring this woman to Madame de Beaumesnil's?"

"I did not."

"How was that?"

"After giving me the order I just spoke of, madame seemed to change her mind, for she said to me: 'All things considered, Madame Dupont, you had better not take a cab. It would give the affair an air of mystery. Order out the carriage, give this letter to the footman, and tell him to deliver it to the person to whom it is addressed.'"

"And he found the woman?"

"Yes, M. le marquis."

"And did Madame de Beaumesnil have a conversation with her?"

"The interview lasted at least two hours, M. le marquis."

"How old was this woman?"

"Fifty years of age at the very least, and a very ordinary person."

"And after her interview with the countess?"

"She was taken back to her home in madame's carriage."

"And you say she has never been at the Hôtel de Beaumesnil since?"

"No, M. le marquis."

After remaining silent for some time, the hunchback turned to Madame Dupont, and asked:

"What did you say this woman's name was?"

"Madame Barbançon."

The hunchback wrote down the name in his note-book, then asked:

"And she lives where?"

"In the Batignolles."

"The street and number, if you please."

"I do not know, M. le marquis. I only remember that the footman told us that the house where she lived was in a very quiet street, and that there was a garden, into which one could look through a small latticed gate."

The hunchback, after jotting down these items in his note-book, said:

"I thank you very much for this information, though it may be of little or no assistance to me in my search. If you should at any time recall other facts which you think may be of service, I hope you will notify me at once."

"I will not fail to do so, M. le marquis."

M. de Maillefort, having rewarded Madame Dupont handsomely, called a cab and ordered the coachman to drive him to the Batignolles.

After two hours of persistent inquiry and assiduous search the marquis at last discovered Commander Bernard's house, where he found only Madame Barbançon at home.

Olivier had left Paris several days before in company with his master mason, and the veteran had just gone out for his daily walk.

The housekeeper on opening the door was so unpleasantly impressed by the visitor's deformity, that, instead of inviting him in, she remained standing upon the threshold, thus barring M. de Maillefort's passage.

That gentleman, noting the unfavourable impression he was making upon the housekeeper, bowed very politely, and said:

"Have I the honour of speaking to Madame Barbançon?"

"Yes, monsieur; and what do you want of Madame Barbançon?"

"I am desirous that you should grant me the honour of a few minutes' conversation."

"And why, monsieur?" demanded the housekeeper, eyeing the stranger distrustfully.

"I wish to confer with you, madame, on a very important matter."

"But I do not even know you."

"I have the advantage of knowing you, though only by name, it is true."

"A fine story that! I, too, know the Grand Turk by name."

"My dear Madame Barbançon, will you permit me to say that we could talk very much more at our ease inside, than out here on the doorstep."

"I only care to be at ease with persons I like, monsieur," retorted the housekeeper, tartly.

"I can understand your distrust, my dear madame," replied the marquis, concealing his impatience, "so I will vouch for myself by a name that is not entirely unknown to you."

"What name is that?"

"That of Madame la Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"Do you come at her request, monsieur?" asked the housekeeper, quickly.

"At her request? No, madame," sadly replied the hunchback, shaking his head, "Madame de Beaumesnil is dead."

"Dead! And when did the poor, dear lady die?"

"Let us step inside and I will then answer your question," said the marquis, in an authoritative manner that rather awed Madame Barbançon; besides, she was very anxious to hear the particulars of Madame de Beaumesnil's death.

"And you say that Madame de Beaumesnil is dead?" exclaimed the housekeeper, as soon as they had entered the house.

"She died several days ago – the very next day after her interview with you."

"What, monsieur, you know?"

"I know that Madame de Beaumesnil had a long conversation with you, and I am fulfilling her last wishes in asking you to accept these twenty-five napoleons from her."

And the hunchback showed Madame Barbançon a small silk purse filled with shining gold.

The words "twenty-five napoleons" grievously offended the housekeeper's ears. Had the marquis said twenty-five louis the effect would probably have been entirely different.

So instead of taking the proffered gold, Madame Barbançon, feeling all her former doubts revive, answered majestically, as she waved aside the purse with an expression of superb disdain:

"I do not accept napoleons," accenting the detested name strongly; "no, I do not accept napoleons from the first person that happens to come along – without knowing – do you understand, monsieur?"

"Without knowing what, my dear madame?"

"Without knowing who these people are who say napoleons as if it would scorch their mouths if they should utter the word louis. But it is all plain enough now," she added, sardonically. "Tell me who you go with and I will tell you who you are. Now what do you want with me? I have my soup pot to watch."

"As I told you before, madame, I came to bring you a slight token of Madame de Beaumesnil's gratitude for the discretion and reserve you displayed in a certain affair."

"What affair?"

"You know very well."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you mean."

"Come, come, my dear Madame Barbançon, why will you not be perfectly frank with me? I was one of Madame de Beaumesnil's most intimate friends, and I know all about that orphan – you know – that orphan."

"That orphan?"

"Yes, that young girl, I need say no more. You see I know all about it."

"Then if you know all about it, why do you come here to question me?"

"I come in the interest of the young girl – you know who I mean – to ask you to give me her address, as I have a very important communication to make to her."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, well, did anybody ever hear the equal of that?" snorted the housekeeper, indignantly.

"But my dear Madame Barbançon, what is there so very extraordinary in what I am saying to you?"

"This," yelled the housekeeper, "this – that you are nothing more or less than a miserable old roué!"

"I?"

"Yes, a miserable scoundrel who is trying to bribe me, and make me blab all I know by promises of gold."

"But, my dear madame, I assure you – "

"But understand me once for all: if that hump of yours was stuffed with napoleons, and you authorised me to help myself to all I wanted, I wouldn't tell you a word more than I chose to. That is the kind of a woman I am!"

"But, Madame Barbançon, do pray listen to me. You are a worthy and honest woman."

"Yes, I flatter myself that I am."

"And very justly, I am sure. That being the case, if you would only hear me to the end you would answer very differently, I am sure, for – "

"I should do nothing of the kind. Oh, I understand, you came here intending to pump me and get all you could out of me, but, thank Heaven, I was smart enough to see through you from the very first, and now I tell you once for all you had better let me alone."

"But one word, I beg, my dear friend," pleaded the marquis, trying to take his irascible companion's hand.

"Don't touch me, you vile libertine," shrieked the housekeeper, springing back in prudish terror. "I know you now for the serpent that you are! First it was 'madame,' and then 'my dear madame,' and now 'my dear friend,' and you'll wind up with 'my treasure,' I suppose!"

"But Madame Barbançon, I do assure you – "

"I have always heard it said that humpbacked people were worse than monkeys," exclaimed the housekeeper, recoiling still further. "If you don't take yourself off, sir, and at once, I'll call the neighbours; I'll yell for the police; I'll cry fire!"

"You must be crazy, woman," exclaimed the marquis, exasperated by the complete failure of his efforts so far as Madame Barbançon was concerned. "What the devil do you mean by all this pretended indignation and prudery? You are very nearly as ugly as I am, and we are not calculated to tempt each other. I say once more, and for the last time, and you had better weigh my words well, I came here in the hope of being of assistance to a poor and worthy young girl whom you must know. And if you do know her, you are doing her an irreparable wrong – do you understand me? – by refusing to tell me where she is and to assist me in finding her. Consider well – the future of this young girl is in your hands, and I am sure you are really too kind-hearted to wish to injure a worthy girl who has never harmed you."

M. de Maillefort spoke with so much feeling, his tone was so earnest and sincere, that Madame Barbançon began to feel that there was really no just cause for her distrust, after all.

"Well, monsieur, I may have been mistaken in thinking that you were trying to make love to me," she began.

"You certainly were."

"But as for telling you anything I oughtn't to tell you, you won't make me do that, however hard you may try. It is quite possible that you're a respectable man, and that your intentions are good, but I'm an honest woman, too, and I know what I ought and what I ought not to tell; so, though you might cut me in pieces, you wouldn't get a treacherous word out of me. That is the kind of a woman I am!"

"Where the devil can one hope to find a woman of sense?" M. de Maillefort said to himself as he left Madame Barbançon, quite despairing of getting any information out of the worthy housekeeper, and realising only too well the futility of his first efforts to discover Madame de Beaumesnil's illegitimate child.

CHAPTER XIII

UNEXPECTED CONSOLATION

Two months had elapsed since the death of Madame de Beaumesnil, and great activity reigned in the house of M. le Baron de la Rochaiguë, who had been appointed guardian of Ernestine de Beaumesnil at a family council convoked shortly after the demise of the countess.

The servants of the household were hurrying to and fro arranging articles of furniture, under the superintendence of the baron, his wife, and his sister, Mlle. Helena de la Rochaiguë, an old maid about forty-five years of age, whose plain black dress, downcast eyes, white, pinched face, and severely arranged white hair made her look very much like a *religieuse*, though she had never taken monastic vows.

M. de la Rochaiguë, a very tall, thin man, between sixty and seventy years of age, was quite bald. He had a receding forehead and chin, prominent blue eyes, and a long nose. His lips were wreathed in a perpetual smile, which displayed exceedingly white, but unusually long, teeth, that imparted a decidedly sheep-like character to his physiognomy. He had an excellent figure, and by holding himself rigidly erect and buttoning his long black coat straight up to his white cravat, he managed to make himself a living copy of the portrait of Canning, "the perfect type of a gentleman statesman," as the baron often remarked.

M. de la Rochaiguë was not a statesman, however, though he had long aspired to become one. In fact, this ambition had developed into a sort of mania with him. Believing himself an unknown Canning, and being unable to air his eloquence in the councils of the nation, he took advantage of each and every opportunity to make a speech, and always assumed a parliamentary tone and attitude in discussing the most trivial matter.

One of the most salient characteristics of the baron's oratory was a redundancy of adjectives and adverbs, which seemed to him to treble the effect of his finest thoughts, though if we might venture to adopt the baron's phraseology, we could truly say that nothing could be more insignificant, more commonplace, and more void of meaning than what he styled his thoughts.

Madame de la Rochaiguë, who was now about forty-five, had been extremely pretty, coquettish, and charming. Her figure was still slender and graceful, but the youthfulness and elaborateness of her toilets seemed ill-suited to one of her mature years.

The baroness was passionately fond of luxury and display. There was nothing that she loved better than to organise and preside at magnificent entertainments, but unfortunately, her fortune, though considerable, did not correspond with her very expensive tastes. Besides, she had no intention of impoverishing herself; so being an extremely shrewd and economical woman, she managed to enjoy the prestige which lavish expenditure imparts to one by frequently acting as the patroness of the many obscure but enormously rich foreigners or provincials – meteors – who, after dazzling Paris a few years, vanish for ever in darkness and oblivion.

Madame de la Rochaiguë in such cases did not allow her protégés the slightest liberty, even in the selection of their guests. She gave them a list of the persons they were to entertain, not even granting them permission to invite such of their friends or compatriots as she did not consider worthy to appear in aristocratic society.

The baroness, holding a high social position herself, could easily launch her clients in the best society, but in the meantime she was really the mistress of their house. It was she alone who planned their entertainments, and it was to her that persons applied for a place on the list of guests bidden to these sumptuous and exclusive reunions.

It is needless to say that she considered a box at the opera and other fashionable places of amusement an absolute necessity, and, in this box, the best seat was always reserved for her. It was the same at the races, and in the frequent visits to the seashore and other fashionable watering-places.

Her protégés rented a house, and sent down chefs, servants, and horses and carriages, and in these admirably appointed establishments Madame de la Rochaiguë kept open house for her friends.

So insatiable is the longing for pleasure in society, even the most fashionable society, that, instead of revolting at the idea of a woman of noble birth devoting herself to the shameful robbing of these unfortunate people whose foolish vanity was leading them on to ruin, society flattered Madame de la Rochaiguë, the dispenser of all this lavish hospitality, and the lady herself was not a little proud of the advantages she derived from her patronage; besides being clever, witty, shrewd, and remarkably self-possessed, Madame de la Rochaiguë was one of the seven or eight brilliant women who exerted a real influence over what is known as Parisian society.

The three persons above referred to were engaged in adding the finishing touches to a spacious suite of superbly appointed apartments that occupied the entire first floor of a mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain.

M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë had relinquished these rooms and established themselves on the second floor, a part of which was occupied by Mlle. de la Rochaiguë, while the rest had heretofore served as quarters for the baron's daughter and son-in-law, when they left their estates, where they resided most of the year, for a two months' sojourn in Paris.

These formerly rather dilapidated and very parsimoniously furnished apartments had been entirely renovated and superbly decorated for Mlle. Ernestine de Beaumesnil, whose health had become sufficiently restored to admit of her return to France, and who was expected to arrive from Italy that very day, accompanied by her governess, and a sort of steward or courier whom M. de la Rochaiguë had despatched to Naples to bring the orphan home.

The extreme care which the baron and his wife and sister were bestowing on the arrangement of the rooms was almost ludicrous, so plainly did it show the intense eagerness and obsequiousness with which Mlle. de Beaumesnil was awaited, though there was something almost depressing in the thought that all this splendour was for a mere child of sixteen, who seemed likely to be almost lost in these immense rooms.

After a final survey of the apartments, M. de la Rochaiguë summoned all the servants, and, seeing a fine opportunity for a speech, uttered the following memorable words with all his wonted majesty of demeanour:

"I here assemble my people together, to say, declare, and signify to them that Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my cousin and ward, is expected to arrive this evening. I desire also to say to them that Madame de la Rochaiguë and myself intend, desire, and wish that our people should obey Mlle. de Beaumesnil's orders even more scrupulously than our own. In other words, I desire to say to our people that anything and everything Mlle. de Beaumesnil may say, order, or command, they are to obey as implicitly, unhesitatingly, and blindly as if the order had been given by Madame de la Rochaiguë or myself. I count upon the zeal, intelligence, and exactitude of my people in this particular, and we shall reward handsomely all who manifest hearty good-will, solicitude, and unremitting zeal in Mlle. de Beaumesnil's service."

After this eloquent adjuration the servants were dismissed, and the cooks were ordered to have everything in readiness to serve either a hot or cold repast in case Mlle. de Beaumesnil should desire something to eat on her arrival.

These preparations concluded, Madame de la Rochaiguë suggested to her husband that they go up to their own apartments.

"I was about to make the same proposition to you," responded M. de la Rochaiguë, smiling, and showing his long teeth with the most affable air imaginable.

As the baron and baroness and Mlle. de la Rochaiguë were leaving the apartment, a servant stepped up to M. de la Rochaiguë, and said:

"There is a young woman here who wishes to speak with madame."

"Who is she?"

"She did not give her name. She came to return something belonging to the late Comtesse de Beaumesnil."

"Admit her," said the baroness.

Then, turning to her husband and sister-in-law, she said:

"I wonder who it can be?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, but we shall soon know."

"Some claim on the estate, probably," remarked the baroness. "It should have been sent to the notary."

Almost at the same instant the servant opened the door, and announced:

"Mademoiselle Herminie."

Though beautiful under any and all circumstances, the lovely face of the "duchess," wan from the profound grief caused by the death of her mother, wore an expression of intense sadness. Her lovely golden hair, which she usually wore in long curls, was wound smoothly around her head, for, in her bitter sorrow, the poor child for the last two months had entirely forgotten the innocent vanities of youth. Another trivial but highly significant detail, – Herminie's white and beautifully shaped hands were bare; the shabby little gloves so often and carefully mended were no longer wearable, and her increasing poverty would not permit her to purchase others.

Yes, her poverty, for, wounded to the heart by her mother's death, and dangerously ill for six weeks, the young girl had been unable to give the music lessons which were her only means of support, and her little store of savings had been swallowed up in the expenses of her illness, so, while waiting for the pay for the lessons resumed only a few days before, Herminie had been obliged to pawn some silver purchased in an hour of affluence, and on the paltry sum thus obtained she was now living with a parsimony which want alone can teach.

On seeing this pale but beautiful girl, whose clothing indicated extreme poverty, in spite of its scrupulous neatness, the baron and his wife exchanged glances of surprise.

"I am Madame de la Rochauguë, mademoiselle," said the baroness. "What can I do for you?"

"I came, madame, to rectify a mistake," replied Herminie, blushing deeply, "and return this five hundred franc note which was sent to me by – by the late Madame de Beaumesnil's notary."

In spite of her courage, Herminie felt the tears rush to her eyes on uttering her mother's name, but making a violent effort to conquer her emotion, she held out the bank-note enclosed in an envelope, bearing this address:

For Mlle. Herminie,

Singing Teacher

"Ah, yes, it was you, mademoiselle, who used to play and sing for Madame de Beaumesnil."

"Yes, madame."

"I recollect now that the family council decided that five hundred francs should be sent to you for your services. It was considered that this amount – "

"Would be a suitable, sufficient, and satisfactory remuneration," added the baron, sententiously.

"And if it is not, the complaint should be made to the notary, not to us," added the baroness.

"I have come, madame," said Herminie, gently but proudly, "to return the money. I have been paid."

No one present realised or could realise the bitter sorrow hidden in these words:

"I have been paid."

But Herminie's dignity and disinterestedness, a disinterestedness which the shabby garments of the young girl rendered the more remarkable, made a deep impression on Madame de la Rochaugüë, and she said:

"Really, mademoiselle, I can not praise too highly this delicacy and keen sense of honour on your part. The family did not know that you had been paid, but," added the baroness, hesitatingly, for Herminie's air of quiet dignity impressed her not a little, – "but I – I feel that I may, in the name of the family, beg you to keep this five hundred francs – as – as a gift."

And the baroness held out the bank-note to the young girl, casting another quick glance at her shabby garments as she did so.

Again a blush of wounded pride mounted to Herminie's brow, but it is impossible to describe the perfect courtesy and proud simplicity with which the girl replied:

"Will you, madame, kindly reserve this generous gift for the many persons who must appeal to you for charity."

Then, without another word, Herminie bowed to Madame de la Rochaugüë, and turned towards the door.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle," cried the baroness, "one word more, just one."

The young girl, unable to entirely conceal the tears of humiliation repressed with such difficulty until now, turned, and said to Madame de la Rochaugüë, who seemed to have been suddenly struck with a new idea:

"What do you wish, madame?"

"I must ask you first to pardon an insistence which seems to have wounded your delicacy, and made you think, perhaps, that I wished to humiliate you, but I assure you – "

"I never suppose that any one desires to humiliate me, madame," replied Herminie, gently and firmly, but without allowing Madame de la Rochaugüë to finish her sentence.

"And you are right, mademoiselle," responded the baroness, "for it is an entirely different sentiment that you inspire. Now, I have a service, I might even say a favour, to ask of you."

"Of me?"

"Do you still give piano lessons, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, madame."

"M. de la Rochaugüë," said the baroness, pointing to her husband, who was smiling according to his custom, "is the guardian of Mlle. de Beaumesnil, who is expected to arrive here this evening."

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil!" exclaimed Herminie, with a violent start; "she is coming here – to-day?"

"As madame has just had the honour to say to you, we expect Mlle. de Beaumesnil, my much loved cousin and ward, will arrive this evening," said the baron. "These apartments are intended for her," he added, casting a complacent glance around the magnificent room, "apartments worthy in every respect of the richest heiress in France, for whom nothing is too good – "

But the baroness, unceremoniously interrupting her husband, said to Herminie:

"Mlle. de Beaumesnil is only sixteen, and her education is not yet entirely completed. She will need instruction in several branches, and if you can make it convenient to give Mlle. de Beaumesnil lessons in music we should be delighted to entrust her to you."

Though the possibility of such an offer had gradually dawned upon Herminie's mind as the baroness proceeded, the thought that a most lucky chance was about to bring her in contact with her sister so overcame her that she would doubtless have betrayed herself if the baron, eager to improve this fresh opportunity to pose as an orator, had not slipped his left hand in the breast of his tightly buttoned coat, and, with his right hand oscillating like a pendulum, said:

"Mademoiselle, though we feel it a sacred duty to select our dear ward's instructors with the most scrupulous care, it is also an infinite satisfaction, pleasure, and happiness to us to occasionally meet persons, who, like yourself, are endowed with all the necessary attributes for the noble vocation to which they have dedicated themselves in the sacred interest of education."

This speech, or rather this tirade, which the baron uttered in a single breath, fortunately afforded Herminie time to recover her composure, and it was with comparative calmness that she turned to Madame de la Rochaiguë, and said:

"I am deeply touched, madame, by the confidence you manifest in me. I shall try to prove that I am worthy of it."

"Very well, mademoiselle, as you accept my offer I will notify you as soon as Mlle. de Beaumesnil is ready to begin her lessons, for she will probably need several days in which to recover from the fatigue of her journey."

"I will wait, then, until I hear from you before coming to Mlle. de Beaumesnil," said Herminie. Then she bowed and withdrew.

It was in an ecstasy of delight that the girl returned to her humble home.

Delicacy, a truly laudable pride, and filial love of the purest and most elevated kind would prevent Herminie from ever revealing to her sister the bond of union between them, even as these same sentiments had given her strength to keep silence before Madame de Beaumesnil; but the prospect of this speedy meeting plunged the young artiste into a transport of delight, and brought her the most unexpected consolation.

Moreover, her natural sagacity, together with a vague distrust of both M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë, whom she had just seen for the first time, told Herminie that this child of sixteen summers, this sister whom she loved without even knowing her, should have been entrusted to the care of very different persons; and if her expectations did not deceive her, the affection she hoped to arouse in her sister's heart might be made to exert a very beneficial influence.

It is almost unnecessary to say that, in spite of her very straitened circumstances, it never once occurred to Herminie to compare the almost fabulous wealth of her sister with her own condition, which was that of a poor artiste exposed to all the trying vicissitudes of sickness and poverty.

Proud and generous natures diffuse around them a radiance which not unfrequently melts even the thick ice of selfishness and egotism, as in the preceding interview, when Herminie's dignity, exquisite grace, and simplicity of manner had awakened so much interest and extorted such respect from M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë, – worldly-minded and unsympathising though they were, – that they had entirely of their own accord made the young girl the offer that so rejoiced her heart.

The baron and his wife and sister, left alone after Herminie's departure, went up to their own apartments to hold a conference on the subject of Ernestine de Beaumesnil's arrival and the tactics that should be pursued.

CHAPTER XIV THE SOLEMN COMPACT

They had scarcely reached the drawing-room on the floor above before Helena de la Rochaugüë, who had seemed very thoughtful ever since Herminie's arrival, remarked to the baroness:

"I think, sister, that you did wrong to select that girl for Ernestine's music-teacher."

"Wrong? And why?" demanded the baroness.

"The girl seems to me to be very proud," replied Helena, placidly. "Did you notice how haughtily she returned that bank-note, though the shabbiness of her clothing showed conclusively that she was in great need?"

"It was that very thing that influenced me," answered the baroness. "There is something so interesting in such a proud refusal on the part of a poor person; besides, this young girl had such a charming dignity of manner that I was forced, even against my better judgment, to make her the offer you censure, my dear sister."

"Pride should never be considered other than reprehensible," said Helena, sanctimoniously. "It is the worst of the seven great sins. Pride is the exact opposite of Christian humility, without which there is no salvation," she added, "and I fear this girl will exert a most pernicious influence over Ernestine de Beaumesnil."

Madame de la Rochaugüë smiled faintly as she stole a furtive glance at her husband, who gave a slight shrug of the shoulders, which indicated pretty plainly how little respect he felt for Helena's opinions.

Long accustomed to regard this devotee as a nonentity, the baron and his wife never for a moment supposed that this narrow-minded, bigoted old maid, who never lost her temper, no matter how great the provocation might be, and who did not utter a dozen words in the course of a day, could ever have a thought beyond those connected with the performance of her religious duties.

"We will think over your suggestion, my dear sister," said the baroness, suavely. "After all, we have made no binding contract with this young person. Your remarks, however, seem to form a natural introduction to the subject of this conference."

Instantly the baron sprang up, and turned his chair around so he could rest his hands upon the back of it, and also ensure himself the ample space which his parliamentary attitudes and oratorical gestures demanded. Already, slipping his hand in the breast of his coat, and swaying his right arm to and fro, he was preparing to speak, when his wife said, impatiently:

"Pardon me, M. de la Rochaugüë, but you must really do me the favour to let your chair alone and sit down. You can express your opinion without any flights of oratory. It will be much better to talk this matter over in a plain matter-of-fact way without indulging in any perorations. Reserve your oratorical powers for the tribune which you are sure to reach sooner or later, and resign yourself to-day to talking like a man of tact and common sense. If you do not, I shall interrupt you every other minute."

The baron knew by experience how deeply his wife loathed a speech, so he turned his chair around again and subsided into it with a sigh.

"Ernestine will arrive this evening, so we must decide upon the course we are to pursue," began the baroness.

"Yes, that is absolutely necessary," replied the baron, "for everything depends upon our harmonious action. We must have the blindest, most entire, most implicit confidence in each other."

"Otherwise we shall lose all the advantages we ought to derive from this guardianship," added the baroness.

"For of course one does not act as guardian merely for the pleasure of it," interpolated the baron.

"On the contrary, we ought to derive both pleasure and profit from the connection," said the baroness.

"That is precisely what I meant," retorted the baron.

"I do not doubt it," replied the baroness. Then she added: "Let us agree in the first place that, in all matters relating to Ernestine, we will never act without a full understanding with one another."

"That resolution is adopted!" cried the baron.

"And is eminently just," remarked Helena.

"As we long ago broke off all connection with the Comtesse de Beaumesnil, – a woman I never could tolerate," – continued the baroness, "we know absolutely nothing about Ernestine's character, but fortunately she is barely sixteen, and in a couple of days we shall be able to read her like a book."

"You may trust to my sagacity for that," said the baron, with a truly Machiavelian air.

"I shall trust to your penetration, of course, but just a little to my own as well," responded the baroness. "But whatever kind of a girl Ernestine may be, there is but one course for us to pursue. We must lavish every attention upon her, gratify her slightest wish, try to ascertain her tastes; in short, flatter her, satisfy her every whim, please her in every possible way. We must do all this if we would succeed. As for the means, they will be found when we become acquainted with Ernestine's habits and tastes."

"The sum and substance of the whole matter is this," began the baron, rising majestically from his chair.

But at a glance from his wife, he reseated himself, and continued, much more modestly:

"Ernestine must think and see and act only through us. That is the main thing."

"The end justifies the means," added Helena, devoutly.

"We are perfectly agreed upon the proper course of action," remarked the baroness. "Ernestine cannot but feel grateful to us for going up-stairs and giving her possession of the entire lower floor, which it has cost nearly fifty thousand francs to renovate, decorate, and furnish for her use."

"And the improvements and furniture will revert to us, of course, as the house is ours," added the baron; "and you know it was decided in the family council that the richest heiress in France must be suitably housed."

"But a much more important and delicate question remains to be discussed," continued the baroness, "the question as to what is to be done in regard to the suitors who are sure to spring up on every side."

"Certain to," said the baron, avoiding his wife's eye.

Helena said never a word, but listened with all her ears.

"Ernestine is sixteen, nearly old enough to be married," continued the baroness, "so the relation we hold to her will give us a prodigious amount of influence, for people will think – and rightly – that we shall virtually decide her in her choice of a husband. This fact is already apparent, for, since you were appointed guardian to Ernestine, any number of persons of high position and noble birth have made, and are still making, all sorts of advances and friendly overtures to me in order to get into my good graces, as the saying is."

"And I, too, have noticed that people I haven't seen for ages, and with whom I was never on particularly friendly terms, are endeavouring to renew their acquaintance. The other day, at Madame de Mirecourt's, I had a crowd around me, I was literally surrounded, beset on every side," said the baron, complacently.

"And even the Marquis de Maillefort, whom I have always hated, is no exception to the rule," added the baroness.

"And you are right," exclaimed the baron. "There is no one in the whole world I hate as I hate that infernal hunchback!"

"I have seen him twice," Helena said, piously, in her turn. "Every vice seems to be written on his face. He looks like Satan himself."

"Well, one day this Satan suddenly dropped down from the clouds, as cool as you please, though he hadn't set foot in my house for five or six years, and he has called several times since."

"If he has taken to flattering you and paying court to you it can hardly be on his own account."

"Evidently not, so I am convinced that M. de Maillefort has some ulterior motive, and I am resolved to discover this motive."

"I'm sorry to learn that he's coming here again," said M. de la Rochauguë. "He is my greatest antipathy, my *bête noire*."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense," exclaimed the baroness, impatiently; "we have got to put up with the marquis, there's no help for it. Besides, if a man of his position makes such advances to you, how will it be with others? This is an incontestable proof of our influence. Let us endeavour to profit by it in every possible way, and by and by, when the girl is ready to settle down, we shall be stupid indeed if we cannot induce her to make a choice that will be very advantageous to us."

"You state the case admirably, my dear," said the baron, apparently much impressed, while Helena, who was evidently no less deeply interested, drew her chair closer to that of her brother and his wife.

"And now had we better hasten or retard the moment when Ernestine makes her choice?" asked the baroness.

"A very important question," said the baron.

"My advice would be to defer any decision upon this subject for six months," said the baroness.

"That is my opinion, too," exclaimed the baron, as if this statement of his wife's views had given him great inward satisfaction.

"I agree with you perfectly, my brother, and with you, my sister," said Helena, who had listened silently and with downcast eyes to every word of the conversation.

"Very well," said the baroness, evidently well pleased with this harmony of feeling. "And now there can be no doubt that we shall be able to conduct the affair to a successful termination, for we will all take a solemn oath, by all we hold most dear, to accept no suitor for Ernestine's hand, without warning and consulting one another."

"To act alone or secretly would be an act of infamous, shameless, and horrible treachery," exclaimed the baron, as if shocked at the mere idea of such an atrocity.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Helena, clasping her hands. "Who could ever think of acting such a treacherous part?"

"It would be an infamous act," said the baroness, in her turn, "and worse, – it would be a fatal blunder. We shall be strong if we act in unison, but weak, if we act independently of one another."

"In union there is strength!" said the baron, sententiously.

"So, unless we mutually agree upon a change of plan, we will defer all action on the subject of Ernestine's marriage for six months, in order that we may have time to strengthen our influence over her."

"This question decided, there is another important matter to be considered," continued the baroness. "Is Ernestine to be allowed to retain her governess or not? This Madame Laîné, as nearly as I can ascertain, is only a little above the ordinary maid. She has been with Ernestine two years, though, and must, consequently, have some influence over her."

"In that case, we had better oust the governess, or prejudice Ernestine against her," volunteered the baron, with an air of profound wisdom. "That would be the thing to do."

"A very silly thing," retorted the baroness.

"But, my dear –"

"The only sensible thing to do in such a contingency is to win the governess over to our side, and then see that she acts according to our instructions. In that case, this woman's influence, instead of being dangerous, would prove of the greatest possible service to us."

"That is true," said Helena.

"Yes, considered from this point of view, the governess might be very useful, very serviceable, and very advantageous," said the baron, thoughtfully; "but if she should refuse to ally herself with our interests, – if our attempts to conciliate this woman should excite Ernestine's suspicions, what then?"

"We must first see what can be done, and I'll attend to that," said the baroness. "If we find that the woman cannot be won over, then we will adopt M. de la Rochaigné's first suggestion, and get rid of the governess."

The conference was here interrupted by a servant, who came to announce that the courier who preceded Mlle. de Beaumesnil's carriage had just ridden into the courtyard, and said that he was but a half hour in advance of the others.

"Quick – quick – to our toilets," said the baroness, as soon as the servant left the room. Then she added, as if the thought had just occurred to her:

"But, now I think of it, being cousins, we wore mourning six weeks for the countess. It would be a good idea, perhaps, to put it on again. All Ernestine's servants are in black, and by our order her carriages will be draped in black. Don't you think that if I should be dressed in colours the first time she sees me, the child would think hard of it?"

"You are right, my dear," said the baron. "Resume your mourning, if only for a fortnight."

"I hate the idea," said the baroness, "for black is frightfully unbecoming to me. But this is one of the many sacrifices a person is obliged to make. Now, as to our compact," added the baroness. "No secret or independent step is to be taken in regard to Ernestine. We will all make a solemn promise to that effect. I, for one, swear it."

"And I," said the baron.

"And I," murmured Helena.

All three then hurried off to dress for the evening.

The baroness had no sooner locked herself in her own room, however, than she seated herself at her desk, and hastily penned the following note:

"My Dearest Julie: – The child arrives this evening. I shall be at your house to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. We haven't a minute to lose. Notify a certain person at once. We must come to a full understanding without delay. Silence and prudence,

"L. DE L. R."

The baroness addressed this note to —

Madame la Vicomtesse de Mirecourt

Then, calling her maid, and handing her the missive, she said:

"While we are at table you must take this to Madame de Mirecourt. You will take a box with you when you go out, as if you were going on an errand."

Almost at the same moment the baron was affixing his signature to the following note:

"M. de la Rochaigné begs that M. le Baron de Ravil will see him to-morrow at his house between one and two o'clock in the afternoon. The matter is urgent.

"M. de la Rochaigné counts upon seeing M. de Ravil at the time and place named, and assures him of his most distinguished consideration."

The baron addressed this note to —

M. le Baron de Ravil,

No. 7 Rue Godot-de-Mauroy

Then he said to his valet:

"Call some one to post this letter at once."

And last, but not least, Mlle. Helena, after taking the same precautions as the baron and baroness, penned the following note:

"MY DEAR ABBÉ: – Do not fail to call to-morrow morning at ten o'clock.

"May God be with you. The hour has come.

"Pray for me as I pray for you.

"H. DE L. R."

This note Helena addressed to —

M. l' Abbé Ledoux,

Rue de la Plaushe

CHAPTER XV

A GLORIOUS DREAM

On the day following this conference in the Rochaigné family, three important scenes took place in the homes of as many different persons.

The first occurred in the house of Abbé Ledoux, the priest we saw administering the last sacrament to Madame de Beaumesnil.

The abbé was a small man, with an insinuating smile, a sharp, penetrating eye, ruddy complexion, and gray hair.

He was pacing his bedroom in a restless, agitated manner, glancing every now and then at the clock, and seemed to be waiting for some one.

Suddenly the sound of the door-bell was heard; the door opened, and a servant, who looked very much like a sacristan, announced:

"M. Célestin de Macreuse."

This pious founder of the St. Polycarpe mission was a tall, rather stout young man with excellent manners, rather faded light hair, regular features, and fine complexion. In fact, he might easily have passed for a handsome man, had it not been for the expression of treacherous sweetness and extreme self-complacency that characterised his countenance.

When he entered the room M. de Macreuse kissed Abbé Ledoux in a Christianlike manner on both cheeks, and the abbé returned the salute in the same apostolic fashion.

"You have no idea how impatiently I have been waiting for you, my dear Célestin," he said.

"There was a meeting at the mission to-day, M. l'abbé, and a very stormy meeting it was. You cannot conceive what a blind spirit of rebellion those miserable creatures display. Ah, how much suffering is needed to make these coarse natures understand how essential to their salvation is the poverty in which they are now living! But no, instead of being content with a chance of salvation, instead of living with their gaze directed heavenward, they persist in keeping their eyes on their earthly surroundings, in comparing their condition with that of more favoured mortals, and in prating of their right to employment and to happiness. To happiness! What heresy! It is truly disheartening!"

The abbé listened to Célestin's tirade with a half smile, thinking the while of the pleasant surprise he had in store for his visitor.

"And what do you suppose has been going on while you were talking wisdom to those miserable wretches down there, my dear Célestin?" asked the abbé. "I have been talking to Mlle. de la Rochaigné about you. Another subject of conversation, too, was the arrival of the little Beaumesnil."

"What!" exclaimed M. de Macreuse, colouring with surprise and delight, "do you mean to say that Mlle. de Beaumesnil – "

"Returned to Paris last evening."

"And Mlle. de la Rochaigné?"

"Is still of the same mind in regard to you, – ready to do anything, in fact, to prevent this immense fortune from falling into evil hands. I saw the dear lady this morning; we have decided upon our course of action, and it will be no fault of ours if you do not marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"Ah, if that glorious dream is ever realised it will be to you that I shall owe this immense, this incalculable fortune!" exclaimed M. de Macreuse, seizing the abbé's hands and pressing them fervently.

"It is thus that pious young men who are living examples of all the Christian virtues are rewarded in this day and generation," answered the abbé, jovially.

"And such a fortune! Such a golden future! Is it not enough to dazzle any one?" cried Célestin, with an expression of intense cupidity on his face.

"How ardently the dear boy loves money," said the abbé, with a paternal air, pinching Célestin's plump cheek as he spoke. "Well, we must do our very best to secure it for him, then. Unfortunately, I could not persuade that hard-headed Madame de Beaumesnil to make a will designating you as her daughter's future husband. If she had done that we should not have had the slightest trouble. Armed with this request of a dying mother, Mlle. de la Rochaiguë and I could have appealed to the girl, who would have consented to anything out of respect for her mother's memory. It would have been a fine thing; besides, there could have been no opposition then, you see, but of course that is not to be thought of now."

"And why is it not to be thought of?" asked M. de Macreuse, with some hesitation, but looking the abbé straight in the eye.

That gentleman returned the gaze with the same intentness.

Célestin averted his eyes, but it was with a faint smile that he replied:

"When I said that it might not be absolutely necessary for us to renounce the assistance of such a statement of Madame de Beaumesnil's wishes – "

"In writing?" demanded the abbé, casting down his eyes in his turn, before the bold assent Célestin's look conveyed.

There was a moment's silence, after which the abbé said, as calmly as if no such incident had interrupted the conversation:

"Consequently, we must begin a new campaign, Circumstances favour us; besides, we are the first in the field, the baron and his wife having no one in view as yet; at least, Mlle. de Rochaiguë, who is entirely devoted to us, says so. As for her brother and his wife, they are extremely selfish and avaricious persons, so it is quite possible that, if we seem likely to succeed, they will side with us, that is, if they feel that it will be to their interest to do so. But we must first place ourselves in a position that will enable us to make our own terms."

"And when, and in what way, am I to make Mlle. de Beaumesnil's acquaintance, my dear abbé?"

"We have not yet decided that very important question. A formal introduction is evidently out of the question, as the baron and his wife would be sure to suspect our intentions. Besides, a slight air of mystery and secrecy would be much more likely to excite Mlle. de Beaumesnil's curiosity and interest. It is necessary, too, if we wish to produce the best possible effect, that this introduction should be managed with an eye to the young girl's character."

Célestin cast a glance of mingled surprise and inquiry at his companion.

"So you had better allow us to attend to all that," continued the abbé, in a tone of affectionate superiority. "We understand human nature thoroughly. From what I have been able to learn, the little Beaumesnil must be exceedingly religious and devout. It is also an excellent thing to know that Mlle. de Beaumesnil has a decided preference for the altar of Mary – a very natural predilection in a young girl."

"Permit me to interrupt you an instant, my dear abbé," said Célestin, hastily.

"What is it, my dear boy?"

"M. and Madame de la Rochaiguë are not very regular in the performance of their religious duties, but Mlle. Helena never misses a service."

"That is true."

"It will be only natural, then, that she should take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, that being the church she always attends."

"Evidently."

"It would be well, then, for her to perform her devotions at the altar of the Virgin, where she will also conduct her young friend to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I would also suggest that the ladies take their places to the left of the altar."

"To the left of the altar! and why, Célestin?"

"Because I shall be performing my devotions at the same altar."

"Excellent!" cried the abbé, "no better plan could be devised. Mlle. Helena shall call the girl's attention to you, and you will make an admirable impression from the very first. A very clever idea, my dear Célestin, a very clever idea!"

"Don't give me the credit of it, my dear abbé," replied Célestin, with ironical modesty. "Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's."

"And to what Cæsar am I to attribute this admirable idea for a first interview?"

"To the author of these lines, my dear abbé." And in a sardonic tone, M. de Macreuse repeated:

"Ah, if you had but seen him as I first saw him,
You would feel for him the same fondness that I feel.
Each day to church he came with gentle air,
To kneel devoutly right before me,
And attracted the gaze of all assembled there,
By the sincerity and ardour of his prayer."

"You see everything has been planned for me, even to offering the holy water on leaving the church," added Macreuse. "And yet, people persist in declaring that the writings of this impious playwright are immoral and reprehensible."

"That's pretty good, upon my word!" cried the abbé, laughing heartily. "Well, Heaven speed the good cause, whatever may be the weapons used! You have everything to hope for, my dear Célestin. You are clever and persevering, and more likely to make a favourable impression on the orphan than any one I know. I would advise, however, that you be extremely careful about your dress. Let it be rich, but not gaudy, and characterised always by that elegant simplicity which is the perfection of good taste. Let me look at you a minute, Yes," continued the abbé, after scrutinising the young man closely for a moment, "you had better give a slight wave to your hair instead of wearing it smooth. It takes something more than fine talk to captivate a young girl's fancy."

"Oh, you need feel no uneasiness, my dear abbé, I understand all those little matters. I know, too, that the greatest victories are often won by trivial means. And success in this instance means the most delightful and blissful future of which man ever dreamed," exclaimed Célestin, his eyes sparkling joyously.

"And you will attain this success, for all the resources at our disposal – and they are immense – will be employed, if need be."

"Ah, my indebtedness to you will be immeasurable."

"And your success will not benefit you alone!"

"What do you mean by that, my dear abbé?"

"I mean that your success will have an enormous, an incalculable influence. Yes, all those fine young gentlemen who pose as freethinkers, all the lukewarm, all the indifferent, who uphold us but weakly, will see what one gains by being with us, for us, and of us. These advantages have also been demonstrated to some extent, I think, by the very enviable position – especially for one of your years and of – of your – obscure birth –" added the abbé, blushing a little, and Célestin somehow seemed to share this embarrassment.

"So, my dear Célestin," the priest continued, "while envious and insolent aristocrats squander their wealth and their health in vile orgies and senseless dissipation, you, my dear child, – come from nobody knows where, aided and pushed forward by nobody knows whom, – will quietly make your way in the world, and soon every one will be petrified with amazement at your marvellous good fortune."

"Ah, my dear abbé, you may rest assured that my gratitude –"

But the abbé again interrupted him by saying, with a peculiar smile:

"Do not persist in talking of your gratitude. No one has a chance to be ungrateful to us. We are not children; we take our precautions; besides, our best guarantee is the love and good-will of those who are indebted to us."

And the abbé, again pinching the young man's ear in a paternal way, continued:

"Now let me mention another no less important matter. You know the saying, 'He who hears only one bell hears but one note.' You may rest assured that Mlle. Helena will descant eloquently upon your many virtues to the little Beaumesnil. Your goodness, your piety, the angelic sweetness of your face, the dignified modesty of your demeanour, will be her constant theme. She will do everything she can to make the girl fall madly in love with you; but it would be an excellent thing if these praises were echoed by somebody else, and particularly if they were repeated by persons of such prominence that the words would exert a great influence upon the mind of the little Beaumesnil."

"That would be a great help, I admit, my dear abbé."

"Let us see, then, my dear Célestin. Among your fashionable friends is there no lady who could be entrusted with this delicate mission? How about Madame de Francville?"

"She is too silly."

"Madame de Bonrepos, then?"

"She is too indiscreet and too garrulous."

"Madame Lefébure?"

"She is too much of a plebeian. There is but one lady upon whose friendship and discretion I can rely sufficiently to make such a request," continued Célestin, after quite a long pause. "That is Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre."

"And you couldn't possibly do better, for the duchess has an immense amount of influence in society," said the abbé, thoughtfully. "I think, too, that you are not mistaken in your assertion, for I have heard her praise you very warmly on several occasions, and have even heard her express great regret that her son Gerald was not more like you."

On hearing Gerald's name, M. de Macreuse's face darkened ominously, and it was in a tone of positive hatred that he exclaimed:

"That man insulted me before everybody not very long ago. I will have my revenge, you may be sure of that."

"My dear boy, did you never hear the Roman proverb, 'Vengeance should be eaten cold.' It is a true one. My advice to you is to remember – and wait. Haven't you a good deal of influence over his mother already?"

"Yes," replied Célestin, "and the longer I think about it, the more convinced I am that it is to Madame de Senneterre that I ought to apply in this matter. I have had convincing proof of the interest she takes in me more than once; and the confidence I now show in her will please her, I am sure. I will consult with her, too, I think, as to the best means of establishing friendly relations between her and Mlle. de Beaumesnil. That will be a comparatively easy matter, I think."

"In that case, you had better see the duchess as soon as possible," replied the abbé.

"It is only half past twelve," said Célestin, glancing at the clock, "and Madame de Senneterre is generally at home to her intimate friends from one to two o'clock. I will go there at once."

"On your way you had better consider well if any inconveniences are likely to result from these overtures on your part. I can see only advantages."

"It is the same with me. Nevertheless, I will think the matter over. As for the rest, that is decided, you know. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock, a little to the left of the altar, in the Chapel of the Virgin, in the Church of St. Thomas d'Aquin, remember."

"That is understood," answered the abbé. "I will go and inform Mlle. Helena of our arrangements. She will be at the chapel with Mlle. de Beaumesnil to-morrow morning at nine o'clock. I can vouch for that. Now go at once to Madame de Senneterre's. You have no time to lose."

So, after an affectionate leave-taking, Célestin hastened to the Hôtel de Senneterre.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE REFUSAL

On the morning of the same day on which the foregoing conversation between Abbé Ledoux and M. de Macreuse took place, Madame la Duchesse de Senneterre, having received an important letter, went out at ten o'clock, as usual. On her return, at half past eleven, she immediately asked for her son Gerald; but that young gentleman's valet reported to madame's maid that M. le duc had not slept at home the night before.

About noon there came another and very peremptory message from the duchess, but her son had not yet returned. At last, about half past twelve, Gerald entered his mother's room, and was about to embrace her with affectionate gaiety, when the duchess, pushing him away, said, reproachfully:

"This is the third time I have sent for you, my son."

"I have but just returned home, and here I am! What do you wish, my dear mother?"

"You have but just returned home at this hour? What scandalous behaviour!"

"What scandalous behaviour?"

"Listen to me, my son: there are some things I will not discuss; but do not mistake my aversion to speaking of them for either tolerance or blindness."

"My dear mother," said Gerald, firmly, but deferentially, "you have always found me, and you will always find me, the most affectionate and respectful of sons; and it is hardly necessary for me to add that my name, which is also yours, shall be always and everywhere honoured and worthy of honour. But what else can you expect? I am twenty-four, and I live and amuse myself like a man of twenty-four."

"But, Gerald, you know that the life you are leading has troubled me very much for a long time, both on your account and my own. You shun society, though your name and talents entitle you to a distinguished place in its ranks, and you keep very bad company."

"Well, so far as women are concerned, I am forced to say that what you call bad company is the best, in my opinion. Come, come, mother, don't be angry! You know I'm still a soldier, so far as plain speaking is concerned. I consequently admit that I have a slight weakness for pretty girls in the lower walks of life. So far as men are concerned, I have friends of whom any man might be proud; but one of the dearest among them is a former soldier in my regiment. If you knew him, mother, you would have a better opinion of me," added Gerald, smiling, "for you judge a man by his friends, you know."

"Is there anybody in the world but you who chooses his intimate friends from among common soldiers?" exclaimed the duchess, shrugging her shoulders disdainfully.

"I think so, my dear mother, though it isn't everybody who has a chance to select his friends on the battle-field."

"But I am not talking of your relations with men, my son, I am reproaching you for compromising yourself as you do with those common girls."

"But they are so amusing."

"My son!"

"Pardon me, my dear mother," said Gerald, kissing his mother in spite of her strenuous efforts to prevent it. "I was wrong, yes, I was wrong. The truth is, though, – but, oh, dear! what shall I say? I don't want to horrify you again – but really, mother, vestal virgins are not to my taste, and you surely wouldn't like to see me carrying ruin and desolation into happy households, would you, mother?" he continued, in half tragic tones. "Besides, the truth is, – for virtue's sake, perhaps, – I like girls of the people better. The sanctity of marriage isn't outraged, you see, and then, as I said before, they're infinitely more amusing."

"You will excuse me from expressing any opinion on your choice of mistresses," retorted the duchess, angrily; "but it is certainly my duty to censure in the severest manner the strange frivolity of your conduct. You do not realise how you are injuring yourself."

"In what way?"

"Do you suppose that if the question of a marriage was broached – "

"A marriage?" cried Gerald; "but I've no intention of marrying, not the slightest."

"You will do me the favour to listen to me, I hope."

"I am listening."

"You know Madame de Mirecourt?"

"Yes; but fortunately she is married, so you can't offer me to her. I'm glad of it, for she's the worst plotter and schemer on earth."

"Possibly she is, but she is an intimate friend of Madame de la Rochaiguë, who is also one of my friends."

"How long since, may I ask? Haven't I often heard you say that that woman was the very personification of meanness?"

"That is neither here nor there," said the duchess, hastily interrupting him, "Madame de la Rochaiguë has now for a ward Mlle. de Beaumesnil, the richest heiress in France."

"Who is now in Italy."

"Who is now in Paris."

"She has returned?"

"Yes, last evening; and this morning, at ten o'clock, I had a long and very satisfactory interview with Madame de Rochaiguë at Madame de Mirecourt's house. I have been devoting my time and attention to a certain matter for nearly a month, but knowing your habitual levity, I would not say a word about it to you. Fortunately, everything has been kept such a close secret between Madame de la Rochaiguë, Madame de Mirecourt, and myself, that we are very hopeful – "

"Hopeful of what?"

"Why, of bringing about a marriage between Mlle. de Beaumesnil and yourself."

"A marriage!" cried Gerald, bounding out of his chair.

"Yes, a marriage – with the richest heiress in France," replied Madame de Senneterre.

Then, without making any effort to conceal her uneasiness, she continued:

"If it were not for your conduct, we should have every chance in our favour, though suitors and rivals will soon be pouring in on every side. There will be a hard struggle for the prize, and Heaven knows even the truth will be terribly damaging to you. Ah, if with your name, your talents, and your face you were a model of virtue and propriety like that excellent M. de Macreuse, for example – "

"But are you really thinking seriously of this marriage, mother?" asked Gerald, more and more astonished.

"Am I thinking of it seriously? You ask me that?"

"My dear mother, I am infinitely grateful to you for your kind intentions, but I repeat that I have no desire to marry."

"What is that you say?"

"I say, my dear mother, that I have no intention of marrying anybody."

"*Mon Dieu!* he is mad!" cried Madame de Senneterre. "He refuses the richest heiress in France!"

"Listen, mother," said Gerald, gravely, but tenderly; "I am an honest man, and being such, I confess that I love pleasure above all things, consequently I should make a detestable husband, even for the richest heiress in France."

"A colossal fortune – an unheard-of fortune!" faltered Madame de Senneterre, stupefied by this refusal on the part of her son. "An income of over three million francs! Think of it!"

"But I love pleasure and my liberty more!"

"What you say is abominable!" cried Madame de Senneterre, almost beside herself. "Why, you are an idiot, and worse than an idiot!"

"But, my dear mother, I love independence, and gay suppers and good times, generally, – in short, the life of a bachelor. I still have six years of such joyous existence before me, and I wouldn't sacrifice them for all the money in the world; besides," added Gerald, more seriously, "I really couldn't be mean enough to make a poor girl I had married for her money as miserable as she was ridiculous. Besides, mother, you know very well that I absolutely refused to buy a substitute to go and be killed in my stead, so you can not wonder that I refuse to sell myself for any woman's millions."

"But, my son –"

"My dear mother, it is just this. Your M. de Macreuse, – and if you really have any regard for him, don't hold him up to me again as a model, or I shall break all the canes I possess over his back, – your M. de Macreuse, who is so devout, would probably not have the same scruples that I, a mere pagan, have. But such as I am, such I shall remain, and love you even more than ever, my dear mother," added Gerald, kissing the hand of the duchess respectfully.

There are strange coincidences in this life of ours.

Gerald had scarcely uttered M. de Macreuse's name before a servant rapped at the door, and, on being told to enter, announced that M. de Macreuse wished to see the duchess in regard to a very important matter.

"Did you tell him that I was at home?" asked Madame de Senneterre.

"Madame la duchesse gave no order to the contrary."

"Very well, – ask M. de Macreuse to wait a moment."

Then turning to her son, she said, no longer with severity, but with deep sadness:

"Your incomprehensible refusal grieves and disappoints me more than I can express, so I beg and implore that you will remain here. I will return almost immediately. Ah, my son, my dear son, you can not imagine the terrible chagrin you are causing me."

"Pray, mother, do not say that," pleaded Gerald, touched by his mother's grief. "You know how much I love you."

"You are always saying that, Gerald. I wish I could believe it."

"Then send that brute of a Macreuse away, and let me try to convince you that my conduct is at least loyal and honest. What, you insist upon going?" he added, seeing his mother moving towards the door.

"M. de Macreuse is waiting for me," replied the duchess.

"Then let me send him word to take himself off. There is no necessity of bothering with him."

But as M. de Senneterre started towards the bell with the evident intention of giving the order, his mother checked him by saying:

"Really, Gerald, another of my great annoyances is the intense aversion – I will not say jealousy – you seem to entertain for a worthy young man whose exemplary life, modesty, and piety ought to be an example to you. Ah, would to Heaven that you had his principles and virtues! If that were the case, you would not prefer low company and a life of dissipation to a brilliant marriage which would assure your happiness and mine."

With this parting thrust Madame de Senneterre went to join M. de Macreuse, leaving her son alone, but not without making him promise that he would wait for her return.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESUMPTION AND INDIGNATION

When the duchess returned to her son, her cheeks were flushed, and intense indignation was depicted on her visage.

"Who ever would have believed it? Did any one ever hear of such audacity?" she exclaimed, on entering the room.

"What is the matter, mother?"

"M. de Macreuse is a scoundrel, – a vile scoundrel!" cried Madame de Senneterre, in a tempest of wrath.

Gerald could not help bursting into a hearty laugh, despite his mother's agitation; then, regretting this unseemly hilarity, he said:

"Forgive me, mother, but this revulsion of feeling is so sudden and so very remarkable! But tell me, has this man failed in respect to you?" demanded Gerald, very seriously, this time.

"Such a person as he is never forgets his manners," answered the duchess, spitefully.

"Then what is the meaning of this anger? You were swearing by your M. de Macreuse a minute ago!"

"Don't call him my M. de Macreuse, if you please," cried Madame de Senneterre, interrupting her son, impetuously. "Do you know the object of his visit? He came to ask me to say all I could in his praise, – in his praise, indeed!"

"But to whom, and for what purpose?"

"Did any one ever hear of such audacity!"

"But tell me his object in making this request, mother."

"His object! Why, the man wants to marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil!"

"He!"

"Did any one ever hear of such presumption?"

"Macreuse?"

"A mere nobody! A common vagrant!" cried the duchess. "Really, it is hard to imagine who could have had the audacity to introduce a creature like that into our circle."

"But how did he happen to reveal his projects to you?"

"Because I have always treated him with consideration, I suppose; because, like so many other fools I took him up, without knowing why, until the fellow thought he had a right to come and say to me that, by reason of the friendly interest I had always taken in him, and the eulogiums I had lavished upon him, he really felt it his duty to confide to me, under the pledge of secrecy, his intentions with regard to Mlle. de Beaumesnil; not doubting, he had the audacity to remark that I would say a few words in his favour to that young lady, adding that he would trust to – to my friendly interest. I do believe he had the impudence to say – to find an opportunity to do him this favour at the earliest possible moment. Really, effrontery is no name for assurance like his!"

"But really, my dear mother, you must confess that it is your own fault. Haven't I heard you praise and flatter this Macreuse in the most outrageous manner, again and again?"

"Praise him – flatter him!" exclaimed Madame de Senneterre, naïvely. "Did I suppose then that he would have the impudence to take it into his head to marry the richest heiress in France, or to think of such a thing as competing with my son? Besides, with all his boasted shrewdness, the man is nothing more or less than a fool to apply to me for assistance in his schemes! He will be surprised when he finds out how I will serve his interests. His pretensions are ridiculous, positively ridiculous! He is an adventurer, a scoundrel! He hasn't even a name, and looks like a sacristan who has just been to dine with his parish priest. He is a hypocrite, a pedant, and a most unmitigated bore, with all his pretended virtues. Besides, he hasn't the slightest chance, for, from what Madame de la Rochemaître

tells me, Mlle. de Beaumesnil would be delighted to become a duchess. Quite a woman of the world, though so young, she has a full appreciation of all the pleasures and advantages which a large fortune combined with a high social position gives, and it certainly is not a plebeian like M. de Macreuse who can give her this high social position."

"And what reply did you make to his request?"

"Enraged at his audacity, I was on the point of telling him that his pretensions were as absurd as they were insolent, and of forbidding him to ever set foot in my house again; but I reflected that I might be able to circumvent him most successfully by pretending that I was willing to assist him, so I promised that I would speak of him, as he deserved – and I certainly shall not fail to do so. Oh, I will urge his claims in an effectual manner, I'll vouch for that."

"Do you know, my dear mother, that it is not at all unlikely that Macreuse will attain his end?"

"He marry Mlle. de Beaumesnil, he?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! Are you, too, mad?"

"Don't deceive yourself, mother. The coterie that sustains him is all-powerful. He has on his side, – I don't mind telling you now you detest him so thoroughly, – he has on his side all the women who have become bigots, because they are old, all the young women who are prudes, because they are ugly, all the male devotees, because they make capital out of their religion, and all the serious-minded men, because they are so stupid; so you see the name of his supporters is legion."

"But with my social standing, my opinion will have some weight, I think," retorted the duchess.

"But you have been one of his warmest champions and admirers up to the present time, and no one will be able to explain your sudden change of feeling, or, rather, every one will be able to explain it; and, instead of injuring Macreuse, the war you wage against him will aid him. The fellow is an unmitigated scoundrel and arrant hypocrite. You have no idea with whom you have to deal, my dear mother."

"Really, you take this very calmly – with truly heroic self-abnegation, I might say," exclaimed the duchess, bitterly.

"No, I assure you, his presumption excites my deepest indignation. A fellow like Macreuse to have such pretensions and perhaps be able to realise them, a man who from my school-days has always inspired me with both loathing and aversion! And this poor Mlle. de Beaumesnil whom I do not even know, but who becomes interesting in my eyes the minute she is in danger of becoming the wife of that rascal, – really I have half a mind to marry her myself, if only to spoil Macreuse's plans and save the poor little thing from that villain's clutches."

"Oh, Gerald, my son," cried the duchess, "your marriage would make me the happiest of mothers!"

"But – my liberty – my precious liberty!"

"But, Gerald, think of it, – with one of the most illustrious names in France, and then to become the richest and greatest landowner in France! Think of the power this immense fortune will give combined with a position like yours, my dear Gerald."

"Yes, that is so," answered Gerald, reflectively, "but think of me, too, condemned to a life of ennui, and silk hose every evening henceforth and for ever. Besides, remember those dear girls who love me so devotedly; for, having the good fortune to be young and poor, I am forced to believe that their love is entirely disinterested."

"But, my dear," insisted the duchess, urged on in spite of herself by her ambition to see her son make this wealthy marriage, "perhaps you exaggerate the requirements of duty too much. Because you are married is no reason –"

"Oh, mother, mother, to think I should ever hear you recommending laxity of morals after marriage!"

"You misunderstand my meaning entirely, my son," replied Madame de Senneterre, considerably embarrassed. "I didn't say anything of the kind. If I insist, it is not only to inspire you with a desire to supplant this abominable man, but also for humanity's sake, so to speak."

"Humanity's sake?"

"Certainly, that poor little Mlle. de Beaumesnil would positively die of grief and despair if she is forced to live with such a monster. It would be a most generous and commendable act to save her from him."

"Really, mother, I expect to hear you say in a minute or two that I shall deserve the Monthyon prize, if I contract this marriage."

"Yes, if the Monthyon prize is to be awarded to the son who makes his mother the happiest of women," replied Madame de Senneterre, looking up at Gerald with eyes full of tears.

Gerald loved his mother so devotedly that the emotion she manifested touched the young duke deeply, and he said, with a smile:

"Ah, what a dangerous thing a mother is! She seems to be quite capable of marrying you to the heiress of millions, even against your will, especially when there is danger that a scoundrel like Macreuse may be converted into a millionaire. The fact is, the more I think of it the more pleased I am at the idea of circumventing this hypocrite. What a blow it would be to him! But there is one difficulty, my dear mother, and it strikes me that I am a little late in thinking of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I am by no means sure that I should please Mlle. de Beaumesnil."

"You will only have to try to succeed in doing it, I am sure, my dear Gerald."

"A true mother's view of the matter."

"I know you better than most people, perhaps."

"You are not capable of giving an opinion on the matter, I see. Your affection blinds you, but I forgive you."

"Leave the matter to me, Gerald. Only consent to be guided by me, and see if I don't conduct the affair to a successful termination."

"Do you know that one would take you for an inveterate match-maker if one didn't know you," said Gerald, gaily. "But all mothers are alike in one respect, when their children's interests are at stake they become positive tigresses and lionesses. Very well, whatever your will may be I resign myself to it blindly."

"My dear, good Gerald," cried the delighted duchess, positively weeping with joy; "you cannot imagine how happy you have made me. That wretched Macreuse will die of spite."

"That is so, mother. I shall give him the jaundice instead of the sword-thrust he would have declined to take."

"Now, Gerald, let us talk the matter over sensibly."

"So be it. I am listening."

"As you have made up your mind, it is of the utmost importance that you should see Mlle. de Beaumesnil as soon as possible."

"Very well."

"This first interview, you must understand, is of great importance."

"Unquestionably."

"The fact is so apparent that I had a long talk with Mesdames de Mirecourt and de la Rochauguë upon the subject this morning. From what the latter lady is able to judge of Mlle. de Beaumesnil's character, this is the plan we think most expedient; but you shall judge for yourself, Gerald."

"Very well, let me hear it."

"We recognised from the first the impossibility of representing you as a serious-minded and settled man – "

"And you showed your good sense, for I should have proved you a set of base deceivers only too soon," retorted Gerald, laughing.

"Of course there is no hope of avoiding the many censorious remarks which the frivolity of your conduct seems to justify, my poor Gerald, so the best thing we can do is to make everything that is said against you redound to your credit as much as possible."

"Only mothers could show themselves such clever diplomatists as that."

"Fortunately, Mlle. de Beaumesnil, judging from what Madame de la Rochaigne says, – she talked with the girl awhile last evening, and the mind of a child of sixteen is not difficult to read, – fortunately, Ernestine de Beaumesnil seems to be very fond of luxury, splendour, and display, so we think it advisable that you should first appear before her in the character of one of the most elegant young men in Paris."

"If you are clever enough to find such an opportunity, I consent, I am sure."

"It is to-morrow afternoon, is it not, that you are to take part in that race in the Bois de Boulogne?"

"Yes, I promised that ninny, De Courville, who has a number of fine horses he is afraid to mount himself, that I would ride his horse, 'Young Emperor,' in the hurdle race."

"Capital! Madame de la Rochaigne shall take Mlle. de Beaumesnil to the race. They will call for me, and as soon as we reach the Bois it will seem the most natural thing in the world that you should come up and talk with us before the racing begins. Your jockey costume of orange satin with black velvet trimmings is extremely becoming to you."

"One word, if you please, my dear mother."

"Let me finish, please. Mlle. de Beaumesnil will see you among a crowd of fashionable young men, in which you shine preëminent, every one must admit. And, then, I don't doubt that you will win the race. It is absolutely necessary that you should win it, Gerald."

"It is the general opinion, mother, that the 'Young Emperor' and I will come out ahead, but – "

"You certainly ride superbly," said the duchess, again interrupting her son; "and when Ernestine sees you excelling your competitors in the midst of frantic applause, there can be very little doubt that, upon one with the tastes and character she seems to have, the impression produced will be excellent; and if, after this first meeting, you make yourself as agreeable as you can be when you choose, that impudent Macreus will appear odious in her eyes even if he should have the audacity to enter the lists."

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