

ЭДВАРД БУЛЬВЕР-ЛИТТОН

**THE PARISIANS —
VOLUME 11**

Эдвард Джордж Бульвер-Литтон
The Parisians — Volume 11

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=35009537

The Parisians — Volume 11:

Содержание

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| BOOK XI | 4 |
| CHAPTER I | 4 |
| CHAPTER II | 8 |
| CHAPTER III | 11 |
| CHAPTER IV | 16 |
| CHAPTER V | 24 |
| CHAPTER VI | 28 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. | 38 |

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

The Parisians — Volume 11

BOOK XI

CHAPTER I

Among the frets and checks to the course that "never did run smooth," there is one which is sufficiently frequent, for many a reader will remember the irritation it caused him. You have counted on a meeting with the beloved one unwitnessed by others, an interchange of confessions and vows which others may not hear. You have arranged almost the words in which your innermost heart is to be expressed; pictured to yourself the very looks by which those words will have their sweetest reply. The scene you have thus imagined appears to you vivid and distinct, as if foreshown in a magic glass. And suddenly, after long absence, the meeting takes place in the midst of a common companionship: nothing that you wished to say can be said. The scene you pictured is painted out by the irony of Chance; and groups and backgrounds of which you had never dreamed start forth from the disappointing canvas. Happy if that be all! But sometimes, by a strange, subtle intuition, you feel that the person

herself is changed; and sympathetic with that change, a terrible chill comes over your own heart.

Before Graham had taken his seat at the table beside Isaura, he felt that she was changed to him. He felt it by her very touch as their hands met at the first greeting,—by the tone of her voice in the few words that passed between them,—by the absence of all glow in the smile which had once lit up her face, as a burst of sunshine lights up a day in spring, and gives a richer gladness of colour to all its blooms. Once seated side by side they remained for some moments silent. Indeed, it would have been rather difficult for anything less than the wonderful intelligence of lovers between whom no wall can prevent the stolen interchange of tokens, to have ventured private talk of their own amid the excited converse which seemed all eyes, all tongues, all ears, admitting no one present to abstract himself from the common emotion. Englishmen do not recognise the old classic law which limited the number of guests, where banquets are meant to be pleasant, to that of the Nine- Muses. They invite guests so numerous, and so shy of launching talk across the table, that you may talk to the person next to you not less secure from listeners than you would be in talking with the stranger whom you met at a well in the Sahara. It is not so, except on state occasions, at Paris. Difficult there to retire into solitude with your next neighbour. The guests collected by Duplessis completed with himself the number of the Sacred Nine—the host, Valerie, Rochebriant, Graham, Isaura, Signora Venosta, La

Duchesse de Tarascon, the wealthy and high-born Imperialist, Prince ———, and last and least, one who shall be nameless.

I have read somewhere, perhaps in one of the books which American superstition dedicates to the mysteries of Spiritualism, how a gifted seer, technically styled medium, sees at the opera a box which to other eyes appears untenanted and empty, but to him is full of ghosts, well dressed in *costume de-regle*, gazing on the boards and listening to the music. Like such ghosts are certain beings whom I call Lookers-on. Though still living, they have no share in the life they survey, they come as from another world to hear and to see what is passing in ours. In ours they lived once, but that troubled sort of life they have survived. Still we amuse them as stage-players and puppets amuse ourselves. One of these Lookers-on completed the party at the house of Duplessis.

How lively, how animated the talk was at the financier's pleasant table that day, the 8th of July! The excitement of the coming war made itself loud in every Gallic voice, and kindled in every Gallic eye. Appeals at every second minute were made, sometimes courteous, sometimes sarcastic, to the Englishman—promising son of an eminent statesman, and native of a country in which France is always coveting an ally, and always suspecting an enemy. Certainly Graham could not have found a less propitious moment for asking Isaura if she really were changed. And certainly the honour of Great Britain was never less ably represented (that is saying a great deal) than it was on this occasion by the young man reared to diplomacy

and aspiring to Parliamentary distinction. He answered all questions with a constrained voice and an insipid smile,—all questions pointedly addressed to him as to what demonstrations of admiring sympathy with the gallantry of France might be expected from the English Government and people; what his acquaintance with the German races led him to suppose would be the effect on the Southern States of the first defeat of the Prussians; whether the man called Moltke was not a mere strategist on paper, a crotchety pedant; whether, if Belgium became so enamoured of the glories of France as to solicit fusion with her people, England would have a right to offer any objection, &c., &c. I do not think that during that festival Graham once thought one-millionth so much about the fates of Prussia and France as he did think, "Why is that girl so changed to me? Merciful heaven! is she lost to my life?"

By training, by habit, even by passion, the man was a genuine politician, cosmopolitan as well as patriotic, accustomed to consider what effect every vibration in that balance of European power, which no deep thinker can despise, must have on the destinies of civilised humanity, and on those of the nation to which he belongs. But are there not moments in life when the human heart suddenly narrows the circumference to which its emotions are extended? As the ebb of a tide, it retreats from the shores it had covered on its flow, drawing on with contracted waves the treasure-trove it has selected to hoard amid its deeps.

CHAPTER II

On quitting the dining-room, the Duchesse de Tarascon said to her host, on whose arm she was leaning, "Of course you and I must go with the stream. But is not all the fine talk that has passed to-day at your table, and in which we too have joined, a sort of hypocrisy? I may say this to you; I would say it to no other."

"And I say to you, Madame la Duchesse, that which I would say to no other. Thinking over it as I sit alone, I find myself making a 'terrible hazard;' but when I go abroad and become infected by the general enthusiasm, I pluck up gaiety of spirit, and whisper to myself, 'True, but it may be an enormous gain.' To get the left bank of the Rhine is a trifle; but to check in our next neighbour a growth which a few years hence would overtop us,—that is no trifle. And, be the gain worth the hazard or not, could the Emperor, could any Government likely to hold its own for a week, have declined to take the chance of the die?"

The Duchesse mused a moment, and meanwhile the two seated themselves on a divan in the corner of the salon. Then she said very slowly—

"No Government that held its tenure on popular suffrage could have done so. But if the Emperor had retained the personal authority which once allowed the intellect of one man to control and direct the passions of many, I think the war would have been averted. I have reason to know that the Emperor gave his

emphatic support to the least bellicose members of the Council, and that Gramont's speech did not contain the passage that precipitates hostilities when the Council in which it was framed broke up. These fatal Ministers found the Chamber, and the reports of the popular excitement which could not be resisted without imminent danger of revolution. It is Paris that has forced the war on the Emperor. But enough of this subject. What must be, must, and, as you say, the gain may be greater than the hazard. I come to something else you whispered to me before we went in to dinner,—a sort of complaint which wounds me sensibly. You say I had assisted to a choice of danger and possibly of death a very distant connection of mine, who might have been a very near connection of yours. You mean Alain de Rochebriant?"

"Yes; I accept him as a suitor for the hand of my only daughter."

"I am so glad, not for your sake so much as for his. No one can know him well without appreciating in him the finest qualities of the finest order of the French noble; but having known your pretty Valerie so long, my congratulations are for the man who can win her. Meanwhile, hear my explanation: when I promised Alain any interest I can command for the grade of officer in a regiment of Mobiles, I knew not that he had formed, or was likely to form, ties or duties to keep him at home. I withdraw my promise."

"No, Duchesse, fulfil it. I should be disloyal indeed if I robbed a sovereign under whose tranquil and prosperous reign I have

acquired, with no dishonour, the fortune which Order proffers to Commerce, of one gallant defender in the hour of need. And, speaking frankly, if Alain were really my son, I think I am Frenchman enough to remember that France is my mother."

"Say no more, my friend—say no more," cried the Duchesse, with the warm blood of the heart rushing through all the delicate coatings of pearl- powder. "If every Frenchman felt as you do; if in this Paris of ours all hostilities of class may merge in the one thought of the common country; if in French hearts there yet thrills the same sentiment as that which, in the terrible days when all other ties were rent asunder, revered France as mother, and rallied her sons to her aid against the confederacy of Europe, —why, then, we need not grow pale with dismay at the sight of a Prussian needle-gun. Hist! look yonder: is not that a tableau of Youth in Arcady? Worlds rage around, and Love, unconcerned, whispers to Love!" The Duchesse here pointed to a corner of the adjoining room in which Alain and Valerie sat apart, he whispering into her ear; her cheek downcast, and, even seen at that distance, brightened by the delicate tenderness of its blushes.

CHAPTER III

But in that small assembly there were two who did not attract the notice of Duplessis or of the lady of the Imperial Court. While the Prince —— and the placid Looker-on were engaged at a contest of ecarte, with the lively Venosta, for the gallery, interposing criticisms and admonitions, Isaura was listlessly turning over a collection of photographs, strewed on a table that stood near to an open window in the remoter angle of the room, communicating with a long and wide balcony filled partially with flowers and overlooking the Champs Elysees, softly lit up by the innumerable summer stars. Suddenly a whisper, the command of which she could not resist, thrilled through her ear, and sent the blood rushing back to her heart.

"Do you remember that evening at Enghien? how I said that our imagination could not carry us beyond the question whether we two should be gazing together that night twelve months on that star which each of us had singled out from the hosts of heaven? That was the 8th of July. It is the 8th of July once more. Come and seek for our chosen star—come. I have something to say, which say I must. Come."

Mechanically, as it were,—mechanically, as they tell us the Somnambulist obeys the Mesmeriser,—Isaura obeyed that summons. In a kind of dreamy submission she followed his steps, and found herself on the balcony, flowers around her and stars

above, by the side of the man who had been to her that being ever surrounded by flowers and lighted by stars,—the ideal of Romance to the heart of virgin Woman.

"Isaura," said the Englishman, softly. At the sound of her own name for the first time heard from those lips, every nerve in her frame quivered. "Isaura, I have tried to live without you. I cannot. You are all in all to me: without you it seems to me as if earth had no flowers, and even heaven had withdrawn its stars. Are there differences between us, differences of taste, of sentiments, of habits, of thought? Only let me hope that you can love me a tenth part so much as I love you, and such differences cease to be discord. Love harmonises all sounds, blends all colours into its own divine oneness of heart and soul. Look up! is not the star which this time last year invited our gaze above, is it not still there? Does it not still invite our gaze? Isaura, speak!"

"Hush, hush, hush,"—the girl could say no more, but she recoiled from his side.

The recoil did not wound him: there was no hate in it. He advanced, he caught her hand, and continued, in one of those voices which become so musical in summer nights under starry skies:

"Isaura, there is one name which I can never utter without a reverence due to the religion which binds earth to heaven—a name which to man should be the symbol of life cheered and beautified, exalted, hallowed. That name is 'wife.' Will you take that name from me?"

And still Isaura made no reply. She stood mute, and cold, and rigid as a statue of marble. At length, as if consciousness had been arrested and was struggling back, she sighed heavily, and passed her hands slowly over her forehead.

"Mockery, mockery," she said then, with a smile half bitter, half plaintive, on her colourless lips. "Did you wait to ask me that question till you knew what my answer must be? I have pledged the name of wife to another."

"No, no; you say that to rebuke, to punish me! Unsay it! unsay it!"

Isaura beheld the anguish of his face with bewildered eyes. "How can my words pain you?" she said, drearily. "Did you not write that I had unfitted myself to be wife to you?"

"I?"

"That I had left behind me the peaceful immunities of private life? I felt you were so right! Yes! I am affianced to one who thinks that in spite of that misfortune—"

"Stop, I command you—stop! You saw my letter to Mrs. Morley. I have not had one moment free from torture and remorse since I wrote it. But whatever in that letter you might justly resent—"

"I did not resent—"

Graham heard not the interruption, but hurried on. "You would forgive could you read my heart. No matter. Every sentiment in that letter, except those which conveyed admiration, I retract. Be mine, and instead of presuming to check in you

the irresistible impulse of genius to the first place in the head or the heart of the world, I teach myself to encourage, to share, to exult in it. Do you know what a difference there is between the absent one and the present one—between the distant image against whom our doubts, our fears, our suspicions, raise up hosts of imaginary giants, barriers of visionary walls, and the beloved face before the sight of which the hosts are fled, the walls are vanished? Isaura, we meet again. You know now from my own lips that I love you. I think your lips will not deny that you love me. You say that you are affianced to another. Tell the man frankly, honestly, that you mistook your heart. It is not yours to give. Save yourself, save him, from a union in which there can be no happiness."

"It is too late," said Isaura, with hollow tones, but with no trace of vacillating weakness on her brow and lips. "Did I say now to that other one, 'I break the faith that I pledged to you,' I should kill him, body and soul. Slight thing though I be, to him I am all in all; to you, Mr. Vane, to you a memory—the memory of one whom a year, perhaps a month, hence, you will rejoice to think you have escaped."

She passed from him—passed away from the flowers and the starlight; and when Graham,—recovering from the stun of her crushing words, and with the haughty mien and stop of the man who goes forth from the ruin of his hopes, leaning for support upon his pride,—when Graham re-entered the room, all the guests had departed save only Alain, who was still exchanging

whispered words with Valerie.

CHAPTER IV

The next day, at the hour appointed, Graham entered Alain's apartment. "I am glad to tell you," said the Marquis, gaily, "that the box has arrived, and we will very soon examine its contents. Breakfast claims precedence." During the meal Alain was in gay spirits, and did not at first notice the gloomy countenance and abstracted mood of his guest. At length, surprised at the dull response to his lively sallies on the part of a man generally so pleasant in the frankness of his speech, and the cordial ring of his sympathetic laugh, it occurred to him that the change in Graham must be ascribed to something that had gone wrong in the meeting with Isaura the evening before; and remembering the curtness with which Graham had implied disinclination to converse about the fair Italian, he felt perplexed how to reconcile the impulse of his good nature with the discretion imposed on his good-breeding. At all events, a compliment to the lady whom Graham had so admired could do no harm.

"How well Mademoiselle Cicogna looked last night!"

"Did she? It seemed to me that, in health at least, she did not look very well. Have you heard what day M. Thiers will speak on the war?"

"Thiers? No. Who cares about Thiers? Thank heaven his day is past! I don't know any unmarried woman in Paris, not even Valerie—I mean Mademoiselle Duplessis—who has so exquisite

a taste in dress as Mademoiselle Cicogna. Generally speaking, the taste of a female author is atrocious."

"Really—I did not observe her dress. I am no critic on subjects so dainty as the dress of ladies, or the tastes of female authors."

"Pardon me," said the beau Marquis, gravely. "As to dress, I think that so essential a thing in the mind of woman, that no man who cares about women ought to disdain critical study of it. In woman, refinement of character is never found in vulgarity of dress. I have only observed that truth since I came up from Bretagne."

"I presume, my dear Marquis, that you may have read in Bretagne books which very few not being professed scholars have ever read at Paris; and possibly you may remember that Horace ascribes the most exquisite refinement in dress, denoted by the untranslatable words, 'simplex munditiis,' to a lady who was not less distinguished by the ease and rapidity with which she could change her affection. Of course that allusion does not apply to Mademoiselle Cicogna, but there are many other exquisitely dressed ladies at Paris of whom an ill-fated admirer

'fidem

Mutatoque

deos flebit.'

"Now, with your permission, we will adjourn to the box of letters."

The box being produced and unlocked, Alain looked with conscientious care at its contents before he passed over to

Graham's inspection a few epistles, in which the Englishman immediately detected the same handwriting as that of the letter from Louise which Richard King had bequeathed to him.

They were arranged and numbered chronologically.

LETTER I

DEAR M. LE MARQUIS,—How can I thank you sufficiently for obtaining and remitting to me those certificates? You are too aware of the unhappy episode in my life not to know how inestimable is the service you render me. I am saved all further molestation from the man who had indeed no right over my freedom, but whose persecution might compel me to the scandal and disgrace of an appeal to the law for protection, and the avowal of the illegal marriage into which I was duped. I would rather be torn limb from limb by wild horses, like the Queen in the history books, than dishonour myself and the ancestry which I may at least claim on the mother's side, by proclaiming that I had lived with that low Englishman as his wife, when I was only—O heavens, I cannot conclude the sentence!

"No, Mons. le Marquis, I am in no want of the pecuniary aid you so generously wish to press on me. Though I know not where to address my poor dear uncle,—though I doubt, even if I did, whether I could venture to confide to him the secret known only to yourself as to the name I now bear—and if he hear of me at all he must believe me dead,

—yet I have enough left of the money he last remitted to me for present support; and when that fails, I think, what with my knowledge of English and such other slender accomplishments as I possess, I could maintain myself as a teacher or governess in some German family. At all events, I will write to you again soon, and I entreat you to let me know all you can learn about my uncle. I feel so grateful to you for your just disbelief of the horrible calumny which must be so intolerably galling to a man so proud, and, whatever his errors, so incapable of a baseness.

"Direct to me Poste restante, Augsburg.

"Yours with all consideration,

LETTER II

(Seven months after the date of Letter 1.)

"AUGSBURG.

"DEAR M. LE MARQUIS,—I thank you for your kind little note informing me of the pains you have taken, as yet with no result, to ascertain what has become of my unfortunate uncle. My life since I last wrote has been a very quiet one. I have been teaching among a few families here; and among my pupils are two little girls of very high birth. They have taken so great a fancy to me that their mother has just asked me to come and reside at their house as governess. What wonderfully kind hearts those Germans have,—so simple, so truthful! They raise no troublesome

questions,—accept my own story implicitly." Here follow a few commonplace sentences about the German character, and a postscript. "I go into my new home next week. When you hear more of my uncle, direct to me at the Countess von Rudesheim, Schloss — ———, near Berlin."

"Rudesheim!" Could this be the relation, possibly the wife, of the Count von Rudesheim with whom Graham had formed acquaintance last year?

LETTER III

(Between three and four years after the date of the last.)

"You startle me indeed, dear M. le Marquis. My uncle said to have been recognised in Algeria under another name, a soldier in the Algerian army? My dear, proud, luxurious uncle! Ah, I cannot believe it, any more than you do: but I long eagerly for such further news as you can learn of him. For myself, I shall perhaps surprise you when I say I am about to be married. Nothing can exceed the amiable kindness I have received from the Rudesheims since I have been in their house. For the last year especially I have been treated on equal terms as one of the family. Among the habitual visitors at the house is a gentleman of noble birth, but not of rank too high, nor of fortune too great, to make a marriage with the French widowed governess a misalliance. I am sure that he loves me sincerely; and he is the only man I ever met whose love I have cared to win.

We are to be married in the course of the year. Of course he is ignorant of my painful history, and will never learn it. And after all, Louise D—— is dead. In the home to which I am about to remove, there is no probability that the wretched Englishman can ever cross my path. My secret is as safe with you as in the grave that holds her whom in the name of Louise D—— you once loved. Henceforth I shall trouble you no more with my letters; but if you hear anything decisively authentic of my uncle's fate, write me a line at any time, directed as before to Madame ——, enclosed to the Countess von Rudesheim.

"And accept, for all the kindness you have ever shown me, as to one whom you did not disdain to call a kinswoman, the assurance of my undying gratitude. In the alliance she now makes, your kinswoman does not discredit the name through which she is connected with the yet loftier line of Rochebriant."

To this letter the late Marquis had appended in pencil. "Of course Rochebriant never denies the claim of a kinswoman, even though a drawing-master's daughter. Beautiful creature, Louise, but a termagant. I could not love Venus if she were a termagant. L.'s head turned by the unlucky discovery that her mother was noble. In one form or other, every woman has the same disease—vanity. Name of her intended not mentioned—easily found out."

The next letter was dated May 7, 1859, on black-edged paper, and contained but these lines: "I was much comforted by your kind visit yesterday, dear Marquis. My affliction has been heavy:

but for the last two years my poor husband's conduct has rendered my life unhappy, and I am recovering the shock of his sudden death. It is true that I and the children are left very ill provided for; but I cannot accept your generous offer of aid. Have no fear as to my future fate. Adieu, my dear Marquis! This will reach you just before you start for Naples. *Bon voyage.*" There was no address on this note—no postmark on the envelope—evidently sent by hand.

The last note, dated 1861, March 20, was briefer than its predecessor. "I have taken your advice, dear Marquis; and, overcoming all scruples, I have accepted his kind offer, on the condition that I am never to be taken to England. I had no option in this marriage. I can now own to you that my poverty had become urgent.—Yours, with inalienable gratitude. This last note, too, was without postmark, and was evidently sent by hand.

"There are no other letters, then, from this writer?" asked Graham; "and no further clue as to her existence?"

"None that I have discovered; and I see now why I preserved these letters. There is nothing in their contents not creditable to my poor father. They show how capable he was of good-natured disinterested kindness towards even a distant relation of whom he could certainly not have been proud, judging not only by his own pencilled note, or by the writer's condition as a governess, but by her loose sentiments as to the marriage tie. I have not the slightest idea who she could be. I never at least heard of one connected, however distantly, with my family, whom I could identify with

the writer of these letters."

"I may hold them a short time in my possession?"

"Pardon me a preliminary question. If I may venture to form a conjecture, the object of your search must be connected with your countryman, whom the lady politely calls the 'wretched Englishman;' but I own I should not like to lend, through these letters, a pretence to any steps that may lead to a scandal in which my father's name or that of any member of my family could be mixed up."

"Marquis, it is to prevent the possibility of all scandal that I ask you to trust these letters to my discretion."

"Foi de gentilhomme?"

"Foi de gentilhomme!"

"Take them. When and where shall we meet again?"

"Soon, I trust; but I must leave Paris this evening. I am bound to Berlin in quest of this Countess von Rudesheim: and I fear that in a very few days intercourse between France and the German frontier will be closed upon travellers."

After a few more words not worth recording, the two young men shook hands and parted.

CHAPTER V

It was with an interest languid and listless indeed, compared with that which he would have felt a day before, that Graham mused over the remarkable advances towards the discovery of Louise Duval which were made in the letters he had perused. She had married, then, first a foreigner, whom she spoke of as noble, and whose name and residence could be easily found through the Countess von Rudesheim. The marriage did not seem to have been a happy one. Left a widow in reduced circumstances, she had married again, evidently without affection. She was living so late as 1861, and she had children living in 1859: was the child referred to by Richard King one of them?

The tone and style of the letters served to throw some light on the character of the writer: they evinced pride, stubborn self-will, and unamiable hardness of nature; but her rejection of all pecuniary aid from a man like the late Marquis de Rochebriant betokened a certain dignity of sentiment. She was evidently, whatever her strange ideas about her first marriage with Richard King, no vulgar woman of gallantry; and there must have been some sort of charm about her to have excited a friendly interest in a kinsman so remote, and a man of pleasure so selfish, as her high-born correspondent.

But what now, so far as concerned his own happiness, was the hope, the probable certainty, of a speedy fulfilment of the

trust bequeathed to him? Whether the result, in the death of the mother, and more especially of the child, left him rich, or, if the last survived, reduced his fortune to a modest independence, Isaura was equally lost to him, and fortune became valueless. But his first emotions on recovering from the shock of hearing from Isaura's lips that she was irrevocably affianced to another, were not those of self-reproach. They were those of intense bitterness against her who, if really so much attached to him as he had been led to hope, could within so brief a time reconcile her heart to marriage with another. This bitterness was no doubt unjust; but I believe it to be natural to men of a nature so proud and of affections so intense as Graham's, under similar defeats of hope. Resentment is the first impulse in a man loving with the whole ardour of his soul, rejected, no matter why or wherefore, by the woman by whom he had cause to believe he himself was beloved; and though Graham's standard of honour was certainly the reverse of low, yet man does not view honour in the same light as woman does, when involved in analogous difficulties of position. Graham conscientiously thought that if Isaura so loved him as to render distasteful an engagement to another which could only very recently have been contracted, it would be more honourable frankly so to tell the accepted suitor than to leave him in ignorance that her heart was estranged. But these engagements are very solemn things with girls like Isaura, and hers was no ordinary obligation of woman-honour. Had the accepted one been superior in rank-fortune—all that flatters the ambition of

woman in the choice of marriage; had he been resolute, and strong, and self-dependent amid the trials and perils of life—then possibly the woman's honour might find excuse in escaping the penalties of its pledge. But the poor, ailing, infirm, morbid boy-poet, who looked to her as his saving angel in body, in mind, and soul—to say to him, "Give me back my freedom," would be to abandon him to death and to sin. But Graham could not of course divine why what he as a man thought right was to Isaura as woman impossible: and he returned to his old prejudiced notion that there is no real depth and ardour of affection for human lovers in the poetess whose mind and heart are devoted to the creation of imaginary heroes. Absorbed in reverie, he took his way slowly and with downcast looks towards the British embassy, at which it was well to ascertain whether the impending war yet necessitated special passports for Germany.

"*Bon-jour, cher ami,*" said a pleasant voice; "and how long have you been at Paris?"

"Oh, my dear M. Savarin! charmed to see you looking so well! Madame well too, I trust? My kindest regards to her. I have been in Paris but a day or two, and I leave this evening."

"So soon? The war frightens you away, I suppose. Which way are you going now?"

"To the British embassy."

"Well, I will go with you so far—it is in my own direction. I have to call at the charming Italian's with my congratulations—on news I only heard this morning."

"You mean Mademoiselle Cicogna—and the news that demands congratulations —her approaching marriage!"

"*Mon Dieu!* when could you have heard of that?"

"Last night at the house of M. Duplessis."

"*Parbleu!* I shall scold her well for confiding to her new friend Valerie the secret she kept from her old friends, my wife and myself."

"By the way," said Graham, with a tone of admirably-feigned indifference, "who is the happy man? That part of the secret I did not hear."

"Can't you guess?"

"**NO.**"

"Gustave Rameau."

"Ah!" Graham almost shrieked, so sharp and shrill was his cry. "Ah! I ought indeed to have guessed that!"

"Madame Savarin, I fancy, helped to make up the marriage. I hope it may turn out well; certainly it will be his salvation. May it be for her happiness!"

"No doubt of that! Two poets-born for each other, I dare say. Adieu, my dear Savarin! Here we are at the embassy."

CHAPTER VI

That evening Graham found himself in the coupe of the express train to Strasbourg. He had sent to engage the whole coupe to himself, but that was impossible. One place was bespoken as far as C———, after which Graham might prosecute his journey alone on paying for the three places.

When he took his seat another man was in the further corner whom he scarcely noticed. The train shot rapidly on for some leagues. Profound silence in the coupe, save at moments those heavy impatient sighs that came from the very depths of the heart, and of which he who sighs is unconscious, burst from the Englishman's lips, and drew on him the observant side-glance of his fellow-traveller.

At length the fellow-traveller said in very good English, though with French accent, "Would you object, sir, to my lighting my little carriage-lantern? I am in the habit of reading in the night train, and the wretched lamp they give us does not permit that. But if you wish to sleep, and my lantern would prevent you doing so, consider my request unasked."

"You are most courteous, sir. Pray light your lantern—that will not interfere with my sleep."

As Graham thus answered, far away from the place and the moment as his thoughts were, it yet faintly struck him that he had heard that voice before.

The man produced a small lantern, which he attached to the window-sill, and drew forth from a small leathern bag sundry newspapers and pamphlets. Graham flung himself back, and in a minute or so again came his sigh.

"Allow me to offer you those evening journals—you may not have had time to read them before starting," said the fellow-traveller, leaning forward, and extending the newspapers with one hand, while with the other he lifted his lantern. Graham turned, and the faces of the two men were close to each other—Graham with his travelling-cap drawn over his brows, the other with head uncovered.

"Monsieur Lebeau!"

"Bon soir, Mr. Lamb!"

Again silence for a moment or so. Monsieur Lebeau then broke it—

"I think, Mr. Lamb, that in better society than that of the Faubourg Montmartre you are known under another name." Graham had no heart then for the stage-play of a part, and answered, with quiet haughtiness, "Possibly—and what name?"

"Graham Vane. And, sir," continued Lebeau, with a haughtiness equally quiet, but somewhat more menacing, "since we two gentlemen find ourselves thus close, do I ask too much if I inquire why you condescend to seek my acquaintance in disguise?"

"Monsieur le Vicomte de Mauleon, when you talk of disguise, is it too much to inquire why my acquaintance was accepted by

Monsieur Lebeau?"

"Ha! Then you confess that it was Victor de Mauleon whom you sought when you first visited the cafe Jean Jacques?"

"Frankly I confess it."

Monsieur Lebeau drew himself back, and seemed to reflect.

"I see! Solely for the purpose of learning whether Victor de Mauleon could give you any information about Louise Duval. Is it so?"

"Monsieur le Vicomte, you say truly."

Again M. Lebeau paused as if in reflection; and Graham, in that state of mind when a man who may most despise and detest the practice of duelling, may yet feel a thrill of delight if some homicide would be good enough to put him out of his misery, flung aside his cap, lifted his broad frank forehead, and stamped his foot impatiently as if to provoke a quarrel.

M. Lebeau lowered his spectacles, and, with those calm, keen, searching eyes of his, gazed at the Englishman.

"It strikes me," he said, with a smile, the fascination of which not even those faded whiskers could disguise—"it strikes me that there are two ways in which gentlemen such as you and I are can converse: firstly, with reservation and guard against each other; secondly, with perfect openness. Perhaps of the two I have more need of reservation and wary guard against any stranger than you have. Allow me to propose the alternative—perfect openness. What say you?" and he extended his hand.

"Perfect openness," answered Graham, softened into sudden

liking for this once terrible swordsman, and shaking, as an Englishman shakes, the hand held out to him in peace by the man from whom he had anticipated quarrel.

"Permit me now, before you address any questions to me, to put one to you. How did you learn that Victor de Mauleon was identical with Jean Lebeau?"

"I heard that from an agent of the police."

"Ah!"

"Whom I consulted as to the means of ascertaining whether Louise Duval was alive,—if so, where she could be found."

"I thank you very much for your information. I had no notion that the police of Paris had divined the original alias of poor Monsieur Lebeau, though something occurred at Lyons which made me suspect it. Strange that the Government, knowing through the police that Victor de Mauleon, a writer they had no reason to favour, had been in so humble a position, should never, even in their official journals, have thought it prudent to say so! But, now I think of it, what if they had? They could prove nothing against Jean Lebeau. They could but say, 'Jean Lebeau is suspected to be too warm a lover of liberty, too earnest a friend of the people, and Jean Lebeau is the editor of *La Sens Commun*.' Why, that assertion would have made Victor de Mauleon the hero of the Reds, the last thing a prudent Government could desire. I thank you cordially for your frank reply. Now, what question would you put to me?"

"In one word, all you can tell me about Louise Duval."

"You shall have it. I had heard vaguely in my young days that a half-sister of mine by my father's first marriage with Mademoiselle de Beauvilliers had—when in advanced middle life he married a second time—conceived a dislike for her mother-in-law, and, being of age, with an independent fortune of her own, had quitted the house, taken up her residence with an elderly female relative, and there had contracted a marriage with a man who gave her lessons in drawing. After that marriage, which my father in vain tried to prevent, my sister was renounced by her family. That was all I knew till, after I came into my inheritance by the death of both my parents, I learned from my father's confidential lawyer that the drawing-master, M. Duval, had soon dissipated his wife's fortune, become a widower with one child—a girl—and fallen into great distress. He came to my father, begging for pecuniary aid. My father, though by no means rich, consented to allow him a yearly pension, on condition that he never revealed to his child her connection with our family. The man agreed to the condition, and called at my father's lawyer quarterly for his annuity. But the lawyer informed me that this deduction from my income had ceased, that M. Duval had not for a year called or sent for the sum due to him, and that he must therefore be dead. One day my valet informed me that a young lady wished to see me—in those days young ladies very often called on me. I desired her to be shown in. There entered a young creature, almost of my own age, who, to my amazement saluted me as uncle. This was the child of my half-sister. Her

father had been dead several months, fulfilling very faithfully the condition on which he had held his pension, and the girl never dreaming of the claims that, if wise, poor child, she ought not to have cared for, viz.,—to that obsolete useless pauper birthright, a branch on the family tree of a French noble. But in pinch of circumstance, and from female curiosity, hunting among the papers her father had left for some clue to the reasons for the pension he had received, she found letters from her mother, letters from my father, which indisputably proved that she was grandchild to the *due* Vicomte de Mauleon, and niece to myself. Her story as told to me was very pitiable. Conceiving herself to be nothing higher in birth than daughter to this drawing-master, at his death, poor, penniless orphan that she was, she had accepted the hand of an English student of medicine whom she did not care for. Miserable with this man, on finding by the documents I refer to that she was my niece, she came to me for comfort and counsel. What counsel could I or any man give to her but to make the best of what had happened, and live with her husband? But then she started another question. It seems that she had been talking with some one, I think her landlady, or some other woman with whom she had made acquaintance—was she legally married to this man? Had he not entrapped her ignorance into a false marriage? This became a grave question, and I sent at once to my lawyer. On hearing the circumstances, he at once declared that the marriage was not legal according to the laws of France. But, doubtless, her English *soi-disant* husband was not cognisant

of the French law, and a legal marriage could, with his assent, be at once solemnised. Monsieur Vane, I cannot find words to convey to you the joy that poor girl showed in her face and in her words when she learned that she was not bound to pass her life with that man as his wife. It was in vain to talk and reason with her. Then arose the other question, scarcely less important. True, the marriage was not legal, but would it not be better on all accounts to take steps to have it formally annulled, thus freeing her from the harassment of any claim the Englishman might advance, and enabling her to establish the facts in a right position, not injurious to her honour in the eyes of any future suitor to her hand? She would not hear of such a proposal. She declared that she could not bring to the family she pined to re-enter the scandal of disgrace. To allow that she had made such a *misalliance* would be bad enough in itself; but to proclaim to the world that, though nominally the wife, she had in fact been only the mistress of this medical student—she would rather throw herself into the Seine. All she desired was to find some refuge, some hiding-place for a time, whence she could write to the man informing him that he had no lawful hold on her. Doubtless he would not seek then to molest her. He would return to his own country, and be effaced from her life. And then, her story unknown, she might form a more suitable alliance. Fiery young creature though she was—true De Mauleon in being so fiery—she interested me strongly. I should say that she was wonderfully handsome; and though imperfectly educated, and brought up in

circumstances so lowly, there was nothing common about her—a certain *je ne sais quoi* of stateliness and race. At all events she did with me what she wished. I agreed to aid her desire of a refuge and hiding- place. Of course I could not lodge her in my own apartment, but I induced a female relation of her mother's, an old lady living at Versailles, to receive her, stating her birth, but of course concealing her illegal marriage.

"From time to time I went to see her. But one day I found this restless bright-plumaged bird flown. Among the ladies who visited at her relative's house was a certain Madame Marigny, a very pretty young widow. Madame Marigny and Louise formed a sudden and intimate friendship. The widow was moving from Versailles into an apartment at Paris, and invited Louise to share it. She had consented. I was not pleased at this; for the widow was too young, and too much of a coquette, to be a safe companion to Louise. But though professing much gratitude and great regard for me, I had no power of controlling the poor girl's actions. Her nominal husband, meanwhile, had left France, and nothing more was heard or known of him. I saw that the best thing that could possibly befall Louise was marriage with some one rich enough to gratify her taste for luxury and pomp; and that if such a marriage offered itself, she might be induced to free it from all possible embarrassment by procuring the annulment of the former, from which she had hitherto shrunk in such revolt. This opportunity presented itself. A man already rich, and in a career that promised to make him infinitely richer, an associate of mine

in those days when I was rapidly squandering the remnant of my inheritance—this man saw her at the opera in company with Madame Marigny, fell violently in love with her, and ascertaining her relationship to me, besought an introduction. I was delighted to give it; and, to say the truth, I was then so reduced to the bottom of my casket, I felt that it was becoming impossible for me to continue the aid I had hitherto given to Louise, and—what then would become of her? I thought it fair to tell Louvier—"

"Louvier—the financier?"

"Ah, that was a slip of the tongue, but no matter; there is no reason for concealing his name. I thought it right, I say, to tell Louvier confidentially the history of the unfortunate illegal marriage. It did not damp his ardour. He wooed her to the best of his power, but she evidently took him into great dislike. One day she sent for me in much excitement, showed me some advertisements in the French journals which, though not naming her, evidently pointed at her, and must have been dictated by her *soi-disant* husband. The advertisements might certainly lead to her discovery if she remained in Paris. She entreated my consent to remove elsewhere. Madame Marigny had her own reason for leaving Paris, and would accompany her. I supplied her with the necessary means, and a day or two afterwards she and her friend departed, as I understood, for Brussels. I received no letter from her; and my own affairs so seriously pre-occupied me, that poor Louise might have passed altogether out of my thoughts, had it not been for the suitor she had left in despair behind. Louvier

besought me to ascertain her address; but I could give him no, other clue to it than that she said she was going to Brussels, but should soon remove to some quiet village. It was not for a long time—I can't remember how long—it might be several weeks, perhaps two or three months, that I received a short note from her stating that she waited for a small remittance, the last she would accept from me, as she was resolved, so soon as her health would permit, to find means to maintain herself—and telling me to direct to her, Poste restante, Aix-la-Chapelle. I sent her the sum she asked, perhaps a little more, but with a confession reluctantly wrung from me that I was a ruined man; and I urged her to think very seriously before she refused the competence and position which a union with M. Louvier would insure.

"This last consideration so pressed on me that, when Louvier called on me, I think that day or the next I gave him Louise's note, and told him that, if he were still as much in love with her as ever, *les absents ont toujours tort*, and he had better go to Aix-la-Chapelle and find her out; that he had my hearty approval of his wooing, and consent to his marriage, though I still urged the wisdom and fairness, if she would take the preliminary step—which, after all, the French law frees as much as possible from pain and scandal—of annulling the irregular marriage into which her childlike youth had been decoyed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.